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## **Networking and collaboration between tourism and agriculture: Food tourism experiences along the National Tourist Routes (NTR) of Norway**

### **Abstract**

Food and culinary routes have been embraced by many destinations (Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000). However, these routes often include narrow geographical areas. The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges and possibilities of networking and collaboration in a food tourism project in a larger geographic area, specifically the Taste of National Tourist Routes (TNTR) in Norway. Although contacts among business operators and participants have been established, different priorities and dissatisfaction among participants suggest that building relationships and sharing knowledge as part of networking and collaboration is difficult. A lack of willingness, involvement and trust are critical factors that affect the success of a well-intentioned network-based food tourism project. Additionally, internal conflicts between government ministries and agencies may also impede the success of a project of this scale. Nevertheless, the outcomes are not solely negative, as the establishment of initial contacts may eventually lead to formal collaborative opportunities and food tourism developments in the future.

**Keywords:** Food routes, Tourism, Agriculture, Collaboration and network, Policies, Norway

### **Introduction**

Although food has been considered to be a core element of the tourism product (Jenkins, 1999; Reynolds, 1994), it is only in recent years that governments, researchers and industry practitioners alike have exhibited a keen interest in the important association between food and tourism. For tourists, food is perceived as one of the essential elements of the tourism experience (Hall, Sharples, & Michael, 2003). Meanwhile, for destinations and regions, local and regional food is recognised and considered as a great contributor to growth and development in general (du Rand & Heath, 2006). However, despite such interests, there is still a paucity of food tourism studies. From the supplier's side, little knowledge of means to create unique food experiences in a networked and collaborative project perspective involving various industry operators as well as government agencies exists. Previous food tourism studies also tended to limit their findings to one local region.

Additionally, many current food tourism initiatives are project-based, seeking to establish networks and collaboration among relevant actors. Based on a research methodology that

consists of both quantitative and qualitative research designs, the purpose of this study is to identify the challenges and possibilities of networking and collaboration in a food tourism project involving different types of actors in a larger geographical area. Food routes that stretch over a wider geographical scale would arguably be more complicated by the need to include a vast number of actors across sectors and communities to achieve desired outcomes. However, few existing studies have investigated the collaborative aspects of such routes. An understanding of these critical factors may provide valuable knowledge that can contribute to the success of food tourism projects. It should thus be of interest to researchers, producers and politicians to understand how networks in such a project could contribute to raising the food awareness and quality that is vital for the agricultural and food industry.

In Norway, 18 tourist routes have gained the status of National Tourism Routes (NTR). It was believed that including the dimension of food could increase visitors' interest in the NTR. As a result, the pilot project, Taste of National Tourist Routes (TNTR), was initiated with an emphasis on food quality and experiences. Additionally, the TNTR project also aimed to include actors and operators in the industries of tourism, agriculture and food. While previous efforts on food tourism seemed to be geographically narrow, concentrating on one single region, the Norwegian NTR encompasses a vast geographical area which includes several regions and counties. As all of the selected routes stretch beyond one geographical area, such focus would naturally create some networking and collaboration challenges and possibilities. Hence, it serves as a suitable case for the purpose of this study. Its findings may also be useful for similar food tourism projects in the future.

## **Theoretical Considerations**

### *Food tourism and culinary routes*

Numerous studies have devoted their attention to understanding the meaning of food as a fundamental part of the overall tourism product. Although cuisines and food habits were not developed merely to satisfy the needs of tourists (Thomson & Cooper, 1994), it is evident that food with high qualities of taste and esthetical appeal would result in the improvement of tourism products (McKercher, Okumus, & Okumus, 2008). From a visitor's perspective, food may contribute to unique experiences. Hall et al. (2003) define food tourism as a desire to experience a particular type of food (including beverages), dishes or produce of a specific region or destination. Food allows destinations to differentiate themselves and to broaden their market bases (Lane, 2009; McKercher et al., 2008). However, it is also an important

vehicle for regional development by strengthening local produce (Everett & Slocum, 2013). Additionally, Hall et al. (2003) identify food tourism as part of the local culture and history, an element of regional tourism promotion which is important for destination competitiveness as well as a vital component of local agricultural development. Thus, food tourism contributes to aspects of economic output such as sustainable destination development in terms of cultural identity and local production (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Everett & Slocum, 2013; Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Telfer & Hashimoto, 2013).

