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*Green pathways: Exploring Greece's and Albania's sustainability and
implementation practices*

**A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts(MA) in East and Central European Studies**

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Abstract

This research explores the state of sustainability and the implementation of sustainable practices in Albania and Greece. Specifically, it examines how municipalities have utilized EU green funding and how they raise awareness about sustainability within their local communities. Qualitative interviews were conducted with city officials from the municipalities of Lushnje and Vlora in Albania, as well as Kalamata and Trifilia in Greece. The interviews were coded and analyzed using theoretical frameworks in sustainability and sustainable development. The findings reveal that city officials not only understand the importance of sustainability but also actively promote and implement it through initiatives aimed at improving local infrastructure, waste management, and biodiversity. Despite recognizing the challenges that hinder sustainable development, they succeed in raising awareness through educational programs, particularly those involving the youth.

Keywords: sustainability, sustainable development, Albania, Greece, qualitative interviews, implementation practices.

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To my parents, thank you for your sacrifices.

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1. Introduction

“If working apart we are a force powerful to destabilise our planet, surely working together we are powerful enough to save it...in my lifetime I’ve witnessed a terrible decline. In yours, you could and should witness a wonderful recovery”. - David Attenborough, (*Rev* 2021).

During my early childhood, I was captivated by documentaries about planet Earth and the wonders of nature. My fascination deepened during my migration from Albania to Greece when I realized that post-communist Albania was not as environmentally friendly as I had imagined, and I came to admire the cleanliness of Greece. In my later years, I viewed Albania as less advanced compared to Greece, an official EU member state. However, I would later witness significant progress in environmental matters during my adulthood, challenging my earlier perceptions.

Climate change is the greatest threat to humanity and our planet, with increasingly devastating natural events driving people to migration, heightening health risks, and causing food insecurity (World Meteorological Organization (WMO) 2023, p. 50). Based on the data gathered by the WMO, they urge governments and the public to take immediate action against climate change. More specifically they address that “ Understanding how extreme events are impacting sustainable development is critical not only to support adaptation efforts, but also to serve as a basis for stronger climate action to mitigate worsening events in the future”, (ibid, p. 30). On this note, after reviewing Greece's and Albania's outdated environmental reports, I observed that issues such as, lack of funding and insufficient data limited the effectiveness of implemented measures (OECD 2020, p. 30) or a lack of knowledge and awareness about the newly-introduced rules and procedures, not only among the companies working in this field but also among the different stakeholders in the public administration (UNECE 2018, p. 10). Climate change must be taken seriously, and there is a pressing need for more comprehensive research to monitor progress in sustainable development, the implementation of sustainable practices, and the challenges faced along the way. In the following sections, I will outline the current state of sustainable development in Albania and Greece, along with a brief historical overview of each country, to help the reader better understand their perspectives and attitudes. However, before delving into this background, I will first present the purpose of this thesis and its research questions. Following that, I will outline the methodology used in my research before proceeding to the analysis chapter.

1.1. Research questions and aim

Studying the current state of sustainable development in Albania and Greece and how each country manages the receiving fundings from the EU has captured my research interest .

After reviewing already existing literature, I have realized that there is no research conducted specifically on the subject of Albania's and Greece's sustainable development and practices, which indicates the existence of a research gap.

Consequently, my thesis aims to examine the current state of sustainability practices and policies in Albania and Greece, with a particular emphasis on the role of local governments in implementing community-level initiatives. It strives to identify challenges, evaluate impacts, and investigate potential for change. By assessing policy frameworks and stakeholder participation, the research hopes to provide academic understanding of policy development in this area. To be more specific, this paper addresses the following research questions :

- a) How do the city officials understand sustainability?
- b) How does local government apply EU support to advance sustainable practices?
- c) What challenges is each local government facing regarding implementing sustainable practices?
- d) How does the local society react and engage in sustainable initiatives?

1.2. Background

This part of the chapter presents some background information regarding the green fundings Albania and Greece received from the EU and their allocations targeting specific areas for development.

To begin with, it's important to mention the specifics of the EU Green Deal that was signed by Albania and the EU in 2023 and their new campaign launch to promote and raise awareness on sustainable matters. According to the EEAS (European External Action Service), the green funds are distributed into three paths (*EEAS 2023*): “

1. **EU4Nature**: a €6 million project that will increase the protection of biodiversity in protected areas and further prepare Albania's protected areas to join the EU's Natura 2000 network.
2. **EU4Circular Economy**: a €30 million project to upgrade waste management, including recycling, and to enhance the circular economy in Albania.
3. **EU4Rivers**: a €7.5 million project to support integrated water management and wastewater pollution reduction in Albania.”

Overall, the amount of the green deal is surpassing the total of forty million euros and the distribution plan appears reasonable and effective in terms of leading Albania to a fully sustainable country by 2050.

A year prior to Albania, in 2022, Greece approved the First Just Transition Programme funding, estimated of a total amount of 1.63 billion euros. The size of the funding is larger and the target areas of improvement are the following: a) to support Greece to accomplish its coal-phasing out plan by 2028, b) to promote diversification of local economy and strengthen entrepreneurship, c) to support land repurposing actions and circular economic activities, d) strengthen workforce skills and promote employment and finally e) to support energy transition and climate neutrality (*European Commission 2022*).

Considering the funds that both Albania and Greece received and all their promotional and awareness campaigns, one could expect that the utilization of these funds can only lead to a positive and rapid development and transform the environmental and societal areas holistically.

Although securing this amount of fundings seems promising and appears to reflect that the countries are progressing with success, several issues call recently for attention. In the latest developments, Albania seems to have overcome its financial difficulties and making a major progress. The World Bank Group reports that in 2023, growth reached 3.3% as private consumption, exports, and investment increased despite rising energy and food prices. Despite another year of exceptional growth in tourism, growth is likely to remain at similar levels in 2024. Poverty is expected to continue to decline as employment and wages rise. The country's medium-term prospects hinge on global recovery, structural reforms, and fiscal consolidation (*World Bank 2024*). The growth and development is, as well, monitored in the Annual Report 2023 that was presented in the Albanian parliament (Sejko 2024). According to INSTAT data, the volume of economic activity in Albania grew by 3.4% over

the past year, by gradually improving the growth pace over the course of the quarters. In parallel, employment rose by 2.2%, while the unemployment rate dropped to a new historic low of 10.7% at the end of the year (Sejko 2024). The financial progress of Albania is evident and monitored by many sources, there are yet more challenges to it to be further discussed. Distinctively, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany (BMZ), reports that as the rate of people leaving the country and the share of the informal sector in the economy continue to be high, the unemployment rate is difficult to estimate. In addition, according to government sources, it is almost 12 per cent. The share of young people who are neither in education or training nor hold a job is especially high – roughly 21 per cent (*Economic situation The economy is picking up*, 2023). Furthermore, the increase of migration has affected the country's journey of progress, as the ones who have migrated or are on the process of migrating are young citizens. As a result, the Albanian median age of population has increased: from nearly 33 years on first January 2011, to 38 years on first January 2022. Remarkably, During the years 2011-2021 it is estimated that on average 42 thousand people emigrated every year and 23 thousand people immigrated every year. The main reasons for emigration have to do with better opportunities for work, education and health care (*Instat*).

Equally, Greece's performance is not better than Albania's. A further matter that calls for attention is the shrinking population and the large migration waves from Greece to other European or non-European countries abroad. Byron Kotzamanis, professor of demography at the University of Thessaly in Volos, states that

“The underestimate in 2021 compared to 2011 is less and that the true figure of people in Greece is 10.6 million, which would be a decline of 4.4 per cent on 11.1 million if correct. This is also the figure that Eurostat, using data sent to them by ELSTAT, recorded as the Greek population for January 1, 2022. Another reason for the decline is both emigration and Greece's low fertility rate. Kotzamanis believes that between 400,000 and 500,000 people have emigrated since the financial crisis, but adds that of that number some 150,000 would have been foreigners living in Greece.” (Judah 2022).

Considering all the information provided above by experts and scholars one could suggest that the Greek economy is far from resilient and is due to a national crisis but this time more harmful than the crisis in 2009 and on. Surprisingly, though, this is far from the case reports and statistics are showing. The Greek economy is forecast to grow nearly 3% this year, approaching its pre-crisis size of 2009 and far outpacing the euro zone average of 0.8% (Papadimas, McAllister, and Fenton 2024). Although this growth is impressive and gives

hope to locals, it does not reflect in the eyes of the residents nor to the reality. While large corporations and banks are thriving, the residents see little to no difference. To verify their concerns, ELSTAT notes that in 2023 the unemployment rate was 22.8% (*The Greek Economy - ELSTAT*, April 2024, p. 36) and the greek government debt is higher than the pre crisis years (Papadimas, McAllister, and Fenton 2024).

Naturally, after the demonstration of these data, it appears that both countries are performing well on financial numbers, yet the reality does not reflect that progress. Therefore questions arise, as to how can a nation succeed in sustainable development given the challenges above, whether sustainable development is only extending in the economic sphere and how are the countries progressing while the younger generations, seeing no improvement, are looking abroad for better opportunities.

