

Sustainable Development in Funeral Practices

How stakeholders impact sustainable funeral practices

Table of Contents

Sustainable Development in Funeral Practices.....	1
How stakeholders impact sustainable funeral practices	1
Abstract.....	1
Introduction	2
Research problem and questions	3
Theoretical framework and literature review	3
Methodology and ethical considerations	6
Results.....	7
Discussion.....	9
Conclusion.....	11
Bibliography	14
Appendix A.....	16

Abstract

The importance of sustainable development is recognised in fields related to human geography and planning. This is the case for the funeral branch as well. However, we do not understand the way stakeholders influence the process towards sustainable funeral practices. The purpose of this research is to create an understanding of the extent stakeholder involvement can contribute to sustainable development when it comes to funeral practices in the Netherlands. This question was answered by conducting five semi-structured personal interviews with various stakeholders in the field. The results show that the general public is the most important stakeholder, however, the general public does not have the information to demand change in the funeral branch. Currently, there are players, mostly the nature burial organisations, that are trying to include the general public and inform them on more environment-friendly options. Stakeholder participation flows from the funeral branch to the general public and does not tend to happen internally because of the highly competitive environment within the branch. If the general public can be included, there will probably be an increased appreciation for sustainable and environment-friendly practices in the funeral branch.

Introduction

'All human beings have the fundamental right to an environment adequate for their health and well being' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987 p286). This can be reached by ensuring the implementation of sustainable development. Human geographers and planners have been researching and implementing sustainable development in various aspects of the field. However, little research is done on sustainable development in the funeral branch, or about the funeral branch in general. This research aims to fill the gap of knowledge when it comes to the impact that stakeholders have on sustainable development in the funeral branch. Santoso and Delima defined stakeholders as individuals or organisations that have interests in the process or phenomenon (2017). This research will mainly focus on traditional burial versus nature burial in the Netherlands and will occasionally delve into cremation. The importance of sustainable development to mitigate the consequences of climate change is well understood by most people and institutions (Kapp, 2001). The United Nations developed the millennium development goals and later the sustainable development goals. Sustainable development does not only focus on ecological aspects but also economic and societal sustainability, this is in line with the World Commission on Environment and Development report that came out in 1987 (Campbell, 2017; Kaltenborn, et al., 2020). Historical changes in funeral practices prove that changes in the future are possible. (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019) describe that during the late nineteenth century the Dutch population got older, therefore death became a less prominent part of society. This caused the discussion surrounding death to move to the background. Funeral practices were simplified, there was little stakeholder involvement during this time. About a decade before the Around the time the World Commission on Environment and Development published our common future, a cultural shift occurred surrounding funeral practices. There was an increased appreciation for the cultural significance of funeral practices. Stakeholder involvement increased as more people got involved with the process itself. The increased awareness for ecological issues was seen in the funeral branch as well as there was an increasing interest in the ecological consideration of burial but especially in cremation (Douglas, Rumble, 2012). Most traditional burial sites are built in a way that requires intensive maintenance. The grass needs to be kept short, weeds are removed and graves and gravestones are cleaned. This lay-out is culturally decided, or institutionalised (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019). If we look at this from an ecological perspective this is an area deprived of biodiversity. To reduce the ecological footprint of the burial site, implementing more nature would be an alternative (Houlton & Field, 2010). Since burial sites already incorporate some aspects of nature, E.g. grass, it would be relatively easy to incorporate more nature, especially if we compare it to urban areas, where finding space for nature can be a difficult task. Nature burial sites can provide a solution for implementing more environmental considerations in our funeral practices. As seen in the research by Mathijssen and Venhorst (2019), the general public is a powerful stakeholder that can influence cultural practices. However, the general public is not the only player involved in the process. Players influence each other and therefore the power relations within the stakeholder network need to be researched. The research question is to what extent stakeholder involvement can contribute to sustainable development when it comes to funeral practices in the Netherlands? With the following sub-questions, How does sustainable development translate to funeral practices? What is the current status of stakeholder involvement and what prominent stakeholders potentially have the most influence on sustainable development? What can stakeholders do to ensure that development is sustainable? More on this can be

found in the next chapter Research problem and questions. The literature review can be found in the Theoretical framework and literature review. Funeral practices can be a sensitive issue (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019), therefore the methodology includes an extensive ethical considerations aspect as well. The results will be presented in the Results section, they will be linked back to the theoretical framework in the Discussion and finally, the Conclusion will show the results and the need for future research.