Despite a high level of interest, many existing food tourism studies rarely extend their focus beyond one region or destination. An exception is food and tourism policies studies, which appear to adopt a national approach (such as Everett & Slocum, 2013; Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000). Similarly, regarding wine tourism studies, many seem to concentrate on specific routes such as wine routes (Bruwer, 2003; Telfer, 2001a, 2001b). Evidently, the development of both food and wine routes has become popular due to the recognition of food experiences. Nevertheless, in Europe, there are still few major routes that are based on food except for the Routes of Olive Tree, which stretches over 18 countries (OECD, 2012). In the UK, there are food routes that focus on one island (The Isla of Arran Taste Trail) and others that cover the region of South West England, such as the Taste of the West Food Trails (Boyne, Hall, & Williams, 2003). Additionally, various types of food routes can be found in Austria (Meyer-Czech, 2003, 2005).

The mutual benefits that tourism contributes to these industries suggest that government agencies and industry practitioners in the relevant industries must work together. However, this collaboration may be difficult to achieve in reality due to differing interests. In many cases, local agricultural development and economic viability are the main concerns, while food tourism is advocated by agricultural policies because food tourism strategies can help the agriculture industry to combat some of their main problems with economic instability (Hall et al., 2003; Telfer & Hashimoto, 2013). A recent initiative involving the agri-food sector in Austria, the EAFRD (European Network for Rural Development), funded a project to encourage the modernisation of the European agri-food sector. The aim was to draw consumer and local farms closer by using technologies such as smartphone apps (Euromontana, 2014). This type of initiative is important for food tourism development, although the main objective was not specifically tourism-focused. The primary interest of agriculture and food industries in food tourism is the contribution to an increased awareness

of food production, food quality and standards (Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000). Hence, conflicting interests logically occur due to the various priorities and agendas.

### *Network and collaboration from a project perspective*

According to Winter, Smith, Morris, and Cicmil (2006), the most important organisational development in recent years has been the rise of network-based projects across different sectors. As a result, effective project management processes are now widely adopted as a means for collaboration to develop new products, improve existing performances and as a strategic approach to business management (Munns & Bjeirmi, 1996; Winter et al., 2006). While literature discusses project management concerning projects within an organisation, changes in the global economy suggest that projects across, within and between sectors and industries are becoming increasingly important.

With the rise of project collaborations, there is also the need to understand the means to manage a project effectively to achieve the desired outcomes. For instance, Ballard and Howell (2003), argue that a project must be supplied with materials, information and resources for the production system to design and produce a product. Projects may fail due to various reasons, including lack of commitment and support, the wrong person as project manager, internal conflict between project members, lack of technique, inadequate resources and unrealistic goals (Avots, 1969; Munns & Bjeirmi, 1996). Similarly, Atkinson, Crawford, and Ward (2006) also discuss the issue of uncertainty in terms of project parties and team members regarding project estimates and uncertainties in the project life cycle. Thus, projects, which involve many organisations as well as the private and public sectors, may experience even more challenges. Generally, government and the public sector are important stakeholders in projects, especially when the project is initiated and funded by the public sector (PMI, 2013). Currently, there is still little systematic research on the internal processes and external impacts of the various types of collaboration programs that exist within a project, particularly a food tourism project. Information about projects is also often restricted to the practitioners, where possible challenges or conflicts are largely understated to present a project in the best possible light (Bramwell & Lane, 2000).

In addition to the general challenges of project management, successful projects of large scale would also require networking across sectors and communities. A network can be defined as “a set of nodes and the set of ties representing some relationship, or lack of relationship, between the nodes” (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004, p. 795). Similarly, Knoke and

Kuklinski (1983, p. 12) define networks as “a specific type of relation linking a set of persons, objects or events.” The existence of a connection or relationship is, therefore, the key here. Networking and collaboration in a project can bring together the knowledge, expertise, capital and other resources from various operators in several sectors (Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1993). The importance of knowledge-sharing and innovation is also widely discussed in network studies of some particular sectors (Ness, Aarstad, Haugland, & Grønseth, 2014; Olsen, Elvekrok, & Nilsen, 2012; Sørensen, 2007) as well as other more general studies of networks (Newell, 2009). Thus, a network is also regarded as imperative for innovation and learning, particularly in the inter-organisational context (Newell & Swan, 2000; Sørensen, 2007) as well as in destination development (Cooper, 2008). As projects, successful networks are dependent on many factors, including the attitude of the participants and the willingness to learn from, share with and trust the participants (Newell & Swan, 2000; Olsen et al., 2012).

