

ViaVia: a way to sustainability?

Tourism social entrepreneurship as a catalyst for sustainable development - the case of ViaVia Travelers Cafés

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Abstract

Tourism social entrepreneurship, a form of social entrepreneurship, has been indicated as a catalyst for sustainable development. Especially in developing countries, this rising alternative to traditional capitalist approaches of doing business can serve as a lever for economic, social, and environmental development. However, social entrepreneurship research has mainly focused on the conceptualization of the definition rather than looking at real life case studies, and tourism social entrepreneurship is currently in an even more embryonic state. Thus, in this thesis, the goal is to identify how a tourism social entrepreneurship relates to all aspects of sustainable development in practice: what is the impact it truly makes? Our focus is the ViaVia Travelers Cafés: worldwide scaled social enterprises where, at the core, sustainable tourism and intercultural entrepreneurship meet. For the first part of this research, ViaVia León (Nicaragua) serves as our case study to see to what extent it relates to the different characteristics of social entrepreneurship and how it can contribute to sustainability. By using a conceptual framework, it becomes clear that (1) its social mission effectively contributes to intercultural entrepreneurship and sustainable tourism, (2) the political situation in Nicaragua heavily affects their operations, and (3) their impact is beneficial to its stakeholders, while social value creation remains limited outside the premises. In terms of sustainability, ViaVia León fosters (1) economic development by creating jobs, paying above average wages, and complementing national labor legislations, all efforts that confirm tourism social entrepreneurship's ability to alleviate poverty, (2) social development by enhancing equal treatment, no discrimination, and small signs of women empowerment, (3) but bumps into exogenous inefficiencies to enhance environmental protection. Similar observations were noted in the second part of the thesis, where sustainability practices of other ViaVia Traveler Cafés from the Global South were compared. Again, contributions towards sustainability predominantly focus on socio-economic development, whereas environmental protection lags behind. Most ViaVias also struggle with the lack of efficiency from the country they're situated in to meet overall sustainability goals.

List of figures

Figure 1. Interconnections between tourism, social entrepreneurship/enterprise and sustainable development. Source: author. 3
Figure 2. Surveyed subjects and stakeholders according to each subquestion.* = performed online 18
Figure 3. Tourist arrivals in Nicaragua from the past two decades (Based on INTUR 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017 & 2020). 24
Figure 4. Locations of ViaVia Travelers Cafes as of 2023 (Source: Author) 27
Figure 5. Forefront of ViaVia León (Source: ViaVia World (2023)). 28
Figure 6. Map of León's city center (Source: Author) 29
Figure 7. Touristic surroundings of León, Nicaragua (Source: Author) 29
Figure A 1 Logo of ViaVia Tourism Academy 71
Figure A 2 One of the brochures created during the internship 73
Figure A 3 Timeline of existing (blue) and closed (black) ViaVias. Adapted from Dobson et al. (2018). 80
Figure A 4 Certificate of Scientific Integrity 81

List of tables

Table 1. Participation in activities of ViaVia León's stakeholders 17
Table 2. Overview field work details 20
Table 3: Overview interviews internship VVTA 21
Table 4. Coding scheme 21

List of abbreviations

B-Corp: B-Corporation

CANATUR: Cámara Nacional de Turismo de Nicaragua

CANTUR: Cámara Nicaragüense de Pequeños y Medianos Empresarios Turísticos

CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

GHG: Greenhouse Gas

GNP: Gross National Product

FSNL: Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional

INTUR: Instituto Nicaragüense de Turismo

LDC's : Least Developed Countries

LGBTQI+ : Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

SDG: Sustainable Development Goal

SE: Social Entrepreneurship

TSE: Tourism Social Entrepreneurship

UNESCO: United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization

USD: U.S. Dollar

VVL: ViaVia León

VVTA: ViaVia Tourism Academy

Table of contents

- Acknowledgements ii
- Abstract iii
- List of figures..... iv
- List of tables..... iv
- List of abbreviations..... v
- Table of contents..... vi
- I Introduction 1
- II. Conceptual framework 3
 - 1. Tourism as a lever for sustainable development4
 - 1.1. Tourism: advantages and disadvantages for sustainable development.....4
 - 1.1.1. On the advantages of tourism 4
 - 1.1.2. On the disadvantages of tourism 6
 - 1.2. Tourism and conditions for sustainability.....8
 - 2. Social entrepreneurship9
 - 2.1. Entrepreneurship / entrepreneur9
 - 2.2. *Social* entrepreneurship9
 - 2.3. Social entrepreneurship and the sustainability lens.....12
 - 3. Tourism social entrepreneurship in the Global South13
 - 3.1. Tourism social entrepreneurship in Latin-America14
- III. Empirical study 16
 - 4. Research Methodology16
 - 4.1. Qualitative research methods.....16
 - 4.2. Research design: case study and comparative research16
 - 4.3. Data collection17
 - 4.4. Research protocol19
 - 4.5. Data analysis.....19
 - 4.6. Limitations.....22
 - 5. Case study context23
 - 5.1. Nicaragua23
 - 5.2. From boom to bust: the importance of tourism in Nicaragua and its policies.....23
 - 5.3. Landscape of social entrepreneurship and corporate culture.....25
 - 5.4. ViaVia as an example of social entrepreneurship in the South.....26

5.5. ViaVia León	28
6. Results & discussion	31
6.1. ViaVia León & social entrepreneurship	31
6.1.1. (a) Adopting a mission to create and sustain value and (b) recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission.....	31
6.1.2. Engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning	32
6.1.3. Acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand.....	34
6.1.4. Exhibiting a heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created.....	36
6.1.5. VVL and social entrepreneurship: major lessons learned	38
6.2. ViaVia León & sustainable development	38
6.2.1. Economic development	38
6.2.3. Social development.....	39
6.2.3. Environmental protection.....	41
6.2.4. Overall sustainability.....	42
6.3. Generalization of findings León to other ViaVia.....	43
6.3.1. Economic development	43
6.3.2. Social development.....	45
6.3.3. Environmental protection.....	47
6.3.4. Sustainability impact.....	48
7. Conclusion.....	50
Bibliography	51
Appendices.....	72
Appendix 1: Internship experience at ViaVia Tourism Academy.....	72
Appendix 2: Translated quotes.....	75
Appendix 3: Nicaragua as a developing country	79
Appendix 4: Timeline of ViaVias	81
Appendix 5: Certificate of Scientific Integrity	82

I Introduction

Tourism is a significant driver for economic and social development (European Commission, 2020), especially in developing countries (Khan et al., 2020). As tourism happens within communities, these communities face tourism entrepreneurs and initiatives for development (Aquino et al., 2018). However, in underdeveloped and developing countries, major parts of the tourism industry remain harmful to the environment (Gössling, 2000) and may impose negative impacts on social aspects of a community (Babatunde Adedoyin, 2020). A potential catalyst for sustainable development in tourism is social entrepreneurship (SE), as it does not follow the traditional capitalist business approach and tries to minimize the negative impacts tourism entrepreneurship may impose on local communities (Aquino et al., 2018). This concept is also known as 'tourism social entrepreneurship' (TSE). Nevertheless, the relationship between sustainability, entrepreneurship and tourism is very complex and not straightforward. Especially the concept of social entrepreneurship looks promising, although quite vague. Social entrepreneurship and sustainability are two closely related concepts that have been rapidly expanding over the last years (Lubberinck, 2019; Maniam et al., 2018). Although there is no widely agreed consensus on the definition of social entrepreneurship (Swanson & Zhang, 2012), it usually refers to "business principles with a passion for social impact" (Wolk, 2008, p.1). The altruistic actions performed by social entrepreneurs have gained a significant amount of attention, as the often neglected social and environmental aspects are taken into account alongside the economic and financial aspects of traditional entrepreneurship (Maniam et al., 2018). Some authors state that social entrepreneurs can, therefore, play an important role in contributing to sustainable development (Lubberinck, 2019). Question: is this really the case? Therefore, our aim is to monitor the impact of a particular social enterprise in a deeply researched context.

One example of a social enterprise in the tourism sector is the ViaVia Travelers Cafés (Dobson et al., 2018), an international chain of cafés that are mostly situated in developing countries but of Flemish origin. For this case study, we opted for ViaVia León (Nicaragua). ViaVia León is one of the currently 16 ViaVia Travelers Cafés from around the world, and is located in the second biggest city of Nicaragua, León. Initially founded in 2003, ViaVia León was built as a café but expanded into a hostel, which has become a household name in the hospitality sector of León. From there, we attempt to generalize some findings and recommendations, based on a rather broad research on other ViaVia Cafés as well.

As such, this research aims to investigate how social entrepreneurship in tourism can be a lever for sustainable development in the South, by using the ViaVia Travelers Café in León, Nicaragua, as a case study. Therefore, the general research question will be the following:

"Is the impact of ViaVia Travelers Cafés sustainable example of social entrepreneurship?"

We attempt to answer this question by the three following subquestions:

(1) How does ViaVia León relate to social entrepreneurship?

This question addresses social entrepreneurship. It aims to identify the elements of social entrepreneurship within the case study of ViaVia León.

(2) How does ViaVia León contribute to sustainable development?

This question addresses sustainable development. It aims at identifying local characteristics of sustainable development in the case study of ViaVia León, using the three pillars of economic development, social development and environmental protection.

(3) To which extent can the findings on ViaVia León be generalized to other ViaVias in the South?

This question addresses the generalization of the findings of ViaVia León in terms of social entrepreneurship and sustainability to other ViaVias in the Global South.

Overall, this research project can provide valuable insights into the understanding of tourism social entrepreneurs for sustainable development in the Global South. Moreover, the case study is an important example of social entrepreneurship practices in Latin America, which have been found to be underrepresented in social entrepreneurship research ([García Alonso et al., 2020](#); [Ibáñez, 2022](#)). Findings obtained from other ViaVia Travelers Cafés allow us to see what opportunities or threats they experience that can contribute to the debate of tourism social entrepreneurship's role in the field of sustainability.

The methodology for this research consists of a literature review on the concepts of tourism social entrepreneurship, combined with an extensive empirical case study on ViaVia León, and a comparative research approach to generalize the findings to other ViaVias from the Global South. A qualitative approach is used through the application of semi-structured interviews with different involved stakeholders of ViaVia León and the managers of the other ViaVia, since a qualitative methodology allows to go beyond the facts and delve into opinions, personal interpretations, reasons, and persons behind strategies, actions, and processes, rather than outcomes ([Apuke, 2017](#)).

The structure of this thesis is delineated as follows. The thesis is divided into two parts, the first of which consists of the conceptual framework. The second part describes the empirical study.

In the conceptual framework, a first chapter presents tourism as a lever for sustainable development, by looking at its advantages and disadvantages. A second chapter elaborates on the concept of conventional and social entrepreneurship, followed by the contextualization of social entrepreneurship through a sustainability lens and its occurrence in the Global South. A third chapter bridges the content of the first and second chapter by looking into tourism social entrepreneurship in the Global South, with a special focus on Latin America.

The empirical case study consists of the research methodology, the case study context and its results and discussion. In the research methodology, attention will be given to the use of qualitative research methods, by looking into the research design, protocol, data collection and applied analysis. Next, the case study context will shed light onto Nicaragua, the importance of tourism in Nicaragua, the local landscape of social entrepreneurship and ViaVia León. After this, results and discussion are shown in the following order of the research subquestions. These are (1) ViaVia León and social entrepreneurship, (2) ViaVia León and sustainable development, and (3) generalization of the findings of ViaVia León to other ViaVias in the South.

II. Conceptual framework

In the conceptual framework, different angles on the concepts of tourism, social entrepreneurship (SE), and sustainable development will be highlighted. These three elements can be interconnected, which result in combinations such as sustainable tourism, sustainable entrepreneurship, and tourism social entrepreneurship (Figure 1). For this thesis, the emphasis is put on the relationship between tourism social entrepreneurship (TSE) and sustainable development. For this purpose, we seek to understand in the first place how TSE's fundamental elements, tourism and social entrepreneurship, relate to sustainable development. Due to the vast literature on tourism and social entrepreneurship, a selection of definitions, advantages, and disadvantages is made that entails the most important characteristics connected to these concepts. Special attention is given to Dees (2001), because of its importance in shaping the conceptual research of SE. For this thesis, even though there is a nuanced difference between SE and social enterprise, the distinction will be made trivial as both terms are highly interconnected within academic research.

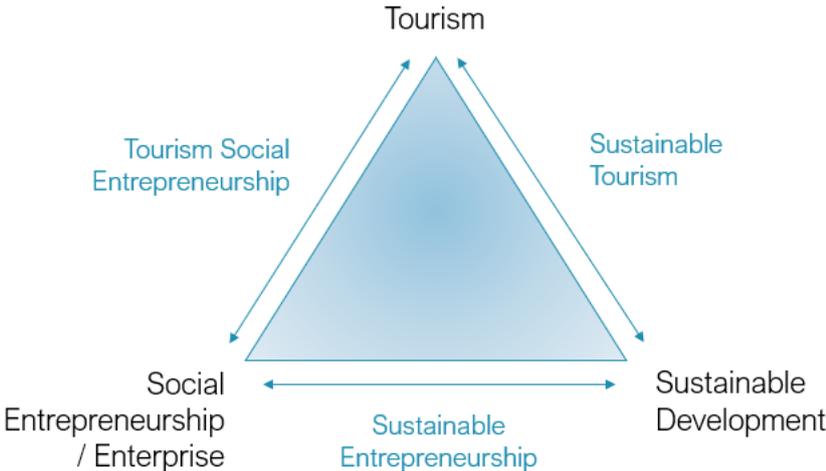


Figure 1. Interconnections between tourism, social entrepreneurship/enterprise and sustainable development. Source: author.

1. Tourism as a lever for sustainable development

Although its impact is extremely varied (UNCSO NGO Steering Committee, 1999), tourism can in general, favorably affect a region in all three pillars of sustainable development: economic development, social development and environmental protection (Kuzior et al., 2021). When all three are in balance, it may be referred to as 'sustainable tourism' (Welford et al., 1999). Of course, a nuanced view on tourism's impacts is necessary, as besides positively contributing to sustainable development, the contrary may also be true.

1.1. Tourism: advantages and disadvantages for sustainable development

1.1.1. On the advantages of tourism

The tourism industry is one of the main economic sectors in the world. It is of a great importance because of its direct, indirect and induced impacts on local economies (Lemma, 2014). While the COVID-19 pandemic ended the trend of continuous growth for tourism over the past decade (UNCTAD, 2021), the sector is slowly rebounding to its former influence. In 2022, tourism contributed to 7.6% of the global GDP and supported one in ten jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2022). It provides both direct and indirect employment in various sectors, ranging from accommodation and transport, to agriculture and retail (Cebr, 2014). Tourism also participates in a country's development and growth by stimulating trade and investment (Siddiqui & Siddiqui, 2019). For many developing countries, it is even the major source of foreign money (Thommandru et al., 2021). As tourism development offers opportunities for market creation and economic diversification, this eventually leads to reduced dependence of e.g. agriculture in the local economy (Brel et al., 2020).

Furthermore, tourism can be a catalyst for regional development (Calero & Turner, 2020), especially for areas that may have limited economic prospects (Liu et al., 2023). To meet the needs of tourists, the construction of infrastructure and facilities like accommodation or roads are stimulated (Jovanović, 2016). This does not only improve the tourism experience, but also enhances locals' quality of life (Godovykh et al., 2023; Song et al., 2022). Moreover, practice has proven that tourism can also benefit the poor (Medina-Muñoz et al., 2016). A commonly held belief is that poverty alleviation is a natural outcome of the induced regional economic growth, as a trickle-down effect reaches the poorest in society (Candradewi Puspitarini & Anggraini, 2019). Tourism that generates net benefits for the poor and unlocks social, environmental or cultural benefits, is referred to as pro-poor tourism (Roe & Urquhart, 2001; Vanneste, 2011).

When it comes to positive sociocultural effects, probably the clearest example is intercultural exchange. Tourism provides an occasion where interaction between members of different cultural groupings can take place. The outcomes of genuine, reciprocal cultural exchange are stronger bonds between these communities, with a developed network that can lead to mutual benefits (Charles et al., 2020). On top of that, a greater understanding and tolerance of one another leads to reduced misconceptions and social harmony (Shahzalal, 2016).

Tourism does not only develop cohesion between communities, but also within them. As tourism development in a certain place likely incorporates elements of the local culture and social norms, concerned community members come together to seize opportunities tourism can provide.

Especially when the community members manage the tourism process themselves (Shahzalal, 2016), it can empower people and provide them with tools to advance the local communities (Vogt & Jordan, 2016). Community development thus fuels self-reliance and a sense of pride among community members (Ivanovic, 2008). When tourism is well managed in a given place, it can also positively influence the image of that destination (Jebbouri et al., 2022).

The revitalized sense of cultural pride and positive perception of a destination can be further exacerbated with the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage through tourism (Bacsi & Tóth, 2019; Ivanovic, 2008). Particularly cultural tourism, in which the visitor desires to experience, learn and understand tangible and intangible cultural elements, may be a catalyst to safeguard cultural heritage (Lussetyowati, 2015). Studies have found that this can be the case for preserving minority languages (Castillo-Villar & Merlo-Simoni, 2022; Luo et al., 2022), handicrafts (Beksultanova et al., 2021), traditional clothing (Torabi Farsani & Jamshidi, 2021), food (Okumus, 2020), music practices (Stipanović et al., 2020), and more. Revenues generated from tourism activities can also be channeled back into initiatives that aim to safeguard the survival of cultural practices (UNWTO, 2012).

In terms of gender, women make up a significant proportion of the tourism industry, representing 54% of the employed people in the sector (UNWTO, 2019a). In this sense, tourism can play an empowering role for women. Studies have found that employment in tourism may positively contribute to gender equality under the right circumstances (Jackman, 2022; Salee et al., 2022), implying improved social status, health, female employment, and education quality (Salee et al., 2022).

Employment within and participating in tourism also stimulates language learning (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005; Iglesias, 2014). Furthermore, tourism's educative role can positively contribute to environmental awareness (Machado Toffolo et al., 2022). By praising the value of nature, environmentally conscious behavior and activities are able to develop that maintain the integrity of the environment (Kapur, 2018).

This inevitably leads to the third and last aspect of sustainability, environmental protection. A direct way in which tourism can contribute to environmental protection is through the revenues from entrance and user fees in natural areas (UNWTO, 2010). Tourism financial flows have a strong potential to contribute to the funding of protected areas, especially in cases where parks are mainly funded through tourism (UNWTO, 2010). In 2021, the ecotourism market size - the area of ecotourism in which visited natural areas are protected and the welfare of local communities is sustained (Akanni Soaga, 2022) - was valued at USD 187.87 billion, with expectations of 15.2% annual continuous growth towards 2030 (Grand View Research, 2021). Because of these substantial revenues, mass tourism, the phenomenon where "a large number of organized tourists [move] to popular holiday destinations for recreational purpose" (Naumov & Green, 2015, p.594), can also benefit ecotourism by the power it can exert through lobbying (Weaver, 2001). This can be the case when other groups seek to exploit the natural environment in ways that cannot coincide with ecotourism, like mining or logging. In such circumstances, the voice of mass ecotourism can be decisive in protecting nature (Weaver, 2001).

1.1.2. *On the disadvantages of tourism*

While tourism may contribute in diverse ways to positive impacts on host communities, there is a growing body of literature that also recognizes the negative impacts tourism may imply.

Seasonality is one adverse effect of tourism. The seasonal concentration of tourists results in an unbalanced use of tourism facilities, and puts pressure on the carrying capacity of a destination (Corluka, 2018). The switch between peak and off season makes it challenging to guarantee a stable income and workforce because of the implied loss of profit due to the inefficient use of resources, as well as low returns on capital and disproportional job demand (Corluka, 2018).

Countries that strongly depend on tourism are also more vulnerable to external factors. For example, the unfolding of the COVID-19 crisis strongly impacted tourism flows and, consequently, countries most specialized in the tourism sector (N. Mulder, 2020). Besides health crises, also natural disasters (Genç, 2018), economic shocks (UNWTO & ILO, 2013) and political instability (Ingram et al., 2013) can make tourism (nearly) collapse.

Moreover, tourism leakage occurs. Leakage implies that “revenues from [a region’s] economic activities are not available for reinvestment or consumption of goods and services within the same destination” (Jönsson, 2022, p.1). Unfortunately, when tourism companies are based abroad or foreign owned, the leaked economic resources then do not contribute to the regional development of a place (Jönsson, 2022). And, although the trickle-down effect is a fact, it is important to notice that tourism has an unequal socioeconomic divide when it comes down to the distribution of its benefits. Even though tourism can decrease the income inequality between urban and rural regions (Z. Zeng & Wang, 2021), it is primarily a benefit to urban and coastal areas and does not necessarily contribute to peripheral or far inland economies (Bohlin et al., 2022). This inequality is also expressed in aspects of gender. While earlier on tourism was mentioned as an empowerment tool for women, its limits must be contextualized. Women in the tourism industry in fact face a significant gender pay gap and are still overrepresented in lower status jobs (de Jong & Cristina, 2022; Obadić, 2016).

