Exploring the Cultural Dimension of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development

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Abstract:
Although there has been a growing interest in policy and among scholars to consider culture as an aspect of sustainable development, the understanding of culture within the framework of sustainable development has remained vague. This study sought to discover what influence culture may have on the practical application of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD). The research focused on the approaches FSSD practitioners take in their application of the framework within different cultural contexts in an attempt both to uncover patterns and to develop guidelines for applying the framework in those contexts with cultural sensitivity. A qualitative research approach was selected, and a literature review and semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the approaches of thirteen FSSD practitioners with experience applying the framework outside of Europe and North America. The results revealed four main cultural factors FSSD practitioners account for when applying the framework in different cultural contexts and four practical strategies used to account for those cultural factors. Based on these discoveries, strategic guidelines were created to complement the FSSD so that it can be more easily applied in different cultural contexts, thereby contributing to the framework’s ultimate goal of accelerating the global transition toward a sustainable society.

Keywords: Framework for strategic sustainable development (FSSD), cultural sustainability, culture, sustainability, intercultural, leadership
Statement of Contribution

Our thesis process has been defined by our commitment to the topic and a strong spirit of collaboration. At the outset, we took time not only to establish a clear purpose, shared values, and common goals and dreams for the project, but also to discuss our respective strengths and weaknesses as teammates. These intentional conversations helped create deep alignment between us and set the tone for the creative and rigorous learning journey that lay ahead.

Each member of the team contributed equally to the successful completion of our thesis, in terms of project management, process design, thought, and content. That said, our individual strengths shined through in different ways during different phases of the work. Prescilla brought her project management prowess, introducing us to programs and practices for keeping our work on track and on time. She also contributed her strong analytical perspective, constantly asking insightful questions that tightened our shared mental model. Yannick contributed his keen ability to see the bigger picture, meanwhile making incisive connections across our data and between our theory and results—a contribution which lent to the academic rigor of our final product. His genuine curiosity and approachability also made him a powerful interviewer, quickly gaining the trust of interviewees no matter their cultural context. Jessica contributed her knack for communications, leading our correspondence with participants and providing guidance throughout the writing and editing process to elevate the quality of our work. She also brought her facilitation skills and commitment to experimenting with processes for both team building and sense making. Together, we held each other accountable to our individual tasks and shared goals in supportive ways, injecting a sense of playfulness whenever possible.

We are each incredibly grateful for the chance to work as a member of such a creative, dedicated, and high-performing team. From beginning to end, we learned constantly not only from the work, but also from our different worldviews and experiences.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we are extremely grateful for all the practitioners who were willing to share their anecdotes and experiences with us. We feel lucky that we had the opportunity to listen to stories about their adventures in applying the FSSD in contexts around the world. This was one of the main reasons why our thesis was such a fun and meaningful endeavor. They took us on their journeys, and in many cases it felt as if we were there in the room with them. The process of being in conversation with these inspiring individuals not only helped us in writing this thesis, but also provided us with guidance for our own journeys after MSLS. We thank them for this direction, for their time, and for their open and honest responses.

Special thanks goes out to our super advisor Pia Lindahl. Her comments, insights, and suggestions kept our process on track and her meticulous attention to detail helped improve the outcomes of our research. She helped us find our way when we were about to get lost and kept our heads from getting bigger and bigger. Beyond this, she provided us with lots of laughter and fun conversations about Sweden. We also want to thank our secondary advisor Edith Callaghan for asking the right questions when we needed them most, and Dr. Karl-Henrik Robert for his thoughtful comments in our online conversations.

We also want to express our gratitude to Merlina Missimer and Alexander Craig for connecting us to the MSLS alumni community and the community of TNS practitioners. And to those same communities: we could not be more grateful for all the warm responses we received. We cannot wait to be part of this community ourselves, and we hope to pass on this spirit of kindness to future students.

Another shout out goes to the larger MSLS program staff and our fellow students. Thank you for being on this journey with us, for your company during our highs and our lows, and for all the experiences that we have shared this year. It has been an amazing and life-changing adventure.

Last but not least, we would like to thank our families and friends for supporting us, listening to us, sending us food, and making this wonderful experience possible. We are forever grateful.
Executive Summary

The goal of this thesis is to discover what influence culture may have on the practical application of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD), a planning framework for the transition to a sustainable society. This research focuses on the approaches FSSD practitioners take in their application of the framework within different cultural contexts in an attempt both to uncover patterns and to develop guidelines for applying the framework in those contexts with cultural sensitivity. The intention behind taking a fresh look at the cultural dimension of the FSSD is to contribute not only to the collective intelligence of the FSSD practitioner community, but also to the broader discussion in the field of sustainability science about the value of connecting the concept of culture to sustainable development, a relatively unexplored and new area of interest.

Introduction

Today human society faces significant environmental, social, and economic issues on a global scale that are unlike any we have ever encountered before. These issues—which, taken together, represent the sustainability challenge—are due to systemic errors in societal design that are manifesting in a variety of different ways and are weakening the capacity of the socio-ecological system to support life as we know it today.

The sustainability challenge is inherently complex, multidimensional, and global in nature. Understanding these characteristics inevitably leads to a focus not only on how the social system interacts with the earth’s biosphere, but also on how different groups within society interact with each other. If we adopt a systems perspective, it may be instructive to examine the cultural dimension of sustainable development because many—if not all—of the planet’s environmental, social, and economic problems have cultural activity at their roots. It is therefore important and necessary to explicitly integrate culture in the sustainability discourse because achieving sustainability goals depends on human accounts, actions, and behaviors, which are culturally embedded.

Although there has been a growing interest in policy and among scholars to consider culture as an aspect of sustainable development, culture and sustainability are two of the most complex policy areas in society today and the understanding of culture within the framework of sustainable development has remained vague. Therefore, many academics, practitioners, and institutional stakeholders are arguing for fresh approaches to pursue sustainability through the framework of culture.

In order to adopt such an approach, it is first necessary to describe culture. While there are many different definitions of culture, one that is often used sees culture as “the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next” (Matsumoto 1996, 16). To identify, interpret, and discuss cultural factors within the data collected for this study, two key frameworks for studying cultural dimensions are applied: Hofstede’s Model for Cultural Dimensions and the Model of National Culture Differences of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner. An additional framework distinguishing three roles for culture in sustainable development by Soini and Dessein is used to locate the larger outcomes of this study in the discussion about the value of connecting the concept of culture to sustainable development in the field of sustainability science.
This study takes the perspective that culture is a necessary foundation for sustainable development and examines the relationship between culture and the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD), a conceptual framework that addresses both the problems and opportunities inherent to the sustainability challenge. First, the FSSD provides a unifying and operational definition of sustainability built on eight basic Sustainability Principles (SPs) that must be fulfilled to prevent further degradation of the socio-ecological system. The FSSD also includes a structuring model which is useful for clarifying the interrelationships between elements in complex systems, and an approach to decision-making and strategic planning that is useful for defining success within the boundaries of sustainability.

The FSSD becomes intriguing with the recognition that it was developed in Sweden and that it has largely been applied in Europe and North America. Given this geographic concentration, a particular cultural outlook seems inherent both to the FSSD’s development and to the majority of the framework’s users to date. Yet because the sustainability challenge requires coordinated collaboration across traditional divides, this then begs the question: What role might culture play in the application of the FSSD?

Research questions
The intention of this research is to improve current and future FSSD practitioners’ understanding of how to work with the framework in different cultural contexts by discovering what influence culture has on its practical application. To do so, the study explores the following questions:

1. What do practitioners do to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD?
   1. What cultural factors do practitioners account for when applying the FSSD?
   2. What strategies do practitioners use to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD?
2. What guidelines can complement the FSSD so that it can be more easily applied in different cultural contexts?

Methods
A qualitative research approach was selected, and a combination of a literature review and semi-structured interviews were used to discover what influence culture may have on the practical application of the FSSD. The literature review sought to understand the current state of the research in the field of sustainability science on the relationship between culture and sustainable development. Semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit the approaches of FSSD practitioners in their application of the framework within different cultural contexts and to answer the research questions.

Thirteen FSSD practitioners who had the experience of applying the FSSD outside of Europe and North America participated in semi-structured interviews. Collectively, they had experience everywhere from Chile to Zambia and China to Mozambique. Analysis of the interviews started with a process of open coding and discussion, and ten themes eventually emerged. This approach to data analysis exposed patterns of experience across respondents, effectively knitting together their individual experiences into one larger story and thereby providing meaningful data to answer the research questions.

Results & Discussion
The ten themes that emerged through data analysis were clustered, presented, and discussed in answer to three questions: why is it necessary for FSSD practitioners to take the cultural context
into account in their application of the framework; what cultural factors do they account for; and how do they account for those cultural factors. The first two themes showcased respondents’ experiences that suggest why it is necessary for practitioners to take the cultural context into account in their application of the FSSD. These were associated with their experiences of people not understanding elements of the framework in certain cultural contexts and, relatedly, the need for conceptually translating and/or simplifying those elements. Four additional themes highlighted respondents’ experiences that suggest what cultural factors practitioners need to take into account in their application of the FSSD. Cultural factors included gender dynamics, power dynamics, time orientation, and spirituality and religion. The first three factors are strongly related to Hofstede and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s cultural frameworks. The remaining four themes illuminated how respondents accounted for those cultural factors using practical strategies in their application of the FSSD. These included adopting a “beginner’s mind,” or a humble, open, curious attitude; trust building; taking time to understand the local context; and using local examples, metaphors, and storytelling.

Based on the discovery of the above, the following strategic guidelines were created to complement the FSSD so that it can be more easily applied in different cultural contexts:
Strategic guidelines for applying the FSSD in different cultural contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adopting a “beginner’s mind,” a humble, open, curious attitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building trust with key stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking time to understand the local context</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural factors to consider within the local context:</th>
<th>Key questions for discovering the cultural factors:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender dynamics</td>
<td>What is the difference in social and emotional roles between genders? How are women and men expected to behave?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power dynamics</td>
<td>How do lower-ranking members of the community or organization expect to be treated? How are older people treated? How is power perceived? In what way(s) is the use of power subject to scrutiny?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time orientation</td>
<td>How does the community or organization manage its past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future? Have the most important events occurred in the past, or will they occur in the future? How are the past, present, and future perceived?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality and religion</td>
<td>How do religious beliefs manifest through culture (e.g., through values, beliefs, orientations to life, rituals, and/or behaviors)? How do these manifestations impact personal, organizational, and/or regional/national contexts?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Strategies:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adapting the approach of applying the FSSD based on the discovery of cultural factors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using local examples, metaphors, and storytelling to conceptually translate elements of the FSSD</td>
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</table>
Possible implications for strategic sustainable development

With the above in mind, it is important to consider what possible implications these results have for the FSSD and strategic sustainable development in general. The research suggests that there is an important relationship between culture and the systems perspective inherent to the FSSD. Adding culture to the systems level of the structuring framework could be a possible solution for expanding the systems perspective to take the cultural dimension into consideration. In addition, the results of this study imply that culture could have value for the success level of the FSSD, serving as a translating element between the general nature of the Sustainability Principles and the specific context where they are applied. Finally, the guidelines that were created as a result of this study could be a valuable addition to the framework’s strategic level, as they provide the necessary guidance for practitioners to discover cultural factors relevant to strategic sustainable development and apply the FSSD in a culturally appropriate and sensitive way.

An important caveat in all of this is that these are all possible implications for strategic sustainable development. More research is needed to further explore what the exact role of culture is in relation to strategic sustainable development and how exactly culture can add value to the systems, success and strategic levels of the FSSD.

Conclusion

Research question 1: What do practitioners do to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD? The answer to this question consists of the combined answers to research questions 1.1 and 1.2.

Research question 1.1: What cultural factors do practitioners account for when applying the FSSD? The research showed that there are four main cultural factors practitioners account for when applying the FSSD: gender dynamics, power dynamics, time orientation, and spirituality and religion. The results also revealed that practitioners needed to take these cultural factors into account in their application of the FSSD in different cultural contexts in order to work successfully with the framework.

Research question 1.2: What strategies do practitioners use to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD? Respondents reported using different strategies to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD, including: adopting a “beginner’s mind,” or a humble, open, curious attitude; trust building; taking time to understand the local context; and using local examples, metaphors, and storytelling.

Research question 2: What guidelines can complement the FSSD so that it can be more easily applied in different cultural contexts? Based on the discovery of the cultural factors practitioners account for when applying the FSSD and the strategies they use to account for those factors, strategic guidelines were created to complement the FSSD so that it can be more easily applied in different cultural contexts. Based on the scope and outcomes of our research, these guidelines can support FSSD practitioners working outside of Europe and North America; however, they could prove useful to practitioners working across the globe.

In addition to answering the research questions, the research showed that the cultural dimension under study has several possible implications for the FSSD and strategic sustainable development in general. Further research is needed to further discover and understand what these implications may be.
Glossary

**ABCD Strategic Planning Process:** The ABCD Strategic Planning Process helps organizations implement the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development to accelerate the transition towards sustainability. At the A Step, people build a shared understanding of the sustainability challenge and a vision of their organization’s role in a sustainable society. During the B Step, they assess the current reality of their organization against the sustainability principles. The C Step involves brainstorming actions to move the organization toward the vision of success, and these actions are later evaluated and prioritized during the D Step. The ABCD process can be repeated frequently to build a shared mental model, inspire creativity, and foster a sense of responsibility within an organization.

**Backcasting:** As opposed to forecasting, backcasting is a strategic planning approach that begins with defining a vision of success in the future based on scenarios or basic principles (i.e., constraints that must be met to maintain a system). Planners then chart the best possible course of action leading in the right overall direction toward the vision of success.

**Culture:** Culture is the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next.

**Five Level Framework for Planning in Complex Systems (5LF):** The 5LF is a framework designed to help people tackle problems within complex systems. It is especially useful for analysis, decision-making, and strategic planning. As its name implies, the 5LF helps structure information into the following five levels: 1.) System Level, which provides information about the complex system, such as stocks and flows; 2.) Success Level, which provides a definition of success based on basic principles; 3.) Strategic Level, which includes strategic guidelines used to select actions; 4.) Actions Level, which lists the concrete actions used to move toward the overall goal; and 5.) Tools Level, which names tools used to support planning toward the goal. Importantly, these five levels are not meant to represent a sequential strategic planning process; instead, users should consider the levels and connections between them simultaneously.

**Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD):** The FSSD is a scientifically sound conceptual framework for the transition towards a sustainable society. It includes a unifying and operational definition of sustainability, as well as an approach for whole-systems change that could be applied in any context, at any scale.

**Funnel metaphor:** The metaphor illustrates the decline of the earth’s capacity to sustain itself. The walls of the funnel represent the sustainable issues such as increasing pollution or decreasing of natural resources. Unsustainable practice will then lead to hitting the wall of the funnel. The cylindrical part illustrates when those unsustainable practices would be resolved: sustainability.

**Socio-ecological system:** A system consisting of both the biosphere and human society and their complex interactions.

**Sustainability challenge:** Today human society faces many significant challenges, both environmental and social in nature, that suggest we are currently on an unsustainable course. These unsustainability problems are due to mistakes in societal design that are increasing at a
systematic rate and systematically weakening the capacity of the socio-ecological system to support human civilization. The sustainability challenge includes these systemic mistakes, the obstacles to fixing them, and the opportunities for society if we are able to overcome them.

**Sustainability Principles (SPs):** The following eight sustainability principles are based on scientific concepts and describe what society must stop doing to prevent further degradation of the socio-ecological system. In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing 1.) concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth’s crust, 2.) concentrations of substances produced by society, and 3.) degradation by physical means. Within that society, people are not subject to structural obstacles to 4.) health, 5.) influence, 6.) competence, 7.) impartiality, and 8.) meaning-making.

**Systems thinking:** As opposed to a reductionist approach, system thinking is way of looking at the world by focusing on the interactions between elements within complex systems, rather than looking at those elements separately.
List of Abbreviations

5LF: Five Level Framework for Planning in Complex Systems

FSSD: Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development

MSLS: Master’s in Strategic Leadership toward Sustainability

SPs: Sustainability Principles

SSPs: Social Sustainability Principles

TNS: The Natural Step
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1 Introduction

The goal of this thesis is to discover what influence culture may have on the practical application of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD), a planning framework for the transition to a sustainable society. This research focuses on the approaches FSSD practitioners take in their application of the framework within different cultural contexts in an attempt both to uncover patterns and to develop guidelines for applying the framework in those contexts with cultural sensitivity. The intention behind taking a fresh look at the cultural dimension of the FSSD is to contribute not only to the collective intelligence of the FSSD practitioner community, but also to the broader discussion in the field of sustainability science about the value of connecting the concept of culture to sustainable development, a relatively unexplored and new area of interest.