Despite numerous studies on the importance of networks for SMEs, which comprise a majority of tourism and food businesses in rural areas, there is limited knowledge regarding the success factors for such networks (Olsen et al., 2012). It is also often unlikely for tourism operators and SMEs in particular to initiate networks and collaboration possibilities on their own (Kelliher & Reinl, 2011; Morrison & Teixeira, 2004) and tourism operators are not always willing to collaborate with other sectors (Mei, Arcodia, & Ruhanen, 2013). Furthermore, Mei et al. (2013) emphasise that to create innovative tourism products and experiences, collaboration with industries other than tourism is vital. Close collaboration between tourism and agriculture businesses and practitioners, therefore, provides fruitful opportunities for food tourism development and innovation. While networking may be challenging in the tourism sector in general, networking across sectors such as tourism and food may be even more challenging. For instance, knowledge from existing food tourism projects such as The Isla of Arran Taste Trail and the Taste of the West Food Trails (Boyne, Hall, & Williams, 2003) and food routes in Austria such have indicated that such trails are mainly driven by food products of the region rather than tourism products (Meyer-Czech, 2003, 2005). This characteristic also makes collaboration challenging, as agriculture and food industries were regarded by tourism operators as being prioritised more highly than tourism. Nevertheless, as networking and collaboration are arguably important for the development of both sectors, each should strive to find common ground to achieve mutual benefits.

### **Tastes of National Tourist Routes (TNTR)**

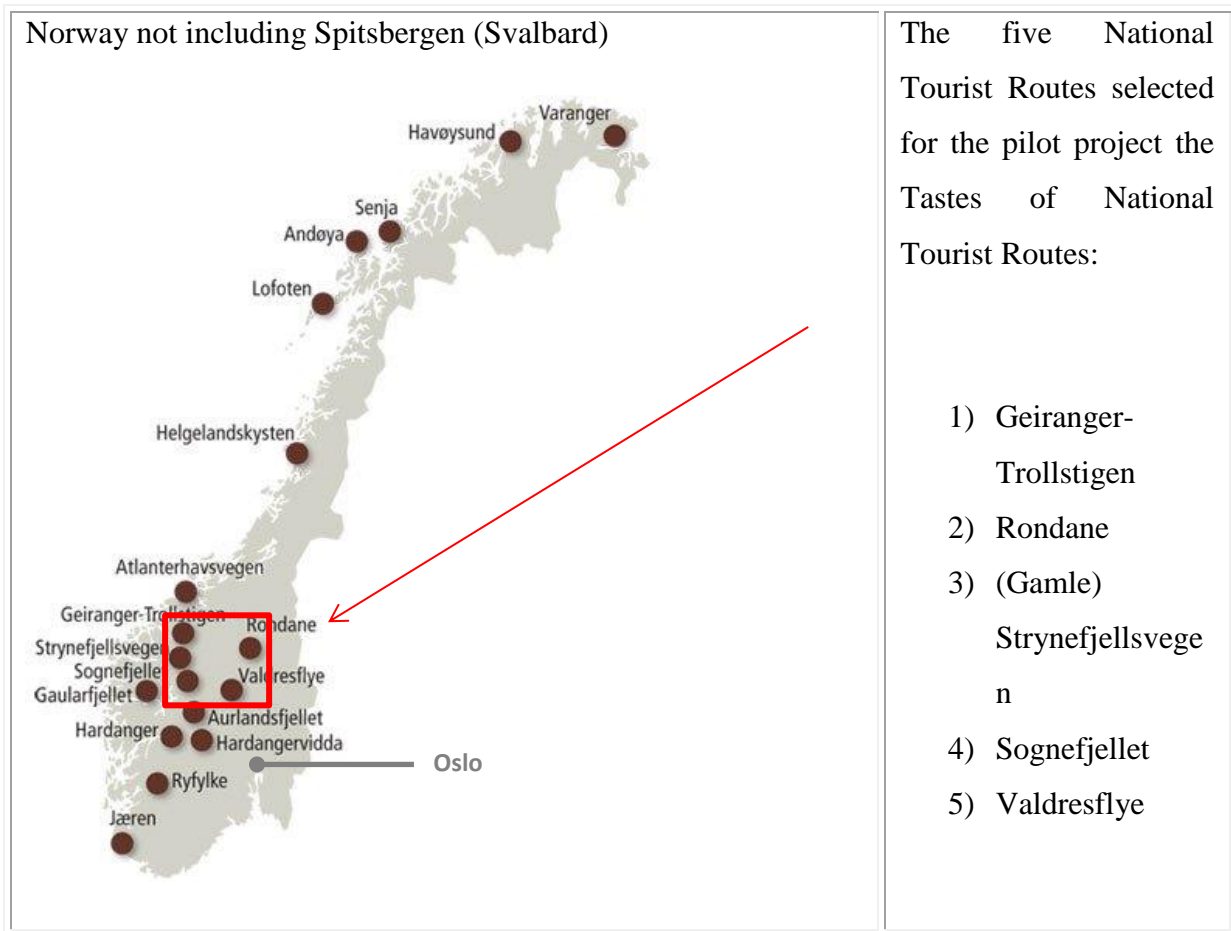
The TNTR was a pilot project based on the Norwegian Public Roads Administration's (NPRA) initiative toward developing the NTR. The project ran for three years, between 2010 and 2013. The purpose of the NTR was to enhance historical and cultural experiences for visitors to Norway. The NTR have been developing since the 1990s and by December 2013, there were 18 routes in total. The NPRA's ambition was to create tourist routes of international quality and appeal to both domestic and international visitors (NPRA, 2013). As part of this objective, it was recognised that the food quality and experiences along the 18 NTR needed significant improvement. As a response, the TNTR pilot project was initiated as a result of an agricultural policy called the "Jordbruksoppjøret", rather than a tourism policy. The TNTR project was to focus on the total experience of tourist routes as an attraction, with emphasis on strengthening and developing food and tourism initiatives in collaboration with all relevant producers and operators within the food and tourism value chain (MAF, 2010). As stated in the project mandate:

