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Municipalities and communities enabling social innovations in peripheral areas – case studies from Ostrobothnia, Finland

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on social innovation processes (SIs) in rural areas in Nordic countries. There are different roles of actors in SI processes such as initiator, promotor and connector, facilitator, follower, opponent, and others. What roles or contributions can municipalities provide to opportunity-driven SI processes in rural localities? More specifically, what kind of relationships can there be between the municipality and local communities in SI processes? The empirical findings presented in this article identifies three specific contributions from municipalities: (1) surveyor of opportunities (in the initiation phase), (2) promoting projects by providing resources such as knowledge and legitimacy (promoter and connector), and (3) securing the future of successful results (promotor and connector). We argue that the reasons why municipalities focus of these specific contributions is that they can be aligned with municipal coordinating mechanisms. Within this framework, they may provide resources, such as the ability to formulate local needs, sector expertise, long-term thinking, knowledge of local and extra-local opportunities (funding and partners), legitimacy, trust, and social capital. In successful SI processes, these inputs from municipalities may empower communities to deliver complimentary resources, such as voluntary work, ideas, the social capital, and legitimacy of local networks.

1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in social innovations (SI), which are defined as the 'development and implementation of new ideas (products, services, and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships' (European Commission 2013, 6). Whereas technological innovations are seen as a driving force for economic change, SIs are regarded as crucial for social, sustainable change (Moulaert et al. 2013). In rural research, SIs are regarded as one response to geographical and social marginalization (Bock 2016; Nel and Pelc 2020). In fact, there is a lot of expectation towards SIs in terms of exploiting opportunities for rural development. Rural areas can offer a favourable context for SIs because they contain small cohesive communities (Bosworth et al. 2016). Various kinds of social needs drive diverse types of SIs, and ideas may come from various sources. Jungsberg et al. (2020) and Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala (2020) have studied how such ideas create motivation and enable several types of actors to connect and implement them.

Our point of departure is that there are two forms of societal organization in peripheral areas, which may or may not enable SI processes: municipalities and communities.

In geography, innovation research has long traditions: the spatial diffusion of innovation was studied already by Hägerstrand (1953), and for him the actors were adopters of new technologies. In general innovation research, Rogers (1983) explored the role of actors in innovation processes. Departing from the roles identified in these fields of research, we will attempt to identify possible roles for municipalities as public sector institutions in opportunity driven SI processes in rural places.

One core characteristic distinguishes municipalities from communities. Municipalities in Nordic countries are institutionalized local political organizations and simultaneously parts of the public sector. In this article, the notion of municipality refers to the local authority and its elected body (both elected politicians and professional officers). Municipalities can delegate some of their activities such as development functions to agencies,[1] which are semiautonomous bodies and controlled only indirectly by the municipalities. We do not count them to the notion of municipality even if they can belong to the local public sector. Municipalities may choose to become actors in SI processes or choose not to be.

Members of local communities have a sense of belonging to the place and work towards a common local goal to develop the place. They face and evaluate challenges and respond to them by developing novel solutions together through SI processes (Jungsberg et al. 2020; Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020; Richter and Christmann 2021). A local community may include for instance members of NGOs, teachers, civil servants, and businesspeople, in other words actors belonging to different organizations in everyday life.

Jungsberg et al. (2020), Vercher (2022); Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020, and Richter and Christmann (2021) have addressed the roles of actors in different phases of SI processes, but this research does not explain the many ways the coordination mechanisms of municipalities as parts of the public sector (combining hierarchy and networking) can interact with community coordination (see Section 2.3). More research is needed on how the tensions between hierarchy and community networking shapes the roles of municipalities and their relationship to local communities in SI processes. Accordingly, our empirical research questions are:

> Given these differences in coordination mechanisms, what roles can municipalities have in SI processes in rural localities, involving several types of actors?

> What kind of relationships can there be between the municipality and the local community in SI processes?

To reveal the potential for constructive municipal involvement in SI processes, we use cases from the LEADER programme, a rural development programme of the European Union. The core of the programme is to promote SIs in rural areas, and municipal involvement is encouraged. Accordingly, the role of municipalities in SI processes and their relations with local communities should be revealed empirically in LEADER projects.

The empirical analysis of the paper is based on six cases selected through a broader exploration of a LEADER project portfolio in Ostrobothnia, Finland. Rural municipalities in Finland are small and have close connections to local communities, which we suppose gives good conditions for SI processes. The cases studied were run over two to three years between 2015 and 2019, with one of the cases having a history of consecutive LEADER development projects going back to the 1990s. The local actors in Ostrobothnia use LEADER in a proactive way, to build local communities, enjoy life in nature, organize cultural events, sports, and other social activities. We emphasize that SIs are drivers of social change in rural localities, potentially leading to new opportunities and development paths through learning and interaction between actors.

The next section (conceptual framework) discusses phases in SI processes in rural places, the role of municipalities as well as their relationship with communities in these processes. Section 3 presents the method and empirical data on SIs in six cases of Ostrobothnian rural areas. Section 4 offers the findings of empirical analysis, Section 5 provides a discussion with reference to the research questions, and Section 6 final comments.

2. Conceptual framework

A relevant backdrop to our study is the concept of place. A place is a space, which people have made meaningful and to which they are attached. Places are locations and they have relations to humans and human capacity to produce and consume meaning (Cresswell 2014, 12–16). Places can emerge because of intersections in networks (Massey 1993), which may be spontaneous or formed through deliberative strategies of place-making (Collinge and Gibney 2010).

We study rural places, where locals feel strong ties, developed through historical bonds between long-rooted locals and a place, e.g. through kinship (Carson, Eimermann, and Lundmark 2020). Feelings of belonging and attachment to the place encourage locals to innovate and create solutions that enhance the overall quality of life. In the SI processes, people's needs, initiatives, and commitments to the rural place integrate, and SI processes can be seen as place-making (Baker and Mehmood 2015; Franklin and Marsden 2015).

The interrelated concepts place-based development (Barca, McCann, and Rodgriguez-Pose 2012) and neo-endogenous development (Ray 2006) have become central parts of both rural research and development policies over the previous couple of decades. According to the neo-endogenous model, the development is based on local resources and participation but also characterized by dynamic interactions between local areas and their wider environments (Ray 2006). The rural development policy based on the model promotes local and extra-local connections that facilitate development potential and exploitation of rural assets (Gkartzios and Lowe 2019). The notions of neo-endogenous development and place-based development emphasize the significance of relationships, which is also central to understanding the development of opportunity-driven SIs in rural places.

We will now turn to the phases of SI processes in rural localities (2.1). Then, we discuss the role of municipalities (and other actors) in SI processes (2.2), the relationship between municipalities and communities (2.3) and end with summarizing the framework (2.4).

2.1. Phases in SI processes in rural places

The notion of SI is often seen as a 'process of inventing, securing support for, and implementing novel solutions to social needs and problems' (Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller 2008). SIs are social in terms of both their ends and their means; they create social value (Bosworth et al. 2016) and implement new ideas with the potential of improving the quality of life, education, welfare, social cohesion, and environment quality (Pol and Ville 2009). They can result in more effective community development through novel governance forms and support collective action, self-governance, and political empowerment (Van Dyck and van den Broeck 2013).

