



UNIVERSITY OF  
EASTERN FINLAND

THE NORTH KARELIAN TOURISM ENTREPRENEURS' MOTIVATION, TRUST, AND  
COMMITMENT TOWARDS THE SERVICES OF VISIT KARELIA. A CASE STUDY.

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**Keywords:** Commitment, collaboration, coopetition, trust, b2b relationships, tourism network

### **Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to understand the possible obstacles for North Karelian tourism companies to decline cooperation with the regional tourism network as well as with the region's DMO, Visit Karelia. Research related to the topic was not conducted in recent years and therefore the study was reasonable to carry out. The study was conducted from the need of Visit Karelia, which was the commissioner of the study. The study used a qualitative approach and was carried out as an intrinsic case study, and the data was collected with semi-structured interviews. 16 interviews were conducted with Teams-meetings and the data analysis method for the study was thematic analysis. The informants were entrepreneurs, CEOs, and employees of North Karelian tourism companies. The findings indicate that the obstacles for not cooperating with Visit Karelia and with the regional network are partly the same as twenty years ago, but additional obstacles were also found, such as issues related to unsimilar values and quality of services. Lack of trust, communication, commitment, and personal chemistries were still considered as obstacles for collaboration. The companies don't see North Karelia as a tourism network, but instead the region is divided to smaller local networks. The region needs to have clear goals and strategy, include companies in the decision making, and also the companies should be more active and get contacted by Visit Karelia. Future research should be done in other regions and as a generalizable study.

## Tiivistelmä

Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli ymmärtää mahdollisia esteitä Pohjois-Karjalan matkailuyrityksille tehdä yhteistyötä Visit Karelian kanssa ja alueellisen matkailuverkoston toimijoiden kanssa. Vastaavaa tutkimusta ei ollut tehty nykyajan valossa ja siksi tutkimus oli aiheellinen. Tutkimus toteutettiin Visit Karelian toimesta, joka oli tutkimuksen toimeksiantaja. Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena, intensiivisenä tapaustutkimuksena ja aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla Teams-palaverissa. Haastatteluja kerättiin yhteensä 16 kappaletta, joihin osallistui Pohjois-Karjalan matkailuyrittäjiä, toimitusjohtajia, sekä työntekijöitä. Aineiston analyysimenetelmänä käytettiin temaattista analyysiä.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että yhteistyön esteet Visit Karelian ja alueellisen matkailuverkoston kanssa ovat osittain samoja kuin aiemmissa tutkimuksissa, mutta uusia esteitä esiintyi myös, kuten muun muassa näkökulmaerot arvoissa ja toimintatavoissa, sekä erot palveluiden ja tuotteiden laadussa. Yritykset eivät näe Pohjois-Karjalaa itsessään matkailuverkostona vaan osana isompia verkostoja sen jakautuessa samalla pienempiin paikallisiin verkostoihin. Alueella tarvitaan selkeitä tavoitteita ja strategia, johon sitoutua. Yrityksien on oltava enemmän mukana päätöksenteossa ja kaikki yritykset tulisi huomioida Visit Karelian toimesta, samalla yritysten ollessa itse aktiivisia. Vastaava tutkimus olisi hyvä toteuttaa muilla alueilla ja samoin yleistävä tutkimus olisi myös hyödyllistä toteuttaa.

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DMO                      Destination management organization

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the study

In the recent years, changes in leadership and rising interest in the role of governance has led to interest in social relations with governments, businesses, and societies. (Presenza & Cipollina 2010). Lots of studies show the important role of the destination marketing organization, as the DMO has in most cases, all of the responsibility of the success of the destination (Bieger, Beritelli, & Laesser 2009). The DMO is set to have the leading role in the direction of the destination, in order to achieve the goals of the destination to become the destination that it is wanted to be. (Konu & Tuohino 2014).

Marketing a destination requires a larger number of stakeholders who as a group provide the product as a whole for the destination. (Komppula 2000, Tuohino & Konu 2014, Chimirri 2020, Pinto & Kastenholtz 2011, 215). This happens while all of the stakeholders have different motivations and interests, objectives and strategies. (Chimirri 2020, Pinto & Kastenholtz 2011, 215). Due to this fact, the success of the destination is in the hands of the individual stakeholders who have to collaborate for the destination to become successful. (Komppula 2000, Bieger & et al. 2009). This is without an exception always a challenge for every destination, and therefore it has been researched a lot and will be in the future as well. (Pinto & Kastenholtz 2011, 215.)

Tourism destinations are the kind of units that involve several stakeholders within the ecosystem that have as many different motivations and goals as there are businesses. (Chimirri 2020, Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino 2017). They do have mutual goals nevertheless, and that is to make the destination that they are operating in more competitive, and to gain advantage on its competitors. Hence, according to Chim-Miki and Batista-Canino (2017) and Konu and Tuohino (2014) the destination should be considered as collective entrepreneurship and an integral product in itself in the customer's perspective. In most cases, the management is in the hands of an agency that focuses on bringing together the organizations; usually it's the destination management organization (DMO). (Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino 2017, 381, Konu & Tuohino 2014.)

How destination leadership is implemented nowadays, is a popular topic of research. (Kozak et al. 2014, Konu & Tuohino 2014, Zehrer, Raich, Siller & Tschdirerer 2014.). Institutional analysis, for instance, is a modern tool for interpreting processes and actions inside the co-operation between stakeholders. This co-operative behavior is labeled as dynamic process-oriented strategy, and for most of the time, it requires leadership to divide the resources and dynamics to achieve the goals of the destination. (Zehrer et al. 2014.) The need for leadership to market formal and informal cooperative behaviors can decrease networking with public and also private stakeholders. Several studies have been implemented, in order to study the factor of leadership and its importance on destination's competitiveness (Presenza et al. 2010, Bregoli, Hingley, Del Chiappa & Sodano 2015, 209.) The need for leadership in the times of economic changes is truly lacking, especially when the new companies emerge to the market. (Bregoli et al. 2015).

Leadership is a relevant issue in the field of tourism and destination development. In these days tourism destinations' continuous shaping could be identified as destination leadership, which is basically motivating, inspiring, and encouraging the stakeholders by setting goals and ways of acting for a long-term timescale. (Pechlaner, Zacher, Eckert & Petersik 2019, 153, Zehrer et al. 2014.) The DMO is the actor that has most of the responsibility in terms of leadership, but it is not only the DMO that does all the work. (Pechlaner et al. 2019). The DMO could have ambassadors that provide important extra enthusiasm and ideas to the table. These actors and such are also part of the leadership standpoint. (Pechlaner et al. 2019, 153, Milwood & Roehl 2018.) The destination itself can also have several ambassadors by different companies because the destination in general is looking to increase macro-level competitiveness and the DMO on the other hand, visitor experience. (Milwood & Roehl 2018).

The DMO has to be able to evaluate its relationships and try to understand the stakeholders, in order to have an insight to such questions like, what are the stakeholder's intentions and actions inside the network? How do they prefer having the services of the DMO? (Bieger et al. 2009, Konu & Tuohino 2014.) From the eyes of the stakeholder, the destination could be seen as an open system of interdependent and multiple stakeholders. The causes for such interdependence could be for example that many destinations suffer from the lack of income, in

order to conduct a budget that is eligible for developing a tourism marketing strategy that sends messages about themselves and at the same time gets the tourists to travel to their destination. Inside a networked community, the destinations are more fragile to surprising disasters and crises that can negatively impact on the reputation of destination including the companies. (d'Ángella & Go 2009.)

## 1.2 Purpose of the study and research gap

The purpose of this study is to increase understanding of companies' potential obstacles for collaborating in a regional tourism network and particularly with the DMO. The study is conducted in collaboration with Visit Karelia. Findings of this study will help Visit Karelia to enhance procedures on their actions regarding on how they would attract stakeholders to collaborate and on their strategies related to these issues.

The research questions that are trying to be solved are: 1. What would be obstacles for collaboration with Visit Karelia and with the regional network's stakeholders? 2. What would be obstacles for participating the network's collaborative actions? 3. How do the companies perceive their role in the regional network? 4. Why do they perceive their role in the network in the way they do 5. What would facilitate the North Karelian tourism companies to commit and collaborate with Visit Karelia and with the regional network?

The theoretical background focuses on the collaboration and commitment of tourism companies inside the network that they are part of. The purpose of the study, however, is not to find out and understand the reasons and phenomena on a general level, but from the Visit Karelia standpoint. Keywords that will be studied in the theoretical background are *trust, commitment, collaboration, cooperation, tourism network and commitment in b2b relationships*. Several researchers have studied these topics in the past and that information will be used in this study to understand the phenomena behind the research problem.