“National tourist roads shall be a special tourist attraction to increase Norway's attractiveness as a destination for road-travelling tourists from home and abroad. The overall aim is to strengthen the industry and settlement, especially in the districts” (MAF, 2010, p. 1).

“Tourists have high expectations to experience natural and cultural landscapes that are genuine and original. They expect that the qualities of services such as accommodation and meals reflect the Norwegian prices” (MAF, 2010, p. 1).

The pilot project concentrated on five selected NTR, consisting of 1) Geiranger-Trollstigen, 2) Rondane, 3) Gamle Strynefjellsvegen, 4) Sognefjellet and 5) Valdresflye (Figure 1). The purpose of the project was to develop a project model which would be transferable to the other 18 NTR in terms of planning, organisational structure and implementation.





**Figure 1. National Tourist Routes in Norway**

Source: Adapted from NPRA (2013)

The groups involved included the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (MAF) and the Ministry of Transport and Communications (MTC) with the NPRA. The Norwegian tourism industry itself is managed by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries (MTIF) and is operationalised and marketed by Innovation Norway (IN). The MTIF, however, was not directly involved in the project.

### Methodology

The study uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods as research design in a three-stage approach to triangulate the data. Triangulation refers to using more than one method or technique to gather data on the premises so that triangulation may give additional information to researchers. It is also useful for studying the same topic from different angles (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002; Myers, 2009). Patton (1990) highlights that the strategy of triangulation provides advantages in data analysis, as well because it allows researchers to

check the consistency and validity of findings generated by different data collection methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges and possibilities of networks and collaboration in a food tourism project involving different types of actors in a larger geographical area. The five selected NTR in Norway in the TNTR are a suitable case for this study, as this project is not limited to a geographical area and its ambition is to include both tourism and food producers in the entire value chain. Furthermore, a case study approach is appropriate for this study, as case studies have the ability to provide empirical evidence to convince others of the applicability of a particular proposition (Myers, 2009). This study focuses on the supply-side. Thus, it does not include a demand-side study of visitors and their perceptions.

Unfortunately, no definite overview of the number and type of businesses located in or adjacent to the five NTRs exists. The research team has therefore approached businesses and actors that have been involved with or in contact with the TNTR. The outcomes, challenges and possibilities are obtained from the participating actors within the five selected NTR as well as key government officials and representatives from trade associations. Both secondary and primary data were collected. While both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used in research design, the low number of usable responses ( $n=76$ ) to the survey cannot be used for any statistical generalisation. Rather, it can only provide information for exploration.

#### *Document analysis*

The research and data collection methods consist of document analysis, surveys and in-depth interviews. The first stage includes document analysis, consisting of all relevant documents associated with the TNTR project. These include project descriptions and reports, all promotional materials, action plans, reports and summaries from various meetings. The document analysis formed the basis of survey questions.

#### *Survey*

In stage two, potential respondents were identified based on their relevance to the TNTR project. These respondents included directly involved business operators, as well as other actors who took part in the production of food, food experiences and/or sales and distribution of food and food experiences along the five routes. The contact details of these relevant

respondents were obtained with the assistance of the TNTR project manager. The main point of contact was email and the survey questionnaire was completed online using the Opinio survey software programme. To increase the response rate, several follow-up emails were sent as reminders.