Social needs and the activities responding to them are drivers of SI. Bosworth et al. (2016) distinguish between adaptive or reactive and creative or proactive responses. Adaptive SIs are driven by necessity and are solutions to fill gaps caused by austerity politics. Creative SIs create social value driven by opportunities and potentially have more transformative outcomes. This paper studies creative SIs driven by opportunities as empirical cases. The opportunity-driven SIs can broaden the scope of local development and increase the well-being and enjoyment of life of local residents. The cases in this paper focus on the issues of historical traditions and heritage, literature, sport, and food culture, all being elements of local identity.

Scholars have identified different phases in the collaborative SI processes: Initiation and implementation phases and the outcome. These phases may be rooted in the place, as elements of place-making or place-based development, and the local and extra-local links explained above. The initiation phase includes the identification of social needs (Neumeier 2017; Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020), idea development to meet these needs (Jungsberg et al. 2020; Kluvankova et al. 2021; Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020), building up initial actor networks (Neumeier 2017), collection of the necessary initial resources, and decision making (Jungsberg et al. 2020).

During implementation, actors negotiate about the new form of collaborative action (delineation and coordination, by Neumeier 2012), form actor networks for SIs (Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020), and enlarge the actor-network (Kluvankova et al. 2021). In rural areas, the SI process is territorial, and both the main actors and potential resources are often local (cf. Jungsberg et al. 2020; Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020; Vercher 2022). However, the implementation also needs extra-local resources (Jungsberg et al. 2020). We differentiate analytically between two phases of implementation with different spatial focus: local network building and acquiring local resources and connecting to extra-local actors to acquire extra-local resources (external collaborators). These phases are in accordance with the neoendogenous approach, and they might be parallel.

The outcome of a SI process is change in attitudes, behaviour, or perceptions of the people in the actor-network leading to new ways of collaboration (Neumeier 2012, 2023). This results either in adaptation or transformation (Kluvankova et al. 2021), which can also be characterized as compensation or emancipation (Richter and Christmann 2021). An important point is the produced or enhanced social capital. As Neumeier (2017) concludes, the result does not only address the specific objective – the SI process becomes asset building for the future. A significant aspect of SI is thereby the strengthening and even regeneration of communities, within localities and beyond. SI processes both make use of communities and bond members of communities together (cf. Jungsberg et al. 2020). In this way, the SI processes can secure the future of the community, which according to our assessment is an important outcome of the SI process.

2.2. The roles of municipalities and other actors in SI processes

According to the literature (ref. Neumeier 2017; Rogers 1983; Vercher 2022), actors may have different roles in SI processes such as innovator or initiator, implementer or promoter, facilitator, connector, opponent or follower. Innovators have new ideas, but not all of them are possible to implement. Promoters are important in the dissemination and implementation of the ideas. Connectors link different people, ideas, money, and power in actor-networks for SIs (Neumeier 2017), and connecting can be seen as a sub role of promoting. Neumeier (2017), Richter and Christmann (2021), Dargan and Schucksmith (2008), and Jungsberg et al. (2020) point to the crucial role of connectors. Facilitators focus on the creation of conditions for actors to proceed with their idea of SI (Rogers 1983; Vercher 2022). Opponents resist the idea of innovation or try to block it (Rogers 1983; Vercher 2022; Vercher, Bosworth, and Esparcia 2023). Followers join the initiative, and they can be collaborators, users, or beneficiaries of the SI. Here, we are specifically interested in the role of the municipality.

Initiating needs creativity, ideas to use the spatial resources, and capability to formulate the social needs. Resources such as knowledge, network, funding, and labour are essential (Jungsberg et al. 2020). A committed core of volunteers is regarded as a necessity; Jungsberg et al. (2020, 281) state that 'a crucial step towards moving from the idea stage to the start-up phase of the SI project is the willingness of local members of the community to invest their time and effort in it'.

Promoting needs a capability to mobilize place-specific resources: nature and habitat, infrastructures, organizations, skills, networks, etc. (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019, 77–91) as well as relevant actors. Tschumi and Mayer (2022) emphasize locally and extra-locally acquired knowledge and their combinations shared with actors through the SI process. Jungsberg et al. (2020) found the importance of project management skills in the implementation phase, such as planning and allocation of tasks, time, and competences. An important skill is the ability to communicate the impact of SI with good stories. Connectors can link relevant actors and resources in the SI process (Neumeier 2017). They can be both local and extra-local.

The resources embedded in social networks, which can be mobilized by the promoter, connector or facilitator are referred in the literature as social capital (Lang and Fink 2019). Bonding social

capital is an attribute of homogenous social networks and trusting inward-looking relationships. Bridging social capital refers to external horizontal relationships, while linking social capital refers to connections to extra-local actors and resources (Szreter and Woolcock 2004).

Facilitators need knowledge of the general conditions needed for SI processes and the ability to develop them and the infrastructure suited for SI processes. They have a normative ability and function in an intermediary role within and outside the rural community (Vercher 2022). According to Jungsberg et al. (2020), the facilitating role of municipalities may support SI initiatives by offering training related to initiating and implementing SI projects, as well as offering meeting spaces. Followers need not to bring specific resources for the SI initiatives.

The actor roles specified on the literature do not however consider the characteristics of coordination mechanisms of municipalities. Municipalities are a part of the political-administrative system, with traits such as standardization, equal treatment, and accountability. These institutionalized aspects inhibit certain roles of municipalities in SI networks. At the same time, they open paths for municipalities to engage in cooperation, and they have proven to be quite active in doing so (e.g. Jungsberg et al. 2020). According to the findings of Jungsberg et al. (2020) on SI processes in rural localities in Nordic countries, municipalities and local communities were the most important actors during the initiation phase. The role of the municipality receded as projects progressed from the initiation phase to implementation, where the role varied from no involvement at all to establishing new partnerships with civil society actors. No involvement can be seen as 'policy neglect', where few supporting policies are put in place, and accountability is limited to fiscal matters (Anheier and Toepler 2019, 2).

According to the relevant literature, resources municipalities can provide to SI networks are:

(1) Sector expertise, since municipalities consist of several internal specialized units and offices, including relations with other parts of the public sector. For instance, Bosworth et al. (2016, 430) suggest that government bodies should 'identify, build and communicate local assets in ways that can underpin local development'.
(2) Capability to formulate the social needs and ideas to use spatial resources (Jungsberg et al. 2020).
(3) As a formalized organization providing services and infrastructure, municipalities have knowledge on legal procedures and funding (Jungsberg et al. 2020). However, they are also
(4) Political organizations, with deep links to various communities and NGOs, which give them knowledge on local communities and other potential local partners in SI networks, i.e. to mobilize bonding and bridging social capital.
(5) Connection to national and transnational networks; municipalities can help SI networks to grow by connecting them to national and transnational networks (Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020), i.e. to mobilize linking social capital.
(6) Legitimacy: the legitimacy of local politicians stems from elections and that of professional officials from their appointment.
(7) Long-term thinking: municipalities depend on the long-term survival and well-being of 'their' society and citizens, as a population paying taxes, voters, and an attractive society, which means thinking and planning long-term, often beyond short-term state-defined indicators. For instance, municipalities have been found to be patient partners in long-term innovation cooperation (Virkkala and Mariussen 2021).

2.3. Potential synergies and conflicts between municipalities and communities in SI processes

The concepts of region and place can be used to describe the connections of municipalities and communities to space: municipalities can be defined with the notion of region, and communities with the notion of place.

