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**COLLABORATING TOWARDS A MORE
SUSTAINABLE SPORTS COMMUNITY**
Case Study on the Initiation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*

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ABSTRACT

Teemu Korvenpää: Collaborating Towards a More Sustainable Sports Community: Case Study on the Initiation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*

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Without any implementation practices, even the finest organizational strategies and development plans are useless. Efforts to practicalize strategies are of paramount importance, regardless of the type of organization. In today's complex organizational environments, actors are increasingly partnering and thus forming inter-organizational entities. As a result, these collectives may formulate deliberate collaborative strategies aimed at developing the inter-organizational entity as well as the performance of individual organizations. In addition to long-term commitment and implementation practices, various structural factors around collaborative strategies play a key role in designing and executing these initiatives. Sustainability provides an interesting and important, albeit challenging, starting point for harnessing collaborative strategies.

In February 2020, the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) published for the first time an inter-organizational sustainability programme, *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, which has been prepared in collaboration between the FOC and dozens of Finnish sports federations. The purpose of this study is to gain a thorough understanding of the programme implementation in the FOC and sports federations during the beginning steps of the programme. To fulfill its purpose, the study asks: "How is the implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* approached by the Finnish Olympic Committee and sports federations during the initiation phase?" The main research question is divided into two sub-questions. Firstly, "What kind of implementation practices can be identified?" and secondly, "How can the implementation structure of the programme be assessed?". Theoretically, central to the research is the approach to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* as a collaborative strategy. In addition, the literature review addresses collaborative strategic management, organizational strategy implementation as well as the concept of implementation structure. A conceptual framework is derived from the literature review, which sets the focus for the study, guides the methodological choices, and assists in interpreting and discussing the findings.

A qualitative research was conducted by employing case study as a research strategy, and the implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* constituted the case for the inquiry. The empirical data consisted of five semi-structured interviews, four event observations, and a review of key documents. Interviews and event observations served as primary data sources for the study, with the review of documents acting as a supporting, secondary data source. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic coding. In event observations, field notes were taken and session summary sheets were finally compiled. Direct interpretation was applied in examining the key documents. As a result of the data generation and analysis, five case themes were developed: General Perceptions of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, Advantages of the Programme, Implementing the Programme through Collaborative Approaches, Implementing the Programme through Organizational Approaches, and Main Challenges Associated with the Implementation.

At the collaborative level, central to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation has been comprehensive collective practices aimed at capacity building, mutual learning, and networking of partner organizations. Above all, the implementation has manifested as an organization- and federation-specific adoption and adaptation at the organizational level. In addition to promising engagement, comprehensive collaborative practices, and adaptive organizational actions, the implementation structure analysis reveals areas for development related to further networking as well as monitoring and evaluation. The results of the analysis are used to deduce managerial implications for the future implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. Furthermore, the study confirms previous research on collaborative strategic management, collaborative strategies, and strategy implementation.

The case study was not commissioned by the FOC.

Keywords: collaborative strategic management, collaborative strategy, strategy implementation, case study, Finnish Olympic Committee, *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Teemu Korvenpää: Yhteistyössä kohti vastuullisempaa urheiluyhteisöä: Case-tutkimus *Urheiluyhteisön vastuullisuusohjelman 2020–2024* käynnistämisestä
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Ilman jalkauttamiskäytäntöjä hienoimmatkin organisaatiostrategiat ja kehityssuunnitelmat ovat turhanpäiväisiä. Strategioiden jalkauttamiseen tähtäävät toimet ovat ensiarvoisen tärkeitä organisaation tyypistä riippumatta. Nykypäivän monisyisissä organisaatioympäristöissä toimijat tekevät yhä useammin yhteistyötä ja muodostavat siten organisaatiokokonaisuuksia. Yhteistoiminnan tuloksena nämä kollektiivit saattavat laatia tarkoituksellisia yhteistyöstrategioita, joilla pyritään kehittämään organisaatiokokonaisuutta ja siihen kuuluvien yksittäisten organisaatioiden suorituskykyä. Pitkän aikavälin sitoutumisen ja jalkauttamistoimien ohella erilaisilla rakenteellisilla tekijöillä yhteistyöstrategioiden ympärillä on keskeinen rooli kyseisten aloitteiden suunnittelussa ja toteuttamisessa. Vastuullisuus tarjoaa mielenkiintoisen ja tärkeän, joskin haastavan lähtökohdan yhteistyöstrategioiden hyödyntämiselle.

Suomen Olympiakomitea julkaisi helmikuussa 2020 ensimmäistä kertaa organisaatioiden välisen *Urheiluyhteisön vastuullisuusohjelman 2020–2024*, joka on laadittu yhteistyössä Olympiakomitean ja kymmenien suomalaisten lajiliittojen välillä. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on saavuttaa syvälinen ymmärrys ohjelman jalkauttamisesta Olympiakomiteassa ja lajiliitoissa ohjelman alkutaipaleella. Täyttääkseen tarkoituksena tutkimus kysyy: ”Miten Suomen Olympiakomitea ja lajiliitot lähestyvät *Urheiluyhteisön vastuullisuusohjelman 2020–2024* jalkauttamista aloitusvaiheessa?”. Päättökysymys jakautuu kahteen alatutkimuskysymykseen. Ensinnäkin: ”Millaisia jalkauttamiskäytäntöjä voidaan tunnistaa?” ja toiseksi: ”Miten ohjelman jalkauttamisrakennetta voidaan arvioida?”. Teoreettisesti tutkimuksessa keskeistä on lähestymistapa *Urheiluyhteisön vastuullisuusohjelmaan 2020–2024* yhteistyöstrategiana. Kirjallisuuskatsauksessa käsitellään lisäksi yhteistyöllistä strategista johtamista, organisaatiostrategian jalkauttamista sekä jalkauttamisrakenteen käsitettä. Katsauksesta johdetaan käsitteellinen viitekehys, joka asettaa tutkimukselle fokuksen, ohjaa metodologisia valintoja sekä auttaa tulkitsemaan tuloksia.

Laadullinen tutkimus toteutettiin soveltamalla tapaustutkimusta tutkimusstrategiana ja *Urheiluyhteisön vastuullisuusohjelman 2020–2024* jalkauttaminen muodosti tutkimukselle tapauksen. Empiirinen aineisto koostui viidestä puolistrukturoidusta haastattelusta, neljästä tapahtumahavainnoinnista ja keskeisiin asiakirjoihin perehtymisestä. Haastattelut ja tapahtumahavainnoinnit toimivat tutkimuksen ensisijaisina aineistolähteinä, asiakirjojen tukiessa aineiston muodostusta toissijaisena lähteenä. Litteroidut haastattelut analysoitiin hyödyntäen temaattista koodausta. Havainnointilanteista laadittiin kenttämuistiinpanoja ja lopuksi havainnoinneista koostettiin yhteenvetolomakkeet. Asiakirjojen tarkastelussa sovellettiin suoraa tulkintaa. Aineiston tuottamisen ja analysoinnin tuloksena muodostui viisi tapausteemaa: Yleiset käsitykset *Urheiluyhteisön vastuullisuusohjelmasta 2020–2024*, Ohjelman edut, Jalkauttaminen yhteistyötavoilla, Jalkauttaminen organisaatiotavoilla, sekä Jalkauttamiseen liitetyt keskeiset haasteet.

Yhteistyötasolla jalkauttamisen keskiössä ovat olleet kattavat kollektiiviset käytännöt, jotka tähtäävät kumppaniorganisaatioiden valmiuksien kehittämiseen, keskinäiseen oppimiseen ja verkostoitumiseen. Organisaatiotasolla jalkauttaminen on ennen kaikkea ilmentynyt ohjelman organisaatio- ja lajiliittokohtaisena omaksumisena ja mukauttamisena. Lupaavan sitoutumisen, kattavien yhteistyökäytäntöjen ja mukautuvien organisaatiotoimien lisäksi jalkauttamisrakenteen analyysi paljastaa kehityskohteet, jotka liittyvät jatkuvaan verkostoitumiseen sekä seurantaan ja arviointiin. Analyysin tuloksista johdetaan kehitysehdotuksia vastuullisuusohjelman tulevalle jalkauttamiselle. Lisäksi tutkimus vahvistaa aikaisempaa tutkimusta yhteistyöhön perustuvasta strategisesta johtamisesta, yhteistyöstrategioista sekä strategian jalkauttamisesta.

Tutkimusta ei tehty toimeksiantona Suomen Olympiakomitealta.

Avainsanat: yhteistyöllinen strateginen johtaminen, yhteistyöstrategia, strategian jalkauttaminen, case-tutkimus, Suomen Olympiakomitea, *Urheiluyhteisön vastuullisuusohjelma 2020–2024*

Tämän tutkielman alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu hyödyntäen Turnitin OriginalityCheck -palvelua.

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Teemu

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CONTENTS

- 1 INTRODUCTION..... 8
 - 1.1 Rationale of the Study 8
 - 1.1.1 Background 8
 - 1.1.2 The Finnish Olympic Committee and Sports Federations 10
 - 1.1.3 Case Description on the Initiation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*..... 12
 - 1.2 Purpose of the Research and Research Questions 15
 - 1.3 Structure of the Thesis 18
- 2 COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT 19
 - 2.1 Conceptualizing Strategic Management 19
 - 2.2 Collaborative Approach to Strategic Management 21
 - 2.2.1 Origins of Collaborative Approach to Strategic Management..... 22
 - 2.2.2 Collaborative Approach as Strategic Management System 23
 - 2.2.3 Collaborative Strategic Management 24
 - 2.3 Defining Collaborative Strategy 25
 - 2.4 Theoretical Models of Collaborative Strategic Management..... 30
 - 2.5 Two Levels of Implementation..... 37
 - 2.5.1 Implementation at the Collaborative Level 38
 - 2.5.2 Implementation at the Organizational Level 40
 - 2.6 Applying Organizational Strategy Implementation to the Levels 41
 - 2.7 Implementation Structure 45
 - 2.7.1 Concept of Implementation Structure 45
 - 2.7.2 Implementation Structure Evaluation..... 46
- 3 SYNTHESIS OF THE KEY CONCEPTS..... 51
 - 3.1 Role of Conceptual Framework in a Study 51
 - 3.2 Conceptual Framework for the Study..... 52
- 4 METHODOLOGY 56

4.1	Philosophical Positioning	56
4.2	Introduction into Qualitative Research.....	57
4.3	Case Study Research Strategy	58
4.4	Data Generation.....	60
4.5	Data Analysis.....	63
5	FINDINGS	67
5.1	General Perceptions of <i>Sustainable Sports 2020–2024</i>	67
5.2	Advantages of the Programme	71
5.3	Implementing the Programme through Collaborative Approaches.....	74
5.3.1	Sustainability Clinics.....	75
5.3.2	One-to-One Sparring Service	80
5.3.3	Sparring Group of the Major Sports Federations	82
5.4	Implementing the Programme through Organizational Approaches.....	84
5.4.1	The Finnish Olympic Committee Consolidating its Work.....	84
5.4.2	Sports Federations Adapting the Programme.....	87
5.5	Main Challenges Associated with the Implementation	91
5.6	Summary of the Findings	95
6	CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION.....	97
6.1	Answering the Research Questions	98
6.2	Managerial Implications	106
6.3	Evaluating the Research	110
6.4	Suggestions for Further Research.....	113
	LITERATURE	115
	APPENDICES.....	125
	Appendix 1. Interview Guide 1. in English.....	125
	Appendix 2. Interview Guide 2. in English.....	127
	Appendix 3. Interview Guide 3. in English.....	129

LIST OF FIGURES

- FIGURE 1 *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* Cover Page (FOC 2020f, 1), p. 13.
- FIGURE 2 Main Illustration of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* (FOC 2020f, 2), p. 14.
- FIGURE 3 Strategic Management and the Core Functions (Adapted from Bryson 2018, 48), p. 20.
- FIGURE 4 Process Model of CSM (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 90), p. 35.
- FIGURE 5 Two Levels of Implementation, p. 38.
- FIGURE 6 Organizational Strategy Implementation (Adapted from Aaltonen & Ikävalko 2002, 416; Mantere et al. 2006, 193), p. 43.
- FIGURE 7 Two Levels of Implementation with the Process Indicators, p. 44.
- FIGURE 8 Conceptual Framework for the Study, p. 53.
- FIGURE 9 Further Networking Platform for *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, p. 108.

LIST OF TABLES

- TABLE 1 Definitions and Aims of the Strategy Concepts, p. 29.
- TABLE 2 Compendium of the Key Concepts, p. 53.
- TABLE 3 Summarizing the Data Generation and Analysis, p. 66.

ABBREVIATIONS

CS	Collaborative Strategy
CSM	Collaborative Strategic Management
FOC	Finnish Olympic Committee
OSI	Organizational Strategy Implementation
SM	Strategic Management
SMS	Strategic Management System

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale of the Study

1.1.1 Background

Successful strategy implementation is important regardless of an organization's type, and without any implementation actions even the greatest strategies and plans are futile (e.g., Noble, 1999; Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; Čater & Pučko, 2010; Lindroos & Lohivesi, 2010; Elbanna, Andrews & Pollanen, 2016). Organizational managers and leaders harness strategies to adjust to the environment, and if successful, strategies act as roadmaps for organizations (Thibault & Quarterman 2011, 83–84). A well-executed strategy implementation facilitates the transition from the planning stages to practical organizational management by incorporating the strategies created into the existing system, be it a single organization or a collaborative organizational entity. Furthermore, the practice of implementation should enable adaptive learning as new knowledge develops and changes occur in the organizational environment. (Bryson 2018, 263.)

In the strategy literature, however, strategy implementation has received little attention compared to strategy planning (e.g., Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; Okumus, 2003; Gottschalk, 2008; Puusa, Reijonen, Juuti & Laukkanen, 2015). Implementation can be understood as a more challenging task in relation to planning and creating strategies, and it is easier for organizations to fail in implementation processes than in formulating promising plans or strategies (Puusa et al. 2015, 111). For example, unrealistic expectations, misinterpretations of the environment, or surrounding structures may hamper strategy realization in organizations (Mintzberg 1978, 945), and therefore the organizational context should be considered when pursuing strategic change and implementation (e.g., Pettigrew, 1987; Miller, Wilson & Hickson, 2004). Strategy implementation is as crucial as ever, and the importance is not diminished at all by the ever-growing focus on sustainability aspects (Engert & Baumgartner 2016, 823). In recent years, aspirations to strengthen sustainability-oriented ways of operating have rapidly increased internationally, and the efforts of different organizations in formulating sustainable operating models, reshaping strategic direction, and integrating sustainability reporting into the activities have gained a prominent foothold. (Klettner, Clarke & Boersma 2014, 145.)

Some research on strategy specializes in the development of partnerships and inter-organizational relationships as a strategic choice to maintain or pursue different competitive or organizational advantages (Thibault & Quarterman 2011, 84). Hence, organizations have partnered for strategic motives for years, and sustainability provides a strategic opportunity through collaborative approaches (Ordonez-Ponce & Clarke 2020, 2122; Selsky & Parker, 2005). *Collaboration* can be understood as a means of attaining together what collaborating organizations cannot attain as singular actors (e.g., Bryson, Ackermann & Eden, 2016; Gray & Purdy, 2018). In such inter-organizational contexts, organizational strategic management may embody a form or approach that can be perceived as collaborative strategic management (e.g., Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Favoreu, Carassus & Maurel, 2016; Bryson, 2018). Concerning this strategic management approach, partnering organizations may develop collaborative strategies and plans and implement them (Astley & Fombrun, 1983; Huxham & Macdonald, 1992; Huxham, 1993; Clarke, 2011).

In the twenty-first century, sport can be perceived as a global phenomenon providing jobs for millions of people in a wide variety of contexts, including for example events, media, retail, and education within sport organizations from smaller communities to top-level sports. Furthermore, sport is a prominent element of many people's lives, whether by means of active or passive participation. This growth and professionalization of the sport industry over the last couple of decades have necessitated changes in the management and activities of organizations at all levels in the field. (Hoye & Parent 2016, 3; Breitbarth, Walzel, Anagnostopoulos & van Eekeren 2015, 254.) Sport organizations of all kinds – be it public, non-profit, or commercial – are also increasingly involved in collaborating with other organizations to make better use of their opportunities and to obtain additional resources, as well as to reduce uncertainty caused by the environment (Thibault & Quarterman 2011, 84). However, collaborative perspectives to sustainability and the application of related strategic management approaches have not gained significant ground in practical Finnish sport management and academic research in the field. Even internationally, the issues of sustainability and its implementation in sport have received stronger attention only in recent years. Illustratively, in 2018, the Head of Sustainability of the International Olympic Committee, Michelle Lemaitre, made a wish for “sport to step up and be the leading industry in sustainability” (Campelli, 2018).

1.1.2 The Finnish Olympic Committee and Sports Federations

When we address the term *sport organization*, the term can refer to a wide variety of organizations that operate in different ways and pursue different goals in the context of physical activity or sports. A large number of sport organizations worldwide act on a basis that builds on the principles of voluntariness and non-profit. Thus, the funds they generate are used for the benefit of the organization's members or the surrounding community. (Slack & Parent 2006, 4.) Sport organizations in Finland can be classified into actors operating in three different sectors: the private, public, and third sector. From this sport organization entity, the third sector can be perceived as a societal sector between the two other sectors, consisting of national sport organizations, regional ones, and other sport associations and foundations, as well as local sports clubs. (Aalto-Nevalainen 2018, 23.) Of these third sector organizations, the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) can be interpreted as being closest to the position of a central sport organization in Finland (Stenbacka, Mäkinen, Lämsä, Nieminen 2018, 49).

The FOC is a nationwide physical activity and sport organization that encourages Finnish people to adopt a physically active lifestyle and operates to ensure that Finnish athletes succeed in top-level sports. The current FOC started operations on January 1st, 2017, as a result of the merger of the Finnish Sports Confederation Valo and the FOC. Originally, the FOC was founded in Helsinki in 1907, and the committee was welcomed as a member of the International Olympic Committee in the Hague, the Netherlands. Today, the FOC has 89 member organizations and 60 employees, and the national Olympic committee operates with an annual budget of circa EUR 10 million, with funding for operations based on government grants and the organization's fundraising. The President of the Board is Jan Vapaavuori, and the CEO is Mikko Salonen. (FOC, 2020a; 2020e.) As for the role of the FOC in the field of Finnish sport organizations, Itani and Tienari (2020, 25) state that "a multidisciplinary umbrella organization, that is the FOC, is a necessary operating model in Finland".

Due to the merger of Valo and the FOC, the operational scope of the current committee comprises top-level sports, federation- and club-based sports, sports activities for children and youth, as well as the daily physical activities of the entire Finnish population (Stenbacka et al. 2018, 49). This entity can be understood as the Finnish sports community. With organizational and structural changes, Finnish physical activity and the sports community have undergone a significant change from the beginning of 2017, as the FOC has commenced to build content

and practices for the sports community and sports culture, be it elite-level sport or physical activity of Finnish people (FOC, 2020a). Therefore, the committee can be understood to be located at the heart of the sports community, and since the last structural adjustments, the position of the institution has been further strengthened (Itani & Tienari 2020, 97).

Despite the wide operational scope of the FOC, its main stakeholder group is the sports federations, which play a key role in the organized Finnish sports system and community. A sports federation is an umbrella organization and a representative for its members, in other words, for sports clubs and individuals within them (OPM, 2004; Mäkinen, Lämsä, Aarresola, Frantsi, Vihinen, Laine, Lehtonen & Saari, 2015). The most important operational role and responsibility of Finnish sports federations is the maintenance of national teams' activity and national competition systems for sports that they represent (Lehtonen 2017, 19). Federations' activities are primarily guided by the organization's own strategic choices and rules. Most sports federations have their origins in the sports' international competition, and thus the key objectives of the federations include promoting the sports at the national level and enabling athletes' participation in international competition. (Mäkinen et al. 2015, 19.)

As the national central organization for physical activity and sports, the FOC has societal goals. In particular, the goals are related to aspects such as strengthening cross-government, promoting a physically active lifestyle, enhancing the operating environment of sports clubs, and ensuring fertile ground for top-level sports success. In striving for the societal ends, the committee employs a variety of means, the most notable of which covers communication with policymakers, organization of various events, giving public statements, and other ways of networking and collaborating with other organizations. (FOC, 2020b.) Accordingly, Itani and Tienari (2020, 24) note that the modern FOC possesses great opportunities to coordinate and develop a wide range of activities in the field of Finnish sports and related organizations. An example of such an effort to make a social and sporting impact is the sustainability programme *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* for the Finnish sports community, published by the FOC in February 2020.

1.1.3 Case Description on the Initiation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*

“Today, making a strategy document is as important as what is finally written in the text. Strategy work in the Finnish Olympic Committee, sports federations and clubs is, as the name implies, work – collaboration and working together.” (Itani & Tienari 2020, 144)

This case description is based on my discussions with the Sustainability Manager of the FOC and on public documents and newsletters that can be found on the FOC’s website. I have been authorized to make use of the materials related to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*.

For years, the FOC has been working towards responsibility and sustainability of physical activity and sports in Finland in collaboration with its member organizations, the most important of which are Finnish sports federations. In the committee’s strategy document *Strategy 2024*, drawn up in collaboration with member organizations during 2019 and updated in autumn 2020, sustainability is identified as one of the five societal ‘forces for change’ that provide opportunities for the sports community’s activities. Concerning sustainability, it is stated that sustainability must be considered in all activities of the sports community and that the community has the opportunity to be part of a sustainable solution to major societal problems. (FOC 2020d, 2, 6.)

However, the sustainability work of the sports community had lacked a coherent approach until the early spring of 2020, when the FOC published for the first time an actual sustainability programme. The programme is called *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, and the aim has been to design the programme in a way that it can be applied in a variety of sport management, physical activity, and sports environments (FOC, 2020h). Figure 1. (p. 13) presents the cover page of the published sustainability programme document.



Figure 1. *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* Cover Page (FOC 2020f, 1)

The idea of creating the programme originated during the spring and summer of 2019 when the management of the FOC began to consider how the organization's sustainability work could be developed into a more efficient and integrated entity. During the autumn of 2019, discussions were held between the Sustainability Manager and the CEO of the FOC, and the initial idea was to formulate a sustainability programme only for the committee's organization. However, it turned out that the major Finnish sports federations were also enthusiastic about forming a sustainability programme – but the federations did not praise the idea that each organization individually would form its sustainability tools and strategies. Thus, consideration was given to establishing a collective sustainability programme, and an inquiry on sports sustainability issues was sent to all partner organizations (69 sports federations responded) of the FOC in the autumn of 2019 (FOC, 2020h). A working group of six major federations was also set up, which, together with the FOC and FINCIS (Finnish Center for Integrity in Sports) undertook to develop the programme. Based on the results of the inquiry, a draft of the sustainability programme was drawn up, and the draft was further developed by circa 35 participants in a workshop organized by the FOC (FOC, 2020h).

Throughout the formulating process, the representatives of the FOC engaged in formal and informal communication with the members of the working group to fine-tune the draft. In addition, the draft was also receiving comments from the entire staff of the FOC and the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. From the end of 2019 until the beginning of 2020, the draft was also available for comments by the Finnish people. The comments received at this stage

were considered in the working group, and the finalized version of the programme was composed by the Sustainability Manager in January–February 2020. Subsequently, the programme was approved by the FOC Board, followed by the publication of the 24-page document in February 2020. Figure 2. presents the main outline of the finalized sustainability programme.



Figure 2. Main Illustration of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* (FOC 2020f, 2)

As can be seen from Figure 2., the programme aims to achieve the five objectives of the sports community: *Good Governance*, *Safe Space and Safe Environment*, *Equality and Equal Opportunity*, *Environment and Climate*, and *Anti-Doping*. Each of the objectives consists of more detailed directives, goals, and measures to guide the activities of the Finnish sports community organizations. The content of the programme is also partly based on several Finnish studies in the field of physical activity and sports, ethical principles for sports, as well as the *United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 2030*. (FOC, 2020f.)

As a result of the formulation and publication of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, the Finnish sports community and the hundreds of sport organizations that belong to it have their shared, comprehensive sustainability programme. In the newsletter regarding the publication of the programme, the Sustainability Manager of the FOC states that the implementation is approached by great seriousness, and collaboration with various stakeholders is essential on the way to approaching and accomplishing the somewhat ambitious objectives declared in *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* (FOC, 2020h).

1.2 Purpose of the Research and Research Questions

The purpose of this case study is to gain a thorough understanding of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation in the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and sports federations during the initiation phase of the programme. In this case study, the inter-organizational sustainability programme is addressed as an entity, without a separate focus on each of the programme's five key themes. This choice of perspective also supports the theoretical and conceptual starting points which are applied in the study.

During the planning stages of this research, it became clear that it would not be possible to include the entire Finnish sports community and the related actors in it, nor the entire implementation process of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, as the programme is intended to serve the community the years of 2020–2024. Instead, concerning implementation, this case study delves into the initiation phase of the sustainability programme and the key activities and practices the phase comprises in the FOC and sports federations. The precise *initiation phase* is difficult to delimit unequivocally, nor does it make sense in terms of the programme's practical implementation in the context of the focal organizations. However, the timeline of the present study and its data generation period from August 2020 to January 2021 can be considered to be part of the initiation phase of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, and the matter has also been discussed with the Sustainability Manager of the FOC, who is responsible for the organization's overall sustainability work.

A key feature in any case study is the designation of the case or multiple cases as the subject of the study. This implies that the research questions are always related to the holistic perception and solving of the case, in other words, "what the case is about and what can be learned by studying it". (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 115.) Central to understanding the nature of this case study is to embrace the theoretical understanding of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* programme as a *collaborative strategy*, which the FOC, together with sports federations, intend to implement as part of their organizational activities. In this study, collaborative strategy, the key managerial instrument in collaborative strategic management approach, is understood as a strategic plan prepared as a result of a deliberate collaborative process, consisting of meta-mission, meta-objectives, and a set of guidelines for the inter-organizational entity. The implementation of such a strategy has not been previously studied in the operations of the FOC

and sports federations from the adopted approach, which makes the chosen case eminently interesting, relevant, and also challenging for the researcher. Furthermore, despite the apparent practical application of collaborative strategic management practices in a variety of inter-organizational contexts, there is less research involved, especially in terms of collaborative strategy implementation (Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Clarke, 2011). For these reasons, one main research question is posed for the case study.