In total, 200 potential respondents were contacted, resulting in 87 responses to the questionnaire, representing a 44% response rate. Six responses were regarded as irrelevant due to their geographic location outside the five NTR and nine responses were incomplete. Therefore, 72 responses were included in the analysis. The data were analysed by using SPSS. Ten different business categories were identified in the analysis. However, this format was not regarded as suitable for further processing and analysis. Thus, to simplify the analysis, the various types of businesses and operators were grouped into five categories. An overview of the types of businesses and their assigned categories is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Types of businesses and their assigned categories**

Type of business	Category
Hotels, B&Bs	Accommodation and hospitality
Camping, cabin	Accommodation and hospitality
Farm	Farm
Food producer	Food producer
Event company	Other industries
Shops	Other industries
Café, eateries, restaurants	Accommodation and hospitality
Museums	Other industries
Farms with activities	Farming and other industries
DMOs	Other industries
Other	Other industries

The types of respondents and their businesses include the five categories of accommodation and hospitality (44), farming and other industries (7), food producers (4), farming only (3) and other industries (14). The survey consists of basic questions regarding the type of business, job position as well as to which NTR they belonged. Regarding their participation in the project, questions were sought to gain insights into their perceptions and opinions of the project outcomes. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the project to their businesses, the activities that they have participated in, the food quality and experiences and

the effects in terms of economic output. There were also various questions concerning the project organisation. The survey also requested information regarding the establishment of collaborations and partnerships among the participating business operators as well as with government agencies. The responses to these questions were of particular interest.

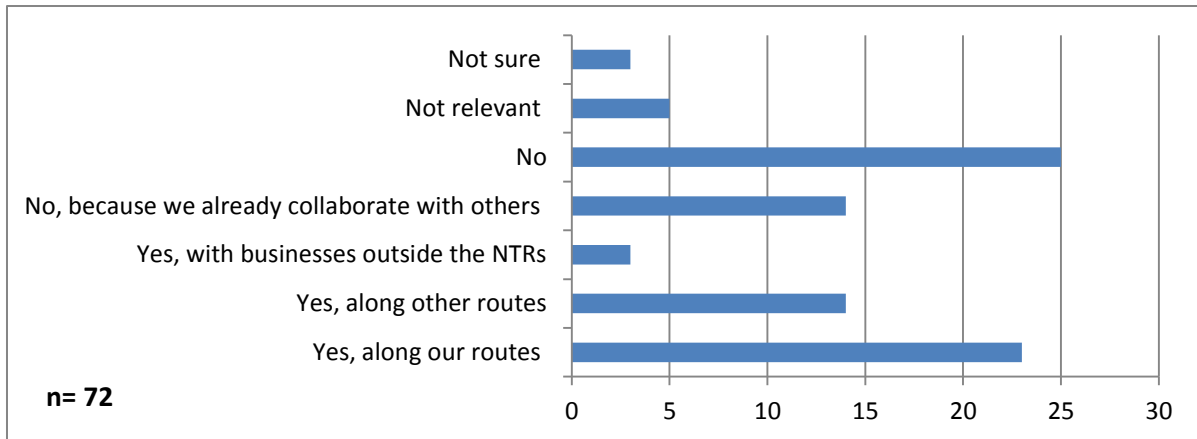
#### *In-depth interviews*

A final stage included in-depth interviews with selected key respondents to explore the quantitative findings in stage two. Interview guides were developed based on topics and themes that needed to be explored further. These included the organisation of the project as well as the networking and collaboration aspects. The questions were open-ended to address the issues as noted above. Respondents were selected based on their geographic locations and the types of business or operation. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with the TNTR project leader, key government officials and all members of the regional steering group involved with the project. In total, ten key respondents were interviewed. Both document analyses and in-depth interviews were subject to content analysis when emerging themes and topics developed.

## **Results and Discussion**

#### *Network and collaboration*

The formation of networks and collaborations as a result of the TNTR was one of the primary interests. A frequency report, illustrated in absolute numbers (figure 2), indicates that 14 respondents stated they already had some collaboration established regardless of TNTR. A majority of 25 respondents did not believe that collaboration had increased as a result. Twenty-three respondents reported that it has in fact increased, but only along their relevant NTR.



**Figure 2. Has TNTR increased collaboration opportunities?**

A majority of tourism operators and business owners emphasise that “We definitely know other businesses better now. We have established contact and hope that it will be something more in the future” and “You know who people are and it has been easier to pick up the phone and talk to each other for example”. Another respondent also insists that “We are seven businesses that have started another project to strengthen the collaboration”. The results therefore indicate that initial contacts may have been formed, even though they cannot be called a formal network to date. Olsen et al. (2012) discuss some of the uncontrollable success factors in networks, such as team spirit, involvement, internal anchoring and willingness to share knowledge. While such factors are harder to measure, the results indicate that some respondents were eager to make the initial contact, suggesting that many were willing to collaborate and to share experiences and knowledge. This willingness also serves as an essential foundation for building formal networks in the future.

