



# **IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN AMICABLE DEBT COLLECTION STRATEGIES IN FINLAND**

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Abstract

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The debt-related issues have increased recently and are still growing in Finland. Reasons for debt exposure might be various, such as long-term sickness or unemployment. Moreover, it has been studied that debt and financial issues cause mental illness for debtors. Therefore, creditors and debt collection agencies must consider social sustainability topics in their operations and strategies.

This research is about implementing social sustainability in Finland's amicable consumer debt collection strategies. First, the current state of the Finnish debt collection industry was investigated, and the five biggest (turnover) debt collection agencies were selected. Their websites and social media were researched, considering social sustainability aspects. Moreover, two questionnaires were conducted: one with a collection agency and one with an expert from the debt collection industry. The recommendations for the debt collection agencies to improve were presented based on theory, public sources, and questionnaires. One of the challenges in implementing social sustainability in amicable consumer debt collection strategies seems to be a lack of awareness and education. In the end, it was recommended that the collection agencies, for example, implicate socially sustainable principles in their values and invest in educating the staff.

Keywords sustainability, debt collection, social sustainability

Pages 46 pages and appendices 5 pages

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# 1 Introduction

In Finland, there were approximately 570,000 debtors on the National Enforcement Office in 2022, and the level remained quite the same between 2008 and 2022. (Statistics Finland, 2023a) Even though this research is regarding amicable consumer debt collection, the Enforcement Office's statistics give insight into the general situation in Finland. There is no common database in Finland where statistics on debtors in debt collection agencies can be found. Still, the number must be multiplied by the Enforcement Office's statistics because debt collection is one step before legal collection (including the first summons in court, and after that, it can be sent to the Enforcement Office). Mostly, legal collection is an option if the amicable collection is effortless. (Minilex, n.d.-a.)

As shown in Figure 1, the share of persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion has increased in recent years (Statistics Finland, 2023b). This indicates the increasing problems in terms of debt-related problems in Finland.

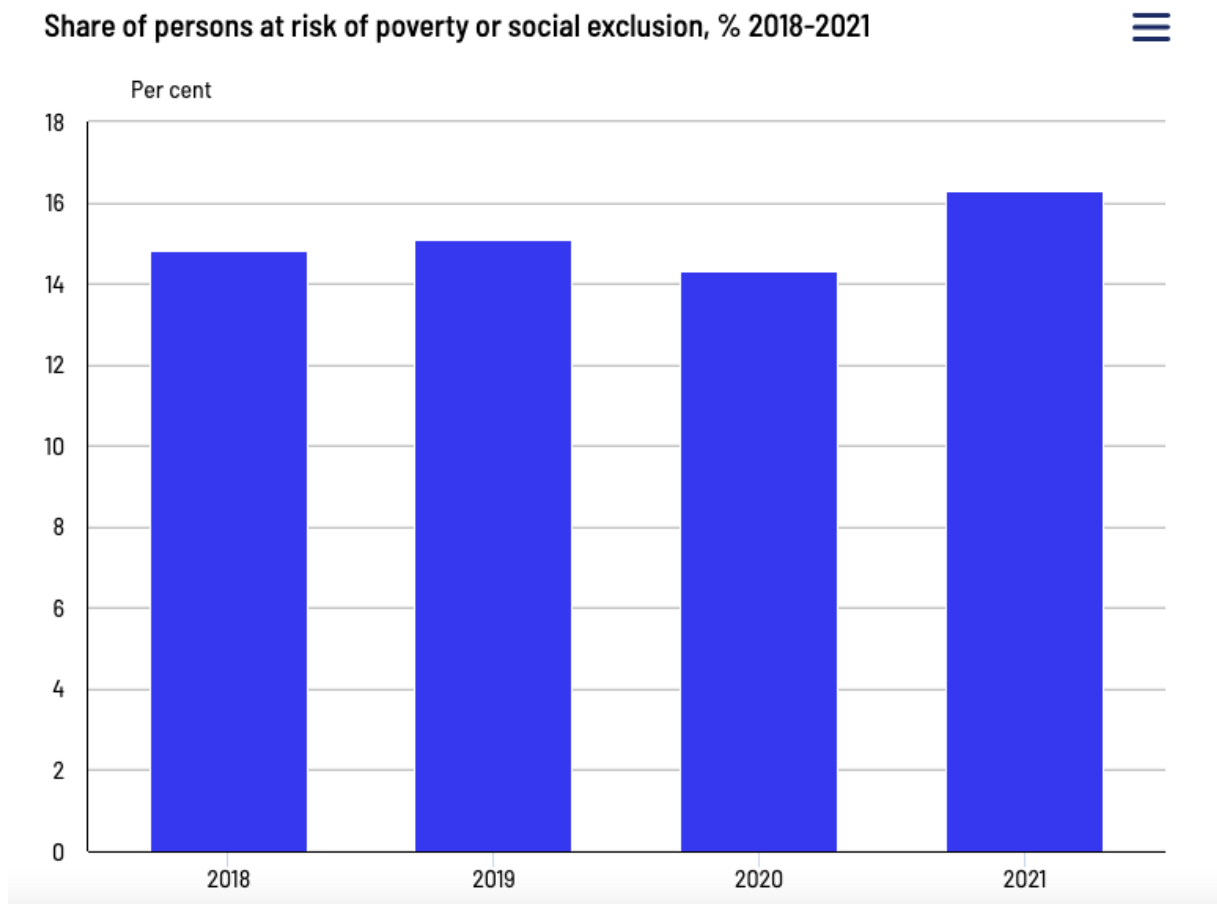


Figure 1. Share of persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion 2018-2021 (Statistics Finland, 2023b)

There are multiple reasons for consumers' economic problems, such as sickness, disability for work, overextension, more significant expenses compared to income, or inflation.

Moreover, Finland's consumer culture encourages the public to spend over their budget and live in debt. Economic problems might cause mental problems and shame. (Mieli, 2023) Mieli Ry researched the relationship between debt problems and mental health in 2023. In that research, it was stated that debt problems have increased in Finland.

Moreover, it states in the international research literature that debts are strongly linked to poorer mental health, suicidality, depression, and other specific mental health symptoms in young people, adults, and older people. A few Finnish quantitative studies have shown that people suffering from debt problems have a higher risk of mental health disorders, disability pensions for mental health reasons, and related mental health for medication. Several domestic qualitative studies have documented the indebted experienced shame, social stigma, perceived stress, and hopelessness, which combine especially the causes of depression. (Hiilamo, 2019) Since the number of debtors is high and many are vulnerable, debt collection agencies must consider social sustainability matters in their practices, especially when facing consumers.

After the performed research, it was noticed that there is a research gap, which this thesis is motivated by the aim to fill: to provide guidelines for debt collection, especially for the amicable consumer debt collection industry, on how to implement social sustainability practices and principles in their strategy, and to the grass root level as well as the importance of it.

## **1.1 Objective and Research Questions**

This research aims to produce insights for the collection agencies and individual companies that collect their receivables, how to consider social sustainability aspects in their operations, and how to implement them in their strategy. This study aims to highlight the importance of social sustainability in debt collection agencies and what impact it might have on debtors. Moreover, this research introduces some challenges and barriers in implementing SDGs regarding social sustainability in debt collection practices and aims to provide suggestions for overcoming those issues.

The research question is as follows:

How do debt collection agencies in Finland approach SDGs and social sustainability in their operations, and how can they improve their practices?

Sub-questions are as follows:

- 1) What are the potential benefits of implementing socially sustainable debt collection practices on debtors?
- 2) What are the critical challenges faced in implementing SDGs and social sustainability in debt collection practices?

## **1.2 Thesis Structure**

This research begins with an introduction (Chapter 1) that presents the selected topic, reveals the motivations behind the study, and outlines the research questions. After the introduction, there is the Literature Review (Chapter 2), which provides a comprehensive overview of amicable debt collection in Finland, including the legal and “good practice” points of view. This chapter discusses the general idea of social sustainability and its implementation in business.

Chapter 3, Methodology, systematically explains the research methods and details their application throughout the study. Chapter 4, Analysis, applies the framework introduced in Chapter 2 to an amicable consumer debt collection context. Moreover, the chapter will introduce the human limitations of using social sustainability principles in business and possible solutions.

In the concluding section, Chapter 5 summarises the culmination of findings from the gathered data, offering responses to the research questions. Additionally, Chapter 6 extends recommendations for the collection agencies and future research. Chapter 7 includes the writer’s self-reflection.

## 2 Literature review

The objective of this chapter, the literature review, is to furnish a comprehensive theoretical foundation that contributes to addressing the issue introduced in the first chapter of this research (introduction).

### 2.1 Amicable Consumer Debt Collection in Finland

Debt collection means the creditor tries to get payment from the debtor for the unpaid invoice or other debt. (Takuusäätiö, n.d.) In Finland, debt collection is divided into amicable and legal. Amicable collection is all actions before the legal collection, such as sending payment reminders, payment demands, and other means to contact the customer. (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, n.d.-b.) Often, the companies outsource the debt collection to the debt collection agencies, but they can also do it themselves. Legal debt collection means a summons application for the claim is sent to the district court. After making the decision, the claim is transferred to the National Enforcement Authority to be collected directly from the debtor's account or assets. After the District Court's decision, the debtor gets the payment default on their credit record. (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, n.d.-b.) This research concerns amicable debt collection for consumers.

Usually, the amicable debt collection moves forward in two-week time slots. The amicable debt collection process starts when the invoice is due 14 days from the original due date. First, the payment reminder is sent to the debtor. If the debt is unpaid after the payment reminder, two weeks after its due date, the first payment demand can be sent. If the debt is still unpaid after the first payment demand, a second demand is usually sent before the legal debt collection process. (Talous- ja velkaneuvonta, n.d) At each stage of amicable debt collection, it might include contact, such as outbound and inbound calls with the customers, emails, or text messages.

The debtor can, at any stage of the amicable collection, contact either the creditor or the collection agency (depending on if the collection is outsourced) and ask for the payment plan or postpone the due date. The purpose of the reminders and demands is to get the debtor to contact and negotiate the payment, and many times, for example, the payment plan is more flexible in agreeing with the collection agency than the original creditor. (Takuusäätiö, n.d.) Sometimes, if the debtor's financial situation is weak, they might want to avoid excess recovery costs and ask that amicable debt collection to be suspended. In that case, the



creditor cannot send the letters that add the recovery costs, except the letters required to inform, for example, of the payment default entry or to terminate the expiration period of the debt. After the debtor asks for suspension, the creditor may send the summons application to the court and apply for enforcement. (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, n.d.-b.)

Figure 2 illustrates the simple flow of amicable consumer debt collection from the debt's original due date till the second payment demand – the case would be closed if the payment is received at any stage of the process. Moreover, as mentioned above, the debtor can contact any stage and negotiate the payment plan – or ask the amicable debt collection to be suspended. In that case, the process would go directly to the legal collection process flow (which is not illustrated in detail here).