1.3. Brief historical background

In order to comprehend a nation's notions and practices, it is paramount to examine their historical background and display facts and life changing events. In this initial point it is vital to highlight that, even though both Albania and Greece are neighbouring countries r, each one's history took an alternative turn in the 20th century which is worth exploring.

"Post-war Greece has been caught up in the whirlwind of transformation and modernization, following the Western development model (Louloudis,1992, p. 135-155)".

To initiate with, this quote captures the westernization of Greece in an attempt to transform its nation and move towards modernization, in the same vein as the countries of the West. After the end of the civil war in 1946-1949, which escalated the already high number of deaths after World War II, the population of Greece further reduced due to a mass emigration abroad to larger Western countries (Damilakou and Papadopoulos 2022, p. 9-10). During the emigration period in the 1950s and 1960s, the country was socially and politically unstable. This instability peaked in the late 1960s, with the after the military coup d'état in April of 1967, which ended seven years later in 1974 (Damilakou and Papadopoulos 2022, p. 36). With the fall of junta in 1974, the institutional platform shifted into a democratic institution, more strong and stable. This change did not only impact the political stage at the time but also the social and intellectual environment. This shift in perspective is reflected in the following quote, which discusses the evolving concept of "Greekness.":

The preoccupation with the elusive notion of “Greekness” which had obsessed the intelligentsia of an older generation such as architects Pikionis and Constantinides, painters Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas, Tsarouchis, and Moralis, film director Cacoyiannis, composers Hadjidakis and Theodorakis, and Nobel prize laureates Seferis and Elytis, gradually gave way to a more cosmopolitan influence. A new generation of artists, novelists, composers, and film directors (Takis, Tsoklis, Kounelis, Ioannou, Savopoulos, Xenakis, Angelopoulos, and Voyadzis to mention but a few) embraced much more decisively Western forms of expression (Koliopoulos and Veremis 2009, p.155).

All these perspective changes, increased the social and political discourse, leading to a greater engagement among the population. As a consequence, the majority of the population was involved in political matters and actively participating in the elective process of their representatives. With its target towards Europe and European Union, “modernized” Greece, finally managed to enter the Western world on the EU, in 1981 and adopted euro as a new currency in 2001 (*Economy and Finance*). From that point and on, Greece was following the western path, maintaining the democratic institutions and financially flourishing.

Greece’s next door neighbour, though, Albania, had a totally different journey and transitioned from communism to liberal democracy and from isolation to integration. Transformation from communism to liberal democracy happened in the 1990s when the first democratic party was elected in 1992. The pivotal reason for its delay was Albania’s forty year long lasting communist regime between 1946 until 1985, when the dictator Enver Hoxha died (Pearce 2008, p. 1). Until the early 1990s, the country was completely isolated from the rest of the world, having its borders sealed and prohibiting any form of communication with the outside world. As a result, the people of Albania and their new democratic party had to conform to new realities and help their country stand on its feet. Particularly, it is mentioned that the social and financial conditions were so severe that “Albania remained the least economically developed country in Europe. The low GDP per capita put it firmly in the African category of low-income countries” (Elbasani 2004, p. 33). The years that came after in 1995-1997, included mass immigration towards Italy and Greece, unregulated illegal economic system and a general chaotic situation where the police and army were nowhere to be found, resulting to armory looting (Pearce 2008, p. 2-3). A series of events as such, within the span of a decade, definitely altered Albania and left the nation with traumatic scars. However, the following decade, the country proceeded into a more stabilized democratic institution. Specifically, in 2000 “national anti-corruption strategy was drafted followed by the establishment of the Department of Internal Auditing

and High State Audit” (Nence 2013, p. 7). This strategy represented a big step towards transparency and stability, considering the fact that three years ago the country was in a state of total chaos. What sealed the steps towards transparency, though, was Albania’s application for an EU membership in 2009 and its eventual grant as an EU candidate status in 2014 (*Consilium.europa.eu*).

Concluding this historical chapter, I deem the research on Albania and Greece, worthy and interesting, as it raises the curiosity on how each nation had an alternative social, financial and historical progression, yet they are evolving in a similar manner and facing similar challenges, as well.

1.3. Previous research

Although, there is no previous research conducted in sustainable implementation practices in both Albania and Greece, there is some prior studies though, referring to sustainability of each country separately, discussing important aspects of it.

In her research paper, Katerina Ongari, discusses how Albania’s progress is bringing the country closer to fulfilling its EU membership goal and how sustainable development could actually bring it to fruition. Particularly, she navigates her research through the countries history, sustainability and entrepreneurship and argues that Albania, after all the hardships, has managed to make a significant progress but there are challenges that still set it back. However, she concludes that the best option to secure Albania’s membership in the EU is through green economy and entrepreneurship. (Ongari 2016, p. 41) Adding to Ongari’s argument, a study conducted in Albanian micro enterprises regarding the sustainable practices they implement, verified the fact that Albania has progressed financially, yet is struggling when it comes to sustainable practices. The enterprises which applied sustainable practices had great improvements and benefits while majority lacks information and understanding on sustainability and its benefits. (Icka, Adams, and Kauffman 2021, p. 13) While every researcher recognizes the efforts and the steps Albania has taken and how far it has come, they all agree on the existence of obstacles. A further research, though, on governmental investment in environmental economy, states that the main setback for sustainable development in Albania is the lack of funding for environmental projects by the government and the insufficient waste management practices (Vučković, Piksiades, and Trifunović 2022, p. 125). Considering the data provided above, green politics and initiatives appear to be a true resource of success and growth for Albania. Unfortunately, though, even

green politics include disadvantages. According to, Ermir Shahini, green politics correlate to democratic notions and through them democracy is “expected to be practiced”. The only disadvantage is that “a country that increases its green politics practices will suffer the increasing rates on unemployment”, according to the outcome of the research (Shahini 2015, p. 32).

Greece’s prior researches on sustainability and sustainable development demonstrate equal complex to Albania’s. In their research, (Pavlis and Terkenli 2023, p. 171) they explore the relevance of cultural sustainability to landscape values in Greece, highlighting how traditional landscapes have been significantly altered due to urbanization following World War II, particularly influenced by the emigration of the Greek population abroad. Specifically, their results suggest that higher education levels have a better understanding of landscape values and sustainability (ibid, p. 177). Regarding education, (Platitsa et. al 2024, p. 1104) study the the perceptions of Greek university administrations on sustainable development and their role on implementing practices. According to their survey, the university administrations views sustainable development as a method of preserving resources for the future generations (ibid, p. 1103). Additionally, the study participants identify financial and institutional constraints as obstacles to sustainable development, suggesting that government and financial support are essential to achieving sustainable progress (ibid, p. 1113). Finally, (Skouloudis and Evangelinos 2009, 43) in an older research they conducted during the financial crisis in Greece, they analyse the evaluating the quality and completeness of sustainability reports published by Greek companies. Specifically, they summarize that indeed the understanding of sustainability in reports has improved (ibid, p. 55), yet there are still challenges regarding infrastructure and governmental regulations (ibid, p.51). In conclusion, while these studies collectively enhance our understanding of sustainable practices, there remains a need for a more comprehensive analysis that focuses on the implementation of these practices in both case countries.

1.4. Limitations

The choice of qualitative semi-structured interviews as a method was intentional, as they provide both the researcher and the participant the opportunity to engage in in-depth discussions and express themselves more fully. I acknowledge that the number of participants in this study is insufficient to be considered thorough. I also recognize the

limitations associated with the selection of participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Participants may offer diverse responses due to their ethnic backgrounds or varying experiences. In addition, I acknowledge that not all of the questions were answered fully by the participants. Finally, an online survey would have served as a valuable supplementary data source, offering more detailed insights, yet the qualitative aspect would not exist in that case.

2. Theory

This chapter introduces definitions of sustainability and sustainable development, as well as, the controversies between experts about the accuracy of those terms. The third part of this chapter examines the importance of sustainability in all aspects of life.

2.1. Sustainability

To begin with, it is crucial to address the concept of sustainability in chronological order, allowing for a clear understanding of its evolution over time. This approach enables a more comprehensive navigation through the development of the term. The definition of the word “sustainable” that people in the modern day are most familiar with comes from the Brundtland Commission’s report of 1987. The term “*sustainable development*” was defined as followed: “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Steinsiek 1999, p. 78). When looking back, the term sustainability has a surprisingly long history. The concept that we are so familiar with today goes all the way back to the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries understanding of soil science. Paul Warde, professor in environmental history at the university of Cambridge, argues in his essay that, the fundamental idea of sustainability is based on the merge of, at the time, modern soil science and agricultural practices. He continues to say that this merge between science and agriculture was essential for the development of circulation of important nutrients within ecologies. This idea of circulation would prevent the process that could eventually lead to permanent degradation. (Warde 2011, p. 153). To confirm the central point of his essay, Warde speaks about the roots that sustainability had in the management practices of pre-industrial societies. Warde specifically writes about it in the context of organic economy and estate management handbooks. Translations of these handbooks of advice were published during the sixteenth century in northern Europe.(ibid, p. 154) Regarding the terminology of “sustainable”, the word emerged from the German equivalent, *Nachhaltigkeit*, which might also be expressed by the idea of “lasting-ness”, is, however, usually dated to the use of the word *nachhaltende* by Hanns Carl von Carlowitz in his *Sylvicultura oeconomica* of 1713, the first great forestry manual of the eighteenth century. The term can be found in the 1650s (ibid, p. 153). Over the years, the advice of estate management found in the handbooks proved their worth, even in the farming industry. Warde states that the distribution of this knowledge led to economic

growth, expansion, management and sustainability within crops and resources within the agriculture industry. (Warde 2011, p. 157).