Another economic disadvantage of tourism is that this industry plays an important role in driving inflation (Shaari et al., 2018). The rapid increase in living costs does not only affect locals, but also turns against a further expansion of the travel market (Barnet, 1975). Further, conflicts arise when there is a significant disparity between the (non-) use value and exchange value provided by tourism or recreation. While use values refer to the qualitative derived values from services that satisfy human requirement, exchange values are the quantitative aspects of value (BIO Intelligence Service, 2011). The “right” price for touristic activities must satisfy both values, because if this is not the case, the outcome will either lead to over- or underpriced services (BIO Intelligence Service, 2011).

Regarding culture, tourism can fuel commodification (Shepherd, 2002). This refers to the commercial exploitation of a place’s culture to make large enough profits to support the economy. Cultural and natural attractions not only make money but are made/adapted to generate money (e.g. ‘Disneyfication’ or ‘McDonaldization’) and reduced to mere products of consumption, hence, they can no longer be experienced as authentic (Pandya et al., 2022; Shepherd, 2002). Moreover, as a result of intercultural exchange, acculturation is likely to occur (Özekici & Ünlüönen, 2019). It is assumed that long standing interaction processes between different cultures may lead to the

adoption of a dominant culture and partial abandonment of the root culture, wherefore tourism can be blamed (Özekici & Ünlüönen, 2019). Both commodification and acculturation threaten the safeguarding of local culture and heritage.

At times, tourism goes along with an increase in crime (Lisowska, 2017), alcohol abuse and illegal drug use (Deery et al., 2012). Particularly in developing countries, other delinquent practices such as prostitution (Eaglen & Maccarrone-Eaglen, 2005) and child labor (ILO, 2013) have also been reported. These negative outcomes of tourism impact the social fabric of a local community (Deery et al., 2012).

In terms of the third pillar of sustainable development, tourism is frequently under scrutiny for its harsh impacts on the environment. One of the main repercussions of tourism is pollution. Pollution in this sense can be diverse; it can range from aesthetic to physical pollution (Holloway & Humphreys, 2022). The former, aesthetic loss of an environment, can be considered when for example local architecture has to make place for newer, out of context buildings (Şafak et al., 2021). Also the excessive concentration of tourists – overtourism – leads to a lower aesthetic quality of a certain place (Kruczek, 2019). On the physical pollution of tourism, tourist impact ranges from almost half of the solid waste generation per resident (Martins & Cró, 2021), to even 1.5 times more waste disposal than locals (Mance et al., 2020). As tourism's perceived natural beauty of a destination is sensitive to environmental changes, unfortunately, a degrading environment can reduce tourist visitation in the long-term (Le et al., 2019).

Due to its strong connection with mobility, tourist travel by car, ship, and airplane also contribute significantly to the emission of Greenhouse Gases (GHG) (Gühnemann et al., 2021) such as CO₂, thereby playing a role in climate change. Although aircrafts have gotten more fuel-efficient than ever, air travel has increased tenfold over the past 40 years (Holloway & Humphreys, 2022). Other sectors within the tourism sector, such as the hospitality sector, contribute to around 1% of the global carbon emissions (UNWTO, 2008). Putting all the direct and indirect emissions from tourism activities together, tourism contributes to 8% of the global carbon emissions (Lenzen et al., 2018). By 2030, these emissions will increase with 25% relative to 2016 levels (UNWTO, 2019b) and, although decarbonization technologies are finding their way into the tourism industry, the rapid increase in tourism outpaces proposed mitigation strategies (Lenzen et al., 2018). Eventually, achieving the Paris Agreement's climate targets under current conditions is strongly doubted (Gühnemann et al., 2021). The interrelationship with climate change is, however, also double-sided; not only does tourism influence climate change, climate change also affects tourism (Scott et al., 2012).

Finally, tourism impacts biodiversity in many ways. As tourism continues to expand, it entails the development of tourism infrastructure, like accommodation and tourism facilities, which can lead to land conversion (Duong et al., 2020). In recent years, the change in use of infrastructure also manifests within residential neighborhoods, with local real estate becoming tourism accommodations because of the rise in digital peer-to-peer distribution platforms such as Airbnb (Stors, 2022).

1.2. Tourism and conditions for sustainability

The United Nations Brundtland Commission (1987) conceptualized sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 41). Shortly after the introduction of the notion of sustainable development, the term ‘sustainable tourism’ was coined (Welford et al., 1999). Being closely linked to sustainability’s social, economic and environmental principles, tourism has a huge potential to contribute to sustainable development. Sustainable tourism, according to the UNWTO (2023a), entails “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. Hence, it should 1) ensure long-term, stable and viable socio-economic benefits and operations that do not produce inequalities and contribute to poverty alleviation; 2) respect the socio-cultural authenticity of local communities, maintain their cultural heritage and traditional values while promoting intercultural tolerance and understanding; and 3) make optimal use of environmental resources without compromising on the safeguarding of ecological processes, natural heritage and biodiversity (UNWTO, 2023a).

In recent years, tourism has increasingly embraced the principles of sustainable development and been put forward on the global development agenda. For instance, tourism has been highlighted by the United Nations in Goals 8, 12 and 14 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted in 2015. Respectively, these are about sustainable economic growth, responsible consumption and production, and the conservation and sustainable use of life below water (UNWTO, 2023b). Furthermore, the United Nations General Assembly designated 2017 as ‘the International Year of Sustainable Tourism Development’, thereby raising awareness on the contribution of tourism to sustainable development (UNWTO, 2017).

Despite the recent trend to engage tourism for sustainability, a significant amount of companies yet engage in the act of exaggerating unsubstantiated sustainability claims to gain greater market share (Kaur Singh, 2019). This is also known as ‘greenwashing’, and manifests in a variety of ways; airlines depicting flying as sustainable or green when you pay an extra carbon fee (El Bakkali & Belga, 2023), hoteliers praising themselves to be ecofriendly, or using another green buzzword, whereas in reality little green practices are to be found (Abeyratne & Arachchi, 2021), or worshipping false labels (Kaur Singh, 2019), among other practices.

2. Social entrepreneurship

2.1. Entrepreneurship / entrepreneur

The word 'entrepreneur' is defined in a variety of ways. According to [Merriam-Webster \(n.d.\)](#), the meaning of entrepreneurship is derived from 'entrepreneur', "one who organizes, manages, and assumes the risks of a business or enterprise".

With this as a starting point, Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832) is traditionally ascribed to be the first person to coin the term 'entrepreneur'. In fact, it was Richard Cantillon (1680s-1734) who laid the foundations of the concept of entrepreneurship, while Say further developed it ([Jonsson, 2017](#)). Both French economists and businessmen, they are seen as the founders of public economics and share a common view that entrepreneurship is an important force in economic growth and development. They opine that an entrepreneur is the principal agent of production, by being an intermediary in the productive process and applying their acquired knowledge to create value. They also shift resources from areas of low productivity and yield to areas of higher productivity and yield ([Koolman, 1971](#)). The entrepreneur thus occupies a central role in the economy and does this on both sides of the market equation. Both Cantillon and Say stress the importance of the role entrepreneurs adopt as risk-bearers and innovators ([Brown & Thornton, 2011](#)).

In a similar way, Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950) acknowledged that entrepreneurship is an important force in economic development, because of its inseparable and embedded innovative nature ([Croitoru, 2012](#)). Entrepreneurship is reserved for the only few 'talented' individuals ([Brown & Thornton, 2011](#)) who dare to undertake. It is no surprise that it was Schumpeter who coined the German word 'Unternehmergeist', loosely translated to 'entrepreneurial spirit' ([Śledzik, 2013](#)).

A more recent figure, Peter Drucker (1909-2005), argues the contrary. Where the conventional agreement after Schumpeter goes that entrepreneurship is a personal, innovative gift, he states that '... entrepreneurship is not "natural"; it is not "creative." It is work.' ([Drucker, 1985](#), p.150). In his vision, the entrepreneur 'always searches for change, responds to it and exploits it as an opportunity' ([Drucker, 1985](#), p.28) that does not necessarily involve taking a risk.

So, the debate on how to define entrepreneurship is divergent. What does become clear through the different points of view, however, is that entrepreneurship embodies three main characteristics: a spirit of innovation, risk-taking and value creation. Entrepreneurship is important for society, as its impact is profound in terms of economic, social and environmental welfare ([Neumann, 2020](#)). In general, entrepreneurship positively affects regional development and economic performance ([Neumann, 2020](#)). It boosts economic growth by introducing innovative products, services, and technologies. On top of that, entrepreneurship allows new job opportunities and raises the productivity of other firms and economies ([Kritikos, 2014](#)).

2.2. Social entrepreneurship

Over the past two decades, researchers have increasingly paid attention to the relatively new concept of *social* entrepreneurship ([Rey-Martí et al., 2016](#)). Social entrepreneurship (SE) usually refers to "business principles with a passion for social impact" ([Wolk, 2008](#), p.1). Although there is no single definition of social entrepreneurship, scholars have made several attempts to reach a conceptual definition concerning this subject.

One way to define SE is by identifying important parameters. According to [Swanson & Zhang \(2019\)](#), organizations can be placed in a social spectrum defined by 1) the nature of business practices that are applied in support of their mission, and 2) the nature of social change as a dominant component in its mission. In their definition, organizations in the social entrepreneurship zone are defined as self-sustained operations that take direct action for social transformation. The common goal is to improve the social equilibrium to a more preferred state.

A second way of conceptualizing SE is by focusing on the differences between traditional entrepreneurship and SE. Both concepts carry all features of a business organization, but SE differs from traditional entrepreneurship because of the primary goal to create social value in SE ([Bedi & Yadav, 2019](#)). While traditional entrepreneurship is spurred on by money, SE is driven by altruism ([Martin & Osberg, 2007](#)). Measuring success is therefore inherently different for both concepts; while traditional entrepreneurship uses financial indicators to quantify its success, SE's performance relies on the created social impact of its target population ([Arogyaswamy, 2017](#); [Austin et al., 2012a](#)). The dynamic between stakeholders also distinguishes SE from conventional entrepreneurship, as in SE "investors" are not necessarily seeking a monetary return, and [...], the "customers" may not purchase the "product" themselves' ([Meyer, Cohen, & Gauthier, 2020](#), p. 432). Whereas traditional entrepreneurship will focus on creating value for their shareholders, investors, and customers ([Meyer et al., 2020b](#)), SE's beneficiaries are local communities ([Maniam et al., 2018](#)).

A third way of defining SE is by identifying a set of criteria that apply to social entrepreneurship. J. Greg **Dees**, "the father of SE" ([Stenn, 2017](#)), is often referred to by other scholars that conceptualize SE ([Abeysekera, 2019](#); [Abu-Saifan, 2012](#); [Martin & Osberg, 2007](#); [Niño, 2015a](#); [Swanson & Zhang, 2012](#)) because of his definition of social entrepreneurship. In **Dees'** work of [2001\(a\)](#), he argues that social entrepreneurs are **agents of change** in the social sector that are defined through five 'pillars', being:

1. Social entrepreneurs "[adopt] a mission to **create and sustain value** (not just private value)";

This addresses the fact that social entrepreneurs should fundamentally embody a social mission of improvement, thereby aiming further than just making money or creating wealth. Long-term social impact is what they strive to achieve.

2. They recognize and "relentlessly [pursue] **new opportunities** to serve that mission";

Social entrepreneurs are characterized by their determination and willingness to achieve their social mission. In that respect, problems are not obstacles, but can be seen as opportunities.

3. Through social entrepreneurship "a process of **continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning**" is engaged;

Social entrepreneurs are not inventors but creatively apply what others have invented. As such, their innovative nature is reflected in their modus operandi; it is not a onetime burst, but a continuous process of improving, adapting, and learning.

4. They "[act] **boldly without being limited by resources** currently in hand";

Social entrepreneurs do more with less; limited resources will not keep them from pursuing their vision. Therefore, they efficiently use resources, collaborate with others to leverage their opportunities, and take calculated risks to reduce harm when failures occur.

5. And lastly, social entrepreneurs “[exhibit] heightened **accountability** to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created”;

This refers to the impact they would like to create by finding a close connection between all their stakeholders. They reinforce accountability and are result oriented.

It is worth noting that in academic literature, criticism exists around social entrepreneurship. First, is SE not just the marketization of the non-profit sector? This extensive debate over whether social entrepreneurship belongs to the for- or non-profit sector is prominent in SE research. Some scholars claim that social entrepreneurship is inherently part of the non-profit sector, as it is merely an application of entrepreneurial strategies to financially sustain non-profit organizations (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Lasprogata & Cotten, 2003). Others point out that SE’s roots lay in entrepreneurship, and thus naturally belongs to the for profit sector (Ibáñez, 2022). The truth is, SE most likely lies somewhere in the middle. It is clear that the spectrum of SE encompasses characteristics of both the non- and for-profit sector (Tan & Yoo, 2015), so choosing one side is altogether radical. As Weerawardena & Sullivan Mort (2006) put it: “[...] not all non for-profits are socially entrepreneurial. In a similar way, not all for-profit businesses are entrepreneurial.” (p.22).

Second, SE may not be confused with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), social innovation (SI) or sustainable entrepreneurship (Ibáñez, 2022). Even though both SE and CSR are responses to environmental demands, CSR is considered more as a set of necessary actions to maintain a good reputation (reactive), whereas SE’s ethical intentions are clear from the start (proactive) (Niño, 2015b). Further, it is true that innovation is an essential element of SE, but it is not necessarily the case the other way around (Kraus et al., 2017). While SE does not exclude working innovatively with already existing products and services, SI emphasizes the newness of the process to meet unmet needs (Carvalho, 2016). In comparison to sustainable entrepreneurship, SE may have similarities in terms of seeking social profitability and well-being. However, SE will not always reduce environmental impact, contrary to the sustainable business model that takes this aspect into account (Underwood et al., 2012).

Third, even though both terms are often used interchangeably, there is a distinction between social entrepreneurship and a social enterprise (Luke & Chu, 2013). Both share a common ground in taking an intermediary role between the for- and non-profit sector and by combining commercial and social activities, but, while innovation and risk-taking are fundamental concepts in social entrepreneurship, this is not necessarily the case with respect to social enterprises (Luke & Chu, 2013). While SE is considered as a process and attitude (Guclu et al., 2002), social enterprises are activities that produce and sell goods and/or services, being more the tangible outcome of SE (Defourny & Nyssens, 2006). A growing group within social enterprises are the B-Corporations (B-Corps), certified social enterprises with a high level of commitment to their social and environmental performance (Chen & Kelly, 2015).

Fourth, and last, social entrepreneurship research faces some serious difficulties, one example being a repetitive narrative. Dacin, Dacin and Tracey (2011) uncovered that social

entrepreneurship research has a biased focus on heroic wins of individuals, creating an idealistic assumption that social entrepreneurs will somehow “save the world”. This view has limited theoretical and practical research on the ability to learn from SE’s failures, which can actually provide important insights (Margiono et al., 2019). SE research also faces theoretical and methodological dilemmas. Though scholars may agree to a certain point on what characteristics belong to SE, the absence of consensus complicates research and the accumulation of knowledge (Abu-Saifan, 2012). SE research also overly relies on descriptive, atheoretical case studies that impose difficulties on the generalization of results (Dacin et al., 2011). Also, questions arise on how to measure the intended social impact and its benefits due to its nonquantifiable, multicausal and temporal dimensions (Arogyaswamy, 2017; Austin et al., 2012b; Barraket & Yousefpour, 2013). This difficulty poses a threat to the legitimacy of SE in terms of its contribution to society (Ibáñez, 2022).

2.3. Social entrepreneurship and the sustainability lens

Lubberinck (2019) acknowledged that social entrepreneurship can play an important role in addressing challenges faced by society. It is to this end more than just a business development option, but a key contributor to sustainable development (Stenn, 2017).

First, SE provides innovative solutions to address sustainability problems. Innovation has been brought forward as a must for sustainable development (K. F. Mulder, 2007), and, as it is an essential part of SE, it tackles environmental and social difficulties by bringing in new perspectives that positively contribute to communities and their environment.

Moreover, SE aims to create a social impact. By addressing issues such as poverty (Zhang et al., 2022), education (Catherall & Richardson, 2017), healthcare (Amini et al., 2018), environmental degradation (Filatova & Gorbach, 2021), clean energy (Becker et al., 2017), and others, SE improves the well-being of local communities. Additionally, SE often targets vulnerable groups in society, whose interwoven change in attitudes and behaviors nurtures their empowerment. To illustrate this, studies have revealed that SE can contribute to the empowerment of women (Datta & Gailey, 2012; Haugh & Talwar, 2016; Perekrestova, 2022), ethnic minorities (Sepulveda et al., 2013), and rural and peripheral communities (Dalimunthe et al., 2021). Especially in countries where governments do not prioritize gender equality and rural development, SE can disseminate international norms that foster a better life to these disadvantaged communities (Perekrestova, 2022).

Furthermore, the interconnections between social entrepreneurship, CSR, and other sustainable business models (Cornelius et al., 2008) incorporate elements that promote responsible consumption and production. Responsible consumption and production is recognized as an important element for sustainable development, because it ensures economic and social progress while taking into account environmental protection (United Nations, 2020).

Lastly, social entrepreneurship mobilizes resources that can be important for sustainable development (Dees, 2001a). Both intangible (relationships, passion, experience, etc.) and tangible resources (investments, grants, donations) find their way into social entrepreneurship, thus creating opportunities to fund sustainable projects.

3. Tourism social entrepreneurship in the Global South

As academics are just beginning to catch up with researching SE, SE within tourism - tourism social entrepreneurship (TSE) - is at an even more embryonic stage (Mottiar & Boluk, 2017). Bridging the two concepts of SE and TSE is possible because of their overarching common goal: both social tourism and SE want to eradicate social problems through social and economic value-creating activities (Altinay et al., 2016). Therefore, unlike traditional tourism ventures that tend to follow a profit-oriented capitalist approach with no regards to social aspects, TSE is a market-driven approach that addresses these social problems and minimizes negative impacts of the tourism industry (Aquino et al., 2018). They do so by mobilizing ideas, capacities, resources and social agreements for sustainable social transformation (Sheldon & Daniele, 2017).

Because of these idealized views, TSE holds great potential to serve as a vehicle for the sustainable development of communities (Aquino, 2022). TSE leads to a more social and inclusive local development, as it often targets disadvantaged or excluded communities or individuals (Aquino et al., 2018). Notwithstanding the tendency to be primarily small to medium-sized entities (Dredge, 2017), studies have shown that TSE may improve livelihoods (Laeis & Lemke, 2016), enhance educational programs (Franzidis, 2019), and alleviate poverty (B. Zeng, 2018). Especially in developing countries, TSE can emerge as an important approach to alleviate a range of socio-economic and environmental issues that local governments fail to address (Dredge, 2017). Moreover, it creates a more sustainable tourism industry (de Lange & Dodds, 2017).

There is a multiplicity of ways in which TSE can be adopted. Based on SE's role in the tourism value chain and system, three types of TSE can be distinguished: the 'supplier' to, 'provider' of, and 'intermediary' of the tourism experience (Aquino et al., 2018; Day & Mody, 2017). 'Suppliers' are the entities that contribute to the tourism experience by providing souvenirs, food and other tangible products to tourists, whereas 'providers' directly develop and manage tourism experiences (Day & Mody, 2017). Intermediaries at last, such as tour operators, promote responsible tourism and influence public views on social issues to the market by selling commercial activities (Aquino et al., 2018).

Over the last two decades, TSEs are rising on a worldwide scale (von der Weppen & Cochrane, 2012). However, there are no empirical studies that document the true extent of TSE, as case studies have not been substantially researched (Sheldon & Daniele, 2017). Further, there is a research gap on the evaluation processes of TSEs, because the traditional approach focuses mainly on the monetary impact TSEs create (Daye & Gill, 2017).

Even though (T)SE displays different trajectories and features from place to place (Bega et al., 2021), it faces certain challenges in the Global South. It is assumed that the entrepreneurial ecosystem in which SE is situated influences its functioning (Roundy, 2017) and this ecosystem, unfortunately, happens to be underdeveloped in the Global South (World Economic Forum, 2013). Especially the governments' lack of institutional and policy support make it difficult to enable optimal conditions where TSE can thrive (Dredge, 2017). The difficulties to expand other elements such as human capital, financial resources and scaling up (Eiselein & Dentchev, 2022) can also be more difficult in developing countries. Also, low levels of education and infrastructure complicate these matters (Chandra, 2022).

3.1. Tourism social entrepreneurship in Latin-America

Despite a growing interest over the past several years, there are still very few studies related to (T)SE in Latin America (García Alonso et al., 2020). The lack of a unified definition and the use of different approaches to identify a firm's position in the (T)SE field are challenges this kind of research restricts (Ibáñez, 2022).

Starting with the northernmost country of Latin America, Clausen (2017) sheds light on a transnational case where US Americans set up TSEs in Mexico. In doing so, they find that besides generating economic wealth, socio-cultural issues in marginalized Mexican communities can be addressed through the TSE's exerted power on authorities. It sets an example of how existing power structures can be altered because of the network ties of TSE.

Further, Espinoza Sánchez et al. (2018a, 2018b, 2022) investigated TSE in the Mexican states of Jalisco and Nayarit. They found that TSE in rural areas can empower locals in terms of economic development and improved access to information (Espinoza Sánchez et al., 2018a), that TSEs can be a catalyst for endogenous local development in terms of a better life quality, protection of natural and cultural heritage and women empowerment (Espinoza Sánchez et al., 2018b), and that the impact of COVID-19 on the sustainability of TSE's partnerships shows to be very different from stakeholder to stakeholder (Espinoza Sánchez et al., 2022).