## AMICABLE CONSUMER DEBT COLLECTION

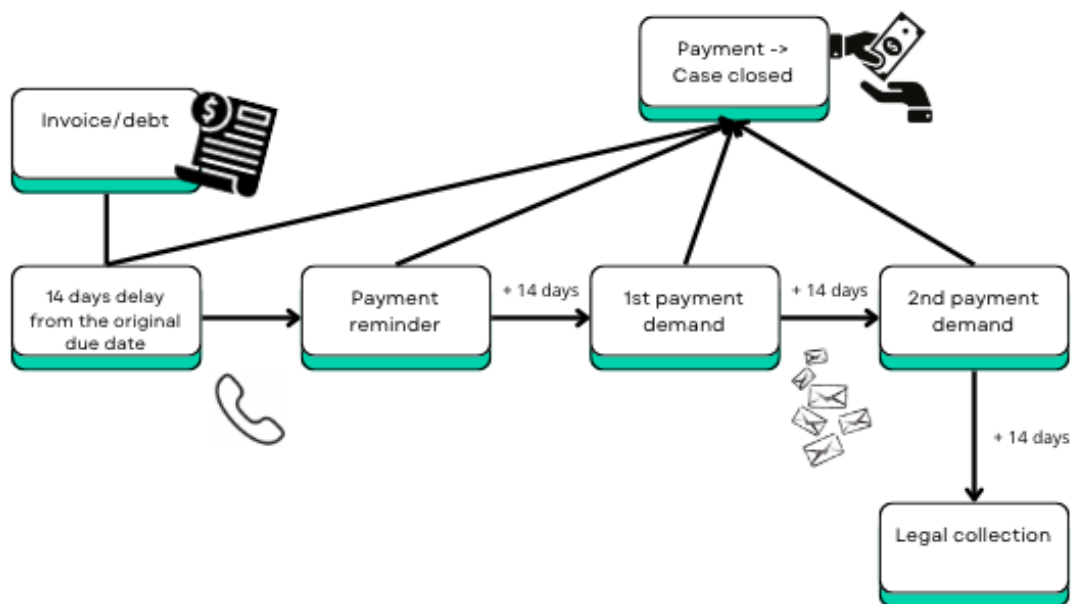


Figure 2. Amicable Consumer Debt Collection (adapted from Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, n.d.-b.)

In Finland, the Regional State Administrative Agency is responsible for ensuring and monitoring all the registered debt collection agencies - also the creditors who collect their receivables - follow the applicable laws and the good collection practices (introduced in the next sub-chapters) in their amicable debt collection operations. (Regional State Administrative Agency, n.d.-b.) In case of default, the Regional State Administrative Agency

primarily tries to settle the dispute with mediation. They could give the fine to the collection agency or creditor or, in the worst-case default, deny the right for debt collection practices. In the most severe cases, the Regional State Administrative Agency files the claim in the court against the defaulted creditor. (Minilex, n.d.-b.)

### **2.1.1 Collection Law in Amicable Consumer Debt Collection in Finland**

As mentioned earlier, there are laws to follow for amicable consumer debt collection in Finland, and the Regional State Administrative Agency monitors that it is applied by the parties doing debt collection acts. The collection law in Finland is used when the creditor tries to collect (amicably) the overdue receivable from the debtor and other factors affecting the parties' position in the debt ratio. The law protects the debtor so that the law cannot deviate to the debtor's detriment. (Finlex, 2024)

The critical aspects of the Finnish collection law on consumer debt collection include (Finlex, 2024):

- Debt collection process: Creditors must follow a formal process, including providing written reminders and demands to debtors regarding the outstanding amounts.
- Regulated practices: Collection agencies (and other parties engaging in collection practices) must follow specific guidelines and regulations regarding communication with debtors, ensuring fair treatment, and respecting their rights.
- Interest and fees: The law specifies the maximum allowable interest rates and fees on overdue debts.
- Enforcement measures: In case of non-payment, creditors may resort to legal actions such as court proceedings to enforce debt collection.
- Consumer protection: The law includes requirements to protect consumers from abusive or unfair debt collection practices, ensuring transparency and fairness throughout the collection process. Moreover, the privacy of the debtor must be strictly guarded.

### 2.1.2 Good Practice in Amicable Consumer Debt Collection

“Good collection practice” in amicable consumer debt collection is issued in Section 4 of the Debt Collection Act to protect the consumers. Good collection practice is quite flexible and open as a term, and it completes other laws and regulations regarding consumer debt collection. Moreover, it facilitates timely intervention in inappropriate activities, accommodating the adoption of new methods and adapting to changes in prevailing societal values without necessitating modifications to laws. (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, 2023) Therefore, good collection practice gives good foundations when adapting social sustainability practices into a debt collection business.

Good practice in Amicable Consumer Debt Collection covers the following (Minilex, n.d.-b.):

- Creditors must avoid causing unnecessary delays when starting the debt collection: Collection should begin as soon as possible, not after a long time after the original due date.
- The debt collection cannot include pressuring or threatening the debtor.
- If the debt has passed the statute of limitations or is no longer valid, the creditor cannot collect it.
- If the debtor requests the payment plan, the responsible approach is necessary: If it seems that the debtor cannot manage the payment plan, the creditor should not agree to it as such.
- The creditor must provide accurate and accurate information regarding the consequences of failing to pay the debt.
- For example, the creditor cannot cause unnecessary or unreasonable recovery costs by frequently sending reminders or demands.
- The creditor cannot cause harm to the debtor or put the personal information in danger.

- The consumer, the debtor, has the right to request up-to-date information regarding its debt and the foundation of the debts, the list of unpaid debts, and the payments and payment allocations.

Even if the debtor is fully responsible for its debt, its rights are still widely secured by the laws and regulations, as learned in this chapter. (Minilex, n.d.-b.) These laws and regulations are good foundations for implementing socially sustainable strategies in Finland's debt collection industry.

### **2.1.3 Importance of Debt Collection**

Debt collection is essential for companies, countries' public finances, and consumers.

Firstly, debt collection is essential for companies since overdue debts and receivables harm the organization's finances. If the debt is unpaid and not collected, the company would write it off as "bad debt" or as a credit loss, which would instantly decrease the profit figures of the business. Moreover, timely payment of debts allows companies to anticipate and include expected income in their cash flow projections, facilitating better financial management by balancing inflows and outflows. This anticipated income is a crucial source of funds for day-to-day operations. Conversely, when debts go unpaid, it disrupts the expected cash flow, impacting the business's financial stability. Recovered funds from debt collection agencies provide timely cash injections, offering the companies the boost they need to manage their payments and maintain economic stability effectively. Finally, if the debt collector understands the importance of empathy and the approach is positive and customer-centric, it would give the consumer a positive customer experience, leading to better customer relationships and loyalty, which is vital to every company to maintain their operations and build long-term customer relationships. (Eames, 2023)

Secondly, debt collection has a role in improving the countries' public finances by companies paying taxes. For example, in Finland, the companies are subject to income tax, which is determined by their profit. This profit is computed as the variance between their taxable income and allowable expenses, taxed at 20 percent. (Veronmaksajat, 2022) As mentioned earlier, the profit figures will decrease if the company has unpaid receivables. (Eames, 2023) Therefore, there will be fewer taxes to pay to improve public finance.

Finally, when treated respectfully and fairly, debt collection is significant for individual consumers. As mentioned at the beginning of this study, many debtors are vulnerable and

might feel ashamed of their economic situation. (Mieli, 2023) When the debt is unpaid and sent to a collection agency, many agencies aim to negotiate flexible payment plans or other arrangements with the customer, even more flexible than the original creditor. (Takuusäätiö, n.d.) Therefore, it may put the consumer out of debt, affecting their overall well-being and economic situation.

#### **2.1.4 Collection Agencies in Finland**

Several debt collection agencies, both international and domestic companies, are operating in Finland. Nevertheless, only those companies registered in the Regional State Administrative Agencies' debt collection register can do debt collection activities in Finland. The registering is required if the debt collection includes a collection of outstanding debts on behalf of another party or the creditor's outstanding debts when the debt has been obtained solely for debt collection. The collection law requires this, with a few exceptions, such as the creditor collecting debt owed personally to them, the creditor collecting outstanding debts for a corporation belonging to the same group, or the occasional debt collection not promoted. (Regional State Administrative Agency, n.d.-a.) In 2023, around 80 companies were on the register. (Manninen, 2023)

The five most prominent (turnover-wise) collection agencies operating in Finland were selected for this study because it can be assumed and expected that those companies making good turnover would have better assets, motivations, and foundations to improve their social sustainability compared to those not doing as good turnover. (Tan, 2023)

The selected five collection agencies will be introduced shortly. Later in this study, the social sustainability aspect of these five debt collection agencies will be evaluated.

The first chosen agency, Lowell Finland (previously Lindorff, later called Lowell), has operated in Finland for over 50 years already, and they state that they serve over 0,5 million customers in Finland with invoices and debt annually. (Lowell Finland, n.d.-a.) They have 380 employees (Manninen, 2023) in Helsinki, Lahti, and Turku. (Lowell Finland, n.d.-a.) Lowell has a turnover of 110,8 million euros in 2023. (Manninen, 2023) Lowell Suomi is part of the Lowell Group, founded in Great Britain. Lowell's values are pioneering, ambition, compassion, excellence, and responsibility. (Lowell Finland, n.d.-a.)

The second chosen agency, OK Perintä, was founded in 1991 and is part of Norwegian B2 Impact. They have around 200.000 customer interactions annually in Finland. OK Perintä

has around 124 employees (Manninen, 2023) in Vaasa, Helsinki, and Tampere. (OK Perintä, n.d.-b.) They have a turnover of 76,1 million euros in 2023. (Manninen, 2023) OK Perintä does not state its values clearly on its website. Still, as a service promise, they tell us to be customer-centric, listen, understand, and activate the customer and always aim to find the solution that ensures the customer can get ahead in their life. (OK Perintä, n.d.-a.)

The third chosen agency, Intrum has roots in Finland for over 110 years (Intrum, n.d.-a.) and is an international group operating in 20 European countries. (Intrum, n.d.-c.) Intrum has around 503 employees in Finland, (Manninen, 2023) in Helsinki, Jyväskylä, Tampere, and Kuopio. (Intrum, n.d.-b.) They have a turnover of 74,2 million euros in 2023. (Manninen, 2023): The values of Intrum are empathy, ethics, dedication, and solutions. (Intrum, n.d.-d.)

The fourth chosen agency, Ropo Capital, has roots in Finland since 2008. It was founded in Finland but is trying to enter international markets. (Ropo Capital, n.d.-b.) Ropo Capital has a turnover of 58 million euros, with around 211 employees in Finland in 2023. (Manninen, 2023) Ropo Capital says on its website that they reach around 2 million customers annually. Moreover, they state they want to improve their operations constantly and are technology enthusiastic. (Ropo Capital, n.d.-c.) The values of Ropo Capital are the joy of work, courage, thirst for knowledge, straight talk, and result orientation. (Ropo Capital, n.d.-a.)

Finally, the fifth chosen agency, WestStar (better known as Kontio Perintä, later called Kontio Perintä), is a Finnish collection agency founded in 2008. (Finder, n.d.) Its turnover in 2023 was 32,8 million euros, with around 17 employees. (Manninen, 2023) Kontio Perintä states on its website that its advantage compared to its competitors is that it is a fully Finnish collection agency, which it says is “rare.” The website has no apparent values but mentions that the company admires a customer-centric approach and service beyond expectations. (Kontio Perintä, n.d.-a.)

## **2.2 Social Sustainability**

This chapter introduces the term “social sustainability,” the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to social sustainability, and the debt collection industry.

Social sustainability, according to the United Nations Global Compact, involves recognizing and managing the impact businesses have on people, whether positive or negative. At its core is how well a company engages with and affects its stakeholders, including employees, workers across the value chain, customers, and local communities. Recognizing that

companies wield considerable influence, whether directly or indirectly, proactive management of these impacts is crucial. While the primary responsibility for safeguarding and promoting social sustainability, including human rights, equality, and support for people with disabilities, rests with governments, the United Nations emphasizes that companies must also play their part. (United Nations Global Compact, n.d.)

