

Navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project: Lessons from Træna, Norway

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on data collected through multiple approaches and presents an exploration of the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project. Through a streamlined qualitative analysis, the study revealed four tactical moves deployed in the early stages of the project. The moves include instilling project legitimacy, forging a support network, anchoring the project, and mobilising resources and capabilities. Further analysis revealed that these moves tend to reinforce each other, and thus they require concurrent implementation. Subsequently, the study develops a framework delineating drivers, enablers, challenges, and key success factors for navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project. Intriguingly, the study contradicts the path dependence perspective, which is often used in project management research. Instead, it suggests that the early stages of such projects require tactical path creation involving well-calculated actions that serve as a breeding ground for valuable random incidents.

1. Introduction

As interest shifts from mass tourism to personalised tourism (Fotiadis et al., 2016; Buffa, 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2012), rural destinations are likely to benefit the most. This is because rural destinations can provide offerings that match the growing interest in personalised and authentic experiences, interaction with the local community, and locally produced offerings (Chin et al., 2017). Many people who lead their working lives in urban areas, being somewhat disconnected from nature, consider their holiday time as an opportunity to escape to a different environment. Interestingly, Vaishar and Štastná (2020) found that during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, rural tourism (RT) has become an alternative to urban tourism. They noted that some rural destinations experienced an increase in domestic tourists in the 2020 summer season compared to 2019. Likewise, Lopes et al. (2021) report an increasing preference for rural destinations, suggesting that these areas are considered to be safer with a lower possibility of coronavirus transmission. While the increased interest in nature-based tourism provides opportunity for the development of rural destinations, it also presents challenges. The main challenge is the social and environmental sustainability issues associated with massive numbers of visitors in rural destinations (Su et al., 2019). For instance, Kaptan Ayhan et al. (2020)

note that increased rural tourism can trigger changes such as new buildings, fast population growth, rapid infrastructural expansion, and environmental pollution, leading to irreversible damage and disturbing the ecological equilibrium. Therefore, rural destinations that overcome competition and attract more tourists must take deliberate measures to ensure sustainability. Nevertheless, striking a balance between economic and sustainability outcomes has been a critical challenge recognised by practitioners and tourism scholars alike (Peric & Djurkin, 2014).

As RT continues to gain attention, implementing sustainable tourism projects in rural destinations is essential for attaining desirable economic, social, and environmental sustainability. However, the success of such projects requires appropriate strategies, actions, and decisions throughout their life cycle. In other words, they need effective execution of the critical project activities, namely initiation, planning, implementation, and closing. Given the importance of sustainable projects in rural destinations, previous studies have explored various issues related to their management. Examples include illustrations of the advantages of adopting sustainable development approaches (Garrod et al., 2006); the role of leadership in promoting followership amongst rural tourism small-scale businesses (Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012); the role of entrepreneurs in enhancing the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations

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(Komppula, 2014); approaches for creating competitive advantage (Chin et al., 2017); and analysis of land-use suitability for rural tourism activities (Kaptan Ayhan et al., 2020). While these studies provide valuable insights, several issues related to managing rural destinations remain unexplored. Among other things, Lane and Kastenholz (2015)'s analysis of 1848 articles published since 2000 observed that rural tourism researchers tended to avoid addressing tourism governance and management issues at local, regional, national and international levels. They concluded their analysis by calling for further research to guide the creation of a New Generation Rural Tourism based on informed destination development and management.

This study advances the body of knowledge on rural tourism management by exploring the dynamics involved in navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project. Specifically, the present study answers the following research question: how do actors successfully navigate the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project? By addressing this question, the paper makes three contributions. Firstly, it contributes practical insights into developing large projects that aim at equitable, bearable, and viable rural tourism. Secondly, given the increasing importance of sustainability initiatives, some of the lessons offered in this study can be applied in other contexts than rural destinations. Thirdly, our findings provide valuable theoretical implications that can stimulate further research in the management discipline. The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the literature review, followed by methodology in Section 3 and Findings in Section 4. The discussion in Section 5 places the findings in perspective by offering theoretical and practical implications, followed by concluding remarks in Section 6.

2. Literature review

2.1. Rural tourism

Following Kelliher et al. (2018), this paper defines a rural destination as a sparsely populated geographic area of fewer than 1000 inhabitants located outside cities and towns interspersed by small settlements and mainly relies on specialist economic bases. Among other activities, RT is increasingly viewed as a means to enhance the attractiveness and vitality of rural areas, mitigate demographic challenges, reduce migration, and promote a range of local resources and traditions while upholding the essence of rural life (UNWTO, 2020). As Su (2011) observed, RT can provide supplementary income and new employment opportunities to local communities. It also contributes to revitalising local crafts and arts such as paper cutting, wood and stone carving, bamboo weaving, lace-making, folk song and dance, local cuisine recipe, wine-making, and traditional therapy. Considering the social-economic impact of RT, it is not surprising to see a growing interest in research on rural tourism. As Ibănescu et al. (2018) note, "it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the importance of rural areas in sustaining the constant growth of the tourism sector". The importance of RT is becoming vivid, especially now that international tourism struggles due to the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognising the importance of rural tourism, UNWTO designated 2020 as the year of tourism and rural development.

Until the mid-20th century, RT was a relatively small and passive activity (Sharpley, 2007). However, over time, its nature, scale and socioeconomic structure have undergone substantial transformation associated with the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist production methods (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). The shift has created both growth opportunities and challenges in rural destinations. As such, rural destinations must capitalise on the opportunities while addressing the unfolding challenges. Examples of such challenges include the displacement of communities and disruption of local livelihood systems, socio-political processes and organisations (Su et al., 2016). As a result, these challenges may jeopardise the sustainability of local livelihoods,

that is, the capabilities, resources and activities required to support individuals, households, or communities in rural destinations. Thus, appropriate interventions are necessary to prevent or alleviate the challenges of developing rural destinations (Campón-Cerro et al., 2017; McGehee et al., 2015; B. Su, 2011). Such interventions include deploying appropriate marketing strategies and tactics (Chen et al., 2013; Roberts & Hall, 2004), stimulating effective participation and collaboration among businesspersons involved directly and indirectly in tourism (Wilson et al., 2001), cultivating qualities of bridging and bonding social capital (McGehee et al., 2015), creating stable tourist activity throughout the year (Guaita Martínez et al., 2019), and promoting social and environmental sustainability (Kim & Jamal, 2015; M. M. Su et al., 2019). For two reasons, the promotion of sustainable RT is of particular interest to the present study. First, sustainability is critical for ensuring the viability of rural destination features. Second, it can serve as a value proposition for attracting rural tourists whose attitude and environmental beliefs are positively associated with willingness to pay a premium for ecotourism (Kazeminia et al., 2016). Additionally, L. Su et al. (2020) found that destination eco-friendly reputation is positively associated with tourists' positive emotions and satisfaction, which are subsequently likely to improve environmentally responsible behaviour.