Studies from Komppula (2000) and Seitsonen (2019) have already done research on tourism collaboration and leadership in the region as well, and especially from the study of Komppula we can understand the complicated relationship between the stakeholders and DMO. The study from Seitsonen on the other hand addressed the lack of leadership in the region on a general level, and Visit Karelia turned out to be the main leader or it was assumed as such. The study from Komppula was a very important study for these questions, but the information is not as relevant probably as times have changed twenty years after. This study can update the latest information on the region's current situation in terms of what the stakeholders think and what the DMOs situation and status inside the region is.

### 1.3 Key concepts

**Commitment** means the will and motivation to maintain a relationship that is valuable. (Tapar, Dhaguide & Shameem 2017). Commitment of a company is a process where the company creates a bond between the network and its stakeholders. (Komppula ed. Flanagan & Ruddy 2000, 38).

**Collaboration** as well as similar terms such as networking and cooperation is a definition for joint effort and/or collective action. Networking includes communication and information exchange; cooperation is mostly for informal relationships for networking and a sum of measurements to achieve the desired goals. (Durugbo 2016, Komppula 2000, Krakover et al. 2007.)

**Coopetition** is the intrusion of competition inside a structure of cooperative action. With coopetition businesses are able to balance the risks that they may endure due to competition with the advantages gained from cooperation. (Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino 2017, 382, Chai et al. 2020, Ritala & Hurmelinna-Laukkanen 2009).

**Trust** is a basic element for a successful relationship in the marketing strategy. (Gil-Saura et al. 2009, 595). Trust lowers the risks and chances of damage in a relationship, which then allows a

much greater and tighter form of a relationship to endure. Inter-company relations are led by relational aspects like commitment standards that are based on trust. (Sousa & Alves 2019, 230, Graca & Barry 2019, 9-10.)

**B2b relationships** are related to multiple businesses that conduct an exchange of various resources in order to gain a competitive advantage and to be able to survive from the upcoming challenges with better success. (Graca & Barry 2019, Gil-Saura et al. 2009).

To define a **tourism network**, the common assumption is that they are patterns of relationships where relationships connect social aspects that, as one, have a particular constancy. Then, the patterns are these networks. In the field of tourism there is much more consistency with these patterns, such as with hotel owners and travel agencies. Networks allow the possibility for a smaller actor to be recognized and heard in general. (Bramwell 2006, 156, Komppula 2000, Johns et al. 2004, Baggio, Scott & Wang 2007.)

## 1.4 Situation in North Karelia

Tourism has a potential to rise to a next level in North Karelia as well. The service-capacity however is very low and clustered in terms of global tourism and in comparison to it. The region also is still highly too dependent on the Russian market. The number of registered overnight stays has been almost 500 000 every year. (Pohjois-Karjalan maakuntaliitto 2017.) Pohjois-Karjalan maakuntaliitto (2017) in their report for 2018 - 2021 state that to develop the region from a tourism standpoint, new resources and procedures should be implemented. Fortunately, however, the North Karelia's tourism development project for 2015-2017 was highly successful and allowed for the demand to expand into central Europe and Asia. Hence global markets are still growing and should be able to be exploited by the region. Following the guidelines of the development project and further enforcing the collaboration with Lakeland and Visit Finland should be continued. (Pohjois-Karjalan maakuntaliitto 2017.)

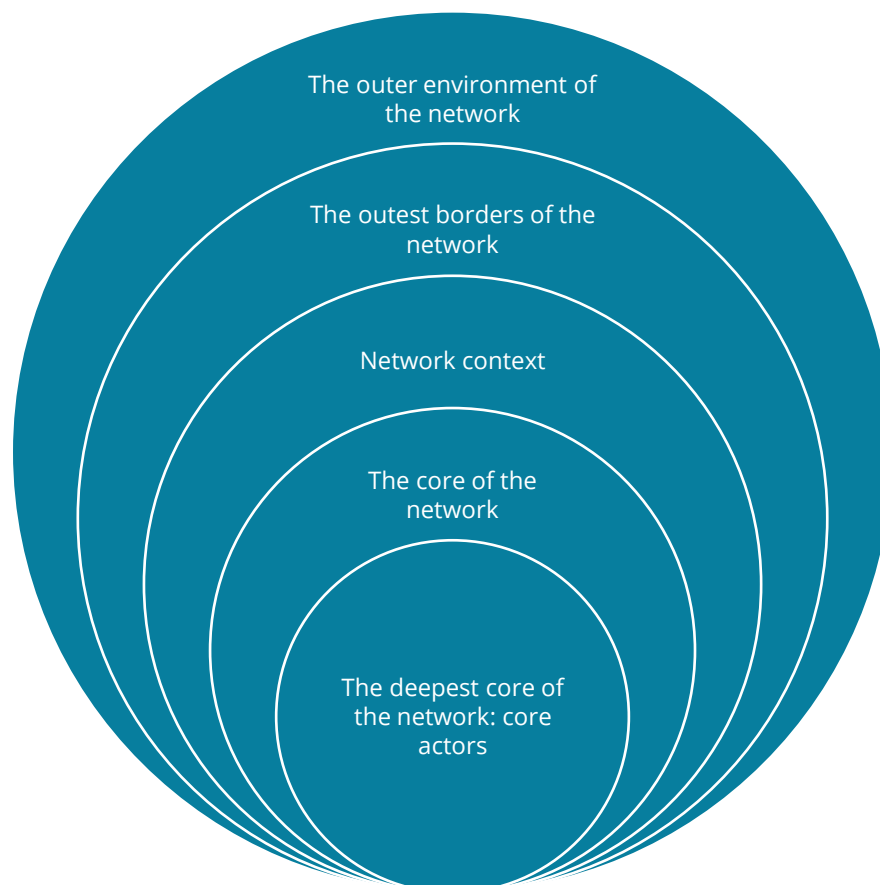
When it comes to the numbers of the region, North Karelia in 2018 had 50 accommodation entrepreneurs, 300 restaurant operators, 0 travel agencies, and 600 tourism employers in general. (Visit Finland 2021). According to Tilastokeskus (2021) in 2019 in the region there were 404 accommodation and restaurant operators, 48 travel agencies (booking operators), 40 culture and entertainment operators and 474 other service operators. (Tilastokeskus 2021). In 2019 the accommodation and restaurant business employed 1585 employees in North Karelia as well. Travel agencies employed 61 employees at the time. (Tilastokeskus 2021.) In 2020 there were 381 477 registered overnight stays by domestic travelers in North Karelia and 34 467 by foreign travelers. (Visit Finland 2021).

According to Pohjois-Karjalan maakuntaliitto (2017) the four development goals in the region's tourism business are: 1. Enforcing the concentrations of tourism and the international competitiveness and selection. 2. Strengthening the marketing and selling of tourism services. 3. Development of event tourism. 4. Development of nature and culture tourism. (Pohjois-Karjalan maakuntaliitto 2017.)

The beginning of North Karelian tourism can be considered to start in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Karelianists discovered the area of Koli and eventually built a cottage for visiting at the top of Koli. Koli started to become the main attraction in the region and the destination was developed throughout the years. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were still no roads headed at the top of Koli due to its difficult location and visitors were brought there by boat at first. In 1909 at the other side of the lake Pielinen, a rail track was built, and it enhanced the possibility of visiting enormously as well as the beginning of a route for ship traffic in 1914. Already in 1923 Koli was the most visited destination in Finland. In the 1930s the first proper road was finally built. (Metsähallitus N.d. & Pohjois-Karjalan Matkailu ry 2018.) During the 1940s and 1950s the tourism in the region was ceased but starting in the 1960s eventually the tourism started to rise again. Several setbacks were tackled during the way and finally in 1991 the Koli national park was opened. (Metsähallitus N.d.).

### 1.4.1. Situation in North Karelia currently

This study assumes that North Karelia is a tourism network, which is limited to the borders of the region and includes only the municipalities inside of it. Komppula (2000) displays a figure to showcase the dynamics and the structure of a network. **Core actors** inside **the deepest core** of the network make decisions to maintain, initiate, end, and increase relationships. **In the deepest core** the most crucial decisions are made. All the actors in the network are in **the network context** and between that and **the deepest core** is **the core of the network** where the key actors are located in. All the decisions that are made in **the deepest core** of the network affect everything and everyone when moving towards the outer dimensions. The dimensions mentioned in the study by Komppula (2000) are displayed in the following figure. (Komppula 2000, 50-51.)



