

When locals do tourism: Gains and challenges from networking on tourism as development path in small rural destinations

Tourism has been put forward as a positive and possible development choice for rural areas. Generally, rural areas should put value to their amenities and resources and according to the neo-endogenous approach link up to external networks in their attempt to create development. Studies on small tourism destinations are pointing to the importance of the establishment of partnerships and networks to promote tourism and local community development. Partly because it is considered to develop better tourism products and attract more visitors, but also because more and more rural areas have to demonstrate their visibility to be heard. Many tourist-oriented partnerships are focused on the implementation of joint marketing initiatives and the strengthening of the experience economy in a region but in the wider rural development, partnerships around common storytelling about an area can not only help to encourage tourists' interest in visiting an area but also improve the residents pride at staying in it.

However, there are also a number of barriers to networking between tourism operators. Some players may have started their business to be master in their own house. Others want to exercise a kind of lifestyle entrepreneurship without any real desire to grow. There may therefore be many different reasons for running a tourist business, which might become obstacles for cooperation. Generally, it is considered that the level of innovation in the tourism industry is low, incremental and characterized by small changes rather than as radical innovation. The exchange of knowledge, learning and pooling of resources that takes place in partnerships and networks may therefore prove central for rural areas. It may help rural areas to become more resilient, better seize the opportunities that appear and shape opportunities themselves. However, there is not much information about how such networks occur and develop in the initial phase and this is where this paper intends to contribute by analyzing and example of a nascent small-scale tourism network in a rural area in Denmark.

According to the national Danish tourism organization VisitDenmark (2009) there are major opportunities for municipalities to work professionally with destination development due to the larger municipalities introduced by the structural reform in 2007. VisitDenmark finds, however, that the municipality should be the smallest scale of destinations (Visit Denmark, p. 10). This is in opposition to the view put forward by the World Tourism Organization (2007) who finds that destinations appear on many different scales: *"... from a whole country (e.g. Australia), a region (such as the Spanish 'Costas') or island (e.g. Bali), to a village, town or city, or a self-contained centre (e.g. Center Parc of Disneyland)* (WTO 2007, s. 1).

Some destinations have special designations, such as national park designation in the Wadden Sea area, which has also received a Unesco-designation. There is a partnership structure attached to national parks in Denmark, which means that the area's actors must commit themselves to collaborate on the development of the area. Also at the national Danish level, tourism has been reorganized in large partnership structures. In both places there is either a formal designation or money that helps the process of the partners defining and organizing them together. In the Stoholm area there are no such designations and not much funds to work with. In 2015, however, a kick-off meeting was organized in order to try to establish a network between several tourist and event actors in the region. The meeting was built upon an idea of a possible common storytelling under the umbrella "The bats Land" – a name derived from the two largest tourist establishments in the area, which are limestone mines with protected bat colonies. The result of the meeting was that it was agreed that it was a good idea to meet again for a number of visits to each other. With

this in mind, the authors of this paper conducted a round of interviews with actors who might eventually become part of a partnership about "The Bats Land" and conducted observation studies at a series of meetings. This was done not knowing about whether "The bats Land" would be realized, but to examine the value and possibly push towards further cooperation between the actors in the area. The main participants at the initial meetings were: Kongenshus Memorial Park, Kongenshus Inn and Hotel, Dare Activity Center, Grønhøj Inn, Stoholm Leisure and Cultural Center, Mønsted Lime Scale Mine, Daugbjerg Lime Scale Mine, Mønsted Room Service, Daugbjerg Mini Village.

Probstl-Haider, Melzer and Jiricka (2014) emphasize four tourism destination models: 1. The Lighthouse model where the driving force is located in a single large tourism project that can generate further spin-off, 2. The 'Small-scale land use' model, which is a model where tourism is integrated with agricultural activities based mainly on rural tourism in cooperation between several farmers, 3. The Zone model in which the tourism offer is based on the nature of large-scale protected areas, and 4. The thematic model where the tourism offer is based on a collection of different individual offers under a thematic umbrella. Activities in the Stoholm project is located closest to model 4, while Legoland could pose model 1, the agricultural countryside in general could constitute model 2, and the Wadden Sea National Park could be an example of model 3. In relation to model 4 Probstl-Haider, Melzer and Jiricka write that: *"Several case studies report that, for the tourist, the process of discovering "jewels" in the actual landscape is more attractive than having thematic aspects presented in a local theme park"* (p. 222). They emphasize, however, that this model requires strong leadership from the start, when the product and the profile is determined.

Since the focus in this paper is on the development of a tourism network, the theoretical approach taken will be on theories dealing with partnerships and networks. Huxham and Vangen (2004) have investigated what the important aspects to consider are when starting up or leading partnerships and networks. They state that the human dimension of partnerships is central and can make the difference between success and failure. The theories often emphasize the ideal situation: synergy and win-win situation and collaborative benefits. But in fact there are several options. Either one can realize the benefits of partnerships or one can succumb to inertia. Huxham and Vangen put forward seven perspectives important to consider and have in mind when one is a part of a partnership: 1. We must have common aims but we cannot agree on them, 2. Sharing power is important, but people behave as if it's all in the purse strings, 3. Trust is necessary for successful collaboration, but we are suspicious of each other, 4. We are partnership-fatigued and tired of being pulled in all directions, 5. Everything keeps changing, 6. Leadership is not always in the hand of members, 7. Leadership activities are continually meet with dilemmas and difficulties. Huxham and Vangen finally state that the actual result is maybe not a concrete outcome, but rather the building of relations between partners. The analysis of how to start a tourism destination is inspired by Huxham and Vangen, especially their first two perspectives on divergent aims and the importance of trust in collaborations.

It is thus the intention of this paper to answer the following question: What happens if a number of tourism and accommodation operators in inland rural area in Denmark form a tourism network and tries to create a smale-scale destination? What are obstacles and what are opportunities in such collaboration?

The paper uses qualitative methods in the form of action research leaning on participant observations and qualitative interviews. Data collection has taken place during autumn 2015 until autumn 2016 at a serious of meetings between tourism actors in the Stoholm area and at interviews in November 2015.

References

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