The definition of sustainability would, without a doubt, be more related to the human environment. Two prime examples of definitions that have evolved within the environmental domain and that are now a part of our dictionaries, includes 1) "of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged" (sustainable techniques)(sustainable agriculture) and 2) "of or relating to a lifestyle involving the use of sustainable methods" (sustainable society). (Santillo 2007, p. 61-62)

Nasrin R. Khalili, mentions that there is a continued growing link between financial profit and sustainability over the centuries. Khalili mentions that in 1946, the Nobalist in economic sciences, Sir John Hicks, gave an alternative definition. Hicks' definition of income is "the amount, whether natural or financial capital, one could consume during a period and still be as well- off at the end of the period".(Khalili 2011, p. 18)

Afterwards, there was a global attention towards sustainability and its concept. This attention was the result of climate change and in general environmental issues that required urgent and imperative measures, along with the immediate adjustment of institutions.(ibid). In 1991, Solow defined the term sustainability as "an obligation or injunction to conduct ourselves so that we leave to the future the options and the capacity to be as well- off as we are, not to satisfy ourselves by impoverishing our successors" (Holliday, Schmidheiny, and Watts 2017, p. 191)

However, the concept of sustainability has multiple layers and continuously evolving. Glancing at all the definitions that were given overtime, the definitions changed and adjusted to each era's needs. As the environmental issues escalate due to human activity, there is a large demand of a definition and commitment to sustainability and its practices. According to Khalili, "because natural, economic, and social systems are all interdependent, it is logical that they must all be addressed when creating sustainable solutions to the environmental crisis". (Khalili 2011, p. 208).

2.2. Sustainable development

As the environmental crisis and the concerns around it were rising, the term "sustainable development" came to the spotlight through the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, when they presented their report document *World*

Conservation Strategy in 1980. In a detailed breakdown they defined the word “development” and the word “conservation” and elaborated how those two words combined, aparted sustainable development.

The definitions (IUCN, UNEP, and WWF 1980, p. 18):

“Development is defined here as: the modification of the biosphere and the application of human, financial, living and non-living resources to satisfy human needs and improve the quality of human life. For development to be sustainable it must take account of social and ecological factors, as well as economic ones; of the living and non-living resource base; and of the long term as well as the short term advantages and disadvantages of alternative actions.”

“Conservation is defined as: the management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations. Thus conservation is positive, embracing preservation, maintenance, sustainable utilization, restoration, and enhancement of the natural environment. Living resource conservation is specifically concerned with plants, animals and microorganisms, and with those non-living elements of the environment on which they depend. Living resources have two important properties the combination of which distinguishes them from non-living resources: they are renewable if conserved; and they are destructible if not.”

By combining those definitions it is suggested that conservation and sustainable development are mutually dependent can be illustrated by the plight of the rural poor (ibid, p. 18). In an alternative expression, both conservation and sustainable development should be addressed simultaneously as an effective conservation could benefit the rural areas and better their resources and at the same time sustainable development could secure a long-term positive effect.

Although this report was crucial and helped to firmly establish the term “sustainable development”, Susan Baker argues that its focus was rather limited, especially when the term ecological sustainability is restricted, rather than linking sustainability to wider social and economic issues (Baker 2006, p. 18). Henceforth, Baker provides in a more philosophical tone, two variant approaches to sustainable development, as she believes they are an indication of different beliefs about the natural world held in different societies, cultures and historical settings at the individual level. Consequently, she suggests that the values are attributed to nature range across a broad spectrum, from an “anthropocentric” to an “ecocentric” position. At the extreme end of the “anthropocentric” view, the wealth of nature is seen only in relation to what it can provide for the service of the humankind, while the ecocentric one holds the view that nature has intrinsic value (Baker 2006, p. 28) In spite of that, she mentions that “sustainable development offers a way of reconciling economic

development and ecological protection while being flexible enough to allow governments to take account of different political cultures, policy contexts and socio-economic needs” (Baker 2006, p.46). These specific dimensions are also known as the three pillars of sustainability where the economic system should maintain and protect the environment and have a positive impact in the society (Jerneck et. al., 2011, p. 75).



(Ongari, 2016, p. 19)

To elaborate on the three spheres of sustainability:

Economic sustainability. Economic sustainability centers around the quantity of the natural resource base, that provides physical input, both renewable (water, wind, etc.) and exhaustible (fuels, minerals, etc.), into the production process. (Khalili 2011, p. 9).

Economic terms, define sustainability as the “maintenance of the capital” or “nondeclining capital” in which capital is referred to as man-made capital. (*Records Collections*). There is also a common belief that natural resources will be renewed as a result of financial growth, in combination with technological advancement. (Cooper and Vargas 2004, p. 111).

However, it has been confirmed that natural resources are not endless and that a percentage of that cannot be renewed or resupplied. Furthermore, “the growing scale of the economic system has overstretched the natural resource base, prompting a rethink of the traditional economic postulations” (Du and Kang 2006, p. 160). According to Dernbach, (Dernbach 1993, p. 13-20), there are specific frameworks with instructions by which transactions are

evaluated and decisions about economic activities are made. In economy, there are three main activities, production, distribution and consumption. These activities are necessary in order for the economy to function properly. However, the accounting framework used to measure and evaluate these activities, sometimes might present a twisted picture, regarding the economic value, resulting in direct impacts both in the society and the environment. (Cao 2017, p. 84-90) . Allen and Clouth ,highlight that “human life on earth is supported and maintained by utilising the limited natural resources found on the earth”. (Cameron and Clouth 2012, p. 40). Consequently, sustainability has many aspects that need to taken into account and requires delicate decisions.

Environmental sustainability. Environmental sustainability referes to the ecosystem that functions naturally and carrying capacity, the amount of activities, of natural environment. (Brodhag and Talière 2006, p. 137). Environmental sustainability requires that natural resources be sustainably used as a source of economic inputs, available over time and as a sink for waste, absorbing and processing waste. (Goodland and Daly 1996, p. 1010) . Therefore, in environmental sustainability there is a requirement of limiting waste and pollution, as well as, not exhausting all natural resources, renewable and non renewable.

Social sustainability encompasses notions of justice, empowerment, accessibility, (Griggs 2017, p. 143) participation, cultural identity and institutional stability (Daly 1992, p.9-14) . The concept implies that people are important because sustainable development concerns the people (Benaim, Collins, and Raftis, p. 16). Basically, “social sustainability connotes a system of social organization that alleviates poverty” (Littig and Griessler 2005, p. 14).In this matter the main claim of the theory of social sustainability, is that in order to reduce poverty, the efforts should be delicate and calculated. A careful process will ensure that the environment will be safe and that there is no financial instability created. To put it in simple words, it should “aim to alleviate poverty within the existing environmental and economic resource base of the society”. (Suresh, Raizada, and Biswas 2014, p. 333). In Saith Ashwani’s (Ashwani 2006, p. 1178) opinion, at the social level sustainability includes the encouragement of the development of people, communities and cultures to help achieve meaningful life, drawing on proper healthcare, education, gender equality, peace and stability across the globe. According to Kolk (Kolk 2016, p. 31), social sustainability is not about ensuring that everyone’s needs are met. If social sustainability is facing any obstructions, these obstructions are considered a barrier. The means to lift these barriers are

to address them directly, in order for individuals, organization or community to make progress towards social sustainability (Brodhag and Talière 2006, p. 141).

2.3. Sustainability principles

Looking up the definition of the word “principle” in a dictionary, it is defined as a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as a foundation for a system of belief or behaviour or for a chain of reasoning (Svenson and Lindberg 2010, p. 3350). Considering this definition, principles are the cornerstones that connect both organisations and individuals into expressing sustainability and its practices. According to Paul Shrivastava and Stephanie Berger, the principles of sustainability unfolded as a response to a socio-historical context marked by environmental abuses and public anxiety, particularly during the 1960s. The decade of the 1960s witnessed an increased awareness of issues such as pesticide effects, smog, birth defects, and pollution, alongside nuclear power and weapons concerns. (Shrivastava and Berger 2010, p. 249). Hence, as a shift towards sustainable development, there is one specific approach introduced, the Natural Steps approach. As stated by Khalili, “in a sustainable society nature should not be overexploited, extraction of substances from the earth’s crust must be restricted, concentrations of substances produced by society must be controlled, and people and society as a whole should not be compromised and subjected to conditions that systemically undermine their capacity to meet their needs” (Khalili 2011, p. 9). Thus, Khalili continues and signifies four principles that can assist as guidelines to sustainable development, a) the human consequence to the increasing collection of material that are being withdrawn from the earth, b) the continuous acceleration of chemicals and compounds created by human activity, c) the persistent physical degeneration and damage to natural environment and lastly d) the factors that compromise people’s ability to ensure that their essential needs are met, for example unsafe working conditions, shelter, food, etc. (ibid, p. 9). Although these principles would seem rather idealistic to tackle the environmental issues to their core, in today’s society that might proven to be challenging and more complicated. On this matter, Thomas Princen argues that throughout history, societies have asserted as principles moderation, thrift, frugality, prudence, temperance, and reverence, in order to resist the human tendency for overconsumption, as all the principles listed were significant for survival. Today though, these principles are linked more to personal behaviour and are becoming rapidly more irrelevant to societal institutions, such as laboratories, factories and markets. The reasoning behind this shift, is the domination of efficiency (Princen 2003, p.45-46). Therefore, while

these principles are fundamental, it is imperative to take into account all pertinent factors before addressing environmental issues and pursuing sustainable development.

