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Sustainable Entrepreneurship Project

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS: THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the role of intermediaries in developing sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems (SEE), focusing on Vereniging Circulair Friesland (VCF) in Friesland, Netherlands. Through qualitative analysis, including interviews with VCF members, the study reveals that VCF plays a crucial role in linking stakeholders, sharing knowledge, and shaping sustainability narratives and policies. These activities significantly contribute to the resilience and growth of the SEE in Friesland. The research is guided by two primary questions: How do intermediaries influence the development of the sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Friesland? What is the perception of Friesland entrepreneurs regarding the work intermediaries have done in promoting sustainable entrepreneurship?

The findings underscore the importance of intermediaries in not only providing practical support but also in influencing the broader sustainability discourse within the ecosystem. While the study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its focus on a single region and organization, suggesting the need for further comparative and mixed-method research across different contexts. In summary, this research highlights the essential functions of intermediaries like VCF in fostering sustainable entrepreneurship, offering implications for both theory and practice in enhancing the effectiveness of entrepreneurial ecosystems.

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of economic development, the quest for sustainability has led governments at various levels—national, regional, and local—to place a significant emphasis on the creation and nurturing of sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems (SEE)(Isenberg, 2011; Spigel, 2017). These ecosystems are intricate networks of interconnected actors—ranging from businesses and investors to policymakers and support organizations—working within specific geographic boundaries with the shared goal of fostering sustainable business practices. The underlying premise is that by encouraging the growth of sustainable ventures, the overall entrepreneurial ecosystem can become more resilient, adaptable, and capable of contributing to long-term economic prosperity because these ventures integrate economic growth with social equity and environmental stewardship into their core activities (Dean & McMullen, 2007).

However, despite the growing body of research celebrating the positive impacts of sustainable entrepreneurship (SE), the ongoing praise of SE often overshadows important questions about the processes and actors that have shaped its current status as a key driver of sustainable development. Specifically, the role of intermediary organizations—such as promotion agencies, incubators, and what Nicholls (2010) refers to as 'field-building actors'—in defining and promoting the concept of SE has not been fully explored. These intermediaries are pivotal in the sense that they do not merely support SE through traditional means such as funding, legal assistance, or business planning; they also play a significant role in crafting the narrative and perception of SE within the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Ogbor, 2000).

This paper seeks to address this overlooked aspect by focusing on the specific role of intermediaries in influencing the development of sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly in the province of Friesland. As Friesland is emerging as a leading example of a successful transition toward a circular economy, it presents a unique context for studying the

dynamics of SE, as it is a region that has actively pursued sustainability initiatives through the efforts of various stakeholders, including government agencies, private ventures, and civil society organizations (ColorCircle, 2020). Within this context, intermediaries such as Vereniging Circulair Friesland (VCF) have emerged as key players in promoting SE.

While it is well understood that intermediaries foster SE through various forms of support—such as providing legal help, facilitating business planning, offering financial resources, and enhancing the legitimacy of sustainable ventures—there is a relative scarcity of knowledge regarding the affective dimensions of this process. Dey and Lehner (2017) highlight this gap, noting that much of the existing research has focused on the structural and material aspects of intermediary support, with insufficient attention given to how these organizations shape the affective environment in which SE operates. Affective refers to stories or narratives that contain the elements of positive emotions (Fabrigar & Petty, 1999). From this perspective, the case of Vereniging Circulair Friesland is particularly instructive. As an intermediary organization, VCF has not only provided practical support to ventures in Friesland but has also played a crucial role in creating a narrative in the ecosystem (Circular Friesland). By framing SE as a desirable and compelling goal, VCF has helped to cultivate a sense of commitment and enthusiasm among entrepreneurs, which in turn has contributed to the overall sustainability of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the region. This process of rendering SE affectively compelling is an important yet underexplored aspect of how intermediaries influence the development of SEE.

The primary purpose of this research is to bring to light the particularities of intermediary organizations in shaping the sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Friesland. By focusing on the specific context of this region, the study aims to enhance our understanding of how intermediaries operate within SEE and how they contribute to the broader goals of sustainable development. This research is particularly timely given the increasing emphasis on sustainability in regional economic

development strategies, as well as the growing recognition of the need for a more nuanced understanding of the factors that drive SE.

To achieve these objectives, the paper draws upon empirical data collected through six in-depth interviews with enterprise members of Vereniging Circulair Friesland. These interviews provide valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of entrepreneurs who have engaged with VCF in the region. The research is guided by two main questions: *1) How do intermediaries influence the development of the sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Friesland? 2) What is the perception of Friesland entrepreneurs regarding the work intermediaries have done in promoting SE?* The first research question seeks to explore the various ways in which intermediaries, particularly VCF, contribute to the development of SEE in Friesland. The second research question addresses the perceptions of entrepreneurs in Friesland regarding the work of intermediaries like VCF. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of intermediary support and for identifying potential areas for improvement. By capturing the voices of entrepreneurs who are directly involved in SEE, the research provides a grounded perspective on the role of intermediaries in fostering a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

The term "ecosystem" was first introduced in business-related research in 1993, with the aim of highlighting the complexity and interconnectedness inherent in the environments in which enterprises operate (Moore, 1993). This concept has since evolved and been widely adopted, especially in the study of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Audretsch et al., 2019; Feld, 2020; Malecki, 2011) to emphasize the dynamic and interdependent relationships within business environments.

Therefore, an entrepreneurial ecosystem is broadly regarded as a cohesive, regional community of entrepreneurs and their supporters that help ventures form, survive, and expand

(Spigel & Harrison, 2018). This definition encapsulates the various benefits and resources produced by such communities, including physical infrastructure, demand, intermediaries, talent, knowledge, leadership, and finance. These ecosystems are not merely collections of individual elements but are characterized by the interactions and synergies among them, which are influenced by formal institutions, culture, and networks (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021).

The research in this field can be broadly categorized into two main approaches. Some researchers focus on identifying a comprehensive list of elements that constitute an entrepreneurial ecosystem. (Feldman, 2001; Isenberg, 2013; Neck et al., 2004) Other researchers adopt a more holistic approach, seeking to capture the ecosystem in its entirety, extending their analysis to macro-social, cultural, and institutional dimensions figuring out how context tailors ecosystem functioning (Mack & Mayer, 2016; Spigel, 2017). By examining both the individual elements and the broader social, cultural, and institutional context, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how these ecosystems function and how they can be nurtured to promote entrepreneurial success.