2.2. Developing sustainable rural tourism

The need for promoting sustainability in rural destinations has long been recognised (see Bramwell, 1994). The extant literature provides several suggestions for achieving sustainability in rural destinations. Among the proposed approaches include the implementation of integrated rural tourism (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). It is a bottom-up approach that emphasises the involvement of local stakeholders as key actors in achieving sustainability. The goal is to facilitate the implementation of sustainability principles to enable optimal use of resources while at the same time protecting and enhancing them. This approach is in line with Rodríguez-Díaz and Espino-Rodríguez (2008) model of strategic evaluation that requires managing a tourist destination as an integrated system. Likewise, Haugland et al. (2011) propose developing an overall destination strategy, emphasising destination capabilities, inter-organisational and intra-destination coordination, and inter-destination bridge ties. Nevertheless, some scholars and practitioners argue that a grand strategy for a destination can hardly be effective considering difficulties in coordinating multiple production/-business systems among diverse actors (Reinhold et al., 2018).

Along the lines of an integrated approach, Sharpley (2007) proposed a system that reflects a more traditional model of development consisting of a prominent flagship attraction that act as a 'growth pole' for the local economy and community. This approach embodies the modernisation development paradigm and involves developing a flagship or mega-attraction to attract large numbers of tourists. However, to elevate the sustainability dimension, it includes additional elements such as environmental sustainability and community orientation, focusing on endogenous development, and integrated planning (planning within the constraints of existing and proposed tourism facilities and infrastructure). The flagship attraction approach is echoed by Pröbstl-Haider et al. (2014), who identified a lighthouse model of rural tourism development. Under this model, tourism in a rural destination is mainly driven by one large tourism project, such as a spa and wellness infrastructure, a cable car enterprise, or a hotel, which aims to further spinoff into other operations. Unlike Sharpley (2007)'s proposal, which emphasises the role of the local community, Pröbstl-Haider et al. (2014) note that in most of the successful lighthouse model cases, one single entrepreneur, who accepts significant financial and non-financial risks, provides leadership and long-term entrepreneurial vision for the project. Among other things, the success of this model depends on the collaborative skills of the entrepreneur and their ability to integrate products from other actors. However, one can easily see that since a single

entrepreneur drives the project, the focus on profit may jeopardise social and environmental sustainability.

Considering the above discussion, it is conceivable that efforts to promote sustainability in rural destinations must include elements of community-based tourism (CBT). CBT is an approach where tourism is “managed and owned by the community and for the community” (Peric & Djurkin, 2014). Therefore, it involves various stakeholders such as the local authority of the destination, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations and the local community members. However, achieving sustainability through CBT is contingent upon several factors. For instance, Lee and Jan (2019) examined the role of CBT in sustainable development and concluded that different strategies should be implemented across different stages of rural tourism development. Thus, appropriate strategies must be implemented at the consolidation, involvement, and development stages of CBT. In their analysis, Dodds et al. (2018) established six factors for successful CBT. The factors include participatory planning and capacity building, collaboration and partnerships facilitating links to market, local management/empowerment of community members, establishment of environmental/community goals, assistance from enablers (government, funding institutions, and private sector), and focus on generating supplemental income for long-term community sustainability.

2.3. Sustainable rural development projects

Developing rural destinations involves several activities that need to be completed to achieve the intended goal. As such, it requires a dedicated project that entails cooperation among different stakeholders. A typical project consists of seven main stages: idea generation, evaluation of the project proposal, detailed investigation to ensure project feasibility, implementation, launch, and post-implementation review (Labuschagne & Brent, 2005). These stages constitute the life cycle of a project. Thus, rural development projects can be viewed as processes that include different and well-thought steps towards the vision of creating and maximising opportunities and benefits for local community development. Due to their significance, rural tourism development projects have attracted considerable attention among scholars. Overall, the focus of the extant literature has been on the justification of such projects (e.g., Tolkach & King, 2015); organisational dynamics (Matilainen et al., 2018), exploring how to strengthen them (Tolkach & King, 2015), how to manage conflicts (e.g., Curcija et al., 2019) and their impact (e.g., Hatipoglu et al., 2020). Noticeably, the extant literature has focused mainly on addressing the last four stages of the project life cycle. The skewed focus is understandable considering the high failure rate or poor performance among tourism development projects (Matilainen et al., 2018).

Although the later stages of the project life cycle are crucial, studies in project management suggest that the early stages are equally important (Koo et al., 2010; Wuni & Shen, 2020). These studies view project management through a path dependence perspective, suggesting that early decisions and actions are critical for project success. This argument is intuitive because it is true that what happens today can influence what happens tomorrow. Thus, one can sensibly argue that what happens in the early phases of a project will most likely affect the subsequent stages. According to Labuschagne and Brent (2005), the early phases of the project life cycle are particularly crucial for sustainability projects due to the various stakeholders and multiple goals involved in such projects. Unlike previous studies on sustainable rural development projects that focused on the later stages of the project life cycle, this study focuses on the early stages. It embraces the path dependence perspective and investigate the dynamics of the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project. According to this perspective, a phenomenon begins with very weak initial conditions, and its progress occurs through contingent events locked in a self-reinforcement mechanism (Vergne & Durand, 2010). Thus, the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism

development project are viewed as complex, driven by multiple elements that mutually interact to generate feedback loops and non-linear dynamics (Garud, Kumaraswamy, & Karnøe, 2010)..