3. Method and data

The method that has been chosen for this research is qualitative interviews along with qualitative data analysis. Qualitative interviews are deemed appropriate for this research, as it seeks to understand the experience and point of view of the stakeholders regarding sustainability and sustainable practices, instead of only focusing on analyzing numeric data.

3.1 Qualitative interviews

With qualitative interview being the main method of data collection, it is pivotal to elaborate on its significance, as well as, concerns, especially connected to digital interviews conducted on communication platforms. To begin with, there are four types of qualitative interviews, the structured, the unstructured, the semi-structured and the focus groups. Bryman defines as structured, the interviews that are controlled by the researcher and include pre-organised questions in order to extract specific answers from the participants, strictly focused on the topic of the interview (Bryman 2016, p. 10). An unstructured interview, on the other hand, is quite flexible and unpredictable, as the participants can express themselves more elaboratively, even deviate and end up in a different discussion. A semi-structured interview though is a combination of both. In a semi-structured interview the questions are pre-organised just as in the structured, but the difference is that the researcher allows the participant to provide more detailed responses through open-end questions (ibid, p.10). Lastly the focus groups, include a larger number of participants, around six to twelve and its a combination of structured, unstructured and semi-structured. In focus groups the participants are discussing, debating, arguing and challenging each other, leading to in-depth interviews that generate high quality data (Dornyei 2007, p. 144).

Even though the focus groups seem to be ideal and bring remarkable results, semi-structured interviews are optimal as well, especially when the number of the participants is smaller than six or when there is impracticality to perform the interviews at a specific time and sight. Louise Barriball and Alison While describe (Barriball and While 1994, p. 330) semi-structured interviews as effective and flexible, as they provided the opportunity to explore the participants perceptions, opinions and engage in discussions around sensitive topics, within a flexible timeframe. On that account, I evaluate that the semi-structured interview is

more suitable for my research, given the geographical distance of the participants and the limited timeframe for conducting the interviews.

However, opinions on video-recorded interviews and those conducted through communication platforms are divided. On the following paragraph, researchers are questioning their authenticity as a qualitative research method. This is attributed to the engagement of impression management, in other words the adjustment of expression, tone and behaviour of the researcher with the person they are interviewing, something that can influence how the participant perceives them. Similarly, researchers share the same concern about video recorded interviews, as it is difficult to say for sure if the participant is being their genuine self or adjusting to an online setting (Sullivan 2012, p. 55). Therefore, the question that emerges is : are the participants genuine during online interviews or do they just adjust to the online settings and questions? To provide an answer to this question, it is essential to highlight how people interpret an authentic and an intentional presentation during social interactions. Particularly, Ervin Goffman, in his book, "The presentation of self in everyday life", examines the distinctions between the "real" and "contrived" performances. In more detail, Goffman argues that as "real" performances are interpreted those which emerge naturally and spontaneously from an individual, accompanied by impulsive reactions. On the contrary, contrived performances are interpreted those which are controlled and calculated, combined with tailored reactions instead of spontaneous and direct response to reality (Goffman 1959, p. 70). Taking into account Goffman's statement, Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002, p. 34-35), argue that the interactions between individuals that take place in various communication platforms online, actually, enable them to express their true genuine self or parts of it. This is due to the anonymity of these platforms, which prevents the existence of fear of disapproval and sanctions by those in their real-life social circle . Nevertheless, in terms of presenting an authentic self, I consider it challenging and complex in both in person interactions and also via internet platforms, as there is no secure technique to determine if the individual is providing truthful information or not. Besides, "issues of authenticity most often come into play when authenticity has been put in doubt" (Peterson 2005, p. 1083).

I completed a total of four interviews. Two were conducted via videoconferencing using communication platforms such as Zoom, while the other two were carried out via email, with participants responding to a set of prepared questions. The video calls lasted forty-five minutes each. Despite some connection issues during the process, the interviews were ultimately successful. Two of the interviews have been recorded and transcribed and the

other two were only transcribed as they agreed to respond to my interview questions via e-mail. To ensure participants were fully informed that their contributions would be recorded and transcribed, I provided them with a consent form. This form confirmed their agreement to participate in the research and permitted the use of recordings and information for transcription and analysis in this thesis

3.2. Topic guide

I developed an interview guide to help maintain a natural flow of questions and ensure that no important topics were overlooked. The questions were carefully tailored to capture participants' thoughts while fostering a smooth, easygoing conversation where they can express themselves confidently, all while staying aligned with the research objectives. My interviews launched with introductory questions regarding personal information, such as name, age, occupation and experience. The following set of questions aimed to assess the participants' understanding of sustainability and their perspectives on its role in their country. After gathering their initial thoughts and perspectives, I moved on to the core of the research, focusing on questions about the EU funding each country received and how sustainable practices are being implemented in each area. While the questions were similar, I tailored each prompt specifically for the participants from each country. The prompts were as follows:

“The EU Green Deal that was signed between Albania and the European Union aiming for net-zero emissions by 2050 and sustainable economic growth, launched a Green Campaign. The new Green Campaign targets to educate Albanians on environmental impact and highlight EU assistance in protecting biodiversity and combating degradation. According to the Green Campaign, how has the municipality promoted and implemented sustainable practices?”

Greece received additional aid from the European Union last year with the first Just Transition Fund (JTF) Programme adopted by the Commission, with a total of 1.63 billion euros. According to the Executive Vice-President for the European Green Deal Frans Timmermans, “Greece will now receive extra support to develop a green, inclusive and resilient economy with decent jobs for all.” How has the municipality promoted and implemented sustainable practices?

In line with the main question, I included an additional query about the challenges each municipality encounters in implementing sustainable practices. Proceeding, the focus of the questions shifted to examining the extent to which businesses engage in and implement sustainable practices, as well as the challenges they face. Concluding the series of main research topics, the questions were about the local community's involvement in sustainable initiatives and the methods/strategies the municipality has initiated, in order to raise awareness and educate residents about sustainability. I further added a question about examples of successful initiatives. The final set of questions focused on the participants' views on the future of the municipality, including sustainable goals and innovations. Additionally, I sought their recommendations and provided a concluding section for any final comments they wished to add about the interview.

3.3. Samples

After numerous online attempts to find participants for my research, I came across two Albanian city officials and two Greek city officials (one of them is a former city officials), who volunteered to participate in this research. The albanian participants volunteered to participate in an interview via email and the greek participants agreed to participate via Zoom video calls. For anonymity purposes, the participants are referred with pseudonyms as Eda, Ilda, (albanian participants) Nick and Maria (greek participants) and their occupation will not be delineated thoroughly. To supply more information, Eda occupies a position of authority within the local government of the city of Vlora and Ilda holds a subordinate position within the municipal administration of Lushnje, monitoring their city's progress and commitment to a sustainable lifestyle. As for the greek participants, Nick occupies a position of authority within the local government of the city of Kalamata and Maria held a subordinate position within the municipal administration of Trifilia.

4. Findings and analysis

This part of the analysis is to explore and capture the views on sustainability held by city officials. Additionally, it aims to inquire into the implementation and the progress that has been made over time and how these officials manage to merge sustainability practices on community levels.

4.1. The Albanian case

Since Albania received funding to promote and implement sustainable practices through the Green Way initiative, there is renewed hope for creating a more sustainable Albania. This progress could eventually position the country as a model for sustainability and support its bid for EU membership. The following chapters will focus on discussing sustainable practices in the municipalities of Lushnje and Vlora and the progress of each one.

4.1.1. Understanding sustainability

The first subject of this analysis is the city officials' opinions and delivery of their own interpretations of the word sustainability. The interview with Eda, the city official in Vlora, supplies this subchapter with her own understanding of sustainability in the following quote:

“an approach and a concept that aims to ensure economic, social and environmental development in order to meet the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Eda, e-mail interview, 11th of March 2024)

The quote by Eda includes a break down of the key elements of their own understanding of the word sustainability. As a definition, Eda defines sustainability as “*an approach and concept*”. The choice of the words show that she, not only views sustainability as a set of actions but also as a larger concept, a greater philosophical idea that assists as a guide to those actions. Additionally, she mentions “*economic, social and environmental development*” which are widely acknowledged as the three pillars of sustainability (Ralph, Mieg, and Frischknecht 2012, p. 451) and manages to capture the concept of a more holistic approach. Finalising her definition with the phrase “*meet the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*”, Eda mirrors the principle of international equity. The concept of international equity stems from Brundtlands Commission's definition of sustainable development which invokes

the needs of future generations counterbalanced to the current unmet needs of much of the world's population (Sneddon, Howarth, and Norgaard 2006, p. 255).