How is the implementation of Sustainable Sports 2020–2024 approached by the Finnish Olympic Committee and sports federations during the initiation phase?

It is two different matters to examine either strategy *implementation* or strategy *realization*. The review of implementation focuses on the efforts made to realize the strategy, while the review or evaluation of realization examines whether the objectives included in the strategy have been achieved and related key choices made (Mantere, Aaltonen, Ikävalko, Hämäläinen, Suominen & Teikari 2006, 154–155). This case study focuses on *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation, and to be able to structure and answer the main research question, it is justifiable to divide it into two sub-questions. The first sub-question is set as follows.

- *What kind of implementation practices can be identified?*

The implementation of collaborative strategy is manifested at two separate but interrelated levels of collaborative and organizational action (Huxham, 1993; Clarke & Fuller, 2010). Therefore, the question aims to inquire into the key activities and practices that can be identified in the initiation phase of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, both in the collaborative interactions and in the activities of individual actors, that is, the FOC and sports federations in the study's context. However, the examination of the implementation levels necessitates a frame that indicates the matters on which the implementation review should focus. Consequently, the concept of *organizational strategy implementation* is applied to anchor the focus and to help in detecting the implementation practices at the two levels. Organizational strategy implementation is outlined in this study through the four interrelated core functions, which are *communication, interpretation, adoption, and action* (Noble, 1999; Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; Mantere et al., 2006).

On the merits of case study research in capturing the complexity of cases as well as the evolution of cases over time, case study research is also a classic way to conduct process or implementation evaluations (Yin 2014, 222). Inter-organizational activity can be examined and evaluated in multiple ways by taking advantage of different concepts and levels of analysis (Provan & Sydow 2008, 696), and thus the implementation of a collaborative strategic plan can also be scrutinized by means other than directly observing strategy implementation practices. One such tool is the concept of *implementation structure* (e.g., Hjern & Porter, 1981; Clarke, 2010; MacDonald, 2016), which is in this study understood as collaborative strategy implementation structure, representing a multi-organizational unit of analysis that diagnoses the structural arrangements and integrates related practices that are utilized in pursuit of the objectives set out in the collaborative strategic plan. As the purpose is to develop a holistic understanding of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation in the initiation phase, the concept of implementation structure and the related evaluative approach provide an applicable theoretical perspective for this case study. In assessing the functionality of such a structure in terms of collaborative strategy implementation effectiveness, five interrelated structural criteria (Clarke, 2011; Sun, Clarke & MacDonald, 2020), identified in this study as partner engagement, collaborative practices, organizational actions, further networking, and monitoring and evaluation, can be applied. Therefore, the second sub-question is worded as follows.

- *How can the implementation structure of the programme be assessed?*

The examination of implementation structure is of primary importance, as the collaborative structure around a partnership plays a crucial role in how collaborative strategic plans are created and implemented in inter-organizational settings (Huxham & Vangen, 2000; MacDonald, Clarke, Huang, Roseland & Seitanidi, 2017). Due to the nature of the concept, the sub-question serves as an aggregating element in the review of implementation practices. Also, through the evaluative aspect of the question, it is possible to adopt a more critical perspective on the study of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation during the initiation phase. Therefore, the sub-question can be identified as having a *formative* role, which denotes that the findings produced by the evaluative approach can be used to aid in adjusting the complex inter-organizational initiative (Yin 2014, 223).

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

There is no single best practice for compiling a case study report (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Robson, 2002; Yin, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Stake (1995, 122–125) discusses the importance of organizing a case study report and emphasizes that – regardless of the method of implementation – the organization should above all support the reader’s understanding of the case. In addition, the researcher should keep the research questions and purpose in mind throughout the logical report composition. This, in turn, forms the basis for a favorable interplay of argument and evidence in the report. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 131.) To meet these requirements, this report utilizes a *linear-analytic structure* that can be considered a standard approach for compiling research reports (Yin 2014, 188). Robson (2002, 511) refers to this structure as the ‘scientific journal’ case study format. In a linear-analytic structure, the organization of chapters begins with an examination of the topic or problem under study, that is, the background information, case description, and research objectives covered in this chapter one, Introduction. This is followed by a review of the pertinent literature in chapter two, which in this study comprises the in-depth exploration of the entity formed by Collaborative Strategic Management. The literature review is summarized in chapter three, Synthesis of the Key Concepts, focusing on presenting and discussing the conceptual framework of this study. Afterwards, the structure’s themes cover Methodology in chapter four and Findings in chapter five. Methodology addresses the philosophical positioning, qualitative design, and data generation and analysis of the study, followed by Findings presenting the five case themes resulting from the data generation and analysis. Furthermore, the content of the themes is summarized in a separate section after the theme-specific presentation in Findings. Finally, the linear-analytic structure leads to the delivery of conclusions and the discussion of their positioning in relation to the initial topic or problem examined. (Yin 2014, 188.) The study is concluded in chapter six Conclusions and Discussion with the four sections: Answering the Research Questions, Managerial Implications, Evaluating the Research, and lastly Suggestions for Further Research. The thesis ends by presenting the list of literature and appendices utilized in conducting the study. The applied structure is suitable for construing a wide range of case studies and possesses great recognizability in academic contexts (Robson 2002, 511).

2 COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

This chapter covers the *literature review* of the present study. No research can be ignited with a crumb of information or without any previous empirical or theoretical background, and thus the researcher must reach into the pertinent literature in order to develop and embrace one's research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 43). To demonstrate this familiarity with the literature, a research comprises a literature review, which has two main objectives in a case study. First, the literature review evinces the researcher's knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon or topics being studied. Second, the review particularizes the relevance of the research questions and the case study to be conducted. (Yin 2014, 192.) To this end, the literature review identifies essential theoretical concepts that facilitate the structuring of the analysis and the explanation of the phenomena under study.

2.1 Conceptualizing Strategic Management

As an academic field, strategic management (SM) embodies a case whose consensual nature can be perceived to be somewhat friable (Nag, Hambrick & Chen, 2007; Cox, Daspit, McLaughlin & Jones, 2012). Subjects tied to the field tend to overlap with other major fields such as economics, organizational sociology, marketing, and psychology (Hambrick 2004, 91), and overall, some scholars deny the essence of SM as an applicable academic field (Cox et al. 2012, 25). Accordingly, Naschold and Daley (1999, 53) state that SM never achieves a form of "finished body of principles" due to its nature, and the concept has different meanings in different contexts. Consequently, definitions of SM and perceptions of the field vary (Nag et al., 2007; Cox et al., 2012).

Koteen (1997, 21) emphasizes SM as a definitionally and practically comprehensive concept covering the extensive bundle of managerial decisions and acts that affect the long-term organizational performance. Poister and Streib (2005, 46) share this notion of breadth by describing effective SM as a holistic process in which an organization's strategic operations are developed and managed. In his definition, Toft (2000, 4) underlines the role of consideration by describing SM as an advanced and consistent form of strategic thinking that aims to deliver a strategic vision to every administrative unit in an organization. However, these definitions fail to provide a more practical understanding of what SM entails. They underline the all-

encompassing nature of SM and decision-making associated with management work but do not help to outline management-related processes or activities. Therefore, it is advantageous to delve into the practices associated with SM.

Regarding a more concrete and practical definition of SM, Naschold and Daley (1999, 54) distinguish between strategic planning and SM. According to them, SM in modern organizations involves, to some extent, a combination of four components: goal-oriented planning, forethought, coordination of elements, and improvement of strategic capability. Similar to Naschold and Daley (1999), Boikanyo, Lotriet and Buys (2016) identify clear components or steps in SM. According to them, SM is an ongoing process consisting of four phases, which are *strategic analysis*, *strategy formulation*, *strategy implementation*, and *strategy evaluation* (Boikanyo et al. 2016, 484). The definition also emphasizes the existence of a key tool related to SM, namely *strategy*. The concept of strategy will be examined later in section 2.3. Describing SM as a four-phased process (Naschold & Daley, 1999; Boikanyo et al., 2016) provides useful insights into the actions of organizational executives and increases the understanding of the broad scope of tasks associated with the field of SM. However, the enumeration of different managerial actions does not yet create a concise enough perception and form of definition of the discipline. Bryson (2018) succeeds in encapsulating the diverse nature of SM by addressing it primarily through *strategic planning* and *implementation* within an organization. Figure 3. illustrates the more in-depth perception of SM through these two functions.

<p>Strategic Management</p> <p>Integration of <i>strategic planning</i> and <i>implementation</i> in an ongoing manner that contributes to the realization of mission, completion of tasks, continuous learning, and value creation in an organization (Bryson 2018, 46, 48)</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Strategic Planning</i></p> <p>Gathering of information and analysis; crystallization of the organizational mission and objectives; identification of the issues to be addressed along the way; future-oriented decision-making (Bryson 2018, 35)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Implementation</i></p> <p>Efforts to actualize in practice the formulated strategies or plans regarding the mission and objectives; promotion of organizational learning and value creation; evaluation, renewal and tailoring of strategies (Bryson 2018, 48)</p>

Figure 3. Strategic Management and the Core Functions (Adapted from Bryson 2018, 48)

As shown in Figure 3. (p. 20), SM can be understood to be a synthesis of the two functions of strategic planning and implementation. SM is realized in an organization in a continuous way that contributes to the achievement of the mission, completion of tasks, organizational learning, and value creation. This definition also combines the essentials of the four phases of the SM process (Boikanyo et al., 2016) discussed previously, as strategic planning involves deliberate strategic analysis and the formulation of strategies, for example in the form of organizational objectives' clarification as well as production of decisions and action plans that guide the organization's operations. Here, implementation – merging the phases of strategy implementation and strategy evaluation of the SM process – involves the practicalization of the strategy, evaluation of implementation effectiveness, as well as strategy renewal and customization if necessary.

In this study, SM is considered as a viable field of academic research, as concluded by Cox et al. (2012) with their paper. If SM were not addressed as such a discipline, the “purpose (of SM) as a field, the study of the roles and responsibilities of general managers, will cease to have a place on the academic landscape” (Hambrick 2004, 91). To serve the purpose of this study, SM is defined by following Bryson's (2018) understanding of the concept. In this study, SM is defined as ongoing organizational practices of strategic planning and strategy implementation, which contribute to the achievement of the set mission and objectives, the fulfilment of tasks, and organizational learning.

2.2 Collaborative Approach to Strategic Management

In this section, the collaborative approach to strategic management (SM) is considered in three sub-sections. The first section, which delves into the historical roots of the inter-organizational management approach, draws heavily on the ideas of Astley and Fombrun from the early 1980s. The second part of the review brings the approach to the applicability of today's organizations, drawing, among other authors, on Bryson's (2018) understanding of SM in a collaborative context. The third and final sub-section presents the conceptualization of the approach applied in this study. Let us begin by discussing Origins of Collaborative Approach to Strategic Management, and then move on to Collaborative Approach as Strategic Management System. Finally, Collaborative Strategic Management is discussed in the third sub-section.

2.2.1 Origins of Collaborative Approach to Strategic Management

Astley (1984, 527) argues that SM has occasionally overlooked one significant variable in organization-environment interconnection. The variable of great importance is *collaboration*, standing for joint organizational action on the matter of strategic priorities (Astley 1984, 527) or expressed at a more general level, “a way of achieving together what collaborating organizations cannot achieve separately” (Bryson et al. 2016, 912). Astley (1984) points out that endeavours to manage organization-environment interconnections must consider the limitations and simplifications associated with the three 'classic' variables of *constraint*, *choice*, and *competition* that have characterized organizational environments.

First, related to the variable of constraint, modern environments are increasingly composed of other organizations. Therefore, environments cannot be perceived only as aggregators of constraints, but as elements whose boundaries merge into organizations. The nature of organizations as part of environments is manifested in the fact that organizations' collective actions with other organizations are a force that determines the characteristics of environments. (Astley 1984, 532–533; Fombrun & Astley, 1983.) As for the variable of choice, it is simply deficient to treat organizations as independent operators in their autonomously managed environments. In response to the variable of competition, observations can be made that interactions between organizations are also defined by different bonds than the purely competitive aspect. (Astley 1984, 532–533.) Interdependence in organizational environments, or the emergence of 'turbulent' environments (Emery & Trist, 1965; Gray, 1985), has evolved so that some organizations merge into collective entities that do not endorse individual action. In these situations, the development of collaboration results in the competitive feature of organizational life being limited or eliminated. (Astley 1984, 533.)

The increased interdependence or 'turbulence' of organizational environments points in the direction that environments have evolved into inter-organizational collective entities. Thus, there is a call for a collaborative approach in organizational management. (Astley 1984, 532; Emery & Trist, 1965; Fombrun & Astley, 1983; Gray, 1985; Huxham & Macdonald, 1992.) More recently, this collaborative approach has been discussed more distinctly as one of the applications of modern SM in various inter-organizational network-like settings (e.g., Agranoff, 2006; McGuire, 2006; Favoreu et al., 2016; Bryson, 2018; Bryson & George, 2020) than as an evolving response to the changes cultivated by different organizational environments.

2.2.2 Collaborative Approach as Strategic Management System

Favoreu et al. (2016) consider the collaborative approach as one of the theoretical entry angles for strategy formation and implementation in public management contexts. According to them, the approach leverages concepts and doctrines from various theoretical foundations such as stakeholder management, social networks, and collaborative strategies (Favoreu et al. 2016, 439). In these contexts, collaborative public management aims to facilitate action in inter-organizational schemes in a way that allows issues to be addressed that individual actors would not be able to address on their own (McGuire 2006, 33; Agranoff, 2006). Here, SM functions, such as strategic planning (see Figure 3., p. 20), can be perceived as an intricate process involving interactions between groups or networks of interdependent actors that engender collaborative solutions and strategic plans to address the identified multi-party issues. Despite the complexity, such interactions between organizations are perceived as driving forces for innovativeness through the sharing of diverse visions and experiences, and ultimately creating a fertile ground for organizational and individual learning as well as social capital development. (Favoreu et al. 2016, 439–440.)

Bryson and George (2020) and Bryson (2018) place the collaborative approach even more strongly at the core of modern SM by addressing it as one of the applicable organizational strategic management systems. A strategic management system (SMS) refers to organizational arrangements for purposefully enhancing the implementation of mandated strategies, the assessment of their effectiveness, and the development of new strategies or adjustment of the current ones. In essence, SMS can be thought of as a kind of organizational – or inter-organizational in this context – manual or ‘big scale’ strategy that steers the functions of SM in the desired direction. (Bryson 2018, 297–298.) Employing a collaborative SMS is justifiable in situations in which obtaining strategic goals and solving problems is not entirely the responsibility of an individual organization (Bryson, Crosby & Stone 2015, 647; Bryson, 2018; Bryson & George, 2020). Similar to Agranoff (2006) and Favoreu et al. (2016), Bryson (2018, 306) emphasizes the role of collaboration as a means of distributing resources and power, such as knowledge and authority, between organizations to achieve common goals. The pursuit of continuous learning, including enhancing the understanding of the collaborative goals and the introduction of performance indicators and accountability demonstrations (p. 287), should also be embedded in the core of the SMS at the design stage. Facilitators or lead organizations (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Bryson & Bromiley, 1993) should be involved in carrying out

inclusive practices, which in turn create and strengthen inclusive structures. (Bryson et al. 2015, 647.)

However, as great as collaborative approach or SMS based on it may sound, collaborators should ensure together that there is an evident *collaborative advantage* endorsing the joint operations, denoting that there is indeed something that necessitates collaborative organizational efforts (Bryson et al., 2015; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Huxham & Vangen, 2005). The benefits of the approach should be carefully weighed against the costs, such as time-consuming planning (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 88) and other resources used. In addition, the deployment of the collaborative approach may involve encounters with, for example, hard-to-bypass routines or practices related to different organizational cultures, or hierarchical behaviour which is usually inconsistent with respect to collaborative approaches. (Favoreu et al. 2016, 448.)

2.2.3 Collaborative Strategic Management

In this study, the collaborative approach to SM is fundamentally understood as SMS (Bryson, 2018) that guides the activities of the organizations involved through inter-organizational arrangements. However, in defining the concept for this study, the term *collaborative strategic management* (CSM) (e.g., Clarke and Fuller, 2010; Favoreu et al., 2016; MacDonald et al., 2017) is utilized, supplemented by the definition of SM developed for this study. Favoreu et al. (2016, 439) describe CSM as “the organized and structured process through which inter-organizational and multiplayer groups, both public and private, develop, implement and evaluate collective strategies”. This study employs the term CSM and defines it as ongoing inter-organizational practices of strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation, which contribute to the achievement of shared mission and objectives, the fulfilment of tasks, and organizational learning.

Regarding the evolution of SM, Mintzberg and Lampel (1999, 29) note that one of the driving forces for change is the emergence of new types of strategies from “collaborative contacts” between organizations. In these contacts, it is difficult for organizations not to learn and excerpt ideas from each other when they are collaborating. In such inter-organizational environments, the concept of strategy acquires specific attributes (Fombrun & Astley, 1983; Astley, 1984;

Huxham & Macdonald, 1992; Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Favoreu et al., 2016). The following section examines the characteristics and definitions of collaborative strategy.

2.3 Defining Collaborative Strategy

The notion of collective or collaborative strategy has been discussed previously in the literature (e.g., Astley & Fombrun, 1983; Fombrun & Astley, 1983; Astley, 1984; Nadler, 1994; Clarke & Fuller, 2010). This section introduces the background and definitions of the strategy type and reflects its nature in relation to more typical forms of strategies. Furthermore, an understanding is formed of what the concept denotes in this particular study.

Collective strategy was originally discussed by Astley and Fombrun (1983), Fombrun and Astley (1983), and Astley (1984). This type of strategy is described as "the joint formulation of policy and implementation of action by the members of interorganizational collectivities" (Astley 1984, 526). Drawing on a social-ecological approach, Astley and Fombrun (1983) recast the concept of strategy by adding dimensions of collective action and resource-direction toward realizing joint objectives held by the members of inter-organizational collectivities. According to them, collective strategy has the potential to act as an organized countermeasure of collaborating organizations to the challenges and alterations posed by the environment. Mintzberg (1987, 16) notes from the concept proposed by Astley and Fombrun (1983) that, viewed from a different perspective, collective strategies can sometimes be characterized as political strategies aimed at suppressing the competitive forces of the environment.

It is beneficial to examine the nature of collective strategy in relation to more typical definitions and forms of organizational strategy. Strategy research and the concept of strategy with it have evolved in many different directions, and therefore it is not necessary to define the concept too rigorously. In competitive situations, strategy can be characterized as a source of uniqueness and superiority, while in a more extensive organizational context, it can be thought of as the backbone of operations and a means of long-term success. (Puusa et al. 2015, 98.) From a broad organizational perspective, strategy can be perceived as a coherent set of internal choices that an organization makes to carry out its operational purpose as successfully as possible (Mantere et al. 2006, 191). In this study, the multifaceted concept of strategy is fundamentally understood

as a plan that is the result and precursor of purposeful action and includes a set of guidelines for organizational activity (Mintzberg 1987, 11).

The three fundamental levels of organizational strategy are *corporate strategy*, *business strategy*, and *functional strategy* (Hofer & Schendel, 1978; Bonn & Fisher, 2011; Puusa et al., 2015; Boikanyo et al., 2016). Under these strategy levels, there are various sub-level strategies, such as network strategies and different business strategies, customer strategies, and product strategies (Lindroos & Lohivesi 2010, 26; Puusa et al., 2015). More recently, much attention is paid to the formulation of different sustainability and corporate social responsibility strategies (Engert & Baumgartner 2016, 822; Epstein & Roy 2001, 585; Trendafilova, Babiak & Heinze, 2013). However, the concept of collective strategy is not intended to replace or ignore the more traditional forms of strategy, such as business strategy or corporate strategy. As Astley and Fombrun (1983, 585) suggest, the dimension of collective strategy should serve as a complement to these more traditional approaches to organizational strategy.

Regarding the three fundamental levels of organizational strategy, Fombrun and Astley (1983, 47) state that strategic planning has taken place mainly at the level of business units and the corporate level. The means to strive for strategic objectives at the business and corporate levels are focused on a functional structure in terms of a single business and, secondly, a multidivisional corporate-level structure across different business units. Where a business strategy focuses on effective competition in a particular industry or market segment by adapting the operations of an organization's business units, the purpose of a corporate strategy is to consider which industries or segments the organization should be involved in at all and how to deliver value to the established business units. At the functional level, the focus of a strategy is to guide the management of different organizational functions, for example, finance or human resource management, and to maximize resource productivity in these functional units. (Bonn & Fisher 2011, 9–10; Hofer & Schendel 1978, 27–29.) Collective strategy, in turn, refers to an organization's actions as it strives to manage or influence the inter-organizational environment and related operational issues. The establishment of such a strategy mirrors the way of influencing, and the implementation of the strategy materializes in different interactions between organizations. (Fombrun & Astley 1983, 49.)

Huxham and Macdonald (1992) propose a notion that can be equated with the concept of collective strategy defined by Astley (1984). The notion is *shared meta-strategy*, which refers

to a strategic statement created for collaborating organizations. This statement rests on expressions of so-called *meta-mission* and *meta-objectives*. Where mission and objectives can be understood to typically form the basis of an organization's strategy, meta-mission and meta-objectives form the corresponding basis for meta-strategy, the scheme that navigates the collaborative efforts. (Huxham & Macdonald 1992, 53; Huxham 1993, 607.) Such a shared strategy can be identified as having four advantages: making common goals visible, enabling evaluation of partner organizations' actions, strengthening a collaborative atmosphere, and marketing the collaboration to a wider audience (Huxham & Macdonald 1992, 53). Huxham and Macdonald (1992) derive their notions from the investigation of strategy-related collaboration among major public organizations in the city of Glasgow. They conclude that a shared meta-strategy and a desire for meta-mission applies most effectively in public or voluntary sectors in situations where the organizations involved are committed to common goals, or *shared core goals* (Bryson et al., 2016), that single organizations alone would not be able to achieve through their actions. (Huxham & Macdonald 1992, 53; Huxham 1993, 608.)

However, the term *collaborative strategy* has also been mentioned when considering the strategic activities of an individual organization, rather than interactions between distinct organizations. Nadler (1994, 30, 44) discusses an approach in which individuals or teams of people in an organization are helped to think strategically and refers to this approach as a collaborative strategy. Here, collaborative strategy can be characterized as a social and inclusive process within an organization, embodied above all by collaborative choices and decision-making of what to do or not to do in the organization. The approach is underlined by three fundamental perceptions, which can be summarized as follows:

- creative and continuous strategic thinking, including designing, acting on, and learning about strategy, should be emphasized in organizations instead of mere strategic planning and analysis that does not convert into action
- strategic thinking can be facilitated through collaborative work processes and methods
- the structural factors of an organization ultimately lead to strategy, not the other way around. (Nadler 1994, 30–31, 44.)

Similarities can be identified in the approach and its fundamentals with the 'inclusive strategy process', which is increasingly being exploited in different organizations. In such a process, the strategy is produced through ways of working that involve many individuals, groups of staff,

and levels in an organization – not just members of the management team. (Lindroos & Lohivesi 2010, 47.)

Despite the fact that Nadler's (1994) approach or idea of collaborative strategy does not focus on inter-organizational activities or describe guidelines or policies on what a shared strategy statement should contain (cf. Astley, 1984; Fombrun & Astley, 1983; Huxham & Macdonald, 1992; Huxham, 1993), notable analogies to the collaborative approach to strategic management (SM) and the definition of collaborative strategic management (CSM) employed in this study can be found at the heart of the approach articulated by Nadler (1994). What the discussed conceptualizations have in common is that they accentuate, above all, the continuity of SM functions beyond the planning phase, the inclusive and collaborative nature of the practices and methods harnessed, and the presentation of shared organizational learning as one of the essential objectives in terms of strategic activity. Furthermore, Nadler's (1994) approach concludes that the structural aspects of an organization and its operating environment determine ultimately strategic choices and the content of the strategy. In other words, a strategy does not aim to define new or old organizational structures but should be the result of these surrounding structural factors. Likewise, it is conceivable that in CSM, inter-organizational arrangements and structures steer what strategic choices are made and how a strategy is ultimately formed.

In their two qualitative case studies of formulation and implementation of regional sustainable development strategies, Clarke and Fuller (2010) employ the term collaborative strategy, which is by term analogous to the approach discussed by Nadler (1994), and by definition to Astley's (1984) collective strategy. Collaborative strategy is defined as "the joint determination of the vision and long-term collaborative goals for addressing a given social problem", comprising both organizational-level and collaborative-level actions and allocation of resources to actualize these activities (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 86). Essential to this definition is that it encompasses both organizational and collaborative action, and in this respect, it differs from the previous definitions of this type of strategy. For the definition, collaborative goals refer to the deliberate objectives expressed in a collaborative strategic plan (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 99). These goals can thus be equated with meta-objectives (Huxham & Macdonald, 1992; Huxham, 1993), which guide the partnering organizations in the desired direction.

In order to gain a concise understanding of the concepts addressed in this section, Table 1. (p. 29) summarizes the terms, definitions, and aims discussed in connection with the

conceptualizations. Finally, Table 1. presents the concept of collaborative strategy applied in this study, by its definition and aims.

Table 1. Definitions and Aims of the Strategy Concepts

Author(s)	Term used	Definition	Aims
Astley & Fombrun (1983)	Collective strategy	"The joint formulation of policy and implementation of action by the members of interorganizational collectivities" (Astley 1984, 526)	To act as an organized response of collaborating organizations to the alterations posed by the inter-organizational environment (Astley & Fombrun 1983, 585–586)
Huxham & Macdonald (1992)	Shared meta-strategy	A statement of strategy for the collaboration, consisting of a jointly agreed meta-mission and meta-objectives (Huxham & Macdonald 1992, 53; Huxham 1993, 606–607)	To achieve meta-mission and meta-objectives in a collaborative process
Nadler (1994)	Collaborative strategy	An approach in which individuals or organizational teams are helped to think strategically; a social process embodied by collaborative choices and decision-making in an organization (Nadler 1994, 30, 44)	To enhance and diversify creative strategic thinking, including designing, acting on, and learning about the strategy; to support organizational learning (Nadler 1994, 30, 31)
Clarke & Fuller (2010)	Collaborative strategy	"The joint determination of the vision, and long-term collaborative goals for addressing a given social problem, along with the adoption of both organizational and collective courses of action and the allocation of resources to carry out these courses of action" (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 86)	To solve a common social problem (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 87)
This study	Collaborative strategy	A strategic plan prepared as a result of deliberate collaborative process, consisting of meta-mission and meta-objectives; both collaborative and organizational level practices are to be adopted in order to achieve the objectives and mission	To implement the guidelines set out in the strategic plan; to enhance organizational learning; to achieve the meta-objectives and meta-mission for the inter-organizational entity

As Table 1. depicts, the term *collaborative strategy* (CS) is utilized in this study, similar to Nadler (1994) and Clarke and Fuller (2010). However, for the definition and purpose of this study, the conceptualizations of previous authors are synthesized and supplemented in a way that best serves the conceptual framework to be constructed for the study. CS is understood as a strategic plan prepared as a result of a deliberate collaborative process between partnering organizations. This idea of joint formulation and determination of the strategy's content is consistent with the conceptualizations provided by Astley and Fombrun (1983), Astley (1984), and Clarke and Fuller (2010).