**Figure 1.** The layered structure of a network. Törnroos 1997, 627 as cited in Komppula 2000, 51.

## 2 Collaboration and networks in tourism business

According to Chimirri (2020) collaboration provides a chance for conversation and negotiation. Hence, it is regarded as a positive possibility for tourism development like planning and conducting actions in the field, especially for the more challenging ones. However, it requires complex and diverse businesses being able to work together even though the motivations and interests may differ a lot. (Chimirri 2020.) To have collaboration there has to be a relationship that is based on consistent transactional procedures. This allows long-term bonds to exist and for relationships among businesses to appear. According to a study by Komppula (1996) entrepreneurs have very different views on how they perceive collaboration. Especially on how they perceive the durability of the relationship would vary a lot, as some would consider knowing someone or being a relative a tight bond in the business environment. (Komppula 1996, 81.)

Komppula (1996) also lists the forms of bonds that create the relationship: The aforementioned example would be considered as a social bond, in which relationship is based on knowing, relativity and on any aspect which allows the ones involved to know each other. Economical bonds appear with long-term relationships and are based mostly on marketing activities, such as on having mutual advertisements, equipment and subcontracting for instance. Some entrepreneurs are also interested on bonds that are based on knowledge and skills, which imply to mutual product development and coordination for example. Bonds based on ICTs and logistics are possible as well as technical bonds, which are meant for mutual equipment and technology investments. Lastly, juridical bonds imply having mutual ownership arrangements. (Komppula 1996, 81-83.)

In order to operate successfully in the field of destination marketing and management, it is crucial to be able to understand the working relationships between tourism companies. In the field of tourism, the stakeholders are a part of collaborative marketing, where there are multiple relationships and forms of relationships that they can choose. (Krakover & Wang 2007, 127, Komppula 2000, 56.) The relationships can be anything between slightly integrated and well-integrated. Less integrated connections can be recognized from only having even mutual interests, good spirits, and support for each other. The most integrated relationships, however,



can be recognized from the participants working for a whole separate project for instance. (Krakover et al. 2007, 127, Komppula 2000, 57.) Komppula (2000) claims also that the organization has to be able to recognize the need to commit. This fact itself will determine if the organization is ever going to commit for relationship or cooperation. The recognition occurs depending on the previous experiences and on the attitudes towards these phenomena. (Komppula 2000, 59.)

It should be understood that the overall experience for the tourist in the destination is an outcome from the actions, procedures, interaction, and collaboration by the destination's stakeholders. This includes every possible public and private actor not depending on their diversity – every single one matters. (Pinto & Kastenholtz 2011, 218, Zach & Hill 2017, Komppula 2000, 37.) Benefits for developing the structures and coordinated approach to the companies and marketing of the destination while involving stakeholders are nowadays embraced and understood. The complexity of having so many different actors has attracted many researchers to study the issue and understand the mission for collaboration. (Pinto & Kastenholtz 2011, 218, Wang et al. 2011, 259.)

When it comes to collaboration occurring in the destination, it is possible to identify different dimensions from this phenomenon (Figure 1.). (Komppula 2000, Tuohino & Konu 2014). Collaboration can be evaluated depending on if it is happening in the destination or between them. Collaboration can be categorized clearly depending on the presence of the DMO. If the DMO is facilitating the collaboration inside the destination, it is known as mediated intra-destination collaboration. On the other hand, if the DMO is facilitating collaboration between destinations, then it should be identified as mediated intra- and inter -destination collaboration. (Tuohino & Konu 2014, 205.)

Companies that do not aim for profitable business tend to collaborate with other companies and organizations, in order to create a bigger effect beyond organizational boundaries. A good way to build networks between companies is with events. Events like conferences, exhibitions, forums and competitions can be worthy by allowing to tighten the relationships and creating

new ones. (Ihm & Castillo 2017.) The competitive advantage of a destination comes from the particular sort of critical available resources. Destinations and regions characterized by relevant attraction aspects usually are not able to be successful in the marketplace. The reason for this is the lack of connection with “tourism services and because of inadequate collaborative and managerial support behavior”. (Ammirato, Felicetti, Dellagala, Immonen & Jussila. 2015.)

Komppula (1996) reminds that the nature of tourism industry and forming of the destination image are such components that force the tourism companies to have collaboration, which makes it necessary. The marketing capabilities are much better with cooperating organizations compared to smaller ones trying to conduct these procedures by themselves. (Komppula 1996.)

## **2.1 Collaborative governance, shared value and strategic performance**

The collaborative governance is a term of leadership that brings together stakeholders from the public and private sector to engage in decision making processes. With collaborative governance the various motivation of the stakeholders can be notified and utilized to enhance local tourism development. (Islamy, Haning & Allorante 2017.) Collaborative governance should be addressed as it is related to the issue under investigation. According to Santoso and Djumiarti (2020, 352) it is a management model in which multiple organizations are involved with stakeholders from the private sector in a formal consensus oriented and deliberative collective decision-making process that is looking to conduct public policies and programs. Here are the characteristics that describe this model:

1) The collective is initiated by public organizations and actors. 2) Participants may allow as non-public actors. 3) The participants are immediately part of the decision making and they don't have to rely on public actors. 4) The forums are arranged formally and together. 5) The intention is to make decisions with collective agreement as the forum is consensus oriented. 6) The collaboration is focused on public policy and management. (Santoso & Djumiarti 2020, 352.)

Strategic performance is one tool of measurement, that is used to evaluate how companies achieve their long-term goals with development in profitability, sales, and market share – tourism companies as well. Strategic performance is a major part of this study as tourism companies especially must be able to function with larger business chains. This causes several challenges for the companies, because of the diverse environmental and isomorphic structural prerequisites. (Majid, Yasir, Yousaf & Qudratullah 2019.) In shared value, firms can create economic value while creating value for society as well. With this approach mutual benefits can be achieved, which are driven from goals, new products, new market segments and from development of new business models. In terms of tourism, this approach can be used to motivate stakeholders to work as one for achieving the common goals for the destination and to obtain the shared value. (Fang, Nguyen & Armstrong 2020.)

Cooperation and collaboration are critical issues in the tourism industry that require straightforward discussion within the participating stakeholders, as this can balance the situation among them. The ones with the most power do not only set the tone for the relations and social actions, but for negotiations as well. (Katsouli 2007.) The need for coordination and collaboration in destination management is imminent and should be understood. The fragile nature of tourism is understood as the main reason for cooperation in the industry, because of the diversity and number of stakeholders. (Komppula 1996, Ladkin & Bertamini 2002, 72, Burgos & Mertens 2017, 3, Bichler & Lösch 2019.) Most of the stakeholders want to participate in decision making, which is only possible by sharing information and the power with every single one of them. Coordination is the main driver for collaboration and that should be understood. (Ladkin & Bertamini 2002, 72.)

Stakeholders' ability to collaborate inside their respective destination, is also a key necessity for sustainable development to occur at the same time. According to Saito and Ruhanen (2017) a destination cannot be successful without collaboration among stakeholders. Both public and private sectors stakeholders should be included in planning and decision-making. Collaboration is achieved when a certain group of stakeholders decide to act collectively to solve a common problem by using mutual means and rules to tackle the issues. (Saito & Ruhanen 2017.) The

most significant advantages gained from collaboration according to Komppula (1996), however, are the reducing of economic risk, marketing and production economy of scales, products that benefit each other, product-technologies, less competition, specification inside networks and competitive advantage towards other networks. (Komppula 1996, 52.)

The most recent research has proved the importance of interorganizational networks in the destinations and the things that appear when collaboration exceeds between companies'. (Presenza & Cipollina 2010). For instance, the networks are characterized by the members who go beyond the organizational borders and structures. In the networks commitment is tried to be increased by setting up mutual goals and by even sharing views and preferred future interests. The feeling of connection is the driver for achievements to become true due to the increased level of innovation and competition by the commitment. Networks allow the knowledge skills and resources to be developed, and the new innovations to be coordinated. (Presenza & Cipollina 2010, 18, Phuong, Khuong & Phuong 2021, Jap & Anderson 2007.)

Tuohino & Konu (2014, 205) also try to make clear that even though the stakeholders could have completely diverse relationships with one another, they still could be competing with another stakeholder from the same destination while at the same time cooperating with the competing firm, to make sure the destination is successful. While there still could be a competitive situation, it is in all stakeholder's favor and good in the end to work for the better of the destination than on yours only. (Tuohino & Konu 2014, 205.)

## **2.2 Global perspective**

The internationalization of geographical and cultural borders has allowed an international cooperation agreement, ICTs, and quick development in transportation to be revolutionized into a whole another dimension. The new and cheap transportation marketing legislations and minimizing limits in between countries, tourism has allowed for people to buy and have more tourism services and products worldwide. This revolution in the industry has shown its possibilities for local entrepreneurs, as before they used to be forgotten because of their

smallness and therefore the inability to have profitable business in the international market. (Ammirato et al 2015.) The term for governance arises from political sciences and corporate management. It includes the development of new ways of communication among societies, firms and countries where diverse communities and people actively communicate with the government or company in terms of main policy issues. (Zeppel 2012, 604.)