While more and more scholars have recognized entrepreneurship as having the capacity to promote societal well-being and address environmental issues (Dean & McMullen, 2007), the question of how these ecosystems promote sustainable entrepreneurship remains undeveloped. The early exploration of sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystems by Cohen (2006) defined SEEs as interconnected actors in a local community committed to sustainable development. Subsequent studies have explored the interdependencies among support organizations (Bank et al., 2017; Theodoraki et al., 2018), business models (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018; Neumeier & Santos, 2018), and sustainable ventures within SEEs. Research has also highlighted institutional factors such as regulatory policies, innovation climates, and social norms play a crucial role in sustainable venture creation. (Sunny & Shu, 2019)

In a recent review, Gonzalez and Dentchev (2021) identified three categories of support provided by ecosystems to social entrepreneurs: "Fuel," "Hardware," and "DNA." "Fuel" includes resources, funding, qualified human capital, and supportive actors. "Hardware" refers to tools, infrastructure, and services that enable entrepreneurs to strengthen their business models and scale their impact. This includes research and development as well as infrastructure arrangements, encompassing social, political, economic, and cultural elements in a particular location. The "DNA" of a SEE comprises an entrepreneurial culture, supportive government policies, and the visibility and recognition of social entrepreneurs, creating favorable conditions for entrepreneurial activity.

Subsequent research has indeed filled gaps in Cohen's study by examining the influence of various components on ecosystems and emphasizing the critical role of local culture in promoting sustainability. However, as there is no standard formula for success, it is acknowledged that little is known about how sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems are, or should be, constructed to foster a supportive environment for the creation of sustainable ventures (Theodoraki et al., 2018). While Fichter et al.'s (2016) study calls for empirical investigation into support organizations for sustainable entrepreneurship, this research will focus on intermediaries from the perspective of sustainable ventures. Next, the key elements under consideration will be developed.

Entrepreneurial Actors

Entrepreneur is the central figure in sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems. The structure, number, and quality of entrepreneurs within an ecosystem are key indicators of its maturity and growth potential (Grigore & Dragan, 2020). The variance among entrepreneurs, particularly in terms of their ambitions and goals, plays a significant role in shaping the ecosystem's trajectory (Stam, 2015). Research has increasingly recognized the powerful influence of successful sustainable ventures on the sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem. These ventures, along with their

visionary entrepreneurs, are emerging as crucial role models within the ecosystem, often serving as mentors and investors who drive further innovation and growth (Robert et al., 2005).

Entrepreneurship, fundamentally, relies on the identification of market opportunities and the creation of innovative combinations of resources to capitalize on these opportunities (Kirzner, 2015; Schumpeter & Swedberg, 2021). This process is inherently dependent on the entrepreneur's ability to perceive and act upon opportunities within the ecosystem (Manimala et al., 2019). In other words, a sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial ecosystem will foster and reinforce sustainable practices among ventures.

Intermediaries

In sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems, elements are either spontaneously or deliberately “bonded” by a group of connectors (Grigore & Dragan, 2020). These intermediaries such as professional associations, entrepreneurship clubs, start-up communities, investor-investee matching services, etc. constitute the key actors of an SEE (Mason & Brown, 2014). They are primarily dedicated to offering services and support, including awards, training, loans, workspace, and networking opportunities, etc. in ecosystems (Dey et al., 2016). These intermediaries can serve in various roles such as enablers, mediators, and aggregators.

As enablers, intermediaries are responsible for supplying the necessary resources and support that ventures need to thrive. This support often includes providing shared office space and facilities, which can significantly reduce operational costs for nascent enterprises. Additionally, intermediaries deliver training programs designed to enhance the skills of entrepreneurs, equipping them with the expertise needed to navigate business challenges successfully. Financial support is another critical aspect of their role, as intermediaries offer funding to address the capital needs of new ventures (Bruneel et al., 2012). Such provisions are fundamental for helping ventures overcome hurdles and achieve sustainable growth, thereby fostering a sustainable entrepreneurial

ecosystem. In their role as mediators, intermediaries bridge gaps between various actors within the ecosystem. They facilitate communication and collaboration by mobilizing and orchestrating resources, which helps align the diverse interests and logic of different stakeholders (Cao & Shi, 2021). This mediation role is crucial for ensuring that partnerships are effectively managed, conflicts are resolved, and a cooperative atmosphere is maintained (Hayter, 2016). These interactions can also play as a form of “path creation” that allows actors to shape the ecosystem in a strategic way (Garud et al., 2010). Intermediaries also act as aggregators by consolidating resources, information, and efforts to create a more integrated and efficient ecosystem. They serve as policy drivers, contributing to the development of sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems by shaping and implementing policies that support sustainable practices (van Rijnsoever, 2022). In addition, intermediaries promote sustainable procurement practices by encouraging the adoption of responsible procurement policies. This role is critical in integrating environmental and social considerations into purchasing decisions, thereby promoting sustainability within the ecosystem. (Barraket, 2020)

The diverse roles assumed by intermediary organizations require them to function in multidirectional capacities—upward, downward, and laterally—across a range of both formal and informal contexts (de Bruin et al., 2023). This multidirectional engagement allows intermediaries to interact with various levels of the ecosystem, including higher-level policymakers, grassroots entrepreneurs, and peer organizations. By navigating these different directions and contexts, intermediaries can effectively coordinate resources, mediate relationships, and aggregate information, thereby enhancing the overall cohesion and functionality of the ecosystem. This comprehensive approach ensures that they can address a broad spectrum of needs and facilitate collaboration among diverse stakeholders.

Entrepreneurial Culture

The concept of culture in the entrepreneurial ecosystem context has been extensively studied with scholars offering a range of definitions that emphasize different cultural aspects (Cohen, 2006; Neck et al., 2004). According to Hofstede (1980), culture is a “shared system of meaning”, highlighting the collective nature of culture as a framework through which individuals understand and interpret their world. Affective elements, such as passion, enthusiasm, and emotional commitment, are deeply embedded in the cultural context of an ecosystem influencing the shared meaning (ul Haq et al., 2018). Meanwhile, Schein (1990) provides a more detailed definition, describing culture as a pattern of basic assumptions invented, discovered, or developed by a group as it learns to cope with problems of external adaptation and internal integration. These assumptions, once proven effective, are considered valid and are taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems. Therefore, this cultural context influences how these affective compelling are expressed, perceived, and utilized within the entrepreneurial environment.