Saiz-Álvarez (2018) looked into detail how TSE works in the UNESCO World Heritage Site and "Magic Town" of the village of Tequila. With the aim of finding out if the interplay between the tequila industry, TSE and prestigious protective titles contributed to reducing poverty. They found out that this interconnection has a rather small impact on poverty reduction and might even limit the creation of other economic alternatives. The interplay does foster the strengthening of gastronomic tourism, nature, and substitute beverages.

In a final case study in Mexico, Gómez Diaz & Ramírez Melendez (2021) aimed at identifying tourism social entrepreneurs and businesses in the area of Huatulco, because of the recent rapid rise of these ventures in the region. The research also confirms that TSE is a good pathway for local empowerment, the smaller firms that are positioned against big corporations in the tourism sector.

Going more south, Franzidis (2019) examined the business model of a successful TSE in Nicaragua. This study showed that tourism can benefit a local community, as all associated stakeholders shared benefits from their partnership.

In Colombia, González-Cortés & Husain-Talero (2020) researched how TSE can function as a baseline in post-conflict regions. The research puts an emphasis on an integrated approach that involves all associated partners and institutions, to overcome the threats and difficulties TSE faces. Their study also found that TSE does not only benefit from peace processes, but simultaneously contributes to them.

Further, Mendoza Macías & Loja Macías (2018) and Lucas Mantuano et al. (2019) analyzed TSE in coastal Ecuador. Mendoza Macías & Loja Macías' (2018) exploratory research found that TSE positively supports the socioeconomic levels of society, but has not been developed extensively despite the state's promotion. In Lucas Mantuano et al. (2019), TSE has been indicated as a

source that favors sustainable development, also majorly because of its profitable socio-economic dimension.

Some studies have also emphasized the role of B-Corps in tourism. [Zebryte & Jorquera \(2017\)](#) focus on this in a Chilean context, whereby they looked at how these ventures achieve the desired impact of this kind of business model. They found that especially in vulnerable communities, the collaborations for impact tend to be the most effective. Yet, a more open political discussion is needed between the negative consequences of the traditional economy and the socio-environmental problems B-Corps try to resolve.

Lastly, [Acevedo-Duque et al. \(2021\)](#) investigates B-Corps as a potential recovery approach for the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America. In this study, the authors conclude that B-Corps develop a more inclusive and sustainable economy that benefits society, which is necessary to address the problems caused by COVID-19. The global crisis also created the possibility to rethink the traditional economic model and create space for other alternatives such as B-Corps.

Aforementioned research projects indicate a presence of TSE in different Latin American countries. Still, due to various reasons, Central Latin America - consisting of Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama - lags behind other developing regions of the world in terms of implementing (T)SE ([Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship, 2017](#)). These countries are small in population and do not possess well-developed infrastructures, making it difficult to carry out (T)SE. However, at the same time, this atmosphere creates opportunities for leapfrogging, the ability to make big leaps forward ([Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship, 2017](#)). With the help of foreign multinational institutions and development cooperations, SE has been promoted in Latin America in the last decade, which can also foster SE in tourism ([Fundación Ecología y Desarrollo, 2016](#); [New Ventures et al., 2019](#)).

III. Empirical study

4. Research Methodology

The goal of this study is to examine the link between social entrepreneurship and sustainable development in ViaVia Travelers Cafés. This is achieved by a set of qualitative methods that are presented hereafter.

4.1. Qualitative research methods

The investigation of social entrepreneurship and sustainability of ViaVia Travelers Cafés happens through qualitative research. Qualitative research may be defined by a unique set of methods that deems to investigate a certain subject in-depth (Roller, 2019). For this work, the motivation of choice is grounded by the subject in question; qualitative research methods are the prime methods to address the dynamics of social structures (Winchester & Rofe, 2000), and to understand reasons on why or how these interactions take place (Apuke, 2017). As the nature of social entrepreneurship integrates social structures, qualitative research methods are found to be appropriate to study this field (Fernandes et al., 2017; Staicu, 2021), which also applies to the field of sustainable development (Olejnik & Reshetkova, 2021). Through this method, a degree of subjectivity can be expected, and this will result in specialized findings that are less generalizable (Apuke, 2017). Still, qualitative methods can offer interesting insights that explore the multiple realities of the subjects in question by going beyond the facts and delving into the social interactions, behavior, and intentions, rather than outcomes (Apuke, 2017).

4.2. Research design: case study and comparative research

In this thesis, a case study and comparative research approach are adopted. According to Harling (2012), a case study is defined as a holistic qualitative research method “that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its natural setting” (p.1). Comparative research, instead, seeks to improve the understanding of observed similarities and differences between the data of two or more existing cases (Pickvance, 2005).

With the purpose of getting a complete picture of social entrepreneurship and sustainability within ViaVia León, a case study is suitable because of its in-depth study characteristics (Krusenvik, 2016). The obtained empirical, context-rich data is considered to have a meaningful internal validity (Krusenvik, 2016), and is well-suited for research in social sciences (Biba Starman, 2013). Within social entrepreneurship research, the case study method has been extensively applied (Dacin et al., 2011). However, a single case study is often doubted to show limitations to generalization because of its microscopic examination (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2012). This is where comparative research comes in handy; by comparing the data of other ViaVia in the Global South, it is possible to understand which elements are unique to ViaVia León, and which ones are more general to the network.

During the field work, participative observation was also used, although this was not the original intention. Observation entails “the systematic description of the events, behaviors, and artifacts of a social setting” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 79) and is used in social sciences as a research method (Kawulich, 2012). The author participated in various activities revolving around the

operation of ViaVia León or its stakeholders (Table 1), spent a considerable amount of time in the establishment outside the research phase, and reflected on this in a personal blog. Because this research method was not intended from the beginning, it was not well-developed in advance. Nevertheless, we did not want to miss an unforeseen opportunity, and the observations gained in this manner provided a valuable opportunity for deeper insights.

Table 1. Participation in activities of ViaVia León's stakeholders

Overview involved activities				
No.	Stakeholder	Activity	Place	Date
1	Volcano Day	Volcano Boarding	Cerro Negro	15/10/2022
2	ViaVia León	Trivia Night	León	17/10/2022, 07/11/2022, 05/12/2022, 12/12/2022
3	Auténtico vzw	Participate in their day to day activities	El Tamarindo	22/11/2022
4	ViaVia León	Friday night live music	León	25/11/2022
5	Volcano Day	One-day hike	Telica	26/11/2022
6	Volcano Day	Beach visit	Las Peñitas	27/11/2022, 04/12/2022, 09/12/2022, 14/12/2022

4.3. Data collection

To uncover all the new information, semi-structured interviews were adopted. This data gathering tool entails a blend of probing open-ended and closed questions that aim to obtain in-depth data. Semi-structured interviews were adapted to relevant target groups (Figure 2), and allowed to make adjustments during the data collection (Adams, 2015). This kind of interview is qualified for research that applies a case study approach (Holmes, 2009), as well as for comparative research (Pagliarin et al., 2023).

The collection of the data happened in two stages. The first part of the research drew on the author's fieldwork experience in León, Nicaragua, that took place from October to December 2022. The author autonomously performed semi-structured interviews that were set up either by herself or by one of the managers of ViaVia León, who also supervised the field research. These interviews aimed to seek information on how ViaVia León, the case study in question, relates to social entrepreneurship and sustainability. This resulted in 30 interviews with the ViaVia managers, employees, tourists, locals, associated tourism agency (Volcano Day), and NGO (Auténtico vzw). These interviews ranged from half an hour up to four hours, and went relatively well in the author's opinion, with many of the participants appearing happy to contribute. All performed interviews - except for the managers and head of the associated NGO - were undertaken in Spanish with no translator, as Spanish is, besides Dutch, the author's mother tongue. The managers' and NGO's interviews were performed, instead, in Dutch. All interviews in this stage were conducted in person (Figure 2).

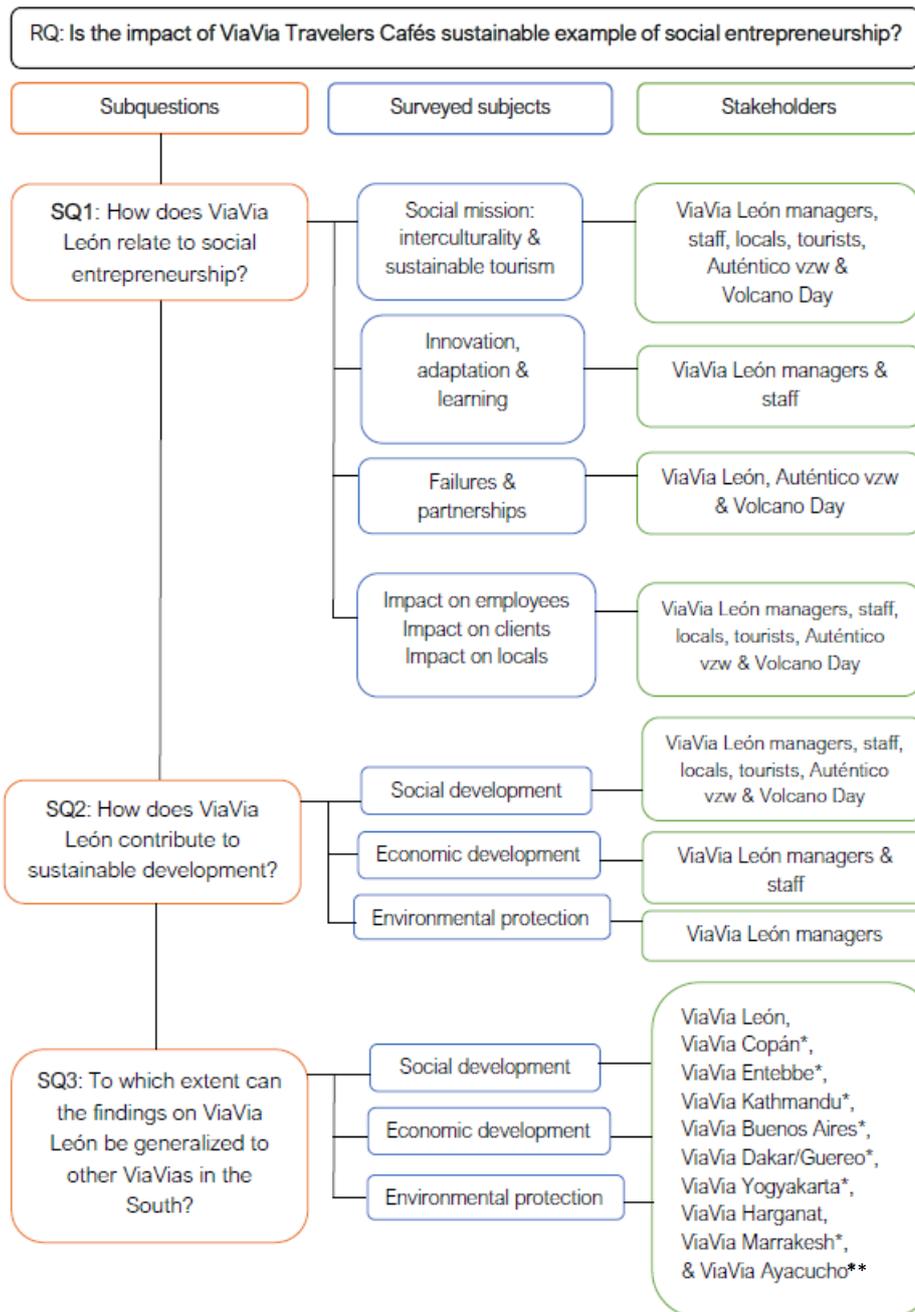


Figure 2. Surveyed subjects and stakeholders according to each subquestion. * = performed online, ** = based on document.

For the comparative element of the thesis, interviews were conducted with other ViaVia in the Global South as part of the author's internship ([Appendix 1: Internship experience at ViaVia Tourism Academy](#)) at the ViaVia Tourism Academy (VITA) in Mechelen, from December 2022 to March 2023. The purpose of the internship was to compose brochures on how the ViaVia 'abroad' (outside of Belgium) perform in the field of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and therefore had a different interview form than the ones conducted in Nicaragua. Respectively, ten interviews with the owners of ViaVia were conducted during the internship, with ViaVia Copán, Entebbe, Kathmandu, Buenos Aires, Dakar/Guereo, Yogyakarta, Harganat, Ayacucho and Marrakesh. Most of them were conducted in Dutch, otherwise in English (Harganat/ partly Kathmandu) or Spanish (Buenos Aires) and were either held online or in person.

The recording of all interviews happened online through Teams or in person with the recording device of the author's mobile phone. An overview of the details of all 40 interviews is presented in Table 2 (fieldwork interviews) and in Table 3 (internship interviews).

In terms of the participant observation, impressions by the author were written down weekly in a personal blog. The gathered information was later collected in a Word file.

4.4. Research protocol

Upon arrival in Nicaragua, associated stakeholders of ViaVia León (employees, NGO, tourism agency) were briefed by the managers on the reason of the author's visit. For the remaining interviewees there, being the locals and tourists, the author introduced the research personally. In the case of the interviews with the ViaVias in the Global South, the project manager of ViaVia TA informed the ViaVias in question by e-mail, where she introduced the purpose of the author's internship, after which she contacted them personally.

Prior to the start of each interview, participants were informed on the goal, set up and process of the study. In this briefing it was made clear that participants' anonymity was guaranteed, and that they were free to elaborate as much as they felt comfortable with. At the end of the interview, participants had the opportunity to share other insights or information and ask questions.

4.5. Data analysis

To obtain information from the yielded semi-structured interviews, the following procedure was put to practice for the analysis:

Apart from the first five interviews that were transcribed manually, interviews were transcribed with the transcription software of Microsoft Word. This yielded nearly perfect results for the English interviews, relatively good results for the interviews in Spanish and moderate results for the ones in Dutch. To ensure accuracy, the transcribed interviews were corrected by the author by listening to the recordings once again. Transcribing the interviews made it easier for the author to recognize themes of interest for the codes.

For the analyses, the yielded interviews were processed and coded through NVivo 1.7.1. (Lumivero, 2023), a software that allows qualitative data analysis. Coding entails the operation of labeling coherent portions of empirical data to themes of interest relevant for a study (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). It is an effective way to reduce large amounts of empirical data and make data accessible for analysis (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Thanks to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, codes for relevant themes for analysis were predetermined (Table 3). The predetermined codes allowed to obtain information deductively, although the author also investigated unforeseen subjects inductively because of the possible interesting elements that could come forward that way. The yielded quotes in the thesis were translated from the original language into English through the online translation tool DeepL. These quotes can be found in their original language in [Appendix 2: Translated quotes](#).

Table 2. Overview field work details

Overview interviewees ViaVia León							
No.	Interview name	Gender	Age	Profile	Occupation	Educational level	Year
1	Manager_1	M	35	Owner	Manager	College	2022
2	Manager_2	M	53	Owner	Manager	University	2022
3	VDAY	M	35	Associated tour operator	Manager tour operator	University	2022
4	NGO_1	M	46	Associated NGO	Founder NGO	College	2022
5	Employee_1	F	33	Employee	Cleaning	Primary	2022
6	Employee_2	M	32	Employee	Cashier/Bartender/Receptionist	College	2022
7	Employee_3	M	42	Employee	Cashier/Bartender/Receptionist	University	2022
8	Employee_4	M	45	Employee	Cashier/Bartender/Receptionist	University	2022
9	Employee_5	M	29	Employee	Cook	University	2022
10	Employee_6	F	59	Employee	Cleaning	Secondary	2022
11	Employee_7	F	25	Employee	Cook	Primary	2022
12	Employee_8	M	48	Employee	Security	Secondary	2022
13	Employee_9	F	42	Employee	Cook	Primary	2022
14	Employee_10	M	29	Employee	Waiter	Primary	2022
15	Employee_11	F	41	Employee	Cleaning	Secondary	2022
16	Employee_12	M	38	Employee	Waiter/Bartender	Secondary	2022
17	Employee_13	F	37	Employee	Cook	Secondary	2022
18	Employee_14	F	56	Employee	Cook	Primary	2022
19	Employee_15	F	35	Employee	Waiter	University	2022
20	Employee_16	F	28	Employee	Waiter	Secondary	
21	Tourist_1	M	26	Tourist	Student	College	2022
22	Tourist_2	M	26	Tourist	Computer Scientist	College	2022
23	Tourist_3	M	24	Tourist	Consultant	University	2022
24	Tourist_4	M	26	Tourist	Student	College	2022
25	Tourist_5	F	23	Tourist	Student	University	2022

26	Local_1	M	30	Local	Student	University	2022
27	Local_2	M	21	Local	Student	College	2022
28	Local_3	F	23	Local	Cook	Primary	2022
29	Local_4	M	46	Local	Company owner	College	2022
30	Local_5	F	32	Local	Teacher	College	2022

Table 3. Overview interviews internship VVTA

Overview interviews internship				
No.	Interview name	ViaVia	In person/online/Other	Year
1	VV1	León	In person	2022
2	VV2	Copán	Online	2022
3	VV3	Entebbe	Online	2022
4	VV4	Kathmandu	Online	2023
5	VV5	Buenos Aires	Online	2023
6	VV6	Dakar/Guereo	Online	2023
7	VV7	Yogyakarta	Online	2023
8	VV8	Harganat	In person	2023
9	VV9	Marrakesh	Online	2023
10	VV10	Ayacucho	Other: based on ViaVia World (2018)	2023

Table 3. Coding scheme

	Theme	Codes
Social entrepreneurship	Social mission with social values	Diversity - Connectivity - Intercultural entrepreneurship - Sustainable tourism
	Innovation, adaptation, and learning	Learning moments – Innovation – Adaptation -Policy/strategy
	Acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand	Partnerships - Finances - Corruption - Conflicts - Failures
	Exhibiting heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created	Impact on employees - Impact on clients - Impact on locals - Impact of employees on ViaVia - Impact of tourists on ViaVia - Impact of locals on ViaVia
Sustainable development	Economic development	Welfare - Creating jobs - Finances
	Social development	Discrimination/inclusion - Education - Gender - Diminishing poverty - Partnerships
	Environmental protection	Local products and services - Sustainability norms - Food - Plastic - Recycling - Energy - Water - Sustainable transport

4.6. Limitations

While the utmost effort was done to interview all stakeholders connected to ViaVia León, it is unfortunate that two important views miss: INTUR¹, the national tourism institute, and the cliniclown² initiative that VVL supports as charity. Conducting an interview with both stakeholders was, unfortunately, denied; the former was denied with no explanation: after repeatedly having contacted them to schedule a meeting, the author was told to contact the Ministry of Foreign affairs instead. As for the latter, the author aborted the interview herself upon request of the managers from ViaVia León. Having obtained information from these two sources could have made the research, however, richer in nature because 1) ViaVia León is influenced by the political situation, thus, having an insight into how the government thinks about SEs could be interesting, and because 2) the charity could have provided a better view on ViaVia León's impact in terms of social value creation. It's a limitation the author was confronted with during the fieldwork and wherefore no direct solution exists because of the exogenous nature of the problem. If the country's political conditions would improve in the future, it could be interesting to disclose the missing voices in further research.

For the comparative element also two stakeholders miss: ViaVia Mopti and ViaVia Grand-Popo. Because of the political situation in Mali, and the uncertain future of the ViaVia in Mopti, the author was commented by her internship supervisor that an interview would better not take place. As for ViaVia Grand-Popo, the recent opening and weak communication from the owners of the premise also led to the cancel of the interview.

For the interviews that were performed with the different ViaVia Travelers Cafés worldwide during the internship for VVTA, a certain bias might be expected. The interviews were conducted in light of making brochures that shed light on ViaVia's positive ideology and efforts that contribute to sustainability in general, thus possibly neglecting negative aspects in their operations. The fact that the author was not able to fact-check this, contrary to the findings of ViaVia León, could lead to the interviewees possibly exaggerating their claims. Therefore, assessing the sustainability aspects in person through an unbiased setting would be a good practice for further research. In this sense, it could also have been interesting to interview ViaVias that have closed over time ([Appendix 4: Timeline of ViaVias](#)), to see what (unsustainable) factors led them to close/fail. In this sense, the interview with ViaVia Dakar can show us some actions of a ViaVia that has recently closed due to relocation³.

¹ Instituto Nicaragüense de Turismo

² A specialized trained clown that helps to distract sick children in hospitals. This charity is the only existing cliniclown in Nicaragua.

³ 'ViaVia Guereo' is the place where the ViaVia from Dakar is relocated to.

5. Case study context

5.1. Nicaragua

Often referred to as the 'land of lakes and volcanoes', Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America by size. Its capital is Managua, the official language is Spanish, and the currency is the córdoba nicaragüense. Despite its size, its number of inhabitants is rather low with only 6.8 million ([The World Bank Data, 2023b](#)). Nicaragua has suffered long series of civil conflicts and economic instabilities since its independence, which resulted in several revolutions and a weaker position in the world system ([Feinberg, 2018](#)). Nowadays, Nicaragua is considered one of the least developed countries in Central America, being the second poorest in the Americas and the Northern Hemisphere in terms of nominal GDP, right after Haiti ([International Monetary Fund, 2023](#)).