As for the content of the CS, it includes a comprehensive meta-mission that describes a goal state for the inter-organizational entity that individual organizations are unable to achieve solely through their activities. In addition to this joint statement of mission, the strategy comprises long-term lower-level meta-objectives, together with guiding practices for developing organizations' activities. In this study, the ideas of jointly agreed meta-mission and meta-objectives apply the terminology proposed by Huxham and Macdonald (1992) and Huxham

(1993), and the long-termism of collaborative goals follows the understanding by Clarke and Fuller (2010).

The purpose of the strategy is to guide the implementation through which the fulfillment of meta-objectives and meta-mission is ultimately possible. Practices and resource allocation, both at the collaborative level and the level of individual organizations, play a key role in putting the strategic plan into practice. In the definition of this study, CS has been formulated to develop partnering organizations' activities and the operational quality of the inter-organizational entity, and therefore the strategy also aims to support mutual organizational learning in pursuit of the objectives set out in the strategic plan. Here one can understand the resemblance both to the definition of CSM formulated for this study and to the approach discussed by Nadler (1994), in which organizational members' abilities in strategic thinking are promoted.

We now understand the context of CSM, and we possess a pivotal managerial tool concerning it, namely, CS. However, we do not yet have a perception of how to leverage CSM in an inter-organizational operating environment, or how to operate with the jointly formulated collaborative strategic plan. The following section fills this gap by introducing theoretical models, frameworks, and approaches that provide suggestions for action on CSM.

2.4 Theoretical Models of Collaborative Strategic Management

For years, organizations in different societal sectors have formed multi-stakeholder partnerships in order to meet a variety of challenges that they would not be able to address as individual actors (Gray & Purdy, 2018; MacDonald, Clarke & Huang, 2019). However, achieving successful collaboration between organizations usually becomes more difficult the more participating organizations or other stakeholders appear in the scene (Bryson, Crosby & Ackermann 2004, 377). In addition, without a concise authority structure or norms for communication, for example, collaborative participants from different societal sectors may have challenges in establishing, developing, maintaining support, and implementing their collaborative plans (Hood, Logsdon & Thompson 1993, 2). To facilitate the formation and management of effective collaborative organizational entities, various process models, frameworks and approaches can be found from the literature on collaborations and management (e.g., McCann, 1983; Hood et al., 1993; Waddell & Brown, 1997; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009;

Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Gray & Purdy, 2018). Next, these tools and their positioning in relation to the theoretical basis of collaborative strategic management (CSM) and the concept of collaborative strategy (CS) are discussed.

McCann (1983) proposes a three-step process framework for social problem-solving in a wide variety of collaborative contexts. Social problem-solving can be understood as a situation in which two or more actors commit to working together to solve or manage a commonly identified problem. The actors involved in the situation are called stakeholders, who are all the individuals, groups, or organizations that can directly influence the identified problem through their activities or are directly influenced by the activities others harness to address it (Gray & Purdy 2018, 2). The three overlapping and interactive processes included in the framework are *problem setting*, *direction setting*, and *structuring*. (McCann 1983, 177–178.) In problem setting, stakeholders identify a social problem domain and gain a mutual understanding of the issue addressing of which necessitates collaboration. Through the step, stakeholders discuss legitimacy issues concerning of parties involved and acknowledge their interdependence, on which collaboration is built. (Gray 1985, 916–917; McCann 1983, 179.) In the second step, “stakeholders articulate the values which guide their individual pursuits and begin to identify and appreciate a sense of common purpose” (Gray 1985, 917). In addition to identifying shared ends for collaboration, in direction setting the legitimacy of these ends is assessed and feasible programs and policies are established to pursue the common goals (McCann 1983, 180). Finally, in structuring, collaboration is strengthened and institutionalized through the consensus of stakeholders, and a jointly accepted “regulative framework” is formed to address the social problem (Gray 1985, 917).

McCann’s (1983) oft-cited framework of collaboration is significant in the sense that it has been laying the groundwork for subsequent illustrations. It can be used to describe many different collaborative situations, and thus the vocabulary used in the naming of the steps and describing their content does not correspond very well to the vocabulary utilized in the context of organizational SM. However, due to the broad applicability of the framework, similarities can be identified with the CSM approach and the concept of CS used in this study. As with CSM, McCann (1983) emphasizes the setting and pursuing of clear, commonly understood objectives in a consistent and ongoing manner through the strengthening of collaboration. McCann (1983, 180) also refers to the harnessing of common programs and policies, and Gray (1985, 917) in discussing McCann’s model, notes that a “regulative framework” to be created

guides the social problem-solving. However, the model focuses primarily on illustrating and enhancing collaborative activity in different contexts, rather than managing a CS in an inter-organizational context.

Hood et al. (1993) offer a theoretical model concerning the different factors that affect the formulation, maintenance, and capability of collaborations striving for social problem-solving. The model focuses on social problem-solving such as McCann (1983) and Gray (1985) but takes a slightly different perspective by placing the different factors that affect collaborative functionality at the center of the review. In describing social problem-solving collaborations, the model by Hood et al. (1993, 3) identifies four phases: first, *environmental factors* and *organizational factors*, that build a foundation for *interactive factors* that, in turn, lead to *collaborative outcomes*. The model is meritorious in recognizing the great importance of environmental, in other words, inter-organizational and individual, organization-level factors especially in the early stages of the collaboration process where the purposes of the whole activity and the definition of problems to be solved actualize.

Although the model by Hood et al. (1993) reflects some similarities to the principles of CSM applied in this study – for example, in terms of organizations' interplay in setting goals and identifying problems in much the same way as McCann's (1983) framework – the disadvantage of the model is that it concentrates on the inter-organizational collaboration process and the influencing factors. The model does not consider the existence of a collaborative strategic plan, the implementation of which is the interest of this case study.

Waddell and Brown (1997) discuss the nature of inter-organizational partnerships and provide a guide of instructional steps for enhancing the establishment and operation of these partnerships. They emphasize the importance of formulating and maintaining “the vision of what could be, and the reasons for undertaking the initiative” (Waddell & Brown 1997, 6). This vision or reason for collaboration can be understood to be associated with the expression of “common purpose” (Gray 1985, 917) in relation to McCann's (1983) framework, as well as the ideas of meta-mission (Huxham & Macdonald, 1992) and shared core goals (Bryson et al., 2016), as the vision keeps participants concentrated on what can ultimately be obtained through the collaboration. In terms of developing collaborative partnerships, Waddell and Brown (1997, 7) provide five fundamental steps, each with its assignments and challenges. The steps are 1) identifying prerequisites for collaboration, 2) convening participants and delineating problems,

3) setting shared directions, 4) implementing joint action strategies, and 5) institutionalizing and expanding successful collaboration.

The five steps of Waddell and Brown (1997) deepens the understanding of the different stages of collaboration and complements the two models discussed earlier, in particular McCann's (1983) three-step framework. From the model, features suggestive of the CSM approach and the concept of CS can also be perceived. Concerning step three, it is stated that through the analysis of visions created and desired direction, participants should be able to formulate an "actual plan of action" that would present the strategic direction for the partnership's activities. Similarly, regarding step four, implementing joint action strategies, it is discussed that in order to launch a major collaborative initiative, the participants have to operate at the collaborative level and develop a "commonly-held" or "shared strategy" to address the identified problem. (Waddell & Brown 1997, 16–17, 21–22.) However, the presented five steps focus most closely on developing partnerships, and the strengthened collaboration is placed as the main outcome of the inter-organizational interplay. Despite the expressions reminiscent of the concept of CS, the model does not posit the formation and implementation of a collaborative strategic plan as the backbone for the collaborative activity.

Seitanidi and Crane (2009) provide a practice-tested model of three process phases for implementing corporate social responsibility partnerships between businesses and non-profit organizations. The three phases for partnership implementation are *partnership selection*, *partnership design*, and *partnership institutionalisation*. As the name implies, in the first phase, an organization chooses the partnership in which it wishes to participate. This selection, and the decision to partner in general, are typically influenced by the organization's strategic priorities and social trends. In partnership design, the nature of the partnership relationship is examined by setting partnership goals for the activity. Understandably, this phase with its procedures is crucial for the future functioning of the partnership. In the final phase of implementation, the partnership is institutionalized to the extent that the partnership, its programmes, and procedures are adopted in the organizations involved. (Seitanidi & Crane 2009, 416, 418–421.) Furthermore, each of the three phases contain different sub-processes and stages, making the model more detailed and comprehensive than the discussed previous models and frameworks, despite the phase-based similarities for example with the steps by Waddell and Brown (1997).

The process model by Seitanidi and Crane (2009) is based on the review of what kind of detailed steps and processes are involved in implementing corporate social responsibility partnerships between businesses and non-profit organizations. Despite the references to “strategic initiatives”, “strategic objectives”, and partnership “programmes” (Crane & Seitanidi 2009, 415–416, 420) playing roles in partnership formations, the model does not elaborate on the two-level implementation of collaborative strategic plans. Instead, the model addresses above all the functionality and life cycle of partnership implementation on corporate social responsibility. Due to this lack of placing the focus rigorously on collaborative strategic plan implementation, the model does not coincide with the intentions of this study.

More recently, Gray and Purdy (2018) approach inter-organizational collaboration and its management as an interactive process or an outcome or both with certain process features. They envisage collaboration to consist of the following components:

- The actors are interdependent in relation to the problem or issue identified and no single actor is able to solve it alone;
- It is an evolving process that takes advantage of shared rules and structures;
- The process involves constructive informal and formal approaches to building consensus and finding ways to create value for all actors;
- Partners offer diverse proficiencies to the collaboration and recognize and learn from each other’s expertise;
- Partners understand joint risks and take responsibility for the outcomes of the collaboration. (Gray & Purdy 2018, 8.)

Gray and Purdy’s (2018) approach to collaboration and its process-like features provides a holistic view of the reasons for initiating multi-stakeholder collaboration, its ideal content, and the joint-ownership and outcome-centricity of the process. With these features, similarities can be identified from the approach in particular to McCann’s (1983) framework, Waddell and Brown’s (1997) instructional steps, and Seitanidi and Crane’s (2009) process model. The approach also has clear features referring to the conceptualizations of CSM and CS applied in this study, as collaboration is described as an “interactive process using shared rules, norms, and structures” (Gray & Purdy 2018, 9). Furthermore, the approach highlights the importance of mutual organizational learning between partners on the path to common outcomes, as

suggested by the definition of CSM applied in this study. However, the approach does not elevate the jointly developed strategic plan and its implementation to the pivotal role. The perception of the collaboration process by Gray and Purdy (2018) serves as a general and more recent framework to describe the desired nature and management of inter-organizational collaboration, but it does not provide a sufficient basis for this study with its conceptual accuracy.

Through a literature review focusing on inter-organizational partnerships and organizational SM, Clarke and Fuller (2010) offer a process model of CSM. The model emphasizes, in particular, the two levels of implementation, the significance of which Huxham (1993, 608) also stresses in terms of pursuing a meta-mission of a collaborative inter-organizational entity. The deductive model has been tested by the authors, as they utilize a case study methodology in examining two empirical cases of managing collaborative sustainable development strategies (Clarke & Fuller, 2010). Furthermore, the model has been applied in subsequent studies focusing on strategic plan implementation in sustainability partnerships (e.g., MacDonald et al., 2017; Ordonez-Ponce & Clarke, 2020). Next, Figure 4. presents the CSM process model (Clarke & Fuller, 2010).

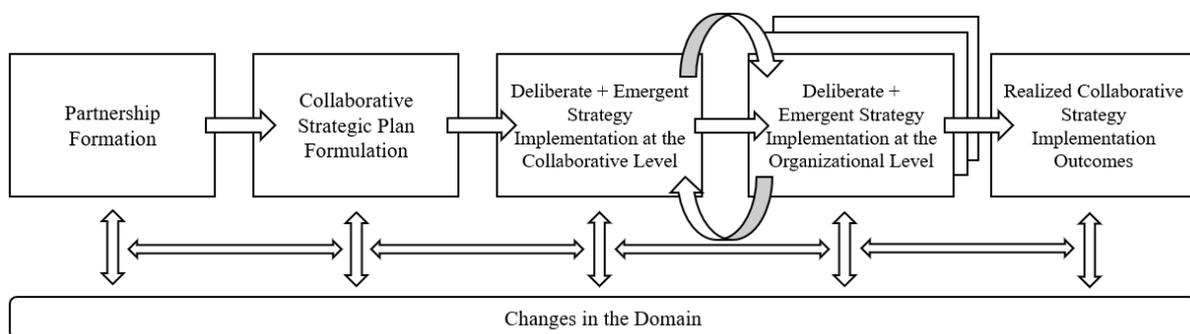


Figure 4. Process Model of CSM (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 90)

As Figure 4. illustrates, the process of CSM involves five phases (Clarke & Fuller, 2010; MacDonald et al., 2017). With its explicit and distinct phases, the CSM model resembles above all the steps of developing and strengthening partnerships by Waddell and Brown (1997). However, despite the similarities, there are notable differences in the approaches. As Waddell and Brown (1997, 7) summarize the fourth step to “implementing joint action strategies”, Clarke and Fuller (2010) elaborate on the clear division of two-level action on strategy implementation, *deliberate* and *emergent* (e.g., Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Mintzberg, 1987;

1994). In the model, these two levels take place simultaneously, and this is illustrated by the bigger arrow symbols connecting the phases. The partnership enacts some implementation practices at the collaborative level and, on the other hand, some practices are applied individually by the organizations involved. (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 90.) The two phases or levels, illustrated as two parts in the model, can also be understood as a single entity, namely by calling it *collaborative implementation* (Ordonez-Ponce & Clarke 2020, 2123–2124). In the CSM process model, a collaborative strategic plan forms the core around which the phases are based and through which implementation outcomes eventually emerge. In this respect, the model differs crucially from the other theoretical models, frameworks, and approaches addressed in this section.

Mintzberg (1990; 1994) criticizes straightforward process models and planning for strategy formulation and implementation, in which distinct steps follow each other systematically. He states that “intended strategies exist, but realized strategies have emergent as well as deliberate characteristics” (Mintzberg 1990, 187). This implies that the stages of organizational strategy formulation and implementation may in practice overlap, and part of strategy implementation results from organizational learning that takes place at different stages of such processes, as “strategy making needs to function beyond the boxes, to encourage the informal learning that produces new perspectives and new combinations” (Mintzberg 1994, 109). The CSM process model (see Figure 4., p. 35) also strives to consider and illustrate this perspective in strategy formation and implementation, and overall a collaborative strategic process can be characterized as iterative by nature (MacDonald et al. 2017, 197). Along with the five phases in Clarke and Fuller’s (2010) model, *changes in the domain* component running below the phases can be noted from Figure 4. (p. 35). It stands for changes and unforeseen events that emerge in the partnership’s operating environment and may affect the CSM process. Furthermore, the component is connected to the phases with the double-headed arrows, which serve as *feedback loops* that allow for corrective actions and cyclical decision-making, as well as reflect the simultaneity of different functions during the process (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 90–91). With the help of these particulars, the model is able to heed the critique concerning ‘rigid’ and over-simplistic process models.

This study does not address the whole CSM process but instead focuses on the implementation of a CS. Therefore, in constructing the conceptual framework of this study, the two implementation phases or levels of the CSM process model (see Figure 4., p. 35) are utilized.

To better understand the implementation of a CS, the following section takes a closer look at the two levels.

2.5 Two Levels of Implementation

When examining inter-organizational relationships and multi-organizational entities, two levels of analysis are typically considered: the level of individual organizations as part of the entity and the collective level, which includes the organizations of the entity in question (Cropper, Ebers, Huxham & Ring 2008, 10). The CSM process model (see Figure 4., p. 35) contributes to this perception and provides a tool to fathom the practice of collaborative strategic management (CSM), especially in terms of formulating and implementing collaborative strategic plans. As noted, regarding the implementation of a collaborative strategy (CS), the model emphasizes the consideration of two distinct but interrelated levels of strategy implementation. Therefore, if one wants to examine CS implementation, it is crucial to understand the existence of the two levels and to include both in the analysis.

Provan and Sydow (2008) organize the numerous approaches to examining inter-organizational relationships and evaluating their effectiveness into three fundamental categories: *structure*, *process*, and *outcomes*. These successive categories can be used as indicators to examine and evaluate both collaborative and organizational practices aimed at achieving shared and individual goals. When employing *structural indicators*, the focus is on looking at the links between organizations, the structures within them, and, for example, the changes that take place in them over time. *Process indicators*, in turn, “typically focus on those actions and activities (rather than structures) that are likely to result in effective outcomes” (p. 699). Finally, *outcome indicators* provide a means of assessing whether progress has been made in terms of the objectives set. (Provan & Sydow 2008, 696–701.) Applying these categories to the CSM process (see Figure 4., p. 35) and focusing on practices related to collaborative implementation (Ordonez-Ponce & Clarke, 2020), it is obvious that process indicators – in other words, the practices through which it is possible to improve on the achievement of the shared strategy’s objectives – are central for the objectives of this case study.

Figure 5. now illustrates the two levels derived from the CSM process model (see Figure 4., p. 35), which is supplemented by the deliberation of what kind of indicators can be utilized when examining CS implementation.

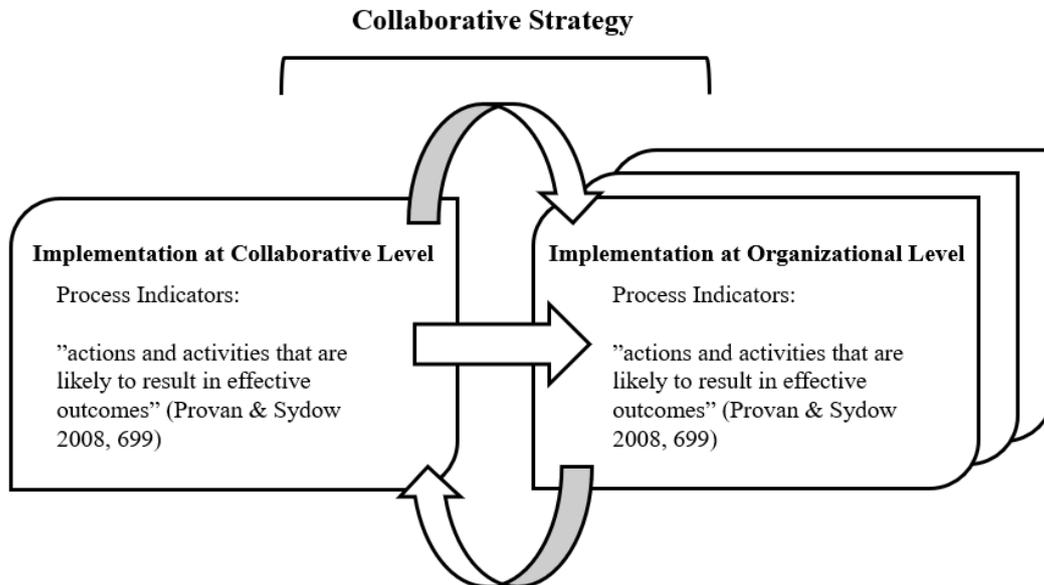


Figure 5. Two Levels of Implementation

As Figure 5. shows, CS is implemented through the two interrelated levels of collaborative and organizational activity. At this point, the main output of Figure 5. is that it concretizes the core focus of the inquiry, especially with respect to the first sub-question (see p. 16) formulated for the study. The review of implementation concerns process indicators (Provan & Sydow, 2008), which are actions and practices aimed at achieving results that are favorable to the collaborative strategic plan's objectives. The actual process indicators that determine the review of the levels are discussed later in the literature review. Next, the two-level implementation is approached in more detail within distinct sub-sections, starting with Implementation at the Collaborative Level. Related theoretical background and findings from case studies are utilized in describing the content of the levels.

2.5.1 Implementation at the Collaborative Level

At the collaborative level, CS implementation is embodied by the partnership's actions to work toward the achievement of shared strategic objectives (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 90). Waddell and Brown (1997, 17) point out that as partner organizations have progressed to the implementation

phase of a collective initiative, the organizations typically already have carried out some collaborative activity, for example, in the form of joint situation review and strategy development. However, mere past joint activities rarely carry towards the achievement of desired outcomes. Thus, at this level, the focus is on what kind of activities will be harnessed at the collaborative level now that the strategic plan exists.

In the two case studies on collaborative sustainable development strategy formulation and implementation, Clarke and Fuller (2010) manage to provide examples of the forms and practices that implementation can have at the collaborative level. In one case, the role of a distinct non-governmental organization established during the partnership formation phase was to influence local sustainability plans, engage partner organizations in the strategic objectives, and reach individuals within the strategy's sphere of influence. In addition, various sustainable business tools, such as the ecological footprint, were introduced at the collaborative level and the organization – which in this case can be understood as a kind of lead organization – helped partner organizations to organize the financial resources needed for implementation. At the collaborative level, the strategy implementation was also driven by emergent approaches and the usage of feedback loops. (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 93.) In such actions, one of the benefits of CS is also concretized – the strategy allows the evaluation of organizational actions in relation to the shared strategic plan. Tasks related to implementation can be assigned appropriately to individual partners, as they are aware of what the action is aimed at. (Huxham & Macdonald 1992, 54.) In the second case, for example, a website was set up to support strategy execution, and annual implementation action progression reports were deployed (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 94).

In the case study of structural features that have an effect on CS implementation, Clarke (2011) points out that networking and associated sharing of 'success stories' and learning from them are important practices at the collaborative level. In terms of sharing information and learning about successful practices, Huxham (1993, 604) notes that collaborating organizations should receive recognition for their good deeds and achievement of goals. This is associated with the idea of *capacity building* of participating organizations, in which partners are helped, for example by a lead organization or task force, to gain confidence that issues are being addressed well in partner organizations (Huxham & Vangen 2005, 210; Waddell & Brown, 1997), as well to respect and learn from other partners' expertise (Gray & Purdy 2018, 10). These matters may materialize through the sharing of success stories from partner organizations and highlighting

best practices in various networking situations. As shown by Clarke's (2011, 160, 166) study, networking can take both formal and informal forms.

Favoreu et al. (2016) identify a CSM approach and describe practices related to strategic project implementation within a French public organization in the case study of strategy formation and execution. Despite the different research designs, similar findings can be identified from the study as by Clarke and Fuller (2010) and Clarke (2011), as well as from the idea of capacity building (e.g., Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Waddell & Brown, 1997). The implementation was manifested as the elements of "knowledge, transversality, and learning". First, the process enabled the interaction of several internal and external stakeholders of the organization in a way that mobilized stakeholders' own planning and organization of activities concerning the strategic project to be implemented. Secondly, the strategy supported decision-making and learning, as the feedback received from actions provided collective information on the results of implementation and the effectiveness of the measures taken. Overall, the strategy project is portrayed as an iterative and engaging cascade that was open to the key actors who had their stakes in the implementation. (Favoreu et al. 2016, 446.)

As previous studies (e.g., Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Clarke, 2011; Favoreu et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2020) suggest, the implementation of a strategic plan at the collaborative level can involve a variety of different forms and practices. However, the collective approach does not reflect the overall picture of collaborative strategic plan implementation. To this end, the following subsection shifts the focus to the second level of CS implementation, the level of an individual organization.

2.5.2 Implementation at the Organizational Level

At the organizational level, CS implementation is materialized through the procedures by the partner organizations within their organizations to support the achievement of shared strategic objectives (Clarke & Fuller, 2010). Waddell and Brown (1997, 17) state that in carrying out joint action strategies at the organizational level, partner organizations need "to develop their own understanding of the situation and what is needed to implement solutions". It helps to develop this understanding if, at the collaborative level, the objectives of the initiative are clarified and, on the other hand, the issues and action steps on which the partners focus in their operations are identified and accepted (McCann 1983; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). As a desirable

consequence, partners commence building their organizational capacities toward achieving common goals. This may require organizations to modify their practices, reallocate resources or develop entirely new resources to support targeted action (Waddell & Brown 1997, 17).

Clarke and Fuller's (2010) study illustrates that CSs may include certain guidelines for action addressed to individual organizations. However, depending on the form and progress of the organization, some activities may be more salient to some partners than to others. Organizations are typically expected to commit to the objectives expressed in the strategy, and they may be allowed to identify for themselves the objectives and actions to which they have the greatest impact and the best ability to commit. (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 95.) In this discussion of identifying essential actions and making organizational progress, it is important not to neglect the role of sharing success stories and learning from them, and building partner capacity (Clarke, 2011; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Huxham & Vangen 2005; Waddell & Brown, 1997). Furthermore, partner organizations may already possess their own initiatives related to the aims of the CS before the actual collective initiative is established, in which case the existing organizational plans or actions may be integrated into the larger framework provided by the collaborative strategic plan (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 95).

Also, in Clarke's (2011) case studies, a foothold at the organizational level was gained by action in which partner organizations were themselves responsible for implementation activities and monitoring the progress. In one case, organizations were given implementation practices from 'tasks forces', while in another case each partner organization was able to decide which collaborative goals to invest in and in what way. Regardless of the method of delegating or activity selection, monitoring progress and results at the organizational level was important. (Clarke 2011, 160.)

2.6 Applying Organizational Strategy Implementation to the Levels

In terms of understanding the nature of collaborative strategic management (CSM), implementation practices related to established plans and strategies are vital to the meaningfulness of the whole managerial activity. As Poister and Streib (2005, 46) state, "strategic plans do not implement themselves". The previous section, with its two sub-sections addressing collaborative strategy (CS) implementation at the two levels, provides useful

information on how collaborative strategic plans can be furthered in practice. Nonetheless, the case studies discussed do not specify an actual tool or indicators per se for how implementation *practices* can be detected and thematized when examining strategy implementation in this study. In other words, what is the framework of concentration that captures both collaborative and organizational level practices with the research objectives and questions in mind. This section addresses this research challenge by delving into strategy implementation practices that allow for the creation of an understandable frame of reference.