Research problem and questions

Cultural values shape traditions and practices surrounding funeral practices (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019). Sustainable development or the concept of sustainability is getting a more prominent role. Little research is done on the connection between cultural ideas of sustainable development and the funeral branch. It is important to gain a better understanding of the stakeholder network before we can understand how sustainable development translates to funeral practices. We reach the following hypothesis; If awareness surrounding ecological options and stakeholder involvement in the funeral practices increase, then funeral practices would become more sustainable. This research aims to answer the main question to what extend stakeholder involvement can contribute to sustainable development when it comes to funeral practices in the Netherlands. It will be answered through the following research questions:

1. How does sustainable development translate to funeral practices?
2. What is the current status of stakeholder involvement and what prominent stakeholders potentially have the most influence on sustainable development?
3. What can stakeholders do to ensure that development is sustainable?

Theoretical framework and literature review

In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development published the Brundtland report, the report that is more commonly known as our common future. In this report, three main pillars of sustainable development are defined (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Silvius, Schipper 2019; Gregory et al 2009). The first pillar is economic, relating to the issue that the benefits of economic development are not shared equally among populations and countries. The second pillar is environmental and social, explaining that environmental stress can lead to conflict. The third and last pillar is developmental and performance, relating to how well a company is doing. Excluding sustainable development in these three pillars, would create a negative spiral towards even further degradation of the social and ecological environment in addition to a waste of opportunities and (human) resources. To summarise, the report focussed a lot on the inequality aspect that unsustainable development brings. The Brundtland report is not against economic growth or development, however, they do warn about the consequences of when this development does not happen in a sustainable way. 'The vision that societal goals, such as economic growth, social wellbeing, and a wise use of natural resources, are interrelated and that none of these goals can be realized without considering and affecting the other two, was widely accepted' (Keating, 1993, cited through Silvius & Schipper, 2019 p 46). It is important to define sustainable development before anything can be said about it. The Dictionary of Human Geography

(Gregory, et al., 2009) defines development as the process of (social) change. Sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Gregory et al, 2009 p 46). The three-pillar aspect of sustainable development is used in various academic sources and theories surrounding sustainable development. Elkington (1997) summarizes sustainable development by saying that sustainability is finding the equilibrium between environment, social factors, and economy. It is different from the pillars by the Brundtland report, as 'development and performance' fall under 'economy' whilst splitting up 'environmental and social' into 'environmental' and 'social factors' to make a split between the natural environment and the social environment. A way to reduce the negative outcomes of unsustainable development is to use the Life-Cycle Orientation. With Life-Cycle Orientation the focus lies on assessing the long-term impact that development has on the environment and society (Silvius & Schipper, 2019). Life-Cycle orientation can be implemented for all different uses, from economic development to calculating the impact policies have on life expectancy (Gregory, et al., 2009). If we apply the Life-Cycle Orientation to the conceptual model shown in figure 1, we can ensure that processes are reevaluated over time and therefore previously unknown negative externalities can be taken into account.