1.1 Sustainability challenge

Humanity has entered the Anthropocene, the era in which human actions have become the main driver of global environmental change (Rockström 2009; Steffen et al. 2011). As a result of these human activities, the Earth's system could be pushed outside of its stable environmental state with consequences that are detrimental for large parts of the world, making it difficult or even impossible to maintain human civilization (Broman and Robert 2017; Rockström 2009). This suggests that we need to fundamentally alter our relationship with the planet we inhabit (Steffen et al. 2011). Altering this relationship and transitioning to a sustainable society requires a change in our ecological, social, and financial systems, which are all currently unsustainable (Broman and Robert 2017).

From an ecological perspective, the atmosphere and oceans are warming, the sea level is rising, the amounts of snow and ice are diminishing, and weather patterns are being disrupted as a result of human activities over the last seven decades (Stocker et al. 2013; Martine et al. 2015). In addition, the world faces “scarcity in critical resources, the degradation of ecosystem services, and the erosion of the planet’s capability to absorb our wastes” (Steffen et al. 2011, 740). The ever-growing population and the resulting increase in demand for fossil-fuels, water, nutrition, and other geological resources, coupled with the technological challenge for satisfying those human needs in more efficient ways, are responsible for deleterious impacts on our planet (Princiotta and Loughlin 2014).

From a social perspective, human beings aim to satisfy their needs, and ecological unsustainability is one of the aspects that hinders their ability to do so (Missimer, Robèrt, and Broman 2017). Over the last decades, there has been an increase in social conflicts, both locally and globally, which are partly caused by the results of this same ecological unsustainability (Hull 2008). Additionally, human society faces widespread issues, such as poverty, inequality, disease, malnutrition, corruption, lack of access to education, and discrimination (Broman and Robert 2017). These issues, in turn, can lead to unintended consequences for the environment, since, for example, people who suffer from poverty and malnutrition may negatively impact their immediate environment in order to survive (Brundtland 1987). This vicious cycle of the reinforcing effects of ecological and social unsustainability increases the urgent need to create a more socially robust system (Missimer, Robèrt, and Broman 2017).

In addition, the economic model that was adopted at the time of the Industrial Revolution is based on assumptions of the need for unlimited growth and the ability of the Earth to provide
for that. In one way, this has led to advances in technology, agriculture, transport, and healthcare but at the same time, it has resulted in an unequal distribution of wealth, a widening economic gap between social classes, and negative environmental impacts across the planet (Ahmed 2010; Martine et al. 2015; Senge et al. 2008). These negative consequences are the result of the fact that the model of economic growth is grounded in the unsustainable use of non-renewable sources and the reduction of biodiversity (Martine et al. 2015). Additionally, much of our economic activity involves the emission of greenhouse gases, which is one of the main drivers of climate change and therefore ecological unsustainability (Stocker et al. 2013). In economic terms, greenhouse gases are seen as an externality, which means that those who produce greenhouse-gas emissions are bringing about climate change and imposing costs on the world and on future generations. The problem is that they do not face the full consequences of their actions themselves (Stern 2007).

These three perspectives—ecological, social, and economic—together form the sustainability challenge and also represent the three main pillars of sustainable development. They have often been approached separately, but they are actually closely interrelated and influence each other in positive or negative ways (Hansmann, Mieg, and Frischknecht 2012). The challenge today is to build an economy that improves human well-being and social equity, while at the same time neutralizing environmental risks and ecological scarcities at a global scale (Kosoy et al. 2012; UNEP 2011).

As if this is not complex enough, the earth itself is a complex system made up of the biosphere, the atmosphere, and the social and economic systems, all of which are subsystems that interact through exchanges of matter, energy, and information (Donner et al. 2009). As a result of these interactions, there is a need to focus on complex systems and complexity since the earth as a whole needs to be considered as a complex adaptive system when addressing the sustainability challenge (Steffen et al. 2011; Schimel et al. 2015). This means that the behavior of the system depends on the way these interconnected parts interact and can sometimes be unpredictable and counterintuitive due to the fact that there is a large number of parts that interact in complex ways (Broman and Robèrt 2017; Wardman 2011). Therefore, to understand a problem within the system, it is essential to not just look at the smaller parts, but at the complexity emerging from the interconnections (Chen 2016). That is why the sustainability challenge is extremely complex, dynamic, and multidimensional and at the same time inherently a global challenge (Nguyen and Bosch 2013).

Due to the complexity of the sustainability challenge, and the fact that it requires a multi- and transdisciplinary approach (Kajikawa, Tacoma, and Yamaguchi 2014), it is necessary to adopt a systems thinking approach as it is an interdisciplinary approach capable of bridging the gap between different fields of science (Cabrera, Colosi, and Lobdell 2008). Simply stated, systems thinking is a way of looking at the world by focusing on the interactions between elements within complex systems, rather than looking at those elements separately (Abson et al. 2017). When this way of looking is applied to the earth and the dynamic interactions within and across its different subsystems, system thinking becomes a valuable tool for understanding the complexities inherent to sustainability challenges (Williams et al. 2017). In fact, this approach can be considered as a “lens through which sustainability issues can be addressed” (Abson et al. 2017, 32) and has led to solutions for sustainability challenges that would have been impossible with a reductionist approach (Abson et al. 2017; Liu et al. 2015). In other words, using systems thinking to gain deeper insights into the functioning of systems leads to better insights into the possibilities for directing those systems (Rotmans and Loorbach 2009). It can
therefore be concluded that in order to develop a thorough understanding of sustainability issues and to find appropriate and effective solutions, a systems thinking approach is required.

Viewing the sustainability challenge from a systems perspective and treating it as a global problem inevitably leads to a focus not only on how the social system interacts within the biosphere, but also on how different groups within society interact with each other. Since sustainability challenges transcend human-made borders just as natural ecosystems do, it is evident that these challenges need to be addressed at a global-scale through coordinated collaboration across traditional divides (Fichtner, Graehl, and Rentz 2002; Steffen et al. 2011; Svedin 1998). Examples of recent global collaborations, such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, therefore not only demonstrate the urgent need for systems thinking, but also signal the importance of working together across borders with cultural sensitivity (Draper 2016).

1.2 Culture and sustainable development

If we adopt the perspective that the sustainability challenge is inherently a complex global challenge, then it may be instructive to examine the cultural dimension of sustainable development. It has been argued that people’s values, worldviews, knowledge and creativity are central to sustainable development and that these are all inextricably linked to culture (Tilbury and Mula 2009). In other words, “It is important and necessary to explicitly integrate culture in sustainability discourse, as achieving sustainability goals essentially depends on human accounts, actions, and behavior which are, in turn, culturally embedded” (Soini and Dessein 2016, 1). Although there has been a growing interest in policy and among scholars to consider culture as an aspect of sustainable development (Soini and Birkeland 2014), culture and sustainability are two of the most complex policy areas in society today (Jeanotte 2017) and the understanding of culture within the framework of sustainable development has remained vague (Soini and Birkeland 2014). This is largely related to the fact that both culture and sustainability are “complex, contested, multidisciplinary, and normative concepts” (Dessein et al. 2015, 14). Therefore, many academics, practitioners, and institutional stakeholders are arguing for fresh approaches to pursue sustainability through the framework of culture (Jeanotte 2017; Soini and Dessein 2016; Dessein et al. 2015).

However, this is an arduous task since both culture (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009) and sustainability (Morelli 2011) are notoriously difficult concepts to define. In the early 1950s, two American anthropologists compiled a list of 164 different definitions of culture (Verluyten 2000; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009), and despite a century of effort to define culture adequately, by the 1990s there was still no agreement regarding its nature (Apte 1994). Compared to the field of sustainability there is an interestingly similar narrative around the definition of sustainability. In fact, among individuals from various professions there has been over a decade of struggle with the definition and relevance of the term “sustainability” (Morelli 2011). Furthermore the many different definitions of sustainability cause confusion about how they are used, given that the meaning of some are only slightly different from one another (Glavic and Lukman 2007).

From the above it becomes clear that culture and sustainability are indeed complex and hard to define. In addition, both concepts have been discussed in great detail separately, but until now they have rarely been explicitly combined (Soini and Dessein 2016). However, many—if not all—of the planet’s environmental, social and economic problems have cultural activity at their
roots, and therefore solutions and approaches are unlikely to be successful without cultural considerations (Dessein et al. 2015).

1.2.1 Definition of culture

In order to consider this cultural dimension, a clear definition of culture is required. “Culture” is often thought to refer to the arts, literature, music, painting, etcetera (Verluyten 2000). This narrow definition, or “high culture” as it is often called, is not what is meant when the word “culture” is used in the context of this study. The word “culture” as it is used here refers to the values and practices that are acquired and shared by people in a group (Hofstede 2011). This closely relates to the definition of culture that Matsumoto (1996, 16) provides: culture is “the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next.”

A key attribute of culture is that it is by definition something shared with other members of a group; it cannot be a property of individuals (Kincaid 1996). Yet at the same time, no two individuals within a group share exactly the same cultural characteristics (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009). This relates to the definition Hofstede (2011, 3) uses to describe culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.” Another way of looking at it is to say that “culture refers to the particular solutions which societies give to universal problems. Thus, feeding oneself is a universal problem; but what is considered edible and what is actually used as food varies from one culture to the next, and ranges from bird’s saliva to caterpillars, live oysters or marshmallows” (Verluyten 2000, 23).

Based on an extensive discussion of different definitions of culture—some of which are mentioned above—Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, 15) were able to distinguish a number of important characteristics of culture:

- Culture is manifested through different types of regularities, some of which are more explicit than others.
- Culture is associated with social groups, but no two individuals within a group share exactly the same cultural characteristics.
- Culture affects people’s behavior and interpretations of behavior.
- Culture is acquired and/or constructed through interaction with others.

It is not the intention of this study to discuss the different definitions of culture in great detail, but rather to move to a more practical and hands-on approach with regards to culture in its relation to sustainability and strategic sustainable development. As such, the following section focuses on a discussion of two of the key frameworks that have been developed in different disciplines for studying cultural factors. These frameworks will be used to discuss and interpret the results of this study.

1.2.2 Cultural frameworks

One of the most used and cited frameworks in cultural research was developed by Hofstede (1980; 2001). Based on a databank of approximately 116,000 responses from IBM employees in more than seventy countries and regions, Hofstede developed a model by identifying four
dimensions of national cultures. Later, a fifth and sixth dimension were added (Hofstede 2011). The six dimensions are labeled as follows:

1. Power Distance, related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality;
2. Uncertainty Avoidance, related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future;
3. Individualism versus Collectivism, related to the integration of individuals into primary groups;
4. Masculinity versus Femininity, related to the division of emotional roles between women and men;
5. Long Term versus Short Term Orientation, related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present and past.
6. Indulgence versus Restraint, related to the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life. (Hofstede 2011, 8)

Where Hofstede’s work can be seen as a social psychological approach, another well-known framework developed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) originated from an international business context. This approach is slightly different and identifies seven dimensions of cultural variability:

1. Universalism - Particularism:
The universalist approach is roughly: “What is good and right can be defined and always applies.” In particularist cultures far greater attention is given to the obligations of relationships and unique circumstances.
2. Individualism - Communitarianism:
Do people regard themselves primarily as individuals or as part of a group?
3. Neutral – Emotional:
Should the nature of our interactions be objective or is expressing emotion acceptable?
4. Specific – Diffuse
In specific oriented cultures a manager segregates out the task relationship she or he has with a subordinate and insulates this from other dealings. However, in some diffuse oriented countries every life space and every level of personality tends to permeate all others.
5. Achievement – Ascription
Achievement means that you are judged on what you have recently accomplished and on your record. Ascription means that status is attributed to you, by birth, kinship, gender or age, but also by your connections and your educational record.
6. Attitudes to time
In some societies, what an individual has achieved in the past is not that important. It is more important to know what plan they have developed for the future. In other societies you can make more of an impression with your past accomplishments than those of today.
7. Attitudes to the environment
Some cultures see the major focus affecting their lives and the origins of vice and virtue as residing within the person. Here, motivations and values are derived from within. Other cultures see the world as more powerful than individuals. They see nature as something to be feared or emulated. (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997, 8 - 10)
The models by Hofstede (1980; 2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) will be used to interpret the results and discover distinct cultural dimensions within the interviews in order to indeed move to a more practical and hands-on approach in discussing the relationship between culture and strategic sustainable development.

1.2.3 Culture in, for, and as sustainability

Despite the growing interest in considering culture as an aspect of sustainable development, until now the understanding of culture within the framework of sustainable development has remained vague (Soini and Birkeland 2014; Jeanotte 2017). Therefore there is a strong need for fresh approaches that locate sustainable development issues within the context of culture—or that apply a culture lens to sustainable development—because they can assist in reframing our thinking, advance our understanding of sustainability challenges, and improve our ability to respond to them (Tilbury and Mula 2009; Jeanotte 2017; Soini and Dessein 2016; Dessein et al. 2015; UNESCO 2014). As Tilbury and Mula (2009, 1) note, “The panoramic view permitted by this culture lens results in the inclusion of alternative perspectives and new connections, and gives access to traditional wisdom and forms of knowledge important to challenging unsustainability.” Since everything we do is culturally determined, culture is needed as a medium that can give shape to the communication and action required for successful sustainable development (Packalén 2010).

Based on the results of the four-year research network COST IS1007 “Investigating Cultural Sustainability” (Dessein et al. 2015) and the review and analysis of scientific peer-reviewed papers using the concept of “cultural sustainability” (Soini and Birkeland 2014), Soini and Dessein developed an interdisciplinary conceptual framework aimed at identifying the different roles of culture in sustainability and guiding the research and policy activities in this complex field. They identified the following three roles or representations of culture in sustainable development:

- **Culture in sustainability.** The first representation considers culture as if it had an independent role as the fourth pillar of sustainability. This representation sees cultural sustainability as parallel to ecological, social, and economic sustainability. It recognizes the importance of conservation, maintenance, and preservation of cultural capital in different forms as arts, heritage, knowledge, and cultural diversity for the next generations, as well as culture as an independent pillar from social sustainability.

- **Culture for sustainability.** The second representation refers to culture having a mediating role to achieve economic, social, and ecological sustainability. This representation suggests that both material and immaterial culture are seen as an essential resource for local and regional economic development. It also implies that cultural values and perceptions need to be considered when aiming for ecological or social sustainability.

- **Culture as sustainability.** The third representation considers culture as a necessary foundation for meeting the overall aims of sustainability. This representation encloses the other pillars of sustainability and becomes an overarching dimension of sustainability. In other words, sustainability becomes embedded in culture and leads to eco-cultural civilization. (Soini and Birkeland 2016, 3)
Figure 1.1 below shows these three different roles of culture in sustainable development. The three circles represent the three pillars of sustainable development—ecological, social, economical—as introduced in the introduction of the research. The left diagram shows culture as a separate fourth pillar, the central diagram shows the mediating element between the three other pillars, and the right diagram shows culture as the necessary foundation for transformation towards sustainability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First: Culture in Sustainability</th>
<th>Second: Culture for Sustainability</th>
<th>Third: Culture As Sustainability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition of culture</td>
<td>culture as a capital</td>
<td>culture as a way of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and development</td>
<td>culture as an achievement in development</td>
<td>culture as a resource and condition for development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of culture</td>
<td>intrinsic</td>
<td>instrumental and intrinsic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and society</td>
<td>complementing</td>
<td>interaction of culture and nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy sectors</td>
<td>cultural policies</td>
<td>all policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modes of Governance</td>
<td>hierarchical governance, 1st order</td>
<td>co-governance, 2nd order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research approach</td>
<td>mainly mono- and multidisciplinary</td>
<td>mainly multi- and interdisciplinary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the earlier presented models by Hofstede (1980; 2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), the above presented model by Soini and Dessein (2016) will be used to interpret the larger results of the study. Whereas the models of cultural dimensions by Hofstede and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner will be used to locate and identify certain cultural dimensions, the model by Soini and Dessein will be used to locate the larger outcomes of this study in the discussion about the value of connecting the concept of culture to sustainable development in the field of sustainability science.

Reviewing the literature that connects culture to sustainability and sustainable development leads to the conclusion that incorporating culture in the sustainability discourse is essential to move towards a sustainable society yet seems to be a great scientific, social, and political challenge. However, a growing movement of academics, practitioners, and institutional stakeholders are adopting new approaches that cross sectoral and disciplinary boundaries in order to pursue sustainability through the framework of culture, advance our understanding of sustainability challenges, and improve our ability to respond to them. After all, it is indisputable that science plays a key role in the sustainability challenge, but the way people will choose to move construct a sustainable society will be a social, political, and cultural process (Miller 2013).
1.2.4 The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development

This study takes the perspective that culture is a necessary foundation for sustainable development and examines the relationship between culture and the FSSD, a conceptual framework for the transition towards a sustainable society. The FSSD was developed by a group of Swedish scientists through a consensus process that began in the late 1980s and resulted, after several iterations, in the creation of a unifying and operational definition of sustainability, as well as an approach for whole-systems change that could be applied in any context, at any scale (Broman and Robèrt 2017). The elements of the FSSD are explained in detail here to provide necessary context for understanding the results of this study.