Kestävä kehitys – a website that has been implemented in collaboration with multiple educational institutes in Finland and financed by the Finnish National Agency for Education (Kestävä kehitys, n.d.-b.) states that the purpose of social sustainability is to ensure people equal opportunities to feel good and healthy, achieve fundamental human rights, obtain the necessities of life, and enable participation in decision-making both domestically and globally. The vision of social sustainability is to ensure that the conditions for well-being are passed on from generation to generation. Global social sustainability issues include population growth, poverty, food and healthcare, gender equality, and education provision. Moreover, the Finnish government's sustainable development agenda as a development target for social sustainability includes, for example, improving employment, avoiding the isolation of individuals, improving health, and maintaining citizens' ability to function. (Kestävä kehitys, n.d.-c.)

Kai Roland Green and Katia Dupret, in their article “Making Sense of Social Sustainability” (2024), wrote about the hybrid interpretation of social sustainability. They indicated that the social sustainability agenda involves various strategic tools that exceed traditional sectoral boundaries of market, state, and civil society. To ensure the preservation and improvement of social relationships and infrastructure for the future, it is essential to focus simultaneously on economic and social aspects. This requires employing hybrid organizational structures integrating economic principles like market dynamics, redistribution, and reciprocity. Such hybrids allow for merging economic and social goals, promoting sustainable development and community resilience. However, defining the specific focus of the 'social' aspect has proven more complex and less compatible with existing sustainability analysis methods. Some researchers have seen the ambiguity of “social” as involvement in the generally positive role of sustainability in “facilitating communication among actors with colliding interests.” (Green & Dupret, 2024)

Originally, “sustainable development” included, indeed, social aspects, but it is needed to focus more on “social” factors alongside environmental and economic factors. The failure to do so has generated new interest in social sustainability. However, it's currently a concept in disarray, which could seriously undermine its importance and benefits. The research of

Vallance et al. (2011) presents the three strands of social sustainability: development social sustainability, maintenance social sustainability, and bridge social sustainability, as seen in Figure 2 below. (Vallance et al., 2011)

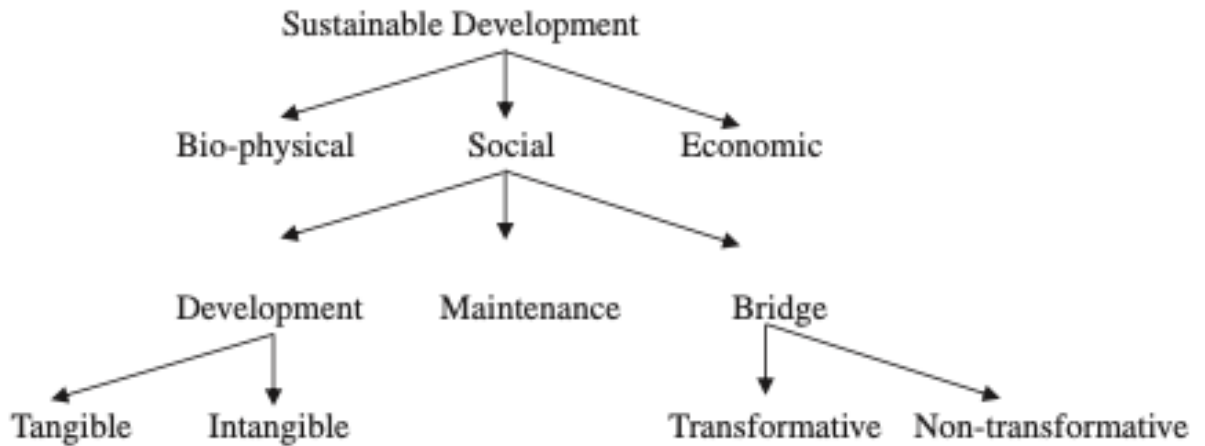


Figure 3. Three strands of 'social sustainability'. (Vallance et al., 2011)

Development social sustainability means meeting basic needs, fostering social connections, ensuring fairness, and preserving resources for future generations without compromising anything from them. It includes various vital elements for maintaining life, both tangible and intangible. This relies on fostering sustainable growth, meeting essential needs like jobs, food, and energy, maintaining a sustainable population level, conserving resources, adapting technology, managing risks, integrating environmental and economic considerations in decision-making, and reshaping international economic relations. (Vallance et al., 2011)

Maintenance social sustainability is about keeping socio-cultural aspects intact despite change and how people respond to those changes. It involves traditions, practices, preferences, and places people want to keep and enhance. These things are important for people's quality of life, social connections, and pleasant living and working environments, and they endure over time. (Vallance et al., 2011)

Bridge social sustainability is about changing behavior to reach environmental goals, rather than assuming good environmental outcomes will automatically happen with development. It connects various fields like psychology, human geography, and socio-ecological studies to



strengthen the link between people and the environment by using people's abilities to achieve the desired results. Bridge social sustainability involves both transformative (changing how people interact with the environment, others, and non-humans) and non-transformative aspects (encouraging different behaviors without requiring fundamental changes in how people relate to the world). (Vallance et al., 2011)

Despite the differences in the definitions from different sources and the complexity of social sustainability, the critical aspect of all the mentioned definitions is that everyone should have equal opportunities in life—to success, impact, food, and utilities, despite race, age, gender, disabilities, or other factors.

### **Sustainable Development Goals Relating to Social Sustainability and Debt Collection Industry**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 goals included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which world leaders agreed upon in 2015. They promise to secure the rights and well-being of everyone on a healthy, blooming planet. (United Nations Global Compact, n.d.)

Since this study is about social sustainability and the debt collection industry, it will introduce the most critical SDGs relating to this topic and the debt collection industry below.



Figure 4. Sustainable Development Goals (The United Nations, n.d.-d.)

## **Goal 1: End Poverty: End poverty in all its forms everywhere**

Globally, there are around 670 million people in 2022 living in extreme poverty, which means surviving less than 2,15 USD a day. The Goal 1 aims to end the extreme poverty for all people everywhere. (The United Nations, n.d.-a.) In Finland, extreme poverty is not expected since the government provides the minimum income in case of an economic emergency. (European Anti Poverty Network Finland, 2023) Still, the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 894.000 in 2021, representing around 16,3 % of the household population. Individuals residing in low-income households, households characterized by limited work engagement, or households facing significant material and social deprivation are deemed to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Moreover, 6,1 % of the household population experienced difficulties making ends meet. (Statistics Finland, 2023b). In 2022, 405.000 persons, representing 7,2 % of the population, that received social assistance from the government, and 29% received it and have been in such a situation for more than ten months. Around 241.200 persons were entirely dependent on basic social security in 2022. (European Anti Poverty Network Finland, 2023) Based on the numbers mentioned regarding the poverty situation in Finland, it can be stated that there is poverty in Finland, and thousands of people struggle with financial issues daily.

As mentioned, the receivable or invoice goes into debt collection if unpaid. (Takuusäätiö, n.d.) Therefore, it can be assumed that the person has no money to pay, which might signify poverty. That is why the debt collection agency (or other party doing collection activities) plays a crucial role in meeting the customer to decrease the risk of debt overhang or insolvency. The good practice in debt collection demands, for example, that the collection follow a responsible way of negotiating and agreeing on the payment plan with the customer. (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, 2023) For example, knowing that the customer cannot manage the installments without leaving other invoices, medicine, or other utilities unpaid could cause more expenses and debt for the customer. Collection law sets the limits of the collection fees and interests, so it cannot be built up from that rate. The total collection fee during the collection process can be a maximum of 60 euros if the capital is 100 euros or less, 120 euros if the capital is from 100 euros to 1000 euros, and 210 euros if the capital is over 1000 euros. (Finlex, 2024). Moreover, to prevent insolvency and further poverty, the debt collector must guide the debtor to seek comprehensive help from their municipality's financial and debt counseling. (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority,

2023) In other instances, the collector could guide the debtor to seek help for poverty towards the social worker for social security (European Anti Poverty Network Finland, 2023) or Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, which can help with an urgent invoice or food in case of financial crisis, or provide financial guidance. (Suomen Evankelis-Luterilainen Kirkko, n.d.)

### **Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries**

It has been studied that 1/6 of people globally have experienced discrimination in some form, with women and individuals with disabilities disproportionately impacted. Social and economic development faces a looming threat from inequality, hindering long-term progress, impeding poverty alleviation efforts, and undermining individuals' sense of fulfillment and self-esteem. Significantly, the financial inequity has increased in recent years. (The United Nations, n.d.-c.) Therefore, Goal 10 targets, by the year 2030, to strive to enhance and advocate for the comprehensive inclusion of individuals across all social, economic, and political spheres, regardless of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or socioeconomic standing. (UNDP, n.d.) Not only globally, but Finland also has challenges in inequity, which causes problems, particularly in socially sustainable development, and impacts another dimension of sustainability. (Kestävä Kehitys, n.d.-a.) For example, women's annual earnings in Finland are 77% -80 % of men's earnings despite the higher education level. Also, immigrants in Finland face inequity; their earnings are approximately 20% less than the native population, and they are poorly employed despite relatively high education levels. (Paukkeri et al., n.d.) Moreover, the statistics show that there are 147.000 disabled people in Finland in danger of poverty. Also, the study indicates they have a higher risk of low income, unemployment, and material and social deprivation than the rest of the population. (Tilastokeskus, 2023) Based on the facts mentioned, it is proven that there are issues regarding inequity in Finland.

Regarding the collection industry, the collection law (Finlex, 2024) or good practice (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, 2023) does not explicitly mention the equal treatment of each customer regardless of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or socioeconomic standing. Nevertheless, this might be explained by the fact that the Finnish Constitution states that nobody should be placed in a different position without any acceptable reason based on gender, age, origin, language, religion, belief, opinion, state of health, disability, or any other reason related to the person. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, n.d.)

Based on the inequity numbers provided earlier, there is a gap in earnings between the different groups in Finland – women, disabled, and immigrants, and they have a more considerable risk of facing poverty in Finland. Therefore, those groups are likely also to be customers of debt collection agencies, and they should consider social sustainability factors.

When discussing inequity regarding the debt collection industry, which is also a customer service, it is necessary to mention unconscious bias. The term unconscious bias means prejudices, stereotypes, or unverified judgments for or against certain groups of individuals that they aren't consciously aware of. That is one of the most dangerous things in customer service-based roles, which might affect customer inequity. (Winstead, 2022) Because most people are unaware of their unconscious biases, but everyone still has them, it is a negative concept that should be addressed. (Suveren, 2022)

Another SDG closely related to debt collection and social sustainability is Goal 5: Gender Equality. However, since it includes similar themes introduced in Goal 10, this study no needs to examine further it and its relation to the debt collection industry.

### **2.3 Implementing Social Sustainability in Business**

This section briefly introduces a few theories on how to implement social sustainability in business in general. Later, this study presents how to apply that to the debt collection industry, including practical examples of how the collection agencies could adapt it with a low threshold and to the grassroots level.

The United Nations (United Nations Global Compact, n.d.) suggests that companies contribute to social sustainability, for example, by respecting rights generally, making strategic social investments and promoting public policies that support social sustainability, partnering with other businesses, combining strengths to create a more significant positive impact, and through different ways contribute to improving the lives of the people they affect.