3. Methodology

The choice of an appropriate research strategy for a study depends on the nature of the research question, the need for behavioural control, and whether a study involves contemporary or historical events (Yin, 2018). The case study design is chosen in this study because the main research question seeks to reveal the mechanism of phenomena (dynamics of the early phases of a project) where behavioural control is not feasible, and the issues addressed are contemporary. Following Miles et al. (2020), four sampling parameters have been considered: research setting, actors, events, and processes. Each parameter has been assessed based on the research objective, conceptual understanding of the phenomenon under study, and feasibility. As described below, Træna Municipal, and the ongoing sustainability-oriented project, provides a suitable empirical basis for studying the dynamics involved in navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project.

3.1. Case description – Træna 365

Træna is a municipality in Norway, comprising of multiple islands located in Helgeland, Nordland County (Træna Kommune, 2021). With around 500 residents, Træna is Norway’s third smallest municipality in terms of population size. Most of the island’s working population is employed within the fishing industry (about 40 per cent). Others are working within maritime and ship maintenance services (about 10 per cent) and public sector (30 per cent), while the remaining (20 per cent) are in industries such as construction, retail, accommodation, and restaurant. Regarding tourism, Træna boasts of its signature festival, Træna Festival. Since 2003, the festival has been attracting several international stars, Norway’s rock elite, and upcoming rock bands. Before the pandemic, the festival, which is usually held in summer, brought about 5000 people to the island. In 2012, Træna was named Norway’s best festival, and in 2015, the Guardian described it as one of “the best festivals in Europe that you’ve probably never heard of” (Coldwell, 2015). In 2018, Træna won the annual innovation prize, which is awarded to a municipality that has demonstrated significant efforts and commitment to innovate (Træna Kommune, 2018). Likewise, the newly established Træna’s winter festival has become an important event, which promotes culture, seafood and other experiences on the island (see the festival webpage¹). Going forward, Træna was determined to become more attractive to tourists while preventing excessive exploitation of the island. Specifically, Træna wants to develop equitable, bearable, and viable rural tourism, making it a year-round destination that is socially, economically, and environmentally feasible. Achieving this requires, among other things, value-added products and strategic leadership. Thus, Træna embarked on Træna 365, a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project (see details of the project on its webpage²).

The project involves establishing an innovative integrated set of facilities consisting of a hotel, museum, vacation cabins, workspaces, and cultural centre. The goal is to provide a place to take time off from work or find the peace to work while having everything you need to relax. Træna 365 will serve both the local community and visitors, thus contributing to developing a year-round vibrant local community. Therefore, the project aims to promote local culture and provide memorable experiences for the visitors while at the same time functioning as an incubator for local entrepreneurs. Træna 365 will embrace

¹ <https://www.trena.net/pageom>.

² <http://tenkraena.no/language/en/365invest/>.

sustainability across all stages, from using eco-friendly materials to implementing a sustainable business model. Ultimately, Træna is envisioned to become a reference point for pursuing sustainable tourism and community development simultaneously. The project can be viewed as a hybrid lighthouse/flagship approach to rural tourism development. It is a hybrid because it merges and extends the lighthouse and the flagship models of rural destination development (Sharpley, 2007; Pröbstl-Haider et al., 2014) while incorporating the elements of destination strategy (Haugland et al., 2011) and the aspects of community-based tourism enterprise (CBTE) (Peric and Djurkin (2014). Fig. 1 conceptualises the Træna 365 model.

As shown in Fig. 1, Træna 365 aims to play a central role in driving the development of the destination and thus serving as the “lighthouse”. As such, Træna 365 will provide vision and leadership for other tourism development initiatives in the destination. However, instead of being led by a single entrepreneur, motivated by profit-making, Træna 365 aims to embrace features of CBTE and thus prioritise the interests of the local community. Therefore, other complementary offerings provided by tourism actors across the destination will be rallied around Træna 365 to form a unified theme for the destination Træna. The objective is to bring

together and coordinate the existing and new offerings under a unified brand of the destination. Travel and tourism experiences often consist of multiple service components involving different actors (Mwesumo & Halpern, 2016), and previous research (e.g., Mwesumo & Halpern, 2018; Halpern & Mwesumo, 2021, p. 100667) suggest that failure of one component may affect the evaluation of the entire experience. Therefore, coordinating the offerings under a unified brand can increase visitor satisfaction by reducing the failure of individual service components. Concerning creating, delivering, and capturing value, Træna 365 will adopt an equivalent of a triple-layered business model. While the original business model concept is economically oriented, the triple-layered business model complements and extends it by incorporating an environmental layer based on a lifecycle perspective and a social layer based on a stakeholder perspective (Joyce & Paquin, 2016). The hybrid destination development model and the three-layered business model will potentially balance social, economic and environmental outcomes of tourism activities. Recognising the role of inter-destination bridges in stimulating innovativeness (Aarstad et al., 2015), the model includes a deliberate strategy to form and maintain inter-organisational relationships with external actors. It represents a network of actors that