The first element of the FSSD is a funnel metaphor (see Figure 1.2) designed to aid our understanding of the sustainability challenge. This metaphor comes from a paradigm which recognizes that our current unsustainability problems are due to systemic errors in the way society has been designed and that those problems are connected to each other in complex ways. As these problems and their effects increase at a systematic rate, they also systematically weaken the capacity of the socio-ecological system to support the fulfillment of human needs. These dynamics can be illustrated by the steadily narrowing walls of the funnel, which represent the decreasing capacity of the socio-ecological system and suggest that the room to maneuver toward sustainability will become more and more limited as we progress deeper in. The challenge for humanity is to chart a course toward sustainability—illustrated by the leveling out of the funnel walls on the right side of the figure—where the opportunities for prosperity have stopped declining without hitting the funnel walls, which may be experienced as changes in legislation and regulations, resource availability, tax rates, etcetera (Broman and Robèrt 2017).

![Figure 1.2: A graphic representation of the funnel metaphor](image)

In addition to the funnel metaphor, the FSSD includes a structuring model based on the generic Five Level Framework for Planning in Complex Systems (5LF), which is useful for clarifying the interrelationships and differences between elements in complex systems and thus providing analytical clarity to strategic planners. In the case of the FSSD, the sustainability context has been applied as a lens to each of the framework’s five levels: system, success, strategic guidelines, actions, and tools. Table 1.1 below includes a description of the levels within both the 5LF and the FSSD.
Table 1.1: The 5LF and the FSSD (Broman and Robèrt 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>5LF</th>
<th>FSSD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>The systems level includes information relevant to the system in which the planning occurs.</td>
<td>The systems level includes principles for the functioning of the global socio-ecological system and an overview of the sustainability challenge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>The success level includes the definition of success based on basic principles.</td>
<td>The success level includes the definition of a vision framed by, or in compliance with, basic Sustainability Principles (described below).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic guidelines</td>
<td>The strategic guidelines level includes the guidelines used to select concrete actions as part of a strategic plan for moving towards success in the system.</td>
<td>The strategic guidelines level includes guidelines for how to approach the principled definition of success in a strategic way. The generic guidelines for any strategic planning process using the FSSD include backcasting from a principle-based definition of success and the use of basic prioritization questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>The actions level includes the actions that follow the overall strategic guidelines to accomplish the goal.</td>
<td>The actions level includes all actions that help move the global socio-ecological system towards sustainability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools</td>
<td>The tools level includes the tools that support the planning process.</td>
<td>The tools level includes tools that support efforts to reach global sustainability (e.g., Ecological Footprint, Environmental Management Systems, Life Cycle Assessment, Global Reporting Initiative, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In answer to the driving question behind the FSSD, the framework also includes a unifying and operational definition of sustainability. Success in the sustainability context is defined as stopping the unsustainable actions that are currently threatening the socio-ecological system, so it follows that the definition of sustainability within the FSSD is built on eight basic Sustainability Principles (SPs) that must be fulfilled to prevent further degradation of the socio-ecological system. These principles serve as the constraints within which society can continue to function and evolve, and, as such, they serve as the boundary conditions in backcasting planning and redesign for sustainability (Broman and Robèrt 2017). The following eight principles also form the foundation for the definition and discussions of sustainability in this paper:

In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing...

1. ... concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth’s crust;
2. ... concentrations of substances produced by society;
3. ... degradation by physical means;

In that society, people are not subject to structural obstacles to...

4. ... health.
5. ... influence.
6. ... competence.
7. ... impartiality.
8. ... meaning-making. (Broman and Robèrt 2017)

Finally, the FSSD comes with a method that supports the execution of backcasting planning and redesign for sustainability called the ABCD Strategic Planning Process (see Figure 1.3). Organizations can use the ABCD method to facilitate creative, collaborative and strategic transitions towards sustainability. The method includes four general steps as follows: In the A step, participants build a shared understanding of the sustainability challenge using the funnel metaphor and a vision of their organization’s role in a sustainable society. During the B step, participants assess the current reality of their organization against the SPs. In the C step participants brainstorm actions to move the organization from its current reality (established in the B step) toward the vision of success (established in the A step). Finally, participants evaluate and prioritize these actions during the D step. Despite being described in a linear process, the ABCD method is more iterative and movement back and forth between the steps is encouraged. This method can be repeated frequently within organizations to build a shared mental model among employees, inspire creativity, and foster a sense of responsibility within an organization for the transition toward sustainability (Broman and Robèrt 2017).

![Figure 1.3: Backcasting from SPs and the ABCD Strategic Planning Process (The Natural Step 2016).](image)

It is important to highlight the role of backcasting as an approach to decision-making and strategic planning within the FSSD. As opposed to forecasting—an approach where planners project current trends in order to predict the future—backcasting begins with defining a vision of success in the future based on scenarios or basic principles (i.e., constraints that must be met to maintain a system), and with this vision in mind, planners then chart the best possible course of action to achieve success (Broman and Robèrt 2017). This approach is especially useful for planning in complex, emergent systems. The ABCD method, described above, puts the backcasting approach in motion.

Since its creation nearly three decades ago, scientists and practitioners have continued to elaborate, scrutinize, and test all parts of the FSSD in a continuous process to improve its capacity to support strategic sustainable development (Broman and Robèrt 2017). Testing the
unifying qualities of the FSSD necessarily involves analyzing other frameworks, tools, concepts, and methods designed to accelerate the transition towards sustainability. This ongoing analysis leads to an understanding of how these various forms of support for sustainability relate not only to one another, but also to the scope of strategic sustainable development that the FSSD intends to cover (Broman and Robèrt 2017). Broman and Robèrt (2017, 18) describe this aspect of the testing process as key to the FSSD’s success as a structuring, inter-relational model for strategic planning: “The purpose of the FSSD has never been to replace or exclude other forms of support for sustainable development, but the opposite; to provide a structure that allows for clarification of their respective strengths and that aids a coordinated use of them.” In this way, the FSSD also assists in the selection and design of the frameworks, tools, concepts, and methods that are needed for the sustainability transition (Broman and Robèrt 2017).

Ultimately, the FSSD makes a unique contribution to sustainable development by providing basic principles that can be used for boundary setting when tackling problems within complex systems. The framework has been found to not only create the possibility for more effective collaboration across disciplines, sectors, and regions, but also to aid organizations in understanding and locating themselves within the context of the global sustainability challenge (Broman and Robèrt 2017).

The FSSD becomes intriguing with the recognition that it was developed in Sweden and that it has largely been applied in Europe and North America. The Natural Step (TNS)—a global network of nonprofit organizations that employs the FSSD to accelerate the transition to a sustainable society—has regional offices in Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy, Canada, China, Finland, New Zealand, Portugal, Switzerland, Israel, and Germany (The Natural Step 2016). Similarly, a majority of alumni of the Master’s in Strategic Leadership toward Sustainability (MSLS) program—a transformational master’s program that teaches students how to use the FSSD to perform strategic sustainable development—are clustered in North America and Europe (Master’s in Strategic Leadership Toward Sustainability 2017). Given this geographic concentration, a particular cultural outlook seems inherent both to the FSSD’s development and to the majority of the framework’s users to date. Yet because the sustainability challenge requires coordinated collaboration across traditional divides, as established in Chapter 1.1, this then begs the question: What role might culture play in the application of the FSSD?

Before these questions can be considered, the fact that the desire for sustainability in the first place is a normative stance (i.e., a value statement) must be acknowledged. Similarly, so is the belief inherent within the FSSD that providing a unifying, science-based definition of sustainability is appropriate and necessary. Broman and Robèrt (2017) suggest that the Brundtland definition serves as a value statement from which the FSSD departs in the definition’s suggestion that we want for humanity development that humanity development that meets humanity’s needs today without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same (Brundtland 1987). As such, defining what sustainability means and envisioning sustainable futures are normative actions because they necessarily attempt to say something about the desires of a society (Miller et al. 2013). These wants or desires can neither be proved, nor disproved through scientific methods or explained by scientific knowledge. They are fundamentally normative (Broman and Robèrt 2017).

It can therefore be concluded that the FSSD itself, in addition to the act of applying it, involves the use of norms and values. Broman and Robèrt (2017, 18) agree: “The FSSD does not exclude the use of norms, values and preferences […] when organizations apply the FSSD to support society’s transition towards sustainability, values and preferences are essential.” On the other
hand, when values fall out of the scope of analysis, which they often do within the field of sustainability science, it is problematic not only because sustainability is an ethical concept (Miller et al. 2014), but also because the field has an important role to play in developing structures that enable communities to constantly learn, adapt, and craft viable visions of the future which represents a new and changing set of values (Ibid.).

As such, our capacity to transition toward sustainability relies greatly on our ability to establish new norms of sustainable behavior. Behavior is closely linked to values, and values are closely linked to culture (Tilbury and Mulà 2009). Therefore practitioners of the FSSD will likely need to take the cultural context into account when they apply the framework in different locations around the world.

1.3 Research questions

It can be concluded that culture has been largely unexplored in the field of sustainability science and in relation to the FSSD. Yet at the same time, based on the evidence presented in previous chapters about the importance of linking culture to sustainable development, it seems increasingly important for FSSD practitioners to be able to apply a culture lens in their application of the framework.

The intention of this research is to improve current and future practitioners’ understanding of how to work with the FSSD in different cultural contexts by discovering what influence culture has on the framework’s practical application. This research focuses on the approaches FSSD practitioners take in their application of the framework within different cultural contexts in an attempt both to uncover patterns and to develop guidelines for applying the framework in those contexts with cultural sensitivity. The intention behind taking a fresh look at the cultural dimension of the FSSD is to contribute not only to the collective intelligence of the FSSD practitioner community, but also to the broader discussion in the field of sustainability science about the value of connecting the concept of culture to sustainable development, a relatively unexplored and new area of interest.

With the conviction that culture is a necessary foundation for sustainable development, this study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What do practitioners do to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD?
   1.1. What cultural factors do practitioners account for when applying the FSSD?
   1.2. What strategies do practitioners use to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD?
2. What guidelines can complement the FSSD so that it can be more easily applied in different cultural contexts?
2 Methods & Data

2.1 Qualitative research methods

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study. This approach draws on the most practical methods available to answer the given research questions and is commonly used to discover a situation, a process, and/or the worldviews and perspectives of the people involved (Merriam 2009). In other words, qualitative studies offer detailed summaries of events and aim for a description of these events as interpreted by the researchers (Sandelowski 2000). According to Savin-Baden and Major (2013, 172), qualitative research marks the intersection of description and interpretation, in which “description involves presentation of facts, feelings and experiences in the everyday language of participants, as interpreted by the researcher.” This approach suits the study given its focus on discovering how FSSD practitioners apply the framework in different cultural contexts and its goal of exposing as patterns of application that are currently unknown. Based on the selection of this approach, the study is descriptive in nature.

A literature review and semi-structured interviews were selected as methods to answer the research questions and achieve the research goal of discovering what influence culture may have on the practical application of the FSSD.

2.1.1 Literature review

The literature review sought to understand the current state of the research on the relationship between culture and sustainable development in the field of sustainability science. This involved the discussion of various authors’ views on the complex relationship between the two concepts, as well as the presentation of different definitions of culture, two cultural frameworks, and the FSSD. Importantly, Hofstede (1980; 2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s (1997) cultural frameworks were selected because both are “culture general” models and therefore suit the research given its aim to highlight cultural factors and strategies that have proven to be important in the application of the FSSD based on our respondents’ experiences. The aim of this research was not to compare national cultures or to create culture-specific guidelines for practitioners working in any of the locations where respondents have had experience applying the FSSD. Additionally, the FSSD was selected as the central focus of the research. No other frameworks for sustainability were included.

The process of conducting the literature review involved searching the Google Scholar, Scopus, and Dart databases using clear and focused search terms such as "sustainability" or "sustainable development" in combination with terms such as "culture" and "intercultural." Boolean logic was used to produce the most relevant search results and snowballing was also used as a technique to collect the most cited articles in relation to the research focus areas.

Data collection and analysis were not explicitly influenced a priori by the knowledge represented in the literature review. For example, the cultural dimensions presented in the frameworks developed by Hofstede (1980; 2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) were not incorporated into the interview questions. The intention here was to keep from influencing the respondents’ answers because the relationship between culture and sustainable development is a relatively unexplored and fairly new area of interest in sustainability science.
2.1.2 Interview method

In the semi-structured interview method, the researcher not only uses a number of predetermined questions that move from more general to more specific topics, but also asks additional questions in response to respondent reactions and comments (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). In other words, researchers are allowed to stray from an interview protocol as appropriate, probing discussion and following ideas (Ibid.). Questions tend to be open-ended, providing interviewees with the freedom to share their opinions and experiences, while at the same time generating data that can be compared across respondents (Ibid.). With these attributes, the semi-structured interview approach was selected based on its relation to the research approach guiding the work and its ability to capture nuances within complex and sensitive experiences while at the same time producing data that could be validly compared. The fact that this method is also capable of producing consistent results when authors collect data individually was also a benefit factored into the selection of this approach.

2.2 Data collection

2.2.1 Interviewee criteria

In order to answer the research questions, FSSD practitioners who have experience working with the framework in different cultural contexts were interviewed. The following two criteria were established to satisfy this need and identify eligible interviewees:

*In order to participate in the research as an interviewee, a practitioner must have...*

1. Experience applying the FSSD, and
2. Experience applying the FSSD outside of Europe or North America.

2.2.2 Identifying interviewees

To identify interviewees, a request for participation was prepared, including a one-page summary of the research, the authors’ biographies, and a link to an online survey for assessing eligibility (see Appendix 1). These materials were shared by the director of the MSLS program via a FSSD practitioner Facebook group page with 302 members, a MSLS alumni Facebook group page with 519 members, and a MSLS alumni listserv with 357 members. The same information was sent by the authors via email directly to thirty-five MSLS alumni currently located outside of Europe and the United States, as well as to the eleven regional TNS offices. Contact information for the alumni was provided by MSLS staff. Ultimately, it was not possible to determine the precise number of individuals who received the request for participation given the authors’ lack of access to the Facebook group pages and email listserv, as well as the significant amount of overlap between these lists.

In total, twenty-five people completed the online survey and/or replied the email request, and of those seventeen met the research criteria. These individuals were contacted via email with a request to schedule an interview. The email included a one-page summary of the research, including preliminary research questions and goals, the authors’ biographies, and an invitation to reply with any questions about participation or the research. In total, thirteen people replied to the request to schedule an interview and ultimately participated in interviews.
2.2.3 Interviews

The thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 12, 2017 and April 7, 2017 with FSSD practitioners who had experience applying the FSSD everywhere from Chile to Zambia and China to Mozambique. Figure 2.1 and Table 2.1 below showcase the specific locations where their experience took place.

Figure 2.1: A map showcasing the locations where respondents have had experience applying the FSSD. Each interviewee’s experience is represented by one color.

Table 2.1: A list of locations where respondents have had experience applying the FSSD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent code name</th>
<th>Location of experience applying the FSSD relevant to the study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 1</td>
<td>Palau, Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 2</td>
<td>Costa Rica, India, Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 3</td>
<td>Zambia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 4</td>
<td>Ecuador, Peru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 5</td>
<td>New Zealand (Māori)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 6</td>
<td>Israel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee 7</td>
<td>Australia, Chile</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee 8</td>
<td>India, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee 9</td>
<td>Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee 10</td>
<td>Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee 11</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
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<td>Interviewee 12</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
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<td>Interviewee 13</td>
<td>China</td>
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A confirmation email was sent to each participant two days in advance of each interview. The email included a confirmation of the interview logistics; clarification around confidentiality stipulations; an invitation to reply with any questions; a request for written agreement to the interview conditions; and advance gratitude for the respondent’s participation.

Twelve interviews were conducted online using either Google Hangouts or Skype video conferencing, and one interview was conducted through a cellular phone call due to the participant’s limited access to the Internet. All interviews were conducted in English. Interview duration ranged between fifty and eighty-seven minutes, and all interviews were digitally recorded using either Amolto or QuickTime Player to aid transcription and increase data reliability. Two authors were present for each interview with the first serving as interviewer and the second serving as notetaker. The interviewer used a preset list of interview questions, which can be found in Appendix 2, to guide the conversation, and asked additional questions for clarification and/or to probe discussion.

The interview questions were carefully reviewed after the first two interviews to determine whether or not any refinements needed to be made to the wording of each individual question or to the overall sequence of questions. Changes were considered for improving clarity, consistency of the type of data elicited, and interview duration. Ultimately no significant changes were made after reflection and discussion, and no additional changes were made after subsequent interviews.

2.3 Data analysis

2.3.1 Transcription

The thirteen interview recordings were divided among the authors for transcription. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, excluding aspects such as the participant’s tone, pacing, and body language, which are difficult to glean from an audio recording of an interview conducted remotely using online software. In this study respondents’ answers were deemed more important than the manner in which they gave their answers.