Social sustainability is often overshadowed by environmental and economic aspects when discussing sustainability. Nevertheless, this is changing due to the increasing awareness and demand of customers and consumers, agreements, and changing legislation, which strongly emphasizes social sustainability and responsibility. Companies should pay attention to the following topics when considering social sustainability: diversity, safety and wellbeing, equality and inclusion, human rights issues of the supply chain, ties to organizations and the local community, business ethics and good governance, data-related ethical and privacy

protection issues, involvement of stakeholders in general, and company involvement in the societal discussion. However, sustainability and responsibility depend on a company's values and culture, with strategy shaping its role in business. Employees must understand how their actions affect sustainability and responsibility. While it can be challenging, especially for large companies, implementing social sustainability is necessary as businesses are increasingly expected to prioritize sustainability and responsibility. (Lanne, 2023)

Socially sustainable business systems are new ways of looking at business practices, policies, and regulations to ensure the planet's and its inhabitants' sustainability. It's about guaranteeing human rights at all levels and ensuring fair processes and outcomes. Socially sustainable business systems refer to all humans being entitled to a life with dignity on the planet. These systems aim for everyone to lead a dignified life on Earth and are designed to make sure everyone works towards that goal. Many companies rely on voluntary behavior regarding corporate social responsibility, corporate citizenship, and business ethics. Still, voluntary efforts have proven not to be the most effective way to transform the current commercial system. Socially sustainable business systems involve setting new standards, rules, institutions, structures, and goals to create a positive future where every life can be lived with dignity. (Carbo et al., 2017, p. 1-2)

Since 2008, after the economic crisis, there has been a focus on economic growth rather than social progress. For example, even developed countries have increased poverty rates and income inequality. Current economic models do not ensure long-lasting societal well-being. Businesses are vital for improving social sustainability, but this topic has not been thoroughly researched yet. (Missimer & Mesquita, 2022)

When discussing social sustainability in business management, multiple terms are present, such as corporate citizenship, corporate sustainability, and corporate social responsibility. Companies need to include social sustainability in every part of their organization to achieve social sustainability. However, studies have found some challenges in doing this:

- Poor definition of social sustainability: There is a lack of literature that clearly defines the concept and research on the topic.
- Picking issues: Poor definition leads to random inclusion of issues, making it harder to achieve social sustainability goals.

- Lack of system and the science-based understanding of social sustainability and goal-setting.
- Lack of ability to deal with issues strategically
- Lack of clarity on how to best use existing tools
- Limited research on how to implement and integrate structures and processes.
- Lack of real-world data and support
- A disorganized organizational structure complicates collaboration on these issues.
- Lack of proper integration; separate tools and approaches are used instead.
- More dynamic processes for working with these issues are needed.

The challenges mentioned are common in the business context. (Missimer & Mesquita, 2022)

Since COVID-19, social issues and setbacks in socio-economic development have become more evident, driving progress towards the SDGs. These actions are necessary to improve health and well-being equally across the world, and businesses play a crucial role in that. (Missimer & Mesquita, 2022)

## **2.4 Social Sustainability in Amicable Consumer Debt Collection**

No Finnish sources and research are available on social sustainability in amicable consumer debt collection. Those would be the most relevant for this study since they relate to Finland's industry. Nevertheless, there are some articles and texts from abroad regarding the topic, and only some of them are introduced in this section.

Chris Leslie has written in 2022 about the ESG (Environment, Social, and Governance) and sustainability in collections in the UK and stated that those ideas came as a topic in the industry not so long time ago; the coronavirus pandemic and recession have brought those topics on the immediate agenda since to the concern of the society. He mentioned that since the collection impacts economic activity, it should reflect its contribution to sustainability. The

collection industry in the UK is a highly regulated and accountable environment where the competitive pressure from the clients drives standards of competence and value that often include good ESG practices. Moreover, many creditors demand their service providers (the collection agencies) positive social actions, including customer responsiveness and openness about the process and transparency (Leslie, 2022)

FasterCapital has written an article in 2024 regarding sustainable debt collection strategies. The article suggests that sustainable debt collection strategies should focus on treating customers with respect and empathy. This involves clear and fair communication, providing understandable information about debts, and offering flexible payment options based on individual situations. It also advises using technology to reduce aggressive collection methods. By following ethical practices, businesses can build trust and maintain a positive reputation. The article offers several tips for ethical debt collection, such as understanding the debt collection landscape, being transparent and empathetic, offering flexible payment plans, and using debtors' preferred communication methods, including social media. (FasterCapital, 2024)

For this thesis, the author of Chapter 18: Consumer Debt and Social Sustainability from the book *Building Sustainable Cities, Social, Economic, and Environmental Factors* was requested to share that chapter. The chapter explains that consumers' financial behavior is important for companies, governments, and consumers themselves. However, a major issue is the lack of knowledge about financial planning, which can lead families and individuals to make poor financial decisions and increase debt. Additionally, the chapter mentions that economic behavior is influenced by factors like age, gender, education, family income, and existing debts. (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2020)

Moreover, cultural aspects affect the responsibility for payment and may differ across cultures. Studies have shown that men are more likely to take financial risks than women. Age is also a factor, with older individuals being more cautious than younger ones. Students are considered a vulnerable consumer group, as they are young and often need more financial education. The chapter states that good economic literature is necessary since all consumers will go through the personal financial life cycle, as presented in Figure 5. (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2020)

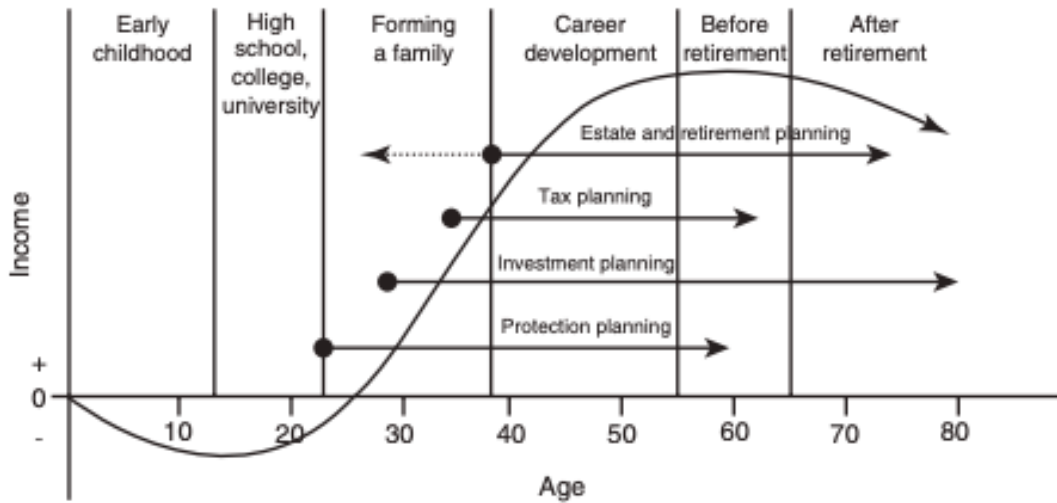


Figure 5. Personal financial life cycle (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2020)

The chapter states, for example, that in Lima, Peru, per capita debt increased five-fold between 2001 and 2017. 80% of Peruvians spend more than they earn. It also states that such a deep problem must be solved and strategies implemented. As a solution, it requests that SDG 1: No poverty be addressed. Financial education helps people avoid and reduce excessive spending, which is one of the main ways to solve the problem. (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2020)

Similarly, SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth can be achieved only by financially educating the citizens, but higher income often leads to more debt. Achieving SDGs requires planned actions from governments, institutions, and citizens. Social sustainability should be a fundamental part of education at all levels, from primary school to college. Including financial education in this agenda is crucial to promote social sustainability. Without it, individuals may struggle with debt despite higher incomes throughout their lives. (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2020)

### 3 Methodology

As a recap, this study aims to produce insights for the collection agencies and individual companies that collect their receivables, how to consider social sustainability aspects in their operations, and how to implement them in their strategy. Moreover, this research introduces



some challenges and barriers in implementing SDGs regarding social sustainability in debt collection practices and aims to provide suggestions for overcoming those issues.

For this study, Finland's five largest debt collection agencies (turnover-wise) were selected: Lowell, Intrum, OK Perintä, Ropo Capital, and Kontio Perintä. There are around 80 debt collection operators in Finland's official register. (Manninen, 2023) Still, turnover-wise, the selected five agencies cover most of the market, which is the primary reason for the selections. Since qualitative research methods (questionnaires and observation of public information such as websites and social media) were used in this study, the sampling technique was judgment sampling (also known as purposeful sampling). The purpose of that technique is to select the most productive samples. (Marshall, 1996). Therefore, choosing the biggest operators in Finland's debt collection industry was the most logical way to get the most relevant information since they contributed the most.

The qualitative research methods were selected because of the nature of the thesis: The research aims to increase the overall understanding of the quality, features, and meanings of the researched topic, the social sustainability in amicable debt collection in Finland, and therefore, the qualitative research method applies. (Hennik et al., 2020, p. 10)

The five collection agencies' websites and social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) were first investigated. The purpose was to examine each collection agency's current implementation of social sustainability and SDGs. The scope of examination was to seek anything related to social sustainability, how they promote it, and if they have a specific tab for "sustainability" on their website or mention SDGs. Only Finnish versions of the websites were used during examinations since there was limited information on English-translated pages.

Following that, questionnaires were conducted by email (due to the author's schedule barriers). The email questionnaire was sent to each of the five debt collection agencies with short information about the research and its societal impact. The primary purpose of the questionnaires was to collect more in-depth information from each collection agency regarding their current state of social sustainability and their insights on what should be improved since examining the public sources gives just limited information.

Moreover, a similar questionnaire query (modified to fit the purpose) was sent to the Regional State Administrative Agency, which keeps the register of the companies involved in amicable debt collection in Finland. (Regional State Administrative Agency, n.d.-a.)

Moreover, the same questionnaire request was sent to the Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority since they manage consumer and creditor disputes. (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, n.d.-a.) In addition, the questionnaire request was also sent to an expert from the industry with over ten years of experience in the debt collection industry. The expert decided to present as an anonym for this study.

The purpose of sending them the questionnaire query was to get the official's/expert's opinion on the topic to improve the quality of the research since they could have a general overview of the debt collection industry in Finland as a registered owner and overseer.

### **3.1 Research Process**

The research often includes similar process steps regardless of the research area or the methodology choice. The research process illustrates the primary scientific method using the following steps: statement of the problem, generating a hypothesis/formulating a research question, review of literature, creating measures, choosing the sample, collecting data, analyzing data, and reporting findings. (Bailey & Handu, 2013) This thesis and the research align with the research process.

The thesis and the research process started with defining the problem, which was the social sustainability implementation of amicable debt collection practices in Finland. The topic has not been researched in Finland, and demand and importance exist.

The research questions were formulated after identifying the problem and the research topic. They aimed to find the answer to the current state of debt collection agencies regarding social sustainability and how it can be improved. As sub-research questions, they aimed to discover possible challenges when implementing social sustainability and what benefits it may cause the debtors.

Next, the relevant literature, such as topical studies, articles, and research, was reviewed. To make the content manageable, it was essential to stay focused on the research topic and the research question. As mentioned earlier, little prior research was conducted in Finland regarding the subject.

Regarding measurement, as qualitative research, this was not the most relevant topic during the research process. Nevertheless, currency was measured as euros, many statistical numbers were presented as percentages, and some figures were reported as millions.

The research samples were selected from collection agencies in Finland. The five largest (turn-over-wise) collection agencies were chosen since they cover most of the industry. The expert was selected from the writer's LinkedIn network, and the reason for the selection was their vast experience from the collection from the different sectors.

Finally, the data analysis consists of the research data collected from the questionnaires and the collection agencies' websites and social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook). In the end, it was proven that the methods used answered the research questions and delivered suggestions for improvements.