Now that we have identified what stakeholders can reach together, the focus is on how stakeholders have to work together to reach this goal. A stakeholder can be defined as a person or an organisation that has an interest in the process at hand (Santoso, Delima, 2017). Beacom, et al. (2020) added that stakeholders are parties that have the potential to influence the policy and decision-making progress, either through market power or through information. This includes governmental organisations as possible stakeholders (Nicholls, et al., 2020). The size of the group of stakeholders is dependent on the size of the organisation, how far a company can spread its products, and the geographical location (Vinten, 2000). The term stakeholder has been used as the base of multiple theories and concepts, they provide a better understanding of the word and how stakeholders can be used for this research. A stakeholder marketing perspective explains that to fully understand a company and its market, stakeholders should include more than just their clients (Kotler 1972, cited through Hult, et al., 2011). Kotler's theory, in which the word stakeholder was not identified yet, is often the base of newer definitions and concepts. Santoso and Delima (2017) added to the definition by Kotler by identifying the importance of effective timing and consultation with relevant stakeholders when working together is required in a process. This is important because stakeholders interact with each other, they can exchange information in the form of knowledge and skills, they can exchange services and goods (Santoso & Delima, 2017). Stakeholder Orientation informs us of the role that stakeholders have in sustainable development (Silvius, Schipper 2019). It is about ensuring that businesses, companies, institutions, organisations, authorities and, NGOs conduct their business in such a way that the negative externalities are not transferred to the future (Silvius, Schipper, 2019; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This aligns with the definition of sustainable development. It is important to keep in mind that even though involving stakeholders can be beneficial for the outcome, it can complicate the process of a project. In addition to this, the key aspects of sustainable stakeholder involvement are Responsibility, Accountability, and Transparency' (Silvius & Schipper, 2019) organisations and institutions in the public and private sector should take their long-term societal and environmental impact into account. Elkington (1997) would add that

companies should also take their economic impact into account. Brown (2016) adds to the discussion on sustainable development by stressing the importance of focussing on the target project and group, as donations and outside involvement can have the negative effect of derailing the conversation and the goals of the project to fit the narrative of the donors or other organisations involved. This is reflected in the difference in methodology between the two studies, where Brown (2016) is more focussed on case studies, whilst Silvius and Schipper (2019) have a more meta-analysis approach, where they have a bigger focus on concepts and perspectives.

If we look at the funeral branch, we see that all three of Elkington's aspects (1997) from the model, Figure 1, are reflected. The economical aspect, as the branch works for profit, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) in the Netherlands, the funeral branch had a net revenue of 1.15 billion euros, which is a growth of around 10 per cent compared to the year before (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2017). This is mainly because of the greying population, which increases the number of funerals that are being held each year. The number of players is also increasing, between 2007 and 2017 there was a growth from 1.11 thousand to 1.99 thousand companies in the funeral branch, around 75 per cent of these companies employ less than five people (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2017). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the revenue in the funeral branch is declining, as due to national restrictions the number of people allowed at a funeral is lowered. The amount of funerals that are being held every day has increased, however, this did not weigh up to the lost revenue (Offerte, 2020). The funeral branch interacts with the second aspect as well, as grave sites are maintained in a culturally decided way (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019) that impacts the environment in multiple ways, for example, the short grass is bad for biodiversity (Houlton & Field, 2010). For the social aspect of the funeral branch, it is important to realise that everyone has an interest in the funeral branch, therefore everyone is a stakeholder (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019). It is even shown that because of increased demand for sustainable options, the funeral branch started to provide more sustainable options (Douglas & Rumble, 2012). Even though this research mainly focuses on burial it is important to note that cremation is the most used form and is on a rise. In 2003, 50 per cent of the deceased were cremated, whilst in 2018 this percentage increased to 65 per cent (Uitvaart.nl, 2019). Meaning that the percentage of people that wish to be buried is getting lower. This could have an impact on the market share of nature burial as well. In multiple countries, nature burial is being introduced to the market. However, not a lot of people tend to make use of these options. Problems relating to the prevalence of nature burial can be that people are not being informed enough about the possibilities (Lau, et al., 2020), or that the culture has an impact on funeral practices (Lau, et al., 2020; Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019).

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model. It is based on the three pillars by Elkington (1997), where development in the economy, ecology, and society should all be sustainable, together this creates sustainable development. Surrounding the base for sustainable development are the stakeholders. As defined by Santoso and Delima (2017) a stakeholder is any person and organisation that has an interest in the process at hand. There are no lines between stakeholders and processes because there was no predetermined way stakeholders interact with each other and the process. This will be researched and explained in the results and discussion section. As mentioned before it is important to keep a Life-Cycle Orientation to this model, to ensure development stays sustainable.