Despite the considerable importance of organizational strategy implementation (OSI), it should be borne in mind that it is a multifaceted and challenging (inter-)organizational process. The theoretical basis for the phenomenon is extensive and includes numerous approaches to the study of implementation. (Noble 1999, 119; 131.) One, somewhat classic, approach is to view OSI as a series of managerial interventions regarding organizational structures, key personnel activities, and control systems that are devised to guide an organization's performance toward desired outcomes (Hrebiniak & Joyce, 1984 cited in Noble 1999, 120; Puusa et al., 2015). From this standpoint, implementation is above all accompanied by activities related to controlling and monitoring (Noble 1999, 120). Floyd and Wooldridge (1992, 27) describe implementation as the means by which an organization's managers act in accordance with the determined strategic priorities, and the shared understanding and commitment that exists within the organization are central to the success of implementation. Schaap (2006, 14) defines strategy implementation "as those senior-level leadership behaviors and activities that will transform a working plan into a concrete reality". From these perspectives, one can notice a rather strong emphasis on the behavioral aspects of managers in implementing organizational strategy.

Noble (1999, 120) synthesizes several viewpoints and approaches to OSI and focuses on the processes associated with the phenomenon, and defines implementation "as the communication, interpretation, adoption, and enactment of strategic plans". This understanding of implementation is further utilized by Aaltonen and Ikävalko (2002) in their study of strategy implementation in 12 service organizations. For their qualitative study, they develop a model that illustrates OSI by employing the four components (Noble, 1999) of strategy implementation. Figure 6. (p. 43) presents the model by Aaltonen and Ikävalko (2002), supplemented by Mantere et al. (2006) with the notions of *strategy planning* and *operative work*.

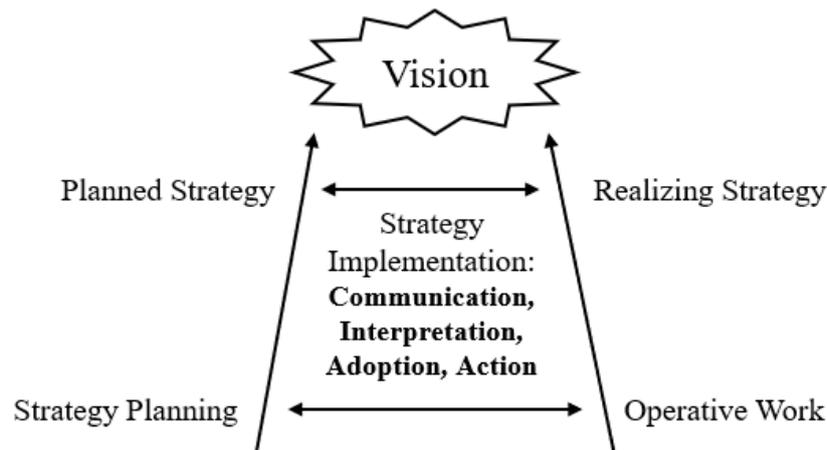


Figure 6. Organizational Strategy Implementation (Adapted from Aaltonen & Ikävalko 2002, 416; Mantere et al. 2006, 193)

As shown in Figure 6., OSI is the coordination between the planned and the realizing strategy, which stems from the operative work of the organization(s) (Mantere et al. 2006, 193). By considering the planned and realized – or emergent – strategy, the model adopts the view of Mintzberg and Waters (1985) and Mintzberg (e.g., 1987; 1990; 1994) on the partially evolving nature of strategies and their implementation in organizations. Thus, the model also coincides with the CSM process model (see Figure 4., p. 35) as for the nature of collaborative strategic plan implementation. The four core implementation practices – *communication*, *interpretation*, *adoption*, and *action* – are not necessarily sequential and it might be difficult to distinguish them in organizational practice. If the interaction between the four components is effective, the organization is guided towards its strategic objectives, and the achievement of the vision is possible. Utilizing this perspective on OSI requires an understanding of how the strategy is designed and what are the practical measures by which the strategy is taken forward in the organization(s). (Aaltonen & Ikävalko 2002, 416.)

Mantere et al. (2006, 10–11) illustrate OSI through the four practices by referring to the gap between strategic plans and practical work. Organizational actors need to be able to build a bridge in the gap that connects strategic planning and practice. However, it is impossible to start closing the gap if the organizational members do not first interpret the strategy in a unified way and then adopt what they have interpreted. These two practices, interpretation and adoption, on

the other hand, cannot be realized without communication. The bridge that closes the gap will eventually be built through the joint action of the organizational members.

Noble's (1999) conceptualization and the modeling on OSI by Aaltonen and Ikävalko (2002) and Mantere et al. (2006) are advantageous concepts in developing the conceptual framework of this study for four reasons. First, the division of OSI into practices of communication, interpretation, adoption, and action is by nature an understandable and comprehensive, but not overly restrictive, way of perceiving implementation. Second, the division does not depend on the type of strategy under consideration. Third, the choice of the four components as an anchor for the review is appropriate in a situation where OSI is in its early stages and it is not yet possible to assess strategy realization. Lastly, the four components focus consistently on process indicators, the use of which serves the purpose of this study.

As discussed in the previous section, CS implementation at the two levels, both deliberate and emergent, is an interactive and simultaneous inter-organizational process. However, the section and Figure 5. (p. 38) highlighting the two levels did not indicate what kind of practices should be focused on when examining the levels in this particular study. Now, Figure 7. illustrates the implementation levels, supplemented with the four discussed OSI practices that set the clear focus for the inquiry on collaborative and organizational practices.

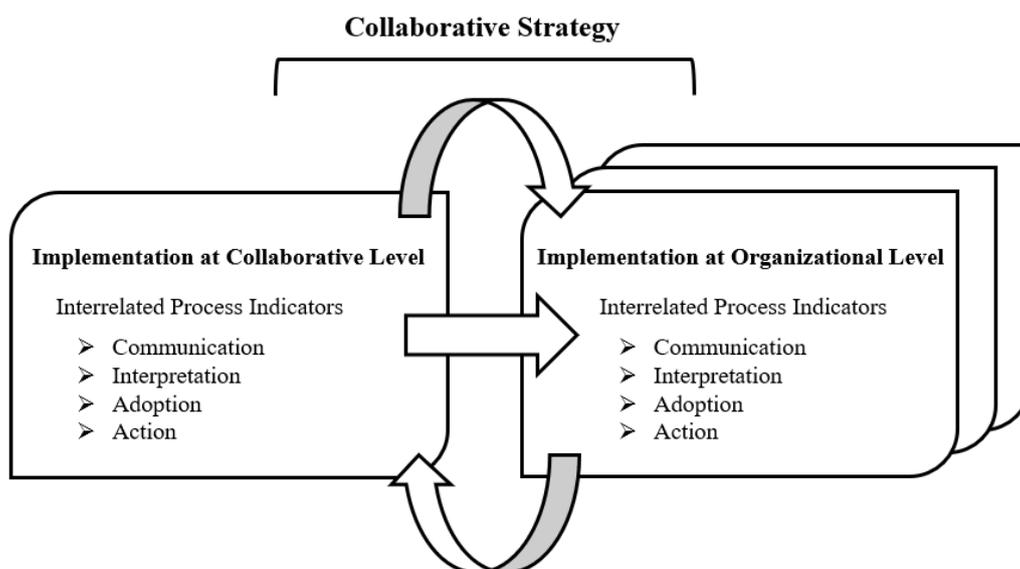


Figure 7. Two Levels of Implementation with the Process Indicators

As Figure 7. (p. 44) depicts, communication, interpretation, adoption, and related actions on CS at the collaborative level may lead to or facilitate implementation practices at the organizational level. This is illustrated by the straight arrow between the levels. However, the implementation does not have to be hierarchical and straightforward in this way, as implementation practices at the organizational level are possible without prior collaborative level support or action. In addition, both levels can take place simultaneously: at the collaborative level, CS and its objectives being addressed on a larger scale, while at the organizational level, implementation being approached in a more narrowly focused and organizationally specific way (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 90) through the four implementation practices. In Figure 7. (p. 44), these features of simultaneity and interactivity are demonstrated by the round arrows connecting the levels.

2.7 Implementation Structure

2.7.1 Concept of Implementation Structure

Inter-organizational activities can be examined and assessed in a wide variety of ways, utilizing different concepts and levels of analysis (Provan & Sydow 2008, 696). One way of such review is to concentrate on the structures involved in the implementation of collaborative plans and strategies and the evaluation of these structures in terms of achieving the objectives (e.g., Clarke, 2011; 2010; MacDonald, 2016; MacDonald et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2020; Ordonez-Ponce & Clarke, 2020). This structural dimension in collaborative settings consists of the organizations and individuals involved, as well as the structural linkages between them (Huxham & Vangen 2005, 203; 2000, 1166). As for the implementation of a collaborative strategy (CS), more specifically, its *implementation structure* can be placed under the lens (e.g., Clarke, 2011; MacDonald et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2020), as the structure is a key factor in how collaborative strategic plans are formulated and implemented (Huxham & Vangen 2000, 1166; MacDonald et al., 2017).

Hjern and Porter (1981, 211) argue that in detailing and evaluating the implementation of different inter-organizational programmes and plans, a “multiorganizational unit of analysis” should be utilized. Such a unit of analysis is implementation structure, which can be defined as an administrative entity that is used by the actors responsible for implementation in pursuit of the set objectives. Thus, implementation structures consist of several organizations or parts of

them and diagnose deliberate activity aimed at putting programmes into practice. (Hjern & Porter 1981, 211; 222.) From an administrative context (Hjern & Porter, 1981), Clarke (2010, 20) introduces the concept of *collaborative implementation structure* in the discipline of collaborative strategic management and defines it as “the particular configuration of partners, form(s), as well as informal and formal processes put in place to achieve its collaborative goals”. For this definition, partners are the organizations involved in the collaboration. Form, in turn, refers to the arrangements that define the ways in which organizations participate, and the processes reflect the practices through which a collaborative strategic plan is formed and implemented. However, it is advantageous to note that – as with CS implementation – implementation structure may have two levels, partnership-based *collaborative* implementation structure and *internal* implementation structure of an individual organization. Internal or individual implementation structure comprises any structural arrangements that individual partner organizations apply to enhance the practicalization of the strategy in their organizations. Such arrangements may include, for example, the establishment of working groups or the introduction of new positions. (MacDonald 2016, 36; 324.)

This study focuses on the collaborative structure, which is referred to in this study as *collaborative strategy implementation structure*. The concept is defined as a multi-organizational unit of analysis that diagnoses the structural arrangements and integrates related practices that are utilized in pursuit of the objectives set out in the collaborative strategic plan. The definition captures inter-organizational interactions as the unit of analysis (Clarke, 2010; Hjern & Porter, 1981) and understands the role of structural arrangements and associated practices in promoting the implementation of a CS, and thus the achievement of the objectives (MacDonald et al., 2017; MacDonald, 2016; Clarke, 2010; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; 2000).

2.7.2 Implementation Structure Evaluation

In section 2.6, which applied the concept of organizational strategy implementation to the two levels, the focus was on process indicators. Considering the categorization of Provan and Sydow (2008), when examining CS implementation structure, the emphasis is primarily – and as the name suggests – on structural indicators. These indicators address the interconnections between organizations as well as changes that take place in them (Provan & Sydow 2008, 697). Process indicators, in this study the practices of communication, interpretation, adoption, and action related to collaborative strategic plan implementation, can be perceived as elements

merging into the structural arrangements that form the implementation structure. We now understand what the concept of implementation structure denotes and what type of indicators are involved in the unit of analysis. Next, we consider the desirable properties – in other words, the structural indicators – of CS implementation structure.

In the study of four in-depth cases on the implementation of collaborative regional sustainable development strategies, Clarke (2011) examines the key structural features of collaborative strategic plan implementation. The study builds on the premise that the purpose of collaborative strategies is above all to achieve plan-centric outcomes, in other words, results concerning the achievement of the declared objectives. With the help of the findings of cross-case comparison, Clarke (2011) proposes five criteria for evaluating CS implementation structure. The criteria, further employed by MacDonald et al. (2017) and Sun et al. (2020) in studies on community sustainability plan implementation, are as follows:

1. the implementation structure engages key organizations, and/or has procedures to identify and incorporate them → Partner Engagement
2. the structure comprises collaborative arrangements to supervise the implementation and to diagnose objective-based measures, as well as enables organizations to network → Oversight
3. individual partners implement the established CS within their own organizations → Community-Wide Actions
4. the structure possesses a communication system allowing for further networking → Communications
5. the structure has a monitoring system allowing for finetuning and correctives to be made to the chosen indicators and current and prospective implementation practices, as well as for revisions to be carried out to the strategic plan. → Monitoring and Evaluation (Clarke 2011, 165; Sun et al. 2020, 3.)

As the first criterion suggests, a sufficient number of key organizations need to be committed through the implementation structure so that that implementation actions reach the critical

actors with the capacity to influence the pursuit of plan-centric outcomes. For this commitment to materialize, the implementation structure must include the means to identify these key players and, in turn, to consolidate the collaboration with potential new partners. (Clarke 2011, 165.) In addition to engaging the key organizations, it would be desirable for a diverse range of organizations to be involved. If this is the case, the contribution of several different actors may also be obtained for problem-solving and value creation. (Alonso & Andrews 2019, 575; McAllister & Taylor 2015, 89.) The importance of key organizations, as well as wide engagement in collaborative efforts to achieve common goals, has been discussed by several authors (e.g., Fombrun & Astley, 1983; Huxham & Macdonald, 1992; Hood et al., 1993; Waddell & Brown, 1997; Huxham & Hibbert, 2004; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Favoreu et al., 2016; MacDonald et al., 2017; Gray & Purdy, 2018).

The second criterion emphasizes, firstly, the approach to long-term goals through short-term measures, as well as the supervision of the implementation progress through collaborative forms. Secondly, with regard to these collaborative arrangements, the criterion highlights the role of networking between the participating organizations. Conducive networking encompasses practices such as capacity building (Huxham & Vangen 2005, 210) and learning from the expertise of other organizations (Gray & Purdy 2018, 8), participating in collaborative situations, and developing new relationships and partnerships (Clarke 2011, 166), as discussed previously in the literature review. Instead of the term Oversight (Sun et al., 2020), the criterion is referred to in this study as Collaborative Practices.

Without the fulfillment of the third criterion, it is challenging to achieve plan-centric outcomes and objectives set for collaboration. Community-Wide Actions indicate that individual partner organizations are able and willing to integrate strategic objectives and required actions into their operations (Sun et al. 2020, 5). In Clarke's (2011) study, which focuses on the implementation of collaborative strategic plans in four cases, the fulfillment of the criterion, in other words, ensures that measures are taken for sustainable development throughout the region covered by the strategy. In this case, the measures are not limited to, for example, collective arrangements at the collaborative level or a lead organization's individualistic efforts within strategy-related issues (Clarke 2011, 166). Instead of the term Community-Wide Actions (Sun et al., 2020), this study refers to the criterion as Organizational Actions.

The fourth criterion of a communication system supporting further networking and reaching citizens is related to the second criterion. This structural feature, along with Collaborative Practices, supports partner networking and keeps organizations and their representatives informed of activities and progress regarding the collaborative strategic plan (Sun et al. 2020, 5). Understandably, the existence of functioning communication encourages member organizations to network and share experiences. Also included in this criterion can be the concept of feedback loops (Clarke & Fuller, 2010) that allow for the deployment of corrective actions as well as enhanced decision-making processes (Favoreu et al. 2016, 446). In essence, effective communication has an important role to play in trust-building and -sustaining in the collaboration entity (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Instead of the term Communications (Sun et al., 2020), this study employs the term Further Networking for the criterion.

Huxham and Macdonald (1992, 54) argue that a meta-strategy must be overseen for the strategy to be effective; the minimum requirement is to verify the consistency of the measures taken. Fundamentally, the fifth criterion reflects the holistic importance of indicators in the collaborative strategy implementation structure. A monitoring system, capturing the appropriateness and efficiency of actions through carefully selected indicators, allows for both present and future assessment, corrective measures, planning, and decision-making. It is also essential that the monitoring system represents flexibility in the sense that adjustments and updates can be made to the strategic plan. (Clarke 2011, 165–166.) The results of the monitoring system may materialize, for example, in the form of regular reports produced by the collaboration, which elucidate the current situation in relation to the strategic objectives. The advantage of such a structured, reporting monitoring system is that it facilitates the assessment of outcomes and thus enhances decision-making in support of process adaptation at the collaborative level. (Clarke 2011, 166; Clarke & Fuller 2010, 97; Favoreu et al., 2016.)

As can be understood, the five criteria for evaluating the implementation structure of a CS are interrelated. Without the organizations' commitment to the strategy, it is impossible to expect them to implement the actions necessitated by the strategy within their organizations (Clarke 2011, 167; MacDonald et al., 2017). In turn, it is difficult to adjust the measures to be taken and to reform the strategy without a functioning monitoring system. This also reflects the fact that the monitoring and communication systems found in the implementation structure may be complementary. Overall, the structure should represent a setting in which the interplay of the criteria serves the purpose of the collaboration and its strategy. When the goal of partner

organizations is to attain plan-centric results, it is not adequate if only one or two of the criteria are met. (Clarke 2011, 167.)

The two matters discussed in this section, CS implementation structure and the criteria for evaluating it, are germane for the present study. This case study focuses on the partnership-based collaborative strategic plan implementation, and hence the concept of implementation structure and the means of assessing it are utilized in constructing the conceptual framework of the study.

3 SYNTHESIS OF THE KEY CONCEPTS

In this chapter, the key concepts from the literature review are compiled and the conceptual framework for the study is presented. However, before delving into the conceptual framework, it is advantageous to first understand what the concept denotes and how this kind of framework functions in academic research. Therefore, the following section briefly discusses the utility of a conceptual framework in conducting research.

3.1 Role of Conceptual Framework in a Study

The purpose of a *conceptual framework* in a study is to illustrate graphically and in the form of a narrative the key issues to be studied, such as the main factors, variables, concepts, and phenomena, as well as their assumed interactions (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2020, 15; Miles & Huberman 1994, 18). The framework provides a logical structure of the selected factors and concepts that, through visual illustration, create an understanding of how ideas in the study relate to each other (Grant & Osanloo 2016, 17). Accordingly, Baxter and Jack (2008, 553) note that “the conceptual framework serves as an anchor for the study”. As the study advances, the framework should be further developed, integrated, and eventually completed, as the researcher’s understanding of the key issues and environment under study expands and the data analysis outlines the enrichment of the proposed framework’s content and the interactions between the perceived structures. (Miles et al. 2020, 15; Baxter & Jack 2008, 553.) In this study, the construction of the conceptual framework evolved with the research process and the framework changed its form as the researcher became more familiar with the literature as well as conducted fieldwork and later analyzed the case evidence. The conceptual framework was either narrowed down to find a more coherent focus in terms of research objectives or it was conceptually organized so that it would not be overly restrictive. In constructing the final version of the framework, some concepts and related terms were also renamed or honed to provide the most accurate understanding of the concepts, and thus the whole framework.

The terms *theoretical framework* and conceptual framework are not interchangeable and therefore not synonymous, although they are sometimes referred to as such. A theoretical framework utilizes generally accepted theory or theories derived from literature and builds on the assumptions they constitute. Instead, a conceptual framework can be characterized as the

researcher's view of how to approach the studied phenomenon most properly, and the framework clarifies the specific direction for conducting the research in question (Grant & Osanloo 2016, 16–17; Miles et al. 2020, 15). The formulation of the conceptual framework is relevant in this study, as the reviewed literature is not guided by or based on a single 'grand theory' on which the framework would be constructed.

3.2 Conceptual Framework for the Study

In this section, the key theoretical concepts from the literature review are synthesized to form a conceptual framework that acts as the backbone for the study. The conceptual framework (see Figure 8., p. 53) is intended to summarize and illustrate *theoretically* and *conceptually* how should the implementation of collaborative strategy be approached in an inter-organizational context, and on the other hand, how can the collaborative implementation structure of such a strategy be examined and assessed. Therefore, the empiricism of this study is intended to converse on the components of the framework developed and their applicability to the case of the study, the initiation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. Next, Table 2. (p. 53) summarizes the key theoretical concepts from the literature review.

Table 2. Compendium of the Key Concepts

Key Concept	Key Authors	Definition or Usage in the Study
Collaborative Strategic Management	Clarke & Fuller (2010); Favoreu et al. (2016), Bryson (2018)	Ongoing inter-organizational practices of strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation, which contribute to the achievement of shared mission and objectives, the fulfilment of tasks, and organizational learning
Collaborative Strategy	Astley & Fombrun (1983); Astley (1984); Huxham & Macdonald (1992); Clarke & Fuller (2010)	A strategic plan prepared as a result of deliberate collaborative process, consisting of meta-mission, meta-objectives and a set of guidelines for the inter-organizational entity
Process and Structural Indicators	Provan & Sydow (2008)	Process indicators focus on organizational activities, while structural indicators examine links between organizations
Two Levels of Implementation	Clarke & Fuller (2010); Huxham (1993)	The implementation of a collaborative strategy at two levels, both through collaborative efforts and through the activities of individual partner organizations
Organizational Strategy Implementation	Noble (1999); Aaltonen & Ikävalko (2002); Mantere et al. (2006)	The four core interrelated strategy implementation practices of communication, interpretation, adoption, and action
Collaborative Strategy Implementation Structure	Hjern & Porter (1981); Clarke (2010); MacDonald (2016)	A multi-organizational unit of analysis that diagnoses the structural arrangements and integrates related practices that are utilized in pursuit of the objectives set out in the collaborative strategic plan
Interrelated Structural Criteria	Clarke (2011); Sun et al. (2020)	Partner Engagement, Collaborative Practices, Organizational Actions, Further Networking, Monitoring and Evaluation

As Table 2. reveals, the development of the conceptual framework for this study founds on seven key concepts involving definitions, suggestions, and studies by various authors related to the disciplines of collaborative strategic management, strategy implementation, and implementation structures. Next, Figure 8. presents the conceptual framework derived from the key theoretical concepts.

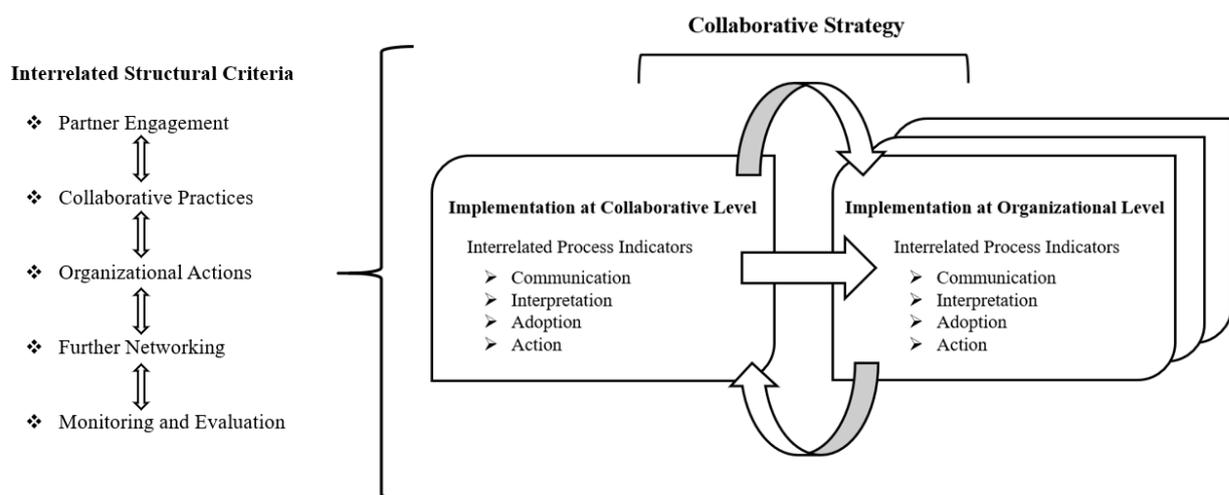


Figure 8. Conceptual Framework for the Study

As Figure 8. (p. 53) illustrates, the conceptual framework consists of four main elements: Collaborative Strategy, Implementation at Collaborative Level, Implementation at Organizational Level, and Interrelated Structural Criteria. In these four elements, the key concepts derived from the literature are epitomized in a way that contributes to the achievement of the study objectives, the design and implementation of data generation, and the analysis and interpretation of the results.

Central to understanding the conceptual framework is perceiving the framework's construction from the theoretical foundations of the collaborative approach to strategic management. Collaborative strategy is a pertinent instrument in the approach, and in this study, the concept is understood as a strategic plan prepared as a result of a deliberate collaborative process between partnering organizations. The implementation of such a strategy takes place at two distinct but interacting levels, illustrated in Figure 8. (p. 53) by the boxes connected with arrows under the framework element Collaborative Strategy. At the organizational level, the 'overlapping' of boxes reflects the fact that several organizations should carry out the strategy on their part. The two-level implementation can be examined by employing process indicators that focus on (inter-)organizational activities. In the conceptual framework (see Figure 8., p. 53), the process indicators include strategy implementation practices of communication, interpretation, adoption, and action. It is important to note that, in practice, the process indicators that are the subject of the focus may be difficult to distinguish in collaborative and organizational contexts, nor do they need to be sequential.

In addition to the study of the level-based implementation practices, collaborative strategy implementation can be examined and evaluated using the concept of implementation structure. Collaborative strategy implementation structure, the terminology utilized in this study, is a multi-organizational unit of analysis that diagnoses the structural arrangements and integrates related practices that are utilized in pursuit of the objectives set out in the collaborative strategic plan. Where the focus on the implementation levels is on process indicators, the focus now shifts to structural indicators, which address primarily inter-organizational linkages. The structure can be scrutinized with the help of the five criteria: partner engagement, collaborative practices, organizational actions, further networking, and monitoring and evaluation. As with the four core practices of strategy implementation, the criteria for describing and evaluating collaborative strategy implementation structure are interrelated. In Figure 8. (p. 53), the

existence of the implementation structure and the related criteria are illustrated with the help of the curly bracket sign on the left side of the two levels.