In the same question, the city official from Lushnje, Ilda, responded with two alternative interpretations of sustainability. In a more detailed answer, Ilda responded that

“in terms of policies, sustainability includes strategic documents that are drawn up at the local, national or EU level, related to certain areas, serving as a guide for the future, through the implementation of which they fulfilled medium or long-term plans for a safe development. (Ilda, e-mail interview, 25th of March, 2024)

In an alternative manner, Ilda, gives a definition of sustainability “*in terms of policies*”. B highlights that sustainability includes “*strategic documents*”. Defining sustainability as such, indicates that she views sustainability rooted in formal, written policies which provide a thorough and structured approach to sustainability issues. Continuing, she mentions “*local, national or EU level*”, indicating that sustainability strategies call for the necessity of collaboration and coordination in all levels of governance. Hence, Ilda recognises the holistic nature of sustainability as a collective effort. The part that is particularly interesting is the usage of the phrase “*in certain areas*” which depicts the understanding of the participant regarding detailed customised policies in specific areas and in specific sectors. In a similar way to Eda, Ilda highlights the importance of sustainability for future generations to promote and stem development in the phrase “*serving as a guide for the future*” and suggests that it requires a long term perspective phrasing “*medium or long-term plans*”.

In further response Ilda added the concept of sustainability regarding projects. Specifically, she mentioned :

As far as the field of projects is concerned, sustainability is related to the final period and the one after the end of the project. In this case, sustainability involves extending the project's results over a longer duration than the project's implementation period and increasing the number of beneficiaries in addition to those involved in the project. (Ilda, e-mail interview, 25th of March, 2024)

In their further definition of sustainability, Ilda highlights its importance through this phrase “*final period and the one after the end of the project*”. This phrase signifies that the lasting period of a sustainability project extends in the long run too. In other words it has a long lasting effect and it is not temporary. The longevity of these projects can be detected in the phrase “*involves extending the project's results over a longer duration*”, which suggests that she recognises that the sustainability can secure long term benefits. In the end, she mentions the phrase “*increasing the number of beneficiaries in addition to those involved in the*

project”, supporting the idea of a larger group of beneficiary inclusion rather than just the initial stakeholders. This idea could promote sharing knowledge, development ideas and resources for all the groups and communities that are involved.

Considering the fact that I cannot define my way to clarity about the meaning of sustainability (Ramsey 2015, p.1085) and that it is a term with a broader understanding, the participants described the parameters of it. To interpret this in other words, the participants do recognise the significant impact sustainability has in economic, social and environmental life and how every project or action can transform a society holistically.

4.1.2 How are the EU fundings being utilized in Albania?

One of the predominant themes during the interviews was the sustainability practices that each stakeholder city implemented, utilizing certain EU fundings. To begin with, Vlora is one of three largest cities in Albania and is located in the coastline, facing the Adriatic Sea. The element that makes the area special, besides its location, is its rich culture and biodiversity which is the main reason the area is developing into a must-visiting destination. (Reaney 2024). Consequently, it is worth exploring Vlora’s progress in sustainability and how the city is adjusting to its growth while promoting and implementing eco-friendly initiatives. To that question, Eda provided interesting information mentioning that the city

“has engaged in a series of projects and policies to achieve sustainable development. These include various challenges related to the environment, transport, infrastructure, land use and social equity.” (Eda, e-mail interview, 11th of March 2024)

Through this statement, Eda highlights the the holistic strategy of Vlora, which does not limit its action only in one territory but it expands in other ones too. To put it in a detailed analysis, the phrase “*environment, transport, infrastructure, land use and social equity*”, implies that the city is trying to tackle multiple issues regarding sustainability. Specifically, these issues include both natural and social dimension.

In further response to her answer, Eda, provided a series of sustainable initiatives, referring to the capital city of Tirana instead of Vlora. Those initiatives include : Public Transport and Sustainable Alternatives, Waste Management and Recycling, Parks and Green Spaces and Development of Urban Spaces. In further detail, Eda mentions that the municipality is:

- “1) investing in public transport infrastructure to improve access and efficiency and creatededicated bicycle lanes and public spaces used for sustainable activities.
- 2) Creating efficient waste collection systems through public service enterprises
- 3) Creating and supporting of green spaces in the city.
- 4) Urban planning to promote sustainable construction and efficient use of urban spaces by using information and communication technology to better manage the city and public services.”(Eda, e-mail interview, 11th of March 2024)

Before I proceed to examine the sustainable initiatives, it is important to address the reference to Tirana in place of Vlora. As the interview was conducted via e-mail, this reference could be interpreted either as a word choice error, meaning she wanted to actually name Vlora or as a textual gap error, which in case, the the participant would address that Vlora has been following the same sustainable practices as Tirana. Regardless, I will proceed analysing the given data as errors would not deem them less important.

As a first initiative, Eda, mentions “*investing in public transport infrastructure improve access and efficiency*”. Targeting public transportation could be described as a social inclusion move first and sustainable second. The core idea of it is summarized in the word “*access*”, which implies the limited access to public transport, in both number of transportation vehicles and extend area connections. Optimally, all residents should have equal “*access*” to public transport regardless of their location. By improving access more people would be encouraged to use public transport, leading to a more sustainable commuting. In addition, creating “*bicycle lanes and public spaces used for sustainable activities*” and “*creating and supporting of green spaces in the city*” could be a great bonus encouragement for residents to use affordable and sustainable transportation by using their bikes and simultaneously devoting time outdoors, utilizing the green spaces. Carrying on, the creation of “*efficient waste collection systems through public service enterprises*” indicates that the city is also, investing in public service, especially waste management in order to meet the needs of the population and effectively manage waste while limiting pollution and promoting recycling. Finally, “*using information and communication technology*” for “*urban planning*” and “*urban spaces*” is definitely a method of investment in local projects that focus on urban enhancement, sustainability and in general creating an eco-friendly city worth living in. All the initiatives mentioned clearly are intergraded in the sphere of social sustainability, targeting the progress of sustainability from its root, which in this case are the people. This perspective falls into Kolks theory that “social sustainability

aims at providing enabling conditions for everyone to have the capacity to realize their needs, if they so desire” (Kolk 2016, p.31).

Following, Lushnje is a small city located a bit distant from the coastline and closer to the capital of Tirana. The city is rich in history and agriculture and it is known as the main provider of agricultural products in the country (Dishnica 2017, p.1-7). As Albania has been experiencing a rapid growth in tourism, specifically with more than ten million visitors in 2023 alone (*UN Tourism* 2024), it is equally vital to examine how an agricultural, more rural area implements sustainable practices.

Ilda mentions that the municipality of Lushnje “has undertaken a significant number of initiatives to promote sustainable practices, such as implementation of the Local General Plan and implementation of the Local Action Plan for Environmental Noise Management.” (Ilda, e-mail interview, 25th of March, 2024)

As part of the implementation of these plans, Ilda adds a series of strict measures that have been taken such as: the addition of green spaces, the construction of lanes dedicated to bicycles, the rehabilitation of the city stream and the reconstruction of roads. (Ilda, e-mail interview, 25th of March, 2024)

In a separate manner, Lushnje has directed its focus towards reconstructing the areas. The “*reconstruction of roads*” indicate that the roads of the area are in poor condition, which most likely are generating issues for the local residents such as traffic, limited accessibility or even accidents. At the same time “*rehabilitation of the city stream*” is also prioritised, implying the existence of issues such as water pollution, flooding, erosion or other.

Nevertheless, the municipality seems to prioritise the “*addition of green spaces*” and “*the construction of lanes dedicated to bicycles*”, signifying their equivalent necessity. These measures will benefit the local environment, improve the city aesthetically and overall motivate transportation by bike, improve the residents physical and mental health and generally, engage in sustainable methods.

Overall, both Vlora and Lushnje appear to aim for the same sustainable targets with the only difference that Vlora, as a larger city, has reconstructed a large part of the area while Lushnje is working on its infrastructural update.

4.1.3. Albanian businesses in sustainability

In reference to the different scales of each city, a further question I shared with the participants was about the sustainable practices local businesses have adopted and implemented or at least are trying to. Ilda mentions that the area of Lushnje is agricultural. Farming and agriculture are the main activities that sustain the local residents. She continues that Lushnje's agricultural community is "focusing more on environmentally friendly growth, and the number of farmers adopting contemporary and environmentally friendly technology is growing. Water treatment plants are another example of a sustainable business strategy. Special attention is also paid to the distinction of garbage created by enterprises." (Ilda, e-mail interview, 25th of March, 2024)

Divergent from Lushnje, the city of Vlora has been increasing its touristic capacity and thriving as highly recommended destinations. The burgeoning tourism industry in Vlora, is the main business activity that sustains the residents. Eda mentioned that businesses are investing in solar panels, as the country is known for its 'unlimited' sunny days during all seasons. In addition, each business personnel is encouraged and has been using more frequently the public transportation. The fundamental key to a sustainable mindset, Eda quotes, is "the development of environmentally friendly services and products, using recyclable materials and clean technology." (Eda, e-mail interview, 11th of March 2024)

Some essential factors to comment to are the alternative focuses each city's industry has. On one hand, Lushnje is highly agricultural and invests in farming industry and development of new sustainable agricultural practices. On the other hand, Vlora, being one of the capitals of tourism, invests in energy, businesses and technology in order to remain updated and upgraded. Regardless of their industries, both cities seem to have progressed and evolved. "How Albania meets these and other related challenges can serve as a learning microcosm for the others. Besides the paradigm shift lessons, another thing that should be noted about Albania is the fierce fighting spirit and courage of its people" (Luthans and Sang 1994, p.13). Considering the current state of Albania, the country has made many steps towards progress and improving its economy. However, the progress sometimes can be overshadowed by several challenges.