Figure 1 Conceptual model (own source)

Methodology and ethical considerations

In the chapter Research problem and questions, it was mentioned that cultural values shape traditions and practices (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019). Because sustainable development is getting a more prominent role in society it would be interesting to see how this translates to funeral practices. Powerful stakeholders are not identified so it is unknown whether cultural values are the only influences on funeral practices. To answer the question to what extent stakeholder involvement can contribute to sustainable development when it comes to funeral practices in the Netherlands? The values and experiences of different stakeholders need to be identified, therefore a qualitative approach fits this research best. A qualitative method is identified as "a set of techniques that are used to explore subjective meanings, values and emotions such as interviewing, participant observation and visual imagery" (Clifford, et al., 2016, p3) as opposed to a quantitative approach, which consists of "statistics and mathematical modelling" (Clifford, et al., 2016, p3). Primary data gathering consisted of conducting five semi-structured personal interviews with different types of stakeholders. The sampling criteria identified that the following types of stakeholders were interviewed; Nature burial site manager (Interview 1), Academic (Interview 2), nature burial site employee (Interview 3), Funeral director (Interview 4), Client considering nature burial, representing the general public (Interview 5). The interview guide can be found in Appendix A. The stakeholders were selected and contacted through online searches, where their backgrounds are important determinators for their participation. After each interview, it was also asked whom the interviewee saw as essential to this research. These stakeholders were contacted as well.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the funeral branch had to work harder, therefore it was quite hard to find a funeral director who was willing and able to make time for an interview. The data was gathered between April 12th and April 30th. To protect the willingness to respond truthfully the interviews were held anonymously. However, they were recorded to ensure transcribing was possible. Respondents were informed about the use of their data, that it will be stored on a password-protected computer, and that their data will only be used for research purposes with the possibility of the professor checking the data. It will be deleted when it does not need to be checked anymore and data will not be sold to or shared with third parties. Informed consent is an important part of the ethical considerations (Clifford, et al., 2016) and is therefore mentioned in the methodology. The analysis is based on identifying patterns in the way interviewees described power relations in the stakeholder relations. Power relations will be identified through this process as well.

Ethical considerations are an important part of this research as funeral practices can be seen as sensitive issues (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019). Clients who were looking for a funeral site for their recently deceased relatives were excluded from this research, as the power relations between the interviewer and interviewee could be seen as skewed in favour of the interviewee. Research should never negatively impact the researched group (Clifford, et al., 2016) and therefore this group is excluded.

In this research, the researcher was considered the outsider towards all interviewees except for Interview 2, with the academic and interview 5, the general public. This could have influenced the willingness of interviewees to answer truthfully and it could influence the understanding the interviewer had of what the interviewee was saying, for example in the case of jargon.

The last aspect of ethical considerations is the effect possible stereotypes could have on the willingness of interviewees to answer truthfully and the possible effect this research can have on stereotypes. When it comes to funeral practices religion is an important player for some people, therefore the research focuses on the difference between traditional burial sites, cemeteries, and nature burial sites not on graveyards, which are on church grounds. Another aspect of religion to keep in mind is that for some religions eternal grave rights can be a deciding factor for choosing a burial site. This research should not portray nature burial sites as facilities that are only for religious people, neither should it exclude this possibility..

Results

During the first interview, with the nature burial site manager, the way nature burial sites operate was explained as follows; Nature burial sites operate by using a plot of land that is used as a nature area or as a meadow. In regards to zoning laws, the nature burial site is classified as a nature area, not as a burial site. The nature burial site organisation aims to restore the plot of land to the type of nature that is native to this area or is culturally valued. Using GPS locations, the graves are divided, or spots are chosen and claimed later. An example can be seen in figure 2, where the graves of a nature burial site in Doetinchem are plotted on a base map. Clients buy a grave, they only pay once and they can hold this spot forever, through the eternal grave rights. Therefore it is possible to reserve a plot long before

you expect to die. The price of a grave consists of the cost for burring the owner of the grave, operational costs and it has a buffer that goes into a trust. When all the slots are sold, the trust should have enough money to hire a groundkeeper for maintaining the nature site. In theory, the maintenance financed through a trust part could keep going forever, but there are currently are discussions on whether nature burial sites are allowed to advertise with eternal grave rights as no one can guarantee this, according to interviewee four.