The involvement of both tourism and agricultural industries and producers was essential to create new food experiences along the NTR. The importance of collaboration is supported by many studies that focus on collaborative product development (Anderson & Law, 2012; Hall & Mitchell, 2005; Howat, Brown, & March, 2004). Nevertheless, the results indicated that in reality, the project became too concentrated on tourism and tourism experiences. This direction led to dissatisfaction among many non-tourism operators and participants such as food producers. Additionally, many of the challenges were attributed to the sizes of operators and businesses involved in the TNTR. Collaboration among SME in the same industry is fundamentally difficult due to their limited resources, time and workforce (Hwang & Lockwood, 2006). Hence, collaboration across various industries with different agendas and business cultures, such as in the TNTR, is even more challenging. In the TNTR, small scale food producers and tourism operators found it difficult to collaborate. For instance, “I don’t

think as a primary food producer, this project has been relevant to me. I don't feel like I have gotten any [collaboration] out of it". Similarly,

"No, it has nothing to do with me. Only restaurants. Little focused on [food] producers. Must consider that we [the food producers] are also there. It's hard to join the discussions, the gatherings, we should have been taken in a little more in the project, but we were not. As small producers, we cannot afford to travel around" (Food producer).

Similar challenges were also identified in other food tourism initiatives, such as the project "A Taste of Wales", although there was a bias toward food producers, rather than tourism operators (Jones & Jenkins, 2002). The results also coincide with the literature because although the mutual benefits of tourism and agriculture were widely discussed, the relationship between tourism and agriculture is often fractious (Everett & Slocum, 2013). Meyer-Czech (2003, 2005) argues that the collaborative challenges between tourism, agriculture and even food producers have always existed. In the case of TNTR, the above quote indicated that it was the food producers that felt left out, whereas tourism operators have shown a more positive attitude towards the project:

"In summary, very positive and good measures. Many good talks, awesome magazine. Good database. Should proceed further!" (Tourism operator)

As a majority of businesses and operators involved in the project were SMEs, not all were willing to or could participate as much. This restriction was also one of the weaknesses of the TNTR, although it was not limited to such projects (Meyer-Czech, 2003). Dredge (2006) argues that there should be an understanding of the power differentials between operators and the different opportunities that actors have to participate. In this sense, not all actors and operators will have the opportunity to participate equally depending on their size, location and other circumstances. Contributions and benefits can vary among the actors involved, whereas some operators may be classified as "free riders" (Lui & Ngo, 2005; Wincent, 2008). The findings coincide with the notion that businesses that did not participate as much also received less positive results in return, leading to a more negative attitude towards the TNTR. Thus, balancing the demands, needs, and expectations of various stakeholders and partners is critical to the success of a project (PMI, 2013). Such balance was evidently not achieved in the current project.

Furthermore, dissatisfaction and the negative attitudes of participants would likely lead to trust issues and affect network formation. It can be argued that trust was not established among all of the participants in the TNTR. This was due to the general dissatisfaction among local food producers, as they felt they were excluded in the project:

“If there is any interest in local food, the project should have considered including us local producers more! Add events and gatherings that are possible for us to attend and that we can get something out of it”. (Food producer)

The attitudes of participants can play a greater role than their expertise in a network group (Sherer, 2003). Similarly, Newell and Swan (2000) highlight the importance of trust in holding participants together in a network. Thus, trust among participants can also be considered as an important factor to advance developing food tourism initiatives beyond the TNTR project. While trust may have been established among tourism operators, the results indicate that cross-sectional collaboration and network formation is largely absent in TNTR.

### *Organisational challenges*

In addition to network and collaboration challenges, the results of this project may also be affected by the internal organisation (Avots, 1969). The organisation of the TNTR was challenging, particularly at the beginning. At the national level, a steering group representing the MAF, farmer associations, IN and the MTC with the NPRA led the project. The MTIF, which is considered to be the “tourism ministry” in Norway, was not involved. This decision was odd, but not surprising since the project was initiated as an agricultural policy. The regional steering group consisted of the Oppland County Governor (leader of the group), IN’s representative from the regional office, farmer organisations, one representative from a municipality and representatives from trade associations such as NHO (Norwegian Hospitality Association) and Hanen - a trade association for farm tourism, food and fishery. The project leader of the TNTR was directly responsible to the regional group. The regional group reported to the national group and used the national group as advisors when needed. Interviews with representatives from both levels revealed some discrepancies. As indicated by one respondent:

"The project was good fundamentally, good and important, but the biggest problem was that the MAF did not clarify the project with other ministries, MTC, MTF, NPRA,

etc. in advance. There were many institutional conflicts between the project and the NPRA and between some people. Many cultural differences and personal interests. I think it should have been clarified in advance. The idea was good, but because much was not clarified in advance, a lot of time was used, especially in the beginning, which was wasted. Some of those who were involved also exceed their role as stately public officials" (A member of the regional steering group).