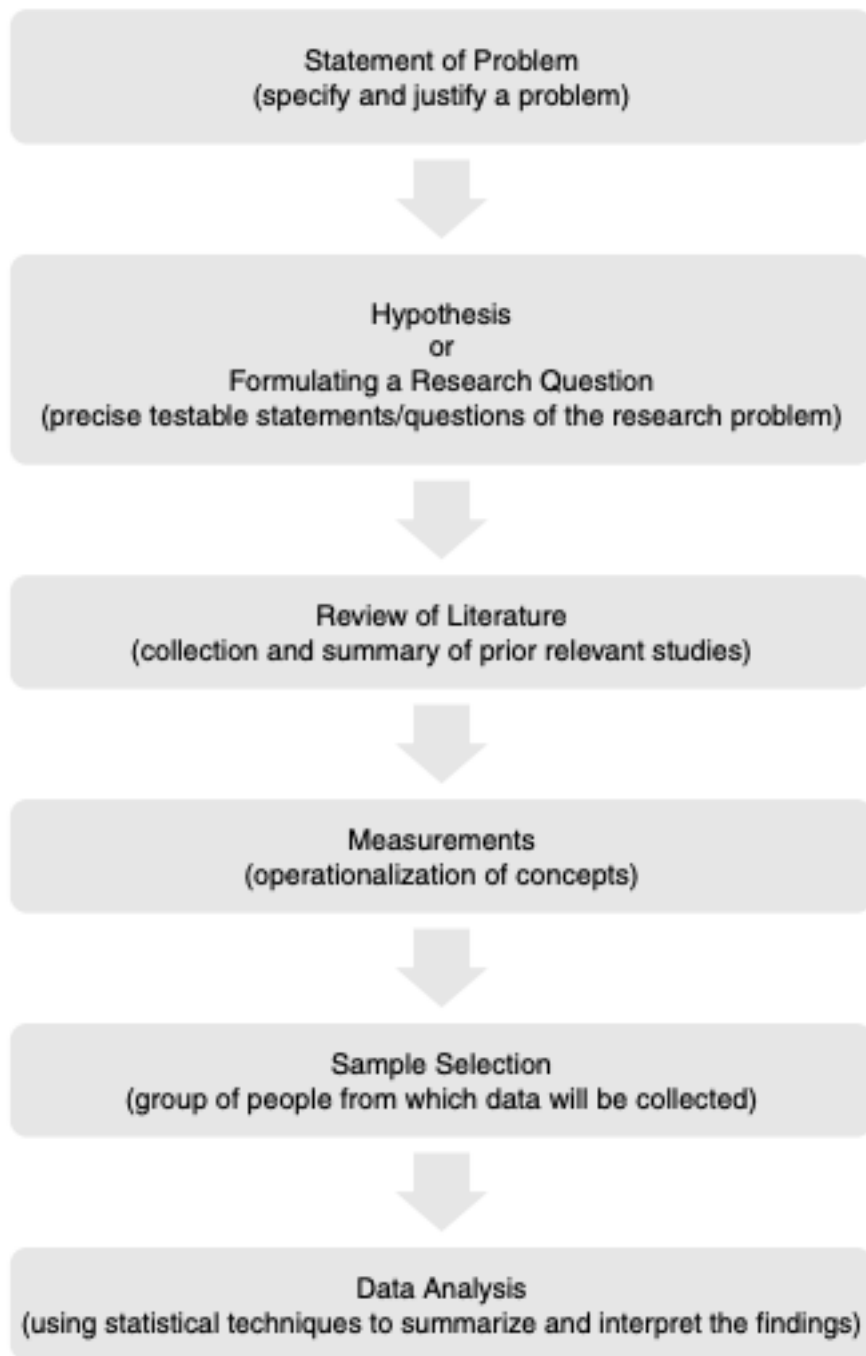


Figure 6. Illustration of the research process (Bailey & Handu, 2013)

### 3.2 Reliability, Generalization, and Validity

Reliability in qualitative research means being thorough, careful, and honest while conducting the study. (Kriukow, n.d.) Using sources provided by the Finnish collection agencies was avoided (excluding the parts where the collection agencies are introduced and investigated) when doing theoretical research to improve the reliability and avoid bias in this study. When examining the debt collection's websites, only Finnish websites were used as sources since it was noted that the English-translated version of the webpage had less information than the Finnish one and could have been outdated. Moreover, using many different sources presents careful and thorough research, which again improves the reliability of the study. Sources were selected by using media literacy to keep the references trustworthy.

Generalization means that the result of the study in one place or time will be the same elsewhere or at another time. (Payne & Williams, 2005) Only the five biggest collection agencies in Finland selected and introduced in this study do not represent Finland's whole debt collection industry. Nevertheless, the five debt collection agencies investigated cover most of the market turnover-wise and have many employees; the rest seem to have less than 70 employees. Therefore, the study covers a significant part of the industry turnover and employee-wise. (Manninen, 2023) Since the study covers the most influential leaders in the industry, it significantly improves the generalization of the study. Currently, the study is valid, but if the laws or regulations change in the future, then this research cannot be generalized anymore.

Regarding validity, three dimensions can be mentioned: researcher bias, reactivity, and respondent bias. Researcher bias means any negative influence on the researcher's knowledge or assumptions of the study. (Kriukow, n.d.) There is a slight chance of influence since the researcher has their own personal experience working in the debt collection industry and has personal experiences from the topic. Nevertheless, it cannot be seen as negatively impacting the research, and vice versa; fully understanding the industry increases the quality of the study and ensures the concentration of the correct issues. Still, the unconscious influence of that cannot be excluded. Reactivity again means the possible influence of the researcher themselves on the studied situation or people. (Kriukow, n.d.) Reactivity was not an issue during the study since the theoretical information was taken from public sources, and no personal opinions were mentioned. Moreover, regarding the questionnaires, the questions were emailed, so it was impossible to influence them personally. Respondent bias means the respondents don't give honest responses for any

reason if they feel that the topic is sensitive or want to please the researcher with the answers they assume are preferred. (Kriukow, n.d.) That issue is possible in this study during the questionnaires with debt collection agencies. Since the topic is sensitive, and the debt collection agencies have a negative stigma, it is possible that they gave sugar-coated answers. Moreover, it can be assumed that they answered by their own perspective, so the customer perspective is not covered.

### **3.3 Limitations**

This study contains a few limitations that might affect its results.

First, only public sources were used – for example, when investigating the current situation of five collection agencies in Finland, it was possible to use only the information they provided on their websites or news articles. Therefore, information might be missing, such as internal information on how they practice social sustainability principles in their process, which is only internal or confidential information. Despite the questionnaires, some information, such as internal and confidential information regarding social sustainability, could still be missing.

Regarding the questionnaires, the email questionnaires could be considered a limitation since sending the questions just by email limits the natural discussion around the topic. Therefore, some insights could be excluded. The decision to use email questionnaires was made due to the author's timing issues, which limited the conducting of face-to-face questionnaires, which would have brought even more value to this research. Moreover, since the questionnaires were performed only by the debt collection agencies and the experts working in the industry, the customer perspective is missing in this study. That could be a topic for future research to examine how the customers see the debt collection agencies' social sustainability approach.

## **4 Analysis**

Chapter 4 provides a condensed overview of the data and findings obtained through the questionnaires and the theory. Moreover, the collected data is applied to practice based on which recommendations can be made and which supports the answers to research questions.

## 4.1 Current Situation in Collection Agencies in Finland in Social Sustainability

This section investigates each of the five selected collection agencies' websites and social media (Instagram and Facebook) to explore how they have considered social sustainability factors: information for debtors regarding the debt process and other relevant factors: forward to seek help for their situation; "Sustainability" or "Responsibility" -page on their website; how the diversity and equity are present; the presence of SDGs; linkage for good collection practices and collection law; social sustainability on company values; raising awareness on financial issues and the motivation to improve. Finally, all collected details from the web pages and social media are evaluated and collected on the table using the scale Excellent – Satisfactory – Poor. Excellent is green in color, which means the collection agency contributes a lot to a particular factor. Satisfactory is in orange, meaning the collection agency contributes somehow to the factor, but there is room for improvement. Poor is in red, meaning the collection agency has not taken the factor into account at all.



Figure 7: Scale

### 4.1.1 Web pages and social media

In this section, the web pages, and social media (Instagram and Facebook) concentrate on the social sustainability factors mentioned above.

#### Lowell Finland

The first page of Lowell Finland's website (Lowell Finland, n.d.-b.) says, "We are here to support you in each phase." That itself gives an idea that Lowell is on the customer's side.

Moreover, on the first page is a link to "Oma Lowell," an electric portal for customers to handle their debts or contact customer service online. The front page gives a lot of

information and links for the other pages where the information is, for example, how the collection goes forward, what to do if getting the payment reminder, and how to seek help if there is, for example, a large electric bill but the customer has yet no money to pay it. As the good collection practice states, the creditors should forward the debtor to seek help (Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority, 2023); that aligns with that statement since Lowell guides the customer to seek help, for example, from social security and tax allowances. (Lowell Finland, n.d.-b.)

Lowell has its own page for sustainability and the statement that Lowell has been Finland's most sustainable operator for over 50 years. They state that they can find an amicable solution with the customer in around 90% of the cases before it moves forward to legal collection and payment default. Lowell ensures they act according to the law and sustainably with all their operations to align their risk management and compliance program. On the page, there is information regarding Lowell's corporate responsibility; they participate in educating Finnish people on economic and financial skills; they facilitate the [Maksumyohassa.fi](https://maksumyohassa.fi) -web page, which provides information about debt collection in an easy and understandable language, and support the people seek help and solutions for their financial issues. Moreover, Lowell is part of the "Mun talous" network, aiming to improve youths' financial skills and prevent economic problems. Therefore, it also raises awareness regarding those issues and solutions. (Lowell Finland, n.d.-b.)

Lowell aims to stop debt overhang and admits that societal actions are insufficient. They also have a sub-page to suggest how to improve that: municipalities should not collect their customer fees from insolvent people, positive credit information register for broad use, manage one's own finances as a more comprehensive part of the curriculum in schools, and raise awareness and discussion about financial distress. Moreover, Lowell provides webinars and education for their stakeholders. (Lowell Finland, n.d.-b.)

On Lowell's web page, the SDGs are not visible. Nevertheless, the social sustainability factors are included in their values: Pioneering, Ambition, Compassion, Excellence, and Responsibility. (Lowell Finland, n.d.-b.)

For example, "Compassion" states that they respect people as they are, are helpful, and act fairly and equitably in every situation. Also, "Responsibility" states that they are open, trustworthy, and responsible, and they do even more than laws and regulations require. (Lowell Finland, n.d.-b.) These two values are mentioned since they closely relate to social sustainability.



On Lowell's Instagram account (Lowell Finland Instagram, n.d.), there has not been much activity since 14<sup>th</sup> April 2022. The latest post is regarding greetings for easter. Generally, Lowell posts mostly things on Instagram about the employees' working lives, summer work advertisements, and introducing their employees. There are posts relating to social sustainability and posts regarding their values: for example, in 2019, they posted about their value of "Responsibility," mentioning that responsibility can be seen in their being openness and trustworthiness, doing more than the law requires, for example, having conversations with the customers regarding their financial issues and spreading the knowledge.

In 2019 and later, Lowell seems to have spread the knowledge about the debts to the customers, but the account has been inactive recently. Lowell has 327 followers on Instagram.

Lowell's Facebook account (Lowell Suomi Facebook, n.d.) seems to be inactive, as well as its Instagram account. The latest post is from 17<sup>th</sup> October 2022, and it informs about the issues in the self-service portal. The following post before the 2022 post is from 2019 and tells the post-strike ending. There are informative posts in 2019 to the debtors regarding advice for financial issues and how to contact Lowell customer service, among others. Nevertheless, in recent years, Facebook has been inactive. Lowell has 691 followers and 667 likes on its Facebook page.