Due to its unique socio-economic challenges ([Appendix 3: Nicaragua as a developing country](#)) and tourism potential (section [5.2. From boom to bust: the importance of tourism in Nicaragua and its policies](#)), Nicaragua serves as a compelling case study for research on TSE. Research on SE and TSE in Nicaragua is minimal ([Franzidis, 2019](#)), therefore this thesis is an interesting opportunity to bring down this research gap. Also, despite its natural richness and cultural history, tourism arrivals have been set back to levels of 20 years ago due to the recent crises in 2018 (political upheaval) and 2020 (COVID-19 pandemic) ([INTUR, 2020](#)). The presence of TSEs in Nicaragua can, if operated sustainably, could translate into a positive development in terms of social, economic, and environmental improvement. Especially for Nicaragua, TSE's innovative approaches can address issues the country has been struggling with for a long time, and empower local communities ([Lubberinck, 2019](#)).

5.2. From boom to bust: the importance of tourism in Nicaragua and its policies

Tourism plays a significant role in Nicaragua's economy and is an important sector for the country. By being a relatively inexpensive country to travel through and by hosting a diverse range of natural landscapes, Nicaragua attracts tourists from all over the world. Besides the natural richness, including surfer's beaches, lakes and rainforests, Nicaragua also offers a unique cultural heritage, with historic sites and colonial architecture that make the country an appealing tourist destination ([Lonely Planet, 2019](#)).

Regarding the profile of Nicaraguan tourists, about half are foreign and predominantly male (60%) ([INTUR, 2020](#)). Most foreigners are of Central American nationality (66%), followed by North Americans (22%), Europeans (5%), South Americans (2%) and people from elsewhere (5%). Most of the tourists have enjoyed higher education and travel solo, entering Nicaragua either via land (68%), or via air at the International Airport "Augusto César Sandino" (32%). High season is between December and January ([INTUR, 2020](#)).

Tourism services are the main contributors to the Nicaraguan economy's gross domestic product (GDP), making up about 6.8% ([Statista, 2023](#)). Besides the revenues gained directly from tourism, (foreign) investment is also considered to be of noteworthy importance ([UNCTAD, 2013](#)). Furthermore, jobs in tourism have slowly been increasing over the past decade, with now around 50,000 employees in the sector ([UNWTO, 2022](#)). Tourism also plays an empowering role for

women, as they represent 73% of the sector (N. Mulder, 2020). Yet, women in Nicaragua’s tourism sector earn on average 30% less than men and occupy insecure, low-status jobs (Moreno, 2015).

Despite the positive impact of tourism, it is worth noting that Nicaragua’s tourism potential has not always been present and currently faces, like any other sector in the country, sociopolitical and environmental challenges. Since 1990, after years of political and revolutionary turmoil, Nicaragua made a change of pace by turning to tourism as a strategic industry for the country’s development (Babb, 2004). Thanks to some neoliberal economic reforms, money was primarily invested in tourism services along the coast and in colonial cities, which breathed new life into the city of León and the tourist triangle of San Juan del Sur, Granada, and Ometepe (Cañada, 2010). Slowly, outsiders began to recognize the potential of tourism in Nicaragua, calling it the “new Costa Rica” (Lavanchy et al., 2020), which eventually resulted in a tourist boom (Cañada, 2010). Over the course of almost 30 years, tourist arrivals increased sixfold, with a peak of 1,958,000 arrivals in 2017 (INTUR, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, 2020). This boom in tourism provided a significant increase in jobs and foreign investment that benefited to the local economy, and which was expected to keep increasing (Lavanchy et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, the tourist boom came to a halt in 2018. Because of the political upheaval, tourism arrivals came to a virtual standstill (Gallón, 2018) (Figure 3).

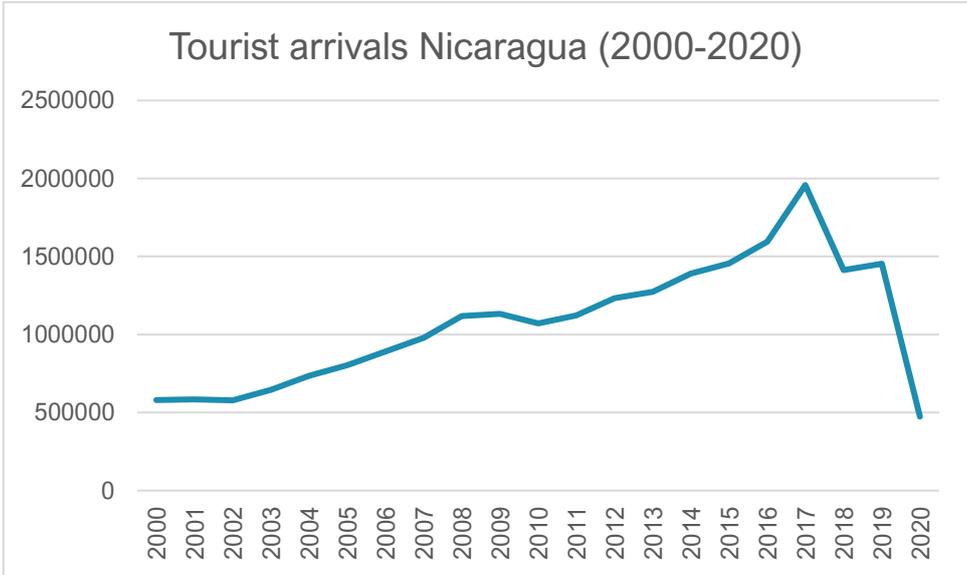


Figure 3. Tourist arrivals in Nicaragua from the past two decades (Based on INTUR 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017 & 2020).

Although tourists were not banned or targeted during those months, people feared to visit the country (Gallón, 2018). Even today, foreign instances give a rather negative advice on travelling to Nicaragua because of the sociopolitical tensions in the country (FOD Buitenlandse Zaken, 2022; Travel.State.GOV, 2023). This bad reputation caused tourist rates to drop by almost 30% in 2018, which was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (-83%) in 2020 (INTUR, 2020). Nicaragua took measures to partially restrict flows of foreign visitors in the first months of the pandemic, but still allowed domestic travel – going against the measures taken by most Latin American countries (N. Mulder, 2020). The true extent of the impact of the pandemic on tourism

remains still largely unknown because of a lack of data (N. Mulder, 2020), but it is a matter of fact that the consecutive crises have taken their toll on small and medium tourism businesses (Olivares, 2022). Until today, the tourism sector has not recovered to its original pre-2018 levels, yet exact numbers are lacking (INTUR, 2020).

On the governance of tourism in Nicaragua, the government ministry INTUR is the prime entity in charge of developing and managing national tourism (INTUR, 2023). INTUR's role is to sustainably develop national tourism, promote Nicaragua as a tourism destination and implement tourism policies, strategies, projects and programs in order to reduce poverty and improve Nicaragua's wellbeing (INTUR, 2023). Besides INTUR, CANATUR (Cámara Nacional de Turismo de Nicaragua) and CANTUR (Cámara Nicaragüense de Pequeños y Medianos Empresarios Turísticos) are two recognized tourism associations that are organized according to the ability and level of their partners and companies. While CANATUR brings together different tourism entities as a non-profit union (CANATUR, 2023), CANTUR encompasses small and medium tourism businesses, thereby aggregating around 85% of Nicaragua's tourism offer (UNCTAD, 2013).

The primary law for tourism development, promotion and regulation is Law No. 306 ("Law of Incentives for the Tourism Industry of the Republic of Nicaragua", aka the General Tourism Law) (UNCTAD, 2013). This regulatory legislation, enacted in 1999, is carried out by INTUR and until recently also by ProNicaragua: a public-private organization that used to take care of business development in the tourism sector among others. However, ProNicaragua has been reformed to a new secretary that lies under direct supervision of the current government (Nicaragua Investiga, 2022). Most importantly, Law 306 governs (foreign) tax incentives. Since its existence, it has boosted the local economy and improved tourism infrastructure with over 500 projects and over US\$800 million of influx (UNCTAD, 2013).

Moreover, the General Tourism Law aims to safeguard historic monuments, sites, intangible heritage and their environment in a sustainable manner (UNESCO, 2003). With this law, Special Tourism Development Zones (Z.E.P.D.T.) are established that divide Nicaragua into six zones of interest, which are given maximum priority of tourism development (UNESCO, 2003).

Within the regulatory framework related to tourism, Nicaragua also approved Law 694 on "Income Promotion Law for Retired Residents and Income Residents" in 2009 (Visita Nicaragua, 2019). This law permits pensioners and rentiers to enjoy their stay or retirement and be exempted from paying tourist taxes, making it an appealing way for foreigners to be lured into Nicaragua.

Tourism has the capacity to further grow in Nicaragua and strengthen the country (Franzidis, 2019; UNCTAD, 2013). Social entrepreneurship in the field of tourism could, therefore, hold a strong potential to safeguard sustainable development in this growing sector.

5.3. Landscape of social entrepreneurship and corporate culture

Not much is known about the landscape of social entrepreneurship in Nicaragua, and even less about SE in the tourism sector. Only one paper written by Franzidis (2019) examines a social business located in Granada, which happens to revolve around tourism.

Nicaragua has been indicated as a well suited country for the implementation of SE (Cardoza, 2019). When looking up Nicaraguan SEs online, a diverse range can be found in areas of poverty

reduction ([Compañeros Inc, 2017](#); [JustHope, 2023](#); [Winds of Peace Foundation, 2019](#)), education ([Hotel con Corazón, 2023](#); [UNICEF, 2022](#)), health ([PSI, 2022](#)), women empowerment ([Guido Creates, 2018](#); [Pro Mujer, 2022](#); [Sirenitas Surf Club, 2022](#)), microcredits ([Fundenuse, 2023](#)), agriculture ([iDE, 2023](#); [SosteNica, 2020](#); [TechnoServe, 2023](#)), coffee ([Gold Mountain Coffee Growers, 2020](#); [Las Chicas del Café, 2023](#); [Pachamama Coffee Farmers, 2023](#); [Vega Coffee, 2023](#)), and the protection of the environment ([3rd Creek Foundation, 2014](#); [Sos Nicaragua, 2023](#)). It is noteworthy that the majority of these SEs are created and implemented by foreigners or Nicaraguans living abroad.

However, with the systematic dismantling of civil society groups by the Ortega regime ([UNHR, 2023](#)), it is unknown how many *social* enterprises are still present and active in the country. In May 2022, a new law came into force that further restricts the functioning of civil society ([United Nations, 2022](#)). Under the guise of preventing money laundering and the financing of terrorism, this law imposes governmental approval for all activities and a more complex registration process. Moreover, it sets a limit of 25% of foreign members involved in civil society organizations, thereby restricting funding and participation opportunities in a country where available resources are already very low.

Before the political upheaval and COVID-19 pandemic, there used to be a few social enterprises active in the tourism sector in the form of hotels, cafés, or conservation projects ([Lewis, 2018](#)). As [Franzidis \(2019\)](#) pointed out, hotels' profits can be used to invest in education and work. [Franzidis' \(2019\)](#) example was found in Granada, and similar projects were to be found elsewhere in Nicaragua: still actively in Estelí ([Casa Vínculos, 2023](#)), and until recently in Ometepe ([Hacienda Merida, 2022](#)). Also found in Granada is a SE café run by deaf people ([Tio Antonio, 2023](#)). In León, ViaVia is the only social enterprise to be found that combines the aspect of hostel and bar/restaurant. One other TSE, Sos Nicaragua, can also be identified in its surroundings. Sos Nicaragua supports social and environmental conservation projects all around Nicaragua by committing to the principles of community tourism, sustainable development, and solidarity economy ([Sos Nicaragua, 2023](#)). Here too, foreigners are predominantly the founders of the different TSEs.

5.4. ViaVia as an example of social entrepreneurship in the South

ViaVia Travelers Cafés are an international chain of cafés with Belgian roots, of which the majority are located in the Global South ([Dobson et al., 2018](#)). The ViaVia cafes are social enterprises where, at the core, sustainable tourism and intercultural entrepreneurship meet ([ViaVia World, 2022a](#)). Nowadays, ViaVia is present in 16 different places (Figure 4), showing its success as one of the few social enterprises that scaled worldwide ([Dobson et al., 2018](#)). Most of these places combine the café with a restaurant, hostel and various local touristic activities and projects.

The history of ViaVia began in 1995, with the opening of the first ViaVias in Heverlee (Belgium) and Yogyakarta (Indonesia). Based on the idea that travelers needed a place to share knowledge with locals, JOKER (°1981) and Karavaan (°1971) created this concept of a place for intercultural encounters. Both Belgian sustainable tourism operations are situated in the same network; Joker, a travel agency, was founded by Karavaan, an organization for tour leaders. In 2001, also ViaVia Tourism Academy and Anders Reizen joined this network; the former being a new NGO that works

in the sector development cooperation for sustainable tourism and intercultural entrepreneurship, the latter an already existing walking tour operator (JOKER, 2023).



Figure 4. Locations of ViaVia Travelers Cafes as of 2023 (Source: Author)

Since the beginning of the JOKER/ViaVia network, intercultural entrepreneurship and tourism for sustainable development have stood central in their operations. This is also reflected in their overall mission: “Contributing sustainably to the dreams, needs and expectations of travelers and local partners by creating meaningful and memorable travel and intercultural experiences” (ViaVia World, 2022b). They do so by embracing four core values: encounter, openness, equality, and amazement. Based on these values, ViaVia aims to develop a worldwide network that 1) “contributes to a more open & enjoyable world where people, planet, profit and pleasure are in harmony”, 2) “connects people and make[s] them aware of the positive aspects of difference”, and 3) “creates a dialogue for learning and amazement in respect of people, culture and nature” (ViaVia World, 2018, p. 4). As one of the distinctive features of social entrepreneurship is the adherence of a social mission with social values (Dees, 2001b), ViaVia certainly fits in this criterium.

Over the years many ViaVia cafes opened, closed temporarily or forever (Appendix 4: Timeline of ViaVias). Nevertheless, their efforts and positive contributions to local communities have always been profound, acknowledged, and rewarded nationally and internationally (JOKER, 2023). Andries & Daou (2016) show the social impact Viavia Yogyakarta created through their exceptional human resource management and financial support in a multitude of projects linked to sustainable tourism. Their impact is diverse: ViaVia Yogyakarta has been able to empower vulnerable groups in society by employing them, training people for free to become tour guides, strengthening arts and educational activities, encouraging environmental awareness, and providing humanitarian assistance in crises. Dobson et al. (2018) confirm this positive impact on society but also mention that establishing the core business model of ViaVia is a prerequisite to create social value. Anyhow, the success story of balancing financial stability and social impact as in the case of ViaVia Yogyakarta formed a source of inspiration for later ViaVias. A last study by

Baldewijns (2019) researched the meaning and role of informal contacts in the ViaVias, concluding that through their sustainable framework, informal contacts are fostered.

5.5. ViaVia León

ViaVia León is located in the heart of the eponymous, vibrant, colonial city, at only two blocks from the largest cathedral in Central America (Figure 5 Figure 6). Situated at the west side of the country, León is the second most important city of Nicaragua after the capital Managua and has a population of 210,000 inhabitants. The original city of León was founded by the Spanish in 1524 on the edge of Lake Managua at the bottom of volcano Momotombo, but moved in 1610 after a disastrous earthquake had leveled the city (UNAN, 1988). The new and current location of the city was built on top of the Indian capital and shrine of Sutiaba, nowadays a suburb in the southwestern part of the city. After Nicaragua's independence in 1839, León and Granada battled repeatedly for the title of capital, until in 1858 Managua was assigned to it. Still, León is considered the intellectual and revolutionary capital of the country because of its many universities, rich history of hosting poets (such as Rubén Dario (1867-1916)), its importance in overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship in 1978-79, and the 2018 political upheaval (Visit León, 2023b).



Figure 5. Forefront of ViaVia León (Source: ViaVia World (2023)).

Because of its historical richness and impressive natural surroundings (Fout! Verwijzingsbron niet gevonden.), the city of León became a touristic landmark in Nicaragua (Aviles-Peralta et al., 2023). Touristic attractions in and around the city are the cathedral-basilica of the Assumption of Mary, La Purísima festivities, Museum of the Revolution, Ortiz Gurdían Foundation Art Center, Pacific coast towns of Poneloya and Las Peñitas, volcano boarding on the Cerro Negro, and many other volcanoes of the Cordillera de Los Maribios (Visit León, 2023a). By the end of 2017, tourism in and around León flourished (Vermeiren, 2018), showing the potential to alleviate poverty⁴ (Bridges, 2016) and safeguard local and natural heritage (Gómez Sal et al., 2006). Despite the flourishing of Leóns tourism in 2017, the sector suffered drastically from the consecutive political and COVID-19 crises, dropping foreign tourist arrivals with 95% and tourism expenditure with

⁴ Even though urban areas in Nicaragua tend to be less poor (IFAD, 2017), still more than half of Leóns population lives in poverty (Vázquez, 2016).

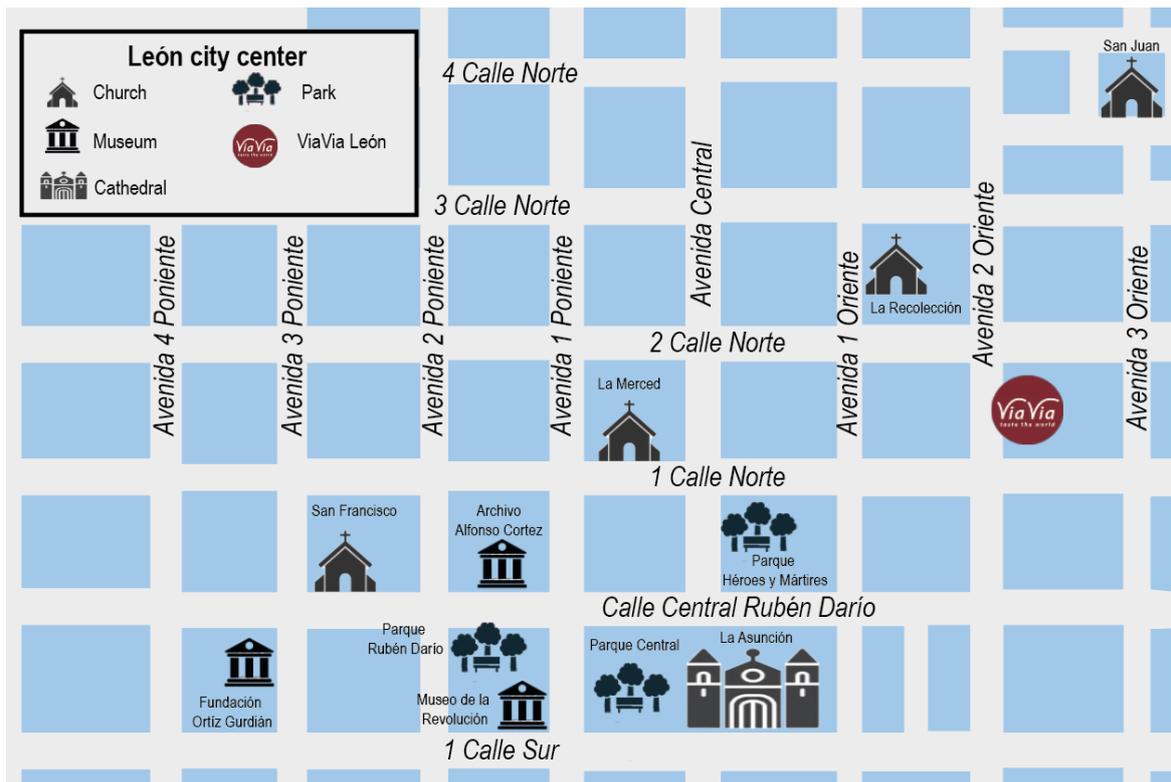


Figure 6. Map of León's city center (Source: Author).

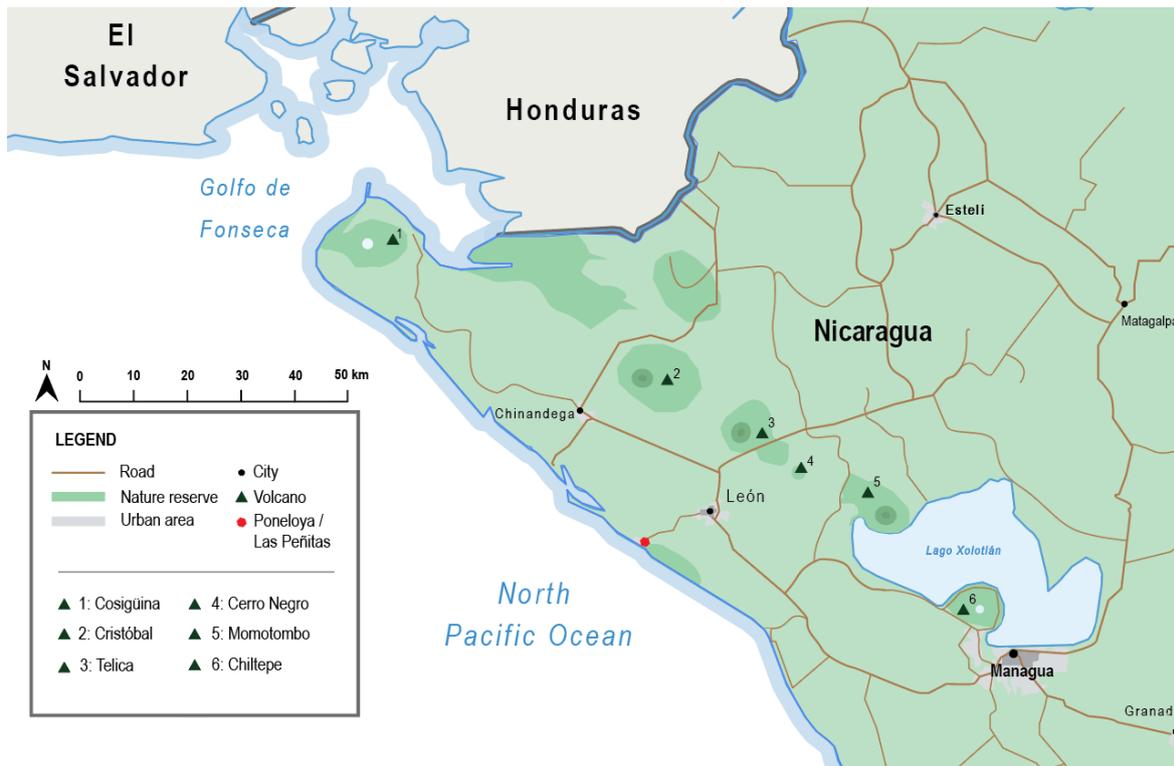


Figure 7. Touristic surroundings of León, Nicaragua (Source: Author)

96% (Aviles-Peralta et al., 2023). One of the few remaining hospitality establishments in León is ViaVia. ViaVia León (VVL) opened its doors in 2001 (Elsen, 2011). Since then, three generations of Belgian owners have passed, with now two Flemish owners managing the place together with around 20 local employees. The place itself consists of two entities: the bar-restaurant and the

hostel in the back, separated by the patio area. Volcano Day, the associated tour operator that provides volcano boarding, hiking, and camping adventures on volcanoes in the Northwest of Nicaragua, is situated in the patio of the colonial building.