Examining the connection between culture and entrepreneurship is crucial because, in practice, ventures often make decisions not just based on rational analysis but also influenced by individual motivations, economic objectives, and socially accepted behaviors (Aoyama, 2013). For example, in regions or countries where failure is viewed negatively, and the societal contribution of entrepreneurs is undervalued, entrepreneurship is likely to be tempered or even inhibited (Isenberg, 2010). Local cultures that stigmatize the risks associated with innovative entrepreneurship can significantly impact the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Staber, 2007).

Besides influencing the rate of entrepreneurship in a region, culture also shapes the nature of the entrepreneurial ecosystem that emerges (Motoyama & Knowlton, 2017). The regional context provides a set of rules, conventions, and norms that prescribe behavioral roles and shape

expectations (DiVito & Ingen-Housz, 2017). These rules are derived from both economic and socio-cultural factors, such as routines, shared values, norms, and trust, which facilitate localized interactions and mutual understanding. This cultural context plays a significant role in the transmission of information and the exchange of knowledge, which are crucial processes in the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Robert et al., 2005).

Social Capital Dimensions for Understanding SEE

In the previous literature review, intermediaries are conceptualized as connectors within sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems (SEEs), and their roles can be understood through the lens of social capital. Social capital, in this context, represents the intangible bonds that allow entrepreneurs to access vital information, resources, and support (Spigel, 2016). It is embedded in the relationships among ecosystem elements, where components of entrepreneurial ecosystems are seen as interdependent, collaborating through these relationships to achieve mutual productivity and benefit (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021).

Social capital in SEEs exhibits key characteristics such as productivity, vintage aspects, accumulation, and complexity (Westlund & Bolton, 2003). Although typically regarded as beneficial (Coleman, 1994), social capital can also have negative effects when networks become too rigid or outdated, obstructing rather than facilitating progress (Portes & Landolt, 1996). The vintage aspects of social capital include enduring norms, values, and traditions that act as stabilizers within ecosystems, while new narratives introduce the change within SEEs. Accumulation refers to the collaborative efforts of multiple entities rather than the dominance of a single one (Coleman, 1988). These characteristics highlight the complex and dynamic nature of social capital and illustrate how it influences the elements within an ecosystem, facilitating its evolution over time.

Several studies have used social capital theory to understand intermediaries' roles and how they contribute to the construction of social capital within entrepreneurial ecosystems. (Neumeyer

et al., 2019; Porras-Paez & Schmutzler, 2019; Theodoraki et al., 2018) In the scope of this study, we will adopt the perspective from previous research that views intermediaries as builders of social capital within the ecosystem. The literature identifies three dimensions of social capital: structural, cognitive, and relational. The structural dimension encompasses established relationships within networks, their configuration, and stability. Additionally, the cognitive dimension of social capital when applied to the entrepreneurial ecosystem involves common goals, shared codes, language, and narratives, while the relational dimension encompasses aspects such as trust, norms, obligation, and identification (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Shared understanding helps to cultivate an affective environment where sustainability is perceived not just as a strategic choice, but as a deeply embedded value within the community (Huy & Zott, 2010).

Social capital provides a structure for scrutinizing the intermediary's role in each dimension that eventually benefits the development of sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems. Scholars and practitioners, therefore, can gain deeper insights into the role of intermediaries in supporting sustainable entrepreneurship.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the role intermediaries play in sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems from entrepreneurs' experiences in Friesland, the research was designed as an exploratory qualitative study situated with a case study. Qualitative research allows researchers to gain in-depth insights through active engagement in real-life experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Phenomenological studies involve gaining insights into a phenomenon by exploring the participants' perspectives (Leedy & Ormrod, 1980). The focus is on gaining insights from ventures that are members of Vereniging Circulair Friesland and answering the research question from their experiences. The research design adhered to Creswell's guidelines (1998), which include formulating research questions to explore the meaning of the experience, conducting interviews, analyzing data to

identify clusters of meanings, and concluding with a report that enhances the reader's comprehension of the essential structure of the experience. This approach enables participants to express their experiences and opinions in their own words, without the limitations imposed by fixed-response questions typically used in quantitative studies. Thematic analysis is considered compatible with phenomenology as it emphasizes participants' subjective experiences and sense-making (Guest et al., 2012); consequently, the study employed thematic analysis to identify meanings and organize patterns from original data. Thus, meanings from participants' experiences are described in a meaningful text organized in themes (Sundler et al., 2019).

Situating the Case of Vereniging Circulair Friesland

The study aims to understand the role of intermediaries in the sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem. Though many organizations act as intermediaries trying to facilitate the sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystem in regions, Vereniging Circulair Friesland (VCF) stood out as a good example, particularly in its facilitation of entrepreneurship circularity within the region. The inception of the association occurred in 2016 through the collaborative efforts of five individuals representing diverse organizational backgrounds, evolving subsequently to actively advocate for the integration of circularity principles within the local political and economic discourse (TOPDUTCH). VCF was then established with the ambition of "making Fryslan the most circular region in Europe" which underscores its commitment to driving sustainable entrepreneurial initiatives (Circulair Friesland).

Functioning as a grassroots entity, VCF plays a pivotal intermediary role within the nexus of various organizations operating within the region. It adopts a bottom-up approach to organizing and implementing the collective learning process to inform its members' transit toward sustainability (Circulair Friesland). The network of VCF has witnessed a significant expansion, currently encompassing roughly 160 entities comprising companies, governmental entities, educational

institutions, and (social) organizations (Circular Friesland). This proliferation signifies more than just numerical enlargement; it underscores the establishment of a cohesive regional community centered around the ethos of sustainable entrepreneurship (Spigel & Harrison, 2018). Therefore, VCF may be comprehended through a dual-layered lens: firstly, as an association featuring a dedicated "working team" tasked with spearheading efforts aimed at achieving sustainability objectives within the region; and secondly, the overarching VCF network can be perceived as a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem with various stakeholders plays in the stage and organization VCF serves as an intermediary in between.