In conclusion, Lowell's website and social media seem to invest more in the web page than social media. Facebook and Instagram have been inactive since 2022, and the posts on social media are not focused on social sustainability. Nevertheless, the website considers social sustainability factors very well and informative. Based on the website, Lowell considers social factors even more than the laws and regulations demand, participates in different knowledge-sharing programs, and provides education.

### **OK Perintä**

On the first page of OK Perintä's website (OK Perintä, n.d.-c.) they state that "We help people get forward in their lives". Moreover, they state that they are pioneers of customer-oriented debt collection and that listening, understanding, and activating the customer is the base of the best collection result.

They have a link to their self-service portal on the first page, as well as some topical articles for debtors to read, for example, regarding the positive credit register, tips for pensioners,

and articles stating how average young end up with indebtedness and how to avoid the debt spiral. They have an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section on their website, where many questions are answered to help debtor with their queries, and a lot of helpful information regarding each stage of the debt collection process. They state that their promise to the customer is to help them always negotiate and restructure their payments and provide flexibility, when possible, to believe that there is always a solution that helps them get further in life. To guarantee that they always listen to the customer and are ready to receive feedback since high-quality and humane debt collection is an honor to them. OK, Perintä always promises to follow good collection practices and says they are transparent. (OK Perintä, n.d.-c.)

OK Perintä states that they are pioneers of ethical debt collection and developed a personal and counseling method of collecting first in Finland. They claim their ethical operating standards extend to the whole industry by challenging others to be even more transparent and understanding to everyone. They aim to be the most sustainable in the industry. OK, Perintä has the sub-page regarding the ways and places where the consumer can seek help for their difficult financial situation, such as a church, Takuusäätiö, and debt counseling. (OK Perintä, n.d.-c.)

OK Perintä has a customer advisory committee that includes the customers (debtors). It aims to improve its operations by listening to the debtors and being more customer-oriented and humane. Another goal is to consider how OK Perintä could support the debtors, help them manage their financial issues, and prevent the shame related to indebtedness. (OK Perintä, n.d.-c.)

OK Perintä's website does not state its values, has no "Sustainability" or "Responsibility" page, and does not mention the SDGs.

OK Perintä is quite active on Instagram (OK Perintä Instagram, n.d.), and they actively promote consumer advice and guidance. For example, on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2024, they posted regarding how older people could consider their pension days from a financial point of view.

Moreover, according to their Instagram stories, they participate in the Gubbe Kummi program, where they spend time with older people, for example, by playing board games.

They have also posted about charity: on 20<sup>th</sup> December, they posted that employees wanted to give bottle recycling money (Pantti) to the charity Project Liv, which intends to bring joy to

sick kids. They also share their customer stories, such as how they figured out the best solution for their customers. OK Perintä has 196 followers on Instagram.

OK Perintä is also active on Facebook. (OK Perintä Facebook, n.d.) They mainly post informative posts, such as opening hours during public holidays, guidance posts, Kummi Gubbe posts, and customer stories. Content is similar to their Instagram. They have 855 followers and 812 likes on their page. Moreover, there is a rating of 1,7/5 on their page, and 42 people gave a rating with the comments. The comments are mostly negative, but there are also a few positive ones. One comment says that even the motorcycle club would be more humane debt collectors than OK Perintä. Still, other comments compliment the excellent and flexible service, which tries to avoid excess costs to the customer.

Overall, OK Perintä's website and social media show that they are doing a lot of work to improve social sustainability, and they are willing to improve since they have a specific customer advisory committee where they collect feedback.

## **Intrum**

On the first page of the Intrum website (Intrum, n.d.-e.), there is a direct recommendation to log in to their self-service portal, and there is information on how that the customer can ask for advice and handle their debt-related matters. There are also a lot of FAQs on the first page, and more if following the link to the other page. Moreover, Intrum has introduced a few common concerns the customer might have, and by clicking the text, it leads the customer to the other page where there is more information regarding the specific situation, such as if the customer cannot pay the invoice or wants to ask some other options on their debt situation.

Intrum also has a specific sub-page for tips and advice, which includes a lot of information for the debtor regarding different debt-related matters and articles, such as "8 tips to reduce debt" and "What happens if the invoice remains unpaid." There is also a page with additional contact information for places to seek help for financial issues, such as Takuusäätiö and debt counseling. (Intrum, n.d.-e.)

Intrum has a specific page for responsibility, which seems to be targeted more at clients and companies buying services from Intrum. Nevertheless, Intrum states that to ensure a safe and trustworthy customer encounter where the customer feels it is respectful and responsible, they are very strict with privacy matters. Intrum also states that they have ethical operational principles that guide the whole personnel's actions. The principles include the

common value ground and operations, which Intrum follows in each operation. They want the customers to eliminate their debts, ensuring full social inclusion. (Intrum, n.d.-e.)

Intrum has developed ten ethically sustainable and strong principles regarding debt collection, which they state will set the foundation of the industry's future standards. With those principles, each customer can be treated fairly and ethically. The page also includes the linkage to collection laws and regulations. Each ten principle reflects social sustainability and puts the customer at the center. Principle number 10 strongly reflects the social sustainability principles by stating that collection agencies should consider vulnerable people and their situation and encourage them to seek help. (Intrum, n.d.-e.)

Moreover, Intrum is also a pioneer in sustainability, regularly training its staff for customer encounters. They concentrate on presence, understanding, and handling the situation simultaneously. They also measure their success with different measurements. Intrum has been a member of FIBS (Finnish Business and Society) since 2017, the leading network community of sustainable companies. Intrum has also considered social sustainability in its values: Empathy, Ethics, Dedication, and Solutions. There is no mention of SDGs on their website. (Intrum, n.d.-e.)

Intrum also has an account on Instagram. (Intrum Instagram, n.d.) They are active in posting stories and posts, regarding their employee recruitments and employee events; for example, on Valentine's Day, they had a chance to make handcrafted cards for co-workers or the team. They have also posted about the coffee break with their co-workers. They have also posted about their customer success; for example, they have posted about their customer satisfaction by mentioning that they have gotten a CSAT score of 4,5 on a scale of 1-5. CSAT is the customer satisfaction measurement. Intrum Group, as the international concern, has the latest sustainability report published in 2023.

Besides that, they have informative video posts for the debtor regarding debt-related matters, such as whether the invoice is due and information on debt collection. In addition to the videos, they have regular text posts with details for the debtors. Intrum has 616 followers on Instagram.

Intrum has no Finnish Facebook page, so it cannot be evaluated for this study.

## Ropo Capital

Ropo Capital's (later Ropo) website's (Ropo Capital, n.d.-d.) front page has the slogan which means from the rise to the fall. Ropo has online self-service and other channels to contact them, such as chat, calls, and messages. Ropo has an FAQ page, which includes plenty of information for the debtors regarding the different situations regarding the debt, such as what to do if there is a mistake on the collection letter and how the collection process goes. Moreover, Ropo has guidance for the debtors to seek help, for example, from the Debt counselor or Takuusäätiö. There is no mention of SDGs on their website.

Ropo Capital has a sub-page for responsibility. They state that responsibility is the centric part of their strategy and leads all their operations. The center of their responsibility work is the people: the customers, client's customers, and employees. Moreover, the central themes of their responsibility strategy are ethical and responsible service production. They follow the laws and regulations and participate in developing responsible operations according to Ropo's good collection practices and ethical principles. For example, they do not accept quickie loans to collect since those loans might increase debt exposure. Ropo has a sustainability report, which includes the whole concern and facts about the offices in Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Ropo has also integrated sustainability into its values: Effectiveness, Courage, Learning new things, Straightforwardness, and Joy of Work. (Ropo Capital, n.d.-d.)

Ropo Capital has a Facebook account (Ropo Capital Facebook, n.d.), where they share posts regarding open recruitments and promote their customer success score, NPS, launched in the company in 2023. Their NPS score was 79, and the customer feedback was mainly positive. They post regularly. Ropo also promotes its development processes, such as 1st February 2024; it said that this year, its target is to renew its online service and make it more customer-friendly, and improving the customer experience is part of its constant development work. Ropo also informs the abnormal opening hours of their customer service on their Facebook.

Moreover, according to Facebook, Ropo participated in the charity Joulupuu last Christmas. They have 825 likes and 843 followers on Facebook. Nevertheless, little content is targeted directly to the debtors, such as sharing knowledge or awareness regarding debt-related matters.

Ropo Capital has no Instagram account targeted at debtors, but the account "Ropojengi." (Ropojengi Instagram, n.d.) It is more targeted to employees and promotes open positions,

employee events, and workplace well-being, and therefore, it is not further analyzed in this research. Moreover, it is not linked to the company's website as the official social media platform.

### **Kontio Perintä**

Kontio Perintä states on their website (Kontio Perintä, n.d.-b.) that they are a Finnish responsible collection agency and customer-oriented. They state that it is essential to collect the money as soon as possible for the client to prevent the default of debt and increase the satisfaction of the client's customers. Kontio Perintä says their operations are based on respecting the customer relationship and experience. Their customer service serves each customer openly and flexibly and ensures the continuation of the customer relationship. They also have a self-service feature. Kontio Perintä says their advantage over the competitor is that they are a fully Finnish collection agency. According to them, Finnish companies and individuals trust their words and operations due to the fact that they are fully Finnish operator in the field. (Kontio Perintä, n.d.-b.)

Kontio Perintä has an FAQ page where the debtor can share information, such as how the collection process goes, the collection fees, and the debt default. (Kontio Perintä, n.d.-b.)

Kontio Perintä has no page for Responsibility or Sustainability, no relation to SDGs, or additional contacts where the debtor could seek help for their overall situation. There is a reference to the collection law or good collection practices, but it is just in a few sentences.

Kontio Perintä doesn't have an Instagram account or Facebook account.

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the table was created based on the selected collection agencies' social media and web pages. As can be seen below, the primary color is green, which implies excellent results. Nevertheless, there are also yellow and red points, which means room for improvement.