Both VVL and Volcano Day advertise themselves as social enterprises. ViaVia applies the same inclusive HR policy as is promoted by the mission of ViaVia Travelers Cafés (5.4. [ViaVia as an example of social entrepreneurship in the South](#)), and primarily employs people for a long-term that mainly, and coincidentally, have a lower educational background. Volcano Day instead aspires to be a platform where local talents can be empowered, as they are the only tour operator in León that is entirely owned by Nicaraguans ([Volcano Day, 2023](#)). Both entities have been praised for their operating by major travel platforms like TripAdvisor ([Volcano Day, 2023](#)) and Lonely Planet ([Lonely Planet, 2023](#)).

6. Results & discussion

In this section the results will be discussed on how ViaVia León (VVL) relates to social entrepreneurship (6.1. [ViaVia León & social entrepreneurship](#)) and sustainable development (6.2. [ViaVia León & sustainable development](#)), and if its findings can be generalized to other ViaVia in the Global South (6.3. [Generalization of findings León to other ViaVia](#)). The part of social entrepreneurship (SE) is built on the main characteristics of Dees (2001), while the part of sustainable development on economic development, social development and environmental protection. Because the interviews with other ViaVia were performed in light of sustainable development, the social entrepreneurship dynamic will not be discussed for that part. As for VVL and all other ViaVias where the same social mission is applied, we draw the theoretical conclusion that they all act as social entrepreneurs. Similarly to VVL, the three different pillars of sustainable development will be discussed.

6.1. ViaVia León & social entrepreneurship

6.1.1. (a) Adopting a mission to create and sustain value and (b) recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission

As pointed out in 5.4. [ViaVia as an example of social entrepreneurship in the SouthFout! Verwijzingsbron niet gevonden.](#), the overall mission of ViaVia is social in its nature and embraces a clear set of social values, such as interculturality and diversity. Deducing that this same mission applies for ViaVia León (VVL), the case study in question, it should fit in the first requirement of Dees' definition of SE, being 'adopting a mission that creates and sustains value' (Dees, 2001b). On top of that, VVL embraces the motto of "cada cabeza es un mundo", translated as "every mind contains its own world". This Spanish saying is often brought in connection with Saint-Exupéry's 'The Little Prince' (as every planet is inhabited by one person) and means that each person has their own perspective. The slogan is used by VVL to show their commitment to fostering social inclusion and, intercultural connections, and to treating their workers well ([Manager_1](#)).

"In my mind, ViaVia's mission [is] to provide a place where everyone feels welcome. [...] A place where people can learn from each other. A Nicaraguan who sits next to a foreigner at the bar and spends a whole afternoon drinking beer, rum or whatever, and at the end of the day or evening knows how many brothers or sisters they each have, what their job is, how much they earn, so to speak,... actually learn from each other." ([Manager_1](#))^{TQ1}

To realize their mission, VVL adheres to a set of actions and activities which has also been observed by [Dobson et al. \(2018\)](#). In the first place, to stimulate interculturality and connectivity, the bar-restaurant provides a menu with dishes from all over the world. Many activities are also organized by VVL that stimulate cross-cultural exchange. On Mondays a Trivia night with live music is held where the collected entry price goes integrally to the associated charity. Friday nights free concerts are held where local bands can play music. Every now and then poetry evenings, book presentations and dance performances are organized, and the pool table with odd Nicaraguan play rules lets people interact with one another. In the backyard, the 'wall of myths' also allows foreigners to interact with local customs: on this wall, main characters from Nicaraguan myths are depicted as clients sitting in the setting of the VVL bar.

That these activities indeed foster intercultural exchange between foreigners and locals, is confirmed by both the tourists and locals ([Tourist_3](#), [Local_2](#)):

“[...] we were a group from like all different countries: it was me from Norway, one from Denmark, a couple from Costa Rica, one from out of Argentina, some Americans, some British, some New Zealand[er]s. Like [from] all over the world. So, I really got to know people from different countries, just at those couple of hours. I got to see Nicaragua and nature, the volcanoes, volcano boarding. On the way [to Cerro Negro], we were talking to each other, we were listening to music. We're exchanging music. We got to see nature. I got a couple of leaves from the trees in my face because the truck was driving so close to the trees that I was yeah...” ([Tourist_3](#), on his experience in VVL and with Volcano Day)^{TQ2}

“I do feel that there is that cultural exchange because several times that I was going [...] it was with local friends. But as I got to know more people, in this case German people, people from Belgium, from the United States, and different countries... I keep having the different cultural exchange, anecdotes and things that happen in their country they get to tell there. Different ways of celebrating, even different ways of consuming alcohol or food. So, I do feel that there is a great intercultural impact between the local people and the people who visit us.” ([Local_2](#))^{TQ3}

This intercultural exchange does not only come forth because of interactions among locals and tourists; within the ViaVia also different nationalities work at the same place. In the case of VVL, the managers are Belgian, while all the employees Nicaraguan. This interesting mix of different work cultures is common within the ViaVias; all Travelers Cafés work with (partly) Belgian owners and local staff⁵. Because of this interference, employees and managers get to know different customs within the hospitality sector, where they can learn from one another.

To end with, sustainable tourism is carried out by VVL's associated tourism agency, Volcano Day. Volcano Day had been set up from the beginning as a social enterprise that aims to empower local talent and works closely together with VVL, as their office is situated in the patio ([VDAY](#)). The different trips they organize to the surroundings of León are done in the most sustainable way possible: by respecting the nature (not leaving trash behind, staying on the road...), locals (paying a fair wage) and keeping an enjoyable atmosphere.

6.1.2. Engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning

When it comes to the second criterion of [Dees \(2001b\)](#) 'engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning' (p.4), we find that this is a weaker commitment than the first criterion.

Although the presence of a social enterprise in Nicaragua is rather innovative and exceptional, it must be acknowledged that further initiatives to engage in a process of innovation are less of VVL's nature. The partnership between VVL and Volcano Day may be considered innovative. VVL is the first and only hostel in León that hosts and works closely together with a tour operator, whereas other hostels organize tourism activities entirely on their own. Furthermore, as mentioned, their menu with diverse dishes from all over the world is something peculiar in León. For example: to

⁵ With the exception of Buenos Aires, that is run entirely by Argentines.

eat a 'kapsalon', a typical fast-food dish from the Netherlands and Belgium, VVL is likely to be the only place in whole Nicaragua where you can find this dish. Moreover, the bar was one of the first bars where people could sit down to drink something, after which others followed. Still, the efforts towards innovation are not per se continuous and seem not to be of an extraordinary nature.

Probably the most significant moments to VVL regarding adaptation were the consecutive crises of 2018 and 2020, respectively Nicaragua's political upheaval and COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to many other establishments in 2018, VVL decided not to close its doors and continue its operations to ensure income for their employees. They set up a system where workers could get loans for free to overcome the crisis. Even though this meant a drastic financial setback for VVL, they were able to survive with the help of the Belgian ViaVia/JOKER network, that decided to set up solidarity actions in favor of them. Similarly, VVL dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic by not closing and finding help through their network, although this network was also impacted by the crisis. Unfortunately, VVL had to dismiss several workers during the pandemic, but still offered help by continuing to pay for social security.

In general, these financial obstacles influenced their operation; VVL had to account for less income because of the drastic decline in tourist arrivals, yet also needed to find a way to not abandon their staff ([Manager_1](#)).

"Profit is super important and without more profit the ViaVia in León is going to fade away quietly [...]. But in times of crisis and during the pandemic, profit should not take precedence alone. The bottom line is that so many businesses in León have simply shut the door and left people without severance pay. I'm not going to call out names, but there are businesses here from down the street where a night guard arrived with an air conditioning unit and wanted to sell it to me because they left there with a lot of back pay, no liquidation, no vacation... [they] received nothing. We don't do that. Of course, there are limits to that because we are not an NGO. We must try to make a profit, but at times of crisis it is not our main goal, [...] even then we do try, with the help of the network in Belgium, to help people who have always worked for us in any way that we can." ([Manager_1](#))^{TQ4}

A similar remark has been made in [Dobson et al. \(2018\)](#), where it is pointed out that ViaVia's flexible and experimental approach to balance social and economic value creation allows quick adjustments to exogenous shocks – going beyond adaptation. This resulted in novel socially oriented activities and some other small changes: whereas before free coffee was offered to Nicaraguans, they introduced the 'café corona' during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paid, but still very cheap coffee allowed locals that used to profit from the free coffee to still find a way to have cheaper breakfast than elsewhere. In the same way, VVL also had to temporarily charge playing billiards, something they only used to do when the table had to be renovated.

Policies and the government are also obstacles VVL must adapt to. According to one of the managers, the government is 'luckily' not aware that VVL is a *social* entrepreneurship, because if they knew, it would threaten its further existence ([Manager_1](#)). The systematic dismantling of civil society by Ortega's regime threatens VVL's existence as the ambiguous position of SE on the non-/for-profit spectrum can potentially be turned against them. On top of that, Nicaragua has developed a defense against foreign interference that inherently poses a threat to VVL because

of their Belgian owners and network. The fact that the paperwork of one of the bosses also still has not been authorized after four years of ownership (Manager_1) induces even more stress to them, as some locals know this does not align with the country's expectations. Yet at the same time, VVL is highly regarded by INTUR León, the local governmental entity in charge of tourism. The managers think this is so because their business has always treated locals on equal terms as tourists, something which is not always applicable in other places with foreign owners (Manager_1, Manager_2).

Still, even when VVL wants to commit to all legalities, escaping from corruption is another difficult task in Nicaragua. Recently, the country reached an all-time low on Transparency International's corruption index due to the political oppression, human rights violations and impediment of freedom of speech (Grattan, 2023). It ranks as the third lowest on this index in Latin America after Venezuela and Haiti, and 12th lowest in the whole world. No employee at VVL acknowledged corruption in their operations, but the managers state otherwise and mention that they – even though they do not support it - sometimes have been positively benefiting from it. In some cases, it is just the way to get things done:

“[...] when the hostel was built, [costs were] then put into an Excel file, and it literally said 'bribery', 'graft'. Many years later, Joker and ViaVia – the entire organization – get a full tax inspection. So, [Manager 2] didn't dwell on that it was still in there [and] forwarded [it], or ViaVia still had it and didn't think about it either. That tax inspector even laughed afterwards: 'Yes, it's a cost that you've declared, and I understand very well that that's how it works there.' And that got accepted.” (Manager_1)^{TQ5}

The other manager acknowledges fraud is present, but the scenery has been changing, which offers better ways to commit to all legalities:

“I think, in that area it has modernized, also become stricter, more controls. [...] It used to be more evident, albeit very limited. Grave corruption was never possible. But minor corruption, yes, and that used to be obvious. But that has actually all gone away [to even] [n]o corruption today. Which is not to say that if, so to speak, if a problem arises...” (Manager_2)^{TQ6}

Regarding the learning aspect of Dees' second criterion (Dees, 2001b), it must be acknowledged that all obstacles that have been mentioned for the adaptation part form an overall important learning process for VVL, namely how to deal with a government that does not welcome SEs. It's a tricky balancing act for VVL, but the fact that this Travelers Café is still present in Nicaragua more than 20 years, shows the ability to learn how to deal with this exogenous pressure. This 'diplomacy' act, in such, is probably the most important learning process for VVL, although the managers did not even mention this aspect. According to them, learning aspects entail small details such as copying some good practices from other SEs and having recently improved an administration process (Manager_1, Manager_2).

6.1.3. Acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand

The third criterion of Dees refers to the fact that SEs will not be limited by their resources in hand (Dees, 2001b). This leads them to use sources efficiently, collaborate with others, and take calculated risks when failures occur.

Resources can refer to stocked staff, materials, money, or other assets to function effectively. Staff at VVL has slightly fluctuated through the crises but is more or less stable. In terms of material resources, an advantage to VVL is that the premise is owned by ViaVia headquarters. So technically, VVL does not own the place but rents it from its own network, which has benefited them in financially difficult times. The financial stability of VVL's operation, however, is less certain. The managers did not elaborate on exact numbers, but they compared their revenues with other bar-hostels from the surroundings sometimes as twice below average ([Manager_1](#)). The cause of this 'below average' could not be directly explained but can partially be attributed to how they handled the consecutive crises of 2018 and 2020, and their socially inclusive modus operandi in general. While financial profit is the main goal for conventional entrepreneurs, the primacy of the social aspect seems to lead to less optimal conditions to pursue economic gains in the case of VVL. Yet, [Abhi \(2017\)](#) argues that SEs are able to reach the same performance levels as conventional entrepreneurs in terms of profitability.

Despite these financial difficulties, VVL tries to pursue social value creation by their own operations and through partnerships. They do so because this has been carried out from the beginning of VVL, and is something the managers acknowledge is something that characterizes being ViaVia ([Manager_1](#), [Manager_2](#)). The most important, symbiotic collaboration is with Volcano Day, with which they execute sustainable tourism. VVL allows Volcano Day to have their office within their premises, and in return Volcano Day uses VVL as a gathering place for their tourists before and after activities, bringing in revenues for VVL. Moreover, VVL works together with a charity and an NGO to create social value. The revenues from Monday's trivia night go integrally to a charity, which happened to be at the time of the author's fieldwork the only cliniclown initiative in Nicaragua, active at the children's hospital 'La Mascota' in Managua. Auténtico, a Belgian non-profit that aims to improve the living conditions of slums in and around León, also has some ties with VVL. One of ViaVia's managers namely helped to construct the garden around Auténtico's educational project in El Tamarindo, and the school itself was built by ESCUELA, the initiative that built and renewed schools in and around León partly through sponsorship of VVL. In the recent past VVL also used to support two other non-profit organizations: Las Tías and Mpowering People. The former offered a safe space for vulnerable youngsters in their day-care centers, and the latter evolved into the current Auténtico. Furthermore, VVL cooperates with local (UNAN) and Belgian educational institutions (KU Leuven and Thomas Morus) by offering internship opportunities for students in tourism or related fields. Although one could expect some networking with other hostels, bars, or NGOs in general, not much collaboration takes place.

Over the course of 22 years - since the opening of VVL - VVL has encountered a few failures. Some remained unresolved because of their minimal importance, like the unused cocktail bar or some unsuccessful activities organized together with other hostels. Others were more profound and drastically changed some habits in VVL's operations, such as the brutal murder of the night guard in 2009 and change of owners in 2017. In 2009, instead of closing doors permanently, VVL organized a gathering with the neighbors to open the premises a while after the incident happened. They did so to show support for the community and got the premises blessed by the catholic church ([Manager_2](#)). With the change of owners in 2017, the managers acknowledge things did not go smoothly, especially when it comes to the charity VVL supports. With no follow-up over the charity projects during the transition of the owners, things just fell apart and a new

charity was chosen because of personal preferences ([Manager_2](#)). This shows, unfortunately, how *ad hoc* charity projects are chosen and may also implicate the long-lasting impact VVL wants to commit to because of the sudden change of support. Also, very recently VVL had to let go one of the local managers because of fraud. To what extent this influences their operations, however, is not clear.

6.1.4. Exhibiting a heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created

To assess the impact created by VVL on its stakeholders we take a look at the employees, locals, tourists, and associated NGO's, and how they also shape VVL.

That VVL has created an impact somehow on its workers, is quite clear. By working with VVL, employees mention that their lives have changed positively because of the economic improvement in their households ([Employee_2](#), 6, 8, 10, 13), it has opened their view on the world ([Employee_3](#), 11, 12, 14, 15, 16), they have gained new skills ([Employee_1](#), 5, 10, 13), learned how to stand up for themselves ([Employee_6](#), 9, 11), or find VVL a place they can call home ([Employee_7](#), 9, 16). The employees themselves also contribute to the open environment of VVL, by showing interest in their clients and treating Nicaraguans just the same as foreigners ([Manager_1](#), [Local_1](#)).

According to tourists, the most notable impact is that ViaVia serves as a platform that develops relationships with others, both with locals and with foreigners (all tourists). An example was given in 6.1.1. (a) Adopting a mission to create and sustain value and (b) recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission, which shows how the cultural activities stimulate cultural exchange, thus fostering meaningful experiences. The fact that tourists also feel that Nicaraguans like to go there, stimulates the feeling of an authentic experience, which cannot be found everywhere:

“It was basically me and mostly people who are living there. And, I had that kind of experience once also in Guatemala, where you're just surrounded by the locals and it's just a different vibe, that's for sure, because they are there to have fun. Obviously, the travelers are there to have fun as well, but they're there in another way. They're kind of in their hometown. They're not, like, seeing it all for the first time. They're there because they genuinely like it.” ([Tourist_3](#))^{TQ7}

Especially the pool table has been mentioned by all tourists as a tool that brings locals and foreigners together (all Tourists). Because of the intercultural interactions, also certain stereotypes break down that locals have on tourists ([Tourist_2](#)).

The other way around, tourists also shape VVL. First, because of the frequent occurrence of travelers from other countries, VVL is known as the place where foreigners can be found ([Local_1](#), [Local_2](#)). Even though none of the tourists had heard about VVL or its social mission before visiting León (all Tourists), foreigners manage to find their way to VVL. According to the managers, foreign tourists come to VVL because of their name and status: VVL is mentioned on several websites⁶,

⁶ Ranging from the prestigious traveler's platforms like Lonely Planet and TripAdvisor, the trendier travel blogs, to even a website where the odd rules of playing billiard in Nicaragua are visualized by photos from VVL.

and locals stay out because the interior is ‘not neat enough’ to show off on socials ([Manager_1](#), [Manager_2](#)). This eventually results in a bar that is known to be ‘*chelero*’, meaning foreign.

Second, tourists change certain norms. VVL caters to the needs of tourists by breaking with certain cultural norms within their premises. This can range from having vegetarian options to how to deal with plastic, but these triggered changes do not always start because of intrinsic motivations. To illustrate: in the past, VVL organized one tour to cockfighting places – a rather common practice in Nicaragua – but stopped because of tourists’ judgement ([Manager_2](#)):

“Yes, that culture shock is fantastic. [...] So you also take the tourists to a suburb where they would never come on their own. [...] We did that for a very long time, every Sunday. Not to make money from it, not at all. But that is something that is less evident today than it was before. Should we do that today, it could turn against us from tourists, so to speak. Before, [it was] not an issue. We were never criticized for that. [...] I’m not anti-woke or anything – but [...] it exists here. [...] I don’t think we, as white people, should start condemning cockfighting here in Nicaragua. Leave that to the Nicaraguans.” ([Manager_2](#))^{TQ8}

The fact that these tourists break traditions and set certain western standards in the tourism sector, may also influence other places in positive ways:

“[We] basically can set standards in the industry [...]. It’s like a microenvironment here: if workers from other bars are there and see the environment, they basically find that there’s a higher standard out there. [...] So, if other workers go there and see a higher standard, they start demanding the same in their company. You know, so their whole standard goes up for the whole city for example.” ([Tourist_1](#))^{TQ9}

For locals, VVL is a known landmark in their hometown ([all Locals](#)), used to locate one another within the center, but known as the place to meet foreigners (the bar ‘*chelero*’). Yet, none of the locals recognize a serious impact in their lives ([all Locals](#)). On the contrary, according to the managers, they think VVL will have created some lasting memories for locals. This was illustrated by an example of an employee’s daughter who celebrated her *quinceañera* at VVL, the celebration of a girl’s 15th birthday and which is an important milestone in Latin American culture ([Manager_1](#)). However, this is a common tradition and is not of such an extraordinary nature. Another example was given that also ‘loners’ will always find company in VVL, which does not necessarily happen in other places ([Manager_1](#)). Locals also shape VVL in the sense that local traditions and architecture are kept visible in VVL (like the wall of myths) and were also respected with the building of the newer hostel part in the back of their premises ([Manager_1](#)).