Upon completion of a transcription, a separate author reviewed it while listening to the audio recording to improve its accuracy and increase its validity. After review, transcriptions were sent back to participants with requests for clarification as needed, invitations to make any desired changes to the data, and requests for approval. Participants provided clarifications but did not make any substantial changes. All transcriptions were approved for use in the study.

2.3.2 Coding

After all transcriptions were approved, data analysis began through a coding process. Each transcription was first cut into meaningful segments, in most cases at the sentence or paragraph level. These segments were then transformed into summary sentences and eventually into open
codes. Through this process all related incidents within the data were conceptualized with codes (e.g., “motivation,” “outcomes,” etcetera) that attached meaning to those incidents (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). Codes in this study were not explicitly influenced a priori by the knowledge represented in the literature review; instead, they were developed based on the data and may therefore be called inductive codes (Ibid.). Each author individually conducted this process for all thirteen interview transcriptions. This resulted in a total of 361 codes.

Next, the authors reviewed the codes per interview transcription, discussing and editing codes based on their individual interpretations until agreement was reached on the codes for each segment of raw data. The total number of codes was reduced from 361 to 105 after these conversations.

With the coding completed, codes were then discussed in relation to the interview questions and compared across respondents in order to discover any existing patterns. Discussion moved from small units of information to the larger story, and the process was repeated until a moment of saturation was reached and no new patterns emerged. Finally, codes were organized into a total of ten themes, or unifying ideas, and all but twenty-six miscellaneous codes ultimately fell into these themes.

Themes were created when ideas (and their corresponding codes) appeared in three or more interview transcriptions, as opposed to being created based on the frequency with which the ideas appeared in the full list of codes. This research is interested in exploring themes relevant to the application of the FSSD across different cultural contexts; it is not interested in exploring themes specific to one country (or themes specific to the experiences of one respondent who may have discussed the same idea multiple times throughout his or her interview). The themes labeled Gender dynamics, Power dynamics, and Time orientation were created based on the knowledge of the cultural dimensions in Hofstede (1980; 2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s (1997) frameworks, and all remaining themes were created based on their connection to the application of the FSSD. A possible eleventh theme around the FSSD’s Social Sustainability Principles (SSPs) was identified, however it was not included in the results due to the respondents’ lack of practical experience of working with the SSPs. However, the relationship between culture and the SSPs is discussed in Chapter 4.5 about the possible implications of this research for strategic sustainable development, as well as in the recommendations for further research discussed in Chapter 4.6. A final list of codes clustered by theme can be found in Appendix 3, a matrix of themes and their occurrence across the data can be found in Appendix 4, and their relevance both to the FSSD and to Hofstede (1980; 2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s (1997) frameworks will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

After the themes were created, they were then clustered and presented in Chapter 3 in answer to three questions: why is it necessary for FSSD practitioners to take the cultural context into account in their application of the framework; what cultural factors do they account for; and how do they account for those cultural factors. This narrative also provides the structure for discussion of the themes in Chapters 4.2 and 4.3.

In sum, this approach to data analysis exposed patterns of experience across respondents, effectively knitting together their individual experiences into one larger story and thereby providing meaningful data to answer the research questions.
2.4 Ethics

Every effort was made to protect the individuals who participated in this research. Their approval was sought at every step of the research process and their responses are presented in Chapter 3 anonymously. There was no formal ethics board approval for this research.

2.5 Limitations and strengths

Regarding limitations, the research design included one round of semi-structured interviews and the resulting data provided important insights into the influence of culture on the practical application of the FSSD. However, an additional round of follow-up interviews would have offered the opportunity to further probe the many rich experiences of the respondents. In Chapter 4.6, the authors make recommendations for further research to fully discover the cultural dimension of the FSSD through the experiences of practitioners.

Although the authors undoubtedly brought their own biases to the research, they come from Benin, the Netherlands, and the United States. Each author therefore brought a distinct worldview and cultural background. This was seen as a tremendous strength for the study, especially coupled with the authors’ commitment to ongoing reflection and discussion to overcome any potential individual cultural biases. This can be described as an attempt at “decentering” and is further discussed in Chapter 4.7.

Another strength of this research is the fact that respondents belong to the intended audience for this thesis: current and future practitioners of the FSSD. Given that FSSD practitioners are the source for data, the research and its outcomes will be directly relevant to its intended audience.

Finally, the fact that the topic of this research is relatively unexplored within the field of sustainability science is both a limitation and a strength of this study. On the one hand, the analysis and discussion of the research could not benefit from decades-long discussion about the value of connecting the concept of culture to sustainable development; however, on the other hand, the results of the study have the potential to contribute significant insights to this new area of interest.
3 Results

The results of this research will be presented through the respondents’ experiences and stories. These provide insight into what FSSD practitioners do to account for the different cultural contexts they work in by showcasing what cultural factors practitioners account for and what strategies practitioners use. The experiences and stories have been clustered by theme. Any given theme may contain examples from only a portion of the respondents, however exclusion of the remaining respondents does not necessarily signal the fact that those respondents have not experienced the theme or do not believe in its importance. Exclusion of a respondent simply means he or she did not provide information that could be connected to the theme during his or her interview.

The first two themes presented in Chapters 3.1 and 3.2 showcase respondents’ experiences that suggest why it is necessary for the cultural context to be taken into account during application of the FSSD. The next four themes presented in Chapters 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, and 3.6 highlight experiences that suggest what cultural factors respondents have taken into account during their application of the FSSD. Finally, the remaining four themes presented in Chapters 3.7, 3.8, 3.9, and 3.10 suggest how they account for those cultural factors using practical strategies in their day-to-day work. Figure 3.1 shows the themes in connection with the why, how, and what questions.

![Figure 3.1: Results of this study are presented through themes and clustered to answer the questions: why is it necessary for FSSD practitioners to take the cultural context into account in their application of the framework; what cultural factors do they account for; and how do they account for those cultural factors.](image-url)
3.1 Lack of understanding of FSSD

Five interviewees explicitly described experiences working with the FSSD where people did not understand it. Interviewee 5 (2017) said, for example, “The Maoris just didn’t get the FSSD as it’s currently presented from Sweden and how we deliver it from the generally acceptable delivering method. They needed it done vastly different to appeal to them.” There were different rationales, however, expressed by respondents for this lack of understanding.

In Interviewee 2’s experience, the structuredness and the scientific basis of the framework, especially the SPs, were two reasons why many people were not able to understand the framework. The scientific aspect was also addressed by Interviewee 5, however in a slightly different way. He compared his experiences in different organizations suggesting how on the one hand the FSSD’s scientific underpinnings are a focal point for The Natural Step, while on the other hand other organizations do not “get as excited by the science [...] because they have a different culture and way of understanding it” (Interviewee 5 2017).

Based on Interviewee 6’s experience, people for whom religion plays an important role can have more difficulty understanding the framework because they may believe, for instance, that “everything is controlled by God” and “redemption will come” (Interviewee 6 2017). On the other hand according to the same interviewee, people who have a more scientific worldview may understand the science better. Additionally, both Interviewees 8 and 10 indicated that the FSSD’s scientific approach is not always capable of addressing everything that is relevant to specific situations such as, for example, spirituality, faith, and religion, yet in many cases these dimensions are very important for successfully working with the framework. Similarly, Interviewee 10 elaborated on how important the difference in worldview—in this case a scientific worldview and an indigenous worldview—can be for the understanding of the framework:

> It’s not only about Chilean culture or European culture. It’s also about holistic worldview and scientific worldview. The scientific worldview has this bias of mechanistic, positivistic, rationalistic way of understanding things. Indigenous worlds are more open to validate intuition, non-linear knowledge, or spiritual tradition as a valued way of knowing (Interviewee 10 2017).

Additionally, Interviewees 5 and 9 commented on how location and worldview played a role in people’s ability to understand the FSSD. Specifically Interviewee 9 speculated that perhaps people in the Northern Hemisphere may be able to understand the framework more easily than people in the Southern Hemisphere. Interviewee 5 also commented on the fact that people with the Maoris worldview may have more difficulty understanding the framework than people with a Western worldview. Another story from Interviewee 8 below—where he describes one of his European colleagues facilitating a workshop in Kenya—shows a possible difference in Kenyans ability to understand the FSSD:

> He did his first few presentations, and very quickly people realized that they didn’t understand what he was saying. Not just because of language, but because of the way he talks. He used wrong examples—well, not wrong examples, but irrelevant examples. So people didn’t understand what he was saying. I was there more or less like his junior, but I had to step up and do the training. So I did the training. I’m from Zimbabwe. The Kenyans, they see me as an African. That probably
helps. But the fact is that I could probably communicate in a way that they could relate to (Interviewee 8 2017).

This story also highlights the fact that it is easier for people to understand the framework when they can relate to the examples used to describe it, or, in other words, when it is conceptually translated and communicated with appropriate words, as discussed in the next chapter.

3.2 Need for conceptually translating and/or simplifying elements of the FSSD

As a result of the lack of understanding of the FSSD among audiences in different cultural contexts, eleven interviewees emphasized the need to either simplify the framework in such a way that it becomes easier for people to understand, or translate it, not just linguistically but also conceptually, to make it more relatable to people’s culture.

Five interviewees reportedly avoid mentioning the SPs to their audiences when possible, yet when it is necessary to do so, they said they need a simplified version to make the principles more understandable. For example, Interviewees 1 and 2 described the need for a “dumbed down” (Interviewee 1 2017) version of the principles when working with audiences at a remedial education level. After making this comment, however, Interviewee 1 recognized that what is needed is not exactly a “dumbed down” version because this implies removing the essence of the principles. Instead, what is needed is a way of simplifying the principles in such a way that they can be conveyed through “more appropriate” (Interviewee 2 2017) language, thus making them “more readily available—something that someone can walk away and remember after one hour” (Interviewee 1 2017). According to Interviewee 2 (2017), the challenge inherent to the act of simplifying lies in finding the right “balance between rigor, applicability and accessibility” in both the conceptual and linguistic presentation of the FSSD. He went on to elaborate that “The most accessible doesn’t have the rigor. The most rigorous doesn’t have the accessibility” (Interviewee 2 2017).

As an alternative to simplifying the FSSD, seven interviewees described the need for translating its elements, again not just linguistically but also conceptually. This means “taking a concept and turning it into something that isn’t just a concept, but something relatable for the individual and the group you are working with” (Interviewee 4 2017). According to Interviewee 7 (2017), it is impossible to engage people “unless we take into account the cultural factors [...] because if it has no connection, no relatability, people will not pay attention.” The following advice from Interviewee 12 also shows the importance of translating the framework to fit the local cultural context:

Frame the message in a way that people can own it. So people feel that things have been translated for them and they’re part of it [...] The challenges, although they’re global, they need to be framed locally [...] If you bring something from abroad, something from another context, people will say it’s not going to work here. It basically requires framing the message in a way that it sounds like it’s a unique solution for a unique problem. Even though it’s not. But you have to frame it that way. It’s like it was invented in Sweden, but it was improved or tropicalized or contextualized for our situation here. So you have to do this. This is something that has to happen for the whole thing to be effective (Interviewee 12 2017).
Interviewee 6 suggested another approach to translating the FSSD, which involves gaining an understanding of the audience’s perspective on sustainable development and then using that knowledge to frame the way the framework is presented. For example, Interviewee 6 shared the story of a situation when she presented the framework to an ultra-orthodox woman who struggled to understand it. Only when Interviewee 6 found a link to the woman’s religion did she finally understand it. Interviewee 7 provided a useful explanation of this strategy, stating:

*It’s less about trying to take these people that might be a square peg and cramming them in the round hole that is the FSSD. Instead it’s about looking at their square peg and adjusting the FSSD to fit perfectly into that square peg. So building it around the people you work with rather than the other way around of forcing the people to work around the FSSD* (Interviewee 7 2017).

Based on these experiences in different cultural contexts, respondents noticed the importance of discovering what is meaningful for their audiences, what their values are, and what drives their personal motivations, and then making the FSSD and its elements more relatable by simplifying or conceptually translating its various elements.

### 3.3 Gender dynamics

Four of the thirteen practitioners also reported on the importance of gender dynamics in their experience of applying the FSSD. Interviewee 1 described how best to navigate a matriarchal social system from the outset of a project, Interviewee 3 described gender inequality as an obstacle to applying the SPs, and Interviewees 8 and 10 shared similar examples of how they made facilitation choices to account for the gender dynamics at play within communities in Liberia and Chile.

First, gender dynamics are important to be aware of in Palau, according to Interviewee 1, who stressed the benefit of building relationships with matriarchs at the outset of a project. He advised, "Build a strong relationship with someone who has a lot of sway in the community [...] The matriarchs are very friendly and often very willing to opening up to foreigners" (Interviewee 1 2017). Interviewee 1 later went on to say that female foreigners often have more success working in Palau than male foreigners.

In Zambia, Interviewee 3 experienced how inequality between men and women is culturally embedded: "In our context the culture emphasizes inequality between men and women" (Interviewee 3 2017). This presented an "obstacle" (Interviewee 3 2017) to his presentation of the SSPs, especially the seventh SP—"impartiality." Even so, Interviewee 3 discussed his attempt at addressing gender dynamics through the SPs, saying, "It becomes very sensitive [...] but I try to address those gender inequalities by adhering to the FSSD Sustainability Principles" (Interviewee 3 2017).

Interviewees 8 and 10 discussed similar examples where gender dynamics required them to adjust their facilitation approaches. In the first case, Interviewee 8 recalled facilitating the creation of a village map with a community in Liberia. Women "who had never spoken out" (Interviewee 8 2017) were present and struggled with their fear to express themselves. Interviewee 8 described how he tried to address their fear by saying, "We invite you to express yourself this way" (Interviewee 8 2017). He also described the facilitation adjustment as a successful way to address the gender dynamics at play, just as Interviewee 10 did in this experience working with the Quinquen community in southern Chile:
We used the World Cafe Method in order to build a shared vision. However, in that culture, women self-inhibit. They inhibit themselves to speak aloud in front of men. So we had to create the same World Cafe experience with the same questions, but at different tables. So there were tables for men and tables for women with a female host for the women and a male host for the men. Because if we cross-pollinated, and if we mixed them, then we could have lost their voices. And in that project it was not our role to change that part of the culture (Interviewee 10 2017).

Importantly, Interviewee 10 acknowledged both how the gender dynamics were embedded within the culture, and the fact that the facilitation team’s role was not to change the culture. Instead, what was needed, and what Interviewee 10 successfully delivered, was a facilitation approach that accounted for the gender dynamics in an appropriate way.

3.4 Power dynamics

The way power dynamics were of influence on the practitioners’ work with the FSSD was a theme discussed by seven respondents.

In three cases power dynamics were discussed in relation to understanding the nuances of how power is distributed within a society or community. For these practitioners it became important to know who the influential people were in the society or community and to build relationships with those individuals. The data contained stories showing how respondents built relationships with “powerful” people varying from the matriarch of a community in Palau, the spiritual leader of the Quinquen community in southern Chile, or the most respected elders connected to a local mosque in India. In all of these cases it was important for the practitioners to build strong relationships with the people who “have a lot of sway in the community” (Interviewee 1 2017), to “gain validity with informal leaders” (Interviewee 10 2017), and to have people supporting them “from the inside” (Interviewee 2 2017).

Interviewee 13 elaborated on how power dynamics impacted her work with the framework in a Chinese business context, offering yet another example of how this cultural dimension can influence the work of FSSD practitioners. She described the traditional Chinese leadership culture as being top-down, which presented a challenge for applying the FSSD in companies: “According to my experience, I think it works best to use the FSSD in a company that has a bottom-up approach in terms of leadership. But this is actually the opposite of most of the Chinese leadership culture. We are more used to top-down leadership. From that point of view it’s actually a big challenge” (Interviewee 13 2017).

Finally, three respondents elaborated on how important it is to account for power dynamics on a more societal level. In the cases of Interviewees 6 and 3, their stories were limited to describing certain elements of their culture and how differences in power led to distrust in their culture. For example, Interviewee 6 described how there is a certain amount of distrust in Israeli culture because people have a tendency to believe that everyone always strives for more power over others. In Interviewee 3’s case, he described the inequality embedded within Zambian culture: “The culture emphasizes inequality between men and women, inequality between adults and children, inequality between those in power and citizens, those who are being led” (Interviewee 3 2017). Interviewee 8 also shared a similar story when he described his work in Liberia; however, unlike the previous examples he went on to explain how the dimension of
power practically influenced his own work. He described a situation where power dynamics influenced the participatory methods he used because people were not used to speaking up. Instead, power was automatically granted to a government official who served as a spokesperson for the whole group:

In Liberia at the time there were not so many people who were going to school. So the cultural dimension, you could say, is here you have a situation where people are not used to speaking out. They are just used to saying ‘Okay, we have this person here who is a government official and one of the few educated people in the village, so he has a lot of power. He is the spokesperson for all of us even though we haven’t really given him that mandate’ (Interviewee 3 2017).