4.1.4. Challenges and parameters

Addressing challenges is pivotal in order to locate the causes of them and provide recommendations or solutions. In relation to that, Eda highlighted how vital tourism is for the city and the country in general, and how sometimes “touristic demand, can bring challenges in managing noise, environmental pollution and touristic waste.”(Eda, e-mail interview, 11th of March 2024). This might suggest that fluctuations in tourist demand can pose challenges for local authorities in effectively managing issues such as noise pollution, environmental degradation, and the accumulation of tourist-related waste.” Therefore, these challenges underscore the need for proactive measures and sustainable practices to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism on the city's environment and quality of life for residents.”(Eda, e-mail interview, 11th of March 2024).

Unfortunately, Vlora is not the only city facing challenges. Particularly, Ilda mentioned that Lushnje is also encountering some challenges. The two most common challenges they face are the “lack of human resources, experts in various fields, alongside the limited financial capacities.” (Ilda, e-mail interview, 25th of March, 2024).

The aspect of challenges was not extensively elaborated upon but rather presented in a generalized manner to provide a comprehensive overview.

Although the challenges can be complex and demanding, the impression that has been given is that they do not have a big impact or diminish the progress and perks each city has gained over the years.

4.1.5. Education and impacts

Even though challenges seem to affect the progress on sustainable development, one cannot undermine the impact education and initiatives have in the society, especially local communities. The residents, on a communal level, seem to engage in sustainability practices, Eda states. This engagement encompasses organizing environmental cleanup efforts, such as “reforestation campaigns and beach cleaning initiatives, which serve to mitigate ecological degradation”. (Eda, e-mail interview, 11th of March 2024). Furthermore, community members participate in diverse social projects geared towards enhancing the overall quality of life and well-being within the locality. Additionally, there is a concerted effort to “promote the consumption of sustainable products and services, with an emphasis on endorsing locally sourced goods and supporting businesses committed to sustainable

practices”. (Eda, e-mail interview, 11th of March 2024). This multifaceted approach demonstrates Vlora’s community commitment to developing sustainability and promoting environmental stewardship in their area.

While the highlighted initiatives provide a positive vision for the future of sustainability in Vlora, it is valuable to augment these conceptual frameworks with practical examples of implemented sustainable practices and projects in the area. To enhance the already mentioned initiatives, additional questions were addressed, including the municipality's approach or strategy for raising awareness and educating on sustainability, as well as examples of successful sustainability initiatives. Unluckily, Eda, refrained from providing responses to those questions, resulting in a void of information or evidential documentation pertaining to the municipality's approach to raising awareness and educating the public about sustainability, as well as, providing examples regarding successful sustainability projects.

On another note, the general community of Lushnje has adopted a new point of view regarding the environment and sustainability. The community is more aware and participates both in decision-making and in voluntary actions. Ilda mentions that “Lushnje’s Municipality has cooperated with groups of individuals, mainly young people, with whose support and initiative we have taken a considerable number of cleaning and awareness initiatives.” (Ilda, e-mail interview, 25th of March, 2024).

Moreover, along with the awareness comes the education of the community of Lushnje, where the municipality takes a number of initiatives to raise awareness and motivate the public of various age groups to engage in educational and action-oriented initiatives. These strategic efforts include the approval of the Local Plan for Integrated Waste Management, developed in collaboration with Co-PLAN, the Institute for Habitat Development, and MetroPOLIS Shpk. Furthermore, the municipality has adopted a Local Action Plan for Environmental Noise Management to address environmental challenges thoroughly. As a result of the heightened awareness and educational efforts, success stories have emerged. Ilda, mentions that “in 2023 alone, the municipality of Lushnje has implemented over fourteen projects from the EU and other donors where the focus has undoubtedly been on the environment, climate protection and renewable energy.” (Ilda, e-mail interview, 25th of March, 2024). Such projects worth mentioning are Unleashing the Potential of Youth of Lushnja, Youth for the Young, Kindergartens and nurseries with intelligent energy, which

includes the installation of photovoltaic panels in educational institutions and last but not least Urban Transition Mission.

The comprehensive presentation of many examples and detailed progress reports about Lushnje's sustainability efforts is crucial for this research. This tangible evidence goes beyond just words and provides a solid basis for this analysis. In the meantime, the lack of data on educational initiatives and examples, create a demand for further research with additional sources.

4.2. The Greek case

As Greece is still healing from the financial crisis it undergone, almost two decades ago, its sustainable status is still evolving and will continue so, owing to the EU funding of Just Transition Fund (JFT) Programme. The following chapters will focus on discussing sustainable practices in the municipalities of Kalamata and Trifilia and the progress of each one.

4.2.1. Understanding sustainability

In a similar manner to the albanian participants, I sought to grasp an insight of the greek participants' views and interpretations on sustainability.

Within their professional capacity, Nick, provided two variant scopes regarding the terminology of sustainability. At first, Nick highlights that “sustainability originated as a notion in forestry, when concerns about wood resource depletion motivated initiatives to sustain output capacity by balancing consumption and replenishment. Following significant environmental events, such as those in Italy in 1972, sustainability became intimately linked to larger ecological challenges. Over time, its scope broadened to include economic, environmental, cultural, and social components, impacting a wide range of human activities.” (Nick, video interview, 29th of February, 2024).

Nick, gives a broader scope of the term sustainability including a historical evolution. He emphasises with the phrase “sustainability originated as a notion in forestry” that initially the term was not connected with sustainable development or the grounded policies. Instead

it was just a notion at the time to the raising “concerns about wood resource depletion motivated initiatives” insinuating that there was mishandling of the wood resources and the notion was the reaction to that specific issue. He additionally, refers to the “significant environmental events, such as those in Italy in 1972”, a historical moment when sustainability was not only a notion regarding forestry but it included environmental issues beyond that. That broadening notion also, included “economic, environmental, cultural, and social components, impacting a wide range of human activities” Nick mentions. (Nick, video interview, 29th of February, 2024). This phrase’s interpretation could be the larger scale impact of sustainability. At this scale, sustainability is deeply interconnected with all aspects of life, including social, financial, and cultural dimensions. People's activities significantly affect these areas, and, conversely, these aspects influence people's actions.

As the second scope of sustainability terminology should also be considered the multi-layered terms of it, such as “sustainable development and growth, addressing multifaceted challenges across different sectors. Through the second scope, it emphasizes the importance of safeguarding the rights of future generations, as articulated by the European Union, underscores the paramount significance of sustainability discourse.”(Nick, video interview, 29th of February, 2024).

As a second scope of their point of view on sustainability, Nick mentions the multiple layers of sustainability with the phrase “*sustainable development and growth*”. The participant recognises that sustainability has many layers and therefore each one is adjusted in order to tackle “*multifaceted challenges across different sectors*”. These sectors, for example, can be the environment, economy, society and so on. One perspective he points out is the *the importance of safeguarding the rights of future generations, as articulated by the European Union*”. Through this phrase, he emphasises that the long-term impacts of sustainability ensure the rights of the future generations (ibid) and is endorsed by the European Union a large system of institutions.

Nick further highlights that “the adoption of sustainability as both an ideology and a set of lifestyle practices in Greece was relatively recent, notably emerging around 2010 and thereafter due to financial recession.”(Nick, video interview, 29th of February, 2024). However, this temporal delay did not deter municipal authorities from establishing objectives and undertaking initiatives aimed at advancing sustainability efforts. Notably, municipal agreements were forged to embrace sustainable practices conducive to addressing climate-related challenges.

One important element to the delay of sustainability's ideology in Greece was the "financial recession", Nick highlights. (Nick, video interview, 29th of February, 2024) Affected by this financial crisis Greece was more focused on saving its economy than developing sustainable ideas. "Due to the heavy debt that Greece economy has dealt big blow to the banking sector that had no problems at first and led to the deepening of the crisis" (Ozturk and Sozdemir 2015, p. 574).

In the same vein as previous informants, Maria, in her professional capacity, summarized the term of sustainability in three verbs: maintain, support and sustain. (Maria, video interview, 17th of March, 2024). In employing these three verbs, she emphasized the connection with the environmental, social and financial development, in other words as "a circle of action and outcome where each person shares responsibility for the future." (Maria, video interview, 17th of March, 2024).

The verbs which Maria used are striking and worthy of a break-down analysis. The three verbs : maintain, support and sustain, capture the core of sustainability. (Maria, video interview, 17th of March, 2024).

The word "maintain", could imply stability and maintenance of resources, situations and systems. The word "support", could be interpreted as aiding and motivating positive contexts and results. Lastly, the word "sustain" could represent the ultimate aim of sustainability which is the endurance of resources and benefits in the long-term.