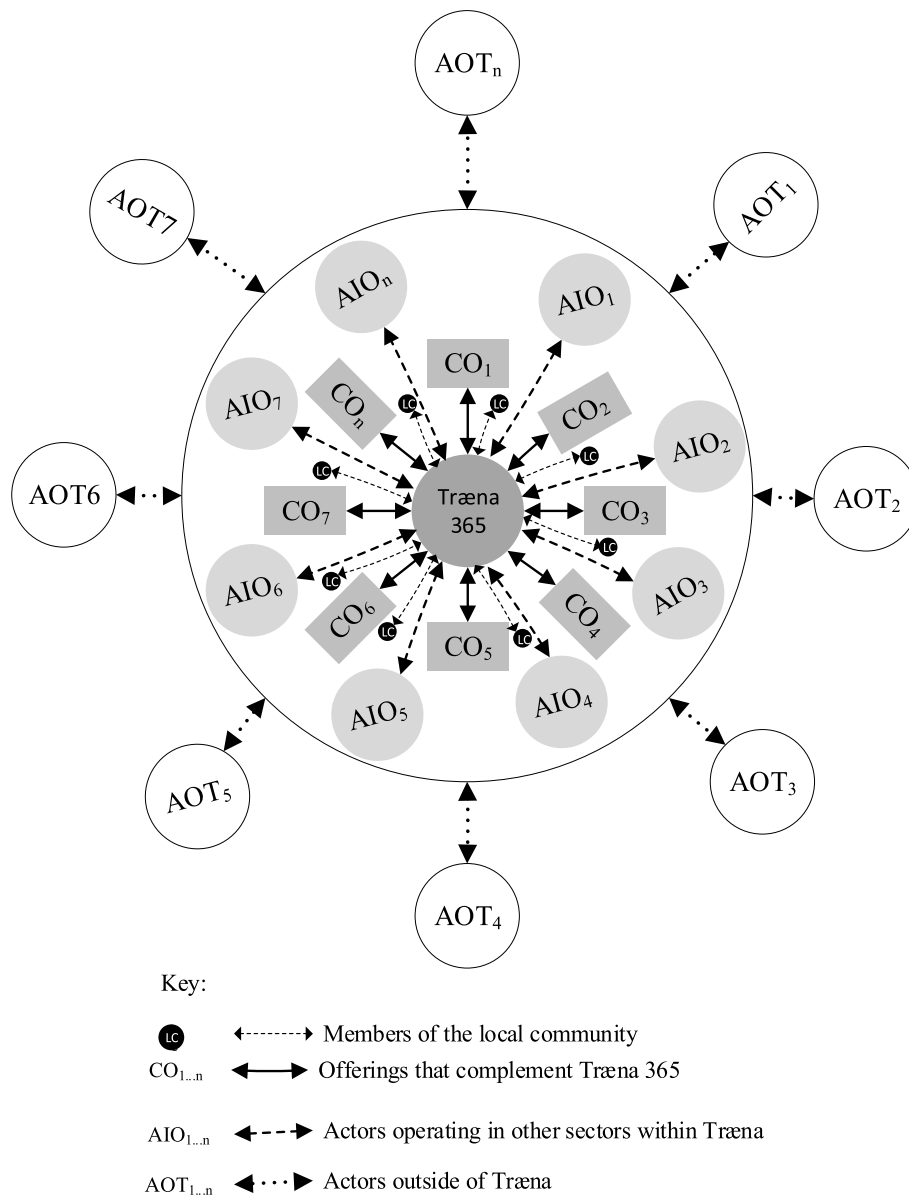


Fig. 1. A hybrid model for developing destination Træna.

constitutes an ecosystem involving interorganizational interactions and interdependencies, which are often crucial for value creation in tourism (Mwesumo & Halpern, 2019). Table 1 presents essential milestones in the early phases of developing Træna 365.

3.2. Data collection

Data collection for this study occurred in four ways, including participation in regular project meetings, document review, video content review, and semi-structured interviews. As partners in the research project that aimed at providing insights for developing Træna 365, the authors have been involved with the project since 2018, closely following various decisions and activities regarding the project. Besides the information obtained through participation in project meetings, additional data were collected through semi-structured interviews with all key persons involved in the early stages of the project. Since all the interviews occurred after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted via Telephone or Microsoft Teams. In their analysis on the use of Skype for data collection, Lolocono et al. (2016)

Table 1
Significant milestones in the early phases of developing Træna 365.

Time	Event
2012	The initial idea to develop a new hotel in Træna is proposed and discarded.
Feb/2015	Moa Bjørnson arrives in Træna and assumes the position as “Head of development” at the municipality.
April/2015	Assessment is conducted to examine the willingness of local tourism stakeholders to extend or upgrade their businesses to offer accommodation services.
Feb/2016	Træna received pre-project funding from the county authority to work with destination development. The aim was to strengthen local actors, improve existing offerings and to look for possibilities to create new establishments.
Nov/2016	A landowner approaches Moa to explore possibilities for initiating a hotel project.
Dec/2016	Contact is established with DOGA, Helgeland Museum and Vardehaugen, an award-winning architectural studio located in Oslo.
April/2017	A new comprehensive plan for the municipality is introduced. The focus was on developing Træna as a destination, including establishing a hotel or an accommodation facility.
Aug/2017	Funding is received from Nordland County Municipality as a follow up on the pre-project. The focus is on the innovation and development of Træna as a destination and the local community.
Jan/2018	Funding is received from the Research Council of Norway to support research activities aimed at providing insights for developing Træna 365.
May/2019	Morten Tøgersen, another key person in the early phases of this project, returns to the position of “technical manager” in Træna municipality.
June 2019.	The municipality began to develop the regulation plan for Nordhusøy.
Aug/2019	Vardehaugen develops vacation cabin units and exhibits them at Oslo Design Fair in Oslo. Trygve, another key person in Træna 365, acquires three units and establishes the firm House by the Sea. Træna municipality acquires two units. The units are to be used as Phase 1 “test windows” for the larger-scale investment and as a demonstration for attracting other investors.
Jan/2020	The municipality approves a new land use plan.
June/2020	The municipality approves new zoning (regulation) plan.
Oct/2020	The construction site for Phase 1 started – the five test units.
Oct/2020	A development company, “Utviklingsselskap Træna 365 AS”, is established by the municipality, landowner, and House by the Sea.
Dec/2020	An external consultant is engaged to find more investors.
Apr/2021	Investor meeting 1 with Laho AS is held.
May/2021.	Investor meeting 2 with Laho AS, Vardehaugen, House by the Sea is held.
June/2021	Investor meeting 3 with Helgeland Museum, Træna Kommune, Laho AS, House by the Sea, landowners and other local stakeholders is held. An agreement is reached.
Aug/2021	The development company Træna 365 AS issues shares, and the investors are now part of the company. Moa and Trygve are hired to manage the project.

encourage researchers to embrace Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) mediated interviews as they are an effective alternative to face-to-face interviews. To reduce errors, minimise bias, and thus increase reliability (Yin, 2018), the interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken. Table 2 provides a list of the interviewees and their roles.

To triangulate the information gathered through participation in the meetings and the interviews, key documents and videos covering different aspects related to the project and destination Træna were reviewed. The documents include the project description, social-economic assessment of the proposed project, architectural drawings, news articles, project webpages, and a report of a study on the residents’ perception of the initiatives to develop tourism in Træna (all these documents are available on the project website). The report is based on a survey that the authors were involved in its design. In total, 18 videos comprising about 2 hours and 19 minutes of content were reviewed. The videos, which can be found on YouTube using the search word “Træna”, include presentations by the head of development in Træna on different occasions, such as at the “Culture, tourism and local development” conference held in Oslo in 2019 and a TEDx talk about creative collaboration between outsiders and locals. They also include videos related to awards given to Træna, short documentaries about Træna and visitors commenting about Træna. The content of these videos corroborated the information obtained through interviews, observations, informal conversations with project team members and document review.