For the associated tour agency, Volcano Day, the partnership with VVL has impacted them positively ([VDAY](#)). Both entities complement each other: whereas VVL lacked an offer of touristic activities, Volcano Day was not able to host their clients in an informal setting before and after their activities. Since Volcano Day’s relocation to VVL in 2017, the symbiotic partnership has eventually helped them to become more visible in Leóns tourism landscape. Volcano Day used to operate from an office that was not centrally situated, thus, lesser known. Since its relocation, Volcano Day has been able to grow and become the most successful tour operator in León ([Tripadvisor](#), 2023), perhaps even the best one in Nicaragua when it comes down to offering

volcano trekking. After each activity, Volcano Day provides an included meal or drink at VVL, which also generates more income and visibility for VVL. So, the partnership eventually benefits both entities and seems to be even more promising, as the founder of Volcano Day and VVL would like to expand the collaboration into more shared activities in the future (VDAY, Manager_1).

While the impact of the partnership with the associated tourism agency, Volcano Day, is quite profound, the impact on the associated NGO, Auténtico vzw, is less. When asked about the efficiency of the partnership with VVL, the founder acknowledges the partnership is a weak commitment, as it is not embedded in the operations of VVL (NGO_1): the only way in which VVL has impacted them was by helping design the garden. The founder thinks it's a pity no further help is offered to them, especially because 'they have the resources ' and many tourists pass in VVL that could serve as volunteers for Auténtico's operations. Still, no further collaborations seem to be planned, and so the social value creation stays rather limited within this partnership.

6.1.5. VVL and social entrepreneurship: major lessons learned

Through the framework of Dees (2001b) it becomes clear that the different aspects that characterize SEs are recognized in VVL but are more 'fluid' in nature than would be presumed in theory. Besides the already known characteristics of SE, through this case study, the following observations can also be concluded:

- (1) (T)SEs can serve as places where intercultural exchange and sustainable tourism take place, through the application of stimulating activities.
- (2) The political conditions in which a (T)SE is situated highly determine the functioning and further existence of a (T)SE.
- (3) TSEs impact is present on staff and associated organizations, while impact on locals is rather limited.
- (4) If embedded within an international network, TSES are able to set 'new', positive standards within the hospitality sector of another country.

6.2. ViaVia León & sustainable development

6.2.1. Economic development

In terms of contributing to economic development, our findings indicate that VVL contributes to economic development primarily by creating jobs. This can be either directly, referring to the employed staff in the hostel, bar, and restaurant, or indirectly, like the guides from Volcano Day. At the time of the fieldwork, VVL employed 20 people full-time: 6 in the kitchen, 5 for the bar, 4 for cleaning, 3 for the registration and 1 as security guard. Three more individuals worked part-time, and one freelance in the marketing part. Before the crises, a few more people used to work at VVL because the higher tourist arrivals created more work. Nevertheless, VVL offers long-term economic opportunities for both young and old, through a fair recruitment process, which can contribute to bringing down Nicaragua's unemployment rate⁷.

Second, VVL pays above average wages, which is confirmed by the employees. It depends on what position the persons are registered at and the amount of time they are working for VVL, but

⁷ 5.8% in 2022, the same percentage as the global estimate (ILOSTAT, 2022).

the pay is guaranteed to be the official minimum wage from the hospitality sector (C\$ 9,531.14; €238,42), or higher. On top of that, VVL adheres to their own '*propinas*' (tips) system. The voluntary 10% tip paid by customers is used for the kitchen and cleaning staff, so they can pay a taxi to get home safely after their late-night shifts. In case not enough tips were collected to cover the costs, VVL compliments the remaining amount. Furthermore, VVL tries to support their staff through other means, e.g., by providing free loans to overcome the 2018 political upheaval, passing around much needed devices in the COVID-19 pandemic, and ensuring social security. If a staff member gets sick or is away for maternity leave, VVL complements their received wage from INSS⁸ to the normal amount. Most employees are happy with the wage they get ([Employee_1](#), [2](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [9](#), [10](#), [11](#), [12](#), [13](#), [14](#), [15](#), [16](#)), yet a small number of employees feel that they should earn more. They state this because of the socio-political tensions the country faces ([Employee_3](#)), or because they find work harder than they actually should ([Employee_4](#)). These accusations seem to remain in the background, however, as both managers find the wages justified and do not communicate openly about the amount their employees earn ([Manager_1](#), [Manager_2](#)).

Moreover, one of the tourists mentioned the possible negative economic impact foreign volunteers at Volcano Day can have ([Tourist_2](#)). Workaway volunteers can reside in a neighboring house for free in exchange for help during the excursions to the volcanoes. Given the 'bad' economy of Nicaragua, one can ask if it is ethical to give away a 'job' to foreigners – who stay there for recreational purposes – instead of hiring a local who merits to gain? This remark has also been raised in [Vermeiren \(2018\)](#), where a former influential tour operator in León also trained foreign volunteers to become guides for treks. This raised concerns among locals, claiming they know the area better and foreigners unfairly steal a local's job. When asked about this issue, the founder of ViaVia stated that working with volunteers is not to save money, instead, they do it for the "intercultural enrichment" ([VDAY](#)). This way, local guides can learn how to interact with different attitudes they may not have encountered in Nicaragua. Thus, these volunteers can serve as an example for the local guides ([VDAY](#)), although it remains unknown if this is also understood by the locals.

Third and last, VVL makes sure to comply with the national labor legislations. While this might be seen as a basic minimum through a western viewpoint, it is important to acknowledge that developing countries face difficulties in effectively applying labor regulations. With the pressure of adopting international standards, it is possible to disseminate harmonized policies worldwide, yet the effective implementation highly depends on the politics of a country ([Dafe & Engebretsen, 2023](#)).

6.2.3. Social development

VVL tries to foster social development in the first place by enhancing an equal treatment towards everyone. Everyone is allowed in, and to work with, VVL, no matter their background.

By not allowing discrimination in the operations of VVL, discrimination is not something tourists, locals and employees should have been (openly)⁹ confronted with in VVL. Translated into practice, people from all classes are treated with respect, no entrance fee is applied at their cultural

⁸ Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social (INSS), the Nicaraguan Institute for social security.

⁹ Although no interviewee mentioned it, we cannot rule out people withheld discriminatory experiences.

activities, and free coffee is provided for those in need. Also, everyone is allowed on their premises – something where VVL used to be rather the exception than the rule:

“Nicaraguans were not allowed to enter [other hostel-bar] until 2018. [VVL’s] previous owner’s sweetheart, a journalist, goes to a party in [other hostel-bar]. They wanted to get in there, but the woman was halted at the door. This has been on the radio, in the newspapers... They shot themselves in the foot of course because with the crisis of 2018, there were no more foreign tourists. The doors suddenly opened wide for the Nicaraguans [but they] said ‘Fuck you, we’ll drink our *‘media ron plata’*¹⁰ in the ViaVia where we’ve been welcome for fifteen years now” (Manager_1)^{TQ10}

When looking at gender, we find that a slim majority of employees at VVL are women. This stands in line with the overall tourism sector in Nicaragua and is a positive trend to be used as a tool for empowerment. It has even helped one employee to escape from domestic abuse:

“I went through a process of violence with my former partner. [...] When I came here to work, they gave me the opportunity, I repeat, to work. To perform, to progress. [...] I feel good working here. I feel that I have made friends, I am getting to know people that perhaps in that world where I was, I didn’t have the opportunity to go out, but today I do. Today I can tell you that I live a stable life, a complex life, a life that I never imagined I would live.” (Employee_11)^{TQ11}

Still, when we take a deeper look at which positions women are employed at, these are predominantly the gender-stereotypical occupations of working in the kitchen and cleaning. Even though women take the lead within these two departments of VVL, it is remarkable that men work in the more visible and higher regarded parts of VVL’s operations, occupying managerial roles, the registration, and serving as waiters. Only two women made it into this last department. Nevertheless, Nicaraguan women enjoy higher levels of education than men (The World Bank Data, 2023a), so their placement is not a conscious decision but more likely a reflection of Nicaragua’s society, in which women are socially assigned to perform domestic chores (USAID, 2012). Moreover, VVL opposes gender inequality and wants to harbor a place where women feel respected by paying men and women equally, allowing more flexible hours to balance out work and private life, and ensuring that women get home safely at night through their tips system (Manager_1).

Even though VVL strives for equality, this goal is not necessarily translated into a diverse atmosphere. While the hostel part is almost always occupied by foreigners, the mix between locals and foreigners is more prominent in the bar-restaurant. Still, one of their pitfalls to ensure diversity are the prices on the menu, which are considered expensive in comparison to other restaurants (author’s notes). Moreover, their location in the center of León most likely attracts people with a higher income, as poor neighborhoods are situated in the outskirts of the city (INIDE, n.d.).

Also, VVL wants to fuel pleasure among their clients and staff. Once a year, VVL grants their staff a getaway to some tourist hotspot such as Las Peñitas. This free getaway is organized by VVL so the staff can enjoy the tourism experience from the other side and spend time informally together.

¹⁰ Nicaraguan rum.

While most employees indicate that they prefer separating work and private life, there are some friendships that manifest outside the premises.

Besides fostering good working conditions, VVL also allows their staff to follow thematical educational courses that strengthen skills in the hospitality sector. VVL does not undertake action to set up workshops themselves but relies on external facilities for this aspect. As such, every now and then INTUR offers trainings and staff members are also allowed to follow other kinds of trainings that can positively influence their job. For the latter, occasionally VVL would financially support their staff in the form of paying for their classes or educational material.

6.2.3. Environmental protection

In terms of environmental protection, we find that first VVL mostly relies on local services and products, ranging from the mosquito nets in the hostel rooms to the ice cream served in the restaurant. Where possible, VVL sticks to local providers. Even though their restaurant serves world cuisine, VVL adheres to these recipes using local produce. The furthest they would go in distance is only for some non-fresh products available at the membership warehouse PriceSmart in Managua, which is situated an hour and a half (98km) from León. Overall, buying locally is a morally praised practice (Ferguson & Thompson, 2020): it reduces the distance a product must be transported from production to consumption, thus releasing less carbon into the atmosphere, it supports the local economy, and it promotes food sovereignty. Luckily, Nicaragua's agricultural economy allows to buy many (fresh) products locally (World Bank & CIAT, 2015).

Whether the food or products are fairly and ecologically created is yet a pertinent question. In this case, sustainable certifications can be used as they promote the protection of the environment while simultaneously generating economic benefits. Putting sustainability certificates into practice is not common in Nicaragua. Yet, even if they are present, it is almost exclusively in commercial crops such as coffee and cocoa (World Bank & CIAT, 2015) and requires considerable administrative costs and technical capacities for the farmers to access certifications (Hagggar et al., 2012). *Manager_1* acknowledges there is no priority to commit to these 'western' norms because of Nicaragua's poverty:

"Fairtrade? Just go to the supermarket here, there's no such thing. You just don't see that. It's the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, that's not a priority here for people. In Belgium, people start thinking more responsibly: 'Okay we'll pay half a euro more and then we know it was grown with respect for the workers and for nature'. Well, that doesn't work in Nicaragua. Too bad." (*Manager_1*)^{TQ12}

That VVL bumps into the inefficiency or lack of Nicaragua's framework to commit to environmental sustainability, is also visible in their waste management. To recycle, informal waste pickers recover most trash, as just a few small semi-formal and formal waste recovery and recycling facilities exist in the country (Hartmann, 2012; Olley et al., 2014; Vázquez, 2016). No exact numbers on recycling in León exist, but if we may deduct from collected waste in Managua, only 3% ends up being recycled, while the rest is lost to nature or landfills (Olley et al., 2014). Recycling is, thus, not part of the city's consumerism nature and analogously something VVL does not actively promote. Although they wish they could do more (*Manager_1*), a small effort is made to support informal waste picking by setting aside cans and plastic bottles in barrels. Inside VVL's buildings,

some elements have also been upcycled, such as the bright orange sofas in the hostel part. By limiting the 'mise-en-place' in the kitchen or providing doggy bags in the restaurant, VVL tries to bring down waste accumulation. Although these efforts are small in nature, copying good elements from other establishments is a common learning process ([Manager_2](#)), thus, VVL may serve as a role model for them if they pick up the same habits.

In the past, VVL organized some cleaning actions in natural areas, together with Volcano Day. These cleaning actions were carried out by both employees of Volcano Day and tourists who signed up to participate in this activity, and were performed in El Tamarindo and on the touristic volcanoes surrounding León. To not pollute in other ways, VVL stimulates tourists to take public transport and provides space for those that travel by bike or motorcycle, thereby trying to bring down their carbon footprint. However, these actions are not explicit goals of VVL, but rather small efforts to ease the tourist experience.

In terms of renewable energy, nothing peculiar can be noticed. Energy-saving lamps are in place and awareness is raised among the employees to act consciously when using water or electricity. A few years ago, INTUR offered the possibility to consider a group purchase for solar panels, which had been declined for unknown reasons by the previous owners ([Manager_1](#)). On why VVL did not make an effort, Nicaragua's lack of efficiency and resources was again to be blamed:

"I'm a big fan of solar panels though. That's definitely something that could come here some time. Gosh, but... What I'm always a bit afraid of here - back home in Belgium, I have solar panels - and yes, you order those and they come and they are put in place and that always works. Okay, that's well regulated. Here, nothing is well regulated, very, very, very much not well regulated. So I'm very afraid of installing solar panels - in which I do make a big investment - that we will then install them, and that it will be broken and there will be no one here to fix it. A guarantee, it's no big deal. These are one of the things that scares me a lot here. If you look at the quality of stuff here, it is very different from ours." ([Manager_2](#))^{TQ13}

Still, this does not mean that they could not do it. [Manager_1](#) does not share the same view on Nicaragua's lack of efficiency but points out that in other parts of the country, such as Ometepe, there is a different mindset concerning the care of nature. Whereas León is a city, people tend to be more sustainable in rural touristic areas because the surrounding nature is what eventually brings the tourists there ([Manager_1](#)).

6.2.4. Overall sustainability

Even though the three components of sustainability were investigated separately, it is interesting to see how VVL and its stakeholders judge VVL's overall operations on their contributions to sustainability.

The managers acknowledge that their activities foster most importantly social development, but find that "if the business runs better, [they] will also be able to do more" ([Manager_1](#)). This finding was also observed by [Dobson et al. \(2018\)](#), who claimed that the core business model has to be established in the first place, in order to add the elements that create social value on top of it. That's true in this case, but running a social entrepreneurship is only possible if it fits within the country's bigger framework. [Roundy \(2017\)](#) found that the entrepreneurial ecosystem is crucial to foster SE, and that is also the case for VVL. According to the thoughts of [Manager_1](#), in the period

the previous owners were running the place, the business was likely to be more sustainable because of the better economic environment in Nicaragua.

When it comes to the employees, they all agree that VVL is a sustainable form of a TSE from their point of view. Some acknowledge this because of the good treatment ([Employee_1](#), 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13), the support of the good cause ([Employee_2](#), 6, 10, 11), the non-existent corruption ([Employee_1](#)), the local partnerships that promote culture ([Employee_3](#)), the cultural exchange ([Employee_5](#)), and the respected status VVL holds in the local community ([Employee_2](#), 12). Still, some mention that more impact could be made ([Employee_2](#), 11). One acknowledges that the many foreigners that come to ViaVia have the capital and resources that could make a change, yet the impact on alleviating poverty is limited ([Employee_11](#)):

“Quite a lot of foreign people come in here [so] there’s is a lot of money coming in here, I think. They can do social work. Because there is a lot of poverty here. [...] and if they don’t want to do it, that’s fine. [...] It’s up to them, but I feel that ViaVia is capable of doing more social work. For the good of the community, yes. It can be a work, they can be benefactors of children. Because look, [...] I come from poor people. I have seen the need. Even one time a little while ago, I was in my house and I said, “I’m going to make a big food basket. I’m going to go to the communities where there is a lot of need”. But I said, “I’m going to make food, but who’s going to help me? I mean, I have the idea. There are children here that I feel sorry for. [...] Begging, I don’t like it. Because it breaks my heart. Because they are not to blame for being the way they are. It is the parents who are to blame for not knowing how to raise and educate their children. So yes, even though I’m poor, I intend to do social work, because I don’t know how to raise and educate my children” ([Employee_11](#))^{TQ14}

All tourists also agree that VVL is a sustainable TSE, although they acknowledge they have no other example to compare with or have not enough insights as outsiders ([Tourist_2](#)). An interesting insight was shared that what they do might be minimal from a western viewpoint, while this can level up standards in the tourism sector locally and beyond:

“So the thing is [...] I’m from Europe, you know, we have some standards *already*. And you see this social entrepreneurship only in states like America or the USA for example, where the standards are ‘low’. So for us, [...] we could say: ‘This is like the minimum!’. What we have in Germany, for example, I don’t even know how they... Like, if they have a minimum wage or something.” ([Tourist_1](#))^{TQ15}

Locals acknowledge more efforts also could be made and that the impact VVL wants to create merely stays within VVL and associated partnerships, with no big impacts on the locals themselves ([all locals](#)). However, they also acknowledge they don’t know enough about VVL’s operations to make these claims ([Local_1](#), [Local_3](#)) and do not offer any solutions on what could be done better.

6.3. Generalization of findings León to other ViaVia

6.3.1. Economic development

In terms of contributing to economic development, we find that all ViaVias do this in the first place by creating jobs. This can be either direct – employed staff in ho(s)tel/bar/restaurant/etc. – or indirect, through their suppliers and partnerships with other entities, such as an external tourism agency. Yet, the scale to which the ViaVias contribute to job creation differs from place to place:

there are smaller premises, such as ViaVia Harganat with 10 employees, and bigger ones, like ViaVia Yogyakarta with around 60 employees. Based on the surveyed ViaVia's, it can be concluded that a regular enterprise is medium-scaled, with usually between 10 to 20 employees.

All ViaVia also swore to comply to the national labor legislations (all VV). In 2017, ViaVia Ayacucho was even rewarded the first prize of 'good work practices' (*Buenas Practicas Laborales*) by the Peruvian Ministry of Labor (VV10). While these efforts might be seen as a basic minimum through a western viewpoint, it is important to acknowledge that developing countries face difficulties in effectively applying labor regulations (Dafe & Engebretsen, 2023). Yet, with the pressure of harmonizing policies globally, developing countries are forced to adopt international standards and can change non-compliance to, e.g., labor regulations (Dafe & Engebretsen, 2023). In ViaVia's case, the premises of Kathmandu (Nepal), Entebbe (Uganda), Mopti (Mali), Grand-Popo (Benin), and Dakar/Guereo (Senegal) belong to the least developed countries (LDC's) (UNCTAD, 2023), to which the efforts to adopt labor regulations can be extremely important.

Similarly to VVL, we find that the pay in all ViaVias is above the national average and equal among men and women in the same work position (all VV). Extras include bonuses or, in the case of Ayacucho, 10% of the profit flows to the employees (VV10). In some ViaVias, loans are or were provided to the employees, being either interest-free (VV1, VV2, VV10) or with a lower credit than the country's average (VV3). These extras and loans are in place to stimulate their workers in developing their personal lives and to overcome financial difficulties. For the latter, the COVID-19 pandemic was indicated as an example, when people in the tourist sector suffered drastically from governmental setbacks on tourism flows and thus would otherwise become unemployed. These different forms of support have led people, in some cases, to successfully start other jobs or undertake themselves:

"There was one who wanted to attend sewing lessons. She then learned to sew [at ViaVia Yogyakarta's expense] and she now has a business herself, which is running incredibly well as a seamstress. I think [she] has 10 people working for her now. [...] There was [another] one who had started here as my cleaning lady and then I saw that she knew some English. I put her in English classes, but she said that her dream was to go to university. She ended up becoming a civil engineer. [...] Eventually she went to work in Japan. We gave her a down payment as well and she gradually paid it back, which is now paid off." (VV7)^{TQ16}

In terms of social security, most ViaVias support it through their operations (VV1, VV2, VV3, VV6, VV8). In the case of Kathmandu, social security support is not in place (VV4), because it's not common in Nepal:

"Right now, there is the social security system, and we are planning to make that contribution for our employees, but I have to say honestly [that] we are not doing that so far because we are just opening and need to see what our money is spent on. [...] [It] is just starting out with the Nepali government and many people do not trust the system because people who actually had health problems, when they go and get money from the social security fund, they say you have to go to ten different places to get ten different signatures, get a form to fill out... So, we also make sure when we start [with social security] that our

staff is actually going to be protected, and, if that is not the case, then we will have to wait and see.” (VV4)^{TQ17}

Besides the compliance to legalities and extras, other strategies are implemented within the ViaVias to reduce poverty among its workers. The most notable initiative is that free meals are provided to the employees (all VV). Furthermore, where tips are the norm, this cash system flows integrally to the employees (VV1, VV2, VV4, VV9). In ViaVia Entebbe, two small projects are set up by ViaVia for the staff, so the staff can also earn something extra, even though the projects are technically owned by the premises:

“We further have a chicken project where we buy our eggs from and [...] we actually buy those from the staff, though they are all in our garden. So basically, a chicken project from the staff, which is again money that flows back to them [...] We [also] have a plant nursery. [...] owned by our staff” (VV3)^{TQ18}

In Entebbe, staff can also enjoy affordable prices or free services provided by the ViaVia, such as using bikes for free, eating with discount in the restaurant or participating in activities for free (VV3). In Kathmandu, staff can also stay over in the ViaVia at no cost after late shifts (VV4).