## Social sustainability in amicable debt collection in Finland

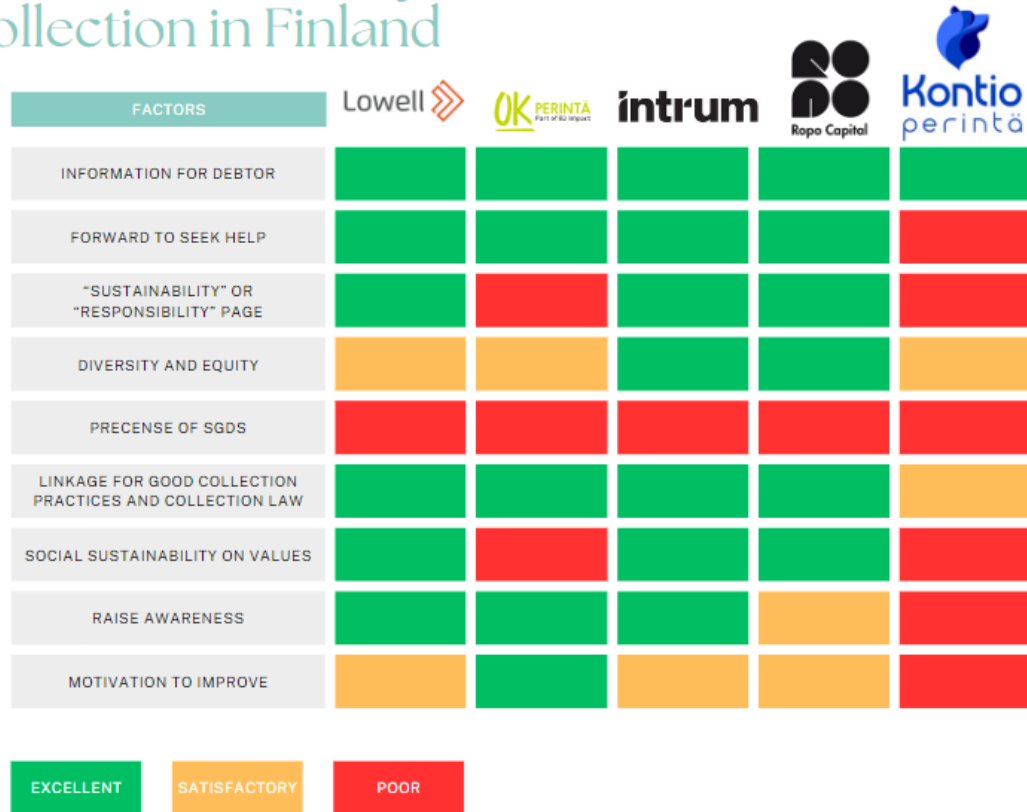


Figure 8. Social sustainability in amicable debt collection in Finland

Based on the investigation, each of the five collection agencies shares valuable information for debtors on their websites, such as how the collection process goes, what can be done if the invoice cannot be paid by the due date, and more. Nearly all collection agencies shared information on where to seek help for the debtors' overall situation, such as debt counseling, social services, and church. Most debt collection agencies have a page for "sustainability" or "responsibility," which includes information regarding their work on those matters. Regarding diversity and equity, most collection agencies have room to improve on this matter and how to bring out more of their ideologies regarding those matters. The presence of SDGs was absent for all collection agencies observed. All collection agencies have a linkage of the good collection practices and collection laws, though some have room to improve. Most collection agencies have social sustainability implicated in values. For some collection agencies, the spot is red on this because the values could not be found clearly on their website. Most collection agencies share the awareness on their social media platforms, but there is still room for improvement for some collection agencies. Finally, most collection

agencies have not revealed their motivations for improvement, but the motivation was still present. It could still be marketed more clearly to the public.

#### **4.1.2 Questionnaires**

Questionnaires were sent on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2024, and the responses were requested by 4<sup>th</sup> March 2024, in two weeks. Reminders were sent on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2024. Despite the multiple requests, only two companies answered the questionnaire. In the last stages of finalizing the thesis, one of the collection agencies that participated in the questionnaire was withdrawn. Therefore, only one collection agency participated in the research. Since only some of the collection agencies in this study replied, this answer is presented anonymously to avoid bias. If the one collection agency that participated in the questionnaire were published, it could create an unequal position within the agencies studied in this research, and that is not appropriate since this study aims to investigate the state of social sustainability on amicable consumer collection as a general in Finland, not in detailed for each collection agency. By using anonymity, this study is more objective.

Also, the expert questionnaire was conducted by email, and it was decided to keep it anonymous. The expert has over ten years of experience in the debt collection industry, from the debt collection agency to the bank and the corporate, domestic and international, B2C and B2B. Currently, they work in the insurance industry, still collecting debt.

#### **Collection Agency A**

First, for the question “How would you describe the implementation of social sustainability principles in your company, and how is it visible at the grassroots level?” collection agency A (later referred also as “the company”) says that laws and other regulations regulate the collection process itself. Nevertheless, they have defined the principles of responsible debt collection, their mission and vision, and the good collection practices that control their operations and customer service. Ethical and accountable service production is a remarkable part of the company’s sustainability strategy. They are also committed to sustainable reporting, which includes the main numbers regarding their collection and customer service and the accessibility and inclusivity of their communication channels.

During the debt collection process, it is essential to treat each customer in a friendly manner and treat everyone equally, with the same professionalism and service mind. The company



trains its personnel for the processes, customer encounters, laws, and regulations. They take into consideration the equal treatment of customers during their training.

Collection agency A says that the most critical measure of social sustainability is the customer experience. They follow their success regularly with the customer surveys; they use the constant, directly sent feedback query after the customer contact, and annual wide company image and customer experience surveys targeted to the customers who have contacted the company.

On a grassroots level, the company's actions are primarily seen as systematic measuring, reporting, and educating based on our practicalities and processes.

Next, the topic was to discuss the question, "What are the potential benefits of incorporating social sustainability principles for private customers?" The company says its goal is to achieve a positive and firm quality customer service experience and ensure that contacting them, regardless of the communication channel, is easy. Its procedures lead it to confront each customer according to its values: friendly, helpful, and understanding. A good customer experience and transparency of the operations are essential benefits for the customer.

For the following two questions, "What are the possible challenges that could be encountered when incorporating the principles of social sustainability?" and "Do you feel that, for example, unconscious bias could negatively affect the implementation of social sustainability (leading to, for example, unequal treatment of customers)? Has your company considered this issue and organized training for personnel, for instance?" the company says that they think unconscious bias and the unequal treatment that follows are risks if not clearly addressed in the company's operational guidelines and training. The company has a clear model for customer encounters and actions that they can agree on and provide for each customer service situation.

Their training program covers the operations guidelines and their ethical ground rules. The straightforward operations guidelines lead to a positive and equal customer experience.

Then, for the question, "Is there room for improvement in incorporating the principles of social development into your operations? If yes, then what?" collection agency A says that their responsibility work is a constant journey. They always aim to find new development areas that can improve, such as our customer experience and transparency. This year, they have renewed the company's education materials.

Next, the question “Have you organized training for your staff on social sustainability (or sustainable development in general)? Do you feel that this is necessary?” was discussed, and the company says that they publish the sustainability report annually and discuss the main aspects, actions, and goals of the year with the personnel. Training and education are needed. This year, the company is introducing sustainability education as part of the personnel annual training program. The goal is to increase awareness of aspects of their sustainability work.

The last is the question, “Do you bring out enough in marketing your socially sustainable way of doing things?” collection agency A says that debt collection is one part of their invoice life cycle services. Their communication is more targeted at the sustainability service production within the invoice life cycle. Sustainable operations could be brought up more, especially at different stages of marketing and sales of their products.

### **Expert Questionnaire Analysis**

First, the question, “How would you describe the implementation of the social sustainability principles in debt collection agencies in Finland?” was discussed, and the expert said that they think that, generally, the debt collection agencies are doing good work regarding social sustainability practices. Often, there are a lot of negative texts and comments about debt collection agencies. Still, many times, those who have bad experiences or feelings after contacting the agency are the ones who write about their experiences. Satisfied customers rarely write about their experiences. Moreover, since sustainability and social sustainability are increasingly known topics, the expert feels that the collection agencies are slowly adjusting the ideas from there.

Next, the question “What are the possible benefits of incorporating social sustainability principles for private customers?” was discussed. The expert said that it improves customer satisfaction. Moreover, since the collection agencies work for companies (the clients who give the collection agency the invoices to collect), a good collection experience may also improve the clients' customer satisfaction. Therefore, it benefits the client as well. The expert thinks that not many people communicate with the debt collection agency by their own will, and this might include shame about their situation or personal problems; customers need to be treated fairly and equally. The expert said they have been serving many customers and debtors by phone for years. Since the expert is invested in social sustainability and serves the customers as such, the customer feedback is highly positive, both on the phone directly or in writing later.

Then, for the question, “What are the possible challenges that could be encountered when incorporating the principles of social sustainability?” the expert said implementing them might be challenging if the company does not have social sustainability practices. Therefore, good change management is required, and all staff must be educated. Moreover, transferring the practicalities to the grassroots level and monitoring them might be challenging. Also, the expert says that there might be multiple employees, especially in the collection agencies, so monitoring and spotting improvement areas from the crowds might be challenging.

For the question, “Do you feel that unconscious bias could negatively affect the implementation of social sustainability (e.g., lead to unequal customer treatment)?” the expert said that they believe it might affect a lot, as it is unconscious. People might not even realize they are under the effect of unconscious bias. Therefore, that might lead to the unequal treatment of the customers and education about it is necessary. When the expert worked in the debt collection agency, this topic was not discussed or considered at any level. The expert says that they have witnessed the unequal treatment of customers in many places they have worked and done debt collection, so they recognize the problem and need for education and awareness.

Then, the question “Do you feel that debt collection agencies in Finland can improve their implementation of social sustainability? If yes, then what?” was discussed. The expert said they strongly think they can improve in that area even though they believe the companies are doing well already. Nevertheless, social sustainability is more known and demanded by customers, clients, and authorities, and debt collection agencies must constantly improve. For example, education, training, and marketing are good starts. Also, investing in good change and strategic management is essential when implementing something new in the company.

Finally, the question of “Is training the collection agencies' personnel needed to implement social sustainability?” was a topic. The expert thinks that it is needed, and constant and regular training should be in place, if not already, at least when the expert was working in the debt collection agency, it was not (around seven years ago). Social sustainability is essential, especially in debt collection, as the agencies have customers from vulnerable positions, such as long-term sick individuals with financial problems, and social sustainability is even more critical for them. The expert has seen colleagues from different companies doing debt collection not being educated well enough to face susceptible customers, such as depressed or sick debtors. Sometimes, they are terrified of how their colleagues speak to debtors, so they strongly vote for regular social sustainability education for employees.

## **Regional State Administrative Agency**

Regional State Administrative Agency stated that they keep the register and monitor compliance with laws and regulations. Therefore, they cannot answer the questions about the social sustainability aspects of amicable consumer collection.

## **Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority**

Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority stated that they don't answer the questionnaire requests relating to the theses due to resourcing issues, and they see that the topic of the questions is not within their competence or tasks.

### **4.1.3 Controversy**

Despite the positive outcome of the questionnaires and the public sources (websites and social media of the collection agencies investigated), Talouselämä has had a recent article in 2023 regarding the multiple complaints made about the collection agencies to the Regional State Administrative Agency. The article says that there were around 560 complaints made in 2022, but only the most serious ones led to the warning. The reasons for the warnings are, for example, unreasonable collection fees or the claim handling process. Moreover, the article has collected a list of the collection agencies that have gotten or have valid warnings at the moment, and nearly all the collection agencies are presented in this research. The number of complaints about collection agencies has been growing since 2015. (Aaltonen, 2023).

Another Finnish newspaper, Seura, discusses the same issue in its 2020 article. In that article, a few representatives of the collection agencies were interviewed, and they said they had made improvements based on the Regional State Administrative Agency's recommendations. (Kaukonen, 2020)

YLE also wrote an article in 2019 regarding the same topic on the faults of debt collection agencies in Finland. The article states there have been complaints made to the Regional State Administrative Agency and that during 2016-2019, they even canceled the license to operate in debt collection for two companies due to the severe neglect of the collection law and good collection practices. The article also states, as two other articles mentioned above do, that the most common reason for the complaints and warnings is the unreasonable collection fees. It says that the complaints made by the collection agencies have doubled,

and not all cases might ever be reported. Nevertheless, they interviewed a representative of the Regional State Administrative Agency, and they said that the increased number of complaints might not indicate the increased number of issues since multiple complaints are not straightforward or are regarding the Enforcement Authority's issues, which do not belong to the Regional State Administrative Agency. YLE has also interviewed the collection agencies for their article. The representatives reminded that they have millions of cases annually, and the number of complaints is relatively small compared to the total number of cases they have. (Mäntymaa, 2019)

Since the number of complaints about debt collection agencies increases annually, it might indicate the need to improve and implement the social sustainability strategies and principles introduced in this study.

## **5 Results**

The main research question for this research was as follows:

How do debt collection agencies in Finland approach SDGs and social sustainability in their operations, and how can they improve their practices?