3.3. Analytical approach

The analysis of the empirical data was performed in two stages. First, the data collected from the four sources were coded to generate a pool of themes that were firmly rooted in the empirical evidence. To provide solid and consistent insights across the data, the analysis followed Saldaña (2021) by applying a streamlined codes-to-theory coding approach. This approach allows to transcend from empirically derived concepts to higher-level constructs. Eventually, the themes were aggregated into constructs representing four tactical moves in the early stages of the project to develop Træna 365. According to Miles et al. (2020), this is a “process coding” approach because the tactical moves connote observable and conceptual actions intertwined with time dynamics. Thus, the constructs were derived through deductive and inductive reasoning, capturing both emergent and theoretically informed concepts. Second, the integration conceptual analysis technique (MacInnis, 2011) was deployed to cluster and determine associations between specific themes derived from the empirical data. The integration technique takes a holistic perspective and involves seeing phenomena in a new way. As such, the method facilitated drawing associations between themes to derive a generalised conceptual framework delineating drivers, enablers, challenges, and key success factors for navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project. In line with Miles et al. (2020), the two steps of analysis undertaken in the study represent a deep reflection and interpretation of the empirical data’s meanings.

Table 2
Interviewees.

Interviewee	Role
A	The head of development in Træna municipality - Project leader and facilitator
B	Investor in Træna 365
C	A restaurant owner representing local entrepreneurs
D	An accommodation facility owner representing local entrepreneurs
E	Technical manager, Træna municipal authority
F	Landowner, as an investor in the project and a member of the local community

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the analysis described in Section 3.3. It starts with the presentation of the results related to the tactical moves deployed in the early stages of the project. Subsequently, it presents a delineation of the mechanism leading to successful navigation of the early stages of the project, consisting of drivers, enablers, success factors and challenges.

4.1. Tactical moves deployed in the early stages of Træna 365

Following the streamlined codes-to-theory approach, the analysis revealed four major tactical moves deployed in the early stages of Træna 365. These include instilling project legitimacy, forging a support network, anchoring the project, and mobilising resources and capabilities. The moves constituted deliberate and adept actions undertaken towards project implementation. Fig. 2 shows the derivation of the moves, and their explication follows.

4.1.1. Instilling project legitimacy

This is the first tactical move that laid a foundation for the other tactical moves. Legitimacy in this context is construed as a positivistic construct to mean sufficient acceptance of the project idea by stakeholders. Legitimacy is crucial because according to Miotto et al. (2020), it provides “credibility, trust, support from stakeholders, and access to the resources necessary to operate”. Accordingly, in the early stages toward the implementation of Træna 365, efforts were directed to legitimise the project idea. The head of development in Træna served as the key driver for the project and engaged in various activities aimed at and contributed to legitimising the project idea. Legitimacy was essential for soliciting the support of the local community, entrepreneurs, and political leaders. As shown in Table 1, the initial idea to develop a new hotel in Træna was proposed in 2012, but it was unsuccessful. The main reason for its failure was a lack of support from the municipality leadership. As the technical manager recalls, “there have long been suggestions of numerous ideas and plans for hotels in Træna. Everything from ready-made hotels from Latvia (module-based) to Japanese-inspired construction with glass and open rooms. The last one, the Japanese-inspired structure, simply lacked political interest. The Mayor did not like the idea; therefore, the municipality did not support it, and everything stopped”. Unlike the previous proposals, Træna 365 started by instilling legitimacy of the project idea among critical stakeholders. As the head of development in Træna, points out: “when I came to Træna, my first task was to

identify all key actors both locally and externally. The project had to be initiated as a comprehensive development mission that is necessary for the island”.

To ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are accommodated, instilling legitimacy was based on social, environmental, and economic aspects. These three aspects were vital because the study on the residents’ perception indicated that although they were optimistic about developing tourism in Træna, they were concerned about the negative consequences on their ways of life and the environmental degradation that the development would bring. Likewise, to win the support of the local entrepreneurs, the project had to be designed in a way that it complements the existing tourism offerings rather than competing with them. The efforts to legitimise the project included constant communication with stakeholders, explaining its essence and what it meant to the island. It also involved conducting analyses and making research-based claims related to the project. Attracting external funds to support preliminary activities also helped to legitimise the project. This is because attracting funds signalled the project’s relevance. Based on the analysis, the following proposition is advanced:

P1: Navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project requires instilling project legitimacy to gain trust, support and resources from stakeholders.

4.1.2. Forging a support network

Recognising that value creation in tourism requires collaboration among various actors (Mwesiuno, 2019), another tactical move pursued in Træna was to forge a support network. The leader and the project facilitator made deliberate efforts to seek and onboard various external partners that would contribute to the realisation of the project. It involved seeking the support of actors beyond the municipality. For instance, in 2017, Træna applied and obtained funding from the Nordland county authority for a preliminary destination development project. The project involved strengthening local actors, improving existing tourism offerings, and searching for new opportunities. Although this was a small project, it was an effective way to onboard the county authority as a support partner for Træna 365. Forging a support network also involved sharing Træna’s story through participation in various events that served as arenas for obtaining prospective partners. Such events included TEDx talk, Oslo Design Fair, Research Council of Norway’s idea generation lab, and tourism conferences. For instance, one of the first investors in Træna 365 came on board after meeting the project leader and facilitator a few times at tourism conferences and finally at the Research Council of Norway’s idea generation lab. The project