Structuring the conceptual framework as outlined in this section (see Figure 8., p. 53) is my view on how the implementation of the *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* can be examined and evaluated in the programme's initiation phase in the best possible way from the applied theoretical perspective. Thus, the core of the study is the theoretical perception of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* as a collaborative strategy, which the Finnish Olympic Committee, together with the sports federations, implement in the organizations covered by the programme's sphere of influence. The conceptual framework provides the lens that indicates the issues on which the study delves into. Furthermore, the framework guides the methodological choices of the study and assists in interpreting and discussing the findings.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Philosophical Positioning

At the early stages of the research process, it may be alluring to immediately consider issues related to research methods, such as data collection, data sources, and research questions. Although these crucial functions have a role to play in the process, it is worth pondering the foundations of the research in the early stages as well. (Farquhar 2012, 16–17.) Various beliefs, perceptions, and philosophical starting points flow into our research, whether we are aware of it or not (Creswell & Poth 2018, 15), and this fact molds and underpins the foundations of our research and methodological choices (Farquhar, 2012; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). A researcher's awareness of philosophical assumptions can both promote the overall quality of research and foster the researcher's creativity (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson 2012, 17–18). Moreover, familiarization with philosophical aspects helps the researcher to determine research design and strategy, which in turn guide the research journey from initial questions to final conclusions (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 11).

The philosophical position that most accurately captures this study is *critical realism*. In critical realism, the knowledge about the world is socially constructed but that is not the holistic depiction, because there is also an observable reality independent of human consciousness. Thus, the philosophical position accepts both the existence of the real world and the events of this real world, as well as the empirical events that can be examined and recorded as part of one's research. (Easton 2010, 122, 128; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 19.) Similarly, in this study, it is understood that there is a reality independent of the researcher or other observer, and thus for example the collective sustainability programme and its implementation exist independently. At the same time, knowledge and individual experiences can be socially constructed around the real-life objects and events under study. Therefore, critical realism allows this study to examine real events without denying the emergence of socially constructed aspects and experiences around those events. Accordingly, Patomäki and Wight (2000, 223) state that in the critical realist approach, the underlying reality creates the stage for both real events and perceived or experienced phenomena concurrently.

In the early stages of each research process, the researcher should determine the subject of the inquiry. The approach of critical realism is especially opportune to the study of clearly defined but convoluted phenomena such as organizations, inter-organizational relationships, or network-type arrangements. (Easton 2010, 123.) From this perspective, critical realism is appropriate for this study, as the focus is on a strategy that unites organizations and its implementation in an inter-organizational context.

4.2 Introduction into Qualitative Research

In this thesis, a *qualitative* research design is used. Qualitative research is a process aiming for holistic understanding that draws on the chosen methodological approach to conducting research and examines a social or human problem in a natural context (Creswell & Poth 2018, 326). Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 5) discuss how a number of different qualitative designs are utilized in research aimed at interpretation and understanding research objects, while quantitative designs are used in research that tests hypotheses and generates statistical analyses. Thus, qualitative designs are employed in relation to phenomena for which it would be challenging to obtain information by quantitative means. However, the division into qualitative and quantitative designs is sometimes illogical, as quantitative data collection methods can also be integrated into qualitative designs. These designs involve flexibility, and thus may also be referred to as *flexible designs*, while quantitative designs are inherently more rigid *fixed designs*. (Robson 2002, 164.)

Qualitative research has been influenced by many lines of thought and research traditions, and thus there is a great variety of qualitative research (Puusa & Juuti 2011, 48). Typical qualitative designs include, for example, *narrative research*, *phenomenological research*, *grounded theory research*, *ethnographic research*, and *case study research*. The importance of the design chosen for a study is reflected in the fact that it provides a framework for the procedures adopted in the study (Creswell & Poth 2018, 43, 67) and the use of these different designs demonstrates that qualitative research has different objectives (Puusa & Juuti 2011, 48). However, information on different designs is widely disseminated in several books and articles, and thus the understanding and application of the designs and related procedures necessitate commitment from a novice researcher. A small exception is case study research, for which comprehensive information is available. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 6.)

A qualitative design has been chosen for this study, as the aim of the inquiry is to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues under examination in their natural context, not to test hypotheses or to produce statistical information. Moreover, it would be impossible to gain this in-depth perception by utilizing quantitative approaches in the research setting in question. As for the qualitative design, a case study is applied in this research. The following section introduces this design as a research strategy.

4.3 Case Study Research Strategy

This study utilizes a *case study* research strategy to conduct empirical research. It is problematic to define case study research universally or comprehensively, as the term is employed to conduct research in a number of disciplines and for different purposes (Eriksson & Koistinen 2014, 4; Yin, 2014; Benbasat, Goldstein & Mead, 1987). Stake (1995) describes a case study as an inquiry of a specific and complex case with the aim of perceiving its activity within important circumstances. More recently, Creswell and Poth (2018, 96) define a case study as a methodology in which the researcher investigates qualitatively one or multiple real-life and current bounded systems (cases) with the help of in-depth data collection consisting of several data sources. Due to its diverse nature, case study research has been characterized as an approach, a stance, or a research strategy, not so much as a methodology or a method for conducting research (Eriksson & Koistinen, 2014; Robson, 2002; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Robson (2002, 178) defines a case study as “a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence”. This perception of case study research provided by Robson (2002) is applied in this study.

The initiation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* constitutes the *case* for this study. Stake (1995, 2) defines a case as “a specific, a complex, functioning thing”. The case can be the situation, individual, organization, or basically anything that the researcher is interested in (Robson 2002, 177). Therefore, researchers may provide different criteria for what may be considered a case. What is essential, however, is that the case under investigation can be reasonably delineated from other contexts. (Eriksson & Koistinen 2014, 5–6.) The inter-organizational sustainability programme and its implementation in the context of the Finnish Olympic Committee and sports federations can be interpreted as a case, as the programme represents a special, first-time

launched collaborative strategy that is to be put into action in a somewhat complex and dynamic environment.

The methods applied in case studies typically address topical issues in certain contexts and seek answers to “why” and “how” questions in relation to the researched issues or phenomena (Bajpai, 2018; Baxter & Jack 2008, 556; Yin 2014, 10). Case study research can be carried out in several ways, depending on matters such as the researcher’s philosophical assumptions or academic background, the purpose of the research, and the nature of the research questions (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 117). Qualitative case studies can be classified according to the type of research unit in which the bounded case analysis is focused. For example, the analysis may concentrate on an individual, organization, or function. Furthermore, case studies can be discerned based on the fundamental *intent* of the study, and there are three groups of classification associated with the intent: the single *instrumental case study*, the *collective* or *multiple case study*, and the *intrinsic case study*. (Creswell & Poth 2018, 98; Stake, 1995.)

With its approach, this case study positions itself between intrinsic and instrumental case study, however, leaning more towards the intrinsic perspective. The study applies models and concepts from the literature on collaborative strategic management and strategy to a complex real-life phenomenon, with the aim of structuring and perceiving the subject of the study in depth. This allows for a better understanding of collaborative strategic management and strategy implementation through the chosen case of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation from an *instrumental* perspective. As understanding grows, it is also possible, within the limits of feasibility, to consider theoretical or practical implications for organizations and actors involved in the case, while keeping in mind the specific context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). However, the main objective of the study is to understand the case, the implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in the programme’s initiation phase, comprehensively as the uniqueness of this case itself is of interest. Hence, the study aims to produce contextual information rather than develop generalizations. That is, to examine the selected case from an *intrinsic* perspective.

As a research strategy, a case study has its advantages and limitations. Case studies are especially useful in situations where in-depth knowledge of a problem or phenomenon is required (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Easton, 2010). In addition, case studies are suitable for exploring situations or research areas that have not been previously studied or to which little

previous research or tenuous theoretical background can be attached (Bajpai, 2018; Benbasat et al. 1987, 372). This research strategy also possesses a significantly flexible nature, as it allows the researcher to absorb the attributes of real-life phenomena without neglecting the empirical perspective to the phenomena being studied (Schell 1992, 2; Easton, 2010). These advantages also support the choice of case study as the research strategy for this study.

As for limitations, case study research does not provide a solid basis for generalizations (Stake 1995, 7; Creswell & Poth 2018, 100; Easton, 2010). For example, it would be difficult to universalize the findings of this case study outside the explicit research context. However, the external generalizability of a case may not necessarily be a problem if it is thought of as an *analytical* or *theoretical* generalization (Robson 2002, 177). Historically, case study research has been accused of lack of precision, and poorly prepared case studies exist (Creswell & Poth 2018, 102; Yin, 2014). Admittedly, this kind of criticism can be raised in connection with any research strategy (Robson 2002, 180). Another typical criticism relates to the very labor-intensive nature of case study preparations. Systematic data collection at different stages of the research necessitates a lot of energy. In addition, analyzing and presenting case study data requires skill and self-awareness from the researcher to avoid subjective biases in the results. (Schell 1992, 8; Yin, 2014.)

4.4 Data Generation

In the case study research strategy, a wide range of materials and multiple *data sources* are typically utilized and applied in parallel. Gathering data from a variety of sources ensures that the phenomenon under study is considered not only through a single “lens” but multiple “lenses”, which makes it possible to capture and understand the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon or issue, as well as to enrich the case description and achieve a reliable outcome for the study. (Eriksson & Koistinen 2014, 30–31; Baxter & Jack 2008, 544.) Consequently, case studies are generally perceived as accurate, convincing, and in-depth when they are built on multiple sources of empirical information. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 126). The empirical data of this study consisted of three data sources, which were *interviews*, *event observations*, and *documents*. Interviews and observations formed the primary data sources for the study, with documents acting as secondary sources supporting the primary data.

Interviews are one of the most significant sources of evidence in the case study research strategy (e.g., Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995). There are different types of qualitative inquiry interviews (e.g., Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Robson, 2002), and this study utilized a *semi-structured* approach to conducting interviews. A semi-structured interview guide has pre-defined themes and questions to be addressed, but the order in which the questions are asked can be modified according to what the researcher perceives relevant during the interview. In addition, the wording and emphasis of the questions can be changed and meaningless questions left out. (Robson 2002, 270.) Thus, the semi-structured approach also allows the researcher to make the interview situation more relaxed and conversational. For this case study, five semi-structured interviews were conducted, two of which involved representatives from the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and three of which involved representatives from sports federations.

Puusa (2011, 76) states that the methodological advantage of an interview is that individuals who are known to have knowledge and experience of the phenomenon or topic under study can be selected for interviews – and such a procedure is referred to as a purposeful, discretionary sample. This discretionary sampling also served this case study very well, with the aim of being able to interview individuals with knowledge about *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and its implementation. As a result of the reasoning, it was decided – and also succeeded – to interview the CEO and the Sustainability Manager of the FOC, as well as three sports federation representatives working in such managerial positions in which they were known to be potentially involved in addressing the sports community’s sustainability programme. However, the sports federations were selected using a random sample so that all these FOC’s main stakeholder organizations were listed in Excel and mixed with the random number function. The top three organizations on the random list were then selected and invitations to interviews were sent via e-mail to individual representatives of those sports federations.

The five semi-structured interviews were recorded using two devices for security reasons. Participation in the interviews was voluntary and they were conducted as single remote interviews via Microsoft Teams between November 2020 and January 2021, ranging in duration from 21 minutes to 52 minutes. The interviewees were contacted by the researcher and the interviewees had the opportunity to get acquainted with the interview guides and questions in advance. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim and pseudonymized so that the sports federations representatives interviewed could not be identified from them. Consequently, in the transcribed versions and this thesis, the representatives of the three sports

federations are referred to as Federation Manager 1, 2, and 3. Instead, the representatives of the FOC interviewed are treated with their exact titles. This is due to increasing the reliability of the study, as well as understanding the central role of the FOC within the research topic. As a researcher, I am responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of personal information collected during the interviews. Three interview guides were employed in carrying out the five interviews, and the guides can be found in the appendices of this thesis (see Appendix 1., 2., and 3., p. 125–129). The interviews were conducted in Finnish, and the attached interview guides have been translated from Finnish to English as accurately as possible.

The second primary data source for the study was *direct observations*. A significant advantage of observation as a technique is that when observing a phenomenon or event on-site, the researcher obtains authentic knowledge and experience, which often involves the simultaneous observation of many individuals (Vähämäki & Paalumäki 2011, 103). Therefore, observational data usually provides additional information about the phenomena under examination and thus assists in answering research questions. (Yin 2014, 114.) As Stake (1995, 60) expresses, “observations work the researcher toward greater understanding of the case.” In pursuit of the objectives of this case study, I participated in four events coordinated by the FOC, where I conducted direct observation in the role of *nonparticipant*. In this observational role, the researcher is an outsider of the subject or people under inquiry while observing the situation and making field notes (Creswell & Poth 2018, 168). Between August 2020 and January 2021, three of the study’s event observations took place remotely via Zoom and one of the events was a face-to-face meeting at the headquarters of the FOC. The duration of the observations ranged from one hour to three hours.

Before carrying out observations, it is beneficial to consider which issues are to be observed, by what means, and what aspects are paid attention to. Often, access to the research site and prior knowledge will determine the choice of observation sites. (Vähämäki & Paalumäki 2011, 105.) When selecting the observation targets and situations for this case study, I had discussions with the Sustainability Manager of the FOC. We considered the event observations in such situations where it would be possible to become familiar with the role of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and its implementation in the interactions between the FOC and its various stakeholders. Of these events, the case study eventually included those where it was possible to observe the collaboration between the FOC and sports federations, in other words, to focus on the actors and issues that were central to the research objectives and questions. However, I also

participated in situations – such as events between the FOC and stakeholders other than sports federations – which were ultimately not included in the case study data due to their nature. These events helped me to gain an even deeper practical understanding of the context in which the FOC operates and addresses the sports community’s sustainability programme.

The discussed two primary data sources of the study were supplemented by the review of *documents*. Almost every research has a use in familiarizing oneself with some sort of documents, such as newspapers, different reports, and the like (Stake 1995, 68), and they are commonly used to complement interviews and observations (Creswell & Poth 2018, 162), as was also done in this study. In this regard, Yin (2014, 107) states that the most important role of documents in a case study inquiry is to corroborate evidence from other data sources. As part of the data generation of this study, the organizational reports and newsletters published by the FOC were examined, the most significant of which were the *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* document (FOC, 2020f), *Strategy 2024* (FOC, 2020d), *Action and economic plan 2021* (FOC, 2020g), *Equality and non-discrimination plan 2020–2022* (FOC, 2020c), and the newsletter on the publication of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in February 2020 (FOC, 2020h). Systematic retrieval of documents relevant to the research objectives is an important part of the data generation plan, and for example, a search of data sources on the internet prior to fieldwork can provide valuable information (Yin 2014, 107). This was also the case in this study, and during the research process documents that could assist in meeting the research objectives and augmenting the understanding of the case were diligently searched.

In a case study, each data source can be thought of as one piece of a “puzzle”, in which each piece promotes the understanding of the issue or phenomenon under study. In the data analysis phase, the data sources are converged to make the puzzle complete. (Baxter & Jack 2008, 554.) The following section discusses the data analysis procedures applied in this study.

4.5 Data Analysis

For a study to be successful, it is crucial that the researcher manages to choose the method or methods of data analysis appropriate to the research questions and research strategy – that is, those that provide answers to the research questions and cover the research objectives (Eriksson & Koistinen 2014, 34). Qualitative data can be analyzed using many different approaches (Elo

& Kyngäs 2008, 107) and, as far as a case study is concerned, data analysis does not require one specific means of analyzing the qualitative data it generates (Robson 2002, 473). The type of analysis or method applied depends on the type of case study (Baxter & Jack 2008, 554), and essentially any method of analysis can be employed in case studies and different methods can also be applied concurrently or sequentially (Eriksson & Koistinen 2014, 34). As an approach to qualitative data analysis, this study applied the analytic strategy of *data reduction*, *data display*, and *conclusion drawing and verification* provided by Miles and Huberman (1994). They present that a holistic data analysis comprises these three simultaneous components or flows of activity (Miles & Huberman 1994, 10). The approach is especially favorable for case studies, although it can be used more extensively (Robson 2002, 473). This section focuses on explaining the data reduction of this case study.

In practice, data reduction starts before any evidence is collected, as the researcher already makes decisions at the design phase of the research process regarding, for example, the content of the conceptual framework and the sampling choices of who is going to be interviewed. During and after data generation, the researcher reduces the amount of data by, for example, writing summaries and abstracts and coding the data. (Robson 2002, 476; Miles & Huberman 1994, 10–11.) Three methods were used to reduce the data in this case study, depending on the nature of the data source. *Thematic coding* (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018) was applied in the analysis of the five semi-structured interviews. Field notes and *session summary sheets* (Robson, 2002) were prepared from the event observations. As described in the previous section, data generation was supplemented with documents, in the analysis of which *direct interpretation* (Stake, 1995) was utilized. Next, these methods are discussed concisely in the context of each data source.

In thematic coding, patterns of meaning are identified and analyzed from qualitative data by creating *codes* and *themes* through a systematic procedure (Braun & Clarke 2017, 297). In qualitative research, codes are most often words or short phrases that symbolically capture interesting details of the data that are relevant to the research question (Saldaña 2013, 3; Braun & Clarke 2017, 297). With codes, the researcher constructs descriptions, applies codes, develops themes or code groups, and produces interpretations from one's own or from perspectives provided by the literature (Creswell & Poth 2018, 189). Thus, themes or code groups are larger entities compiled from the codes and generate a frame for structuring and presenting the researcher's analytic perceptions (Braun & Clarke 2017, 297). After carefully

reading the study's interview data, the five transcribed semi-structured interviews were coded using ATLAS.ti software, which allows the researcher to organize a wide range of data such as text, images, audio, and related coding, notes, and findings in a project format (Creswell & Poth 2018, 212). Thus, as part of the research process, *computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software* (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) was utilized. In the coding, the data were treated through an *abductive* approach, which means that the coding was aided both by the theoretical concepts and the conceptual framework developed for the study (see Figure 8., p. 53) and by the single interviews' content (e.g., Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Once all the interviews were coded, the individual codes began to be grouped into code groups that focused on the aspects that were central to the research objectives and through which a holistic understanding of the interviews was formed.

In the four observation situations I participated in, I wrote field notes with the help of a personal computer. The notes were written on the Windows OneNote platform, which also served as a kind of research diary during the research process. The field notes addressed the situations of the observed events, the roles of the participants, and provided interpretations of the events' significance and their content. In the actual analysis of observational data, session summary sheets were prepared from the field notes in the research diary, summarizing what evidence was obtained from the observations (Robson 2002, 477). These electronic sheets focused on details relevant to the research questions, as well as highlighting other salient situations or issues that emerged in the event observations. The final, compacted session summary sheets were incorporated as part of Findings section of this thesis in an applied manner.

Direct interpretation was used in the processing of the third and secondary data source, documents. In direct interpretation, the case study researcher understands and analyzes the pattern or significance of events or textual data by asking oneself "What did that mean?". Hence the researcher draws key meanings even from single instances in the data. (Stake 1995, 78, 170.) In this way, documents found to be relevant to this case study were approached. For example, the documents were not coded in their entirety, but were searched for interesting and noteworthy instances, 'face value', with research objectives in mind. In this sense, the applied method of analysis for documents differs from, for example, *qualitative content analysis*, in which textual data is systematically reviewed by categorizing and even by counting the frequencies of words or expressions (e.g., Mayring, 2000; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

The identification and formation of *case themes* play a key role in developing an in-depth understanding and description of the case. Case themes are entities consisting of the major findings of a case study (Creswell & Poth 2018, 98, 322). Stake (1995, 74) refers to these as *categorical aggregations* in which the case study researcher collates instances from the data to classes. At the end of the data analysis phase, the final case themes of the study were given their forms and names. In addition to the anchoring provided by the conceptual framework (see Figure 8., p. 53), the theme creation was guided by the evidence from the semi-structured interviews and event observations, with the documents providing additional details. Now, Table 3. summarizes the data sources in this case study, the methods used to analyze the sources, and their hierarchy and roles.

Table 3. Summarizing the Data Generation and Analysis

Data Source	Method of Analysis	Role	
Five semi-structured interviews, including two representatives from the FOC and three from the sports federations	Thematic coding (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018)	Primary data source; to guide the formation of case themes; to support the observational evidence	Formation of case themes (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995)
Four direct observations in the events coordinated by the FOC, in the role of nonparticipant	Field notes and preparing of session summary sheets (Robson, 2002)	Primary data source; to guide the formation of case themes; to support the interview data	
Documents in the form of organizational reports and newsletters produced by the FOC	Direct interpretation (Stake, 1995)	Secondary data source; to corroborate the evidence from other data sources; to assist in meeting the research objectives	

5 FINDINGS

Now that we understand the conceptual framework of the case study as well as the methodological choices made, this chapter presents the empirical findings that result from the data generation and analysis. One stumbling block with the analysis phase is that each data source would be addressed individually, and the findings detailed separately. This is not the purpose of a case study, as instead the data should be integrated and harmonized in order to grasp the case under consideration holistically – not the different parts of the case or the elements that affect it. (Baxter & Jack 2008, 555.) Thus, in the data displaying (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of this chapter, the data sources are combined and structured into an understandable textual form. In case study reports, the findings section may consist of both a case description and case themes (Creswell & Poth 2018, 98). In this thesis report, the actual case description and related background information were included as part of the report's first chapter, Introduction, due to their importance in terms of increasing the reader's understanding of the research context and study objectives. This chapter, in turn, focuses on case themes, and Findings are divided into five such aggregations. The case themes of this study are discussed in the order of General Perceptions of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, Advantages of the Programme, Implementing the Programme through Collaborative Approaches, Implementing the Programme through Organizational Approaches, and Main Challenges Associated with the Implementation.

5.1 General Perceptions of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*

“Well, we have not had that (programme) in this form before, in which we together with our member organizations first understand what sustainability denotes, which aspects, elements it includes, and then we prioritize the most important key themes. To sum up, it is a very important programme that guides the work and way of working of the entire sports community.” (CEO, FOC)

To be able to examine the implementation of a strategy, programme, or plan, it is first advantageous to develop a profound understanding of what exactly is at stake. In this case theme, the programme-related insights from the representatives of the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and the sports federation managers are addressed. The review is complemented by the key documents. The perceptions related to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*

emphasized above all the nature of the programme as a backbone that guides the sustainability work of sport organizations, providing structuring and understanding of the sustainability objectives' roles in the Finnish sports community. The FOC's *Equality and non-discrimination plan 2020–2022* describes *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* as a programme drawn up in close collaboration with sports federations and acting as a “framework for sustainability work for the entire sports community” (FOC 2020c, 10). In the same way as in the equality plan and in the newsletter from February 2020 on the publication of the programme (FOC, 2020h), the Sustainability Manager of the FOC characterized *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in the interview as a collective five-theme guideline that should serve as the basis for organizations and individuals in the field of Finnish sports.

“It (the programme) provides a framework for the sustainability work of the entire sports community. It has been done together, so there is commitment to it, and it has five clear themes that the sports community should focus on.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

In the interview, Federation Manager 1 identified a similar role with the programme and described it as a body that guides the operations of their organization.

“Rather, this (the programme) forms the particular frame or foundation within which our own work is done.” (Federation Manager 1)

During the collaborative drafting phase of the programme, the aim was to focus on making it a solid and concise entity that would be easy to understand and interpret. By looking at the five key objectives of the programme – *Good Governance, Safe Space and Safe Environment, Equality and Equal Opportunity, Environment and Climate, and Anti-Doping* – and the related guidelines and measures, one can understand that, in the context of the programme, the concept of sustainability also involves other elements than purely the aspects of environmental responsibility typically associated with the concept. The overall objective of the programme, in turn, is declared as follows: “The sports community aims for responsibility in sports activities” (FOC 2020f, 3). The CEO remarked about this broad scope of sustainability and its connection to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, as well.

“Sustainability is a big set of concepts, as illustrated by those programme titles...”
(CEO, FOC)

Despite the scope, the programme allows for an increase in the understanding of organizations and individuals operating in the sports community through the five objectives of how sustainability can be approached in sports – not just *in general* – but for the work of community actors themselves. One of the federation managers interviewed summarized the role of the programme and its objectives from this perspective.

“If we think about these five objectives of the programme now, then in a way they provide such a certain structure, through which it is good to consider the issue (sustainability) for our own activities as well.” (Federation Manager 1)

Although the programme is now established and includes the five themes or objectives that provide a clear structure and certain kinds of ‘minimum criteria’ for sustainability work for organizations operating in the programme’s sphere of influence, the programme itself possesses adaptability where necessary. The Sustainability Manager described the need for the programme to live with the times and its renewability as the situation demands it.

“Definitely here you have to have the lights on and the antennas upright to see how this world is changing. It (the programme) is editable, it has to be alive... even if it is a locked pdf-file, if necessary, it will be opened and a clinic, for example, is organized and it (the programme) will be edited. That has been my starting idea right from the start.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

The FOC’s *Strategy 2024*, prepared during 2019 and updated in autumn 2020, has also been created in collaboration with the committee’s member organizations and stakeholders. In the document, which is stated to serve as the basis for the operations of the FOC and to provide guidelines for the sports community, sustainability is identified as one of the five ‘forces for change’ in society, the other forces being digitalization, urbanization, competitiveness, and Generation Z. Furthermore, ‘acting sustainably’ is placed as one of the cornerstones of the strategy map as well as an organizational value for the FOC. As for sustainability as a force for change, it is articulated that people expect organizations and communities to act responsibly and to be involved in solving major issues related to sustainable development. Organizations

are considered to have the potential to influence more than just their operations. (FOC 2020d, 2, 5–6, 11–12.) This broader societal perspective was also underlined by interviewed sports federation representatives 1 and 2 when discussing *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and its significance. Federation Manager 1 compared the content of the programme to organizational values and their role as a backbone for organizational activity.

“These (programme objectives) are a bit like values in an organization’s operations, that it is important that they exist and support the actual activities of the organization... and then provide the basis for doing the right thing.” (Federation Manager 1)

Federation Manager 2, in turn, reflected the importance of sustainability programmes and strategies for today’s organizations and paid particular attention to the need to address the issues in sports as well.