In any large project, internal challenges will exist. Conflicting interests were also evident in the TNTR. At the regional level, the NPRA was initially a part of the project at the beginning. However, this group left and was further represented by the NHO. The official reasons were that they became critical of the project because it put too much emphasis on tourism and too little on the needs of the farmer, which was in conflict with the goals of agricultural policy. Such findings were also supported by the in-depth interviews, as many realised that too many resources were used for marketing-related activities. As a result, the TNTR was dissociated from the NTR, leading to the channelling of additional resources to the management and organisation of the TNTR. This conflict, which resulted in minimal cooperation between the TNTR and the NPRA, complicated project organisation and implementation. The findings coincide with Mason (2010) and Meyer-Czech (2003), who argue that involving public administrators and key politicians is vital to the development of food routes projects, although this is not as easily achieved in practice.

It is well-documented that internal disagreements within various government departments and organisations impact the effectiveness of their roles as supporters and facilitators (Dallen, 1998). As noted,

"NPRAs have to figure out what they want in their major project. They were very unclear about what they wanted. Look at the organisation, three levels in a project carried out locally. It was very cumbersome. Tourism was also a major part; the MITF should have been involved. I'm unsure if it was MAF and the 'Jordbruksavtalen' (agricultural settlement) that should be financing such projects" (Member in the regional steering group).

Additionally, the non-involvement of the "tourism ministry" MTIF also proved to be problematic. These issues have undisputedly had an impact on project organisation. The ambiguous roles between the national and the regional steering groups also led to some organisational challenges. Meyer-Czech (2003) state that coordination of food trails is vital



but difficult to establish due to the many public and private interests. For these reasons, many food routes remain at the development stage and when the funding is gone after a given period, no further development occurs (Meyer-Czech, 2003). This limitation is also one of the common failures of a project, as it is often restricted to a limited period. Furthermore, previous network studies also indicate that successful networking across various industries and communities, such as private and public, tourism and food, would depend on the proper management of networks and the structure of organised meetings (Olsen et al., 2012). The internal conflicts regarding government involvement, which led to some significant management challenges, certainly affected the success of the project.

Despite the result, the involvement of the public sector is inevitable, particularly in terms of projects of larger scale. Although it is primarily the industry operators' and actors' responsibilities to maintain and foster partnerships to thrive, many forms of networking and collaboration are arguably difficult to establish if government support and stimulus are not present (Mei et al., 2013).

#### *Food awareness, quality and experience*

Although the principal purpose of this study is the network and collaboration perspective, it can be assumed that most food tourism projects have the ambition to enhance the food tourism experience while increasing food quality and awareness. Hence, it is also important to draw some lessons from the current case. Regarding the TNTR and its effect on businesses and operators, a majority of both hospitality operators (hotels and restaurants) and many non-hospitality operators (including food producers) believed that it was very positive or somewhat positive. As illustrated in Table 2, the remainder felt that the project had no effect and that it was still too early to tell. Very few considered it to have had an adverse impact on their businesses. Many participants nevertheless anticipated a very positive impact of the TNTR in the upcoming three years.

**Table 2. Impact of TNTR on individual businesses and operators (%)**

		Very positive	Somewhat positive	None	Somewhat negative	Too early to know	N
Impacts to date	Hospitality operators	21	46	25	2	6	52
	Non-Hospitality	14	43	29	7	7	14
	All	20	45	26	3	6	66

Expected impacts for the upcoming 3 years	Hospitality operators	43	33	10	0	14	49
	Non-Hospitality	46	15	15	8	15	13
	All	44	29	11	2	15	62

Regarding food tourism experiences, a majority of tourism and hospitality operators believed that as a result of TNTR, their businesses indeed had focused more on food experiences, whereas some food producers believe the opposite. This discrepancy is not surprising, as food producers would primarily be concerned with economic output than overall visitor experiences (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Telfer & Hashimoto, 2013).

To stimulate business development and awareness both internally and externally, several workshops, conferences, and hands-on contacts between tourism and food producers and experienced chefs were organised. Additionally, significant resources were directed toward a magazine, which was launched in several languages. The aim of these activities was to raise the level of awareness regarding the quality of both the food and the food experiences:

“We have become more visible through the internet and magazines. Think that emphasis of it [magazine] is very important, the best thing that has happened, gets incredible wide praise! Norway’s best guidebook, much better maps” (Tourism operator).