Graves plotted



10-6-2021

1:4,514
0 0.02 0.04 0.09 mi
0 0.04 0.07 0.15 km
Esri Community Maps Contributors, Land NRW, Kadaster, Esri, HERE,

Figure 2 Nature Burial site with plotted graves, created through ArcGIS

During interviews one, two, three, and four it was identified that there are different degrees of interaction with and within the funeral branch. Stakeholders in the funeral branch can be plotted into a graph with two axes, see figure 3. The x-axis represents the degree of dependency of the market of the funeral branch. The y-axis represents the degree of influence individual stakeholders have on the market. A governmental body that has the power to legislate, has a high degree of influence but in itself is not at all dependent on the market, therefore governmental bodies, like municipalities and waterboards are located at (0,2). The general public is placed higher on the y-axis (influence) because in all interviews it was expressed that the power of the general public was higher than the power of the governmental organisations. Interviewees one through four explained that this was the case because the national government tends not to change legislation often, therefore excluding themselves as powerful stakeholders. Local municipalities do have a lot of influence as municipalities are the owners of cemeteries (interview four).

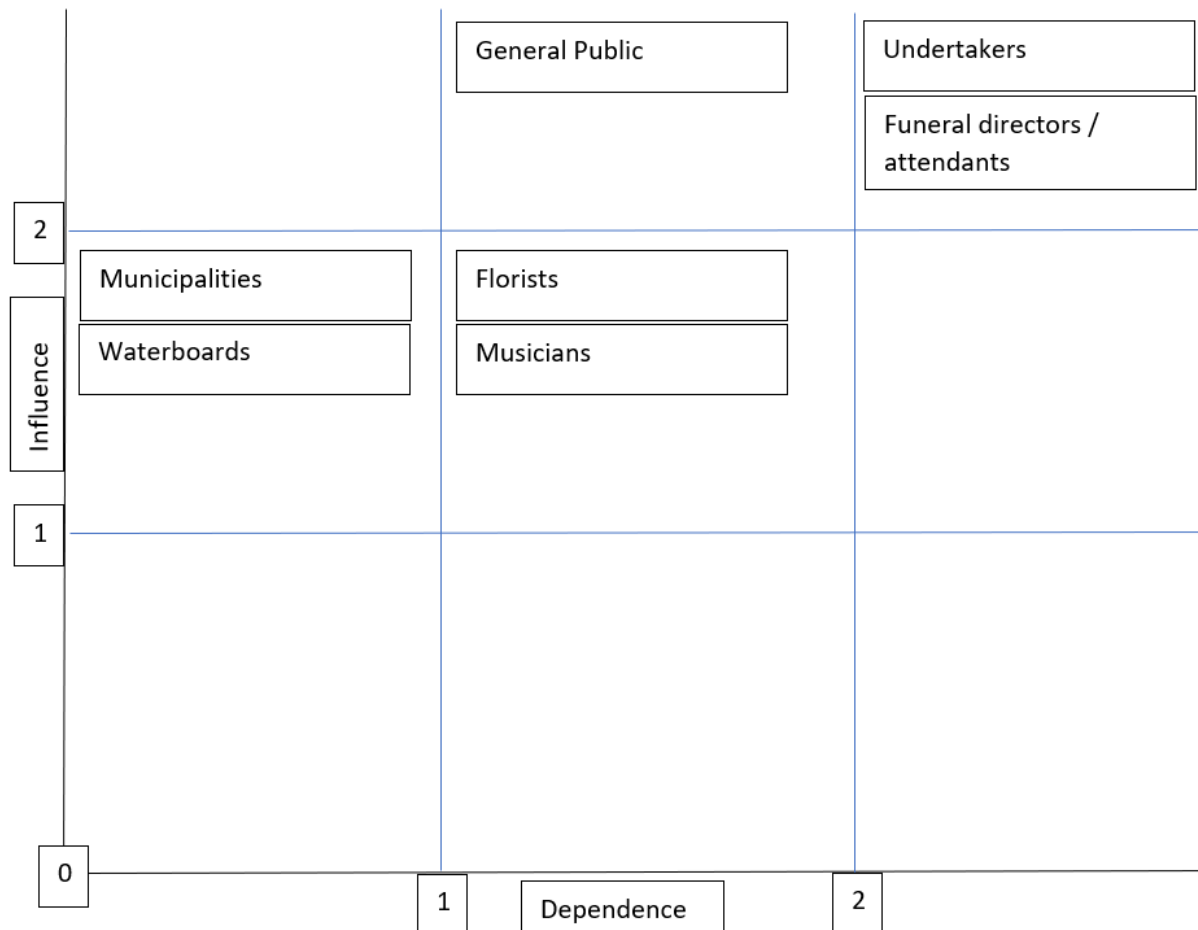


Figure 3 Stakeholder matrix (Own source; derived from interview result).