Through both of the participants personal understanding of sustainability is primarily related to "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Steinsiek 1999, p.78). This is a very specific choice of phrases that the participants mentioned and the reasoning behind its usage could be interpreted with its usage in the past in the journal *Our Common Future*, also known as the *Brundtland Report*, which was published in October 1987 by the United Nations (ibid, p. 78)

4.2.2. How are the Eu fundings being utilized in Greece?

Greece received additional support from the European Union last year with the first Just Transition Fund (JTF) Programme adopted by the Commission, with a total of 1.63 billion euros. The fundings will support projects and initiatives until 2027, aiming to "foster a green, inclusive, and resilient economy, with a focus on generating decent employment

opportunities for all” (*European Commission* 2022). In further elaboration, the programme’s goals are the following: to support Greece to accomplish its coal-phasing out plan by 2028, to promote diversification of local economy and strengthen entrepreneurship, to support land repurposing actions and circular economy activities, to strengthen workforce skills and promote employment and lastly, to support energy transition and climate neutrality.

In this context, Nick provided detailed insights into the effective utilization of this financial support, supplementing his discourse with several examples drawn from municipal initiatives. Distinctively, Nick mentioned one of the most effective initiatives of the municipality of Kalamata being

“the replacement of the city lights with a more technologically and energy efficient advanced system including LED light bulbs. Additionally, the municipality is currently running the Intelligence City Challenge, where taxi drivers will install lighting stations in electric taxi stations, to provide them with free electricity and to commit to thirty per cent of their vehicles to be replaced with electric taxi installations. Lastly, the municipality will promote in six schools a digital platform where the pupils can interact with their schools digital twin and participate actively in decision-making while observing their decision’s impact on the environment.” (Nick, video interview, 29th of February, 2024).

With all the initiatives highlighted, one could think that Greece is fast-moving towards a “green and fair growth for all”, as Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, Elisa Ferreira said (*European Commission* 2022). On the contrary, Maria emphasized that the municipality of rural Trifilia has received a comparatively lesser amount of funding in contrast to other cities with greater tourism activity. These funds primarily target road reconstruction, an ongoing project. This observation led the participant to perceive a sense of “neglect towards smaller rural areas by the regional government.” (Maria, video interview, 17th of March, 2024).

In more detail, she highlighted, that the Waste Management project, which was delayed for several years due to disagreements within the committees, has proven to be successful and vital for the local residents.

Though there is a slight improvement, through the information provided by maria and a quick online search on the municipality’s webpage and the local news, it validates that a rural area such as Trifilia does not receive equal funding or even a fair share. The causes for this neglect are unclear, so it would be inappropriate to speculate without verified data, let alone try to justify with various interpretations. In this situation, it is suitable to provide

comprehensive data regarding the overall situation in Greece, as well as a detailed analysis of the specific challenges faced by local areas.

4.2.3. Challenges and parameters

The challenges faced by each area differ for various reasons, which are crucial to address in order to comprehend their impact on local communities. Regarding the obstacles of adopting sustainable practices, Nick emphasises the dual nature of Kalamata's coastal position, which offers both significant advantages and disadvantages.

“Firstly, as a coastal city it is eroded by the waves on the coast. Secondly, the frequent earthquakes are an issue as it tests the resilience of the city with regard to tectonic movements, with a devastating highlight in 1986 where the whole city was destroyed by an earthquake and rebuilt. Thirdly, the danger of climate change in matters relating to tourism development and how man interferes with the environment, something the city faced with the floods in 2019. Finally, that the aging infrastructure of Kalamata, reflective of its historical character, poses durability challenges.” Based on the foregoing information, Kalamata is facing challenges from various directions which augments the difficulties of implementing sustainable alternatives. (Nick, video interview, 29th of February, 2024)

On the other side of the coin, rural Trifilia faces different challenges that are not of natural cause. In more detail, Maria addresses the challenges outweighing the benefits, highlighting the municipality's constrained human resources across various professions. She notes a reduction in the number of professionals employed by the municipality last year.

Consequently, “instead of investing in professionals to innovate and revitalize rural areas, the municipality allocates funds towards annual celebratory events, diverting resources that could otherwise be allocated to new projects.”(Maria, video interview, 17th of March, 2024).

Given the information Nick and Maria provided, it is evident that the nature of challenges vary. On one side, the city of Kalamata is coping with environmental and infrastructural issues, such as earthquakes, floods and deterioration of old buildings, and on the other side Trifilia is lacking human resources. The differences, though, are not solely allocated in the forms of challenges but also in forms of managing. To elaborate, natural disasters can be controlled with precautional measures, yet not to a full extend due to the unpredictability of nature. Challenges in lack of personnel and experts, though, can be fully controlled and resolute by employing personnel, only if the funding allocation is not solely towards annual celebratory events..

4.2.4. *Greek Businesses in sustainability*

To better understand the sustainable practices in each area, it is equally important to explore how promoting sustainability influences local businesses. Nick marked that there are businesses which are putting effort and funding into embracing sustainable practices or developing environmentally friendly products. One of these stakeholders, he mentioned is a local factory, Klimis Coal¹, which modify the seed of the olives and alter it to coal which can be used for barbeque with zero harmful emissions for the environment. Considering Kalamata's regional abundance in olive trees, during the harvesting season the seeds turn into waste, which factories struggle to dispose of and in consequence Klimis, alters waste into an eco-friendly fuel.

Furthermore, it is imperative to examine the local stakeholders' initiatives and their involvement in sustainability efforts. As Nick addressed before, the patterns of sustainability started developing after 2010 and on, as Greece was undergoing a big financial recess. Therefore in the next decade, as the local businesses were slowly healing, the pandemic wave occurred which led numerous businesses to terminate their operations, either temporarily or permanently. Both of these financial excruciating waves directed businesses to non investments in the field of sustainable products or development, as they are financially constrained and “they evaluate investment in sustainability as a risk” , Nick mentions. (Nick, video interview, 29th of February, 2024).

Proceeding, Maria emphasized the significance of rural areas, stressing that “their potential must be harnessed by both the populace and local governance.”(Maria, video interview, 17th of March, 2024).

Particularly, Trifilia stands out as a region with a robust agricultural sector, where the majority of residents engage in farming and agriculture. Concerning businesses, a substantial portion of local factories has opted to “upgrade their machinery to more energy-efficient models. Additionally, younger farmers are transitioning towards ecological fertilization methods and adopting biological farming production practices.

” While the local agricultural community endeavors to transition towards environmentally sustainable farming and production methods, there is a noted lack of substantial support from the government. This reality presents a significant challenge for the community; however, it does not diminish their resilience, determination, and commitment to implement positive changes.” (Maria, video interview, 17th of March, 2024).

¹ Further details regarding Klimis Coal can be found at <https://klimiscoal.gr/>

Although it is noted both by the participants that the local economy is healing and still striving for a better outcome, the business owners are still hesitant to adopt sustainable practices while the farmers have become more willing to shift towards sustainability and invest more.

Despite the ongoing financial crisis and the numerous hardships Greek business owners have endured, it is evident that there is a noticeable hesitation among them to adopt sustainable methods. “Business organizations often focus attention particularly or primarily on environmental issues regarding sustainability and therefore fail to acknowledge the holistic principle of sustainable development”. (Sharpley 2000, p. 11) An additional reason that explains the hesitation behind business owners is mentioned in a research conducted by Irma Shyle, which indicates a high reluctance in businesses toward adopting sustainability practices. “Sixty-two (62) percent of respondents saw no reason to implement sustainability practices because they were not required to do so and they saw no benefit to the practices” (Shyle 2018, p. 49). Therefore the question that arises is : how do we enlighten people about the significance and vitality of sustainability? This question will be analysed and answered on the final chapter below.

4.2.5. Education and impacts

At the core of the adoption of sustainability as a lifestyle and practice it, the education and the engagement of the local community is vital. On the question of community engagement, Nick stressed that “for greek communities, the local community has been active and engaging better than expected.”(Nick, video interview, 29th of February, 2024).

The main challenge the municipality is facing, is convincing the local residents that public transportation within the city can be replaced with eco-friendly transportation such as biking, using electric scooters or even walking, as the city can be navigated on foot from the northeast point to the southwest within twenty minutes. The local residents' impression that a pedestrian-friendly city requires excessive walking distances and necessitates transportation for every occasion will be addressed in the concluding chapter. More importantly, Nick highlights the need of “investing in education and cooperate with greek universities and set as examples the scandinavian countries and their development history, in hopes that the

local residents of Kalamata but also Greece will realise the value of quality of life and begin to appreciate nature more”. (Nick, video interview, 29th of February, 2024).

In the realm of social involvement in sustainability, Maria highlights a considerable deficiency in both information dissemination and public education. The municipality has not undertaken “proactive measures to educate its residents on environmental concerns and strategies for fostering sustainability.” (Maria, video interview, 17th of March, 2024).

Furthermore, there is a notable absence of community involvement in the decision-making process. A prime example Maria brought was that “if a person of older age than forty is asked about what sustainability is, the person inquiring will possibly receive an odd look.” (Maria, video interview, 17th of March, 2024). Finally, she asserts a firm conviction that the adoption of sustainable lifestyles stems directly from early education on the subject.