The rationale was that focus on tourism and marketing through the magazine would raise the overall involvement and commitment of the operators, including the producers. Many were satisfied with this effort and the proactive method of organising the project. Nevertheless, one of the criticisms, raised by both tourism and food producers, was there were too many marketing-focused activities, including the magazines.

“I think that it’s good, but maybe a little too much resource has been used on it. It costs a bit. English and Norwegian was OK, maybe the most important. However, maybe English could be combined with the Norwegian version instead of a separate version. Anyhow, I believe that both Swedish and Japanese versions were wasted. Swedes read Norwegian and English. Maybe it was just one business that wanted Japanese. Another criticism is that it was a bit random who was profiled, think the contact before the magazine was created was random, [I am] somewhat dissatisfied with this” (Farmer).

"Yes it was very much focused on it [magazine], the emphasis can of course be discussed. It was a positive impression. However, I think that we needed a Norwegian version only, it was the one that meant the most to us then" (Tourism operator).

Boyne, et al. (2003) discuss the problem associated with applying a marketing approach to food-related initiatives because limited work has been conducted in this area. As this study did not seek to explore visitor perceptions of the TNTR, it was unsure whether this marketing effort achieved the desired effects externally. It was also generally difficult to isolate the consequences of such a project (Briassoulis, 2000). Furthermore, the results demonstrated conflicting issues, as a tourism focus required a greater marketing approach, something for which food producers, for instance, did not see the value.

"I believe that Norway has become more profiled in regard to food, and that is important of course. I think, they have become much better at making good food at these hotels and restaurants. However, the local food has not improved at all; there is still very few local produce. I certainly haven't seen that the project has contributed to improving this" (Food producer).

This statement again illustrates the diverse interests and priorities among various types of food and tourism operators that lead to problems with food tourism projects, as discussed in the existing literature (Everett & Slocum, 2013; Jones & Jenkins, 2002; Meyer-Czech, 2003, 2005).

From the present study, several key lessons are drawn. To ensure ideal results, it is crucial to include operators in the entire value chain consisting of both small-scale producers and operators in both the tourism and agricultural industries. The extent to which the government manages to clarify its roles and funding between its several ministries and agencies will also have an impact on government-stimulated food tourism projects. It is assumed that if the government's roles and funding were clarified in advance, the organisation of the project would be much more efficient by eliminating or reducing internal disagreements and conflicts of interest. The marketing effort and external communication of its results and outcomes would have also been conveyed much more effectively with NRPA and IN's joint marketing activities. In this sense, the project could also perhaps have focused more on fostering networking and collaboration among all operators and participants in the value chain, rather than being left alone with the marketing efforts. Additionally, similar to other food tourism

projects, the different interests, willingness and attitudes of participating tourism operators and food operators were also a factor that affected the success of the project.

## **Conclusions**

The synergy between food and agriculture has surely captured the attention of practitioners, public sectors and researchers alike. Using TNTR as a case, this paper has identified a number of the critical factors that impede the success of these projects. It can be argued that networking and collaboration involving both food and tourism operators in the entire value chain are crucial to achieving success. However, networking and collaboration across various sectors are challenging, particularly in a food tourism project of such a wide geographical scale. Additionally, when some key participants display negative attitudes and dissatisfaction, the purpose for using a network to build relationships and for share knowledge is non-existent. If the operators and participants in a food tourism project merely wish to establish some contact with other operators and participants, then formal networks and collaborations as an outcome as well as the opportunities of these networks, such as innovation, cannot be expected. The relationship aspect of a network is vital and cannot be forced upon the participants, as trust must first exist. Additionally, in such a project, not all of the participants would be willing or would have the opportunity to participate equally.

Regardless, the outcomes are not solely negative, as the establishment of initial contact may eventually lead to formal collaborative possibilities and food tourism developments in the future beyond the current food tourism project. In addition to these uncontrollable factors, another important challenge is the organisation and structure of the project or network, including coordination between government agencies. Realistically, it would be impossible to satisfy everyone's needs and wants. However, if the goals and activities of the project were communicated and allocated in advance, then the involved operators and participants would be better prepared by knowing what they should expect before committing to the project. Furthermore, it must be considered that effects and results of the TNTR are difficult to isolate and measure. Other circumstances, such as increased food tourism initiatives in general and the general awareness by the public of food quality, for instance, may have all contributed to a keen interest in food tourism experiences.

This study has primarily investigated the supply-side. Future studies should also consider the demand-side and investigate tourists' point of view regarding this topic. Although the authors acknowledge that successful tourism routes would require a combination of many elements

(Anderson & Law, 2012), this study has limited its focus on the networks and collaborations, government involvement and organisational perspectives. Further studies may wish to investigate the overall product element and the management and communication aspects of food routes as well as the roles of food and tourism operators.

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