Regions are homogenous units in terms of specific criteria, such as administrative, economic, or cultural phenomena, bounded by the other regional units. Municipalities are administrative units, regions with self-governing competence, and they vary with many features (cf. Beer et al. 2020, 15–16). As administrative units, municipalities have duties to design and implement local policies and promote the welfare of citizens.

The notion of place refers to a sense of attachment and belonging. According to the definition by Agnew (2011), place involves three aspects: concrete geographical location, material settings for social relations, and sense of place. Local communities are based on the sense people have for places they live in or have emotional bonds to. Local community emphasizes belongings to the place (Luoto and Virkkala 2017).

The coordination mechanism in public organizations such as municipalities is networking and hierarchy (Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020). Hierarchy is manifesting in silo thinking, standardization, and monitoring (Thuesen and Andersen 2021), which may weaken trust between organizations. Hierarchy is based on the traditional government, while networking has been described as governance networks (e.g. Sørensen and Torfing 2007), where more actors are participating in fulfilling the duties of municipalities, local development being one example. From the spatial point of view, hierarchy and networking and their balance as spatial coordination principles belong to the local physical planning, which is a task of the municipality.

Membership of local communities is based on shared convictions, values, or expertize (Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020), and the coordination mechanism is equal participation. The communities enable collaborative practice, which is central in SI processes (Jungsberg et al. 2020; Neumeier 2012). Members of a community are peers with respect to the identity of the collective. Continuity of a local community depends on energy and motivations of people committed to common matters. They are working towards a common goal, a project supported by their community and sometimes also by their municipality.

When communities are coordination mechanisms, decisions are made by equals with reference to a shared characteristic, for instance a joint informal rule (Mayntz 2010, 39). Communities may cross organizational borders and include members of different organizations. Rural communities may be local, but communities may also have wider geographies. Local communities may unite or divide municipalities. The different notions of space and different coordination mechanisms influence the relations of local communities and municipalities. For instance, municipalities might be obligated to treat different villages equally, and not put resources in projects of more active villages or local communities. Copus et al. (2017, 8) have found that 'the close relationship between municipalities and local communities in the Nordic countries provides a basis for active public-sector involvement in social innovation'. Jungsberg et al. (2020) accordingly conclude that many SI initiatives act in partnership with municipalities and local communities. Municipalities can have an active role even as place leaders (cf. Beer et al. 2019; Horlings, Rope, and Wellbrock 2018) envisioning the future, mobilizing other actors for SIs, and revitalizing latent rural communities (Nordberg, Mariussen, and Virkkala 2020).

In order to cooperate despite their different coordination mechanisms, municipalities and local communities need a convergence of views and objectives through dialogue (Thuesen and Andersen 2021). Trust is built in long-term relationships with an on-going dialogue, which for instance implies that the government official must act more as a promoter, connector and/or facilitator of SI processes rather than as a traditional bureaucrat (Uster et al. 2018).

The development of governance networks has accordingly resulted in activities where the notions of region and place come together, a situation where the municipality and the community increasingly find themselves as partners on (sometimes) more equal terms in development efforts. Based on the conclusions drawn by Jungsberg et al. (2020), we suppose three options regarding the relationship between municipalities and local communities:

(1) Municipalities and local communities work together, and can act in multiple roles, such as initiator, promoter, connector and/or facilitator,

(2) Local communities are main actors (as initiators, promoters, etc.) in SI processes without municipalities,

(3) Municipalities are the main actors (as initiators, promoters, etc.) without local communities.

2.4 Summary: potential roles of the municipality

The research questions on the roles of municipalities and their relationship to local communities can be explored through a framework of different phases of the locally embedded SI process as explained below. In looking at this process, differences in coordination mechanisms are crucial.

Coordination mechanisms can be seen as structural 'filters' or selection mechanisms, which provides incentives to actors to select certain solutions and reject others (Jessop 2008). National level policy frameworks tend to lock up municipal budgets to certain priorities. Local decision-making may also prevent major budget reallocations. The roles of initiator, promotor, connector and facilitator in opportunity-driven SI processes, and the corresponding list of resources (see above in Section 2.2.), refers to contributions which may be made by the municipal staff, and available policy tools, without interfering too much with existing municipal budgets. The role of community may be to provide voluntary work, as well as mobilization of other forms of support from outside municipal budgets.

However, combining municipal and community resources may run into the spatial distinction between a local community and a municipality with responsibility for a wider region. A SI process can be seen as an exploitation and enhancement of local resources. This spatial process is sustained, but new types of relationships and possibly even new actors are expected to be outcomes of the SI process.

Governance networking requires some kind of alignment of goals between local communities, SI networks, and municipalities. However, in some cases there might be conflicts of goals and interests, in others top-down innovation strategies may fail to connect with local communities. SIs are often enabled by local actors, who recognize the social needs of the people in their community. First, in the initiation phase, there might be ideas produced that the municipality could act on, or weak local communities might need assistance in formulating their needs. Second, the municipality may promote the formation of the local network. Third, the municipality may aid in connecting the local network to regional, national, or international actors. Fourth, the municipality may have a role to play to secure the future of the new SI in a way that leads to self-reinforcing development.

Table 1 summarizes the phases of SI and the resources needed in each phase. Here, as a hypothesis, we have attempted to formulate in what role the municipality may provide resources. The assumption is that the municipality does not have most resources in-house but may for instance acquire knowledge from elsewhere.

The strengths of rural areas – strong communities and social and geographical proximity – give municipalities abilities to facilitate development processes where weaknesses are compensated for, and development opportunities are acted on (Nordberg 2021). We expect that this is true in our case study areas, and simultaneously, we expect to find cases of 'policy neglect', where the municipality fails to support SIs and instead delegates responsibility.

3 Research methodology, data, and cases

3.1. Process analysis

SIs processes in rural contexts are spatial phenomena consisting of events, and therefore process analysis provides a suitable research strategy. According to Abbot (2001), events cannot be analysed through variance analysis explaining the change (variation) in the outcome as a result of causal

Table 1. Resources and roles (actors) across the phases of social innovation processes according to literature.

Phases of SI	Resources needed in the phase	Potential role of the municipality and added resources
Initiation	Capability to identify and formulate the social need(s) Ideas to use the spatially embedded resources	Initiator: sector expertise aid in finding opportunities and ideas for development, and formulating needs
Formation of local network and acquiring local resources for SI	Nature, infrastructure, local knowledge, skills, voluntary work, funding, social capital (bonding and binding), sense of place Capability to promote network building	Connector: local knowledge is used to identify potential partners and where to find resources Promoter: social capital, legitimacy, and personnel resources are used to arrange dialogues Facilitator: expertise for training SIs, meeting places for SI actors
Connecting to regional, national, and international actors	Extra-local knowledge and partners Other extra-local resources Social capital (linking)	Connector: sector expertise, social capital, legitimacy, and personnel resources aid in finding extra-local partners with required expertise and resources
Securing the future	Accommodation of results Funding	Promoter: using expertise and local knowledge to plan how results are used in the future Make use of results within municipal duties

variables. In process research, events are the results of decisions by actors, and their meaning may change over time. Process research aims to understand how things evolve over time and why they evolve in a specific way. The aim is to track the temporal sequences of the events to discover the process. The focus is on mechanisms and patterns (Abbot 2001; Langley 1999). According to Langley (1999, 692) 'process phenomena have a fluid character that spreads out over time and space'. To approach the fluid character, many levels and units of analysis are needed. In this study, understanding of the process is used to reveal relationships at different levels, both between municipalities and communities as well as evolving networks.