VCF has organized a diverse array of initiatives tailored for its membership, including the Circular Expedition, Circular Café, Ambition Talks, Project Ambition Tables, etc. These platforms serve as avenues for members to convene, engage in mutual learning, draw inspiration from one another, and capitalize on each other's strengths and capabilities to collectively advance the circular agenda in Friesland. Furthermore, VCF is actively involved in youth outreach efforts through educational endeavors, forging partnerships with institutions in the region to plant the seeds for future generations of entrepreneurs. Additionally, VCF undertakes campaigns aimed at broadening its societal reach, amassing a following of over 5,000 individuals across various social media platforms and garnering media coverage from the public. Therefore, the case study of VCF offers valuable insights into how the efforts undertaken as an intermediary contribute to the development of a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Exploratory Phase

To have a comprehensive understanding of VCF as an intermediary organization and its network as a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem, a highly exploratory analysis is conducted. Different methods were integrated in this phase, with the aim of pre-understanding the

organizational dynamics and operational strategies of VCF, while also gauging the broader impact of its initiatives on the regional entrepreneurial landscape.

Initially, the analysis involved looking at the online materials delivered by VCF. This entailed a thorough review of the organization's website, social media platforms, and other digital resources, to gain insight into VCF's mission, objectives, and past activities. After gaining a foundational understanding of what VCF aims to achieve and how it works, interviews were conducted with key internal stakeholders within VCF. These interviews served as a crucial means of gaining firsthand insights into the day-to-day operations of the organization, as well as the motivations driving its activities. Through candid discussions with VCF staff, valuable perspectives were garnered regarding the process of engaging business entities, the perceived significance of memberships, and the challenges and opportunities inherent in fostering sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems within the region. Additionally, the analysis incorporated a comprehensive examination of data derived from membership surveys conducted by VCF. By analyzing responses from VCF members, insights were gained from the side of members. These include their levels of satisfaction with VCF activities, the extent of their involvement with the organization, and their overall experiences as part of the VCF community.

Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, a sample of twelve firms in the VCF membership survey database was chosen for interviews. The purposive sampling method was employed to ensure a diverse representation within to increase the generalizability of the findings (Dess et al., 1997). The selection criteria included the following: the company should be based or originally founded in Fryslan or the northern region of the Netherlands; the company has joined VCF for at least one year, the company should be a non-passive member of VCF.

Out of the twelve selected firms, a total of 6 companies agreed to participate in the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted either online or in person and lasted between 20 to 40 minutes each and were transcribed to enable the use of direct quotations in this study. To capture participants' perspectives and minimize our influence on their responses, an interview guide was designed with key themes and open-ended questions but allowed for flexibility to ensure new topics could be introduced by interviewees (Glaser et al., 1968). During the interviews, participants were asked to share their experiences with VCF the rationals that drive them to participate in VCF, and their involvement in various activities. They are also asked to describe the development of a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem they have observed in Fryslan and offer recommendations for VCF from their perspective (Eisenhardt et al., 2016).

FINDINGS

The study's findings shed light on the crucial function that intermediaries play in fostering the development of a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem. All six participants expressed positive perceptions of Vereniging Circulair Friesland's (VCF) involvement, highlighting its significant contribution to the ecosystem in Friesland. While some participants acknowledged areas where VCF could improve, others emphasized that VCF has already made substantial progress. VCF is the pioneer in the country, as noted by the participant, *“In my perspective, I think all the provinces are looking at CircularFriesland for the way they operate, the way they are in the front of the transition.”* Participants shared their personal experiences with VCF, noting that the organization's efforts not only provided direct benefits to them as entrepreneurs but also contributed to the broader goal of building a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Friesland.

Intermediary Roles

In the remaining section, selected quotations from participants' responses are presented to further illustrate the specific role VCF plays in shaping and sustaining the entrepreneurial

ecosystem in Friesland, highlighting the organization's impact on both individual entrepreneurs and the broader community.

Networking and collaboration

The most prominent role VCF plays is connecting different actors within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. VCF links various actors including ventures, government, and academic institutions to identify new opportunities and create a supportive environment conducive to venture success in sustainability. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of VCF's role in bringing together diverse stakeholders who might not otherwise interact. Its extensive network is invaluable for delivering complex sustainability projects, particularly in establishing connections with municipalities and other government bodies. This network serves as a bridge, enabling organizations to collaborate with key stakeholders in the region. The practical benefits of being part of VCF's network were emphasized, with participants noting how the organization can connect businesses facing specific challenges with companies that have the necessary expertise or solutions. This matchmaking capability is efficient for not only problem-solving through access to specialized knowledge within the network but also connecting the supply and demand sides. The efforts of VCF also lead to clearer connections within the sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Friesland. As the following participants explained:

“I think in many of the projects related to sustainability or circularity, we can use the network of Circular Friesland. ... That's also very interesting for us to find the connection with, for example, the municipalities or other governments.” (P4)

“... they are also capable because it's an organization with quite a few members. If you run into some issues with regard to circularity, if you make a building and you want a specific solution for a specific problem, they might have a company within their network and they can link you to that. So that's also something that they can provide.” (P1)

“My observation is that over here because the connections are clearer, we have a clear goal with each other and a party who connects these goals. We make bigger steps in Friesland than in these big regions... by connecting these companies in the same sector with the same challenges, you can, it's easier to make steps.” (P6)

“What they did good is that they linked the asking side with the demanding side. So like we sell something to party B, and party B buys something from us. Through Circular Friesland, we came in touch with that party to come and talk about the upcoming demands with the circular transition.” (P5)

Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing is also strongly supported by participants as the main benefit provided by VCF. It is critical for the success of sustainability ventures, as it enables the diffusion of innovative ideas, best practices, and technical expertise across various actors within the ecosystem. Participants in the study emphasized that VCF’s efforts in knowledge sharing significantly contribute to the overall development and success of sustainability ventures in Friesland. By organizing workshops, inspiring talks, and collaborative projects, VCF helps to disseminate valuable insights and cutting-edge research that can drive sustainable innovation. This knowledge exchange offers three key benefits: first, it empowers individual ventures to overcome challenges and enhance their operations; second, it strengthens the ecosystem's collective ability to tackle broader environmental and societal issues; and third, it provides ventures that share their knowledge with increased visibility and recognition. As the following participants explained:

“I think the events where entrepreneurs share their best practice or their way of organizing entrepreneurship, that is for me, always very helpful. Because then I meet some other people, I hear stories, they inspire me.” (P2)

“They can provide knowledge and know-how. For example, if you want to make something more circular and they have done it before, they can provide you with the knowledge of how you can do something like that.” (P1)

“It's provided us with a model, the metabolic model of the seven characteristics of a circular economy. And that's the model we adopt in our day-to-day business. So we make profit in a way on ecological level and also on social levels.” (P5)

“We also did sometimes this inspirational talk by ourselves. So we got on the stage. It's also a way of, you can, of course, provide some publicity for one of your members.” (P4)

Narrative shaping and policy influence

Narrative shaping and policy influence share similar significance to the VCF's role in the Friesland sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem. VCF is crafting and promoting the narrative of sustainable entrepreneurship. By shaping the discourse around sustainability, intermediaries like VCF contribute significantly to how sustainability is perceived and embraced by different stakeholders within the ecosystem. Through their communication strategies, events, and collaborations, they bring each stakeholder into the common ground of understanding sustainability. In Friesland, sustainability is recognized not only as a moral obligation but also as a strategic business advantage. VCF goes beyond connecting actors and sharing knowledge; they are also instrumental in shaping the narrative that propels the ecosystem forward. Cultivating a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Friesland creates opportunities for entrepreneurs with a sustainability mindset to establish and grow their businesses in the region. As participants comment:

“... different organizations have different understandings of circularity...you (VCF) create a language that is adopted by various companies in the market, so you create a new economy...” (P5)

“... they’ve done a marvelous job. Because of the team, circularity is more and more important in Friesland. It’s more known, that there are more entrepreneurs acting on circularity.” (P2)

“... with the upcoming narratives about successful companies that operate in a circular environment or sustainable environment, they highlight companies in the ecosystem, so they make the market aware of the possibilities.” (P5)

“I think that’s a big difference from my experience before I came here. And that’s, why I was really surprised because, before I moved to Friesland, I was a bit afraid because I’m working in this sustainability. ... So I thought maybe all these sustainable ideas of mine were not welcome here, but it was really easy to fit in here and easy to work further with my sustainable steps.” (P6)

The findings reveal that VCF plays a pivotal role in advocating for regulatory changes that support sustainable entrepreneurship, particularly within the circular economy. As VCF puts it, “We are our members” (Circular Friesland), implying that VCF enables individual sustainable ventures to become part of a larger movement, allowing them to leverage greater influence in shaping policy. This collective approach is seen as a key benefit of VCF’s involvement, as it amplifies the voices of individual ventures and aligns them with broader industry goals. Participants highlighted the value of VCF’s ability to aggregate inputs from various stakeholders and represent these collective interests at the national level. One participant noted that VCF’s potential to address issues with national regulations—such as those that hinder the use of circular building materials—makes it a crucial intermediary for overcoming regulatory barriers. Therefore, VCF serves as the voice of its network, representing the interests of sustainable ventures in dialogues with governmental bodies. By advocating for policy adjustments that can accelerate the transition to a circular economy, VCF

ensures that the needs and challenges of its members are communicated to policymakers. As participants state:

“So for us, the value would be in their ability to collect all the different inputs that are necessary. So, for example, we have quite some issues with national regulations that prevent us from deploying certain circular building materials. Circular Friesland could be an organization which is capable of addressing that on a national level.” (P1)

“... you are in a bigger movement. So when you want to change regulations and laws, it's easier to be with a big group. And that's also, for me, what is useful, I think, for Vereniging Circular Friesland.” (P6)

“They can help like be the voice of the network and accelerate the market on the governmental side of the market. How can governance be adjusted so that we can accelerate the circular economy? So they are the voice of our network.”(P5)

Impact of Intermediaries on Entrepreneurs

Having explored the various roles that VCF plays in fostering a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem, it becomes evident that VCF is not merely a passive supporter but an active agent of change. From establishing connections, and sharing knowledge to shaping narratives and influencing policy, VCF serves as the backbone of the ecosystem, enabling ventures to thrive in a complex and evolving landscape. The following section delves into how the involvement of intermediaries like VCF directly or indirectly influences the perceptions, success, motivation, and sustainability of entrepreneurial ventures in Friesland, exploring how the roles discussed translate into real-world outcomes for entrepreneurs in Friesland.

Support perception

The members of VCF perceive support from VCF and this perception stems from the multifaceted assistance VCF offers, which ranges from providing access to valuable networks and knowledge to advocating for policy changes that benefit sustainable practices. Participants consistently highlight the organization's ability to connect them with key stakeholders, including other businesses, government entities, and academic institutions. This connectivity not only facilitates collaborations but also opens doors to new opportunities that might not have been accessible otherwise. Participants appreciate the tailored support that addresses specific challenges they face, particularly in a niche market like sustainability. This personalized approach enhances the overall effectiveness of the support, making sustainable ventures feel more confident in their ability to innovate and implement sustainable solutions. The perception of VCF's support also extends to its role in fostering a sense of community among sustainable ventures. By creating a collaborative environment, VCF helps reduce the isolation that entrepreneurs might feel when pursuing sustainability-focused initiatives. This sense of belonging to a larger movement reinforces their commitment to sustainable practices, knowing that they are part of a broader effort to drive positive change.