In general, the data showed that the dimension of power was addressed by the majority of the practitioners. They reported different ways in which this element influenced their work with the FSSD and therefore also showcased different ways of accounting for it.

3.5 Time orientation

Another theme that arose within our data was the practitioners’ need to account for a community’s time orientation, especially while using backcasting as an approach to decision-making and strategic planning. Three practitioners described backcasting as a useful tool for countering a community’s short-term orientation to time, whereas two practitioners described how a community’s circular time orientation caused difficulty for practitioners using the backcasting approach in the way it is construed within the FSSD.

In the cases where practitioners described backcasting as a useful tool for countering a community’s short-term time orientation, their rationale is similar. Short-term thinking prevents these communities not only from being able to create long-term visions and goals, but also from linking near-term actions to those visions. Interviewee 1 (2017) explained, “I do think that backcasting has a place in Palau’s society in particular because they have a tendency to plan in the long-term, but think in the short-term. Backcasting would allow more focus on actions that are long-term beneficial and larger goals.” Interviewee 13 (2017) described how there typically “isn’t any link between vision and action” in China, which is problematic especially when changes are happening fast in an environment “you can’t really predict or forecast” (Ibid.). These practitioners posit that backcasting would be a valuable tool to help these communities shift the way they are approaching sustainability planning.

In the two examples where practitioners reported having difficulty using backcasting in the way it is construed within the FSSD, the two communities they were working within had a circular time orientation as opposed to a linear time orientation. Interviewee 5 described, for example, that the Maori community has a deep appreciation for how the past affects the future. When Interviewee 5 (2017) introduced the concept of backcasting, the community “actually turned it around because they walk backwards into the future, looking where they came from and looking at their history.” In this way, the Maori move toward the future yet remain focused on what has come before. Interviewee 10 described a similar experience when he presented the concept of backcasting to an indigenous community in Chile:

During the harvesting of the World Cafe, one of the elders told us that in their worldview, time is not linear. Time is circular. So they cannot talk about the future without talking about the past. For them, stewarding the peace and harmony in
the land is preserving the past. In order to preserve the future, you need to preserve the past. To honor their ancestors, to honor their traditions. So that’s the way they think. That’s the way their worldview is about putting the past first, and that’s why they start all of their meetings honoring their ancestors, honoring their traditions in order to preserve the future. So basically to do a strategic planning approach in a linear way is very different. Because in some way, when you are building a shared dream, well, that shared dream is also a memory of the past. So the projection of the dream is equal to the past in their worldview (Interviewee 10 2017).

In these two examples, the communities’ circular time orientation influenced the way these practitioners could work with backcasting.

### 3.6 Spirituality and religion

Of the thirteen interviewees, four spoke about the importance of accounting for spirituality and religion while applying the FSSD. Interviewee 6 described the need to consider the religious backgrounds of her workshop participants, Interviewee 2 shared an experience in which he connected the sustainability imperative to Hinduism, and finally examples from Interviewees 8 and 10 illustrated how religion and spirituality play a large role in decision-making for communities in Africa and Chile, thus requiring adjustments to Interviewees 8 and 10’s facilitation strategies.

In the first case, Interviewee 6 facilitated a workshop in Israel in which an Orthodox Jew, who believed “everything was controlled by God” (Interviewee 6 2017) and “everything she did didn’t matter because God has everything planned” (Ibid.), participated alongside an individual with a background in natural and environmental sciences. Interviewee 6 (2017) alluded to the importance of taking their vastly different worldviews into account while presenting the FSSD in her comment that “To have them on both ends of the scale is really interesting in the group, and you have to talk to both of them about the FSSD.”

Interviewee 2 also shared an experience in India when he was able to connect the sustainability imperative to the religious worldview of an individual, despite prevailing cultural norms. He was speaking to a Hindu about sustainability when the man “chucked a plastic bag out the window” (Interviewee 2 2017). His excuse was that “everybody does it—no big deal” (Ibid.). Cows are thought to be sacred in Hinduism, and after Interviewee 2 described to the man how a cow could potentially eat the plastic and become sick, the man was shocked. Interviewee 2 said he sensed the idea had never occurred to the man, and in this way, he was able to connect the cultural norm of littering to the individual’s religious worldview and to the sustainability imperative.

Finally, Interviewee 8 and 10 both shared similar experiences illustrating how religion and spirituality play a large role in decision-making for communities in Africa and Chile and how this required adjustments to their facilitation strategies. First, a community facing relocation in Africa reportedly said to Interviewee 8 (2017), “Our ancestors lived here, so we cannot be relocated to another place.” Based on this and similar experiences in parts of Africa, Interviewee 8 (2017) described, “It is a fact that spirituality and ancestry play a huge role in the way decisions are made. If you don’t take that into consideration, no matter how fantastic your project is, it might not move.”
Similarly, Interviewee 10 encountered a situation while working with the indigenous Quinquen community in southern Chile that helped him see the role spirits and spirituality play in decision-making and also required him to adjust his facilitation plans in a way he never imagined before:

Another cultural aspect that was very important was to involve the spirits. That’s something that no MSLS, no MBA, no master’s degree will prepare you for! How to involve spirits in a participatory strategic planning process. We needed to ask the spirits for permission to start the workshop. Finally, after a few months of facilitating workshops, we saw that the elders were more afraid of opening the community to tourism. The youngsters, the teenagers, were more open because some of them had Internet, some of them had Facebook. Finally, after lots of talk around the fire and having mate, they told us what they were afraid of. Their biggest fear was that the foreigners, the tourists, would come to the forest without asking for permission from the spirit of the forest. The spirits would be angry, and they would go away. That was their biggest fear. So, our proposal was to make the tourists ask for permission from the forest, to oblige the tourists to have a local guide, and to put up a sign with three languages—English, Spanish, and their local indigenous language—requiring them to ask for permission from the spirits. Ok! And with that condition they accepted. They were willing to accept that condition (Interviewee 10 2017).

In sum, the data showed that religion and spirituality played an important role in the experiences of four respondents.

3.7 Adopting a “beginner’s mind”

When responding to questions about what advice they would give to future practitioners working with the FSSD in different cultural contexts or what leadership capacities are needed to do this, ten out of thirteen respondents described a similar kind of attitude that they saw as necessary for working with the framework in different cultural contexts. This attitude was described by the practitioners using keywords such as humbleness, flexibility, curiosity, a “beginner’s mind,” and openness. Although the practitioners described this attitude in different ways, a clear pattern was seen when the answers were compared. Almost all of them stressed the importance of having this open and humble attitude—an attitude of curiosity with the willingness to be surprised. Interviewee 2 described this by referring to the concepts of a “beginner’s mind,” which is a concept that stems from Buddhism:

The thing that first comes to mind is “beginner’s mind.” In Buddhism there’s this perspective on no matter how many times you’ve sat, no matter how many times you’ve meditated, or listened to a guided meditation, come there as if you don’t know anything, and start again. This requires an extremely humble approach. Yes, I know what I know. Yes, I believe in what I know. And no, I don’t think that’s all there is. And no, I’m not unwilling to change my mind. I’m open to have the conversation. It doesn’t mean that everything just goes overboard when I hear something else, but it means that whatever else comes has space (Interviewee 2 2017).

It was this kind of attitude that many of the practitioners described in different words. An important element of this attitude that the practitioners described was their ability to listen first
before they started talking about and explaining the framework. They described the importance of taking the time, listening, and understanding the perspective of the people that they were working with. In addition, four of the practitioners stressed how essential it is not to force the framework onto others. In one of the examples, Interviewee 7 (2017) described this by saying, “If you just go to somebody and start preaching the framework and it has no connection, no relatability to that person, it’s pretty likely they won’t give it a shit. They aren’t going to listen to you.”

### 3.8 Building trust

Eight of the thirteen practitioners stressed the importance of building trust, another key theme in our data collection. They indicated how important it is to listen and to take the time to build relationships and demonstrate their commitment to the people they worked with. Relatedly, many respondents described how important it is to have an open, humble attitude and to be willing to first listen instead of directly starting to talk and explain.

In one case, Interviewee 5’s for example, the process of building trust took more than two years. By constantly showing commitment to the process, Interviewee 5 and other practitioners were able to build relationships with the communities or organizations they were working with. Interviewee 7 (2017), for example, stated: “It was more about showing the commitment to them and showing them day-to-day that we were there to work with them together on this. That was really when we were starting to get those results.”

Trust building commonly took place during informal conversations. Many practitioners elaborated on the importance of engaging in one-on-one conversations, going for a cup of coffee, or having lunch with key stakeholders and opinion leaders in order to build a trustworthy relationship. The practitioners described the process of trust building as a prerequisite before “the real work” of applying the FSSD could take place. Interviewee 10 explained this with a cooking metaphor:

> Yeah, I think it’s very intuitive. I don’t know in other cultures, but Latin American cultures are cultures of informal conversations. Much of the process is built through informal conversations, one-to-one, in small groups. Then in the workshop you prepare the scenario to make it formal, however most of the “cooking” process is previous to the kitchen. You need to pre-cook the process, and that means a lot of informal conversations with communities, gaining validity with informal leaders. Especially with indigenous communities, they have a distributed leadership. So they have a leader for spiritual issues, a leader for conflicts, a leader for strategic things. So it’s important to build trust with all of them (Interviewee 10 2017).

Importantly, Interviewee 10 was aware that the context in which he was working had a specific cultural characteristic (i.e., the “culture of informal conversations”), which needed to be taken into account and required him to adjust his approach.

> In general, the data showed that the importance of trust building was addressed by almost all of the practitioners. Many of them stressed how important it was to consciously work on this—describing it as a prerequisite—before they could start working with FSSD concepts. Although the interviewees all operated in completely different cultural contexts,
and their stories all highlighted different ways of building trust, the common denominator was that they all stressed the importance of this element (Interviewee 10 2017).

3.9 Taking time to understand the local context

In order to simplify and/or conceptually translate elements of the FSSD to make them more relatable, eleven respondents reported that it is indispensable to first take time to understand the local context, including the place’s history, politics, culture, etcetera. According to Interviewee 4 (2017), “to be successful in any place of the world, you need to be really rooted in the place where you are and have that cultural knowledge to understand all those forces at play.” Similarly, in reference to his work with the Maori people of New Zealand, Interviewee 5 (2017) said, “Had I been more in tune with their culture beforehand, I would’ve had an easier time.”

With the following comment, Interviewee 7 also showed how taking time to understand the local context will help practitioners learn information about a community or characteristics of the local culture that can then be used to make the framework more understandable to people:

> Spend time in the community and understand their way of life [...] My wife and I moved into the first artisanal fishing village that we partnered with, and we tried to really focus on understanding their way of life because that has to resonate if you’re ever going to get through. So I would say, step one, just spend a lot of time with them. Go and be part of their culture to understand it. When you do that you can start to pick up on those different items that connect and relate [...] You’re going to pick up on the fact that they have an issue when it comes to how they’re heating their homes. Maybe there is an issue about how they can get access to a hospital, how they’re getting access to clean drinking water. You can start to pick up on those things and say, you know, this is stuff that I can connect to it (Interviewee 7 2017).

Eleven interviewees also stressed how taking time to understand the local context can lead to the discovery that, in comparison with other issues, sustainability is not a priority. In some cases, this may cause people to respond poorly to the framework. This is what Interviewee 8 (2017) realized when he arrived in Mozambique after living in Switzerland for four years: “I came to Mozambique. I looked at where the country was at the moment, realizing that sustainability was not on the agenda. Of course there were people working on different aspects of sustainability, but it was not something that was on the agenda on the strategic level.”

Similar stories were shared by multiple respondents, including Interviewee 6 who reflected on how security issues are more important than sustainability issues in Israel; Interview 7 who explained that in Chile sustainability issues may not be on people’s agenda simply because their basic needs are still not always met; and Interviewee 4 who described how in some places in Peru, sustainability issues are still relatively new and people do not always have the knowledge to address them. For practitioners this was important knowledge in taking the local context into account for their application of the framework.

In addition, the following example from Interviewee 2, showed how important it is to understand the nuances of the local context and how this possibly influences the SP’s. In this example, Interviewee 2 shows that the local context, in this case living in a caste system, can greatly influence what the SP’s actually mean in a society, what is perceived as a structural obstacle, and therefore also how a practitioner might address this issue:
And of course when you talk about culture, if you are steeped into a caste system, then you perceive that as normal. And unless you are in a space that is critical of it, the space for questioning it is also not very big. And if you’re higher up in the caste, then why would you question if it’s benefiting you? So the idea of sustainability, or the benefit for all, or the idea that every single being has the same rights, and every human being has the same rights and is of equal value—where would that feature? Well, it doesn’t. Simple as that (Interviewee 2 2017).

3.10 Use of local examples, metaphors, and storytelling

Nine out of the thirteen respondents reportedly used local examples, metaphors, and storytelling as a strategy in their application of the FSSD. Practitioners tried to “speak their audiences’ language” by using these local examples and metaphors to explain certain elements of the FSSD such as the SPs, the funnel, and backcasting. The practitioners stressed the importance of finding out what is meaningful to the people that you work with and relating elements of the framework to their perspectives. By using local examples, metaphors, and storytelling the practitioners were able to make the framework more understandable and more relevant. Interviewee 8 explained this by stating:

So we first needed to find the examples. You have to find the examples locally. Examples of what we are talking about when we are talking about system condition one, and system condition two, etcetera [...] And we also needed to find current examples about the funnel, and that we can probably find most of the time (Interviewee 8 2017).

Next to describing how important it is to find local examples and use local metaphors, the practitioners also gave examples of how they did this. This varied from practitioner to practitioner including references to a specific type of bird that has an important cultural meaning, building a story around local dams or gas plants, or using the mythological story of a local hero and his quest to cross the river. Many practitioners showcased how they were able to adapt the stories and examples that they used to the cultural narratives of the people they were working with to explain elements of the FSSD. An example of this was seen in the interview with Interviewee 5. He described how he explained the concept of the funnel by using an example specifically tailored to the cultural context he was working in:

Or as I did for example with the funnel, I used something related to them. So I used a “Hinaki,” which is an eel trap. They would put these traps in the river which are made of flax [a native plant]. And they shaped those flax in a series of hoops going down at an angle [in the shape of a funnel]. It’s a clever design. So when the eels go in, there is a flax that sticks outwards so they can’t get back out again. But it looks quite inviting to go in. So that’s an ideal metaphor for the funnel. Swimming in, and when they get to the end, shit! They can’t get out. So they would be somewhere swimming around that. They really grasped that nicely when I talked about it (Interviewee 5 2017).

The practitioners also reported on what they were not doing. The data collection showed several examples where practitioners spoke about how they explicitly did not mention the SPs, the funnel, or other elements of the framework. They indicated that explaining these elements did not work in their specific cultural contexts because these concepts did not connect to the worldviews or the daily experiences of the people they worked with. Instead, the practitioners
again explained how they used local examples and metaphors to discuss certain elements of the framework and make it more relatable and understandable.

In general, almost all of the practitioners stressed the importance of using local examples, metaphors, and storytelling. They all had different ways of doing this and all used different kinds of examples, stories, and metaphors, however the data showed a clear pattern and numerous of examples of practitioners using this strategy. Interviewee 8 (2017) summarized the main idea behind this strategy by saying: “Actually the method here is to take their stories and frame them with the FSSD. And when you do that, I think they see. It’s my experience that people see, because I’m taking their story, and I just put it in this different frame.”
4 Discussion

4.1 Framing our discussion

This chapter will relate the results of the research to the three models relevant to culture and sustainability—Hofstede (1980; 2001), Trompenaars-Hampden Turner (1997), and Soini and Dessein (2016)—as presented in Chapter 1. This analysis will give insight in which cultural factors practitioners account for when working with the FSSD in different cultural contexts and how this enabled them to work with the framework more successfully. Similarly, the analysis will provide the same insights for the strategies that practitioners use to account for the cultural context when working with the FSSD. In addition, the results of this research will also be related to strategic sustainable development and the overarching discussion about the relation between culture and sustainable development in general.

Before diving into discussion of the results, it is important to note that we are not aiming to compare national cultures or create culture-specific guidelines for practitioners working in any of the locations where respondents have had experience applying the FSSD. Our aim is instead to highlight cultural factors and strategies that have proven to be important in the application of the FSSD based on our respondents experiences. Therefore, we chose to discuss our results through the lens of the “culture general” models of Hofstede (1980; 2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). An important caveat is that these models reflect central tendencies on a national scale. This means that any single individual can differ from the national average, or in the case of our research, the experience of any respondent may differ from the national average where she or he was applying the FSSD. Interviewee 10’s experience with a specific Chilean community’s time orientation, for example, is not necessarily representative of Chile’s national orientation to time. It is not our intention to make a generalization about Chile based on Interviewee 10’s experiences. In this case, time orientation is merely a cultural factor that might prove to be important for practitioners to take into account in their application of the FSSD in different cultural contexts.