Collaborative networks are the type of systems that give support to tourism organizations in natural spaces. Collaborative actions are the basis for developing an environmentally sustainable tourism destination. Because not every natural space can be managed successfully with governments regulations only, involvement of multiple stakeholders from the public, private and non-profit sectors are required. (Cruz, Albrecht & Briones 2016.) The motivation to have collaboration in the tourism industry has gone up especially in the times of environmental evolution and operational complexity for companies. Several key reasons are behind this cause and globalization is the most relevant one. The process of globalization has set aside the borders between economic systems and forced them to transform towards integration. The developments in ICTs, distribution, communication, and policy changes have only enforced and still continue to enforce this trend. (Fyall & Garrod 2018, 53.)

Community based tourism should be acknowledged as well. It means the optional models of tourism development that are meant for maximizing the advantages coming for the locals, which then directly are turned into the benefit of the whole community's goals. Community based tourism includes also taking part in planning the tourism business activities, host-guest interactions, communal management of tourism and protecting cultural and natural heritage. (Tolkach, King & Pearlman 2013.)

The cooperation between stakeholders is crucial to conduct functioning management as the diversity of stakeholders is enormous. Knowing that, being able to manage the network with these attributes is absolutely necessary to have necessary legitimacy and acceptance. (Bichler & Lössch 2019, 2-3). Collaborative marketing and sustainable development for community-based tourism enterprises (CBTE) can be utilized, which is a multichannel stakeholder approach for

management to promote sustainable development for these firms. In order for CBTE to get sustainable development, the dual objectives of commercial viability and network have to be balanced. (Ngo, Hales & Lohmann 2019.)

Tourist destinations are constantly having to deal with multiple challenges because of the increasing internationality with more and more diverse stakeholders with different needs and motivations. The fast rise of population related to the international mobility of income, labour, IT and people means that destinations now have to have competition on an international level with different cultures in order to get capital. (Soteriades 2012 & Ammirato et al. 2015.) While the population is growing and the number of travelers as well, the amount of harm caused by those aspects to the environment has been growing. This means that to be successful nowadays requires the destinations and companies to be able to engage becoming sustainably active. (Jamal & Jamrozy 2006, 164.)

Inside a global tourism market, which is highly competitive nowadays, having success also requires developing the destinations' marketing effectiveness by adapting the suitable approaches and using the right tools by the DMO. Strong focus on strategic marketing approach is often recommended. The destinations have to go through various challenges every now and then because of the travelers and environment. According to estimations, destinations that are able to identify changes in the market and then respond by taking action will always be successful in the marketplace. (Soteriades 2012.)

### **2.3 Tourism Network**

Tourism network is not an easy task to define. According to Johns, Lynch & Morrison (2004) and Jenkins et al. (2011) networks can be identified in several ways. The type of network depends on the type of connections with members, types of mutual goals or exchange and geographical location for instance. (Johns, Lynch & Morrison 2004, 197-198, Jenkins et al 2011.) Benefits of tourism network can be divided to three categories: learning and exchange, community, and business activity. With learning and exchange among network members advantages are

leveraged that they have the possibility to have positive results in business activity and community. The factors of a successful tourism network include leadership, structure, trust, resourcing, member engagement, inter-organizational learning, sustainable nature, and lifecycle. (Johns et al. 2004.)

The usage and operation of networks has been under research for a few decades and with the research it has been attempted to find out how agencies coordinate and integrate their actions with the approach on differences among network structures and management. The analysis of the network starts off with the hypothesis that actors are dealing with a lot of relationships, and it is not possible to figure out their actions without understanding the context that they are operating in. (Wang & Xiang 2007, 76.)

Studies regarding network in general clearly state the structure of the network is an easily predictable area that has a lot to do with the dynamical behavior inside the network. Network analysis is used to collect and analyze data regarding the patterns of relationships inside the networks. In tourism with network analysis it is possible to view the tourism system and help managers to improve the destination based on the given data. (Baggio, Scott & Wang 2007.)

With network, there are also other advantages such as creating new innovations. First of all, the quality of the innovations depends on the formality of the relationship. They also depend on the composition of the network, and this includes the factors in the corporate level. Heterogeneity of information between companies, leadership commitment to inventions and collaboration are those factors. (Zach & Hill 2017, 196.) Tourism networks are great examples for understanding innovation networks because they are greatly networked due to the fact that several service providers have the responsibility of creating the actual end-product for the consumer. (Pinto & Kastenholz 2011, Zach & Hill 2017, 196, Komppula 2000, 37). This has caused the destinations to create a collective network of service providers, because the perspective is about the experience as a whole for the whole timeline of the journey instead of having different experiences inside the destination. (Zach & Hill 2017, 197.)

When networks are conducting their strategies according to their respective goals, the processes occurring that end up defining the goals of the network can widen the realization of a commitment for the network. When creating the cooperation in the tourism network, the common values and financial and organizational models should be openly discussed. The diversity of the network in terms of companies' sizes, differences and values causes a challenging situation. (Komppula 1998, 411.)

This applies to the regional tourism business as well because the actors who are conducting a different type of business are simultaneously trying to produce the end-product of the destination together collectively – even if they are not intending to do that. (Pinto & Kastenholtz 2011, Zach & Hill 2017, Komppula 2000, 37, Konu & Tuohino 2014). Different dimensions of cooperative destination marketing have issues regarding their vertical cooperation because of their usually distinct independency. In destination marketing it is therefore important to set a clear identification of markets while being able to provide fresh packages of services related to the current market situation. (Pechlaner 2000, 151-152.)

When the goal is to develop a regional tourism network, and a strategy for it, the crucial aspect is the collaboration among public and private stakeholders. (Komppula 2000, 100). The stakeholders that should be able to collaborate inside the regional tourism network should be the ones that are in at least some way part of the destination or are doing something concrete for the destination. Basically, everyone should be involved, for instance, investors, local administrators, entrepreneurs, ambassadors, travel agencies and the local people even. (Komppula 2000, 103.)

Also, collaborative destination marketing structures in tourism are involved with several diverse stakeholders who work together for achieving a goal that would benefit everyone in the network and the whole destination itself by gathering ideas and knowledge and sharing financial and human resources. (Pinto & Kastenholtz 2011, 218, Wang & Pizam 2011, 259.) This kind of collaborative marketing is implemented in many ways, such as promotion campaigns, cooperative programmes for trade shows and advertising, setting up get-to-know tours for travel



agencies and destination familiarization events for instance. By gathering resources like knowledge, expertise and capital, the collaborative actions can end up providing consensus and togetherness that leads to new possibilities and solutions with more effectiveness. (Wang et al. 2011.)

### **2.3.1. Challenges for tourism network**

The diversity of stakeholders brings a massive challenge, as the goals are very different, but they still feel like they must cooperate. (Chimirri 2020, Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino 2017, Pinto & Kastenholz 2017). If the stakeholders then choose not to collaborate, and conduct the networks mission, because they think that their own goals are not recognized, they might leave the network. It is important to understand that it is also about committing to the wanted identity by the network, and this can be too much for some even though it is one of the major aspects for the success of the network. (Pilving, Kull, Suskevics & Viira 2021, 314.) Collaborative networks can be created within collaboration with the customers, suppliers, and competitors while at the same time searching for universities, research organizations to enforce the innovations. This is because the collaborative networks are built to strengthen innovation resources, and they are built with suppliers, customers, competitors, and research organizations. (Mulyana 2021, 216.)

Marketing and promoting a destination isn't an easy task for networks that are relying on tourism in order to develop economically. Conducting marketing actions collaboratively in the tourism organizations is the answer to this common challenge. (Wang & Xiang 2007, 75.) Tourism services and products have been sold as smaller units and pieces by different providers. This is why the demeanor is very scattered because many businesses operate in the same marketplace with their own business goals while all having the responsibility for the success of the destination. (Komppula 2000, Pinto & Kastenholz 2017, Wang & Xiang 2007.)

### 3 Commitment in b2b relationships

#### 3.1 Collaboration and collaborative networks

Previously networks and collaboration were not as big of a topic in tourism research, but the situation changed thanks to the fact that networks allowed researchers to analyze their actions by providing a platform that could be investigated. Now, they were able to study the growth, product development and opportunities for future development, for instance. Another reason also was that networks seemed to be important channels for leading public relationships and for understanding the structures behind tourism and destination management. (Tuohino & Konu 2014, 204.) Tourism managers admit that the industry is lacking in terms of collaboration and coordination, and the weak nature of the industry does not improve the situation at all. Constant tourism planning must be integrated among all other planning for social and economic development to become an interactive platform. Trying to operate individually is not the modern way and trying to do so wastes the potential of what is possible to get achieved. It's crucial to have an effective organizational structure in the industry as well as being able to plan constantly with other stakeholders. (Jamal & Getz 1995, 186-187.)