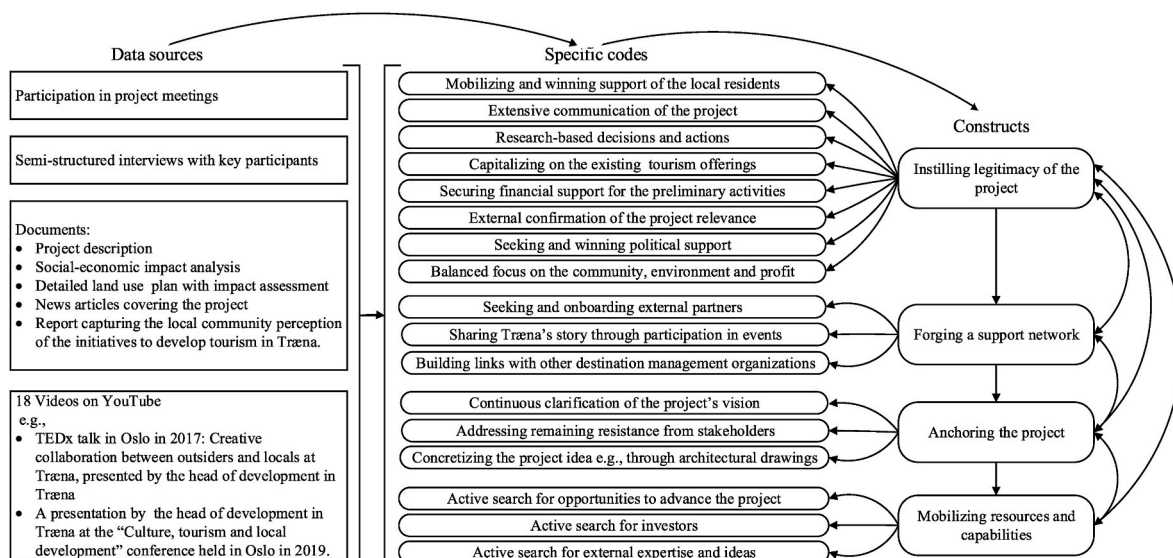


Fig. 2. Analytical approach.

leader and facilitator recalls: “When I went to this event [idea generation lab], I had a clear idea of what kind of people I wanted to work with in the idea brainstorming team. I had met Trygve at a conference before, and when I met him at the idea lab, I knew that he was a person that I wanted to have in my team”. Through the idea generation lab, the research institute also came on board to support preliminary research activities for Træna 365. Thus, a second proposition is presented:

P2: Navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project requires forging a support network to facilitate relevant activities.

4.1.3. Anchoring the project

Anchoring the project is concerned with positioning the project idea firmly and ready for implementation. One of the key activities at this stage is to address any conflicts and resistance from stakeholders. Even after achieving considerable confidence of the stakeholders, some stakeholders will still be not entirely on board, and some may even try to sabotage the project. For instance, one of the local actors in Træna launched a personal attack against the project leader and the project due to concerns over the dramatic changes that the project would bring to the island. Eventually, the perpetrator gave up and decided to leave the island because it became apparent that most members of the local community support the project. Winning such support requires continuous communication of the project idea and close involvement of the local actors. Excellent communication of Træna 365 is reflected in one of the quotes from a restaurant owner: “they have been really good at sharing information about the project. We have been invited to several meetings for clarification of the project. I feel that the plan is clear”. Informing the local community about destination development initiatives is crucial for improving their attitude towards the initiatives. As Lopes et al. (2019) found, being informed and involved tend to make residents develop positive perceptions about tourism, while poor information and less involvement make them develop negative perceptions. Thus, they suggest that the development of tourism in a rural destination must involve clear consultation with the residents to accommodate different needs of the community. Anchoring the project idea also involves concretisation of the project through tangible evidence. In the case of Træna, this involved developing architectural drawings and obtaining land use approval from the authorities. As the technical manager recounts, “Obtaining land use approval was one of the most critical aspects in this project. It would be difficult to move forward without it”.

Consequently, anchoring the project idea had a feedback effect on both forging a support network and instilling legitimacy of the project idea. This is because the absence of resistance from stakeholders, architectural drawings that provide a mental image of the project, and obtaining land use approval increased the perceived achievability of the project. As such, stakeholders became convinced of the project’s feasibility, which attracted more partners and supporters of the project. Based on insights in psychology research, feasibility, which refers to the ease or difficulty with which an outcome can be achieved, significantly impacts how people evaluate the process leading to that outcome (Tok et al., 2021). Hence, a third proposition is postulated:

P3: Navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project requires anchoring the project firmly among stakeholders.

4.1.4. Mobilising resources and capabilities

Like other rural tourism destinations, Træna municipality did not have adequate resources and capabilities to support the early and later stages of Træna 365. Besides, Træna is a relatively remote destination, and therefore attracting resources and capabilities is challenging. One of the respondents, an investor in Træna, noted that “it is quite challenging to work in Træna considering the weather, its location, and logistics. Due to these challenges, it has been even difficult to attract construction contractors”. Given the project’s scope, Træna needed additional resources and capabilities, including funds, human resources, innovative ideas, and

entrepreneurial skills. Thus, another tactical move in the early stages of the project was to mobilise resources and capabilities. This move included an active search for external expertise, ideas, opportunities, and more potential investors. These resources and capabilities were mobilised to facilitate activities in the early stages of the project and prepare for the implementation phase.

Regarding external expertise and ideas, the project team mainly deployed an equivalent of an open innovation system. Wang et al. (2021) note that an open innovation approach is suitable for exploiting both internal and external ideas and expertise for value creation. As for Træna, this approach entailed opening up and interacting with actors within and outside of Træna. This way, they engaged in co-creation of value, involving internal and external actors. Likewise, Træna has opened up for more investors to join Træna 365 AS, a development company established by the municipality, two private investors and a property developer. In sum, a fourth proposition is posited:

P4: Navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project requires deliberate efforts to mobilise resources and capabilities to facilitate relevant activities.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that each of the identified tactical moves reinforced each other. For instance, while instilling the project’s legitimacy helped attract investors, having investors reinforced the project’s legitimacy. Likewise, legitimacy influenced forging a support network, which in return unleashed a reciprocal effect. The same applies to developing a support network and anchoring the project. Essentially, the interdependence nature of the tactical moves calls for their parallel implementation. Therefore, a fifth proposition is posited:

P5: Navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project requires concurrent implementation of the four tactical moves: instilling project legitimacy, forging a support network, anchoring the project, and mobilising resources and capabilities.

4.2. A mechanism leading to the successful navigation of the early stages

After identifying the four tactical moves, this section presents a generalised conceptual framework delineating drivers, enablers, challenges, and key success factors for navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project. In this case, the success of the early stages was indicated by launching the project implementation phase. Fig. 3 presents the framework, followed by its explication.