Process analysis has been used in organization and management studies in the context of a single organization. When applying the method in geography and regional and rural studies, the complex and multi-actor nature of the development should be considered (Sotarauta and Grillitsch 2023). Sotarauta and Grillitsch (2023) approach the phenomenon with process tracing, and narrative analysis consisting of main phases, and they call this methodology as path tracing.

This study uses a narrative strategy and aims to track the processes of SI in six rural projects consisting of events, which are then classified as phases in the process. The starting point of the study is the spatially embedded SIs as lenses to rural development. We constructed categories and narratives to track SIs as processes where new relationships are expected to be created. We have a particular focus on the role of municipalities in the SI process and the relations between municipalities and communities in these changes. The specific relationships and roles are patterns of interaction that develop through events and common activities. In this manner, we analysed how the roles and relationships in the case studies matched against the conceptual framework.

3.2. Context and data

Concentration of economic activities and population in bigger university cities and depopulation of rural areas and smaller towns have been longer trends in Finland and other Nordic countries (Andersson, Eriksson, and Hane-Weijman 2018; Lundgren, Randall, and Norlén 2020; Moisio and Sirviö 2021; Tervo 2019). Rural areas are often classified as intermediate areas, rural areas close to cities, and rural remote areas (OECD 2012), such as sparsely populated areas in Nordic countries. In Finland, the population in sparsely populated rural areas has declined markedly. Rural core areas have also generally lost population, whereas the population in rural areas close to cities has grown during the twenty-first century (Sireni 2017). This paper sees rural core and

remote areas as peripheral and focuses on rural localities belonging to rural core areas about 400 km northwest of the metropolitan area in Finland.

Finland has been one of the most decentralized countries of the developed world and its municipalities have had even higher degrees of autonomy than their neighbouring Nordic countries (André and Garcia 2014). In Finland, democratic legitimacy is generated from below, which may give synergies between the activities of municipalities and the local communities. When Finland was ruled by the tsar in Moscow, municipal and later national forms of democracy emerged from informal local communities gathering outside churches after sermon on Sundays (Katajamäki and Mariussen 2013). The villagers discussed current affairs and made decisions on actions to solve urgent common problems. The basis of municipal autonomy is nowadays laid down in the Constitution, and municipalities possess strong self-government ability based on local democracy and decision-making and the right to levy taxes. Municipalities receive transfers from the state based on population needs to ensure equal service provision across the country (Ministry of Finance 2021).

In the European Union, the LEADER approach is the main instrument to encourage local communities to implement bottom-up planning and projects to create new jobs and revitalize rural areas. In Finland, there are 54 regional local action groups (LAG) that urge rural communities to carry out community-based development projects in accordance with national rural policy objectives. These projects involve renovating village houses and other community places, developing local services, carrying out employment projects, creating sports and recreational places, and organizing festivals, art exhibitions inter alia (leadersuomi 2022).

The empirical data of the article consists of projects run under the LEADER programme operated by the LAG (Aktion Österbotten) responsible for LEADER activities in Ostrobothnia in western Finland. Ostrobothnia is a bilingual region (Swedish and Finnish) consisting of 14 municipalities, which are characterized by strong civil societies (represented by NGOs) and an entrepreneurial spirit. Part of the archipelago is designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. There are about 180,000 inhabitants, and the population is decreasing owing to migration from most of the rural municipalities.

When gathering the data, we used a project database provided by the national rural authority and discussed with the officials of the LAG. We found altogether 80 development projects (LEADER) which have been funded by the Rural Development Programme for Mainland Finland 2014–2020 in the target region. Many projects were run by the same project owners. We selected projects that have attempted to create new networks with different stakeholders, and which are regarded as innovative in the local contexts. The projects are spatial: they respond to specific local needs, are built upon local resources, and focus on certain rural localities. The sample reflects variation in terms of the ownership of the project and the actors involved, the type of activity, and the geographical position in relation to regional centres. Accordingly, we selected six projects as representatives of SIs and collected, processed, and analysed the data to describe the four phases of the spatially embedded SIs and particularly the role of municipalities in these processes.

The cases were studied first with secondary data consisting of project reports and other material, and second by directing a total of 13 interviews in the spring of 2019 with key actors in each case. Two supplementing interviews were conducted in the spring of 2021. The interviews were directed to key informants: in all cases a representative of the organization leading the project, as well as one or two partners to validate and enrich the narrative presented by the project leader. Questions concerned how the project was initiated, how the network of actors was formed and why specific actors were involved or not involved, what role different partners had, as well as the purpose, aims and effects of the project. The interviews were distilled, and overviews of the SI processes were written. Afterward, the specific roles and perspectives of the municipalities were identified.

3.3. Cases: Six Leader projects

SIs in rural areas are processes in which local social needs are identified and responded to in networks of actors in a way that the outcomes are new social relations. In these processes, local

resources are used, transformed, and upgraded. For this article, we are interested in the role of municipalities and their relations with communities in the studied cases. Some of the projects deal with using heritage and local industry for place branding, defined as 'aims to construct a place image to the benefit of residents, business, and visitors' (Boisen et al. 2018; Grenni, Horlings, and Soini 2020). Others want to develop leisure activities, and one of the projects aims at business development. All projects attempted to initiate new relations and establish new networks for local development, which was something we were interested in for the purpose of this article. Four of the cases may be considered successes regarding the emergence of new relationships, while the other two largely failed at establishing new networks.

The case projects are presented in Table 2, see also Appendix. Here, the phases of locally embedded SI processes are used to analyse the progress of each project. In our cases, local communities are defined in accordance with the activity of the project. Local communities correspond to administrative borders of municipalities (The Birch and the Star, The Red Gold Region, Minnovation) or to geographically defined areas such as villages (Oravais Battlefield, Malax Ice Rink, Old Harbour). Villages are not administrative units in Finland, but the village communities are active in both national rural policy and LEADER actions. The local identity is often multiscalar: people identify themselves both to the village and to the municipality of their residence. In these cases,

Table 2. Process description of six Leader projects in Ostrobothnia.

Phases	Oravais Battlefield	Malax Ice Rink
Initiation	First initiative by municipality, later NGO.	Municipality denied financing which spurred the NGO to act.
Creation of network (promotion)	Network of NGOs and entrepreneurs resolving around the story of the battle of 1808.	A joint-stock company was formed, and fund-raising directed to locals, engaging neighbouring NGOs and communities.
External collaborators (resources, knowledge)	Knowledge acquired from national, and international war history communities, as well as the University of Applied Sciences.	The hockey arena attracted engagement of a wider regional and even national hockey community.
Self-reinforcing development (secure future)	The activities have created a network of actors which continue to develop the site.	The large engagement secures the maintenance and continuous development of the arena.
Phases	*Red Gold Region*	*Minnovation*
Initiation	The idea originated from the local development agency.	The idea originated from the local university unit Novia.
Creation of network (promotion)	The project cooperated with local restaurants and arranged workshops with local communities to explore local resources. The project failed to establish the network.	The project established cooperation with schools but failed to find real engagement in the companies. Instead, it contributed to municipal planning.
External collaborators (resources, knowledge)	The project did not establish connections to external knowledge sources.	The project did not establish connections to external knowledge sources.
Self-reinforcing development (secure future)	The project failed in establishing the new brand in the greenhouse industry and other actors in the region.	The project developed a tool for organizations in the region, but no strategy was made for its future use.
Phases	*The Birch and the Star*	*Old Harbour*
Initiation	Initiated by individuals in the local community, who brought the idea to the municipality.	The initiative originated from a local NGO.
Creation of network (promotion)	Project activities targeted village communities and entrepreneurs directly.	A new NGO was founded, and joint efforts were established, where the municipality found local partners to work with. The NGO invited the local university unit to plan the project.
External collaborators (resources, knowledge)	External actors were engaged, such as a society for the study of Finnish-Swedish culture, and an educational institute, which contributed with expertise in place branding.	The project collaborated with designers, writers, and media producers to develop logos, visitor maps, and a common web page
Self-reinforcing development (secure future)	The potential as a tourist destination was discovered. Shared values connected villages, entrepreneurs, and the municipality, which enables future activities.	The project connected actors and sparked engagement, enabling continuous development of the area. Connections to politicians secured the municipal engagement for the future.

the sense of the place is also multiscalar and the local community is operating on two levels simultaneously.