This study shows that debt collection agencies are on a good path regarding the social sustainability implications of their operations. For example, they share information regarding debt-related issues with debtors. They forward the debtor to seek help for their general situation and share awareness on social media. Moreover, some agencies even use sustainability reporting or participate in different kinds of charity work. Many agencies collect feedback from their customer and are willing to improve their operations. Nevertheless, although plenty of positive efforts have already been made regarding social sustainability, there is still room for improvement, introduced in the next sub-chapter. For example, none of the five collection agencies did not refer SDGs to their public sources.

The lowest score on the scale used got the smallest collection agency (turn-over-wise), which might imply that the more prominent operators have more budget to invest in social sustainability and sustainability in general.

Sub-questions were as follows:

What are the potential benefits of implementing socially sustainable debt collection practices on debtors?

During this study, a few potential benefits were discovered. For example, it might improve the debtor's negative prejudice regarding debt collection agencies and their mental health. In the best scenario, if the collection agency supports the debtor in overcoming the debt and forwards them to seek help, it will improve the debtor's financial status and inclusion in society. Most importantly, when the collection agency operates in a socially sustainable way, it will decrease inequity between the customers.

What are the critical challenges faced in implementing SDGs and social sustainability in debt collection practices?

Implementing the SDGs and social sustainability in debt collection practices might pose a few challenges. For example, a lack of personnel education and unconscious bias were identified as potential challenges. Moreover, as with every change process, this also requires good change and strategic management to ensure a successful transformation, so if that is lacking, it might cause challenges in implementing the SDGs and social sustainability in debt collection practices.

The research shows that many collection agencies are motivated to improve their operations, which creates a good foundation for enhancing their social sustainability principles. Many of them have made multiple positive attempts and plans regarding this, which implies motivation for improvement.

## **6 Suggestions**

Based on the questionnaires, the public sources, and the theory introduced in this research, the following recommendations are presented for the debt collection agencies in Finland to improve their social sustainability practicalities.

### **Education and awareness of the staff**

Staff should be educated on social sustainability topics and update their knowledge annually. Moreover, separate training should be provided on encountering vulnerable customers and

unconscious bias. Unconscious bias training is necessary since everyone has unconscious biases, and it might be impossible to recognize them without awareness.

### **Guiding and educating the customers**

Collection agencies should provide extensive information about debt-related matters, including debtor's rights and options. Moreover, they should guide how to reach a better financial status. The information and awareness could be shared on websites and platforms where the debtors are, such as social media. It might be good to try different forms of information: text, videos, and pictures. Since many collection agencies have multiple channels for customer service, guidance and education could happen to each customer contact whenever necessary.

### **Customer engagement**

Relating to the previous point, the debt collection agency can bring itself closer to the customer by engaging with them actively on social media, for example. Sharing content regularly on social media is recommended to improve customer engagement and make it easier for the collection agency to approach debt-related issues.

### **Marketing**

Marketing should use social sustainability actions, both internal and external. Making the actions visible will gradually build trust with customers. All positive actions and attempts regarding social sustainability should be used in marketing.

### **Bringing social sustainability and SGDs to the website**

It would be recommended to have its sub-page on the website, "Sustainability" or "Responsibility," where all the sustainability-related matters are collected. Moreover, all the collection agencies should consider sustainability reporting and share the information with the staff. Furthermore, the collection agency could bring out customer satisfaction statistics from the surveys and metrics they use. If the company doesn't measure customer satisfaction or collect feedback, it should start doing it to improve its operations continuously.

### **Integrating social sustainability into values**

The collection agencies should consider integrating social sustainability into their values and clearly stating it on their websites and other channels. Since values are the foundations of all operations, this implies that the company takes social sustainability topics seriously. Staff can also easily adjust the issues since they are written in the values.

### **Identifying the possible challenges and preparing for them**

As it was discovered during this research, integrating socially sustainable principles into debt collection might face some challenges. That is why collection agencies should assess the possible challenges and plan to overcome them to achieve successful transformation.

### **Suggestions for future research**

A suggestion for future research could be the customer's point of view regarding the social sustainability of debt collection agencies. Moreover, since the change to more socially sustainable practices requires a good chance and strategic management, future research could investigate the topic from those points of view.

Moreover, since one conclusion of this thesis was to educate consumers, especially debtors, more about financial factors, one suggestion for future development of social sustainability in debt collection could be to make material for educational purposes. That would benefit the debtors to know their rights and demand socially sustainable service.

## **7 Reflection**

This chapter introduces critical reflection on the research process, methodologies, challenges faced, lessons learned, and significance of the findings.

The research process was generally logical. Research questions were initially formed for the first time but were clarified and edited slightly during the thesis process. In the theoretical part, the information was timely and difficult to seek and find since there was not a lot of literature or research available on the topic. Data collection and investigation of the collection agencies' websites and social media were effective methods since the aim was to investigate each selected collection agency's current state of social sustainability. Nevertheless, the questionnaire optimally would have been conducted orally as an interview to get more



relevant information from the participants. The results were formed according to all the information collected during the data collection and theoretical investigations. The results reflect what currently needs to be improved in several collection agencies and give general guidelines for the minimum effort of socially sustainable acts according to the implementation of the principles of its operations. The research did not go as planned since it was expected to get more collection agencies involved in the questionnaire, but first, just two agreed to participate, and later, one of them has withdrawn. Unexpected challenges during the thesis process were overcome by simply using the collected content – one questionnaire with the collection agency and the expert.

A few challenges were faced during the thesis process. Firstly, time challenges were faced since the author was working a full-time day job in addition to the research process. This affected the research process in such a way that the writing process was often scheduled for late evenings when the energy levels were not optimal regarding the demanding research and writing process. Therefore, it might have affected the quality of the work. Moreover, due to the timing challenges, the questionnaires were emailed. That might have caused the limited replies since the natural conversation during the oral interview was absent. Also, time challenges caused a tremendous amount of stress for the writer. Secondly, the other challenge was faced after the second questionnaire since it was withdrawn in the final moments of finalizing the thesis. That causes a significant lack of thesis analysis content. Both challenges were unavoidable, though the first challenge regarding the time issues was predicted.

The methodologies used were chosen because they best answered the research questions and added value to the thesis. The results presented were able to answer the research questions well, and they aligned with the research questions.

The thesis is significant to the debt collection industry since similar research has not been conducted in Finland before. As learned during the thesis process, the topics of social sustainability are timely and demanded at the time, so the research contributes well to existing knowledge in the field. It is highly hoped and expected that the collection agencies will improve their operations to be more socially sustainable, positively impact the debtors, and cut the negative stigma of the collection agencies.

The aim of the thesis is also to provide information to the debtors. The information should be significant to debtors so they can educate themselves on their rights and demand socially sustainable service from all instances they communicate with, especially concerning

sensitive debt-related matters. Nevertheless, since this is a research-based thesis, it could be used in future development as a peer-reviewed article to be educational and more suitable for debtors.

Even though the thesis provides significant research results for the industry, it still leaves room for future research, which would be highly needed. As mentioned earlier, the customer's point of view regarding the social sustainability of debt collection agencies would be fascinating and informative research. Since this thesis investigates from the debt collection agencies' point of view and what they are currently doing in a sense of social sustainability, it would be crucial to research how those actions reflect the customer's point of view. Moreover, since the change to more socially sustainable practices requires a good chance and strategic management, future research could investigate the topic from those points of view.

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## **Appendix 1. Collection Agency A – Questionnaire in English**

How would you describe the implementation of social sustainability principles in your company, and how is it visible at the grassroots level?

What are the potential benefits of incorporating social sustainability principles for private customers?

What are the possible challenges that could be encountered when incorporating the principles of social sustainability?

Do you feel that, for example, unconscious bias could negatively affect the implementation of social sustainability (leading to, for example, unequal treatment of customers)? Has your company considered this issue and organized training for personnel, for instance?

Is there room for improvement in incorporating the principles of social development into your operations? If yes, then what?

Have you organized training for your staff on social sustainability (or sustainable development in general)? Do you feel that this is necessary?

Do you bring out enough in marketing your socially sustainable way of doing things?

## **Appendix 2. Collection Agency A – Questionnaire in Finnish**

Miten kuvailisitte sosiaalisen kestävyiden periaatteiden toteutusta yrityksessänne, ja miten se näkyy ruohonjuuritasolla?

Mitkä ovat mielestänne sosiaalisen kestävyiden periaatteiden sisällyttämisen mahdolliset hyödyt henkilöasiakkaille?

Mitkä ovat mielestänne mahdolliset haasteet, joita sosiaalisen kestävyiden periaatteiden sisällyttämisen yhteydessä voisi tulla vastaan?

Koetteko, että esimerkiksi tiedostomattomat ennakkoluulot (unconscious bias) voisi vaikuttaa negatiivisesti sosiaalisen kestävyiden toteuttamiseen (johtaen esimerkiksi asiakkaiden eriarvoiseen kohteluun)? Onko yrityksessänne huomioitu tämä asia, ja järjestetty esimerkiksi koulutuksia henkilöstölle?

Koetteko, että teillä olisi kehitettävää sosiaalisen kehityksen periaatteiden sisällyttämisessä operaatioihin? Jos kyllä, niin mitä?

Onko teillä järjestetty koulutuksia henkilöstölle liittyen sosiaaliseen kestävyteen (tai kestävään kehitykseen ylipäätä)? Koetteko, että onko tällaiselle tarvetta?

Tuotteko mielestänne tarpeeksi esille markkinoinnissanne sosiaalisesti kestävä toimintatapanne?

### **Appendix 3. Expert – Questionnaire in English**

How would you describe the implementation of the principles of social sustainability in debt collection agencies in Finland?

What are the possible benefits of incorporating social sustainability principles for private customers?

What are the possible challenges that could be encountered when incorporating the principles of social sustainability?

Do you feel that unconscious bias could negatively affect the implementation of social sustainability (e.g., lead to unequal customer treatment)?

Do you feel that debt collection agencies in Finland can improve their implementation of social sustainability? If yes, then what?

Is training the collection agencies' personnel needed to implement social sustainability?

#### **Appendix 4. Expert – Questionnaire in Finnish**

Miten kuvailisitte sosiaalisen kesävyiden periaatteiden toteutusta perintätoimistoissa Suomessa?

Mitkä ovat mielestänne sosiaalisen kestävyiden periaatteiden sisällyttämisen mahdolliset hyödyt henkilöasiakkaille?

Mitkä ovat mielestänne mahdolliset haasteet, joita sosiaalisen kestävyiden periaatteiden sisällyttämisen yhteydessä voisi tulla vastaan?

Koetteko, että esimerkiksi tiedostomattomat ennakkoluulot (unconscious bias) voisi vaikuttaa negatiivisesti sosiaalisen kestävyiden toteuttamiseen (johtaen esimerkiksi asiakkaiden eriarvoiseen kohteluun)?

Koetteko, että perintätoimistoilla olisi kehitettävää sosiaalisen kestävyiden toteutuksessa Suomessa? Jos kyllä, niin mitä?

Koetteko, että perintätoimistojen henkilöstön koulutukselle olisi tarvetta liittyen sosiaalisen kestävyiden toteuttamiseen?

## **Appendix 5. Data management plan**

The data for this thesis is collected through email questionnaires. It was agreed by email that the respondents should be kept anonymous and that all personalized information from the thesis should be cut to keep all the responses anonymous. The email responses are saved for one (1) year from the response date and will be destroyed in March 2025. The basis for storing the data for one year is security since the thesis result can be verified and deleted securely if needed.

No other personal data was seen during the questionnaires despite the given name, surname, job position, and email address. Still, it will not be published at any point or given to any third party.

The author of the thesis owns the data.