“Well, a sustainability programme is an extremely important part of any organization nowadays, whether it’s volunteering or business. It helps to ensure that the organization operates in a predictable but also transparent way, telling how the organization acts. And for sports, it is extremely important that the same laws that are realized in the corporate world are realized in organizations that also have a lot of this voluntary side involved.” (Federation Manager 2)

Like Federation Manager 2, the CEO of the FOC adopted the broader societal standpoint when addressing the role of sustainability and the programme now and in the future. Aligned with *Strategy 2024*, the CEO referred to people’s expectations and perceptions of sustainability in today’s society, as well as attitudes, especially in terms of the Finnish sports community. The CEO’s view aptly concludes this case theme by linking sustainability and the programme to a greater societal purpose.

“Altogether, people are more aware and sustainability – how we act, how we do – is more and more under the magnifier and one has to remember that organized sports are Finland’s largest people’s movement with more than a million people and how much passion is aroused by sports, so we are being looked at as if with a magnifier.” (CEO, FOC)

5.2 Advantages of the Programme

In addition to the general perceptions of sustainability and the programme, the interviewees discussed the benefits of the collective approach to the strategic management of Finnish sports organizations from the perspective of sustainability, which is embodied by *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. Above all, the perceived advantages relate to the enhanced structuring and sharpening of sustainability work at collaborative and organizational levels, as well as the elimination of work overlapping in sport organizations. The Sustainability Manager considered the overall significance and benefits of the programme compared to the previous responsibility and sustainability work of the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and the sports community, as follows.

“It (the programme) has brought posture, it is one of the most important (benefits). In previous years, sustainability work has been done but it has been a bit in a way that we list everything possible we do in Excel or some PowerPoint slides, and this does not feel so solid... those things (in the programme) are nothing new and wonderful per se, but that packaging was now the big benefit here, plus doing it together.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

Like the Sustainability Manager in the quotation, Federation Manager 1 also pointed out that the aspects of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* are not revolutionary or that they would have not previously been considered in sport organizations’ activities. Where the Sustainability Manager described the solid foothold for sustainability work provided by the programme, the Federation Manager 1 referred to the same phenomenon, noting that the programme provides sport organizations and related actors with firmer coordination and a platform on sustainability issues.

“There are a lot of elements in this (programme) that we already have in our own activities anyway, but of course this collective programme now gives the sports community a stronger guidance and a starting point from which each sport can then easily take them (programme measures) into its activities.” (Federation Manager 1)

In the interviews, two other representatives of Finnish sports federations highlighted the usefulness of the programme from a federation’s perspective. Federation Manager 3 pointed

out the importance of working in sports federations of different sizes and characteristics in terms of the applicability of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. Federation Manager 2, in turn, saw the role of the programme from a strategic perspective and reflected on the programme's contribution to the quality of the federation's operations.

“Because there are so many sports federations – some are big, some small – so in a way, the fact that there is right kind of steps for action to take into account, especially for small sports federations, is a really good thing in my opinion.” (Federation Manager 3)

“Just as we have the quality of operations as one of our strategic goals alongside growth and performance, this (programme) is specifically an entity that delivers more quality to our strategic goal of quality operations.” (Federation Manager 2)

As stated in the case description as part of Introduction, the FOC was originally intended to prepare a sustainability programme only for its own organization's purposes. The idea to create the programme arose during the spring and summer of 2019 when the FOC began to consider how the organization's work on sustainability could be further enhanced. Back in the autumn of 2019, the intention was still to formulate a sustainability programme for the committee, but then it became clear that the major Finnish sports federations were also interested in creating a sustainability programme. However, the federations were not in favor of each organization developing its programmes or strategies and related objectives. Consequently, consideration was given to drawing up a collective sustainability initiative, involving various organizations and actors in the drafting phase. It was also decided to proceed so, and as a result, it was possible to eliminate work overlapping and not-so-uniform approach of organizations to the issues of sustainability among the sports community. Concerning these aspects of overlap cutting and activity harmonization that took place through the collaborative formulation process of the programme, related views also emerged in the interviews. Federation Manager 1 approached the issue in terms of structuring the work of the organization as well as the transferability of sustainability activities and made an interesting point about the benefits of consistent terminology entailed by the programme.

“(The programme) supports the structuring of our work and it is logical in a way to use the same structuring so that those good practices and models can be found and

therefore it may be easier to organize them logically, whether we are talking about a level of a federation or a club... it (the programme) also standardizes the terminology, as we have a lot of concepts that are interpreted or understood or used in slightly different meanings, so in that sense building a common ground like this allows us to talk more about the same things and understand things more in the same way.” (Federation Manager 1)

The Sustainability Manager of the FOC emphasized the collective and integrated approach made possible by *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* as a decisive advantage for the activities of various sport organizations in Finland – the advantage that also gained a foothold in the newsletter regarding the announcement of the programme in February 2020.

“No one need now, be it a sports federation or a club or a sports institution or academy, to start from scratch to think about what this sustainability means, but to take it (the programme) as a basis and start personalizing it for their activities.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

The CEO of the committee shared views on the benefits of the joint initiative and considered the issue in particular from the perspective of the collective effectiveness of the FOC and sports federations, in other words, from the perspective of the actors that were central to formulating *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*.

“There is a big difference in that everyone (sports federations) would make their own (programmes)... organized sports, that we and the federations represent, form the biggest, most central, and most visible part. And the more we go in the same direction in things like this, the more influential the work is and the more influential we are as actors.” (CEO, FOC)

In addition to the more sharpened and structured sustainability work of different sport organizations and the elimination of planning and operation overlapping enabled by the programme, the Sustainability Manager identified a key benefit related to the visual side of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. This visual benefit, which is related to the main illustration of the programme, especially affects the Sustainability Manager’s work with regard to presenting and implementing the programme in the interactions between the FOC and its stakeholders. The main illustration has been actively used in multi-organizational events such as trainings,

seminars, and webinars where the sustainability programme has been addressed. Furthermore, the illustration has been integrated into other materials produced by the FOC, such as into *Action and economic plan 2021* (FOC 2020g, 7) and *Equality and non-discrimination plan 2020–2022* (FOC 2020c, 4). The Sustainability Manager summed up the benefit of the programme’s main illustration by describing it as a convenient introductory tool to various events and which is naturally effortless to utilize as a mainstay in discussing the sustainability objectives of the sports community.

“As we have talked about how important it is to have some illustration, which is the opening image in this sustainability programme, so it is somehow such a good ‘roll-in product’.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

The two case themes recorded so far have provided us with insights into the core nature of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, the perceptions associated with it, and the benefits of the joint initiative. Next, we delve into the findings regarding how the programme has been addressed and implemented at the collective level during its initiation phase.

5.3 Implementing the Programme through Collaborative Approaches

“What is on the surface at a given time is also paid attention to... that is, there lies a great value in it that this (programme) has been done, there has been that process and it is now being implemented. Even these as elements raise sustainability to discussions, imperceptibly to everyday deeds. We have to remember that often the journey is important.” (CEO, FOC)

Since its publication in February 2020, *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* has been addressed and implemented through a variety of collaborative approaches involving the stakeholders in the programme’s sphere of influence. This case theme presents the key practices that were identified during the research process concerning the initiation phase of the programme and that could appropriately be included in the scope and objectives of this case study. It is worth noting that it is impossible to include in a single case study all the communication or other related activities around the programme. Interactions between the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and its stakeholders also include ad hoc-type, emergent activities and forms of communication that are difficult for the researcher to incorporate into research.

In this case study, three main approaches were identified through which *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* has been addressed and implemented at collaborative contexts between the FOC and sports federations during the initiation phase. The three approaches are Sustainability Clinics, One-to-One Sparring Service, and Sparring Group of the Major Sports Federations. Next, these approaches are reviewed in distinct sub-sections, the content of which is notably based on the observational data collected for the study. The review is complemented by the insights from the interviewees.

5.3.1 Sustainability Clinics

I was involved in observing three Sustainability Clinics between August 2020 and January 2021. These training sessions, typically gathering together circa 20 to 70 representatives from sports federations, were conducted mostly as Zoom webinars due to the prevailing COVID-19 situation, and participation in the clinics was voluntary. The clinics were primarily aimed at the FOC's main stakeholders, in other words, Finnish sports federations and their representatives. The sessions were organized by the FOC, and sometimes the organization could involve a party with special knowledge and expertise of the clinic's subject. The training sessions focused on the objectives of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and of the sessions I attended, two addressed the objective of *Equality and Equal Opportunity* and one on the objective of *Environment and Climate*. Before delving into the details of the observed clinics, it is good to note that these training sessions have been part of the FOC's operations even before the launch of the actual sustainability programme. However, the Sustainability Manager noted that *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* provides clinics with a stronger backbone, and described the role of the clinics as follows.

“We have had clinics for several years before the sustainability programme was made. They (clinics) are like that where several dozen people are gathered at once and those topics (programme objectives) are covered.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

Clinic 1. The first clinic I was observing was held on August 27, 2020, in a hybrid format where participation was possible either remotely or on-site. I was involved remotely, via Zoom. At its best, there were 50 people altogether, most of whom represented various Finnish sports federations. The clinic was co-organized by the FOC and the Finnish League for Human Rights,

with the FOC and its representatives facilitating the event, and the Finnish League for Human Rights acting as the “expert” at the event. The training addressed the basics of human rights, equality, and non-discrimination in sports organizations, and it was led by the two representatives from the League.

At the beginning of the clinic, the Sustainability Manager of the FOC presented the main illustration of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and noted that the promotion of equality and human rights issues are a key part of the sustainability work of the sports community. In this way, the programme was linked to the clinic and it was made clear to those present that the clinic focused on the programme’s objective *Equality and Equal Opportunity*. After the introduction was given by the Sustainability Manager, the training presentation by the League representatives began one of the main messages of which was that organized sports lack a holistic approach to human rights issues. Representatives emphasized the importance of monitoring the implementation of human rights issues and challenged those present with the following questions on equality and non-discrimination in sports organizations.

“Who (everyone?) in your organization has responsibility in cases of discrimination?”

“How is the implementation of equality/non-discrimination monitored?”

“How is the promotion of equality and equal opportunity resourced in your organization?”

In addition to the training provided by the Finnish League of Human Rights, the clinic included the “Learning Café” section, which highlighted practical examples of sports federations’ activities on *Equality and Equal Opportunity*. A representative of a sports federation gave a presentation on how to create a good equality plan for a sport organization. In the presentation, the essentialness of the simplicity and clarity of an equality plan in terms of adoption, as well as the importance of assembling a motivated working group and engaging employees were emphasized. Another example put to the stand an equality project for sport organizations implemented in 2018–2020. The project was illustrated by presenting practical measures related to the project and its goals, such as developing equality plans in Finnish sports federations and inspiring sports clubs and federations to work for equality through different events and communication. In addition, the importance of collaboration between different actors in the development of organizational activity was underlined. As an example of such collaboration, it

was discussed that sports organizations would work more closely with actors with expertise on specific issues – such as human rights and equality issues.

The Sustainability Manager of the FOC concluded the clinic by noting that the work of the sports community on the addressed topics continues. The duration of the observation was three hours, and all materials on display at the clinic were subsequently delivered to participants by e-mail. It was also possible to give feedback about the clinic by e-mail.

Clinic 2. On November 25, 2020, I attended another three-hour clinic, which was also implemented remotely via Zoom. What was significant about this training session was that it acted as the first actual sustainability clinic regarding the *Environment and Climate* objective of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. The clinic was once again aimed at representatives of sports federations, and at best, this session organized by the FOC had a total of 25 participants. The clinic focused on identifying and assessing the environmental impact of sport organizations' activities.

At the beginning of the clinic, it was discussed under the chairmanship of the FOC's representative that *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* should be outlined as an entity by sport organizations. The aim for sports federations and other stakeholders is to move forwards in all five focus areas of the programme. Concerning the objective of *Anti-Doping*, it was declared to have solid roots and to pass through the Finnish sports federations under "its own weight", based on existing precise and strict guidelines. *Environment and Climate*, on the other hand, represent an objective that should, over time, achieve a status similar to that of *Anti-Doping*. Once again, the main illustration of the programme was presented at the beginning of the clinic, followed by a closer look at the entries in the sustainability programme related to the green objective of *Environment and Climate*. In addition to the goal of identifying and assessing the environmental impact of organizations in the field of sport, the representative of the FOC emphasized, in particular, the need to increase awareness and motivation on environmental and climate issues within the sports community.

The clinic also relied on external expertise, as a representative from a Finnish university gave a presentation on the development of environmental management in physical activity and sports organizations. As a conclusion, it was reasoned that the demand for environmental management abilities is growing rapidly in organizations operating in the field of physical activity and sports.

Furthermore, the desired change processes in organizational cultures should be supported by better information, resourcing, operating models as well as political and social coordination. In the presentation, the university representative also emphasized the importance of sports federations recognizing their approach to the broad environmental themes. Next, a representative of a sports federation gave a pragmatic introduction to the possibilities of utilizing a carbon footprint calculator ‘Hiilifiksu järjestö’ in sports organizations. In addition to the tips on how to utilize the calculator, the presentation included reflections on the benefits of calculating carbon footprint and how various and different-sized organizations could approach calculating the carbon footprint in their activities.

Towards the end of the clinic, members of the sports federations present were able to practice identifying the environmental impacts of their organizations using a mapping form provided to the participants via e-mail by the representative of the FOC. As the importance of sports federations recognizing their angle of entry into environmental issues had previously been underlined at the clinic, the mapping form was found to be helpful in this respect. The form was first reviewed jointly and then the participants were activated to identify a few significant areas of environmental impact in the federations’ activities. In this initial survey, the most significant environmental factor was considered to be federations’ transporting activities. At the end of the clinic, participants were encouraged to comment on the session and the tools discussed, with the representative of the FOC stressing the importance of sharing experiences related to organizations’ environmental work.

Clinic 3. On January 29, 2021, a two-and-a-half-hour webinar called “Towards a more equal sport” was held, a slightly different sustainability clinic co-organized by the FOC and a project focusing on gender equality in Finnish sport management. It was the final webinar of the equality project and the session included features typical of the two sustainability clinics observed previously, such as expert speeches and practical examples of the sustainability work done by sports federations concerning the objective on *Equality and Gender Equality* declared in *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. At the beginning of the webinar, it was stated that the project is part of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and its objectives, and thus the main illustration of the programme was once again on display. The project’s integration into the sustainability programme of the sports community reflects the fact that the programme represents, in a big picture, an entity also implemented and “marketed” through practices and initiatives that in themselves go beyond the focus of this case study. However, understanding this scope of the

programme is advantageous in reviewing and interpreting the findings of this study. Due to the webinar's nature, there were more participants than at a regular sustainability clinic – over 160 at best – and the participants also consisted of the FOC's stakeholders other than representatives of sports federations.

Following the presentation of the gender equality project and the aims of the webinar, an expert on equality and diversity issues gave practical tips on developing equality and non-discrimination work in sports federations and clubs. The presentation highlighted the “four steps to change”, which were *identification*, *understanding*, *will to change*, and *acting*. *Identification* denotes that the issues that are relevant to the activities, as well as factors that potentially cause discomfort, are recognized in sport organizations. *Understanding* emphasizes perceiving the existence of unconscious human perceptions that might affect our behaviour. Individuals working in sports federations and clubs should be able to become collectively aware of such unconscious perceptions concerning equality issues, and then learn not to act following those perceptions. *Will to change*, in turn, involves the key questions of “Do we all want this?”, “Is this important to us?”, and “Is this important to you?” and their processing in the organization. *Acting* touches on the duty – not volunteering – of sports federations and clubs to be able to create an open and safe operating culture that respects people's diversity.

A key part of the webinar was once again the emphasis put on the practical examples of sustainability work and future action plans in sports federations. Two representatives from a federation presented how they had constructed a sustainability programme for their organization based on *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, and discussed how they considered the operating environment of the sports when formulating the programme. Their sustainability initiative included the same five focus areas as the sports community's collective programme. Representatives of the federation also expressed that they had gained an international perspective and best practices from the sports' international umbrella organization for the making of the organization's programme and enhancing their sustainability work. Concerning the theme of the webinar, the federation also had an initiative launched in 2020, which aims to increase the number of women and girls in the sports' operating environment, both in the umbrella federation and clubs. The representatives also praised the sparring assistance provided by the FOC – which will be discussed in the next sub-section – in supporting the development of the federation's work on sustainability issues.

In the following presentation, a representative of another sports federation underlined the importance of the example and implementation work conducted by federations in pursuing the goals of *Equality and Gender Equality* in the sports community. According to the representative, it is difficult for sports clubs to strongly contribute to the pursuit of equality goals unless the federation, which acts as the umbrella organization for the sports clubs, first addresses equality issues itself and begins to act in a way that promotes them. The representative also described their organization as having prepared concrete materials for sports clubs to develop equality and non-discrimination work and discussed the measures taken and ongoing by the federation for 2019–2023. In the webinar chat, the examples of sports federations acting received a lot of good feedback on the inputs in organizations and their ability to concretize the promotion of equality issues.

In the interview, the Sustainability Manager summarized the core purpose of the sustainability clinics as follows.

“They (clinics) have always had such concrete approach, that it would not be like a ‘high cloud’, but that those sports federations and other stakeholders would really get material from there for their work.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

5.3.2 One-to-One Sparring Service

“But then I started to think at some point that they (clinics) might not be enough for this sparring service we offer...” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

In addition to the sustainability clinics that bring together dozens of people, since the autumn of 2020, the FOC has begun to offer sports federations individual sparring and support services related to the implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. These meetings have typically been attended by two representatives from the FOC and on to three representatives from a sports federation. The Sustainability Manager described the sparring entity as a systematic process in which one-to-one meetings are interactive situations that benefit both parties from a mutual learning perspective. Contents of the meetings are based on the needs and priorities of the sports federation present. Sparrings are voluntary and the representatives of the sports federations can book their own meetings by contacting the representatives of the FOC. The duration of these meetings has been from about an hour to an hour and a half and, for example, in September

2020, there had been sparrings with 10 sports federations. (FOC, 2020i.) The service has entered the FOC's range of services with the sustainability programme, but its seed was sown before the launch of the initiative. According to the Sustainability Manager, the main benefits of the service are the individual approach to sports federations' issues and the existence and development of personal contacts.

“A few years ago, we tried a kind of ‘mini clinic’ where there were only 20 minutes per sports federation, and we went through one specific issue in them, and we had really good experiences from those... realized the importance of that personal contact, so we decided to try this one-to-one type (service). I believe that our range of services has now improved, as we have these general clinics where you can attend for a few hours to get ingredients and then, in addition, these sparrings where we focus on the issues of that individual sports federation.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

Sparring Meeting. In September 2020, I was involved in observing a one-hour sparring meeting between representatives of the FOC and a representative of a sports federation. The meeting was held at the headquarters of the FOC, Sportitalo, and was attended by two representatives of the FOC, including the Sustainability Manager, and an executive manager from the sports federation. At the beginning of the meeting, the Sustainability Manager briefly introduced *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, and the federation manager present stated that the programme was familiar to the federation. The sports federation in question had also prepared its sustainability programme based on *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, which included the same five elements as the joint programme of the sports community. The programme prepared by the federation was reviewed in the meeting and the federation manager expressed that their organization wanted to modify it to be suitable for their sports specifically. The aim was to make the programme a solid entity, with only concrete objectives and measures. At that moment, the federation was in the process of visualizing the programme and communicating it forward. As for the five objectives, the federation manager stated that there is room for development in all of the five focus areas, but that *Environment and Climate* is particularly in need of enhancement.

Like in Sparring Meeting I attended, also in interviewing the Sustainability Manager, it became clear that one of the advantages of the sparring service is that when the perspectives and tools of one's organization are brought to the meetings, the commitment improves compared to typical clinics.

“Individuals’ questions have been brought in (for the sparrings) and materials from federations have been shown, and that is probably where the level of commitment is in a different category than in a clinic where one can be half-listening.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

In the sparring meeting, it was also discussed that the operating environment always influences the success of the implementation and that the Finnish sports federations are in very different situations in terms of sustainability issues and the programme implementation. Regarding the objective on *Environment and Climate*, it was noted that sports federations have varying capacities to influence the related matters. It would be essential to include sustainability themes in the structures of the action plans of organizations, for instance. Towards the end of the meeting, the representatives of the FOC inquired about the use of various responsibility and sustainability tools in the sports federation and the sports’ operating culture.

Overall, the role and core benefits of One-to-One Sparring Service are intertwined in the following comments from Federation Manager 3 and the Sustainability Manager of the FOC.

“Now that we had this sparring a month ago, it was kind of pretty nice to see that, in fact, we are pretty advanced. If someone had asked me before that sparring discussion what the situation in our federation is in these sustainability issues, I would probably have said that “Well, I do not really know... we have been trying to do something, but I am not quite sure if it is enough”. “ (Federation Manager 3)

“A lot of good has followed from those sparrings, how things have progressed there (in federations) even after that meeting and now, for example, we have a new sparring with one federation, as they want to present us their now completed sustainability programme and one federation has asked for help with the equality survey and such.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

5.3.3 Sparring Group of the Major Sports Federations

The third main collaborative approach identified for addressing and implementing the programme in the initiation phase is the so-called Sparring Group of the Major Sports Federations. This sub-section of the case theme is based on the interview with the Sustainability

Manager of the FOC as well as discussions with the manager, as the study's observational data did not include a meeting of the sparring group.

“There are 6–10 federations that are already really active with me doing this (implementation and sparring) that it would no longer make sense to have such separate sparring when we are sparring regularly.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

This is the same group of major sports federations' representatives that was set up when the planning of a joint sustainability programme for the sports community commenced. Thus, from the outset, this working group coordinated by the Sustainability Manager of the FOC has been sparring and looking for best practices both in the design phase of the programme and now in initiating the implementation. The sparring group meets approximately every two months in meetings where federations' sustainability issues are addressed in a more informal tone than in the clinics. The arrangement enables the group's sports federations to continue collaboration and networking between the events and trainings related to the sustainability programme. Consequently, emergent solutions and feedback are also key elements of the group's activities in addition to the general collaborative atmosphere and mutual support.

“That sparring group of sports federations, it is perhaps the most important feedback channel for me. They (the group's federations) pretty boldly say there a lot of things, so these (feedback) are, for example, now matters through which we have been shaping these future clinics of environmental programmes.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

Although the group's name is used in this study as the group of 'major' sports federations, it is good to note that this does not mean that the group would include only the most significant Finnish sports federations and their representatives. The composition of the sparring group has also varied, and new active sports federations have been invited to join the group in opportune situations. There have also been federations that are not that 'major' but have progressed in furthering *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in their organizations. The Sustainability Manager highlighted the matter and summarized the overall importance of the group for the sustainability work of the federations and sports community.

“There (in the group) are all the big sports and now I invited one more federation as they do such a good job in sustainability issues. They were not willing to join at the

beginning, but now they expressed that they wanted to join. After all, I think that they represent this whole sports federation field pretty well and, in that sense... it is a valuable group.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

5.4 Implementing the Programme through Organizational Approaches

“We kind of confirmed it (the programme) as the foundation of our sustainability work.” (Federation Manager 1)

In addition to the identified collaborative approaches and practices, *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* has also been addressed and implemented in individual organizations in the programme’s sphere of influence. For this case study, these organizations refer to the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and its main stakeholders, the sports federations. However, it is advantageous to understand that this study does not strive to cover all organizational activity concerning the programme in the FOC and sports federations, as it is not possible in a single case study and not the aim of the research. Instead, in this case study, through the collection and analysis of interviews, event observations, and documents, the main organizational activities in furthering the sustainability programme in the FOC and sports federations are identified. At the organizational level, in the initiation phase of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, it has been mostly a matter of focal organizations adjusting the programme to their activities and thereby strengthening their sustainability work. The case theme is mainly based on the interviews conducted and the review is supplemented with observational data and documents.

5.4.1 The Finnish Olympic Committee Consolidating its Work

“Everything we do needs to be built-in on the principles that are now crystallized in our sustainability programme.” (CEO, FOC)

Communication regarding *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* naturally began in the programme’s preparatory phase, involving staff within the FOC. This partly reflects the fact that in practice it can be difficult to clearly distinguish between the planning, preparation, and implementation phases of different organizational programmes and strategies. In the interview, the Sustainability Manager described the organization’s internal activities and their success concerning the formulating phase of the programme.

“As we have this ‘time out’ practice, where the entire staff is gathered together, there it (the programme) has been on display at its preparatory phase. And of course, when it was completed, I presented it to the staff. In the construction phase, I have interviewed several persons internally and it (the program) has been on a commentary round in the management team in a way that one can still make an impact... there has not been a feeling that something was being done somewhere behind one’s back but (persons) have been involved and informed well enough.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

Familiarization and communication concerning the programme objectives continue in the FOC in 2021 – as if the sparring service highlighted in the previous case theme but within the organization.

“We are now starting such sparrings what has been done for sports federations, like ‘conditioning the home nest’, that we go through all our units internally and discuss about these issues and how one can promote it (sustainability) in one’s own work.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

As discussed earlier, sustainability work has been done in the FOC as a single organization and a service organization for the stakeholders in previous years, but the work has lacked a clear backbone. The committee has also had a staff team for a couple of years working on international affairs, public relations, and sustainability, led by the Sustainability Manager. Therefore, the team existed before the sustainability programme, and it originated as a result of equality projects coordinated by the FOC. Currently, the team meets once a month in meetings to address topical events in the sports community in the three focus areas and to share related information. When the FOC’s strategy was updated in the autumn of 2020, sustainability rose to a stronger role in the committee’s strategy. This can be noticed by comparing the strategy documents prepared by the organization in the autumns of 2020 and 2016. The Sustainability Manager described this change cultivated by *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in the interview.

“The main choices of our strategy, namely top-level sports and club activity, in these sustainability has now been considered, through the programme, in a completely different way than before... before there was not even a sustainability programme, so sustainability work was much smaller in scale.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

Concerning actions related to these two main strategic choices or areas of the FOC – top-level sports and club activity – since its establishment, *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* has started to be integrated into these areas. At the end of 2020, the programme was reviewed internally by the committee, and based on it, a separate sustainability programme was formulated for top-level sports. This modification is “personalized” in a way that it illustrates what sustainability denotes in practice from the perspective of top-level sports. As for the second strategic choice, club activity, the operations will be strengthened by preparing a training package aimed at developing sports clubs’ sustainability work. In 2021, the FOC will also draw up an environmental programme for its organization, the formulation of which will be assisted by *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. The Sustainability Manager summarized the role of the FOC in assisting sports federations in sustainability and expressed that the evaluation and success of the implementation will be considered, which can be construed as a natural continuation after the initiation phase of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*.