“I think in many of the projects related to sustainability or circularity, we can use the network of Circular Friesland” (P4)

“Circular Fryslan also helps with subsidies for circular economy and that's what they do also. And these subsidies probably I can use so that will help me.” (P2)

“So we started with a circular mindset they provided us with the tools and the awareness in what's possible. So it accelerated our growth.” (P5)

Public awareness and engagement

VCF's activities support entrepreneurs and actively cultivate a broader societal understanding and commitment to sustainability. Increasing public awareness would encourage

active participation in sustainable practices, which are vital for the long-term success of sustainability ventures in Friesland. While participants did not pinpoint specific activities that notably enhance public awareness about sustainability, they acknowledged that VCF's ongoing efforts are evident in their daily operations. These efforts emphasize the importance of sustainable practices and educate the community on how they can contribute to a circular economy. These initiatives are crucial in changing public perceptions, which, over time, will evolve into an ingrained culture within the ecosystem. By engaging with different segments of the population, from residents to policymakers, VCF cultivates a deeper understanding of the benefits of sustainability and what is necessary to address the current challenges. Moreover, narrative-building is crucial in creating a positive feedback loop, where increased awareness leads to greater engagement, which in turn strengthens the overall ecosystem. As participants noted:

“... (VCF) make the message heard better. So whether or not the government moves that something entirely different, at least the message might come across.” (P1)

“With the upcoming narratives about successful companies that operate in a circular environment or sustainable environment, they highlight that companies in the ecosystem, so they make the market aware of the possibilities” (P5)

Influence on venture success

The impact of VCF on the success and sustainability of ventures within the ecosystem is widely recognized by participants. Intermediaries play a pivotal role in guiding ventures through the complex landscape of sustainable business practices, providing crucial support that directly influences their outcomes. VCF's role extends beyond mere support; it acts as a catalyst for innovation, helping ventures navigate regulatory hurdles, access funding, and connect with other key players in the ecosystem. Participants commit this support is essential not only for the

individual success of ventures but also for fostering a culture of sustainability that permeates the entire ecosystem. As participants commented:

“... now it's shifting more towards how can we help companies in Friesland transition to a more circular business model, what barriers they come across, and how can we assist them in crossing those barriers. So it started more, it's gone more from an information platform and just trying to figure things out, and we figured it all out together, and together we are quicker to do something that is more a facilitating organization...” (P1)

“In my opinion, it's the network activities. So come in touch with other companies that operate circularly. And with that in mind, you can learn from each other and you can adapt to new possibilities and new businesses. And in that way, we can accelerate our revenues.” (P5)

Motivation and commitment

The presence of a dedicated intermediary that actively promotes sustainability and circular economy principles helps ventures stay focused on their long-term goals, even in the face of challenges. VCF enhances entrepreneurs' motivation and commitment to sustainable practices by offering them both opportunities and deeper insights into sustainability. Businesses are motivated to engage with VCF because it provides access to valuable projects and customers within its network, reinforcing their participation in sustainable initiatives. For many, the practical benefits of being part of VCF's ecosystem, such as finding new business opportunities among its members, serve as a strong motivator to remain involved. By providing a supportive network, knowledge, and a shared vision, VCF also helps entrepreneurs broaden their understanding of sustainability beyond basic practices. This deeper awareness, facilitated by VCF, encourages entrepreneurs to expand their efforts and integrate more comprehensive sustainable practices into their operations. The realization that there is always more to be done in terms of sustainability drives a stronger commitment to

ongoing improvement and innovation. Thus, VCF's influence goes beyond just providing opportunities; it actively fosters a mindset where sustainability is viewed as a continuous, evolving journey, motivating entrepreneurs to pursue greater impact within their ventures. As participants stated:

“There are projects for me. My customers are there. As long as I can find these businesses out of the membership, I'm participating.” (P4)

“What I see in the training that I give is that a lot of companies start with, yes, we are quite sustainable because we have sustainable energy on our roof. So we are all fine. But after the training, they see that sustainability is much more. And I think that's the thing about Circular Friesland that companies see: there is much more we can work on.” (P6)

DISCUSSIONS

This study aimed to explore how VCF as an intermediary influences the development of the sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Friesland and to understand entrepreneurs' perceptions of the intermediary's impact. Examining the role of VCF in shaping sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems within the context of Friesland provides several key insights into how such organizations contribute to the development and sustainability of these ecosystems. The findings from this research reveal the multifaceted roles that intermediaries play, from traditional support functions to the narrative building of SEEs and their influences on their members.

The analysis demonstrated that VCF is instrumental in linking diverse stakeholders, disseminating sustainability knowledge, shaping narratives, and influencing policies within the ecosystem. These contributions have direct or indirect impacts on its members, particularly in how they perceive the support provided by the VCF. Participants consistently highlighted the tailored support VCF offers, which ranges from access to valuable networks and knowledge to advocacy for policy changes. This support not only facilitates collaborations and opens doors to new

opportunities but also enhances entrepreneurs' confidence in their ability to innovate and implement sustainable solutions. The perception of VCF's support also extends to its role in fostering a sense of community among sustainable ventures, reducing the isolation that entrepreneurs might feel and reinforcing their commitment to sustainability. The interactions between businesses and the entrepreneurial ecosystem are consistent with previous research, which suggests that ecosystems provide ventures with essential resources, such as "fuel," "hardware," and "DNA," that facilitate specific behaviors such as sustainability (Diaz Gonzalez & Dentchev, 2021). VCF plays a crucial role in this process by acting as the enablers, mediators, and aggregators within the ecosystem. They provide the necessary support, knowledge sharing, and network opportunities that help businesses access and utilize these resources effectively. In turn, the behaviors and actions of these ventures contribute to the evolution and strengthening of the sustainable ecosystem and reinforce the ecosystem's capacity for sustainability (Stam, 2015). This interconnectedness underscores the importance of intermediaries in ensuring that the ecosystem remains vibrant, adaptive, and conducive to sustainable development. Going beyond the prevalent research that primarily focuses on the impact ventures have on the ecosystem or the influence the ecosystem exerts on ventures, the study has uncovered the interplay between ventures and SEE with VCF acting as a key facilitator in this process.

VCF as an Mediator, and Aggregator

The research highlights the diverse roles that intermediaries like VCF assume within SEEs. Previous literature suggests that enablers typically provide essential resources for ventures. However, while participants acknowledge that VCF significantly aids their sustainability efforts, they primarily reference the support in terms of knowledge and networks rather than resources like funding. Therefore, the research findings indicate that VCF's role as an enabler, in the traditional sense, is not as prominent.