Bramwell and Lane (2000) and Saito and Ruhanen (2017) state that collaboration has advantages, for instance, to achieve the goals for sustainable development and tourism in the destination as well. They also agree that the cooperative actions of individual tourism organizations, such as common rules and structures, help tremendously to solve issues on tourism development. (Bramwell & Lane 2000, 201, Saito & Ruhanen 2017.) Collaboration can be understood as a phenomenon where the actors involved share their own resources to be used by any other actor that is involved in order to gain the best possible strategic benefit. (Saito & Ruhanen 2017, 190). In terms of sustainable development, the stakeholder's collaboration is a key factor for it – especially when a set of diverse stakeholders are willing to commit and seek for common goals to get achieved. Also in tourism development perspective, the importance of achieving consensus in some sense, at least, is critical for the long-term success for a destination. (Saito & Ruhanen 2017, 190, Bramwell & Lane 2000.)

If the parties involved consider the collaboration useful and satisfying in terms of results, they more probably wish to continue to do it. The longer the collaboration has been going on successfully, the more it enforces the bond and the harder it is for it to fail. If the relationship fails nevertheless due to setbacks, it may have long-lasting consequences as others tend to see the ones failing collaboration in a more negative way after that. (Komppula 1996, 52.)

If the destination is lacking on collaboration and integration, and in managerial support, then the destination is most probably going to struggle in the marketplace, because they are only relying on relevant attraction aspects. If the destination wants to be able to perform on a high level consistently, it should agree on collaborative procedures. (Ammirato et al. 2015.) As the success of the destination relies on the leader of the group, then for the one responsible for the leading role should have to understand their salience in a collaborative procedure. If being able to understand the salience of the stakeholder collaboration, the coordination becomes easier when deciding the role for everyone in collaborative processes. (Saito & Ruhanen 2017, 190, Konu & Tuohino 2014.)

Collaboration can still be declined and there are several reasons for that, and the reasons can be detected on community level, company level and on a personal level. Reasons for declining collaboration on a community level are for instance, competition, competitive legislation, the state of small companies in the product system. Other reasons are political unbalance, exchange rate, inflation, international relationships and/or structure of the market. Lack of information of the company can be a reason for the collaboration to not happen. (Komppula 1996, 45.)

Collaborative networks can even have competitors inside the network having an inter-organizational relationship, and that is known as coopetition. Even if competition is recognized to exist inside the networks, the participants want more power and resources even though mutual rules, and infrastructures are usually meant to deal with collaborative networks heterogeneity. (Durugbo 2016, 3751.) Coopetition will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 4.

After the desired level of collaboration has been achieved it can still fail, and hence, Komppula (1996) lists the reasons for the discontinuation of collaboration: Setbacks and problems allow this to happen but more specifically, cultural issues, slower decision making, disagreements on sharing the profit and on sharing the funding sources as well as the tensions among staff are some of the reasons. In a longer-term relationship the reasons can be for instance: Disagreement on investments, lack of trust, lack of certainty and lack of customer satisfaction. (Komppula 1996, 50.)

Planning requires a lot of effort when operating in a collaborative network. Dredge (2006) discusses how in tourism the collaborative networks can be very exclusionary and undemocratic. Tourism research is looking to find answers into these questions regarding consensus and disagreements in tourism policymaking. (Dredge 2006.) The ideal consensus in tourism policy making is happening when actors having the same view temporarily and commitment to mutual goals are able to discover a platform or purpose to share together for discussion and solution. (Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino 2017, Dredge 2006.) If actors are not willing to discuss and make a compromise, tension, instability and disagreement will occur and make the planning more difficult. (Dredge 2006, 570-571). Tourism companies are interdependent as they have to collaborate to ensure a quality tourist experience and benefit for the firms' performance. Being able to cooperate by the stakeholders in their destination is one of the most basic fundamentals for successful destination, tourism relationships and policy. (Krolikowska, Kuenzel & Morrison 2019, 2841.)

### **3.2 Interorganizational relationships**

Jap and Anderson (2007) state that cooperative interorganizational relationships are crucial to businesses in general that they are useful for several reasons: product supply, product development, market entry and production for instance. Interorganizational relationships have started to compete against the more conservative and traditional centrality of the company. (Jap & Anderson 2007, 260.) The most critical element of interorganizational relationship is its level of

dependence. One actor can be dependent while the other one is giving away valuable benefits that are much harder to get from other places. The reason why these relationships are made is because the ones involved are then able to get benefits that they wouldn't get outside the relationships. Opportunism is the negative side-effect that can be recognized but also it's acceptable as the dependence on others is necessary to gain the competitive advantage. (Jap & Anderson 2007.)

Gezhi, Jingyan and Xiang (2020) point out the importance of relational norms that are obtained by most of the managers and decision makers. These are used to manage interfirm collaborative relationships. Relational norms have been studied a lot and they help promote a long-term orientation in the exchange, lead companies to bilaterally useful strategies, lower transaction costs and lower the chances of conflict. (Gezhi, Jingyan and Xiang 2020, 864.) Relational norms have three main attributes, which are flexibility, information exchange and solidarity. Flexibility means the ability to react and adapt in a situation where circumstances have changed. Information exchange in this context means that every actor involved shares the information to others which is perceived as useful for them. Hence, solidarity is the mentality that someone's issues are every actor's issues and they should be solved together. (Gezhi, Jingyan and Xiang 2020.)

Interorganizational relationship is possible when multiple companies are willing to exchange important resources like services, products, facilities, guests, and employees for example. (Phuong, Khuong & Phuong 2021, Jap et al. 2007). Inter organizational relationships are either temporary or then long-term relationships. The reason why competing companies end up having this particular relationship lies on being able to tackle lack of resources and risks that are easier to face together than as one. This will motivate small and medium sized enterprises in the industry to work together, in order to achieve the common goals. (Phuong, Khuong & Phuong 2021.)

Interorganizational relationship (IOR) and its effect are related to the whole evaluated relationship. It is viewed as the main motivation from the actors involved to reach the expected

results. There are also two approaches to the IOR effectiveness: The first one is related to the participants overall satisfaction. The satisfaction is viewed as the company's positive experience depending on its partners' ability to commit to the respected rules and perform in the expected manner. The second one is seen as quantitative measure of the common benefits that are gained by the stakeholders in the relationship. (Phuong, Khuong & Phuong 2021, 1902.)

### 3.3 Commitment in b2b relationships

The goal in this study is to understand b2b relationships and especially in the tourism industry, but according to Jeong and Oh (2017) there has not been much research conducted regarding b2b relationships in tourism business context. In their study they discuss the social exchange theory, which is an economic approach to social relationship situations. The idea of the social exchange theory is that individuals in social relationships decide whether to continue or to discontinue the relationship based on the comparison of benefit and disadvantages or costs to have the relationship. They also argue that the benefits and costs can be segmented to social outcomes as well, such as trust, companionship, reliance and dependence, for instance. (Jeong & Oh 2017, 116.) Commitment is a key component in terms of close relationships in b2b marketing. Commitment is considered as a will to cooperate and contribute to the desired goals of mutual interest. Committed relationships are possible only when there is a persevering will to maintain a relationship that is important for the parties involved. (Sousa & Alves 2018, 230.)

The key concepts in this study are *commitment, trust and cooperation*, which are necessary for b2b relationships. In this study, under investigation are organizations and their relationships, especially to the core actor in the deepest core inside the network, which in this case is Visit Karelia. According to Komppula (2000) the core actors are in the *deepest core* of the network, and they initiate, maintain and end relationships in the network. After this dimension the second layer in the network is the *core of the network* and it displays the other key actors. These actors are operating in the *network context* which describes the industry and markets they are operating in. (Komppula 2000, 50-51.)

### 3.3.1. Keys to commitment

What makes the company want to commit in the first place is the key question. Komppula (2000) states that commitment is the result of two actors creating a bond between each other. This bond is created when the actors involved agree on their respected actions and interpretations. How they finally perceive each other depends on the development of trust and commitment. Commitment is all about committing to an agreed goal even when the expectations are not certain. (Komppula 2000, 53.)

Commitment according to Gil-Saura et al. (2009) is with trust one of the main drivers for relationship marketing as well. Commitment between companies has been studied for a long time and is the most studied aspect related to the topic. Commitment refers to a company's belief that relationship is so crucial that it requires all possible means to keep it going. Commitment is then considered as more important as it goes beyond the evaluation of the benefits and costs of the relationship. (Gil-Saura et al. 2009, 596.)