The results were presented and will be discussed as independent themes. It is important to note, however, that the distinct themes are strongly interconnected, both in terms of where experiences fit (i.e., one experience may fit equally well into two separate themes) and how themes build on each other. Interviewee 1’s experience with Palau’s matriarchal society, for example, could be interpreted as showcasing the cultural dimensions of both power and gender dynamics. Similarly, the need for conceptually translating elements of the FSSD was closely interlinked with the strategy of using local examples, metaphors and storytelling. By using this strategy, respondents were successful in conceptually translating elements of the FSSD that were not previously understandable to their audiences.

4.2 Relevancy of the research

The results of this research confirm that culture has an important role to play in the application of the FSSD. The themes Lack of understanding of the FSSD and Need for conceptually translating and/or simplifying elements of the FSSD specifically showcase the experiences of respondents when they were confronted with audiences who, for various reasons, did not understand elements of the framework without conceptual translation or simplification.
First, in some cultures the local traditional knowledge holds greater significance than knowledge from the “universal science of the modern era” (Opstal and Hugé 2013). In those cultures the FSSD with its scientific underpinnings will not always appeal or make sense. Relatedly, some respondents also suggested that the FSSD’s “scientific structuredness” makes it too complicated for audiences to understand. For these reasons, respondents expressed the need to simplify the framework or to create a version that is more readily accessible to people who may not have a scientific worldview or prioritize scientific knowledge. This was illustrated by Interviewee 10 when he elaborated on how important the difference in worldview—in this case a scientific worldview and an indigenous worldview—can be for the understanding of the framework:

*It’s not only about Chilean culture or European culture. It’s also about holistic worldview and scientific worldview. The scientific worldview has this bias of mechanistic, positivistic, rationalistic way of understanding things. Indigenous worlds are more open to validate intuition, non-linear knowledge, or spiritual tradition as a valued way of knowing* (Interviewee 10 2017).

This tension that Interviewee 10 addresses between different worldviews seems to be closely related to what Miller (2013) calls “thin” and “thick” sustainability. Thin sustainability, or universalist sustainability, is described as the approach to sustainability that encourages widespread agreement but at the same time does not translate substantively to the level of individual behavior. Meeting human needs without degrading the planet’s life support system, both now and in the future, is an example of this universalist approach. A main characteristic of thin sustainability in this sense is that it is complemented by a belief in the universal applicability of science. Thick sustainability on the other hand is contextual and embedded in a certain place or unique to a certain group of people (Ibid.).

This difference between thick and thin sustainability, or holistic worldview and scientific worldview as Interviewee 10 called it, could well be one of the reasons why people from specific cultural contexts might have difficulties to relate to and understand certain elements of the framework. The FSSD is a framework which has a strong scientific foundation and could be seen as a framework that to a certain extent adopts a universalist mindset. The SP’s may be the best example of this since they are universally applicable. The experiences of the practitioners showed, however, that the SP’s, and other elements of the framework, did not always relate to their audience and in some cases the practitioners needed to conceptually translate parts of the framework to make it more understandable. Culture and cultural factors seem to play an important role in fulfilling this need for conceptual translation in cases where a lack of understanding of the framework exists. Exploring the cultural dimension of the FSSD might contribute to bridging this gap and make the framework better applicable in certain contexts.

4.3 **What do practitioners do to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD?**

In Chapters 4.3.1 and 4.3.2, the data that relates to the first research question will be discussed by interpreting and analyzing respondents’ experiences through the lenses of Hofstede (1980; 2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s (1997) frameworks, as well as other literature where appropriate.
4.3.1 Cultural factors practitioners account for when applying the FSSD

Gender dynamics. As our results showed, gender was an important cultural factor that appeared in our data. This influenced the work of practitioners in different ways. One practitioner learned to navigate a matriarchal society while another experienced how inequality between men and women was culturally embedded, which presented an obstacle to his presentation of the SSPs. In two other cases, practitioners worked with communities where women were not able to participate in the process equally, which required the practitioners to adjust their facilitation plans to account for these gender dynamics in an appropriate way.

When we view this theme through the lens of Hofstede (1980; 2001), it is strongly related to the dimension **Masculinity—Femininity**, which “refers to the distribution of values between the genders...a fundamental issue for any society” (Hofstede 2011, 12). One key characteristic of a feminine society is that there is a minimum difference in the social and emotional roles between genders, whereas in a masculine society the opposite is true. Similarly, in a feminine society, men and women should be caring and modest, whereas in a masculine society, men should be and women may be ambitious and assertive (Ibid.).

In the case of Interviewee 1 working in the matriarchal society of Palau, what was required of him was to first have the awareness that **Masculinity—Femininity** dimension existed in order to understand the implications of working in a matriarchal society. With this awareness, he was then able to navigate the gender dynamics present in the community, and focus on building relationships with women, who have greater influence and who could also open up opportunities. In other words, his ability to navigate this dimension was essential for successfully working with the FSSD in Palau.

Interviewees 8 and 10 encountered a clear distinction between the role of men and women in their experiences facilitating FSSD process in Liberia and Chile. In both situations, women were not used to having an equitable role or having their voices heard in group activities where men were present. This necessitated a facilitation approach that would respectfully account for those different roles without losing the women’s input. Interviewee 8 made a special invitation for women to participate in the creation of a village map, and Interviewee 10 facilitated separate World Cafes for men and for women. Again, their awareness of the **Masculinity—Femininity** dimension and their capacity to navigate it enabled a stronger FSSD application with equal contributions from both men and women.

The theme of gender appeared in the data in variety of different ways. What we saw was that the practitioner’s ability to account for it resulted in better outcomes of their FSSD applications. Based on these outcomes, however, the data does not suggest a specific approach to address this cultural factor; instead, the data suggests gender as a dimension practitioners may need to be aware of when working with the FSSD in different cultural contexts.

Power dynamics. Power also surfaced as an important cultural factor in our data in a variety of ways. It was important for some practitioners to know who the influential people in a society or community were and to build relationships with them. For one practitioner, the type of leadership—top down or bottom up—affected her ability to apply the FSSD. Finally, a number of other practitioners experienced the role of power on a societal level and how that impacted their application of the framework.
Viewed through the lens of Hofstede’s (1980; 2011) framework, this theme is strongly related to the dimension *Power Distance*, which is defined as “*the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions...accept and expect that power is distributed unequally*” (Hofstede 2011, 9). One characteristic of small power distance societies is that lower-ranking members expect to be consulted, whereas in large power distance societies lower-ranking members expect to be told what to do. Another characteristic of small power distance societies is that older people are neither feared nor respected, whereas in large power distance societies, older people are both feared and respected. Finally, in small power distance societies, the use of power should be legitimate and is subject to scrutiny, whereas in large power distance societies, the legitimacy is irrelevant to how power is distributed. In other words, power is a given fact of society (Ibid.).

In the case of the practitioners for whom it was important to build trusting relationships with people in power, power was often attributed to people in later stages of life. In these examples, practitioners needed to first be aware how power was assigned to certain groups of people, or in other words understand this characteristic of the *Power Distance* dimension, because they needed the support or approval of influential people to successfully work with the FSSD.

In addition, the characteristic of large power distance societies, where lower-ranking members expect to be told what to do—and conversely in small power distance societies, where lower-ranking members expect to be consulted—relates to the experience of Interviewee 13 who encountered difficulty applying the FSSD in an organization with a traditional, top-down leadership culture. In this case, Interviewee 13 found that a large power distance—whether in a society or an organization—can strongly influence whether or not people will join or contribute to a participatory process. Since the FSSD requires a strong participatory approach, it was useful for Interviewee 13 to understand why and how power dynamics were in play.

Finally, Interviewee 8’s experience is one among several in the data that showcases the role of power on a societal level. In this example, Interviewee 8 wanted to use a participatory technique to facilitate a decision-making process in Liberia, but people were not used to speaking up. Power was automatically assigned to a government official, who served as a spokesperson for the entire community. Notably, the community had not given him that mandate; instead the role was assumed based on his function and education level. This relates to the characteristic of how power is either a given fact of society or not in Hofstede’s description of *Power Distance*. Interviewee 8 described how helpful it was to be aware of the fact that it is accepted for power to be distributed unequally or without legitimization.

Power was yet another important theme in our data that influenced practitioners work with the FSSD. The experiences discussed here show the many ways power plays a role in different cultural contexts, and suggest the importance of FSSD practitioners understanding this dimension for the success of their work.

*Time orientation.* Time orientation was yet another cultural factor that many practitioners described taking into account in their application of the FSSD, especially in connection with their use of backcasting as an approach for decision-making and strategic planning. Three practitioners observed how communities’ short-term time orientation could prevent them from making the kind of strategic plan required for strategic sustainable development. Two other practitioners described their unsuccessful attempts to use backcasting in communities with a circular time orientation.
Looking at this theme with Hofstede’s (1980; 2001) framework in mind, we can see that there is a strong connection with the dimension Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation, which is “related to the choice of focus for people’s efforts: the future or the present and past” (Hofstede 2011, 8). In other words, it is about how a society manages its own past whilst dealing with the challenges of the present and the future. A key characteristic of this dimension is that in short-term oriented societies, most important events occurred in the past or take place now, whereas in long-term oriented societies, most important events will occur in the future (Ibid.). In addition, looking at this theme through the lens of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s (1997) framework, there is a connection to the dimension Attitude to Time, which can be sequential or synchronous. In sequential time people prefer for events to occur in order, whereas in synchronous time people see the past, present and future as interwoven periods (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997).

In the case of the practitioners who worked within communities and organizations that displayed a short-term orientation to time, they noticed how that orientation limited those communities and organizations from creating a vision for sustainability in the future and backcasting from that vision to create a strategic plan. This illuminates a clear connection to Hofstede’s dimension of Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation. Understanding this dimension enables practitioners to better cope with the limitations a certain time orientation may have for the use of backcasting in the way it is construed within the FSSD.

Interviewees 5 and 10 both worked within communities that have a circular orientation to time in New Zealand and Chile. For both communities it was important to honor the past in their planning for the future. This relates to the characteristic of Hofstede’s Short-Term Orientation where most important events in life occurred in the past or take place now. Additionally, when looking at Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s (1997) dimension Attitude to Time, these communities can be classified as having a synchronous attitude to time where people see the past, present, and future as interwoven periods. Interviewees 5 and 10 needed to adjust their facilitation techniques based on their knowledge of this time dimension.

The theme of time orientation appeared in connection with practitioners’ use of backcasting in our data. In many cases, successful use of this element of the FSSD seemed to hinge on the practitioner's ability to both recognize how time orientation was expressed and how best to adjust a facilitation plan to ensure that the application of the FSSD would receive the benefits of the backcasting approach.

Spirituality and religion. Spirituality and religion was the final cultural factor that appeared in our data as an important theme. This influenced the work of practitioners in several ways. While preparing content for a presentation of the FSSD, one practitioner considered the religious backgrounds of the participants who would attend her workshop. Another practitioner successfully connected the sustainability imperative to Hinduism. In two other cases, practitioners described how they adjusted their facilitation strategies in response to the large role religion and spirituality played in decision-making for communities in Chile and Africa.

Unlike the other cultural factors that appeared in our results, there is not a direct link between the theme of religion and spirituality and Hofstede’s (1980; 2001) framework. In other words, there is not a clear correlation between the theme and one of Hofstede’s (1980; 2001) dimensions. However, religion is mentioned in some capacity several times in the characteristics of several of Hofstede’s (1980; 2001) dimensions. Within the Masculinity—Femininity dimension, for example, a key characteristic of feminine societies is that their
religions focus on fellow human beings as opposed to gods, which is often the focus in more masculine societies (Hofstede 2011). Yet neither this characteristic, nor those that appear in the descriptions of Hofstede’s (1980; 2001) other dimensions, seem to shed light on how respondents in our study experienced religion and spirituality in their applications of the FSSD. The same is true for the connection between this theme and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner’s (1997) framework.

Even so, in other literature religion is seen to play an important role in culture and indeed described as “inextricably woven into the cloth of cultural life” (Tarakeshwar, Stanton and Paragament 2003, 377). Given this, it follows that religion manifests itself through culture in a variety of ways, “including in members’ values, beliefs and orientations to life [...] and in their buildings, rituals and behaviour” (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009, 41). Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, 41) go on to say that “these cultural manifestations can have a major impact across a wide range of contexts and at different levels—personal, organizational, and regional/national.” This idea of religion manifesting through rituals and behavior and having the potential to impact different contexts correlates strongly to our respondents’ experience of religion and spirituality in the field, and especially to the experiences of Interviewees 8 and 10.

Based on his extensive experience working in multiple African countries, Interviewee 8 (2017) described spirituality as “one of the cultural things you need to deal with in most parts of Africa” because it plays a major role in the decision-making of many African communities. He emphasized that “If you don’t take that into consideration, no matter how fantastic your project is, it might not move” (Ibid.). It becomes clear from these comments that spirituality does indeed manifest in particular African communities’ behavior through their decision-making, and that this manifestation has an impact on whether or not a project—in this case the application of the FSSD—will or will not be successful.

Similarly, while working in southern Chile, Interviewee 10 discovered the influence of spirits and spirituality on the Quinquen community’s decision-making. Their religious practices required Interviewee 10 (2017) to learn how to “involve the spirits” in his application of the FSSD by, for example, asking their permission to start a workshop. Perhaps even more impactful was the fact that the the solution to the Quinquen’s eco-tourism project was to require tourists to ask for permission from the forest before entering. Similar to the example presented above, spirituality manifests in the Quinquen’s behavior through their decision-making, and this manifestation required Interviewee 10 to adjust his facilitation approach in order to successfully apply the FSSD.

Again, the theme of spirituality and religion appeared in the data in several different ways. What became clear through the experiences we analyzed was that spirituality and religion manifested in the culture and through the behaviors of the communities and organizations respondents worked with in their application of the FSSD. As such, the data suggests spirituality and religion as a cultural factor practitioners may need to account for when working with the framework in different cultural contexts.

In summary, based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that gender dynamics, power dynamics, time orientation, and religion and spirituality are important cultural factors that FSSD practitioners account for in their applications of the FSSD in different cultural contexts.
4.3.2 Strategies practitioners use to account for different cultural contexts when applying the FSSD

Adopting a “beginner’s mind.” An important strategy that practitioners used was to adopt a “beginner’s mind” before entering a community or organization with the intention of applying the FSSD. This attitude is defined by humility, openness, curiosity, flexibility, and the willingness to be surprised. Listening to understand the perspective of the people who the practitioners were working with and not forcing the framework upon them are also part of the approach one takes with this attitude. It can be argued that these characteristics show certain similarities to the co-initiating and co-sensing phases of the “U-Process” illustrated in Figure 4.1 below.

![Figure 4.1: The U-Process, which can be seen in connection with the attitude of “beginner’s mind” (Scharmer 2016)](image)

The “U-Process” allows people to operate from an altered state rather than simply reflecting and reacting to past experiences. It also enables them to understand how social action comes to fruition and to realize the best future possibilities for that action (Scharmer 2007). When this process is applied to practical situations and complex issues, such as the sustainability challenge, two phases of the “U-Process” become relevant and can be related to the strategy of adopting a “beginner’s mind”:

- Co-initiating, which involves listening to and speaking with players in the field; and,
- Co-sensing, which involves observing without any judgement and deep-listening with open heart and open mind (Ibid.).

The characteristics of a “beginner’s mind” attitude—especially the ability to listen with humility—are closely connected to both co-initiating and co-sensing, and based on the results, are a great asset for practitioners in their application of the FSSD.

Building trust. Building trust was one of the most important strategies that the practitioners described using. They often referred to trust building as being a prerequisite before starting the “real” work of applying the FSSD. Since trust is considered by many intellectual disciplines as the bedrock of all kinds of relationships (Ojong 2017), it follows that trust building would be a prerequisite in the application of the FSSD—a process that relies heavily on participatory engagement and strong relationships with stakeholders.

Based on the advice respondents gave during their interviews, the strategy of trust building involves adopting a “beginner’s mind,” as well as taking the steps required to be accepted and integrated into the community where the work of applying the FSSD takes place. This can be
accomplished through a demonstration of commitment to the work and of interest in the community by paying attention and by actively listening and engaging in conversations with a variety of potential stakeholders, often in one-on-one or small group settings. Similarly, respondents stressed the importance of not forcing a rigid application of the FSSD on their audiences but instead being flexible in general and also with their application of the framework. These actions were discussed by respondents as thoughtful ways to build trust with the corollary effect of engaging people in the participatory processes connected with the application of the FSSD. These actions can also help practitioners guard against slipping into an “egocentric attitude,” which would potentially complicate their ability to establish trust (Ojong 2017) and compromise the success of their application of the FSSD.

Overall, the strategy of trust building as described by respondents can help practitioners become rooted in the communities or organizations where they apply the FSSD. This social proximity enables the development of trust, which then serves as the foundation for the “real” work of applying the FSSD.