Emphasizing the pivotal role of local governance in demonstrating care for the community and its environment, Maria advocates for initiatives inclusive of all age demographics, with particular emphasis on educating young children in schools, given their status as the future custodians of the environment. Furthermore, she posits that “involving individuals in decision-making processes fosters a deeper sense of responsibility and mindfulness towards their surroundings, as they witness the tangible outcomes of their contributions.” (Maria, video interview, 17th of March, 2024).

Undoubtedly, education is intrinsically linked to progress. The more people are educated, the more likely they are to understand and appreciate the value of nature, and consequently, to contribute actively towards creating a better future. Education fosters awareness and instills a sense of responsibility, making individuals more inclined to engage in sustainable practices and support environmental conservation efforts. “Individuals and communities influence green informatics through their behaviours and social and cultural interactions, and in turn, green informatics affects new cultural practices” (Wahyudin 2018, p. 27).

In 2023 a team of experts conducted a study on students in Greece. “The study was conducted in the context of the CS curricula and, more specifically, in the data and information section with a total of 82 students (38 girls and 44 boys), 15- 17 years old. The students completed an online 26-item questionnaire uploaded onto Moodle platform as a data collection tool to determine their prior knowledge about the subject of sustainability and green informatics. The results demonstrated that a considerable number of the pupils (68.2%) had no or poor knowledge or had not heard about the concept of sustainability, while an even more substantial number (76.8%) had no or insufficient knowledge or had not

heard about green informatics. For the vast majority of the pupils (90.2%), it was the first lesson they had dealt with sustainability. As expected, most pupils are interested in learning more about sustainability (80.1%) and green informatics (83%), respectively". (Maria Eftychia, Kavouridis, and Doulogeri 2023, p. 4)

Concluding this chapter, both participants highlighted the importance of education regarding sustainability and how much progress it can bring to a community and change the perspectives of the locals by applying sustainable practices in their daily lives. The impacts of sustainability and discussions of it are proven through various researchers and will continue to spark interest in educational institutions.

4.3. Discussion

Considering the status of Albania's EU candidacy while Greece has held membership in the EU for several decades, it becomes clear that they exhibit notable similarities. Commencing with the city officials from both countries, it is evident that they are deeply committed to advancing sustainability initiatives and actively engaged in projects regarding sustainable practices that will eventually enhance the environmental and socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, in both cases, the countries received funding from the EU regardless of their membership status. This underscores the EU's commitment of fostering the potential for development and capabilities of non-member countries, particularly in instances where the progress demonstrated is verified by evidence. The progress of both Albania and Greece is plausible, however, both countries are also connected by similar challenges. The most significant challenge is corruption.

According to Transparency International, the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) shows that corruption is thriving in Albania with a score of 37/100. (Transparency International) To elaborate on the numbers, CPI uses numbers on a scale from 0 to 100 where 100 indicates very clean and 0 highly corrupt. On this issue Arben Asllani has mentioned that "corruption in both government and private sector has become a major barrier for Albania's integration with the European Union". (Asllani, Becherer, and Theodori 2014, p. 245-246) In a similar manner, Mirsida Nence argues that "the main reasons for the high levels of corruption in Albania are mainly the low wages and the social acceptance of bribery that still exists and narrow social networks". (Nence 2013, p. 3-4) In both instances, though, corruption is a rooted issue that has a heavy impact on the

development of a nation, as it leads to mistrust from other nations to invest or collaborate with.

On top of that, as stated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the next largest issue Albania is facing, is a lack of government funding for various projects. “There are no government funds that are specialized for financing environmental projects”.

(UNECE 2018, p. 13) A fact which is indeed verified by Ilda and has been an obstacle for the creation of a sustainable city.

However, it is no secret that Greece has not been performing better than Albania in terms of corruption perceptions. According to Transparency International, the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) reveals that corruption is flourishing in Greece as well. Greece has achieved a score of 49 out of 100, which marks a decline of 3 CPI points since 2022. This indicates a worsening perception of corruption within the country. (Transparency International)

Several scholars have expressed their concerns and acknowledge the state of corruption in Greece deteriorating. For instance, Oxford law professor Pavlos Eleftheriadis states that, even though Greece has a well-structured legal system and a strong constitutional tradition, there are severe issues regarding implementation practices. As a result, the laws are not applied, “courts and other law enforcement institutions have not managed to stamp out corruption, and the legal system does not provide timely justice” (Eleftheriadis and Featherstone 2006, p. 150). Furthermore, the former chief justice of Greece Vasilios Kokkinos addresses the same issues and makes a similar point. He states that “although the judicial branch is constitutionally coequal with the other branches, in practice its role does not measure up to the letter and spirit of the law.” Kokkinos proceeds to the admission that courts in Greece do not provide equal justice for all, describing it as a total failure and blames this failure “on the intrusive behavior of the executive branch and the chorus-like atmosphere created by the country’s mass media”. (Kokkinos and Manos 1998, p. 223-237).

The participants did not acquire any information concerning corruption and neither did I refer to such a sensitive topic, opting for a more informational survey rather than an uncomfortable setting for them. Nevertheless, my objective concerning corruption in Albania and Greece was to present it as a fact supported by data and perhaps, if further investigated in the future, corruption could be connected with the sustainable development progress.

However, a positive outcome from the cases of Albania and Greece that I examined is the increased investment in education. Three out of the four cities I examined confirmed that their municipalities are actively raising awareness on environmental issues. They promote activities that primarily engage younger generations but also involve older individuals, providing them with firsthand experience in sustainable practices and including them in decision-making processes. Meanwhile, the municipality of Trifilia has opted to allocate funding to various local events, none of which focus on raising environmental awareness or educating residents, particularly the younger generation, who will ultimately inherit the environment.

As a final point, a remarkable observation is that unintentionally the cities examined for this research were one larger coastal city and one small rural city from both parties. This element provided a significant insight as to how small rural areas that sustain themselves on agriculture practice sustainability more in business and product development than a larger city that receives funding. Furthermore, in Albania, rural agricultural regions benefit from substantial support and educational initiatives aimed at engaging citizens in sustainability practices. Conversely, such initiatives are notably absent in Greek rural communities, indicating a lack of interest and agenda focus from the local municipality. Finally, a salient point of consensus among all participants lies in the recognition of the pivotal role of educational initiatives in fostering sustainability. Each participant concurred that instigating change begins with educating individuals, thereby incentivizing their engagement in diverse activities, inclusive of decision-making processes, and embracing environmentally conscious lifestyles. The community must understand and accept the importance of sustainability practices. Sociocultural sustainability fosters the development of people, communities and cultures to help achieve meaningful life, drawing on proper healthcare, education gender equality, peace and stability across the globe (Ashwani 2006, p.1178). To conclude, the distinctions between the Albanian and Greek sustainability implementation practices and progress are not far from each other. Both parts have a common timeframe in launching sustainable development, yet it is notable that Albania is taking advantage of its strong agricultural potential and utilizing it as a tool to implement sustainability and finalize their EU membership.

5. Recommendations

Given the thorough discussion of the challenges and concerns, there is a clear need for recommendations to enhance sustainability and improve implementation practices. For local communities to transition to a sustainable lifestyle, it is essential for local governments to take the lead with proactive initiatives. By demonstrating their commitment and dedication to improving the quality of life and living conditions for their residents, local governments can inspire and guide communities toward a more sustainable future. It is also crucial for local governments to be transparent in their use of funds, maintaining an open dialogue with residents and regularly updating the community on the progress of funded initiatives. Finally, and equally important, I firmly believe that the shift toward a sustainable mindset should begin at an early age. Investing in initiatives that involve children and youth in sustainable actions and decision-making can significantly raise awareness of current climate change issues, ultimately fostering a more sustainable mindset and lifestyle.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this research has been both comprehensive and insightful. Throughout the process, I made a conscious effort to avoid letting my own biases and personal experiences influence my engagement with city officials and their perspectives on implementing sustainable development. I learned to listen carefully before evaluating and investigating their responses, rather than rushing to conclusions.

The main conclusion of this research is that, as climate change events become increasingly severe, the pursuit of sustainable development must be viewed as a necessity rather than a mere local initiative. Additionally, the younger generation holds the key to driving this sustainable shift, and older generations should heed their calls for climate action rather than dismissing them.

In conclusion, this research underscores the critical importance of sustainable development and its benefits for both the planet and humanity. By exploring sustainable development and its implementation practices, we gain valuable insights into environmental challenges, their solutions, and learn from successful cases in other countries. As we progress, it is crucial to address environmental issues and their wide-ranging impacts, ensuring that people recognize their severity and act swiftly and cohesively.

A promising path for future research could involve investigating the perceptions and opinions of citizens in Albania and Greece regarding sustainability and environmental issues. This topic holds significant potential for contributing to the current body of research. Although I initially attempted to explore this area through interviews and a survey to gauge public understanding of sustainability, I was unable to gather a sufficient number of participants. Consequently, this research idea stands out as an ideal candidate for future exploration, providing an opportunity to gain valuable insights into the environmental awareness and attitudes of people in these two neighboring countries.

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