Oravais Battlefield builds on the historically significant battle between Sweden and Russia in Oravais in 1808, when Sweden and Finland ended up as two separate countries. This local heritage was used as a resource over consecutive LEADER projects developing the area to a destination, engaging historical societies, gastronomical knowledge and entrepreneurs starting new businesses. The *Malax Ice Rink* started due to a rejection by the municipality to fund a hockey arena, which spurred the local hockey club to use local engagement as well as the regional hockey community as resources. *The Red Gold Region* wanted to use the position of the town of Närpes as the centre of the greenhouse industry in Finland to construct a new regional brand. The aim was to evolve this largely Fordist industry into developing new products and services. The attempt largely failed due to difficulties in establishing enthusiasm both locally and in the industry. The *Minnovation* project aimed at using the creativity of children to solve problems and come up with ideas. The project failed in engaging companies but contributed to municipal planning. However, the project failed to secure the future of the activity, since no organization was found to accommodate and promote the model. *The Birch and the Star* wanted to build a place brand based on the heritage of the celebrated Finnish nineteenth century author Zacharias Topelius, writer of the children's tale The Birch and the Star. The project found substantial enthusiasm in the local community and was able to establish a new local network. The *Old Harbour* raised visibility of the heritage of Jakobstad as a harbour and shipbuilding town. Here, local inhabitants as well as entrepreneurs and local associations were connected to form a new local network for the development of the area.

4. Results

Based on the empirical analysis, we can now respond to the research questions on the role of the municipalities and their relations to the communities.

4.1. The roles of the municipality

The first research question asked what role municipalities can have in SI processes in rural localities, involving several types of actors. In the cases, we see the municipality in different roles. In *Oravais Battlefield*, the municipality had a weak role as initiator in the first phase and was largely absent in the other. In *Malax Ice Rink*, the municipality initiated the activity by refusing to take part and had a role as follower in the self-reinforcing development by purchasing ice time for the public and school pupils. In *The Birch and Star* case, the municipality had a role in the initiation by supporting the idea, as a connector in reaching external collaborators by offering different kinds of expertise (such as accounting), and as promoter by coordinating the project with other municipal activities. In securing the future, the municipality had a role as partner (as promoter), connector and facilitator when developing the place brand further. In *Old Harbour*, the municipality had no role in the initiation phase, but joined the process in the promotion phase as a central actor and connector when constructing the local network. Similarly, the municipality had no role in expanding the network to external collaborators but had an important promoting and facilitating position in securing the future as a partner to the other local actors in developing the area further.

In *Red Gold Region*, the municipality had a minor to non-existent role throughout the project, as its activities were delegated to a development agency. Although this agency was owned by the municipality, the delegation hindered contacts with other municipal sectors, a role approaching the neglecter. The *Minnovation* case was similar, where the municipality was engaged as promoter in the creation of local network, but its activities were delegated to (municipal) schools, with little to no association with other municipal sectors. As a result, the municipality had no role in the other phases, which also contributed to a lack of activities to secure the future of the results.

Similar to Jungsberg et al. (2020), we may conclude that municipalities have no single type of role; the role is highly context dependent. We see the municipality as initiator of the process, as provider of resources and connecting actors, as facilitator, and also in a neglecting role. In our cases, the municipalities were not directly opposing the SI initiative, but had a neglecting role (Anheier and Toepler 2019) in two cases.

While the above roles are helpful in describing the role of the municipality, we find that they do not take the coordination mechanisms of municipalities into account. For instance, in the initiating phase, municipalities cannot define ideas freely, since they are restricted by local political decisions, budgets, legislation and so on, and similar issues are apparent also in the other roles. We accordingly suggest a specification of the possible roles of municipalities by suggesting three particular contributions: in the initiator role, the municipalities have a distinct sub role as *the surveyor of opportunities*. The promoter and connector role contains sub roles as *promoter of projects* and *the actor securing the future of the results*. Securing the future is a new role important for the self-reinforcing development of SI projects, which we imagine may be a special duty for municipalities. In the studied cases, we find the municipality acting in these roles in the following ways:

Surveyor of opportunities: In the Oravais Battlefield case, the municipality saw the opportunity to develop a historically important site and presented this idea to the local NGO. In the Red Gold Region case, the municipality (or the development agency) saw the opportunity to develop a place brand. In the Birch and the star, the initiation came from other actors, but the municipality had already identified the opportunity to develop the local heritage and could thereby point out a path for the project to follow. This role is thereby about using knowledge about local needs and resources as well as knowledge about extra-local resources and opportunities.

The promoter of projects: The municipality had a large role as a promoter of the Birch and the Star project by housing the project, providing expertise and by coordinating activities. In the Old Harbour case, the participation of the municipality provided the project agency and legitimacy, both when expanding the local network and when planning its activities. Here, the municipalities made use of their knowledge about local circumstances and actors, as well as trust from previous collaborations. This role is consequently about providing resources (especially knowledge), facilitating the SI process, and connecting both local and external actors, all in accordance with municipal duties, strategies and budget priorities.

Securing the future of the results: The municipality had an important role in securing the future of the results both in Birch and the Star and Old Harbour. In Old Harbour, the municipality integrated the results in for instance spatial planning, and in The Birch and the Star, the municipality used the results to further promote the new place brand also after the project ended. The Red Gold Region and Minnovation on the other hand displayed the lack of this municipal role, as there was no other actor that could accommodate results that probably were quite useful. In Malax Ice Rink and Oravais Battlefield, the results were self-reinforcing, not needing the involvement of the municipality. This role is thereby about identifying useful results and, in cases where the self-reinforcement is insufficient, plan how the results may come to use. SI processes with positive outcomes may be self-sustainable, which helps the municipality to accommodate the results, but we see that this is not always a self-propelling process.

The cases are thereby both examples of how municipalities act in these roles, and how the lack of these roles may inhibit the SI process. Table 3 describes the resources the municipalities brought to the table in each role and phase of the process.

The surveyor of opportunities has not been mentioned as an actor role in the recent literature on rural localities. However, Bosworth et al. (2016, 430) suggest that the (local) government should identify and build local assets in ways that can underpin local development, which can be interpreted as surveying local and non-local opportunities such as demand for leisure or rural tourism, funding opportunities, and exploitation of available knowledge and resources. In the Jungsberg et al. (2020) study, municipalities were initiators of SI processes generating social service provision, but they did not mention surveying of opportunities as a role for municipalities or other actors.