4.2.1. Drivers for project initiation

As shown in Fig. 3, the analysis suggests that successful navigation of the early stages of Træna 365 started with the strong motivation that triggered the project’s initiation. With a long history and rich cultural heritage, Træna has always been a diverse and innovative community, with an ambition of remaining so. Thus, the first driver for initiating the project was Træna’s determination to contribute to the social and environmental sustainability goals. This factor was crucial given the increasing attention that sustainability has gained worldwide. To reflect its innovative spirit, the efforts had to be well-coordinated through an impactful project. Secondly, there was a strong desire to develop Træna economically. This factor was essential considering Træna’s ambition to attract more residents. Thirdly, Træna was determined to become a role model for other rural tourism destinations. As stated on the project website, “the goal is to become a reference point [for other destinations] on how to pursue sustainable tourism alongside community development”. Thus, besides the social, environmental and economic benefits to the island, there was a *greater good* that Træna was keen to achieve through Træna 365. These three factors represented the force that prompted the project and kept the enthusiasm of the project team even in the face of obstacles. Thus, the following proposition is postulated:

P6: Successful initiation of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project must be driven by solid endogenous and

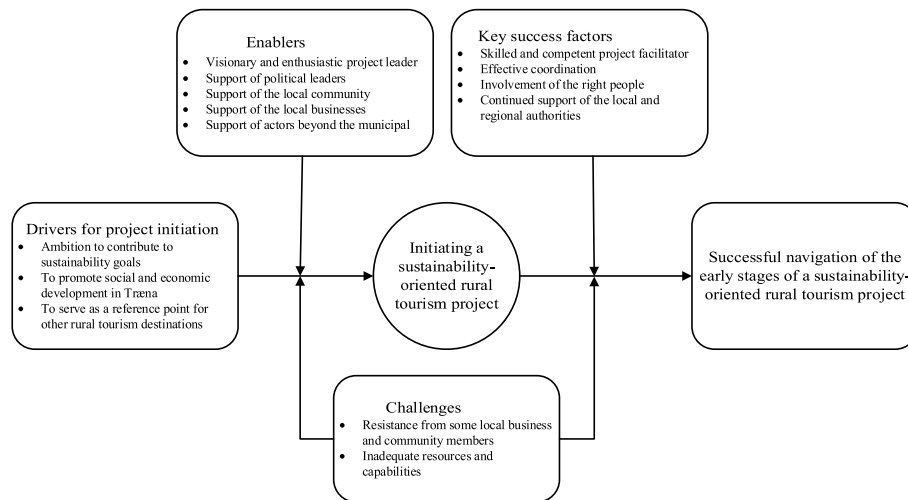


Fig. 3. A mechanism leading to the successful navigation of the early stages.

exogeneous motivating factors.

4.2.2. Enablers of project initiation

As shown in Fig. 3, having a solid motivation does not necessarily guarantee project initiation. Instead, the initiation is contingent upon several enabling factors. In the case of Træna 365, the analysis has identified five crucial enablers that facilitated its initiation. Firstly, it requires having an enthusiastic project leader. As pointed out in all interviews and the complementary data collected in this study, the project would not be initiated without a visionary and passionate project leader – the head of development in Træna. For a tourism project with implications on multiple stakeholders, and given the limited resources in Træna, an enthusiastic project leader was vital for initiating the project. As one of the investors underscored, “without her, this project would not start”. The lesson here is that, for such a project, you need at least one person who embraces the project’s vision and is passionate about rural tourism development. However, further analysis suggests that this person cannot initiate it alone; they need a competent team and the support of stakeholders. In the case of Træna, the much-needed support came from local political leaders, members of the local community, local business actors and actors beyond Træna (for example, funding organisations, regional tourism organisations, and research institutes). The support of all these actors was crucial for the project team to overcome the challenges involved in initiating such a project. Such challenges include inadequate resources and capabilities and resistance from some stakeholders. Therefore, the following propositions are posited:

P7a: Successful initiation of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project is contingent upon an enthusiastic and visionary project leader.

P7b: Successful initiation of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project is contingent upon the support of internal and external stakeholders.

4.2.3. Key success factors

Further analysis revealed that initiating a large sustainability-oriented project does not necessarily guarantee successful navigation of the early stages. Thus, several key success factors must be in place. The analysis suggests that the first and foremost key success factor is a project facilitator with the right set of skills to orchestrate the four tactical moves identified in Section 4.2. The analysis revealed that having a project leader with a vision and passion for rural tourism development is necessary but not sufficient for successful navigation of the early stages of the project. In addition to the enthusiasm, a facilitator with the right skills to orchestrate the four tactical moves is needed. Such skills include negotiation, conflict resolution, problem-solving,

interpersonal, presentation, coordination, multi-tasking, leadership, salesmanship, and communication skills.

Moreover, they must possess relevant qualities such as creativity, innovativeness, proactivity, strategic thinking, and perseverance. Since one person is not likely to have all these skills and qualities, there must be a support team consisting of people with complementary skills. However, the team members must also share the vision and passion of the leader. In the case Træna 365, the team members included the technical manager, a landowner and an early investor. Furthermore, the project team needs continued support of the local and regional authorities. As much as they were crucial in initiating the project, the authorities must continue to support the navigation of the early stages of the project. As for Træna 365, the authorities have continuously supported the project team as they orchestrated the four tactical moves. To sum up, we propose the following:

P8a: Successful navigation of the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project is contingent upon a skilled and competent project facilitator.

P8b: Successful navigation of the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project is contingent upon the involvement of competent and motivated project team members.

P8c: Successful navigation of the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project is contingent upon continuous support of local and external stakeholders.

5. Discussion

This study explored how to navigate the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to address this question. Therefore, its findings offer valuable insights, especially now that rural tourism development is attracting significant attention. To achieve meaningful results, initiatives to develop rural destinations require striking a balance between social, environmental and economic aspects. Given the unique characteristics of rural tourism destinations, the present study provides actionable lessons to guide scholars and practitioners involved with rural tourism development and project management in general. As such, the findings have implications for both theory and practice, as discussed below.