According to Komppula (2000) the factors that affect the attitudes to commit are primarily the firms' personal goals, which are directly affected by the companies and/or the entrepreneurs' attributes. Another factor is the information that has been available before, during and after the processes of the network. The attributes of the other stakeholders matter as well. (Komppula 2000, 255.) Usually, tourism companies are more committed to networks rather than other companies. The size of the firm, knowledge and how much the firm is dependent on the network affect the companies' goals as well. When it comes to smaller firms the entrepreneurs' personal attributes play a critical role, and therefore it brings correlation between the attributes of the entrepreneur and the firm itself. (Komppula 2000.) Eventually, firms and organizations choose to integrate with the collaborative network with diverse motivations and the motivation can be categorized to five different motivations: strategy-oriented, learning, cluster competitiveness, community responsibility and transaction-cost oriented. (Wang & Pizam 2011, 265).

### **3.3.2. Trust as a commitment factor**

Trust is a significant factor in order to have commitment in general. It means the actors' willingness to trust the partner which it believes and trusts in. Researchers think that trust is achieved because the actor thinks that the partner is worthy of its reliability, expertise and intentions, and therefore it's worth it to trust the opposing partner. On the other hand, trust is considered also as an intention and/or behavior which can be seen as a behavior that reflects on trust towards the partner that includes the possibility of getting hurt and uncertainty. (Komppula 2000, 61.)

Trust can be developed however through positive interactive experiences if it's considered to give some sort of advantage. Trust can be divided to general and specific trust according to Komppula (2000). General trust means being aware of the attributes both parties have that can be recognized in the early stages of creating the collaboration where the ones involved don't know each other as well yet. Specific trust on the other hand relates to the other partners ability and willingness to operate in a trustworthy manner. (Komppula 2000, 63.)

According to Komppula (1996) entrepreneurs don't want to have written agreements, because economical investments are not necessary. The written agreements are considered to be too limiting, bonding or too bureaucratic. This applies when it comes to evaluating the commitment on two-way relationships. (Komppula 1996, 84-85.) What then causes the commitment on these relationships to fail is usually lack of trust. After that dishonesty, personal chemistry and agreement violations are the most common preventing aspects. What the entrepreneurs, however consider as advantages gained from committing to these relationships are: savings on costs, gained recognition, gained customers and income as well as gained know-how and feelings of togetherness. (Komppula 1996.)

The level of commitment is different among actors in the issue-based nets. In an issue-based network, a smaller bunch of actors should be leading the collective action process and the bulk membership can be made of a set of passive operators that are not directly involved with the provision of the collective advantage. Komppula and Lassila (2000) even present an idea how a



brand-new tourism organization should be initiated with the basic idea of creating it with a cooperation basis through six phases: antecedents, problem display, direction setting, constructing, conducting and results. (Komppula & Lassila 2000 ed. Flanagan & Ruddy 2000.)

Chen and Huan (2020), however state that the motivation for companies to cooperate elevated thanks to telecommunication technologies, including in the tourism industry as well. Changing market circumstances forces companies to look for relationships to help each other to keep up with the trends and to innovate new products and services in hopes to elevate market performance. Previous studies show that trust and commitment are crucial factors for knowledge communication or business deals among companies. (Chen & Huan 2020, 697-698.) Communication is also a major measurement of results in b2b relationships. (Murphy & Sashi 2018).

In tourism business as well, 20% produce more than 80% of the whole tourist turnover out of all of the companies. Hence, smaller and bigger companies have different needs and therefore should be notified personally. In the study by Komppula and Lassila (2000) they state that it can be proved to have happened before in other studies, that the smaller companies especially don't consider the regional network strategy to affect them, and this obviously is not good for collaboration. In this study, for instance, smaller companies' entrepreneurs see themselves part of the local network rather than the regional one. (Komppula & Lassila 2000 ed. Flanagan & Ruddy 2000.)

### **3.4 How to create b2b relationships**

Gil-Saura, Frasquet-Deltoro and Cervera-Taulet (2009) discuss in their study the significance of the b2b relationships. During the last decades, b2b relationships have become more tighter and businesses tend to have less of them than before as well. (Gil-Saura, Frasquet-Deltoro & Cervera-Taulet 2009, 593). Marketing perspectives have become more intangible focused rather than tangible focused, and also more relationship focused than transaction focused. (Gil-Saura et al. 2009, 594.)

When it comes to research, there is a clear consensus on the fact that trust is a critical aspect in b2b relationships. The ones involved must have a certain vulnerability towards each other to become operational and, for most of the time, this happens because it exists between business buyers and sellers because of the high sort of interdependency needed to achieve the wanted goals. (Gil-Saura et al. 2009.) In order to prevent the possible opportunistic actions by taking advantage of the trust can be prevented by including possible punishments for these attempts. Nevertheless, this still does not wipe away completely the possibility for this to not occur, and some researchers even agree that trust therefore is not necessary for collaboration. (Komppula 2000, 61.)

Syukron, Sanaji and Aliyafi'iy (2021) in their study make a claim that applies to micro, small and medium sized enterprises. They discuss the importance of relationship marketing to the MSMEs, and how it can build tighter customer relationships and therefore better business performance. A relationship that is built around trust will give important support to the ones involved. It can be a significant factor for the gained advantages towards relationship commitment. (Syukron, Sanaji & Aliyafi'iy 2021, 484.) Information and social networks are important for the formation of firms, and also for the success of the firm. The significance of behavioral commitment is highly correlated to turnover. When everything is directed to increase performance, managers also have to focus on managing all possible resources to increase financial and non-financial performance. (Hasyim, Sahyar & Syahreza 2021, 1416.)

Partnership is a choice to build tight relationships to influence the result of the exchange and realize that exchanges can differ from transactional to relational. Relationships prove that trust on cooperation is greater than commitment to cooperation. Decisions to make partnerships are the kind of cooperation that demands both actors in the relationship to get involved actively in order to achieve mutual goals and to gain success in the relationship. Eventually, the relationships should have a bigger effect on exchange results in business than in consumer markets. (Syukron & Aliyafi'iy 2021, 486.)

### 3.5 The advantages of b2b relationships

Competitive advantage is even harder to maintain nowadays as several strategic procedures have been under research in order to solve the most fitting ones. Peronard and Brix (2018) highlight the benefit of collaborative networks to enhance and maintain the position for firms in the market. In collaborative networks firms seek to collaborate to achieve a mutual goal. Being part of the network brings several advantages for the participator: being involved in the networks is an important driver for new market creation, new managerial possibilities or market relations are allowed and also it increases factors such as customer value, competitiveness and market development. (Peronard & Brix 2018, 546.)

Collaboration is a flexible and dynamic process where multiple actors share their views and/or resources in order to find solutions to issues that cannot be solved alone. This collaborative action can result as benefits for the participators. For instance, the networks allow access to information, financial resources, marketplaces and technology. (Burgos & Mertens 2017, 3, Bichler & Lösch 2019, Komppula 2000, 59.) The network also promotes innovations and provides support for the members over challenging times and conditions. Due to the sensitive and dynamic demeanor of tourism, it's clear that the collaborations are indeed necessary to manage tourism destinations. (Burgos & Mertens 2017, Bichler & Lösch 2019.)

Collaboration and relationships in tourism are more successful if the person who has the responsibility on gathering the stakeholders together has legitimacy while leading the community. (Konu & Tuohino 2014, Keyim 2018, 485). The convener can be a tourist organization, company, group or even a government agency if the convener has the attribute of legitimacy, expertise, leadership, and resources. Local authorities usually hold power over the economic and political resources, which makes them often undisputed leaders when convening and leading the development processes. (Keyim 2018.)

Collaborative policymaking internationally has nowadays more the reputation of enabler rather than provider. In the public sector centralized approach, especially in tourism gave authority on marketing, infrastructure, provision, and proactive development for the advantage of the public.

Now it's more of a decentralized form of management where local organizations are asked to take more responsibility on the management -side. (Vernon, Essex, Pinder & Curry 2005, 326-328.) Collaboration includes several stakeholders working together for the greater good with a formal cross-sectoral approach. (Chimirri 2020, Komppula 2000, Krakover et al. 2007, Vernon et al. 2005).

Jenkins, Dredge and Taplin (2011, 26) however state that destinations have very little similarities in their geographical size, in the historical nature on their development, spatial size and organization, topography, climate, infrastructure, governance, culture, HR, resources and attractions. How can we define a destination? It depends on what institution defines it and in what scale is it operationalized, and why is it defined as a destination. (Jenkins, Dredge & Taplin 2011, 26.) The destinations are all different, but as Komppula (2000) says, the need for collaboration applies for every destination: The reason why a company decides to commit to a network is not because of the result of cooperation happening inside the network. It's a developing attribute that has developed during the process of cooperation – and this is possible only through the need for the company to have relationships and cooperation. (Komppula 2000, 253.)