The perspectives of the way the stakeholder network is ordered varied greatly per interviewee. For example, during interviews, one, two, and three the funeral branch was described as having a healthy competition where the aim is to increase the quality for the customer. During interview four (funeral director) however, it was mentioned that the funeral branch is very competitive in an unhealthy manner. There is little interaction between stakeholders within the field because of the high competition. Interviewee five (a representative from the general public) this view was reflected as they see the funeral branch as very competitive in an unhealthy way as well. The interviewee did not have the same negative views on nature burial organisations. The view of interviewee five was confirmed by earlier interviews with one and three as they describe that stakeholder involvement with different parties is used to increase quality towards clients and increase positive impacts on nature. Examples of stakeholder interaction, in this case, are a collaboration between nature conservations, water boards, and nature burial organisations. Interactions between the general public and nature burial organisations are seen as an important aspect of day-to-day activities for nature burial organisations (Interview one and three). Because interviewees one and three operate in a different sub-market, namely the nature burial market, the perspective from interviewee four (funeral director) is most likely to be the most accurate for the market as a whole. Therefore it is most likely that there is a difference between the general funeral market and the nature burial site market, with the first being very competitive and the latter not.

When it comes to the nature burial part of the branch, stakeholders are working together to reach the best quality for nature and clients as possible. The nature burial entrepreneur is dependent on bigger players outside of the funeral branch, like nature conservation organisations, water boards, local municipalities, provinces, and local citizens before they can start a practice. When they already have a location their most important interactions are with the general public. As they wish to change people's perspectives on nature. They also interact with other companies within the industry, mainly aimed towards the wishes of their customers. As they do provide their customers with advice on what other companies they can go to, for other necessities relating to funeral practices, they do have a possible impact in promoting sustainable options. If we take a look at the funeral branch as a whole, this impact can be seen in various stakeholders. Mainly in the larger organisations that have a large customer base. Therefore the stakeholders with the biggest potential are the general public and large funeral organisations.

In interviews one to four it was identified that sustainable development is implemented in the funeral branch. How this is implemented depends on the subset of the branch. Interviewee two identified funeral undertakers as influential stakeholders when it comes to sustainable development. This is because funeral undertakers have the power to decide what goods and services they offer their customers. If funeral undertakers provide more sustainable options, like fair trade products, cremation facilities with added air filters, or burial sites that take biodiversity into account, the general public will have an easier time choosing the more sustainable option.

In interview four it came to light that larger funeral organisations have the financial means to advertise to the general public. In these advertisements, the general public is made aware of the sensitivity of the situation when the family does not know what the wishes of the deceased are. The advertisements ask the general public to create a plan of action or at least make known what individuals want to happen after their death. Especially with burial, family traditions play a large role, therefore starting the conversation is important. Smaller funeral homes reap the benefits of these commercials as people come to the funeral director more informed of the wishes of their loved ones (interview four). When it comes to nature burial sites, most of their clients come to the sight in advance and reserve a spot. Increased awareness among the general public could therefore also mean that more people chose nature burial as an option (Interview one and three). Nature burial sites are not the only 'green' option that people can choose from, interviewee two mentioned that some crematoria install filters that exceed the minimum legal requirements, to keep emissions low. Fairtrade or eco-friendly products like coffins or caskets can also be an option, interviewee two sees it as a possible task for undertakers to inform possible clients about sustainable options. Nature burial organisations are currently the most active player when it comes to informing the general public about sustainable funeral practices (interviews one and three), however bigger players with more financial abilities might have a bigger influence if they would start marketing campaigns surrounding sustainability and death. On the other hand, the branch also develops with general trends observed in other fields. The driving forces behind sustainable development do not necessarily need to be internal, it could come from the general public through a cultural shift, without the information provided by the funeral branch (interview four).