Table 3. The specified roles of municipalities in SI processes and the resources municipalities may contribute across the phases.

	Initiation	Creation of network (promotion)	External collaborators (resources, knowledge)	Self-reinforcing development (secure future)
Surveyor of opportunities	Expertise Local knowledge Knowledge of funding opportunities			
The promoter of projects		Expertise Legitimacy Trust Social capital (bridging) Local knowledge Staff working time	Expertise Legitimacy Trust Social capital (linking) Staff working time	
Securing future of the results				Financial support Legitimacy Staff working time

The promoter of projects as a role of municipalities in SI processes has been mentioned in the literature. This role spans both the creation of the local network and the expansion of the network to external resources, which were separated in the analysis as phases 2 and 3. Vercher (2022) found in his case studies in Spain and Scotland that the local government was often a facilitator or promoter of SI processes and sometimes leader of the initial stage. Our findings support the hypothesis (see Table 1) that in successful cases, municipalities use their personnel resources in searching for local and extra-local partners with expertise and other resources. As a promoter, the municipality secures the suitable conditions for SI with knowledge of available resources, for instance by informing and guiding communities in their formalizing process on appropriate legal forms of organizing, such as associations or co-operatives (cf. Jungsberg et al. 2020). The role of promoter is based on the legitimacy of municipalities and the trust between actors in the SI network.

In successful cases, SI processes lead to self-reinforcing local development, which *secures the future* of the results and improves conditions for further SI processes. Municipalities can have a central role here, since they have knowledge of the process, legitimacy, and a long-term perspective. Another instance is that the municipality may incorporate the outcome in its duties (spatial planning in one of our cases). SI is an open process, which might continue and be cumulative, and the outcome might partly emerge in the long term (Kluvankova et al. 2021). Accordingly, securing future activities may be an important task even in cases that momentarily seem to be self-sufficient.

4.2. The relationships between municipalities and local communities in SI processes

The second research question asked what kind of relationships there could be between the municipality and the local community in SI processes. We supposed three types of relationship: municipalities and communities working together, communities acting without municipalities, and municipalities acting without communities.

We found the first type in the cases Birch and the Star and Old Harbour (Table 4). These are successful cases, where the idea for SI sparked interest across stakeholders, and where the municipality was able to secure the future of the project results by establishing communication channels to local communities and giving structure to the future efforts. In these cases, there is a synergy between the coordination mechanisms of municipalities and communities. Municipalities and communities have managed to converge their interests and build trust through dialogue. In the Old Harbour case, the network grew among the actors at the site (NGOs, firms) as well as towards the locals visiting the area. The connection to the municipality was essential since it allowed the municipal spatial planning to be engaged in the area, thereby elevating the activities, and giving them structure and stability. The Birch and Star case displays a similar role of the municipality,

Table 4. The relationships in the SI process of the cases.

Type 1: Municipalities and communities working together		
Project	The Birch and Star	Old Harbour
Main actors	Community, municipality	New NGO, joint effort
Tasks of the municipality	Owner of the project due to self-financing Consultative role, discussion in municipal council	Municipal officials active in workshops Spatial planning expertise
Factors promoting municipality's role	Financial resources, decision-making, access to expertise	The leader of the NGO a member of municipal council Idea fitted into municipal agenda and previous planning
Factors preventing/ weakening role of municipality	Bureaucratic structure, too slow progress	No preventing factor
Impact	Emerging place branding, local identity	Municipal planning used the outcome, new local network
Coordination mechanism alignment	Strong alignment between municipality and community	Strong alignment between municipality and community
Type 2: Autonomous communities		
Project	Oravais Battlefield	Malax Ice Rink
Main actors	NGO	Community, NGO, joint stock company
Tasks of the municipality	Annual grants to the NGO, takes care of the monument	Purchases ice time for schools and public
Factors promoting municipality's role	Weak role	No role
Factors preventing/ weakening role of municipality	Bureaucratic structure, too slow progress Enlargements of municipality weaken the interest in local opportunities	Political opposition from other municipal districts to the initiative
Impact	Place is well-known, network of entrepreneurs and wider military-history community	Growing local identity, network of local NGO, local community, and wider hockey community
Coordination mechanism alignment	Weak integration between municipality and community	Weak alignment between municipality and community
Type 3: Delegation of activity		
Project	Red Gold Region	Minnovation
Main actors	Business development centre	University and municipality
Tasks of the municipality	Delegation of tasks	Teachers in the project
Factors promoting municipality's role	Delegation of tasks	No factors promoting
Factors preventing/ weakening role of municipality	Dependent on individuals, locked in one sector	Possibly locked in one sector, dependent on individuals, no ownership of model
Impact	Weak relationships	Municipality did not accommodate the model
Coordination mechanism alignment	Attempt of hierarchy	Attempt of hierarchy

handing the activities structure and supporting them with administrative expertise and assistance. Still, complaints were voiced regarding the ability of administrations to participate in projects, especially regarding the Birch and the Star case. A project worker complained that the project could not rely on the lengthy timetable of the bureaucratic apparatus and that officials often expressed that they were too busy to be able to participate in the project. This thereby exemplifies the obstacles of bureaucracies to become a local developer, or even place leader.

The second type are cases where the idea for the SI spurred such a strong interest in the local communities that the project results become largely self-sufficient. The municipality had a role as initiator in Oravais Battlefield, while the rejection of involvement in Malax ice rink was the initiating factor there. However, what makes these cases similar is the non-existent role of the municipality in the promotion of the innovation and in securing its future. We interpret that hierarchy as a coordination mechanism inhibited the municipalities to have an active role. These cases were instead run by communities and can be seen as examples of cases where a well-suited idea to an existing need becomes the basis for a self-sufficient network of actors. The idea for the SI sparked

interest first within the local communities, and later expanded the networks to regional, national, and even international levels. These are good examples of neo-endogenous development without the involvement of the municipality. Although these cases are self-sufficient, we see an opportunity here for municipalities especially in weak peripheral areas to make use of these networks, to search for spin-offs or to further secure the future of the activities.

The third type is exemplified by the Red Gold Region and Minnovation cases. Here, the role of the municipality was delegated, in the Red Gold Region to a business development centre and in Minnovation to elementary schools. Delegation is hierarchy, a coordination mechanism of the municipality. The projects were from the standpoint of the municipality largely locked into the sectors of business development and schools respectively, and it seems that this arrangement somewhat hindered the emergence of self-reinforcing development. In the Red Gold Region, a place brand was produced, but no actor took the responsibility to promote it further. In Minnovation, a participative model for children was developed, but the case similarly did not involve an actor that could accommodate it. The cases simultaneously display how the idea together with the results did not resonate in the targeted communities: tomatoes as a basis for a regional brand did not spark interest in the local community and companies were not interested in the innovation model in Minnovation. Still, there were signs in both cases that the results of the projects were useful. The restaurants were enthusiastically engaged in promoting the Red Gold Region brand during the 'lunch weeks' and the greenhouse producers realized the value of making the industry more visible to visitors, while the innovation model in Minnovation made significant contributions to public planning. There were accordingly results to build on, but no actor stepped in to develop and exploit them further. In a projectified reality, especially in rural areas where the number of actors is sparse, the municipality may well be the only available actor to do this.