However, VCF significantly contributes to the SEE in Friesland as a mediator who bridges gaps between various stakeholders within the ecosystem. As noted in the literature, intermediaries act as connectors within the ecosystem, facilitating communication and collaboration across different levels of actors, including entrepreneurs, government agencies, and other support organizations (Cao & Shi, 2021). VCF's efforts to orchestrate resources by co-delivering projects with ventures and speaking for businesses to the upper-level dialogue, demonstrate how intermediaries can help synchronize the activities of various ecosystem elements to promote cohesive and sustainable growth. Moreover, the study's findings suggest that intermediaries engage in what Garud et al. (2010) refer to as "path creation," where they strategically shape the ecosystem by fostering new norms and practices. VCF's initiatives, such as facilitating projects, and organizing inspiring talks, etc., not only provide practical support but also create platforms for discourse and knowledge sharing, which help to align the ecosystem's development with broader sustainability goals. This ability to mediate between different actors and facilitate the creation of shared visions and goals underscores the critical role that intermediaries play in steering the trajectory of SEEs.

The role of intermediaries as aggregators is another crucial aspect that emerged from the analysis. Intermediaries like VCF do more than just provide individual forms of support; they consolidate resources, information, and efforts across the ecosystem, creating a more integrated and efficient environment for sustainable entrepreneurship (van Rijnsoever, 2022). This aggregation role is evident in VCF's success in bringing together a diverse network of stakeholders and creating narratives and shared commitment to circularity. By serving as a central hub for these activities, VCF enhances the overall cohesion of the ecosystem, thereby facilitating more effective collaboration and resource utilization among its members.

Social Capital and the Role of VCF

The result of the study didn't observe apparent obstacles in Friesland's ecosystem that prevent ventures from committing to sustainable practices. Therefore, the study doesn't present negative productivity or evolution process as discussed in previous literature. However, VCF, in the participants' opinion, acts as a facilitators. It is noteworthy to mention the VCF's role in the accumulation of social capital within the ecosystem (Coleman, 1988). By bringing together various actors and facilitating collaboration, VCF ensures that the benefits of social capital are distributed across the ecosystem, rather than being concentrated in the hands of a few. This collective approach to social capital accumulation enhances the ecosystem's overall resilience and capacity for innovation, as different entities contribute their unique strengths and perspectives.

Social capital, as discussed in the literature, comprises various dimensions that are crucial for the development and functioning of SEEs. These dimensions—structural, cognitive, and relational—help elucidate how intermediaries contribute to the ecosystem by facilitating access to information, resources, and support (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

VCF contributes to the structural dimension of social capital in Friesland through both formal and informal means. Formally, VCF engages in various local projects that bring together ventures, institutions, and other stakeholders, facilitating collaboration across the ecosystem. Beyond this, VCF connects diverse actors, linking ventures with government bodies, academic institutions, and other key stakeholders. By fostering these connections, VCF helps build a robust network that supports the exchange of knowledge and resources, enabling entrepreneurs to overcome challenges and seize new opportunities.

VCF also plays an active role in shaping narratives, which has led to increased public awareness and commitment to sustainability, reflecting its impact on the cognitive dimension of social capital. This is achieved through initiatives such as organizing inspirational talks where

success stories are shared, informing the public about market opportunities within the sustainability sector, and eventually fostering an entrepreneurial ecosystem where sustainability is deeply embraced. VCF's role in rendering sustainable entrepreneurship as a compelling and desirable goal for entrepreneurs in Friesland is also a prime example of affective influence which refers to fostering a sense of commitment and enthusiasm among entrepreneurs (Dey & Lehner, 2017).

In the relational dimension, VCF's advocacy efforts, which include representing the collective interests of its members in policy dialogues, strengthen the sense of community and trust among ventures. By addressing the needs of sustainable ventures in regulatory frameworks, VCF creates a supportive environment that encourages ongoing engagement and innovation within the ecosystem. This study has observed a novel approach to building relationships, with VCF acting as a spokesperson for its members, further solidifying its role in fostering connections within the ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the critical role of intermediaries in shaping the development of a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Friesland, with a particular focus on the influence of Vereniging Circulair Friesland. Through a qualitative case study involving in-depth interviews with VCF members, the research revealed how VCF functions as a pivotal intermediary, not merely supporting sustainable entrepreneurship through resources and networks but actively shaping the narrative and policy landscape within the region. This study contributes to the broader understanding of the nuanced and multi-dimensional roles that intermediaries play in fostering and sustaining SEE.

The study uses the social capital framework to demonstrate how intermediaries like VCF contribute to the distribution of social capital across structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions. The research suggests that the success of SEE depends on intermediaries' ability to foster a shared understanding of sustainability and encourage collaboration among diverse stakeholders.

Practically, the study underscores the importance of intermediaries in promoting sustainable entrepreneurship. Policymakers can learn from these findings to create environments conducive to sustainable business practices, while intermediaries can focus on initiatives that are highly valued by ventures. The VCF case particularly highlights the effectiveness of a bottom-up approach, where local actors drive sustainability initiatives tailored to regional contexts.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is geographically limited to Friesland, a region with specific socio-economic and cultural characteristics that may not be generalizable to other regions or countries. The unique context of Friesland, where sustainability has become a central theme in regional development, may have influenced the findings, making it challenging to apply the results universally. Second, the sample size of six interviewees, although providing rich data, may not capture the full diversity of experiences and perceptions within the broader VCF membership. As such, the findings should be interpreted with caution, considering the potential for bias and the limited scope of perspectives.

Future research could explore the role of intermediaries in different regions or countries, comparing their functions, strategies, and impacts across various contexts. Such studies could also investigate how cultural, economic, and institutional differences affect intermediaries' effectiveness in promoting sustainable entrepreneurship. Additionally, future research could delve deeper into how intermediaries shape public policy and regulatory frameworks that support SEE, potentially driving systemic change by advocating for policies that promote circular economies, social innovation, and environmental stewardship.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Information Sheet for the Companies

INFORMATION SHEET

The development of sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems: the role of intermediaries

Dear participants,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. This letter explains what the research entails and how the research will be conducted. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If any information is not clear kindly ask questions using the contact details of the researchers provided at the end of this letter.

WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT?

The current global scenario, where environmental concerns and societal expectations, are pressing organizations to adopt sustainable practices. There is a growing need to understand the mechanisms through which intermediary organizations facilitate business sustainability commitment within sustainable entrepreneurial systems. By examining the activities of Vereniging Circulair Friesland (VCF) and its effects on member experiences and entrepreneurial outcomes, this study seeks to fill a gap in understanding the intermediary's role in promoting sustainable entrepreneurship in fostering a sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem. The study focuses on understanding how intermediaries, exemplified by VCF, impact the promotion of sustainable entrepreneurship (SE) initiatives in the Friesland region.