“We will continue to help sports federations, (sports) academies... it continues all year round. And then we start to think about this (programme) evaluation and the success of the implementation, that at some point the sports federations will certainly be asked in more detail what they think about how this implementation has progressed.”
(Sustainability Manager, FOC)

As with the clinics, there has been communication within the FOC regarding success stories related to the programme implementation. The advantage of such internal communication has been, according to the Sustainability Manager, instances it provides that *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* has moved forward in sports federations. The comment also leads us to discuss the findings on the activities of sports federations in the initiation phase of the sustainability programme.

“About this implementation, what was probably the best thing in the ‘time out’ once, that I briefly presented what a sports federation has already done, it concretized that “hey this (programme) goes forward in the federations” and how they had done that implementation well... it (the communication) was at least a good thing at that point.”
(Sustainability Manager, FOC)

5.4.2 Sports Federations Adapting the Programme

“That (implementation) is now visible in the sense that several sports federations have built their own sports-specific versions based on this (the programme), where those sports-specific priorities have emerged or been raised.” (CEO, FOC)

The introductory quotation for this case sub-theme by the CEO on the implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in sports federations largely reflects the nature of these organizational approaches in the initiation phase of the programme. As the FOC, in drawing up the “personalized” sustainability programme for the strategic choice of top-level sports, Finnish sports federations, the main stakeholders of the FOC, have applied the programme to suit their activities and considered the content from the perspective of their organizations. Evidence and examples of this can be found in observational data on the sustainability clinics and Sparring Meeting, and in addition, the FOC has occasionally highlighted federations’ activities on sports-specific adaptation and measures in its social media communications. Furthermore, the same kind of procedures emerged in the interviews with the federation managers. Federation Manager 1 described how they were preparing a programme of ethical guidelines in their organization before the planning of the joint programme under the FOC’s leadership ignited. However, in the federation, it was rationalized that the preparation work should be suspended when information about the plan and its purpose became known.

“But when the preparation of this programme was launched by the FOC, the decision was then made in our federation that it would make more sense to look first at this collective part of the sports community and thereafter make our sports-specific adjustments to this (the programme).” (Federation Manager 1)

Some of the objectives of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* include fairly general guidelines for the activities of the sports community organizations, while in some of the objectives it is defined in more detail what is the desired target state. For example, one of the goals of *Good Governance* is declared as follows: “The good governance or our activities enhances trust and satisfaction, engages people, and ensures the quality and continuity of our operations.” (FOC 2020f, 4). Federation Manager 2 grasped this partial generality of the programme goals in terms of organizational adjustments while emphasizing the importance of measurement and finding one’s organizational approach.

“Perhaps those goals are that much general (in the programme) that we probably want to set the goals a little more precisely in the sports federation also because I see the importance of their indicators... Surely, we will then look at the goal setting and measures for our federation with our own eyes, focusing on the key elements in terms of action... and we will specifically think about the means of measurement for our own sustainability programme.” (Federation Manager 2)

Federation Manager 1 referred to this making of refinements and adapting *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* as “a need for going further” and deepening the themes of the programme. The manager also noted the importance of guidance provided by the sports’ international federation in applying the programme, a matter which also arose in connection with another sports federation’s presentation in Clinic 3.

“We identified and recognized and identify, of course, that we need sports-specific content that goes a little further in some areas of this sustainability programme... in a way we should not and cannot be content with that basic level (of the programme)... certain things we take further, either because of the expectations of our international federations or because of our own needs.” (Federation Manager 1)

Federation Manager 3 approached the interpretation and adaptation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in sports federations in a slightly more objective-oriented way, and the manager’s comment also indirectly reflects the somewhat general nature of the programme’s themes and goals, which were also discussed by the other federation representatives interviewed. Federation Manager 3 highlighted the essence of the objective on *Anti-Doping* as an element in which the programme itself has no new significance due to the long tradition of the theme, and distinguished it in that respect from the other themes in the programme. Similarly, at Clinic 2, the Sustainability Manager of the FOC stated that *Anti-Doping* represents an already deep-rooted area, to the level of which, for example, *Environment and Climate* should evolve over time.

“These first four (*Good Governance, Safe Space and Safe Environment, Equality and Equal Opportunity, Environment and Climate*), probably every sports federation will have to ponder “what does this mean by the way, what does all this effect?”, but this *Anti-Doping* is such that “well, let’s continue in the same way” because there is

nothing miraculous about it, it has been made for ages and ages.” (Federation Manager 3)

The CEO of the FOC also considered the role and positioning of the five objectives of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in the implementation from the perspective of sports federations, as well as other actors in the sports community. According to the CEO, the varying interpretation and emphasis put on the five focus areas in organizations may also pose a challenge for the programme implementation.

“Of course, the fact that different sports always judge their priorities for doing things and it can only be human or any other reason so that something (about the programme themes) is not seen as so important or relevant at that very moment... or perhaps that is wrongly said, this (programme) is seen (as important) but that how much weight each party gives to it. That is how it affects the efficiency and effectiveness of implementation.” (CEO, FOC)

In addition to the fact that the sports federations may prioritize and emphasize the five programme objectives in different situations and for different reasons, it is good to note that they may be at quite different phases in addressing the programme. This was also discussed in Sparring Meeting. In some of the federations, the objective-related issues have already been well established before the launch of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, while others are sharpening their activities within the programme, and some federations may be in the early stages of their sustainability work. Federation Manager 3 also referred to this matter when reporting on the use of One-to-One Sparring Service.

“We just had this sustainability sparring with the Olympic Committee about a month ago, and it seems that we are pretty much ahead of many other federations, at least half a year (in activity related to one of the programme’s five objectives) where we are going right now.” (Federation Manager 3)

The customization and adaptation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* being in the core of organizational approaches, interviews with federation managers also highlighted a few organizational practices that could be linked to the programme implementation in the initiation phase. Examining these practices was hampered by the demarcation of where the actual research boundaries of this case study lie. This matter had to be borne in mind when analysing

the data, as recording individual measures related to the implementation of the programme between sports federations and sports clubs as part of the research would have obscured the focus of the study. Federation Manager 1 described an interesting practice, referring to benchmarking-type activities in their organization, with regard to the implementation among other sports federations and actors in the sports community. In this practice, in addition to finding valuable procedures for the federation's activity, the idea is to eliminate work overlapping and to collaborate with other parties.

“What we have done is that I have given an assignment to one team member to become familiar with what other sports (have done) in respect of this sustainability programme... in a way, as a groundwork for this our work that we do not start to invent the wheel again. As if, through this framework (the programme), we have identified good practices, operating models from other sports.” (Federation Manager 1)

Federation Manager 3 considered the activities of their organization concerning the programme, in particular through the objectives of *Safe Space and Safe Environment*...

“Every coach who travels on the federation's trips must sign an agreement in which one commits to these ethical and disciplinary rules and practices and if they find inappropriate (behaviour) then address it immediately, with clear steps established on how to deal with such inappropriate stuff... we encourage each coaching group to agree internally on their own rules of the game, to know what is ok and what is not. That is perhaps the most important thing, in my opinion, to talk about these things.”

and *Environment and Climate*.

“These environmental issues so... yeah with small things, not printing (competition) results but sending electronically.” (Federation Manager 3)

5.5 Main Challenges Associated with the Implementation

“Well, maybe in the same breath we can say that this (programme) is, however, a very broad entity and then the fact that one could find, in a way, the right level to do these (sustainability) things... identifying matters that a well-functioning and ethically sound organization should take into account... but still the main task is and the main focus is on doing sports.” (Federation Manager 1)

There are, obviously, many challenges and stumbling blocks in taking forward and implementing a multi-organizational initiative, and examining the implementation of such an initiative without any critical perspective would not correspond very well to the reality in which organizations do their work. These challenges also emerged extensively from the interviews and observational data, and this case theme summarizes the key challenges that could be associated with *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation in the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and sports federations. Of the challenges at the organizational level, the interviews emphasized finding one’s level of execution and abilities in relation to, for example, *Environment and Climate*, while at the collaborative level, the practical realization of implementation and barricades posed by sports cultures gained a foothold. The challenges of the programme implementation are not the real bread of this study, but as far as the pursuit of a holistic understanding of the case is concerned, the existence of challenges cannot be ignored or denied. As in the opening quotation from Federation Manager 1, Federation Manager 2 also underlined the key role of sport – and the challenge it poses – in implementing the programme. Furthermore, the manager’s view highlights the matter that Finnish sports organizations employ a significant number of people on a voluntary basis. As a result, the sustainability programme might not be managed and implemented by actual professionals in the field of sustainability.

“In my opinion, it is an unreasonably high requirement for volunteers to run a professional sustainability programme on a purely voluntary basis, because volunteering in sport is based after all on that love for sport – not for corporate governance and sustainability programmes... I do not see a great chance of having a large number of volunteers with enough professional skills and understanding of sustainability programmes, building them, implementing them, and overseeing their realization in everyday life.” (Federation Manager 2)

The attitude and commitment of sports federations to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in the initiation phase have been good. According to the Sustainability Manager, this is mainly since the programme was built in open collaboration comprising the FOC and 35–40 sports federations. In addition, a good number of federation representatives have attended the sustainability clinics, ranging from twenty to seventy, as in previous years. Clinic 3, on the other hand, had even more people (over 160 at best) due to the nature of the event. At the time of the Sustainability Manager's interview, there had been 24 one-to-one sparrings, the amount of which was also satisfactory to the goal set by the FOC. However, despite this level of engagement, it has not been complete and penetrating the whole field of Finnish sports federations. In the interview, the Sustainability Manager captured the issue and it also came up that there are plans to address the issue.

“But what I think here (when discussing the engagement to the programme) must now be really careful attention, that is, those (sports federations) who have not yet shown any apparent interest in this (programme), they have not been dug up so it can be said that half of the federations are such that we are not yet aware of their sustainability work. They may not have been in the clinics or at least not booked sparring... we (the Sustainability Manager with a colleague) will pick from the lists those federations that have not yet been in sparring and we propose one. That is, we cannot be lulled by the fact that everyone here would be like “wow!” but let's say that we are on the right track.” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

With regard to the five objectives of the programme, above all *Environment and Climate* proved to be challenging to practicalize at the level of sports federations. The nature of this objective and the challenge of implementing the related measures were raised in the interviews, in Clinic 2 focusing on *Environment and Climate* and, also in Sparring Meeting. Discussions took place that different sports federations, as well as the FOC, have different capacities to influence environmental issues. In addition, it can be difficult for the federations to find their own “angle of entry” and level of implementation concerning the measures declared in *Environment and Climate*, depending largely on the characteristics of their sports. Federation Managers 1 and 3 referred to this issue in the interviews.

“Perhaps that *Environment and Climate* is a one that has the least concrete measures of our sports. In those others (programme objectives), we have already had quite advanced stuff so far.” (Federation Manager 1)

“That environment task is a bit lost for us in what it really means... No one comes up with it (an environmental programme for the sports federation) so that one just starts writing things down. Instead, it needs a bit of discussion, it is such a multifaceted thing.” (Federation Manager 3)

For example, Clinic 2 provided sports federations with tools to map the environmental impacts of organizations and to calculate carbon footprints. Such tools help the federations, at least in part, to alleviate or solve the problems and challenges mentioned in the quotations. On the other hand, the practical applicability of these tools in different organizations should be considered separately. However, future sustainability clinics on *Environment and Climate* will focus on measuring concrete environmental impacts and developing federation-specific programmes, so the work on the objective continues.

As for the programme as an entity, its objectives, for example, *Good Governance*, include a clear goal state or states, such as “Our rules and regulations prevent inappropriate behavior and enable us to address it.” (FOC 2020f, 4), and measures to help organizations to achieve the goal state or states. Furthermore, supporting materials, such as studies, regulations, and guides, have been attached to each of the five objectives. However, there are no clear indicators or indicator sections included in the five objectives as such, which would demonstrate how successes could be viewed within the framework provided by the programme. In the interview, Federation Manager 2 took up this lack of actual indicators and pondered the issue from the broader strategy-related perspective than from *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*.

“Perhaps the biggest challenge of the sustainability programme is, as it is of sustainability programmes in general, the question of what are the indicators by which this success is measured. And at least I have not come across indicators yet, objectives and measures exist but so... the importance of indicators can never be overemphasized, and at the same time, I fully understand the pain of creating indicators in all these strategies and especially in terms of sustainability.” (Federation Manager 2)

An identified main challenge for both individual organizations and the sports community as an entity in implementing *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* is the operating culture of sport and the various organizations and actors involved. As one of the federation managers interviewed

pointed out, sports cultures can, in many cases, be strongly rooted in old practices that are no longer flattering in today's light. The challenge posed by culture or cultures is certainly faced within a wide variety of organizations that formulate and implement different development plans and strategies. Among others, Federation Manager 2 underlined the issue and discussed its significance, above all, from a broader organizational perspective which also extends beyond sport organizations' activities.

“For when a sustainability programme is made, that culture in practice will determine whether it remains just a paper, great goal, or whether it is really part of that culture. And whenever it is not part of the culture, then it also poses pretty big risks to the organization because the number one destruction of organizations is that talk and actions do not meet.” (Federation Manager 2)

The challenges posed by the multi-organizational nature, the ambitiousness of objectives, and the sports culture for *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation are crystallized in the views of the Sustainability Manager and the CEO of the FOC.

”The challenge, that it (the programme) does not stop at something in this structure but ultimately cuts across the entire sports community... and on the other hand, these are also difficult themes (the programme's objectives) and ships turn slowly, culture changes slowly...” (Sustainability Manager, FOC)

“That (the programme) in itself will do no good unless it is implemented, unless it becomes a genuine, living part of that activity.” (CEO, FOC)

5.6 Summary of the Findings

As a result of the data generation and analysis, five case themes were developed. The themes were General Perceptions of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, Advantages of the Programme, Implementing the Programme through Collaborative Approaches, Implementing the Programme through Organizational Approaches, and Main Challenges Associated with the Implementation.

Although the set of case themes discussed adheres to the conceptual framework developed for the study (see Figure 8., p. 53), the findings also comprised data-driven themes. The first data-derived theme addressed the views and interpretations regarding the sports community's sustainability programme. As for General Perceptions of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, the programme is first and foremost a framework or foundation that provides guidelines for the activities of organizations and actors in the Finnish sports community through the five, relatively broad, objectives of *Good Governance, Safe Space and Safe Environment, Equality and Equal Opportunity, Environment and Climate, and Anti-Doping* declared in the programme. Although *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* was established and published in its pdf-form in February 2020, the programme itself possesses customizability and adaptability when needed. The programme is intended to live with the times, and it will be edited if some noteworthy changes or disruptive elements emerge from the sports community's operating environment. Furthermore, *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* can be perceived to play a role in what kind of expectations people set for the Finnish sports community actors now and in the future, and the content of the programme can also be thought of through organizational values.

In addition to general perceptions associated with *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, different advantages and benefits associated with the joint initiative emerged from the data, and thus the second case theme Advantages of the Programme was formulated. Above all, *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* provides a backbone and a clear structuring for the sustainability work of the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and sports federations of different types and sizes compared to previous years, when there was no sustainability frame with the commonly shared main objectives. Through these features, the programme also harmonizes sustainability-related terminology in Finnish sport organizations. According to the interviews, another decisive advantage of the joint initiative is its significance in eliminating work overlapping of sports

federations. Furthermore, the main illustration of the programme has a facilitating effect on presenting and discussing *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in collective situations and events. Consequently, the main illustration has been actively used in multi-organizational events such as trainings, seminars, and webinars where the sustainability programme has been on display.

In its initiation phase, the programme has been addressed and implemented in a variety of collective events and situations, and this case study focused on examining the interactions between the FOC and sports federations. From these, the third case theme *Implementing the Programme through Collaborative Approaches* was built, into which three main approaches could be integrated, namely Sustainability Clinics, One-to-One Sparring Service, and Sparring Group of the Major Sports Federations. Due to the initiative's collective nature, *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* has also been implemented in individual organizations, which are the FOC and sports federations in the scope of the study. Thus, as a counterweight for the collaborative approaches, the fourth case theme *Implementing the Programme through Organizational Approaches* was developed. Regarding the initiation phase, the case sub-themes *The Finnish Olympic Committee Consolidating its Work* and *Sports Federations Adapting the Programme* were included in the case theme, with their details.

A number of challenges related to the practical implementation of the sustainability programme could also be deduced from the research data, which formed the fifth and final case theme *Main Challenges Associated with the Implementation*. First of all, the Finnish sports community's diverse operating environment poses challenges to the programme adoption and implementation. Sports federations may have difficulties in finding their level of application and angle of entry to the declared objectives, in particular to the objective *Environment and Climate*. In addition, practical implementation in sports federations may be hampered by the lack of actual expertise and clear indicators to oversee the progress within the framework provided by the programme. As for collaborative commitment to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, it has not yet permeated the entire sports federation field. Finally, deep-rooted sport culture or cultures and their slow changes may place stumbling blocks for the implementation.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation in the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and sports federations during the initiation phase of the programme. At the core of the study was the identification of a collaborative strategic management approach in the top-level Finnish sport management and the perception of the sports community's sustainability programme as a collaborative strategy that is to be implemented in the inter-organizational context of the focal organizations, the FOC and sports federations. Fulfilling the research purpose also covered the familiarization with the parties' organizational activities regarding the processing of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and the programme's implementation structure assessment.

In a qualitative study, conclusion drawing and verification starts at an early stage of the data generation when the researcher reflects on which factors are relevant to the research and what suggestions and conclusions can be derived from the data (Miles & Huberman 1994, 11). Through the adopted theoretical perspective, the developed conceptual framework (see Figure 8., p. 53), and the utilized research methods, this case study succeeds not only in its purpose but also in contributing to the previous theoretical background and research on collaborative strategic management, collaborative strategy implementation, and implementation structures. Furthermore, the findings of the case study can be used to derive managerial implications for the future implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*.

In Introduction, after elaborating the research objective, the research questions for the study were defined. The answers to these questions are formulated in the following section. Then, as a continuum, managerial implications derived from the conclusions are discussed as a separate section. Afterwards, the evaluation of the research is addressed, and then the thesis is concluded by the discussion on suggestions for further research.

6.1 Answering the Research Questions

The research question of the study was defined as follows.

How is the implementation of Sustainable Sports 2020–2024 approached by the Finnish Olympic Committee and sports federations during the initiation phase?

To answer the question, it was further divided into two sub-questions, the first of which was as follows.

- *What kind of implementation practices can be identified?*

The fundamental theoretical starting point for this case study was the approach to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* as a collaborative strategy (CS), defined in this study as a strategic plan prepared as a result of a deliberate collaborative process, consisting of meta-mission, meta-objectives, and a set of guidelines for the inter-organizational entity. Consistent with the conceptual framework (see Figure 8., p. 53), the implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and sports federations has been evident in two distinct but interrelated levels of collaborative and organizational action (Huxham, 1993; Clarke & Fuller, 2010) during the programme’s initiation phase. The four core practices of organizational strategy implementation – communication, interpretation, adoption, and action (Noble, 1999; Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; Mantere et al., 2006) as the process indicators (Provan & Sydow, 2008) – were used to anchor the focus in reviewing possible implementation practices during the case study data generation. These four interrelated functions were effectively commingled in practice, as evidenced by the interviews and observational data.

Implementation at the Collaborative Level – the FOC and Sports Federations. In this study, three main approaches to implementing *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* at the collaborative level were identified. These are Sustainability Clinics, One-to-One Sparring Service, and Sparring Group of the Major Sports Federations.

Coordinated by the FOC, Sustainability Clinics bring together several dozen sports federations’ representatives and aim to help sports federations develop in the focus areas of *Sustainable*

Sports 2020–2024 through the provision of internal and external expertise, presentations, and discussions, as well as concrete working methods and materials, depending on the topics being addressed at the clinic. Thus, the clinics serve as opportune situations to *communicate*, *adopt*, and *act* on implementing the sustainability programme at the collaborative level, as well as to build partner capacities and learn from other's expertise (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Waddell & Brown, 1997; Gray & Purdy, 2018). Since the publication of the sports community's programme, a pivotal part of the clinics has been the collective sharing of and discussions on practical examples – success stories as suggested by Clarke (2011) – related to the federation-, club-, or project-based implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*.

Through One-to-One Sparring Service, the FOC has improved and deepened its range of services for sports federations. The purpose of the sparring meetings, which have entered the picture after the launch of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, is to achieve a more individual and thus in-depth approach to the sustainability work of the present sports federation. Above all, the sparring service helps the federation representatives to *interpret* and *adopt* the sustainability programme from the perspective of their organizations. The meetings' contents are tailored to the needs and priorities of the federation, and federation representatives' questions and materials regarding the sustainability programme and its implementation are reviewed in the sparrings typically. The meetings also act as mutual learning and capacity building (Gray & Purdy, 2018; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Waddell & Brown, 1997) situations for the parties, as they offer opportunities for the FOC's and federations' representatives to perceive in which level the federations are in relation to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* objectives and to discuss which issues to focus on in the federations' future sustainability work.

Sparring Group of the Major Sports Federations is the third collaborative approach to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation. This group of 6–10 sports federations, coordinated by the FOC's Sustainability Manager, was formed when the planning of the joint sustainability programme commenced. The group allows for *communication*, networking, and feedback concerning the programme implementation between more formal events such as the clinics and other seminars or trainings. The group can be perceived as a feedback channel that can be used in assisting organizations to *adopt Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and in developing, for example, future sustainability clinics. Thus, the implementation also materializes through emergent approaches and usage of feedback loops (e.g., Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Favoreu et al., 2016).

Implementation at the Organizational Level – the FOC. The representatives of the FOC interviewed for the case study *interpret* the programme as a framework that should serve as a foundation for sustainability work for all actors in the Finnish sports community, which is also for the FOC's organization itself. *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* was characterized as an initiative of great importance whose collaborative approach to identifying the key sustainability themes has been exceptional compared to the sustainability work of the sports community actors in previous years. Furthermore, the Sustainability Manager construed how the main illustration of the programme has significance as a “roll-in” product in collective situations, such as in trainings, seminars, and webinars, where the programme is displayed. Similarly, Huxham and Macdonald (1992, 54) discuss that a shared meta-strategy “provides a sales platform” that can be employed as a consistent foundation for marketing the collaborative plan also to a wider audience. After the programme was finalized in early 2020, the Sustainability Manager presented it to the entire staff of the organization. *Communication and adoption* on *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* continue in the organization in 2021, as development discussions will be initiated for all organizational units concerning the programme objectives and how one could promote sustainability in one's work.

Regarding the FOC's two main strategic choices, top-level sports and club activity, sustainability now has been considered in their development much more strongly than before the launch of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* when the organization's sustainability work was smaller in scale and more inconsistent. The programme has begun to be integrated into the strategic choices, and for example, a personalized sustainability programme for top-level sports was formulated based on the joint programme at the end of 2020, reflecting the *adoption and action* on *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation in the organization. The stronger emphasis on sustainability than in previous years can also be perceived in the FOC's *Strategy 2024* (FOC, 2020d), which was refined in the autumn of 2020. Furthermore, the main illustration of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* has been integrated into other materials produced by the FOC, such as into *Action and economic plan 2021* and *Equality and non-discrimination plan 2020–2022* (FOC, 2020g, 7; 2020c, 4).

Implementation at the Organizational Level – Sports Federations. In the sports federations that participated in the study, *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* has been *interpreted* as an entity that provides a backbone and structuring for the sustainability work of federations of different types and sizes in comparison to previous years, when there was not such an initiative declaring

the collective aims. In this way, the collaborative strategic plan, in this case, *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, makes shared goals explicit for the collaborating organizations (Huxham & Macdonald 1992, 54). However, it is good to note that sports federations may be at very different stages in terms of processing the sustainability programme at the organizational level due to, for example, varying capacities to influence environmental issues or international guidance from sports' umbrella organizations. Thus, when implementing collaborative strategic plans in individual partner organizations, some practices may be more relevant to some organizations than others (Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Waddell & Brown, 1997), which was also evident in this study.

The key implementation practices on the programme *adoption* and *action* identified in this study, supported by both the interviews and observational data, were the organization- and sports-specific adaptation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. The federation managers described how, due to the partial universality of the objectives and measures declared, their organizations elaborate on the programme content and set more specific targets or practices in the five focus areas, such as in *Good Governance* and *Safe Space and Safe Environment*. Similarly, the observational data on the clinics and Sparring Meeting illustrated the adjustments *actions* taken by sports federations to implement the programme during the initiation phase. In some cases, the adaptation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* links to the fact that sports federations already possess their initiatives concerning the programme objectives. Then, the existing procedures and plans may be integrated into the broader frame enabled by the CS (Clarke & Fuller 2010, 95), as was also demonstrated by the sports federations' procedures.

In addition to the customization of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, the interviews with the federation managers highlighted a few interesting concrete *actions* on the sustainability programme implementation in sports federations. One federation manager described a benchmarking-type assignment given to a team member to get acquainted with the measures taken for the programme in other sports federations. Another federation manager discussed the internal agreement of rules within the federation's coaching teams concerning *Safe Space and Safe Environment* and underlined the importance of talking about issues related to this objective in their organization. In the same sports federation, *Environment and Climate* has been promoted by moving to electronic form instead of printing sports competition results.

However, this case study did not show convincingly how the sports federations have internally *communicated* the content of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and actions on the implementation, such as the adjustments made to the programme. Understandably, there has probably been internal communication when interpreting, adopting, and acting on the programme, but this communication as such did not emerge strongly in this study. On the other hand, this reflects well the interplay of the four core functions of strategy implementation. However, communication is an issue to be considered, as successful communication of organizational strategies is central to implementation (e.g., Noble, 1999; Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; Mantere et al., 2006; Lindroos & Lohivesi, 2010; Puusa et al., 2015). This lack or undetectability of communication may also be an issue that this case study did not reach with the applied methods.

In pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation during the initiation phase, the second sub-question of the case study was worded as follows.

- *How can the implementation structure of the programme be assessed?*

Due to the theoretical basis of implementation structure (e.g., Hjern & Porter, 1981; Clarke, 2010; MacDonald, 2016), the sub-question served as an aggregating element for the examined implementation practices in the FOC and sports federations. In this case study, collaborative strategy implementation structure was defined as a multi-organizational unit of analysis that diagnoses the structural arrangements and integrates related practices that are utilized in pursuit of the objectives set out in the collaborative strategic plan. In examining and evaluating the structure, five interrelated criteria of partner engagement, collaborative practices, organizational actions, further networking, and monitoring and evaluation (Clarke, 2011; Sun et al., 2020) can be applied. Thus, the utilization of the criteria also provides a more critical perspective on *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation as a counterweight to the review of the practices alone.