Outside the usual combination of restaurant and ho(s)tel, some ViaVias added another compartment to their operations that generate economic wealth too. In ViaVia Yogyakarta, Entebbe, and Ayacucho, a fairtrade shop had been established (VV3, VV7, VV10) and Yogyakarta also owns an artisanal bakery (VV7). Lastly, touristic activities are, just as in VVL, either operated through an associated tourism agency (VV1, VV4) or organized by an own tour agency (VV2, VV3, VV5, VV6, VV7, VV8, VV9, VV10). Prices differ according to the type of activity, but to make the stay accessible for different budgets, most ViaVias offer different accommodation types within the premises (VV3, VV8).

6.3.2. Social development

Social development is fostered in the different ViaVias by creating a space where discrimination is not allowed, but peace, equality and interculturality is stimulated (all VV).

ViaVias can act as safe spaces for minority groups, such as LGBTQI+ and women. Two ViaVias (Copán & Yogyakarta) for example, openly profile themselves as places that fully support people identifying as LGBTQI+ (VV2, VV7). These unpopular statements can be extremely important contributions towards the acceptance of LGBTQI+ people, especially in developing or Muslim countries like Honduras or Indonesia, where the acceptance rates of this group is rather low (Flores, 2021). Even though support could discredit these ViaVias, it seems that they find a balance by their outweighing contributions to the local community, such as work creation. Still, the fact that sexuality can be openly discussed at these places, also fosters debate on other themes such as feminism;

“On the terrace above all the chairs [were] removed, all on the floor. There were about 60 women sitting there together. Then those sex toys [were demonstrated], with jilbabs on and so on. Very silly things and then those sex toys... Yes, that did spark off a whole discussion about feminism... [There were] people who said: 'Feminism? We don't want that. That's not us; that's dirty, those aren't fine women', and then another woman stood up [from] my age,

an Indonesian professor at the university, and said: 'If there were no feminists, you wouldn't be sitting here now experiencing all this!'. You can argue all you want, but that impacted them." (VV7, on a workshop about sex toys)^{TQ19}

In terms of gender, we find that all ViaVia praise working with women. Similarly to VVL, women are paid equally as men within the same positions (all VV), given flexible work hours to balance work with private life (VV9, VV10), or occupy leading roles (VV2, VV4, VV7, VV9). It is notable that some of ViaVia's actions go further to empower women and are of a novel nature in different places. To illustrate: ViaVia Copán positively discriminates women by only hiring them¹¹ and creating a space where women can feel safe (VV2). They consciously do so to go against Honduras' deeply rooted patriarchal society ('machismo') that hinders women to participate in the economy and takes a stand against the many injustices done to them (Lomot, 2013). In the same line, ViaVia Yogyakarta drastically changed the tourism scenery in Yogyakarta by employing women and supporting them through different projects (VV7; Andries & Daou, 2016). These 'controversial' practices positively influenced the women's reputation and position in the tourism field, something that before was heavily male dominated (VV2, VV7). Another women empowerment project is currently set up in the area where ViaVia Guereo will be opened, in the form of a workshop where women are taught how to make soaps with the idea that they can trade them autonomously afterwards (VV6). The fact that most ViaVia are managed by women and their partner (VV3, VV4, VV5, VV6, VV7, VV8, VV9, VV10), could also inspire employees to undertake themselves. Still, just as in VVL, it seems that women majorly end up in gender stereotypical jobs within the tourism field, such as working in the kitchen. This leaves the high-skilled, better paid jobs to men, and may unconsciously keep the vicious cycle of women in lower skilled jobs ongoing.

Cultural exchange is, just as in VVL, fostered in many ways, including world cuisine on the menu (all VV) and activities such as traditional cooking classes (VV5, VV6, VV7, VV10), language courses (VV3, VV6, VV7, VV10), performing (traditional) sports (VV3, VV5, VV7, VV8), music lessons or performances (VV4, VV5, VV6, VV9, VV10), archaeological tours (VV2, VV8), making handicrafts (VV6, VV7, VV9), providing space within the ViaVias to serve as an art gallery (VV3, VV7), and other specific workshops (VV3, VV7). Also, in ViaVia Guereo and Harganat, volunteer opportunities for foreigners exist (VV6, VV8). Yet, to what extent the examples of intercultural exchange reach has to be put in perspective: most actions only allow (superficial) enrichment for tourists, and not the locals. Also, while the former examples always applied to the ViaVias individually, intercultural exchange within the network of ViaVias is rare. To illustrate: only once an exchange took place of a cook of ViaVia Mechelen (Belgium) that went to Entebbe (VV3).

Lastly, to create social value within the wider community of the ViaVias' environment, all ViaVias tend to set up partnerships with local NGO's, social enterprises, universities, and other organizations (all VV). The partnerships are truly diverse, with some having a focus on (1) disadvantaged people, with several projects that alleviate poverty (VV2, VV4, VV10); (2) education, being ViaVia Copán's project that disseminates learning books to children in rural areas (Nacho Para Todos) (VV2); (3) protecting animals and wildlife, such as the parrot rehabilitation project (PRO-ALAS) or stray dog protection (Chucho Catracho) in Copán (VV2); (4) conservation of nature (VV3, VV7, VV8), like Yogyakarta's trees4tours collaboration that plants a tree in return

¹¹ With the exception of the night guard.

for a small contributions that stem from tours they offer; (5) sustainable materials, being the partnership with a bamboo start-up in Entebbe (Bamboo Uganda) (VV3); (6) supporting disabled people (VV7, VV10), like the adapted mobility service DifaBike in Yogyakarta; (7) sustainable transport (VV7, VV9) like Marrakech Green Wheels that stimulates bike as a means of transport; (8) cultural preservation (VV7, VV10), such as the project Hilos y Colores in Ayacucho that promotes ancestral textile techniques; (9) intercultural exchange, like ViaVia Guereo's partnership with the Belgian volunteer organization Bouworde (VV6); and (10) art (VV3), being the several projects ViaVia Entebbe has with Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen.

6.3.3. Environmental protection

As in VVL's case, all ViaVia contribute to reducing their carbon footprint by mostly buying local (all VV). This is always the case when it comes to fresh products, whereas dried goods are sometimes imported (VV4). The latter is not always a voluntarily choice (VV4), as some countries' economies, like in Nepal's case, are heavily dependent on import (Long, 2022).

Instead of buying from elsewhere, some ViaVia's grow their own produce (VV3, VV8) and hatch eggs from their chickens (VV2, VV8) – something VVL does not do. Growing vegetables is either done on the same premises as the hostel (VV9), or on a separate farm (VV5).

Regarding sustainability norms, some ViaVia's tend to pay more attention to them than VVL. Particularly ViaVia Ayacucho, Buenos Aires, Entebbe and Yogyakarta make it a priority in their menu (VV2, VV5, VV7, VV10). The fact that this supply exists, has led in the case of ViaVia Buenos Aires to the opening of a farm called 'Gaucho Verde'. This organic farm is situated one hour away from the metropolitan city and provides organic and agroecological food to a whole network even beyond ViaVia (VV5). Their actions also set an example that influences start-ups:

“We managed to create an Instagram of Gaucho Verde where we started to generate a bit of a community and are constantly uploading content on how to make determinations both for the animals and for the vegetable garden. And that led us to give talks at INTA, which is a governmental agency that provides seeds every year to all the people who want them, so that you can grow your own vegetable garden and things like that. [...] Then we have been approached by many people, for example nutritionists and things like that, who invite us to participate in certain projects where they teach people how to maintain gardens.” (VV5)^{TQ20}

The other ViaVias do not really consider buying certified produce because it is expensive (VV4), short supplied or unavailable in their surroundings (VV2, VV4, VV9), they cannot fact check the whole supply chain (VV6, VV8), or the produce without certification is usually already organic (VV4, VV8).

Much like VVL, most ViaVia's struggle with waste management because there is no well-coordinated national system in place (VV4). As in VVL, waste is sometimes set aside for informal waste collection (VV3, VV4, VV10). Other ways of handling waste are also recognized; more than half of the establishments recycle organic waste by composting (VV3, VV4, VV6, VV8), letting it be picked up to go to a compost place (VV9), feeding it to animals (VV3, VV4, VV5, VV7, VV10) or using it in a biogas system (VV4). Systems to reduce waste include measuring food beforehand (VV2), deliberately choosing for smaller portions in the restaurant (VV5, VV9, VV10), banning or avoiding single-use plastic (VV3, VV5, VV6), using reusable plates or cutlery in the restaurant or

touristic activities (VV4, VV5, VV7, VV10), and catching rainwater or using a rain pit (VV3, VV4, VV6). However, whether these contributions to improving waste management also find their way outside the premises is rather difficult to determine. The only case where a ViaVia went beyond, was with ViaVia Dakar: they tried to raise awareness among locals through several workshops that revolve around plastic (VV6).

In the construction of the premises and the interiors, special attention is given to sustainable materials. ViaVia Copán, for example, is made of adobe walls (VV2) and for the building of ViaVia Guereo, compressed earth blocks are used (VV6), which are both considered environmentally sustainable building materials (Hanafi, 2021; Sharma et al., 2015). Within the interiors, most owners have also consciously thought about the design, ranging from not using local wood to avoiding the use of illegally logged wood (VV2), to applying sustainably grown bamboo (VV3) and choosing for secondhand materials or objects (VV7, VV9, VV10).

Furthermore, ViaVias can contribute to making the environment greener. This hasn't been consciously supported by most ViaVias, but is rather an outcome of the environment the ViaVias are situated in. For example, those located outside urban areas, Entebbe and Guereo, have larger gardens where nature and small ecosystems can be kept safe (VV2, VV6). Gardens can also be found in VVL, Kathmandu (VV4), and Ayacucho (VV10), although in smaller sizes. To keep the environment safe and clean, Entebbe uses fishes in its ponds that can eat mosquitos and perform biocontrol (VV3), while Marrakesh, just as VVL, has made efforts by doing clean-ups around the premises (VV9).

Contrary to VVL, most ViaVias in the Global South have at least one form of renewable energy. Solar panels are by far the most popular tool, being present or having been present in six establishments (VV4, VV5, VV6, VV7, VV8, VV10). Other examples are solar heaters (VV3) and biogas (VV4). Those who do not have a renewable energy source mention that it is not common in their country (VV2) or (and therefore) is too expensive (VV9), e.g., because one must import the equipment. Nevertheless, all ViaVia's state that they support renewable energy sources, and put effort in saving energy through other means, such as energy saving lamps (VV2, VV3, VV4, VV7) and raising awareness among their employees (VV1, VV2, VV3, VV7).

6.3.4. Sustainability impact

Through the different examples given in the former paragraphs, it becomes clear that there are many direct impacts that enhance sustainability by the different ViaVia Travelers Cafés worldwide: (1) in terms of economic development, ViaVias create an impact through job creation, compliance with labor regulations, providing social security, loans and other means of financial support; (2) social development includes creating a safe space for minorities, enhancing women empowerment, intercultural exchange, and undertaking meaningful partnerships; and lastly (3) environmental protection is fostered by buying locally, making the environment greener and applying renewable energy sources.

However, it must be acknowledged that ViaVia's impact probably goes beyond these actions: the indirect impact is less clear and probably underestimated. Given that the interviews were performed only with the managers of the ViaVias, it is difficult to estimate if these actions have also inspired other actors to improve in different sustainability areas. For example: it can be presumed

that the different means of financial support could have contributed indirectly to the empowerment of women, as these are not always common in other enterprises. The diverse efforts that are carried out by the ViaVias could furthermore set an example to external organizations and people; ViaVia Buenos Aires' dissemination of tips and tricks from their farm^{TQ20} give a good example of how an indirect impact can take place.

7. Conclusion

This thesis investigated how TSEs in the Global South relate to social entrepreneurship and sustainability. The ViaVia Travelers Cafés are one of the few tourism social enterprises that have scaled worldwide and served as our case study in question. To assess how social entrepreneurship and sustainability are performed in practice, ViaVia León (Nicaragua) was intensively investigated, while the sustainability aspect was also researched in 9 other ViaVia Travelers Cafés from the Global South.

Using the definition of [Dees \(2001b\)](#) allowed the author to analyze how ViaVia León relates to the different aspects of social entrepreneurship. Through this framework, it becomes clear that TSEs achieve intercultural entrepreneurship and sustainable tourism through a set of stimulating activities. Even though the mission of this TSE should be carried out in the same way by all premises worldwide, it is unique how these elements are translated into practice for each premise. Furthermore, to create more social value, ViaVia León establishes partnerships with different stakeholders that show that, when institutionalized, they can lift each other up in a positive way. However, a profound impact is missing when we look at all involved stakeholders; the beneficiaries in this case are 'only' the staff and associated tourism agency. It is important to acknowledge that the overall standards that characterize ViaVia León and social entrepreneurship may set a good example for other establishments in the hospitality sector. Yet, the operations of a TSE are strongly influenced by exogenous shocks and the political landscape of a country: in an idealized world where both elements wouldn't be overarching, the impact could be more profound. Especially in Nicaragua, that suffered two profound crises in the past five years, the presence of a TSE and its socioeconomic contributions can be a valid alternative to complement to the country's needs. This observation was made by [Acevedo-Duque et al. \(2021\)](#), but is also supported by our findings.

The fact that the case study sheds light on the difficulties experienced by a TSE, allows us to bring down the idealistic focus on heroic wins and show a more truthful, balanced view on the complexity of SEs. This idealism has been recognized as a problem in SE research ([Dacin et al., 2011](#)), but focusing on the possible pitfalls could help to adapt and ensure the further existence of other (T)SEs.

In terms of contributing to sustainability, we can conclude that the ViaVia Travelers Cafés can indeed act as catalysts for sustainable development. It must be noted that the focus lies on socioeconomic development, whereas environmental protection still lags behind. For ViaVia León and the other ViaVias, economic development is fostered by creating jobs, paying above average wages, providing social security and complying with national labor legislations, which are all efforts that confirm TSEs ability to alleviate poverty ([Espinoza Sánchez et al., 2018b](#); [Lucas Mantuano et al., 2019](#); [Mendoza Macías & Loja Macías, 2018](#)). Social development is stimulated by enhancing equal treatment, intercultural exchange, and signs of women empowerment. These observations are positive and align with findings from earlier research ([Gómez Diaz & Ramírez Melendez, 2021](#)). Still, just as in the case of ViaVia León, this research confirms that the contributions to achieve sustainability highly depend on the available supply, infrastructure and politic landscape of a country ([Dredge, 2017](#)). Overall, the impact of ViaVia Travelers Cafés can be taken as a sustainable example of social entrepreneurship in the tourism sector.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Internship experience at ViaVia Tourism Academy

ViaVia Tourism Academy vzw (Figure A 1), in short VVTA, is an autonomous nonprofit organization that aims to use tourism and intercultural entrepreneurship as a leverage for sustainable development. It was created in 2001 by the expertise and civil engagement of the employees and travel agents of Joker (1981) and the worldwide network of ViaVia Travelers Café (1995). Therefore, it is embedded in the network of Karavaan, Joker, ViaVia Travelers Café and Anders Reizen.

Although its headquarters are located in Mechelen, VVTA has a worldwide scope by mostly focusing on development and cooperation activities focused on the third and fourth world. According to their mission statement, among the activities that VVTA performs belong 1) “the making and implementing of long term projects that allow locals to get acquainted with sustainability in terms of their cultural, ecological and economic environment”, 2) “sharing knowledge and expertise”, 3) “setting up of and concretizing training and cooperation programs in the broad field of sustainable tourism”, 4) “organizing activities, thereby enabling contacts and initiatives with the ever-increasing multicultural world”, 5) “encouraging intercultural dialogue”, 6) “providing information”, 7) “organizing and/or guiding travel and intercultural exchanges” and 7) “awareness raising, research and education around the ideas of sustainable tourism” (ViaVia Tourism Academy, 2015, p. 4).



Figure A 1. Logo of ViaVia Tourism Academy.

Concrete projects they have worked on or are contributing to revolve around concept development (the Sundry Seeds social business model, a social entrepreneurship training program and the Joker/ViaVia project fund), training and education (Lerend Netwerk Duurzaam en Innovatief Toerisme (LNDIT), SMILES Management and the university program on Sustainable Territorial Development) and learning networks (Café Herman, #womenwithimpact campaign, and The Travel Future We Really Want). Projects in the making are Make it Happen Now, R.I.S.T.o.VET and Kara-Tunga Arts & Tours in Uganda.

To link my internship intrinsically to my thesis, I agreed with sustainability coordinator of Joker and VVTA Greet Huybrechts to revolve it around social entrepreneurship. I'd assist the team of VVTA, mainly Isabelle Claes, with working on brochures of all the ViaVia Travelers Cafés in the world by performing interviews with the managers and translating the contents into an 'attractive' output. The theme I'd research would be the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) and what the ViaVias do to support them. In the past there was one document made by ViaVia Ayacucho on this theme, which should be the inspiration source for making similar brochures for each ViaVia. These outputs would be a nice way for visitors and other interested parties to see in a glance the good deeds a ViaVia does by being a social enterprise.

To do this internship I started on distance, when I was still in Nicaragua. I started my preparation by looking into Agenda 2030, where all the different Sustainable Development Goals were listed together with their targets. Based on these insights, I made a questionnaire with specific questions for the ViaVias. Some were open (E.g., 'How do you provide good working conditions?'), others closed (E.g., 'Does your ViaVia make use of renewable energy? If yes, in which form?'), but all referring back to the Sustainable Development Goals through a coding scheme. After feedback from my internship supervisors, the survey was ready to be applied, so communication with the ViaVias started.

Isabelle introduced me through an email with the different ViaVias, where the purpose of my study and the interviewing was explained together with how they would benefit from it later (meaning, the brochures). After that, it was up to me to keep in touch with the ViaVias, set up dates for the interviews, make invites through Teams, see that the interviews were adjusted to the language the ViaVia owners spoke (Dutch, English or Spanish) and perform the interviews. After each interview, that mostly took one hour and a half to conduct, I transcribed the content and contacted the owners for thanking them and reminding them to send in pictures to use in the brochures. The content of the transcriptions were then used as the source for linking it to the SDG's, which I listed in a separate document.

The brochures themselves, that I made all myself, consisted of a general introduction that highlighted the history and vision of the ViaVias, the SDG's and sustainable development. This was followed by an introduction of the ViaVia in case and how they work on the three important pillars of sustainable development: People, Planet and Prosperity. The document ends with references to the network ViaVia Travelers Cafés are embedded in.

Besides working on the brochures, I also helped VVTA out in making the Spanish version of their renewed website, as well as list projects I got to know of during my interviews as an inspiration for a proposal for the Joker/ViaVia project fund. About the working conditions, I ended up in the end working partly in the headquarters in Mechelen the moment I got back in Belgium, and partly remote as my work allowed it to do and my colleagues preferred working from home.

Self-evaluation

Looking back on my internship, I really liked working with ViaVia Tourism. The working environment was nice, with very friendly colleagues and an interesting topic. I must admit it wasn't always that easy, nor stress-free, but I got a better insight into what social entrepreneurship can be in real life and how they contribute to sustainable development.

The interviewing part is what interested me the most. The planning of it was the most chaotic component of my internship as I had to work with social entrepreneurs that live for their work; finding a right time perform an interview in their busy schedule was almost impossible. A holiday is coming up, the owners are traveling, a ViaVia has financial issues to survive, etc. All these different motives lead to the fact that interviewing wasn't always a priority. Nevertheless, I learned to be firm and persevere to make interviews possible, and once they were set, it was just a matter of asking the right questions at the right time.

Besides the questionnaire, there was room for sharing thoughts and comments on sustainable development and social entrepreneurship during the interview, which lead me to really get to know the interviewees' intentions. It was very insightful to see how all the ViaVias have the same mission and values, yet take a different approach to reach sustainability. This is, however, not a simple task given the recent coronavirus pandemic and the sociopolitical framework of the country a ViaVia might be situated in. It is a reality check for me and many of these owners that financially surviving these rough conditions is a prerequisite for improving or doing side projects revolving around sustainability. Although the right mindset and motivation is present, it is sadly not enough to make 'real' change possible. To illustrate: if there is no overall recycling plan in a country, all efforts of doing it the right way in a ViaVia are 'useless'. Many more of this kind of examples happened to be reality.

The next step in the internship process was transcribing, which was very exhausting. At the beginning I wasted so much time by writing word for word documents, until I finally discovered more efficient ways to transcribe. This, however, made me know the interviews inside out, hence, I know exactly what information to use in the brochures. If something was unclear in the raw versions of the brochures I could always take a look at the transcription and be sure of what I was writing.

Making the brochures was actually very nice. Scavenging pictures on different media, putting the content of the interviews in such a way that is readable for a general public, and working on the layout was something I very much liked to do. It was with some trial and error, as I gave first a layout that wasn't correct according to their house style, and there were some disagreements on some parts of the introduction. With feedback, however, I ended up making some beautiful brochures (Figure A 2) that I hope the ViaVia will display in their hotel or restaurant. A huge advantage is that by now I'm a master in working with Canva, the online tool I created the brochures with.

Overall, I think I'm proud of what I achieved by working for VVTA through my internship. It took quite a while but I learned how to develop a project from scratch to a final product, how to deal with communication struggles among different stakeholders, I improved my research skills and experienced making a creative output for a general public. Those are all skills I'm sure will help me in my future professional career and I am beyond grateful to have acquired them with VVTA.