In some cases, the involvement of the municipality is not necessary to achieve significant and enabling types of networks, but when they are involved in a meaningful way, they may elevate the activities of the network, as well as secure the future of the results. We may conclude that municipalities and communities worked together when their respective coordination mechanisms were strongly aligned, as in the type 1 cases. In type 2, we found weak integration or weak alignment of the coordination mechanisms between the municipality and the community. We did not have a case where municipalities are strong actors without communities, but the type 3 cases indicate hierarchy as an attempt of coordination mechanism of municipalities. These latter cases failed to create new SI relationships securing the future of the projects.

5. Discussion

Municipalities are local actors, and at the same time, they have public responsibilities and are subordinate to national policy and legislation. In doing so, they combine hierarchical coordination and networking, including place-based development crossing sectoral and institutional borders. Budgetary control, top-down policy implementation, public administration's norms and rules regarding equal treatment create tension with networks based on the coordination mechanism of community. This tension requires some kind of alignment of goals between communities and municipalities. It is not easy. Through our cases, we have shown that coordination mechanisms of municipalities and communities can be aligned, and municipalities and communities can work together if municipalities focus on a role as initiator, promoter and connector, facilitator, and follower.

In the cases of delegation, the targeted community was not mobilized, and no new relationships emerged, which led to failure. In the cases led by strong communities separate from municipalities, the role of the municipality also was mostly follower. In these cases, the community autonomously mobilized the actors and resources needed.

Accordingly, our findings confirm that the involvement of local communities is an indispensable condition for successful SI processes in rural contexts (cf. Jungsberg et al. 2020; Neumeier 2017).

Table 5. The specified roles of municipalities in SI, with attributes and required resources.

Role	Attributes	Resources	Consistency between municipal coordination and community
The surveyor of opportunities	Finding opportunities for new relationships	Knowledge of local conditions and partners Knowledge of extra-local networks Knowledge of funding opportunities	Use existing resources Discover new opportunities which are consistent with existing objectives and priorities
The promoter of projects	Developing relationships Combining resources	Expertise Legitimacy Trust Social capital Local knowledge Staff working time	Social capital and voluntary labour provided by communities
Securing the future	Maintaining networks and relationships	Knowledge (local and extra-local) Legitimacy Long-term thinking The positive outcome of a SI process	Build on an institutionalized success story

Strong local communities may make successful SI processes without municipalities. Even in these cases, municipalities can reinforce and broaden the SI processes.

Table 5 displays how the resources used by the municipalities in these diverse roles is mostly about different kinds of knowledge, as well as trust and legitimacy. We also find that when the outcome of the SI fits within the locality, it may be an important source of legitimacy and thereby a resource for the municipality to use in securing the future of the results. Municipalities may act within existing objectives when the new activities do not compromise other municipal priorities. They may use local or extra-local resources that are already available. By joining the LEADER programme providing new resources, they may avoid zero-sum conflicts of limited, existing resources and thereby create plus-sum games. They can survey and find opportunities and secure the future of SI project results where the already established success justifies its involvement.

According to our findings, the resources provided and acquired for the SI process were both local and extra-local, which is in line with previous literature (Jungsberg et al. 2020; Tschumi and Mayer 2022). However, in our cases, the extra-local actors were mostly providers of resources, such as knowledge, and not directly involved as participants in the local networks for SI. This finding differs from that of Tschumi and Mayer (2022) and Bock (2016), who emphasize the participation of extra-local actors in the local SI network. We can conclude that there are varying forms of neo-endogenous development, where the degree of involvement of extra-local actors differs.

In this study, we used a narrative strategy of process research to find the different types of relations and roles of municipalities. The process approach proved to be useful in discovering and explicating how complex coordination mechanisms of municipalities and communities can be aligned. Municipal leaders who understand, explore, and exploit these opportunities of alignment can build more successful municipal strategies, because they can tap into resources mobilized by communities. Process analysis can create more awareness on the benefits of SI processes for municipal policies and strategies, for instance, how SIs may contribute to enjoyment of life such as heritage, leisure, culture, services, infrastructure, and development of natural resources.

6. Final comments

The cases investigated in this article were EU-funded LEADER projects. Participation from municipalities in these kinds of activities demands that they adapt the rules and methods of LEADER. The field of community involvement promoted by LEADER is densely populated with complimentary EU and OECD-based policy instruments promoting deliberative, community-based decision making, co-production and co-creation relevant for SI processes. These instruments often promote

creative methods of decision making in 'linear' ways, without considering interaction with the existing public administration, and the existing local communities.

Based on our cases we argue that public administration has a valuable and sometimes indispensable role to play in these kinds of SI processes. Municipalities, as the local public organizations, are especially fit, as they are already involved with local network relations and locally based knowledge. They should be actively involved.

Our findings contribute to the literature on SIs in rural contexts by addressing the role of municipalities in SI processes in a more nuanced way. We highlight the importance of alignment of the coordination mechanisms of municipalities and communities. Collaboration between municipalities and local communities on SIs should be encouraged. Municipalities benefit by learning from participating in SI networks, and communities benefit from their support. The SI network may accordingly respond to peripheralization (Pelc and Nel 2020) through triggering self-reinforcing development where new networks are emerging. This might lead to new trajectories (such as in the New Harbour and Birch and the Star cases). The specific roles of municipalities in SI processes, the resources required from them, and their capacity to unleash the potential of community-based involvement in peripheral and rural areas explained in this article need to be better understood. Further studies should explore the relation between municipalities and communities in regional planning, alignment of coordination mechanisms with a broader set of actors, and the potential for new path creation, where opportunity-driven SI processes are combined with institutional transformations regulating the practices of municipalities.

Note

1. Regional development agencies have arms-length degree of operational freedom: the direct political interference is limited; the sponsoring authority only interferes on a general level, such as allocation of resources and broad policy guidance (Danson, Halkier, and Damborg 1998, 18–19).

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Appendix

Process description of six Leader projects in ostrobothnia.

The Birch and the Star in Nykarleby (https://www.nykarleby.fi/topelius/home)

Time period: 2017–2018

Local community (initiation)	The project raised awareness of the heritage of the celebrated Finnish nineteenth century author Zacharias Topelius, writer of the children's tale The Birch and the Star and born in the small town of Nykarleby. The project was initiated by individuals in the local community, who brought the idea to the municipality. The municipality initiated a jubilee working group, which had a consultative role throughout the project. The municipality ended up as the owner of the project, largely due to the self-financing obligation. The municipality as a project owner means access to different kinds of expertise, such as accounting, and the arrangement gave stability and security.
Creation of network (promotion)	The project leader saw that the place branding activity must be based on the people and in cooperation with entrepreneurs, rather than be based in the municipal administration. The project activities accordingly targeted village communities and entrepreneurs directly. The project thereby was able to tap into a largely hidden local engagement in Topelius.
External collaborators (resources, knowledge)	The project leader had trust in the municipal officials but found that the progress is too slow if the project relies on the timetable of the officials and the bureaucratic structures. Municipal officials were mostly not available/busy. Still the municipality had a consultative role in including external actors, such as the Svenska litteratursällskapet, a society for the study of Finnish-Swedish culture, and the educational institute Novia, which contributed with expertise in place branding.
Self-reinforcing development (secure future)	The potential as a tourist destination was discovered. Shared values connected villages, entrepreneurs, and the municipality. Local associations have experienced the local administration to be more contact seeking after the project. The project and the jubilee year raised attention also externally.