Taking time to understand the local context. Taking time to understand the local context through engagement with communities and organizations was described by respondents as a crucial strategy for a successful application of the FSSD.

This strategy is closely connected to the deep listening involved in adopting the “beginner’s mind” attitude and the one-on-one or small group conversations used to build trust, both of which have the capacity to help practitioners understand the cultural factors, local metaphors, and other nuances that are important to the local context. One respondent compared the strategy of taking time to understand the local context to the “co-sensing” phase of the “U-Process.” “Sensing” is about seeing the system from the perspective of other people by suspending your own judgement and any existing preconceptions (Senge et al. 2005). In other words, it requires one to “observe, observe, observe” and to become part of the surrounding environment (Ibid.). “Sensing” is therefore closely related to the process of taking time to understand the local context described by respondents for whom the strategy means taking time to observe the community or organization and understand day-to-day life, the people’s perspectives, and what matters to them.

In sum, taking time to understand the local context helps practitioners gain awareness of the cultural factors present in the communities or organizations they work within, which positively influences their application of the FSSD. For example, it would neither be possible for practitioners to sense people's ability to understand different elements of the FSSD, nor be possible for practitioners to know how to adjust their facilitation techniques to fit the local context.

Adapting their approach to the local context and the cultural factors. The strategies described in the previous sections enabled the practitioners to identify the cultural factors that could be relevant to their application of the FSSD: Gender dynamics, Power dynamics, Time orientation, and Spirituality and religion. The results of this research showed that these cultural factors require special attention when applying the FSSD and practitioners needed to adapt their approach based on (their knowledge of) these cultural factors in play. This strategy was therefore derived from the results around the different cultural factors instead of it being a separate theme. The practitioners showcased different ways of adapting their approach when different cultural factors were in play.
For example, when gender dynamics were obviously influencing the process, instead of gathering everyone in the room without paying attention to this dimension, practitioners divided the group in two separate groups based on gender, as Interviewees 8 and 10 did. By doing this, they were able to engage everyone and avoided losing any voices in the room. The same can be said about spirituality and ancestry. In some cases, addressing this factor and, for example, ask the permission to ancestors and spirits before starting a process was important to take into account. Practitioners needed to be aware of this element and how it could potentially influence a successful outcome of their process.

In relation to the importance of adapting their approach to a specific context, Interviewee 6 talked about the fact that some facilitation techniques work well in certain contexts not necessarily have the same positive effect in others. The importance of being flexible, as mentioned in the theme Adopting a beginner's mind is also relevant to the strategy of adapting their approach to the local context. Similarly, Interviewee 12, stressed it is important to give people the idea that the approach a practitioner brings to the situation is specifically designed for this specific group instead of just translating methods or frameworks used in a totally different cultural context. This means that it is necessary not to be stuck on one’s own favorite facilitation techniques, methods, or tools but instead be ready and open to other options. Practitioners can also refer to the U-process (Scharmer 2007) and the “letting-go” capacity.

Use of local examples, metaphors and storytelling. In order to adapt the framework to the local context, practitioners reported on conceptually translating elements of the framework as the strategy they used. By presenting elements of the framework from the perspective of the audience, the practitioners made the framework more relatable to them. They did this by using local examples, metaphors, and through storytelling. This is also the reason why the themes Need for conceptually translating and/or simplifying elements of the FSSD and Use of local examples, metaphors, and storytelling are indeed interconnected. The use of local examples, metaphors, and storytelling is an answer to the need for conceptually translating elements of the framework. At the same time, this strategy is also connected to Taking time to understand the local context as it would not be possible to come up with the right examples, metaphors, and stories that make the elements of the framework more understandable without a good understanding of the local context. One illustration for that is the example given by Interviewee 5 about the use of using the example of an “eel trap” as a metaphor to explain the funnel. The eel trap in this case was a specific example in a Maori context. Interviewee 5 needed to have a deep understanding of the cultural context he was working in in order to be able to use this example.

All of the above can be related to what Jeannotte (2017) states about the importance of developing new metaphors and stories about sustainability. Doing so and assigning a central role to local context into the sustainability narrative can help illuminate the mediating and contextualizing role that culture can play in the journey toward a sustainable society.

Next to the strategy of using local examples, metaphors, and storytelling, the data also showed examples of the ways of simplifying elements of the FSSD. Similarly, these were also related to the need expressed by the practitioner for the simplification of elements of the FSSD. Nevertheless, the data did not show a concrete strategy used by practitioners for this kind of simplification allowed for a separate labelling as a strategy used by the practitioners. Only Interviewee 5 gave an example of a simplification that he knew a Canadian company used. Instead of naming and explaining the SPs, he replaced them by “take” (extracting from the Earth’s crust), “make” (producing substances), “break” (deforestation), “cake” (social element).
Or as interviewee 5 explained it: “Then so you only take what can be replaced, you only make what can be sustainable, you don’t break, and cake is around the social aspects. People get that [...]” (Interviewee 5 2017).

4.4 Guidelines for applying the FSSD in different cultural contexts

As discussed above, clear themes emerged from the respondents’ stories about working with the FSSD. These themes included both the cultural factors practitioners account for, as well as the strategies practitioners use when applying the framework in different cultural contexts. After interpreting and analyzing themes against the literature, a key question remains: How can these results—the collective intelligence of the FSSD practitioner community—support current and future FSSD practitioners in, for example, conceptually translating the framework to different cultural contexts in such a way that it retains its integrity and meaning? How can this be accomplished in a culturally sensitive and appropriate way, based on the insights of respondents? In other words, what guidelines can complement the FSSD so that it can be more easily applied in different cultural contexts? What follows is a narrative description of the guidelines for current and future FSSD practitioners presented in Table 4.1 below. Note that the guidelines appear to be in sequential order, however many of the guidelines are interrelated and may occur simultaneously.

Before entering a community or organization with the intention of applying the FSSD, adopt a “beginner’s mind,” which is defined by a humble, open, curious attitude, and a willingness to be surprised.

Even before the work of applying the FSSD starts, build trust with individuals in the local community and/or organization that will be involved in the process. This may involve informal one-on-one or group conversations that unfold over a long period of time. The goal is to build trusting relationships that can serve as the foundation for the work of applying the FSSD.

Then take time to understand the local context of the place where the FSSD application will occur. This involves researching the location’s history, culture, and political context. The overarching goal is to better understand the local people’s way of life, which, in turn, will provide clues about how the FSSD can be applied most successfully.

During the time spent researching the local context and building trusting relationships, various cultural dimensions—gender dynamics, power dynamics, time orientation, and spirituality and religion—will likely become clear, or lead to new questions. What is the difference in social and emotional roles between genders? How is power perceived? How does the community manage its past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future? How do religious beliefs manifest through certain behaviors? These cultural factors will likely influence the way people engage in participatory processes or the content of the FSSD.

When the local context and its cultural dimensions are well understood, the need for adapting the approach of applying the FSSD may become apparent. This may mean changing a facilitation plan to appropriately accommodate the gender dynamics in play, or it may also mean stressing the importance of backcasting to help shift a community from short-term to long-term thinking.
Similarly, the need for conceptually translating the FSSD may also become clear. In this case, using local examples and metaphors can help people feel more directly connected to ideas, and conveying content through stories can help make those ideas more understandable.

**Table 4.1: Strategic Guidelines for applying the FSSD in different cultural contexts.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic guidelines for applying the FSSD in different cultural contexts</th>
<th><strong>Strategies:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>These actions lay the foundation for a culturally sensitive application of the FSSD.</strong></td>
<td>Adopting a “beginner’s mind,” a humble, open, curious attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building trust with key stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taking time to understand the local context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural factors to consider within the local context:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Key questions for discovering the cultural factors:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender dynamics</td>
<td>What is the difference in social and emotional roles between genders? How are women and men expected to behave?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power dynamics</td>
<td>How do lower-ranking members of the community expect to be treated? How are older people treated? How is power perceived? In what way(s) is the use of power subject to scrutiny?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time orientation</td>
<td>How does the community manage its past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future? Have the most important events occurred in the past, or will they occur in the future? How are the past, present, and future perceived?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality and religion</td>
<td>How do religious beliefs manifest through culture (e.g., through values, beliefs, orientations to life, rituals, and/or behaviors)? How do these manifestations impact personal, organizational, and/or regional/national contexts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>This action contributes to a culturally sensitive application of the FSSD.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strategies:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adapting the approach of applying the FSSD based on the discovery of cultural factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using local examples, metaphors, and storytelling to conceptually translate elements of the FSSD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the scope and outcomes of our research, these guidelines can support FSSD practitioners working outside of Europe and North America; however, they could prove useful to practitioners working across the globe.
4.5 Possible implications for strategic sustainable development

This then begs the question: what does this mean for strategic sustainable development? What possible implications can these results have for the FSSD and strategic sustainable development in general? What does the cultural dimension of the framework look like?

4.5.1 Systems perspective

One of the key characteristics of the FSSD—what distinguishes it from other sustainability frameworks and makes it strategic—is its systems perspective. By adopting this perspective, the FSSD takes a bird’s eye view of the system that is relevant to the overall goal. In the FSSD, this bird’s eye overview consists of elements such as the sustainability challenge, an understanding of the overall socio-ecological system and its interactions with the lithosphere, the basic constitution of human beings, trust between people and between people and societal institutions, and known relationships between human practices and its impacts in the ecological and social systems (Broman and Robert 2017).

This systems perspective, or the information on the systems level of the FSSD, is crucial when we look at the relationship between the framework and its cultural dimension. As we have seen, achieving sustainability goals essentially depends on human accounts, actions, and behavior which are, in turn, culturally embedded (Soini and Dessein 2016; Tilbury and Mula 2009) and many—if not all—of the planet’s environmental, social and economic problems have cultural activity at their roots (Dessein et al. 2015). This strongly relates to the information at the FSSD’s systems level about known relationships between human practices and their impacts on the ecological and social systems, as well as the interaction of the socio-ecological system with the lithosphere in general. It could be argued that culture is a defining element in all of these interactions and therefore implies that the influence of culture on sustainable development happens on a systems level. One could even say that taking cultural factors into account when aiming for ecological and social sustainability and acknowledging culture as an essential foundation of sustainable development is actually an example of systems thinking and adopting a systems perspective.

This can, in addition, be connected to Soini and Dessein’s (2016) third representation of culture as sustainability, which considers culture as a necessary foundation for meeting the overall aims of sustainability. Considering culture as a necessary foundation implies that it is something that is needed to be taken into account as part of the bigger system that is relevant to achieve the overall goal. Again, this suggests that the influence of culture on sustainable development happens on the systems level. Adding culture to the systems level of the FSSD could, therefore, be a way to incorporate this notion more deeply in the framework. By doing this culture will become a necessary foundation that is ingrained in the framework and will therefore be automatically considered when working with it. However, more research is needed to further explore what a possible description of culture on the systems level could look like.

4.5.2 FSSD Sustainability Principles

The results of this research indicate that the cultural dimension of the FSSD also concerns the SPs. By conceptually translating the SPs, practitioners made them more relatable and understandable for their audiences in different cultural contexts. In addition, six of the practitioners indicated that there could possibly be a strong connection between culture and the
SSPs. In many cases, unfortunately, they indicated that their lack of experience in working with the SSPs made it difficult to suggest what that relationship looked like. However, Interviewee 2 was able to explicitly state what the relationship entailed according to him:

>I’m now really curious how the social sustainability principles are going to work out because it’s not the easiest language, and it needs a little bit of explanation. I mean, you know, most of my friends and most of my colleagues and most of my business contacts who I sent teasers to are like: “We sort of get impartiality. Meaning making? What are you on about? What is that?” And I’m like, okay, we’ve got some translation work to do. And to me that is all about culture (Interviewee 2 2017).

As this study has shown, conceptually translating the principles (and other elements of the framework) was part of one of the strategies the practitioners reported using. In most cases this was related to the ecological principles since many practitioners lacked the experience of working with the SSPs. However, the same strategy could apply to the SSPs. Since they are basic principles, they are necessary, sufficient, general, concrete, and non-overlapping (Broman and Robèrt 2017), which means that they are applicable to every society. However, how these principles show up in a society or what a society sees as a structural obstacle to one of these principles is culturally determined. Or to use the words of Verluyten (2000, 23): “Culture refers to the particular solutions which societies give to universal problems. Thus, feeding oneself is a universal problem; but what is considered edible and what is actually used as food varies from one culture to the next, and ranges from bird’s saliva to caterpillars, live oysters or marshmallows.”

In other words, the SSPs health, influence, competence, impartiality, and meaning making are the basic social conditions, grounded in scientific knowledge, for the successful continuation of the socio-ecological system (Broman and Robèrt 2017), but what these principles mean and what are considered to be structural obstacles can vary from culture to culture. This line of thought can be connected to Max-Neefs (1991, 18) definition of fundamental human needs—which served as the foundation for the first version of the social principles—where he states that “fundamental human needs are the same in all cultures and in all historical periods. What changes, both over time and through cultures, is the way or the mean by which the needs are satisfied.”

Culture in this way functions as the translating element between the general nature of the SSPs and the specific context where they are applied. In other words, the SSPs are universal but how they show up in a society is culturally determined. This can be seen as an example of Soini and Dessein’s (2016) second representation of culture for sustainability, in which culture is described as having a mediating role to achieve economic, social, and ecological sustainability. It implies that cultural values and perceptions need to be considered when aiming for ecological sustainability. The translating or mediating role culture plays in relation to the SSPs can be seen as an example of culture for sustainability, and this “translating role” might represent the value that culture has in relation to the SSPs.

4.5.3 Strategic guidelines

Similarly, it could also be argued that the cultural dimension influences the strategic level of the FSSD. This level includes strategic guidelines for how to approach the principle-framed vision of sustainability in a strategic way (Broman and Robert 2017). The guidelines that were
created as a result of this study, and that provide assistance when working with the framework in different cultural contexts, can be seen as strategic guidelines and could potentially be added to the framework on the strategic level. They provide information and guidance on how to account for cultural factors when working with the framework and therefore can assist practitioners of the framework in reaching their goals strategically.

The results of this research have also shown that culture is of influence on one of the existing strategic guidelines: the concept of backcasting. In some cases practitioners indicated that their use of backcasting was greatly affected by the cultural dimension of time orientation. In certain cultural contexts, for example, practitioners elaborated on the fact that they needed to adapt their way of working with backcasting because the people they were working with had a different orientation to time. For example, practitioners shared experiences of working in a cultural context where time is seen as a circular concept, instead of a linear concept, which affected how they applied the concept of backcasting. It is important to note, however, that the respondents did not elaborate on the nuances of how different orientations to time affected their use of backcasting. Due to the fact that no follow-up interviews took place, the question of what practitioners actually did to adapt their use of backcasting unfortunately cannot be answered based on the results of this research.

4.6 Recommendations for further research

An important caveat in all of this is that all of the above mentioned implications are possible implications for strategic sustainable development. More research is needed to further explore what the exact role of culture is in relation to strategic sustainable development and the FSSD and how exactly culture can add value to the systems, success and/or strategic levels of the FSSD. Especially when we take into account that the current understanding of the relation between culture and sustainable development has remained vague until now (Soini and Birkeland 2014) and there is a strong need for fresh approaches to pursue sustainability through the lens of culture (Jeanotte 2017; Soini and Dessein 2016; Dessein et al. 2015).

This means that more research is necessary to explore how culture can be of most value to strategic sustainable development and on what level of the FSSD it should be incorporated. Should it be incorporated on the system, success, or strategic level? What would this look like? Or should culture not be incorporated in the framework at all? In order to provide a clear and meaningful answer to these questions, the cultural dimension of the FSSD should be further explored. More specifically, research will have to show whether or not it is valuable to include culture on the systems level, how the “translating role” of culture can benefit the SSPs, and if adding the created strategic guidelines around culture will be beneficial for practitioners of the framework.

In addition, further research is needed to discover whether or not the created strategic guidelines around culture also apply for practitioners who work with the framework in Europe and North America. Discovering this could lead to a more nuanced understanding of which cultural factors are in play with regards to strategic sustainable development and whether or not a relationship exists between certain cultural factors and geographical locations.
4.7 Reliability and validity

In cross-cultural and intercultural research, there is a high risk that data collection and analysis is conducted from the cultural viewpoint of the researcher and hence may be culturally biased. The term ‘decentring’ refers to the process of moving away from the researcher’s perspective so that more equal weight is given to various cultural perspectives.

(Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009, 269)

The team of authors come from the Benin, the Netherlands, and the United States and therefore all come from distinct cultural backgrounds. The authors embraced the concept of reflexivity, which suggests that the position or perspective of the researcher(s) shapes everything: what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of the conclusions (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). This motivated the authors to constantly reflect and compare across the different cultures in the group through conversations and thereby overcome potential individual cultural biases. By doing so, the authors constantly tried to “decenter”—to move away from their own cultural perspective and give equal weight to the perspectives of all the cultural groups involved (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009).