Partner Engagement. Central to this criterion is the commitment of a sufficient amount of key organizations to implement the collaborative strategic plan. According to the Sustainability Manager of the FOC, attitudes and engagement of sports federations at the collaborative level towards *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* have been positive and active during the initiation phase. These auspicious views of sports federations to the programme and its practicalization were also conveyed through the interviews and event observations. The Sustainability Manager

noted that the commitment has probably been positively influenced by the fact that the programme was co-developed at a clinic attended by the FOC and 35–40 sports federations. In addition, a satisfying number of federations' representatives have participated in Sustainability Clinics and sparrings in proportion to the targets set by the FOC. However, the engagement has not been fully covering the sports federation field and, as the Sustainability Manager pointed out, the FOC is not yet aware of the sustainability work of half of the federations at the time of conducting this study. In this regard, the manager stated that they intend to propose One-to-One Sparring Service to federations that have not yet participated in one.

Collaborative Practices. The criterion requires that the structure enables collaborative arrangements in which the implementation progress can be reviewed and that allow for networking and capacity building of partners. As effectively shown by both the event observations and interviews, the implementation structure of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* includes comprehensive collaborative forms in accordance with the criterion. These have been demonstrated by Sustainability Clinics, One-to-One Sparring Service, and Sparring Group of the Major Sports Federations. The three main collaborative approaches have allowed the FOC and sports federations to network and oversee the implementation progress. For example, it has been possible to regard federations' implementation actions in particular through One-to-One Sparring Service, and at Sustainability Clinics, practical examples and tips related to *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation have been shared collectively. The clinics also allow for learning and capacity building of organizations through the discussions led by external expertise and the introduction of materials and tools, such as the carbon footprint calculator at Clinic 2.

Organizational Actions. The third criterion denotes that the individual partners implement the shared strategy in their organizations. Although this study focused on the initiation phase of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, it became clear that the programme has been processed in individual organizations, that is, the FOC and sports federations in this case study. The FOC has consolidated its sustainability work with the help of the programme, and sports federations, in turn, have customized *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* to be better convenient for their activities, for example, by setting their organization- and sports-specific objectives and practices. However, it is good to note that federations may place different emphasis on the five areas of the programme due to varying organizational capacities to address them. For example, *Anti-Doping* – in addition to its long traditions – possesses solid national- and international-

level guidance in federations' activities, whereas, for *Environment and Climate*, several organizations are still pondering their own practical organizational approaches. Indeed, one of the federation managers interviewed was concerned about the lack of expertise and knowledge in sports federations and other actors in the sports community, firstly, to practicalize sustainability programmes and secondly, to measure the results appropriately at the organizational level.

Further Networking. The criterion examines whether the structure possesses a communication system that supports the continuous networking of partners and keeping up to date with the strategic plan and its progress. Although the implementation structure comprises collaborative arrangements where the FOC and sports federations have the opportunity to network and monitor implementation progress, there is no designated communication system or platform around *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* enabling additional, possibly more emergent, interaction between the organizations that are implementing the sustainability programme. Of the main collaborative approaches identified, the closest to such a communication channel is Sparring Group of the Major Sports Federations due to its more informal nature and procedures, but the problem of the group in this regard is that it reaches only a limited number of organizations, namely the FOC and 6–10 sports federations. The FOC has also occasionally published in its website newsletters on sports federations' sustainability activities and the contents of the held sustainability clinics. However, such communication cannot be construed as an actual interactive system.

Monitoring and Evaluation. The last structural criterion relates to the adaptability of the collaborative strategic plan, its correctability, and collective monitoring of the implementation through carefully selected indicators. As stated by the Sustainability Manager of the FOC, the starting point with *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* has been that the programme would live in the spirit of times and that its content would be adjusted or corrected if issues to be considered arise from the sports community's environment. Such an adjustment of the programme would take place, for example, in a similar clinic where it was developed in the first place. Attendance at the clinics and the number of the sparring meetings held are also recorded by the FOC, and both oral and written feedback has been collected regarding the collaborative events. However, there are no clear indicators or indicator sections included in the programme's five objectives intrinsically, which would demonstrate how enhancement or successes could be scrutinized within the framework provided by the programme. This issue was also somewhat strongly

emphasized by one of the federation managers interviewed. On the other hand, some of the measures subsumed into the objectives can be thought of as indicators, such as the *Environment and Climate* measure “We prepare an environmental programme and monitor and assess its implementation.” (FOC 2020f, 17).

To conclude the answers to the research questions, as well as to reflect on the theoretical and practical contribution of the case study, it can be stated that the practices identified for implementing *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* confirm the previous research and literature on collaborative strategic management (CSM) approach (e.g., Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Favoreu et al., 2016; Bryson, 2018) and CS implementation at the two levels (Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Huxham, 1993). In particular, the programme implementation at the collaborative level manifested – through the three identified collaborative approaches around *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* – in the practices aiming at partner organizations’ mutual learning and capacity building (e.g., Gray & Purdy, 2018; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Waddell & Brown, 1997), and which are also related to the broader perspective of inter-organizational relationships and collaboration research. At the organizational level, the interpretation and adaptation of the CS (e.g., Clarke & Fuller, 2010; Waddell & Brown, 1997), and thus the ownership of the strategic objectives through organizational actions (Clarke, 2011), were evident.

In addition to the examination of the two-level implementation practices, the study applied the concept of implementation structure (e.g., Hjern & Porter, 1981; Clarke, 2010; MacDonald, 2016) and the five interrelated criteria for the structure evaluation (Clarke, 2011; Sun et al., 2020). The implementation structure analysis of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, conducted with the help of the five criteria, can be understood to be highly context-specific, which, in turn, was one of the purposes of the second sub-question (see p. 102). However, the study evinces that the concept of implementation structure and the structural evaluation criteria can be applied in examining the interaction between the FOC and sports federations.

This case study contributes to the research and literature on the nature of CSs (e.g., Astley & Fombrun, 1983; Astley, 1984; Huxham & Macdonald, 1992; Clarke & Fuller, 2010) as joint inter-organizational initiatives aiming at adjusting to the inter-organizational environment, strengthening collaboration, as well as making a social impact that individual organizations alone would not be able to. What makes the focal collaborative strategic plan and its implementation exceptional, however, is that the practical implementation of *Sustainable*

Sports 2020–2024 continues beyond the FOC and sports federations to sports clubs, due to the organization of the Finnish sports community. Therefore, the programme's role and implementation features in the initiation phase in all details cannot be aligned unequivocally with the previous research on CSs.

Finally, there was no previous research on collaborative strategic plan implementation in the FOC and sports federations. This case study evinces that the CSM approach and the concepts of CS and implementation structure can be applied in the focal context. In conducting this study, it was also possible to make conducive use of the four practices of organizational strategy implementation (Noble, 1999; Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002; Mantere et al., 2006). However, this study engages the concepts in the specific context of Finnish sport organizations, and the matter may pose limitations to the practical transfer of the case study findings outside the study's remit. Instead, if desired, the findings can be approached through *analytic* or *theoretical generalizability* (e.g., Robson, 2002; Yin, 2014).

6.2 Managerial Implications

“In today's world, strategy is not a plan but work. It is not a secret science of the few but doing things together. It is continuous development, experimentation, and piloting. It is a variety of practices that can be constantly developed to be smarter.” (Itani & Tienari 2020, 143)

This study aimed to create an in-depth understanding of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation in the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and sports federations during the initiation phase of the programme. This was done by examining the implementation practices both at the collaborative level and the organizational level, as well as by delving into the implementation structure of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. The findings of the case study can be used to derive managerial implications for the future implementation of the programme, and these implications are discussed in this section.

Due to its evaluative approach, the second sub-question (see p. 102) concerning the implementation structure of the sustainability programme yielded observations that allow the deliberation of development proposals regarding the implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. The most significant areas of development identified through the five interrelated

structural criteria relate to Further Networking and Monitoring and Evaluation. By virtue of the apparent interplay of the criteria, advancements within these two areas could also have a positive impact on Partner Engagement, the effectiveness of Collaborative Practices, and the continuity and practical realization of Organizational Actions aiming at implementing *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. The criterion on Further Networking scrutinized whether the implementation structure comprises a communication system that allows for continuous partner networking and implementation progress overseeing between the more formal collaborative arrangements. Understandably, such a system or platform would provide, when properly utilized, the groundwork for also enhancing Monitoring and Evaluation of the strategy. However, the *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation structure analysis revealed that there is no actual communication system between the FOC and sports federations to foster more informal and emergent communication and partner networking on the implementation.

As the main managerial implication for strengthening the implementation structure and supporting the future implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, a Further Networking-based communication system or platform could be launched between the FOC and sports federations' representatives responsible for processing the joint sustainability programme at the collaborative level. In addition to serving as open communication and networking channel, the digitally-enabled platform would potentially contribute to the fulfilment or development of other interrelated criteria and, in that way, strengthen the work aiming at practicalization of the sports community's joint programme. Formulated based on the Further Networking criterion in the implementation structure analysis, Figure 9. (p. 108) outlines a simplified entity, the purpose of which is to promote the future implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* through the four incorporated attributes or tasks. The figure is followed by a concise discussion on each of these four conceptual elements.

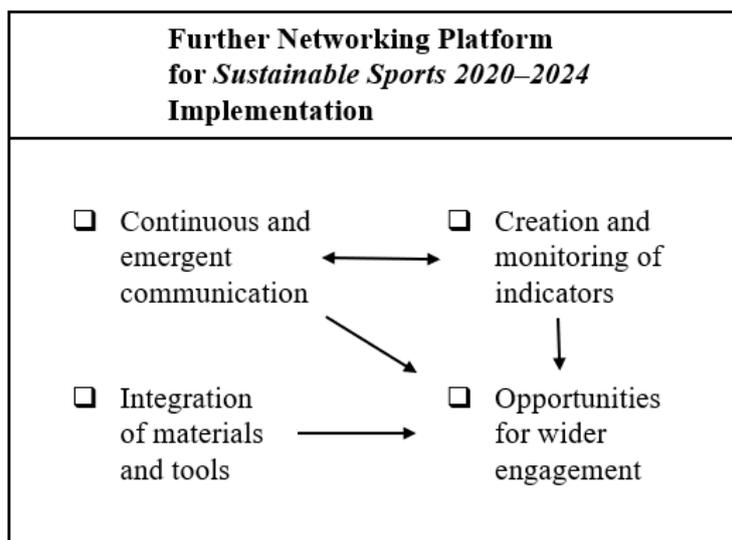


Figure 9. Further Networking Platform for *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*

Continuous and emergent communication. The platform enables partner organizations to network, continuously communicate, and ‘keep up to date’ on the strategy and its progress, following the Further Networking criterion. The pivotal point here is that the platform or communication system would be accessible to all sports federations’ representatives responsible for or keen on developing sustainability work in their organizations. Due to the more informal nature compared to Collaborative Practices, the platform could encourage the FOC’s and sports federations’ representatives – also from smaller and ‘silent’ federations that have not yet been reached – to share experiences, views, and development proposals on the content of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and its implementation also outside the collective events. The platform would also play a role in supporting the internal communication of partner organizations, especially that of sports federations, which did not stand out eminently in this study. This feature is also closely associated with the next task of the platform, creation and monitoring of indicators. Therefore, the two are connected in Figure 9. by the double-headed arrow.

Creation and monitoring of indicators. As for the collaborative strategic plan adaptation according to the criteria of Monitoring and Evaluation, the implementation structure analysis manifested that *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* is modifiable, and the adjustments necessary could be carried out, for example, at Sustainability Clinics. However, a platform enabling open and emergent communication between organizations’ representatives could assist and accelerate this adaptation work. On the other hand, the implementation structure assessment

revealed that there are no clear-cut shared indicators in the programme helping to detect progress and successes within the framework. However, this does not imply that a separate indicator should be developed for each measure of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, as it is not meaningful due to the programme's purpose as an adjustable framework or foundation. Instead, the focus could be on collaborative level indicators or such organizational level indicators, the monitoring of which would be of paramount importance according to the FOC's and sports federations' representatives. The Sustainability Manager of the FOC noted that, during 2021, more detailed consideration is given to measuring the success of the programme and setting some indicators to oversee the implementation. To this end, the communication platform could be used – along with Collaborative Practices – first, collectively discuss and develop the indicators, and later, to monitor their realization. It would be possible, also desirable, to integrate the key indicators not only into the platform but also into the *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* document.

Integration of materials and tools. Within Collaborative Practices in the implementation structure of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, particularly at Sustainability Clinics, a variety of materials and practical tools have been addressed through which the FOC and sports federations can develop their sustainability work and thus further the joint sustainability programme implementation. Afterwards, the materials have been provided via e-mail to the organizations that attended the collective events by the FOC's representatives. The platform's role in this regard is that the materials and tools would be added to it after and between the collective events in such a way that they are available to all sports federations at any time. Furthermore, the platform would allow for a wider and more informal collective discussion and mutual learning – and thus enhanced capacity building of partner organizations – on the practical utilization of the materials, for example, in problem situations.

Opportunities for wider engagement. Central to the Partner Engagement criterion in the implementation structure evaluation is that a sufficient number of key organizations are committed to executing the collaborative strategic plan. According to the Sustainability Manager of the FOC, and supported by the interviews and observational data, attitudes and engagement of sports federations to the programme implementation have been at a promising level during the initiation phase, although not covering the entire sports federation field. The existence of the *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* platform open to all federations would in itself allow for wider interest and commitment to processing the programme in organizations. In

addition, the other three features or tasks of the conceptual platform – continuous and emergent communication, creation and monitoring of indicators, and integration of materials and tools – would have a positive contribution in terms of broader Partner Engagement. Therefore, of the other three elements in Figure 9. (p. 108), the arrows lead to opportunities for wider engagement. However, despite the existence of these attributes, collaborative or organizational level engagement cannot be guaranteed through the platform or communication system, and thus in this context, reference is made to *opportunities* for wider engagement.

In conclusion, it is advantageous to outline the networking platform for *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation as ideation based on this case study, not as an absolute truth about what the FOC and sports federations’ representatives should necessarily do concerning the future processing of the programme. If the introduction of the platform would not seem meaningful and there is no use for it, other ways to improve the programme implementation can be considered with the help of the implementation structure analysis or the identified practices. Therefore, despite the assembly of Figure 9. (p. 108), the elements – such as the creation and monitoring of indicators – can also be intensified in inter-organizational practice without a platform-based communication system.

6.3 Evaluating the Research

Qualitative research seeks an in-depth understanding of phenomena, which is achieved, for example, by visiting participants, spending a lot of time in the research field, and getting acquainted with the research data in detail (Creswell & Poth 2018, 253). However, during and at the end of the research process, the researcher should ask: “Do we have it right?” (Stake 1995, 107). There are several ways to perform this validation and evaluation of research (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2018; Horsburgh, 2003; Robson, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In principle, case studies can be evaluated by following the same kind of procedures as in other research designs. However, there are also specific evaluation criteria established for case studies (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 133) and, for example, Stake (1995) and Yin (2014) discuss the means of assessing case studies comprehensively. Yin (2014) provides five such evaluation criteria for a case study through which the exemplarity of the study can be scrutinized. These criteria are employed in evaluating this research.

First, the case study should be *significant* in one way or another. Achieving this significance, relevance, and uniqueness can be tricky if a researcher has only a few cases to choose from. However, even a single case can be significant if it represents an unusual phenomenon of theoretical or practical interest. (Yin 2014, 201; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 133.) The implementation of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in its initiation phase, the research topic of the case study, can be considered as a unique and significant case as it reflects a real-world event that has not been studied previously in its context, due to the case’s novelty. In addition, a comprehensive understanding of the case is of particular practical importance, and the CEO and the Sustainability Manager of the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) have discussed the exceptional nature of the sustainability programme and the relevance of studying its implementation.

The second, albeit difficult-to-characterize criterion, is that the case study should be *complete*. The criterion requires the researcher to carefully define the boundaries and context of the case(s), extensively collect relevant evidence, and appropriately conclude the study. (Yin 2014, 202–203; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 133.) Due to the examined phenomenon, special attention had to be paid to setting the case boundaries in this study. At the beginning of the research process, it became clear that the case study would not cover the whole implementation process of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*. For this reason, it was emphasized that the inquiry would focus on the initiation phase of the programme. In addition, the number of actors involved in the study was reduced to concern ‘only’ the FOC and sports federations, not the Finnish sports clubs operating under the federations. The aim was to collect as much evidence as required for the research objectives, and in the end, more evidence was gathered than could eventually be included in the study. However, this helped me to understand the research context and the actors’ roles more profoundly. The data generation was concluded when data concerning the initiation phase had been collected so that, for example, more event observations would no longer have produced new significant perspectives. On the other hand, in completing the research process, I was guided by the scheduling of the university semester.

Third, the case study should *consider alternative perspectives*. This denotes that the researcher examines evidence from different perspectives, not from a single standpoint, and identifies the existence of rival evidence that challenges the research results. In fulfilling this criterion, *triangulation* can be utilized. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 133; Yin, 2014.) Triangulation is a helpful and often employed strategy, which “involves the use of multiple sources to enhance

the rigour of the research” (Robson 2002, 174). Of the different forms of this strategy, this case study utilized *data source triangulation* (e.g., Stake, 1995), in which the phenomenon under study was approached and examined by generating data from multiple sources: through interviews, event observations, and documents. With regard to the treatment of alternative perspectives in Findings, the main challenges associated with the implementation were also highlighted, in addition to the identified implementation practices. This reflects the adopted neutral attitude towards the data, as the implementation challenges were not per se the subject of the study. However, it is good to note that the applied philosophical position was critical realism, in which the knowledge about the world is socially constructed but, at the same time, it is understood that there is an observable reality independent of human knowledge (Easton, 2010). This matter implies that the knowledge gained from the data analysis is partly socially constructed, and thus the interviewees’ experiences, events in the observational situations, and the researcher’s interpretation and presentation of the data are to some extent subjective.

The case study should include *sufficient evidence*. Overall, the case study should present crucial evidence so that those familiar with the research can make independent interpretations of the correctness of the analysis and conclusions made. Furthermore, in conclusions, the researcher should be able to discuss both supportive and rival evidence. (Yin 2014, 205; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 133.) In this study, the research data was treated as neutrally as possible, aiming at presenting both supporting and challenging views. This is evident when addressing the implementation structure analysis of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* and discussing the theoretical contribution of the study. However, this study did not reach considerable depth in examining the organizational level implementation of sports federations. This matter was since only one representative of the three federations was interviewed. Interviews with more representatives from the same federations or more federations would have provided alternative and richer evidence on the sustainability programme’s nature and its implementation. On the other hand, the reliability of the interviews in terms of research objectives was increased by interviewing persons in significant positions in the FOC and sports federations. The examination of the collaborative level implementation was more in-depth, as it included various relevant event observations, the analysis of which were supplemented by the interviews.

Lastly, the case study should *be composed in an engaging manner* in such a way that the research report captures the reader’s interest convincingly. This criterion is, obviously, for the case study report’s author challenging to assess. However, to meet this criterion, the matter can

be influenced by, for example, the clarity of writing, the enthusiasm of the researcher, and the unusualness of the research. (Yin 2014, 205–206; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 133.) In preparing this master's thesis, special attention has been paid to the clarity of writing and grammar. As for the thesis' structure, it has been modified several times during the research process to form an understandable and coherent entity. Furthermore, the thesis is drafted and structured following consistently the features of the case study research tradition. The methodological choices made in the study have strived for comprehensiveness and interestingness, aided by the originality of the research topic. Finally, I have been very committed to and enthusiastic about the phenomenon under study, and I believe these matters also are reflected in the master's thesis.

6.4 Suggestions for Further Research

This case study focused on *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation in its initiation phase, with the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) and sports federations as the focal organizations. The study aimed at developing a thorough understanding of the collaborative and organizational level implementation practices at this phase and the features of the implementation structure. Due to the timing of the review to concern the beginning of the implementation process, it was not possible to review the outcomes of the practices and thus strategy realization (Mantere et al., 2006). Therefore, it would be interesting to examine further how the implementation of the sports community's sustainability programme progresses in the future after the initiation phase and how the objectives have been achieved. Such review would be possible due to the programme's duration, for example, in 2024 and 2025 with the help of a new case study design. Simultaneously, possible changes in the implementation structure and their effects on the functionality of practical implementation work could be examined.

This study examined *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* implementation from the perspectives of collaborative strategic management and collaborative strategy (CS), which denoted that the review considered the two levels of implementation – the collaborative and organizational level. However, the programme implementation could be studied either at the collaborative or organizational level by utilizing different research designs, theories, and literature. In that case, it would be possible to obtain alternative and even deeper perceptions concerning the levels. A compelling option for such further research would be to choose a sports federation and study

how the processing of the programme continues in the organization, for example, in the form of examining organizational experiences and practices and measuring the programme realization in future years. Alternatively, the FOC's activity on the development of the organization's sustainability work could be addressed solely. In that case, as far as the concept of implementation structure is concerned, the focus could shift from the partnership-based collaborative structure analysis to the review of the internal or individual implementation structure (MacDonald, 2016).

Due to the organization of the Finnish sports community, another collaborative level can be identified within the frame provided by *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*, namely from the interaction and coordination between sports federations and the sports clubs under those. The role and effectiveness of this interaction cannot be underestimated as Finnish sports clubs can, to some extent, be understood as actual 'end users' of the sustainability programme. Therefore, a fascinating subject of further research would be how the programme implementation progresses from interaction between the FOC and sports federations to the collaboration between the federations and sports clubs. A research design similar to this case study could be in principle adopted to examine this 'second' level. However, one would probably perceive differences in the identified implementation practices and the implementation structure.

Overall, more research is needed regarding the implementation of different CSs and concrete implementation outcomes in various inter-organizational contexts. In future research, special attention should be paid not only to the examination of implementation practices but also to the means of monitoring successes within collaborative strategic plans. Concerning the concept of implementation structure and the interrelated structural criteria (Clarke, 2011; Sun et al., 2020), there is room for future research to focus more firmly on the relationship between implementation structures and practical results of CSs, in the pursuit of designing successful inter-organizational partnerships (MacDonald et al., 2017).

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview Guide 1. in English

Interview guide for the semi-structured interview:

At first, brief introductions, review of the consent form and collection of the necessary personal data.

General questions

1. What thoughts does the joint sustainability programme of the sports community evoke in you?
2. The Finnish Olympic Committee has taken the sustainability programme forward in its communications and events. How do you perceive the activities of the committee in relation to the sustainability programme and its implementation?

Your organization and Sustainable Sports 2020–2024

3. Has the programme been communicated / will it be communicated in your organization? If so, how?
4. How do you interpret the programme and its content in your organization?
5. Has the programme been incorporated into the activities of your organization? If so, how?
6. Have concrete actions been taken / will be taken in your organization regarding the objectives of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*? If so, what actions?

Opportunities and challenges related to the implementation and sustainability work

7. Do you feel that there are opportunities in terms of the programme implementation and sustainability work at the level of your organization and in your own work? If so, what kind?

8. Do you feel that there are challenges in implementing the programme and in sustainability work at the level of your organization and in your own work? If so, what kind?

Sustainable Sports 2020–2024 and learning

9. Have you learned or realized something about the sustainability programme and / or its implementation?
10. Have you noticed any changes in the activities of your organization that could be related to the sustainability programme of the sports community?

At the end of the interview, the word is free, questions, additions, etc.

Appendix 2. Interview Guide 2. in English

Interview guide for the semi-structured interview:

At first, a brief review of the study objectives, review of the consent form and collection of the necessary personal data.

Warm-up questions

- Would you briefly tell me about your job description?
- Sustainability has been recognized in the updated strategy of the Finnish Olympic Committee as one of the five forces for change, and it has also been positioned as an organizational value and strategic theme. What does sustainability mean from the perspective of your organization?

The Finnish Olympic Committee and Sustainable Sports 2020–2024

1. How would you briefly describe the sustainability programme of the sports community?
2. How has the programme been addressed / communicated in your organization?
3. The Olympic Committee has its own sustainability tools, such as the sustainability compass. What is the role of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* in relation to such tools?

The sustainability programme and collaboration

4. *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* has been implemented, for example, in sustainability clinics and sparrings. How would you describe the role of these functions?
5. How would you describe the attitude and commitment of sports federations to the sustainability programme and its implementation?
6. Is there a channel where different actors in the sports community can continue working together and networking related to the programme, “after” clinics and sparrings?
7. In the action plan, indicators for implementing the programme are specified (e.g., number and quality of measures, number of participants in networking events, feedback). How do these indicators work in practice?

8. Sports federations have tailored the programme to suit their own activities. Does the sustainability programme, as such, contain flexibility and room for corrective action when necessary?

Opportunities and challenges related to the implementation and sustainability work

9. What are the benefits of *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024* for your own work, your organization, and collaboration with stakeholders?
10. What challenges you feel that there are in terms of sustainability work and the programme implementation?

Learning and steps in the future

11. Have you learned or realized something about sustainability work along with the programme and its implementation?
12. What are your thoughts on the future concerning the sustainability programme and its implementation?

At the end of the interview, the word is free, questions, additions, etc.

Appendix 3. Interview Guide 3. in English

Interview guide for the semi-structured interview:

At first, a brief review of the study objectives, review of the consent form and collection of the necessary personal data.

Warm-up questions

- Would you briefly tell me about your job description?
- Sustainability has been recognized in the updated strategy of the Finnish Olympic Committee as one of the five forces for change, and it has also been positioned as an organizational value and strategic theme. What does sustainability mean from the perspective of the Finnish Olympic Committee?

Sustainable Sports 2020–2024

1. How would you briefly describe the sustainability programme of the sports community?
2. How do you see the role of the Finnish Olympic Committee in implementing *Sustainable Sports 2020–2024*?

Opportunities and challenges related to sustainability work

3. What are the benefits of the joint sustainability programme for the Finnish Olympic Committee's stakeholder collaboration?
4. What do you think are the main challenges related to the implementation of the programme?
5. How do you see the role of sustainability in sports and physical activity in the future?

At the end of the interview, the word is free, questions, additions, etc.