The structure of the relationship is strongly related to the destination's management and usually the DMO is highlighted for this role. (Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino 2017, 381, Konu & Tuohino 2014, Farias & Hoffmann 2021). The stronger the structure is locally, the better chances there are to create bonds for network. The successful performance of the firms included is always related to the success of the destination that they are in. It has to be remembered though that territory constructs, supporting organizations, structure of the relationship and destination management are interconnected constructs, which has the effect to cluster the companies involved geographically. (Farias & Hoffmann 2021, Chim-Miki and Batista-Canino 2017.)

### 3.6 Coopetition

Coopetition was recognized for the first time in research in 1996 and according to Chim-Miki and Batista-Canino (2017) it was regarded as a new way of doing business at the time. Coopetition means a new approach for achieving cooperative relationships, where there has been embraced the fact that the competition is actually the reason to cooperate. (Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino 2017, Ritala & Hurmelinna-Laukkanen 2009, Muijs & Rumyantseva 2013).

There are four main components for coopetition that can be identified as well: 1. Grow the market: Participants do this by cooperating and then initiate the competition once it is done. 2. Companies have different relationships with different stakeholders, but the most important ones are the ones with complementors as they extend the markets by showing up to customers and suppliers to complement the offering. 3. When the business procedures are not directly related to the customer itself like R&D, the competitors usually start to cooperate. But if the procedures are closely related to the customer, like marketing, the organizations stay in the competitive form. Hence, the form of activity for the customer determines the relevance and way of interaction between organizations. 4. Competition and cooperation can still be divided among different business units, even if the activity is close to the customer. This happens because the organizations compete and cooperate in different markets and product areas. (Muijs & Rumyantseva 2013.)

However, Muijs and Rumyantseva (2013) present another perspective on coopetition. In their study, they discuss the fact that collaboration cannot always be successful, and in order to achieve a different level in terms of competitive advantage, coopetition should be utilized. It is based on the fact that if there is a solid amount of competition and collaboration between companies, it can result in a much greater competitive advantage. (Muijs & Rumyantseva 2013.) Eventually, this phenomenon that will occur due to these procedures, can be identified as coopetition, as it is the definition for competing organizations collaborating in hopes for better bigger markets and creating more value and then later again start competing for the value created. (Ritala & Hurmelinna-Laukkanen 2009.)

Hogevold, Svensson and Otero-Neira (2019) add to this discussion that the main purpose is to connect customer satisfaction to loyalty and by coming more customer-oriented will result in more long-term relationships. Value-based relationship embracement therefore results in positive impact on profitability and loyalty. There is not much difference to b2b context, however, as in b2b, long-term relationships are considered as necessary to continuity. Loyalty and trust on the other hand are necessary for long-term relationships. Long-term relationships aim to create collaborative networks because it improves the business performance. (Hogevold, Svensson and Otero-Neira 2019, 722.) Lascaux (2020) and Basterretxea, Charterina and Landeta (2019) state that inconvenient attention that is concerned in terms of trust from the coopetition standpoint shows that in general the nature of coopetition is not understood. If following several coopetition scholars, a paradoxical view is taken and following tensions among coopetitors as a first-choice conceptual lens through which coopetitive actions and results can be discovered and understood. Trust should be considered as the focal point of tensions and disagreements resulting in coopetitive settings. (Lascaux 2020, Basterretxea, Charterina & Landeta 2019.)

### **3.6.1. Advantages of coopetition**

Coopetition is also a key factor for innovations to develop. Hani and Dagnino (2021) claim that coopetition allows for innovations to happen and benefit economies, minimize uncertainty, access new markets and gain complementary knowledge. Innovations are the main keys for economic development and is also one of the reasons for the success of a company. Innovations happen as a result of an interactive process among the company and the environment it's operating in, and when collaboration takes place in this environment with actors from different industries. (Hani & Dagnino 2021.) Coopetition allows information exchange to happen with great success and allows innovation to arise with new knowledge and services. The possibility of wanting to cooperate or not, depends on the level of knowledge, resources and appropriability capacities. Companies with better chances of getting information from external sources and to protect it allows better innovation results from coopetition. (Basterretxea & et al. 2019.)

Cehan, Eva and Iatu (2021) conducted research where they used social network analysis (SNA) to understand stakeholder collaboration in tourism destinations. Fewer studies have been

conducted where interactions among the relationships have been researched. Many tourism destinations are complex units and for some reason, even though importance of relationships among stakeholders is understood better nowadays, the full potential of the benefits is not taken advantage of. (Cehan, Eva & Iatu 2021, 316-317.) More studies nowadays are using social network analysis, and this has increased the number of research made on analyzing the structure of stakeholder networks. Most of the analyses study the overall networks which displays the destinations stakeholders as a whole. (Cehan, Eva & Iatu 2021.) Positive effects of trust among actors in a cooperative market environment are laying, at first, in the mitigating of possible conflicts and disagreements that can happen due to interunit or interfirm cooperation, and secondly in creating positive behavioral and performance results among cooperative groups. (Lascaux 2020.)

Komppula (2000) mentions, however, that the reason why companies join the network is because they wish to acquire a competitive advantage which then requires market-regions to be at the same place where operating-region is for it to be considered as a network. This kind of overlapping is a sign for competition to exist – only partial overlapping means collaboration and so there is a clear difference. (Komppula 2000, 41.)

### **3.6.2. Cooperation and its downsides**

Trust is indeed recommended to be present if the relationships have an increased level of interdependence and uncertainty. Relationships that involve cooperation have an extra-level of vulnerability and risks to deal with. (Kostis & Näsholm 2019, 67.) Definitions of cooperation differ, depending on the level of focus. Kostis and Näsholm (2019), for instance, present dyadic cooperation which categorizes cooperation as dyadic and paradoxical relationship that is found when two companies are cooperating in some extent and competing in one another. (Kostis & Näsholm 2019.) It should be understood, however, that cooperation is not the best approach in all cases. When the collaborative stakeholders choose to conduct this cooperation strategy, it should be remembered that it will create a lot of tension due to shared knowledge and understanding and learning a lot from each other. It will all come down to trust and managing the cooperation the right way, because the tension can ruin everything and then there can be the

one that loses and the one that wins, even though both should be winning equally if the tension can be managed. (Le Roy & Czakon 2015.)

It is indeed a very difficult task to implement relationships among competitors that are based on trust. Trust that is eventually achieved is indispensable for rivals to completely attain the goals that are accepted and specified by their counterpart. When being part of the cooperative project between competitors, it demands the elaboration of certain capabilities to hold and maintain the trust and unreliability that is always under consideration by the participants. (Lascaux 2020.)

## **4 Methodology**

### **4.1 Methods of research**

Qualitative approach was chosen for this study. Qualitative research is used to interpret research questions as an idealistic approach for instance. Qualitative approach is utilized when wanting to understand behavior, attitude, or beliefs and experiences for example, and it does not provide numerical data or information. (Pathak, Jena & Kalra 2013, Silverman 2020.)

The purpose of the study was to increase understanding of companies' potential obstacles for collaborating in a regional tourism network and particularly with Visit Karelia. Findings of the study will help Visit Karelia to enhance procedures on their actions regarding how they would attract stakeholders to collaborate. This study used a case study method as a method of research, and therefore the study was carried out as an intrinsic case study. Case study is considered as a specific analysis of a case with the assumption that the researcher can gain enough information about the phenomenon under investigation by looking at the particular case only. The researcher can expect that the implementation of the study can be followed through by what they will interpret from the collection of the data. This brings a lot of useful flexibility for using this method, and it is considered as one of its advantages. (Fidel 1984, Gilstrap 2009.)



This research method was chosen because the purpose was to gain understanding of the situation of North Karelia only, but not any other region. Hence, the study was conducted as an intrinsic case study. The goal is then to not make general conclusions about the phenomena that the case could be attached to. It is important that the interest is based and held on only in the case itself and not being expanded to similarities or generalization that it could be brought up to. (Baxter & Jack 2008.)

## 4.2 Methods of data collection

The data was collected by using semi-structured interviews as there were questions that would be asked from every interviewee but also some questions that would be presented spontaneously depending on the interviewees previous answers, in order to gain the best possible data. Semi structured interviews are spoken discussions where the interviewer is trying to get useful information from the interviewee by asking questions that are predetermined, but also by giving the opportunity for the interviewee to add something they might feel important to be addressed in order to better understand the phenomenon at hand. This usually happens in a rather conversational type of questioning where the interviewee might even answer some questions beforehand and also add something that the researcher was not aware of. (Longhurst 2003.) It was necessary to use this method, as often the interviewees would answer some questions beforehand unintentionally due to the open demeanor of the questions, as well as because of the interviewees lack of understanding of some of the issues under investigation.