There are a lot of steps stakeholders can take to ensure that development is sustainable. Organisations with influence can spread information and demand more sustainable options from other stakeholders. Interviewee four confirmed that informing the general public does promote more sustainable behaviour, as previously informed clients come back better prepared for planning a funeral. The power of the general public increases when decisions surrounding funeral practices are made before death and their wishes are known in their social environment, or even officially written down.

Discussion

When it comes to the definition of sustainable development, it is important to keep in mind the renewal aspect. (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Gregory, et al., 2009; Silvius & Schipper, 2019) define sustainable development as development happening today, that does not hinder the ability to meet the needs of future generations. All the interviewees identified the importance of the continuation aspect. Nature burial sites are not renewable, therefore the use of nature burial sites is not a form of sustainable development. According to interviewee one, sustainable development is not the goal of nature burial organisations, nature conservation is their main goal. Nature burial organisations could rethink their policy regarding eternal grave rights, could it be possible to sell the spots again after a certain time frame? This consideration will be impacted by other stakeholders, like the opinion of the general public, the demand from customers in the future and it could even be impacted by governmental authorities. During interview four it was mentioned that legal discussions are surrounding the eternal grave rights aspect, can nature burial organisations advertise with these concepts, as they cannot guarantee the availability of the spot forever? However, the ecological benefits of nature burial should not be underestimated either. During interview one, the nature burial site manager explained some added ecological benefits of nature burial. Forest-like areas are better for reducing temperatures in and surrounding urban environments than traditional burial sites that only contain grass and tombstones that absorb heat, (Houlton & Field, 2010) describe this process in nature as well. Tombstones are not allowed on a nature burial site, therefore the emissions associated with excavating, shipping and creating tombstones are prevented.

If we look back at the Theoretical framework and literature review we can see that the theory on stakeholder involvement does not provide a pre-determined structure of power relations. It mainly provided definitions that can be linked back to players identified through the interviews. This was reflected in Figure 1 as the stakeholders all surrounded the three pillars of sustainable development. Santoso and Delima (2017) identified stakeholders as persons or organisations that have an interest in the process at hand. When it comes to sustainable development in the funeral branch, all organisations with financial ties to the branch can be seen as stakeholders, in addition to this, the general public is a stakeholder and governmental authorities are stakeholders as well. When we compare this to the definition of Beacom, et al. (2020), stakeholders are parties that have the potential to influence policy and decision making, through market power or information, the perspectives of power relations start to change. As identified in interview four, large players have the financial power to influence the general public by implementing marketing campaigns. They also have the power and influence to lobby when it comes to laws and regulations regarding funeral practices. Smaller funeral

organisations have this power as well, but they need to organise in a branch organisation first. During the interviews, the general public was identified as the stakeholder with the biggest potential impact. It was mentioned by (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019), as they explained the importance of cultural values when it comes to funeral practices. However, in the literature, the general public was not identified as the most important or influential stakeholder. Identifying a stakeholder should be done on a case by case basis. In other branches, the general public might be less relevant. That is why in figure 1, the stakeholders were not connected, and there was no indication that one stakeholder was more important than the other. When it comes to figure 1, it is important to ensure that some form of a Life-Cycle Orientation is implemented as this will ensure development remains sustainable in the long term. If we take nature burial as an example, we can argue that for now, nature burial is an ecological-friendly option. However, if we apply Life-Cycle Orientation to this phenomenon, we can see that nature burial plots can only be used once, therefore nature burial is not a long term sustainable option.

The conceptual model, figure 1, was based on the three pillars of sustainable development by Elkington (1997). From those three pillars environment was the most used aspect. Society, environment, and economy all have their own stakeholders, examples would be the general public, waterboards, and for-profit funeral organisations. However, it was not researched how sustainability affected them in the long term. To understand this impact, further research is needed. During the interviews and in the theory the importance of the longevity aspect came to light. Development is only sustainable if it does not hinder future generations to meet their needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Gregory, et al., 2009; Silvius & Schipper, 2019). Even during the interviews with a nature burial employee and manager, it was acknowledged that nature burial is not sustainable as the eternal grave rights hinder future burial or other forms of land use on that location. This means that nature burial does not follow the Life-Cycle Orientation (Silvius & Schipper, 2019).