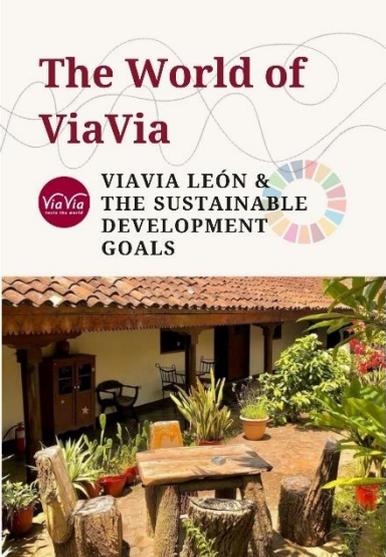


Figure A 2. One of the brochures created during the internship.

Appendix 2: Translated quotes

TQ1: “In mijn ogen [is] de missie van ViaVia een plaats aanbieden waar iedereen zich welkom voelt. [...] Een plaats waar mensen van elkander kunnen leren, een Nicaraguaan die zich naast een buitenlander aan de toog zet en een hele namiddag pinten, rum of *whatever* zitten te drinken, en op het einde van de dag of avond van elkaar weten hoeveel broers of zussen ze elk hebben, wat hun job is, bij wijze van spreken zelfs hoeveel dat ze verdienen, ... eigenlijk van elkander leren.” (Manager_1)

TQ2: “[...] we were a group from like all different countries: it was me from Norway, one from Denmark, a couple from Costa Rica, one from out of Argentina, some Americans, some British, some New Zealand[er]s. Like [from] all over the world. So, I really got to know people from different countries, just at those couple of hours. I got to see Nicaragua and nature, the volcanoes, volcano boarding. On the way [to Cerro Negro], we were talking to each other, we were listening to music. We're exchanging music. We got to see nature. I got a couple of leaves from the trees in my face because the truck was driving so close to the trees that I was yeah...” (Tourist_3)

TQ3: “Sí siento que hay ese intercambio cultural porque varias de las veces que estuve yendo [...] fueron con amigos locales. Pero a medida que fui conociendo más gente, en este caso gente alemana, gente de Bélgica, de Estados Unidos, y diferentes países... Si sigo habiendo el intercambio cultural diferente, anécdotas y cosas que ocurren en su país llegan a contarlas allí. Diferentes formas de festejar, incluso diferentes formas de consumir alcohol o comida. Entonces sí siento que hay un gran impacto intercultural entre la gente local y la gente que nos visita pues.” (Local_2)

TQ4: “Winst is super belangrijk en zonder meer winst gaat de ViaVia in León stilaan uitdoven [...] Maar ten tijde van crisis en tijdens de pandemie mag winst niet alleen primeren. Het komt er op neer dat er zoveel zaken in León gewoon de deur hebben dichtgetrokken en mensen zonder ontslagvergoeding hebben achtergelaten. Ik ga geen namen noemen, maar er zijn hier zaken van in de straat waar dat de nachtwaker met een airconditioning unit aankwam en mij die wou verkopen want ze zijn hier vertrokken met veel achterstallig loon, geen liquidatie, geen vakantie... [zij hebben] niets ontvangen. Dat doen wij niet. Daar zijn natuurlijk ook grenzen aan want we zijn geen ngo. We moeten proberen winst te draaien, maar het ten tijde van crisis is het niet ons hoofddoel [...] maar dan nog proberen we wel, met hulp van het netwerk in België, dat mensen die voor ons hebben gewerkt jaar en dag te helpen op elke manier dat wij kunnen.” (Manager_1)

TQ5: “[...] toen dat het hostel is gebouwd, pakt dat er toen een Excel file van was gemaakt, en daar stond letterlijk in ‘omkoperij’, ‘afkoping’. Zo veel jaren later krijgt Joker en ViaVia - de hele organisatie – een volledige belastinginspectie. Dus [Manager_2] had er niet meer bij stilgestaan dat dat er in stond, [en had het] doorgestuurd of ViaVia had dat nog en er ook niet bij stilgestaan. Die belastinginspecteur moest er zelfs mee lachen achteraf. ‘Ja, het is een kost dat jullie hebben ingegeven, en ik snap heel goed dat dat ginder daar zo werkt’. En dat werd gewoon geaccepteerd.” (Manager_1)

TQ6: “Ik denk, op dat gebied is het gemoderniseerd, ook strikter geworden, meer controles. [...] Vroeger was dat duidelijker aanwezig, weliswaar heel beperkt. Nooit grof, grove corruptie kon nooit. Maar kleine corruptie, ja, en dat was vanzelfsprekend vroeger. Maar dat is eigenlijk allemaal weggegaan. Vandaag geen corruptie zelfs. Wat niet wilt zeggen dat als, bij wijze van spreken, als er zich een probleem voordoet,... “ (Manager_2)

TQ7: “It was basically me and mostly people who are living there. And, I had that kind of experience once also in Guatemala, where you’re just surrounded by the locals and it’s just a different vibe, that’s for sure, because they are there to have fun. Obviously, the travelers are there to have fun as well, but they’re there in another way. They’re kind of in their hometown. They’re not, like, seeing it all for the first time. They’re there because they genuinely like it.” (Tourist_3)

TQ8: “Ja, die cultuurshock is fantastisch. [...] Dus je pakt de toeristen ook mee naar een buitenwijk waar ze alleen nooit zouden komen. [...] Dat hebben we heel lang gedaan, elke zondag. Niet om geld mee te verdienen, helemaal niet. Maar dat is iets waar vandaag minder vanzelfsprekend is dan voordien. Moesten we dat vandaag doen, zou het kunnen zijn dat dat bij wijze van spreken tegen ons keert vanuit toeristen. Vroeger niet, vroeger totaal niet, geen issue. We hebben daar nooit geen kritiek op gekregen. [...] Ik ben niet anti woke ofzo – maar [...] het bestaat. [...] Ik vind niet dat wij, als blanke mensen, moeten gaan veroordelen dat hanengevechten hier in Nicaragua bestaan. Laat dat aan de Nicaraguanen over.” (Manager_2)

TQ9: “[We] basically can set standards in the industry [...]. It’s like a microenvironment here: if workers from other bars are there and see the environment, they basically find that there’s a higher standard out there. [...] So, if other workers go there and see a higher standard, they start demanding the same in their company. You know, so their whole standard goes up for the whole city for example.” (Tourist_1)

TQ10: “In [ander hostel-bar] mochten tot 2018 geen Nicaraguanen binnen. [VVL’s] vorige eigenaar, die zijn liefje, een journalist, gaat naar een feestje in [ander hostel-bar]. Die wouden daar binnen, die vrouw werd aan de deur tegengehouden. Dat is op de radio geweest, dat heeft in de kranten gestaan... Die hebben daar natuurlijk kei hard mee in hun eigen voet geschoten want met de crisis van 2018, waren er geen buitenlandse toeristen meer. De deuren gingen ineens wagenwijd open voor de Nicaraguanen [maar zij] zeiden ‘fuck you, we gaan ons *mediake ron plata* wel drinken in de ViaVia wara we ondertussen al vijftien jaar wél welkom zijn” (Manager_1)

TQ11: “Yo paseó un proceso de violencia con mi antigua pareja. [...] Cuando yo entro aquí a trabajar, me dieron la oportunidad, cómo te vuelvo y te repito, de trabajar. De desempeñar, de progresar. [...] Yo me siento cómo todo, me siento bien trabajando aquí. Siento que he hecho amistades, voy conociendo personas que quizás en aquel mundo donde yo me encontraba no tenía la oportunidad de salir, de respirar hoy en día si. Hoy en día te puedo decir que vive una vida estable, una vida compleja, una vida de que yo nunca me imaginé que iba a vivir.” (Employee_11)

TQ12: “Fairtrade? Ga maar eens naar de supermarkt hier, dat bestaat niet. Dat zie je gewoon niet. Het is het tweede armste land van het westelijk halfrond, dat is geen prioriteit hier voor de mensen. In België gaan mensen verantwoordelijker denken. ‘Oké wij betalen wel een halve euro meer en dan weten we dat het met respect voor de werknemers en voor de natuur is geteeld’, ja, in Nicaragua werkt dat niet. Spijtig.” (Manager_1)

TQ13: “Ik ben wel een grote fan van zonnepanelen. Dat is zeker iets wat hier nog wel een keer zou kunnen komen. Goh, maar... Waar ik hier altijd wel een beetje schrik heb - thuis in België, heb ik zonnepanelen - en ja, je bestelt die en ze komen die zetten en dat werkt ook altijd. Oké, dat is goed geregeld. Hier is niks goed geregeld, hè – of toch heel, heel, heel veel niet goed geregeld. Dus ik heb daar heel veel schrik voor om zonnepanelen te zetten - waar ik wel een grote investering in doe – dat je die dan gaat leggen, en dat het kapot is en er hier niemand is die het kan maken. En die garantie, die stelt niks voor. Dat zijn zo van die zaken waar ik hier heel veel schrik voor heb. Als je gaat kijken hier naar de kwaliteit van spullen, dat is hier dan toch heel anders dan bij ons.” (Manager_2)

TQ14: “Porque aquí entra bastante gente extranjera. Aquí entra bastante, pienso yo, bastante dinero. Ellos pueden hacer obras sociales. Porque aquí hay mucha pobreza [...], y que si no lo quieren hacer esta bien [...] Qué es cosa de ellos, pero sin yo siento que ViaVia está capacitado a ser una obra social. Para bien de la comunidad, si. Puede ser una obra, pueden ser benefactores de niños. Porque mire, [...] yo vengo de personas pobres. Yo he visto la necesidad. Incluso una vez hace poquito, estaba en mi casa y digo yo,: “Voy a hacer un gran perol de comida. Voy a ir a las comunidades donde hay mucha necesidad”. Pero digo yo, si voy a hacer la comida, ¿pero quién me iba a ayudar? O sea la idea yo la tengo, porque no creas a mí. Aquí hay niños que a mí me da pesar. [...] Pidiendo a mí no me gusta. Porque se me rompe el corazón. Porque ellos no tienen culpa de andar como andan; las culpables son los padres por no saber criar y educar a sus hijos. Entonces sí, aunque soy pobre, tengo la intención de hacer una obra social, porque la vida no puede ser que... Es transnacional y tiene los recursos para hacerlo.” (Employee_11)

TQ15: “So the thing is [...] I'm from Europe, you know, we have some standards *already*. And you see this social entrepreneurship only in states like America or the USA for example, where the standards are 'low'. So, for us, [...] we could say: 'This is like the minimum!'. What we have in Germany, for example, I don't even know how they... Like, if they have a minimum wage or something.” (Tourist_1)

TQ16: “Er was er een die wilde naailes hebben. Die is dan leren naaien [op ViaVia Yogyakarta's kosten] en die heeft nu een bedrijfje zelf, dat ongelofelijk goed loopt als naaister. Ik denk dat die wel 10 mensen onder haar heeft staan nu. [...] Er was er een eentje die hier was begonnen als mijn poetsvrouw en dan zag ik dat die wel wat Engels kon. En heb ik die op Engelse les gezet, maar zei die dat het eigenlijk haar droom was om naar de universiteit te gaan. Die is dan uiteindelijk burgerlijk ingenieur geworden, [...] Uiteindelijk is ze gaan werken in Japan. Ook die hebben we een voorschot gegeven en dat heeft ze stilaan terugbetaald, wat nu is afbetaald.” (VV7)

TQ17: Owner 1: “Op dit moment bestaat er wel zoiets als het sociale zekerheidssysteem en wij zijn van plan om die bijdrage te doen voor onze medewerkers, maar ik moet zeggen – eerlijk gezegd – dat we dat tot nu toe nog niet doen omdat we pas open zijn en wat moeten kijken waar dat ons geld aan gependend wordt. [...]”; Owner 2: “[It] is just starting out with the Nepali government and many people do not trust the system because people who actually had health problems, when they go and get money from the social security fond, they say you have to go to ten different places to get ten different signatures, get a form to fill out... So, we also make sure when we start [with social security] that our staff actually is going to be protected, and, if that is not the case, then we will have to wait and see.” (VV4)

TQ18: “Wij hebben verder een kippenproject waar wij onze eitjes [van] kopen en [...] wij kopen die eigenlijk van de staf al zitten die allemaal in onze tuin. Dus eigenlijk een kippenproject van de staf, dat is weer geld dat naar hun terugstroomt. [...] Wij hebben [ook] een plantenkwekerij. Ook in handen van onze staff” (VV3)

TQ19: “Daar zaten denk ik op het terras boven alle stoelen weggedaan, allemaal op de grond. Zaten daar een 60 vrouwen bij mekaar. Dan werden die seks toys, met jilbabs aan enzo van die hele domme dingen en dan werden die seks toys... ja dat was wel een hele discussie op gang over feminisme... [daar waren] mensen die zeiden van ‘feminisme, dat willen wij niet, dat zijn wij niet, dat is vies, dat zijn geen fijne vrouwen’ en dan stond er een andere vrouw op, mijn leeftijd, een Indonesische, professor op de universiteit en die zei ‘als er geen feministen zouden zijn, dan zouden jullie hier nu niet zitten alles mee te maken’. je kan discussiëren over wat je wilt, maar dat pakte.” (VV7)

TQ20: “Nosotros logramos hacer un Instagram del gauchoverde donde nosotros empezamos a generar un poco comunidad y donde nosotros estamos permanentemente subiendo contenido de como hacer determinajos tanto a los animales como de la huerta. Y eso nos llevo a bueno por ejemplo dar charlas en el INTA, que es una agencia governamental que se encarga provener a todas las personas que lo quieran por ejemplo semillas todos los años para que uno crece su propia huerto y cosas asi. [...] Despues nos han hablado mucha gente por ejemplo nutritionista y cosas asi que nos invitan a participar de ciertos proyectos donde se enseña a los más como mantener huertas.” (VV5)

Appendix 3: Nicaragua as a developing country

Often referred to as the 'land of lakes and volcanoes', Nicaragua is a Central American country that borders in the north with Honduras, in the south with Costa Rica, in the west by the Pacific Ocean and the in the east by the Caribbean Sea. Its capital is Managua, the official language Spanish and the currency the córdoba nicaragüense. Although Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America by size, its number of inhabitants rather low with only 6.8 million (The World Bank Data, 2023b). Nicaragua's population is predominantly Catholic or Protestant and made of Mestizo's, followed by a minority of Indigenous People and Afro-descendants, as a result of Spanish-British colonization and miscegenation (Osorio Mercado & Serra Vázquez, 2021). About 1/5 of the population lives in the three largest cities of Nicaragua, being respectively Managua, León and Matagalpa (World Population Review, 2023).

Since independence, Nicaragua has suffered long series of civil conflicts and economic instabilities that resulted in several revolutions, leading to its weaker position in the world system (Feinberg, 2018). Nowadays, Nicaragua is considered one of the least developed countries in Central America, being the second poorest in the Americas and the Northern Hemisphere in terms of nominal GDP, right after Haiti (International Monetary Fund, 2023).

Currently, President Daniel Ortega governs the country together with his populist-socialist party *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN). Ortega had been president in the past: a first time from 1985 to 1990, and now reclaiming presidency since 2007 (Congressional Research Service, 2022). His presidential power - that is characterized by authoritarian rule and oppressive actions - has gradually been consolidating over and dismantling the country's institutions and society, turning Nicaragua into a police state (Congressional Research Service, 2022).

Ortega's polarizing figure alarms human rights defender both at home and internationally; over the last few years, government critics were arbitrarily prosecuted, freedom of speech has severely limited, a total abortion ban entered into force, the government closed over 3,000 nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) (Human Rights Watch, 2023; UNHR, 2023) and the Catholic Church has been persecuted (Udin, 2022). The regime of terror and suppression has caused much unrest particularly since April 2018, when a civic uprising sparked by proposed social security reforms escalated into a political crisis (Klein et al., 2021). For months, revolts and clashes led to brutal state violence, with reports of torture (UNHR, 2022), a death toll between 325 and 568, some 4,500 injuries and 1,300 detainees (La Vanguardia, 2019). A set of constitutional and legal reforms allows President Ortega to keep his totalitarian power and be able to be (undemocratically) be reelected in the future (IACHR & OAS, 2021). This stands in stark contrast to the time when FSLN came to power in 1979 in Nicaragua, after having defeated the four decade long dictatorship of the Somoza family and US domination (Dore & Weeks, 1992).

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown further signs of the governments' indifference to the fellow citizens by downplaying the health crisis. Unlike its Latin American peers, and going against recommendations of the World Health Organization, Nicaragua never went into a lockdown or followed common strategies to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Jarquin, 2022; Pearson et al., 2020). Although the true extent of the coronavirus remains unknown because of underreporting

and manipulation of statistics by the government (Huete-Pérez et al., 2021), Nicaragua's economy did suffer from the effects of the difficult domestic sociopolitical situation and the complicated global economic environment (ECLAC, 2021). Despite recent positive economic growth in the last decade, Nicaragua experienced a slight economic decline since April 2018, which was further exacerbated by COVID-19 and Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020 (ECLAC, 2021). Nicaragua is slowly recovering from the impacts of these multiple shocks with the help of large-scale public investment, a strong export demand and external financial assistance (World Bank, 2023).

Still, the country faces challenges with respect to poverty eradication, as some estimations state that between 30% to 40% of the country lives below the poverty line (USAID, 2023; WFP, 2022), while other statistics prove a positive decline towards 25% (UNICEF, 2021). Important to notice is that this poverty is divided; with half of the rural population living in poverty and only one in eight of the urban population being poor, the urban versus rural divide is very prominent (IFAD, 2017). Minorities, like Indigenous People or Creoles, face even higher poverty rates (IFAD, 2017). This inequality does not only manifest in low income levels but is multidimensional; poverty goes along with lower levels of education, high family sizes, minimum urban conditions, bad dwelling characteristics and a high dependency on agricultural activities (Wiggins, 2007).

As in many other Latin-American countries (FAO & ECLAC, 2020), agriculture is the main driver for Nicaragua's economy (World Bank & CIAT, 2015). It is not only the major provider of employment (30% in general, 70% for rural Nicaragua), but also accounts for 17% of the GDP and 70% of the national export (World Bank et al., 2015). Agricultural production focuses primarily on coffee, livestock products, sugarcane, beans and peanuts (USDA & GAIN, 2021). Despite its importance in the economy, current agricultural growth is still far below its full potential because of the national socio-economic context (World Bank et al., 2015). On top of that, agriculture faces the dangers of natural disasters and climate change (UNDP, 2010).

Because of its geographical situation alongside the Caribbean Sea and on the verge of the Caribbean and Cocos Plate, Nicaragua is prone to natural disasters like earthquakes (Brown Jr et al., 1974), landslides (Devoli, 2005), volcanic eruptions (Freundt et al., 2006), tropical hurricanes (NOAA & NWC, 2021), and droughts (Maurer et al., 2022). These natural disasters lead annually to many economic losses, with return periods of several centuries (World Bank Group, 2016). To illustrate: the 1972 Nicaragua earthquake, with a magnitude of 6.3 on the scale of Richter, strongly affected Nicaragua's capital Managua and left the 27km² affected area devastated, with reportedly 11,000 casualties, 20,000 injuries and 75% of the capital destroyed (Brown Jr et al., 1974). The estimated losses of this earthquake were about US\$300 million, equivalent to 30% of the 1972 Gross National Product (GNP) (World Bank Group, 1973). Because the frequency and intensity of extreme climate events are projected to increase in the future, Nicaragua is considered vulnerable to climate change (UNDP, 2010).

Lastly, because of the multiple deeply rooted challenges Nicaragua faces, about 200,000 inhabitants have fled the country between April 2018 and March 2022, in search for better life conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The majority (66%) migrates to Costa Rica, where they can seek asylum (Solís Bastos & Hernández Murillo, 2022), while others go to Panama or embark the often dangerous journey north, crossing the Mexico-U.S. border (Ripley III, 2023).

Appendix 4: Timeline of ViaVias

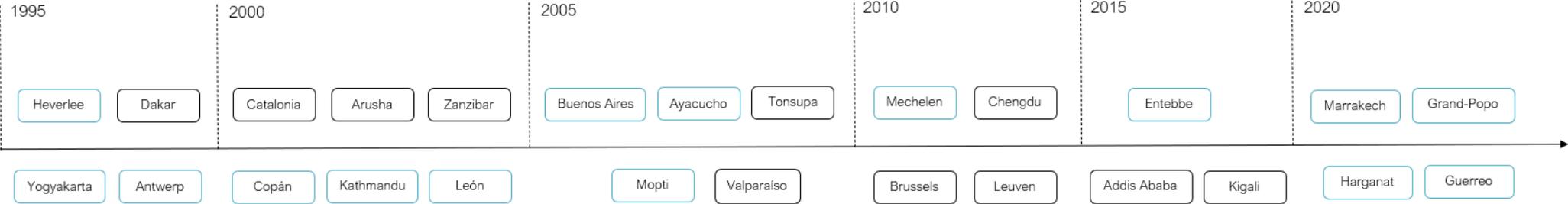


Figure A 3. Timeline of existing (blue) and closed (black) ViaVias. Adapted from Dobson et al. (2018).

Appendix 5: Certificate of Scientific Integrity

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Certificaat – Wetenschappelijke integriteit aan de ...

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Figure A 4. Certificate of Scientific Integrity.