Participant Inclusion

About 6 participants will be asked to participate in this study. These participants will include members of VCF. Entrepreneurs are included as they represent key stakeholders in the sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystem and are directly impacted by the activities of intermediaries like VCF.

Funding

This research is not funded by any other party.

WHAT DOES PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

Participation in this study involves engaging in one online or face-to-face interview, which will last between 25 to 35 minutes. During the interview, participants will be asked about their experiences with events organized by VCF and their perceptions of the intermediary's role in fostering the sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystem. The interview will delve into various aspects such as perceived benefits, and the impact of VCF's activities on their entrepreneurial endeavors. Your insights and perspectives will contribute to a deeper understanding of how intermediaries support sustainable entrepreneurship.

DO YOU HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate, and your decision to take part or not will not affect your relationship with VCF or any other entities involved. Furthermore, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and you can choose not to answer any questions without facing any consequences or needing to provide reasons. Your autonomy and comfort are of utmost importance, and your decision regarding participation is entirely respected.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS IN PARTICIPATING?

There are no risks in participating in this study.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS IN PARTICIPATING?

While there are no direct benefits associated with participating in this study, your involvement can contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of sustainable entrepreneurship and sustainable entrepreneurship ecosystem. By sharing your experiences and insights, you will help researchers gain a deeper understanding of how VCF better supports sustainable entrepreneurship in Friesland. The findings of this research will be informative for future initiatives aimed at fostering sustainable business practices and promoting sustainable entrepreneurship within the region.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

The information you provide will be recorded, stored, and protected according to strict procedures to ensure confidentiality and compliance with GDPR rules:

- Interviews will be recorded using secure and encrypted recording devices or software.
- Transcriptions of interviews will be anonymized, meaning any identifying information will be removed or replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.
- All recorded data and transcriptions will be stored on password-protected electronic devices or secure servers accessible only to authorized personnel. Only authorized researchers involved in the study will have access to the raw data.

Future Data Handling

- After the completion of the study, all collected data will be securely archived for a specified period as required by institutional policies or regulatory guidelines.
- Any identifiable personal information will be securely deleted, leaving only anonymized data for analysis and future reference.
- Data may be shared with Vereniging Circulair Friesland (VCF) to inform their initiatives and enhance their support for sustainable entrepreneurship.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The information provided will be used in conjunction with other participant data for thesis research and paper for a Sustainable Entrepreneurship master's program. A research translation will also be created about the findings. The thesis research and findings will be presented at the Campus Fryslân Conference. The document will be uploaded and available through the UG library catalog. Based on the findings, recommendations may be formulated to inform policy decisions and practices related to supporting sustainable entrepreneurship initiatives. These recommendations could be shared with relevant stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profit organizations, and intermediary bodies like Vereniging Circulair Friesland (VCF).

ETHICAL APPROVAL

- This research study has obtained ethical approval from the Campus Fryslân Ethics Committee.
- The researcher will uphold themselves to relevant ethical standards.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Please sign the informed consent form below. This means you have the intention to participate and you may withdraw at any time.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

Yike (Sophie) Wu, the researcher of this study

Email: y.wu.84@student.rug.nl

Emma Folmer, the academic supervisor of this study

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Appendix B: Link to Signed Informed Consent Forms

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1YV5sUI8kfg0o9C7dixiuCgJXglcFtmvn?usp=sharing>

Appendix C: Interview Guide for Companies

Introduction

- Greet the interviewee and introduce myself
 - Welcome, thank you for participating in this research, I really appreciate you being here today
 - Introduce myself
- Explain the purpose of the interview/ study
 - to gather their insights about sustainable entrepreneurship initiatives within the ecosystem facilitated by VCF
 - Explain a bit about what VCF is doing if necessary (although it's assumed participants are aware of VCF as they are members of the association)
- Confidentiality and anonymity
 - Assure confidentiality, hand-in information sheet and consent form, and explain the recording/transcription process
 - Invite any questions before proceeding.

Background and Experience

1. Can you please introduce yourself and your role within your organization?
2. How long have you been involved with VCF, and what motivated your organization to become a member?
3. Can you provide some insights into your experiences with VCF's activities and initiatives related to sustainable entrepreneurship?

VCF's Initiatives and Impact on companies

4. From your experience, what are some key initiatives or activities organized by VCF to support sustainable entrepreneurship?

5. What did you learn from these experiences?

Specifically ask their experiences on the following events if necessary:

Circular Expedition including Members' Day (June 1), ALV, Circular Café, Ambition talks, Project ambition tables

6. Do you think VCF's initiatives have influenced your organization's approach to sustainability?

- a. If yes: Could you share any specific examples?
- b. If no: what're the barriers you see in this?

7. In your opinion, what are the most significant benefits or outcomes that your organization has experienced as a result of participating in VCF's activities?

VCF's Initiatives and Impact on the Ecosystem

VCF is thriving its effort on building an ecosystem in Friesland that supports business here to become more circular.

8. In your opinion, what has changed from the past 10 years?

9. How does the VCF contribute to fostering sustainability in the entrepreneurial ecosystem?

10. In what ways do you believe the ecosystem facilitated by VCF contributes to the promotion of sustainable entrepreneurship?

Future Directions and Recommendations

Thank you for sharing your insights. Your perspectives provide valuable understanding of VCF's operations and their impact on their target audience and the Friesland ecosystem.

11. From your perspective, what additional support or resources could VCF provide to further support sustainable entrepreneurship?

12. Looking ahead, what do you envision as the future role of VCF in promoting sustainable entrepreneurship within the region?

13. Is there anything else you would like to share or discuss regarding your organization's involvement with VCF and sustainable entrepreneurship?

Conclusion

- Thank the participants for their valuable insights and time.
- Offer to share a summary of the interview findings if they're interested.
- Reiterate appreciation for their contribution to the research.

Appendix D: Link to interview transcription

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cHjAerACZ--x_W6adMgyLnbUE9-VTiQ?usp=sharing