Old Harbour in Jakobstad (https://www.gamla-hamn.fi)

Time period: 2017–2019

Local community (initiation)	The project raised visibility of the heritage of Jakobstad as a harbour and shipbuilding town. The old harbour area is today an area mostly for leisure, with a beach, traditional boathouses, and some small-scale shipbuilding. The initiative came from a local association, the Vega foundation, which is focused on preserving a schooner located in the area.

Creation of network (promotion)	The first focus of the project was to build the network between the local actors, including firms, civic organizations, municipality representatives, and citizens. The result was the foundation of a new association for the development of the old harbour area. The municipality participated actively in the arranged workshops. Municipal planning benefitted from the project. The project offered dialogue forums and other activities that the municipality could use for the further planning of the area. Old municipal plans to develop the area could now also be realized. The project established joint efforts where the municipality found local partners to work with.
External collaborators (resources, knowledge)	The Vega Foundation invited Centria University of Applied Sciences to plan the project and funding was received from the LEADER programme. The place-building activities of the project were largely driven by the association through the organization of events. This responded to a demand to develop both leisure activities and tourism. The project collaborated with designers, writers, and media producers to develop logos, visitor maps, and a common web page. This all found support in the municipal strategies and plans for the development of the area.
Self-reinforcing development (secure future)	The project was able to connect actors and spark engagement which gives possibilities for a continuous development of the area. The municipality had a central role in giving structure to these efforts. The leader at the Vega foundation is also a member of the municipal council and presented a bill to establish a working group for the area to continue the work the project initiated.

Oravais battlefield (http://www.oravais1808.fi)
Time period: Multiple LEADER projects 1995 – to date

Local community (initiation)	The historically significant battle between Sweden and Russia in Oravais in 1808, when Sweden and Finland ended up as two separate countries, was until the 1990s an unexploited site. The activity in the area started from an initiative taken by the municipality. At that time, in the 1990s, the place was an undeveloped camping area. The municipality wanted arrangements that could benefit from the historical significance of the place and thereby attract tourists. This led to the founding of the Oravais Historical Association, with the association Ostrobothnian Regiment as a cornerstone.
Creation of network (promotion)	The network revolves around sharing the story of the battle of 1808. Several consecutive LEADER projects, with the Historical association as the leading part, has step by step constructed a site with historical buildings and accessories, a museum, a restaurant serving historical dishes, large occasional dramatizations of the battle and other events and activities for visitors. The key actors are the two associations and a restaurant owner, and more entrepreneurs are getting involved in order to be able to offer more experiences and services.
External collaborators (resources, knowledge)	The Historical association has made use of knowledge from local, national, and international war history communities. To develop historical menus, the association reached out to the University of Applied Sciences in Vaasa where chefs are trained. A student at the university later became entrepreneur, starting the restaurant at the site.
Self-reinforcing development (secure future)	The activities have created a network of actors which continue to develop the site. Still, the association is dependent on funding for project activities. The association receives small annual grants from the municipality. The municipality has also aided the arrangement of marketing efforts and other consulting. The project leader suggests that municipal mergers have weakened the municipal interest for the development of the area.

The Red Gold Region (https://www.dynamonarpes.fi/sv/en-smakstart-röda-guldets-region)
Time period: 2016–2018

Local community (initiation)	The town of Närpes is famous for its greenhouse industry, which supplies Finland with the vast majority of tomatoes consumed. The project aimed at creating a gastronomical region on this basis, where this largely Fordist industry could evolve to develop new products and services. The idea originated from the local development agency, owned by the municipality, and involved restaurants, local small scale food processing firms and local communities.
Creation of network (promotion)	The project developed a concept called 'lunch weeks' together with the restaurants, where the new brand was promoted. The project also arranged workshops with local communities to explore local resources, promote the brand and find possible actors to develop the brand further with. However, the project was not able to establish a network connecting different actors, and the greenhouse industry was not involved directly.
External collaborators (resources, knowledge)	The project did not attempt connections to external knowledge sources such as advanced knowledge-based food production, which could have helped in establishing connections also to the greenhouse industry.
Self-reinforcing development (secure future)	The project experienced recurring replacements of project leaders, which fragmented the efforts. After the project, the business development centre engaged producers to jointly construct a small green house for display on the centre square of the town. In essence, the project did not succeed in establishing the new brand in the greenhouse industry and other actors in the region.

Malax ice rink (http://www.targahallen.fi)

Time period: 2015–2016

Local community (initiation)	In the rural municipality of Malax, the locals have wanted an indoor ice rink for decades. At one point, a few years before the start of the project, the issue was discussed in the municipal council but was voted down. Afterwards, a group of people with connections to the local ice hockey club started to investigate the possibilities for constructing the ice hockey arena with private resources. A joint-stock company was formed, and a fund-raising effort directed to locals was conducted. The municipality had no part in the effort, except backing a bank loan for half the construction cost.
Creation of network (promotion)	The ice hockey arena project tapped into a large local and sub-regional demand for such activities. The engagement started from the hockey club, and through the fund-raising effort, then by an extensive effort of voluntary workers in the construction of the arena. The involvement grew within the community and also to neighbouring communities. 1130 private donors and thousands of voluntary working hours are evidence of strong local engagement. The hockey club enlarged its number of members from dozens to several hundreds.
External collaborators (knowledge resources)	The project received state funding (The Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland, ARA), and separate funding for dressing rooms from the LEADER programme. The hockey arena has attracted engagement of a wider regional and even national hockey community. External hockey clubs purchases practice time and regional tournaments are arranged there.
Self-reinforcing development (secure future)	The large local and regional interest secures the maintenance and continuous development of the arena. The arena is built in the vicinity of other sport facilities, which increases the general attraction of the area. Maintenance costs are covered by incomes for purchased ice time and sponsors. The municipality does not provide any funding for continuing costs but has signed a 10-year deal to purchase ice time for the public and school pupils.

Minnovation https://www.novia.fi/forskning/alla-projekt-pa-novia/konst-kultur-och-entreprenorskap/minnovation-lab

Time period: 2016–2018

Local community (initiation)	The idea of the project was to make use of the creativity of children to solve problems and come up with ideas. The idea originated from Novia University of Applied Sciences, who wrote a project plan with the aim of developing a model for allowing children to solve company problems. A 'lab' was setup at one of the elementary schools in the municipality of Jakobstad, where children would then be presented to the problems companies wanted help with. The project also addressed and benefitted from the new school curriculum presented nationally at this time, which included stimulating children's creativity and entrepreneurship skills.
Creation of network (promotion)	The project was run by Novia and teachers in Jakobstad. The project produced a model for idea generation and involved children through a cooperation with schools. Ten firms were engaged, for the most part found based on the project leaders' personal social networks, and accordingly, all firms except one was local. The municipality was only indirectly involved through the schools and the network did not involve for instance larger business communities or local communities.
External collaborators (knowledge resources)	The project experienced difficulties of finding real engagement in the companies, especially since they generally found it difficult to identify problems that the children could work with. The model instead found use in contributing to the Old Harbour project, by engaging children in the planning of the old harbour area.
Self-reinforcing loops (secure future)	The project suffered from several replacements of project leaders, both at Novia and at the schools. One of the project leaders saw negative consequences of this since many subprojects 'came to nothing'. The project was not able to establish the model as a tool for organizations in the region to use. Novia produced the model, but no strategy was made for its future use. The municipality had no further engagement than through the elementary schools.