In terms of theory, the findings of this study contradict the path dependence perspective, which is often used in project management research. Indeed, the elements of contingencies and self-reinforcement mechanisms were observed in the early stages of Træna 365. However, as presented in the findings, the navigation of the early stages of

Træna 365 consisted of tactically engineered actions that resulted in some random outcomes. In other words, it was a process in which the project team, led by a visionary and enthusiastic project leader and facilitator, strategically shaped the contexts for action that resulted in some random valuable events. For instance, the project leader randomly met one of the early investors in a couple of tourism conferences/events before bringing him on board. However, the tactical move of attending tourism conferences, was not a random event. Instead, it was a well-thought tactical action intended to benefit the project. Likewise, the drivers for initiating the project were not “random”, but they resulted from a deliberate decision to pursue a given cause of action. Therefore, one can argue that Træna intentionally created strong initial conditions, rather than starting with weak conditions.

Overall, the findings suggest that successful navigation of the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project consists of a combination of random and deterministic events. In other words, one needs to embark on specific well-calculated activities (deterministic) to create a breeding ground for valuable “random” events. Besides, the moves have to be preceded by strong motives as initial conditions. The shaping of the contexts is manifested by the careful orchestration of the four tactical moves (instilling project legitimacy, forging a support network, anchoring the project, and mobilising resources and capabilities). These moves served as conduits through which valuable random events occurred. In sum, theoretically, the findings suggest that navigation of the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project requires tactical path creation involving well-calculated actions that serve as a breeding ground for valuable random incidents.

Regarding practice, the study offers several lessons. First, it identifies and proposes actionable moves essential for successfully navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project. Therefore, actors who are involved in developing rural tourism destinations can implement these moves. However, one must note that since every rural tourism destination is unique, the specific actions pursued in every move must be tailored according to the contextual factors. For instance, while mobilising resources and capabilities is essential in any context, the type and quantity of resources and capabilities needed are likely to vary across destinations. Second, the analysis suggests that having an enthusiastic, visionary, skilled and competent project leader and facilitator is critical for initiating and successfully navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural development project. Hence, rural destinations that intend to embark on such projects must recruit such a project leader and facilitator. This is understandable because a large sustainability-oriented project represents a significant change in the destination. As Mwesiuno et al. (2019) recommend, an initiative that entails a significant change requires the involvement of enthusiastic people who will be eager to navigate the associated dynamics. In addition, Mwesiuno et al. (2021) suggest that such people must have a positive attitude towards the initiative.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed an array of skills and qualities that the project team must possess to execute the four tactical moves. Conceivably, it is challenging to find one person who possesses all the requisite skills and qualities. Therefore, rural destinations that plan to embark on such a project should find a project leader with most of these skills and qualities. Subsequently, they should bring onboard team members that complement the skills and qualities of the project leader. Although the roles of project leader and facilitator for Træna 365 were carried out by one person, destinations that do not have a person with such capacity may assign these roles to different individuals. While the project leader would provide vision and overall guidance, the facilitator would be responsible for coordinating and orchestrating the four moves.

Finally, the study offers implications for the external stakeholders who are engaged in promoting rural tourism development. The findings suggest that the success of the four tactical moves partly depends on the positive response from external stakeholders such as funding organisations and regional authorities. Connecting with these stakeholders was

crucial in reinforcing other tactical moves. Therefore, organisations and regional authorities interested in promoting rural destinations should reach out to rural destinations and support ongoing sustainability-oriented projects. Their support does not necessarily need to be large amount of funds to support the activities. Even acknowledging the relevance of the projects is valuable as it helps in instilling legitimacy of the project, anchoring it among other stakeholders, and in mobilising resources and capabilities. Overall, the findings underscore the role of open innovation and co-creation in the implementation of sustainability-oriented projects in rural destinations. As observed in the early stages of Træna 365, close involvement of multiple stakeholders played a key role. Indeed, the four tactical moves were geared to drive the co-creation of the project, involving the community members, local leaders, business actors and other stakeholders.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated what it takes to successfully navigate the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project. The study draws on Træna 365, a sizeable sustainability-oriented project initiated and launched by Træna municipality in Norway. Based on multiple sources of evidence, the study explored Træna 365 journey and revealed four tactical moves explored in its early stages. The four moves are instilling project legitimacy, forging a support network, anchoring the project, and mobilising resources and capabilities. These moves embody activities that were essential towards the successful launching of the project. Further, the study has delineated the relationship between key variables representing the drivers, enablers, key success factors and challenges associated with successful navigation of the early stages of a large rural tourism sustainability-oriented project. Based on the findings, the study has developed eight actionable propositions and discussed relevant implications to theory and practice.

Despite the valuable insights provided in this paper, there are several avenues for future research. For instance, a similar study can be conducted in other rural destinations that initiate a sustainability-oriented project to determine the relevance of the four tactical moves. Rather than exploring what happened, future studies may assume a form of field experiment by implementing the four moves in another rural tourism and assess the impact. More so, since the present study has focused on the early stages of the project, future studies can explore the implications of the tactical moves on the later stages of the project. Such studies can also compare the performance of later stages of projects that did not involve the four tactical moves. Likewise, it will be interesting to explore the relevance of the four tactical moves in navigating the early stages of sustainability-oriented projects in other contexts than rural tourism. For instance, the significance of the moves can be examined among non-governmental organisations that attempt to initiate and launch sustainability-oriented projects in urban areas.

Impact statement

This study identifies and presents a practical approach to navigating the early stages of a large sustainability-oriented rural tourism development project. The analysis suggests that to succeed with such navigation, one can implement four tactical moves. These include instilling project legitimacy, forging a support network, anchoring the project, and mobilising resources and capabilities. These moves are presented alongside examples of specific actions implemented in each of them. In addition, the study identifies essential qualities and skills required to implement the moves. Thus, it offers guidance for recruiting team members for such projects. Finally, the paper delineates drivers, enablers, key success factors, and challenges associated with successful navigation of the early stages of a large rural tourism sustainability-oriented project. Overall, the study provides eight concrete propositions that guide managerial action.

Credit author statement

DEODAT MWESIUMO: Deodat developed the ideas for the study, including the theoretical, methodological and analytical approaches. He also analysed the data, wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and acted as the corresponding author for the submission and review process. JON HALFDANARSON: Jon contributed through data collection, analysis, and revision of the first draft of the manuscript. MIKHAIL SHLOPAK: Mikhail contributed through data collection, analysis and revision of the first draft of the manuscript.

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