During interview four it was mentioned that for burial, family traditions are the most influential denominator. This relates to (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019) as they identified culturally decided practices as an important aspect of practices surrounding funerals. This is important to keep in mind when trying to create cultural changes surrounding funeral practices. Since the general public was identified as the most powerful stakeholder in all interviews a cultural shift towards more awareness is needed. The nature burial sub-branch is already on its way to increase awareness in the general public (interviews one and three). However we do need to reflect on this as the Central Bureau of Statistics (2017) shows us that cremation is the most popular funeral option in the Netherlands, and as mentioned by (Douglas & Rumble, 2012) in the cremation sub-market environmental friendly options are already in use. This was confirmed by interviewee two who explained that some crematoria add filters so the emissions remain lower than the legal minimum.

Conclusion

Nature burial sites are not the answer to the problem of increasing sustainable development in the funeral branch. This is because the eternal grave rights hinder the availability of resources for future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Silvius & Schipper, 2019) when it is implemented in large numbers. Nature burial sites do provide possibilities for nature conservation, Biodiversity is protected through the protection of nature and because it is not allowed to place tombstones or other grave markings except for a wooden plate, CO₂ emission is prevented in the excavation of marble and international transport towards the location of the grave. Governmental authorities should keep the possibility open to implementing nature burial sites in nature conservation programmes, for example, Natura2000. This should be done in a case-by-case manner and not be put into national practice. Nature burial sites could also rethink their policy on eternal grave rights, however, it is not researched how this would impact nature burial sites, and therefore further research should be conducted, before implementing this as standard practice.

The funeral branch has other options of increasing sustainable development, the example mentioned during interview two (academic) was that funeral undertakers can push more sustainable goods and services to their clients, the impact of widespread implementation needs to be researched further. In all interviews the impact of the general public was identified as having the biggest potential to initiate change, this is in line with the article by (Mathijssen & Venhorst, 2019) that described an increase in stakeholder involvement from the general public that coincided with changes in funeral practices in the Netherlands from 1980 onward. There currently are stakeholders that try to increase participation from the general public. Larger funeral organisations are trying to start conversations surrounding death and what funeral practices should be implemented on their funerals (Interview four). During the same interview, it was also mentioned that these commercials could add a focus on sustainability, which would cause the general public to take this into account as well. Nature burial organisations are trying to involve the general public in the conversation surrounding sustainable funeral practices by informing the general public on the possibilities of green funerals and providing nature burials as a service. Involving the general public most likely has sustainable outcomes, even if nature burial is not the most sustainable long-term option. The general public has one last potential power that was not reflected in the theory and in the interviews, the power to influence (national) legislation. If the voting population demands more laws surrounding sustainability and funerals, this would most likely have an impact on voting results. This consideration should be researched in the future. Power relations within the funeral branch have not been studied enough and therefore more research should be done on this topic in general.

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Appendix A

Definitions

How would you define natural funeral sites?

And how is that different from 'traditional' funeral sites?

How would you define sustainability?

How would you define stakeholders relating to this field, and how do they relate to each other?

For example, how does a funeral director relate to the municipality. Do you think that the general public is a stakeholder? And how does your company relate in this network of stakeholders?

Are there stakeholders that operate more behind the scenes and what stakeholders are more open (for example, some organisations have commercials on tv/radio, like Yarden, Dela).

Do laws/regulations/policy related to the funeral sites often change? Is the government/municipality supportive of what you do?

Is there mostly competition between stakeholders or do is there a culture of working together to better the industry and experience for the people that need to use it?

What do you do when you reach capacity? How will you ensure the availability of new slots.

Pro's Con's

In your opinion, what are the positive aspects of natural funeral sites, negative aspects?

What are the approximate market shares regarding funeral sites, (traditional, natural, cremation, and maybe there are additional options I missed).

Do you notice differences in the market regarding the market share of natural funeral sites, related to 'traditional' burial sites.? If there is a change, what stakeholders had the most impact of this change?

Would you define the move towards natural funeral sites as a sustainable one? Why/why not?

Do you have consultations with guests as well? If so, what are some common remarks you hear?