Another attempt at increasing the validity of this research was the authors’ intentional use of triangulation throughout the research process. For example, each of the three authors was involved in every interview, either as an interviewer or note taker, or always as a transcriber. This again ensured that possible individual biases were countered as much as possible and that the data collection happened consistently and in a valid way. The same goes for the process of analyzing and coding the data. Authors tried to avoid any individual biases by each individually coding the interviews and comparing results afterwards. This again increased the internal validity of the research.

The external validity of this research, on the other hand, is limited. The results of this research are based on the experiences of this specific group of respondents. No generalizations can be made to “all practitioners of the FSSD” or even “practitioners of the FSSD in a given cultural context.” This also has never been the intention of the research. The expectation does exist, however, that if the research were conducted with a similar group of practitioners of the FSSD, it would lead to similar results.

In addition, to improve the reliability, this research includes a clear description of which steps have been taken, how results have been classified and interpreted, and as much valuable data to support this is included in the appendices. It must be noted, however, that the final results and conclusions of this research will always be the interpretation of the researchers. This interpretation influenced the way the interviews were transcribed, how they were coded, which themes were selected, how the data was interpreted, and which examples were used. Due to the fact that the relation between culture and (strategic) sustainable development is largely unexplored, this research can be seen as a first step to opening up the conversation and discovering how applying a culture lens can assist in our understanding of strategic sustainable development.
5 Conclusion

This research explored the cultural dimension of the FSSD by conducting semi-structured interviews with practitioners of the framework located outside of Europe and North America. In this chapter the main research questions and sub-questions will be answered.

Research Question 1: What do practitioners do to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD?

The answer to this question can be divided in two separate sections: the cultural factors practitioners account for and the strategies they use to account for the cultural context they are working in. The answer to this question therefore consists of the combined answers to research questions 1.1 and 1.2.

Research Question 1.1: What cultural factors do practitioners account for when applying the FSSD?

The research showed that there are four main cultural factors practitioners account for when applying the FSSD: gender dynamics, power dynamics, time orientation, and spirituality and religion. These cultural factors could be related to and viewed through the lens of existing cultural frameworks created by Hofstede (1980; 2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). The results showed that the practitioners needed to take these cultural factors into account when working with the framework in different cultural contexts. These factors influenced the practitioners work with the framework in different ways. This varied from influencing certain elements of the framework (e.g. backcasting) to the facilitation techniques used to guide the process. Accounting for these cultural factors enabled practitioners to better work with the framework and understanding the dynamics of them turned out to be an important element for the success of their work.

Research Question 1.2: What strategies do practitioners use to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD?

The practitioners reported using different strategies to account for the cultural context when applying the FSSD: adopting a beginner’s mind, building trust, taking time to understand the local context, adapting their approach to the local context, and using local examples, metaphors, and storytelling to simplify and conceptually translate elements of the framework. The results showed that working with the FSSD in different cultural contexts requires practitioners to take the time to understand the local context and build trustworthy relationships with the right people before they can really work with the framework. In addition, the cultural context required them to be flexible with their approach and the facilitation techniques they used. This strongly related to the influence that the different cultural factors had on their work. In order to make the framework more understandable and relatable for their audience, the practitioners used local examples, metaphors, and storytelling.

Research Question 2: What guidelines can complement the FSSD so that it can be more easily applied in different cultural contexts?

The guidelines that can complement the FSSD so that it can be more easily applied in different cultural contexts are informed by the both the cultural factors that practitioners account for as
the strategies they use. In fact, the answer of this question can be seen as the sum of the first research questions.

For practitioners who work with the FSSD in different cultural contexts, it is important to enter this process with an attitude of humbleness—a so called “beginner’s mind.” This attitude was described by many of the practitioners as essential to adopt before commencing the “real” work of applying the FSSD. Also, as part of the pre-cooking process, practitioners need to build trust with key players in order to maximize their chances of successfully working with the framework and also take the time to understand the local context. During the actual process of applying the FSSD the practitioners need to account for the cultural factors of gender dynamics, power dynamics, timer orientation, and spirituality and religion. By doing so, and adapting their approaches in such a way that they could successfully navigate these dimensions, and the practitioners improve their ability to apply the framework in different contexts with cultural sensitivity. Finally, in order to adapt and conceptually translate elements of the framework, and make it more relatable for their audiences, the practitioners used local example, metaphors, and storytelling.

In sum, this research has shown that culture not only is a necessary foundation for sustainable development as the literature suggests, but also has important implications for strategic sustainable development and the FSSD. These implications are seen in both the practical application, as well as the design of the framework. Practitioners indeed needed to account for cultural factors when working with the framework in different cultural contexts in order to achieve the most successful and most meaningful outcomes. In other words, the experiences of the practitioners showed that in certain contexts the framework requires conceptual translation to retain its integrity and meaning, and the created strategic guidelines around culture can assist in how this can be accomplished with cultural sensitivity and grace.

In addition, the research also showed that the cultural dimension of the FSSD can have possible implications for the design of the framework. It suggests that incorporating the notion of culture more deeply in the framework can possibly serve as a valuable addition to the systems, success, and/or strategic levels of the FSSD. More research is needed to determine exactly what this would look like and how the cultural dimension can be embraced in such a way that it becomes most valuable to the framework and its overall goal of transitioning to a sustainable society.

This research provided a first attempt at uncovering and unpacking the relationship between culture and strategic sustainable development. Exploring this dimension has great potential to positively contribute to society’s overall transition toward sustainability. The results have the potential to provide meaningful contributions not just to the collective intelligence of the FSSD practitioner community, but also through the work of those practitioners in organizations and communities to people who struggle to meet their basic needs. In other words, by exploring the cultural dimension of the FSSD, this research can contribute to a more widespread use of the framework (and possibly other similar sustainability frameworks) around the world. What’s more, this research also adds value to the broader discussion in the field of sustainability science about the value of connecting the concept of culture to sustainable development, which until now is a relatively unexplored and new area of interest.
References


Stern, Nicholas Herbert. 2007. _The economics of climate change: the Stern review_. Cambridge University press.


Appendix 1: Online survey for assessing participant eligibility

Many thanks for your interest in our thesis topic! Please complete this 2-minute survey to share some basic information about yourself and your experience in applying the FSSD, and to confirm your availability for an interview during March or April 2017.

Cheers,
Yannick, Prescilla & Jessica

*Obligatoire

1. Name: *

2. Email address: *

3. Current location: *

4. How would you describe yourself? Please select all that apply. *
   Plusieurs réponses possibles.
   - Master’s in Strategic Leadership toward Sustainability (MSLS) alumnus
   - The Natural Step practitioner
   - Sustainability practitioner
   - Autre : ___________________________

5. Please rate your understanding of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD). *
   Une seule réponse possible.
   - Poor
   - Fair
   - Good
   - Very good
   - Excellent

6. How many years have you been actively applying the FSSD? *
   Une seule réponse possible.
   - I have no experience applying the FSSD
   - Less than one year
   - 1-2 years
   - 2-4 years
   - More than 4 years
7. Where have you applied the FSSD? Please select all that apply. *

Plusieurs réponses possibles.

☐ Africa
☐ Asia
☐ Europe
☐ North America
☐ Australia
☐ South America

8. Can you commit to at least one two-hour interview during March or April 2017? *

Une seule réponse possible.

☐ Yes
☐ No
Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview questions

Guidelines for opening the interviews

- Check in. Thank you for making time to speak with us!
- Do you have any questions about the thesis project after reviewing the one-page summary?
- Reminder about the recording and transcription. Interviewee will have a chance to review and revise their responses after the interview.

General questions

Where are you currently located? Is this your home country?

Where do you work, and what kind of position do you hold?

Have you worked in different countries? Which countries?

Sustainability journey

Can you describe your sustainability journey?

How did you learn about the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD)? How and where have you applied it so far? Are you still actively applying it?

Cultural dimension

Contextualize: We’re interested in the cultural dimension because the sustainability challenge is a global challenge. When we look at it from that perspective, it becomes clear that sustainable development will require collaboration across traditional divides. In our initial literature review, we noticed that the link between culture and sustainability is relatively unexplored, yet we agree with the sentiment that “cultural values and perceptions need to be considered when aiming for ecological or social sustainability.” People’s cultural backgrounds and worldviews intrinsically shape how development is defined and the future envisioned. Therefore we want to explore the cultural dimension of the application of the FSSD.

Can you describe an experience when you noticed the influence of the local culture on your application of the FSSD? Did you notice any differences between your work in ______ and _______. (Europe and Asia, for example, or Europe and South America)
While applying the FSSD, do you account for the cultural context that you’re working within? If so, how do you do this?

Are there any specific elements of the FSSD (e.g., the sustainability principles, facilitation techniques, and so forth) that require special attention when applying the framework in different cultural contexts?

Have you noticed any impact of culture on the way people understand sustainability and/or engage in the process of applying the FSSD? (e.g., the meaning of “sustainability” or “sustainable development”, the sustainability principles)

Based on your experience, what leadership qualities and/or competencies are necessary for working in different cultural contexts?

What advice would you give to a practitioner of the FSSD preparing to work in a different cultural context for the first time?

How might the FSSD be enriched by the experiences you’ve had in applying the framework in different cultural contexts?

If there’s something you would change or add to the FSSD to make it easier to translate to different cultural contexts, what would it be?

What advice do you wish you would’ve received when you were preparing to apply the FSSD in ______ for the first time?

Is there anything else related to this topic that you’d like to add?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix 3: Final List of Codes clustered by theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of understanding of FSSD</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Explicitly not mentioning the (elements of the FSSD)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Need for conceptually translating and/or simplifying elements of the FSSD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adapt (facilitation) approach to local context</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender dynamics</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Power dynamics</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Time orientation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Time orientation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Spirituality &amp; religion</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adopting a &quot;beginner's mind&quot;</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Building trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of understanding local culture/context</td>
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<tr>
<td>Importance to be rooted in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of being a foreigner on presenting the FSSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power of the jungle/ Believe in auto regeneration of the jungle</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taking time to understand the local context</th>
<th>Using local examples, metaphors, and storytelling</th>
<th>Importance of story telling</th>
<th>Consciousness as a leadership quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Relation to the SSPs (This theme is discussed separately in Chapter 4.6 as a suggestion for further research.) | Describes importance of sovereignty and notes connection to SSPs | Describes suggestion for changing SP8 | Different model for social sustainability than the SPs | Relation culture - social sustainability principles |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|

| Describes current location/local context; Describe personal experiences/ sustainability journey; Describe personal experiences/ sustainability journey; Importance of the economic aspect instead cultural factor; Importance of the economic aspect instead cultural factor; Environmental issue as way to address urgency; Environmental issue as way to address urgency; Environmental issue as way to address urgency |

- These are not cond - to do - to the role Play of others - other Function |
urgency; Theory as a good way to show up to the work; Place of dialogue; Need for action; Importance/role of the SPs; Individualism; No local value creation; Social vs ecological; Describes that traditional African culture has been influenced by Western culture; Difficult and thankless nature of sustainability work; Homogenic group of people working on sustainability; Relationship building with key “influencers” is important for advancing sustainability; Lack of successful examples of implementation; Describes connection between wisdom and scripture; Long and unique process to enlarge group of people working with sustainability; No local value creation; Negativism vs Positivism; Strategic, broadview, systematic; Capacity building (for leaders); Spread “sustainability”; Importance of facilitation techniques/skills; Leadership as a way to introduce sustainability; Individualism/collectivism; Inter-epistemic as answer to scientific ‘problem’ of FSSD; Inter-epistemic as answer to scientific ‘problem’ of FSSD; Theoretical knowledge is different than practical knowledge; Comparing influence of organizational culture vs. national culture; multi stakeholders engagement; FSSD is well suited to large, supply-chain oriented companies vs. sm- or med-sized businesses; FSSD is well suited to large, supply-chain oriented companies vs. sm- or med-sized businesses; Example showing the importance of activating people within a community to suggest sustainability (power mapping); Non-collaboration of the local population for sustainability; Make people able to Implement the framework themselves
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Need for</th>
<th>Matricual Society Masculinity vs Feminity</th>
<th>Hierarchy Society &quot;Sway&quot;</th>
<th>Backcasting useful because of short time orientation</th>
<th>Spirituality and religion</th>
<th>Adopting a &quot;Beginner's mind&quot;</th>
<th>Building trust</th>
<th>Taking time to understand the local context</th>
<th>Use of local examples, metaphors, and storytelling</th>
<th>Relation to the ISSPs (This theme is discussed separately in Chapter 4.6 as a suggestion for further research)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 1</td>
<td>Describes people not understanding how to execute the FSSD</td>
<td>Need for Simplifying the SPs</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Advice &quot;Empower Respected Elders&quot; -Eco temples</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Eg: Story on the train (cow as a sacred animal)</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Describes trust as essential for effecting change</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Local Examples, Durmaggetti=legen ds=birds</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 2</td>
<td>Describes how the FSSD’s structuredness is not easy to understand; The science is too complicated</td>
<td>Need for Making it more relatable; smaller scales</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Reference to backcasting (planning element) as a good tool</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Equanimity Ignore (work with individuals) Shame; Relativism; Humility; Listen; Patience; Bravery vs shutting up (humility)</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 3</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Gender Inequality (Touches it bu no example)</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Example of land snail</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Listen-Take time</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>2 years to gain trust; understanding</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Understand values, Aligning between culture &amp; FSSD</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 4</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Need For make it more relatable; smaller scales</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>People want more power</td>
<td>Short term</td>
<td>&quot;God is in control...Redemptrian will come&quot; - Then No problem with sustainability -But sustainability present in every religion</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Meet People where they are</td>
<td>Take time to listen; understand local culture</td>
<td>Landnails, River, Ed trap, Hero, Pidgeon</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 5</td>
<td>Describes lack of understanding due to differences in worldviews; Provides many examples related to the lack of understanding and need for translation</td>
<td>Need for Translating + Simplifying Egg Take, Make, Break, Cake</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Example of land snail</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Listern-Take time</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>2 years to gain trust; understanding</td>
<td>Take time to listen; understand local culture</td>
<td>Landnails, River, Ed trap, Hero, Pidgeon</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 6</td>
<td>Difference in worldviews + science; example of religious woman + not presenting the FSSD</td>
<td>Need For Making them more relatable Find the connection with people</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>People want more power</td>
<td>Short term</td>
<td>&quot;God is in control...Redemptrian will come&quot; - Then No problem with sustainability -But sustainability present in every religion</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Meet People where they are</td>
<td>Take time to listen; understand local culture</td>
<td>Landnails, River, Ed trap, Hero, Pidgeon</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 7</td>
<td>Not relatable, no connection</td>
<td>Need For Translating and simplifying</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Successful use of backcasting</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Empowerment Understand Local Culture Guiding Compass Be flexible Focus on people and results</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Commitment + perserverance</td>
<td>Understand local culture</td>
<td>Importance of local examples</td>
<td>Discussed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 4: Matrix of Themes - Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAIN THEMES</th>
<th>Interviewee 8</th>
<th>Interviewee 9</th>
<th>Interviewee 10</th>
<th>Interviewee 11</th>
<th>Interviewee 12</th>
<th>Interviewee 13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding of FSSD</td>
<td>Need for conceptually translating and/or simplifying elements of the FSSD</td>
<td>Need For Simplifying</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
<td>Need For Simplifying</td>
<td>Tropicalize Example</td>
<td>Not explicitly discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender dynamics</td>
<td>Power dynamics</td>
<td>Example of mining</td>
<td>Scientific wording doesn't work for all</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Translated to plain English and plain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time orientation</td>
<td>Spirituality and religion</td>
<td>Influence of power in the society</td>
<td>Separating men and women in a world cafe</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Bottom up vs Top down leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality and religion</td>
<td>Adopting a &quot;Beginner's mind&quot;</td>
<td>Successful use of backcasting + planning from past experiences</td>
<td>Successful use of backcasting + example of circular time</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Short term orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building trust</td>
<td>Taking time to understand the local context</td>
<td>Importance of facilitation skills</td>
<td>Asking permission to spirits</td>
<td>Self awareness of own bias</td>
<td>Practitioner advice; example around fear; Latin American cultures are relational</td>
<td>Compared it to meeting a person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of local examples, metaphors, and storytelling</td>
<td>Relation to the SSPs (This theme is discussed separately in Chapter 4.6 as a suggestion for further research.)</td>
<td>Theory U</td>
<td>Trust building</td>
<td>Social before environmental</td>
<td>Understanding importance of culture</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General trust building; UN example</td>
<td>Participatory Process</td>
<td>Flexibility Listening</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Cultural sensitivity</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Local Example to explain no g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Account for political context</td>
<td>Open to other cultures</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
<td>Not discussed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- **Not discussed**: Theme not explicitly discussed during the interview.
- **Need For Simplifying**: Theme need for simplifying during the interview.
- **Example**: Example given during the interview.

Notes:
- The matrix highlights key themes discussed in the interviews, categorized under main themes.
- Each theme is linked to specific interviewees and their respective aspects discussed in the interviews.