The interviewees had to be representatives of tourism businesses and/or actors from inside of the region of North Karelia, and they were preferably CEOs, owners, or entrepreneurs of their companies. A list of companies was delivered by Visit Karelia to the supervisor and to the researcher to choose the best candidates to contact. The goal was to interview companies that would be:

1. New, that had never been in touch with Visit Karelia or ones that had had a new entrepreneur for less than two years.
2. Businesses that had never been in touch with Visit Karelia; these were

considered as unknown and passive. 3. Companies that had been in contact with the DMO before but were not anymore. Out of the list of companies provided by the commissioner, five most suitable options were selected from each of the three categories with the supervisor. The cause for preferring these options was to acquire the most diverse set of companies to get the best possible sample of data. Eventually the fifteen first choice options were contacted first and finally nine of them were interviewed.

Altogether sixteen interviews were conducted in November and December 2021 and in January 2022 by using teams-meetings. The interviews were recorded, and the interviewees were informed about that, as well as about the fact that any of the answers they were about to give, would not be given to the commissioner of the study, Visit Karelia but only to the researcher and to the supervisor of the study.

The informants have been presented in the upcoming table and only their gender, year of establishment, position, group of activity and area inside North Karelia are revealed. This is in order to not make the informants to be recognized. Therefore, even the municipality of the informants is not revealed. Instead, the municipalities have been categorized to three areas, and only the area of the informant/business located is revealed to protect the identity of the informant. The areas are 1. Joensuu region, which consists of Joensuu, Kontiolahti, Heinävesi, Ilomantsi, Juuka, Liperi, Outokumpu and Polvijärvi. 2. Middle-Karjala (KETI-region) which includes Kitee, Rääkkylä and Tohmajärvi. 3. Pielinen Karelia -region that includes Lieksa and Nurmes.

**Table 1.** List of interviewees.

Company	Area	Established	Gender	Activity	Position
S1	Joensuu region	2011	F	New	Entrepreneur
S2	Joensuu region	2019	F	New	Entrepreneur
S3	KETI	2019	F	New	CEO
S4	KETI	2009	F	Used to be	CEO
S5	Pielinen Karelia	1998	M	Passive	Entrepreneur
S6	Joensuu region	2020	F	New	CEO
S7	KETI	1992	M	Used to be	CEO
S8	Joensuu region	2020	F	New	Entrepreneur
S9	Pielinen Karelia	2015	F	Passive	Entrepreneur
S10	Joensuu region	2006	F	New	VP
S11	Joensuu region	2017	F	Used to be	Employee
S12	Pielinen Karelia	2009	F & M	New	Owners
S13	Joensuu region	2019	M	New	CEO
S14	Joensuu region	2021	F	New	CEO
S15	Joensuu region	2004	F	Used to be	Executive director
S16	Joensuu region	2016	M	Used to be	CEO

Eventually out of the sixteen interviewed stakeholders, nine were new businesses and/or had an entrepreneur that had been running the business for less than two years. Five were businesses that were considered as active before, but not anymore and the final two stakeholders were categorized to the businesses that were unknown and passive. The three categories' businesses were contacted equally as much, but mostly the ones that were from the category of "new businesses" were the most eager to answer back and agree for an interview. The unknown businesses were the least eager to answer back at all.

**Table 2.** List of interviews and types of businesses.

Company	Duration of interview	Date of interview	Type of business
S1	48:12	11.1.2022.	Accommodation, experiences
S2	44:10	7.1.2022.	Experiences, wellness
S3	36:19	4.1.2022.	Accommodation, experiences
S4	55:26	10.12.2021	Accommodation
S5	1:02:17	10.1.2022.	Experiences
S6	40:26	22.12.2021.	Experiences
S7	32:12	13.1.2022.	Accommodation
S8	40:51	14.1.2022.	Wellness, nature experiences
S9	50:27	14.1.2022.	Accommodation
S10	36:54	14.1.2022.	Accommodation
S11	48:03	5.1.2022.	Accommodation, experiences
S12	51:53	5.1.2022.	Accommodation
S13	39:14	22.12.2021.	Experiences
S14	56:24	8.12.2021	Accommodation
S15	38:59	9.12.2021.	Art, tourism sights
S16	38:50	30.11.2021.	Experiences, education

### 4.3 Methods of analysis

Thematic analysis was used as an analysis method for this study. It is a method for systematically identifying and categorizing themes that occur in the data. With thematic analysis, it is possible to detect collective themes, experiences and ideas occurring from the data with a reasonable manner. With this method, the researcher can detect the most common way of mentioning a theme in the data set, and then make reasonable conclusions from the matching topics. (Braun & Clarke 2022.) The informants gave away valuable information that was not provided due to the predetermined interview questions. Therefore, additional themes were brought up during the interviews that provided relevant data for this study.

## 5 Results and analysis

The research questions of the study that were supposed to get answers to were: 1. What would be obstacles for collaboration with Visit Karelia and with the regional network's stakeholders? 2. What would be obstacles for participating the network's collaborative actions? 3. How do the companies perceive their role in the regional network? 4. Why do they perceive their role in the network in the way they do 5. What would facilitate the North Karelian tourism companies to commit and collaborate with Visit Karelia and with the regional network? Here, the results of the study are presented in order to the research questions.

### 5.1 Preventing factors for cooperation

The informants were asked what would be the reasons that would prevent the informant to initiate or cease cooperation with another stakeholder and whether they had real experiences from those happening. The mentioned causes are presented in the following.

**Table 3.** Causes for the denial of cooperation.

Company	Loss of trust	Lack of commitment	Costs	Lack of communication	Personal chemistry	Quality of services	Lack of time	Unmatching values
S1	x		x					
S2	x	x	x					
S3	x			x	x			
S4	x	x		x	x			
S5						x		
S6	x	x				x	x	x
S7	x					x		x
S8				x		x		x
S9		x	x	x	x			x
S10		x			x	x		x
S11		x	x		x	x	x	
S12	x		x	x				x
S13			x	x	x		x	x
S14	x	x			x	x		
S15	x	x					x	
S16		x	x		x	x		x

Loss of trust was mentioned by nine of the sixteen informants. Lack of commitment by nine out of the sixteen, costs by seven. Lack of communication was mentioned by six informants, personal chemistries by eight, quality of service by eight, lack of time by four and unmatching values by eight informants. S3 thinks that the reasons are that chemistries between people don't match, jealousy, and unwillingness for cooperation, because for some people cooperation is unnatural and they just cannot embrace or accept that.

S4 thinks that if the benefits are not seen, then it will not happen. So far, these informants have not told what the preventing factors for them are, but what they think are for others even though the question was meant for the informant themselves and speak for their behalf not others. For some reason the informants did not understand this or tried to avoid answering this. This kind of wanting to have an image of accepting cooperation was often seen in other questions as well, but still the actions and answers were not as believable to match with these claims. It was said every time that there are not right or wrong answers and that the commissioner will not see the answers, but still many seemed afraid of judgement from someone if they would not seem cooperative.

S6 tells a personal reason and example, however, which are not enough time, unsimilar values and quality. She says that there are good projects to be part of but there is not enough time, and if the quality of the counterpart is not on the same level, it will not be considered. S7 tells that the only reason would be if everyone on the same area would offer only similar products which would create such competitive situation where it would basically harm the business. However, if a mutual product would be implemented, that would change the dynamics. S8 shares that if quality and values don't match, then it would not happen. S9 thinks they would not cooperate if the counterpart does not have flexibility and will to try new things. For instance, S9 says that hotels won't even market their services which are unique in the region, even though they don't offer those services themselves.

S10 agrees with this as says that many in their region are used to do business alone and offer everything by themselves, and this perspective where everyone is considered as competition is

not appreciated by S10 if starting to cooperate. S11 would not cooperate with someone that does not match with them in terms of demeanor, quality, operating and expression. S12 would not cooperate if the counterpart would have a bad reputation or if the benefits of it would be unclear. S13 shares that they would not cooperate if it would not feel right, or if there are not enough resources for that and if the communication with the partner does not work out. S14 thinks they would not cooperate if the work would not be divided equally and clearly, and if the knowledge of key customers is not on good level as well as the quality of services.

The informants were then asked, that when initiating the cooperation eventually, what are the reasons that can stop it happening? The reasons are presented in the previous table as the reasons were the same even though the question was different. S1 mentions that if it starts costing too much. S2 says that if the benefits are not divided equally anymore and the partner starts to forget recommending the other one, it would cause problems. S3 and S4 tell that lack of communication can end it because it can cause misunderstandings if the agreements are unclear. S6 tells that if the agreements are not committed to that will cause problems and shares a common issue in the region:

*“One thing is that if the partner does not do what is agreed on. But as a major challenge we have considered the fact in cooperation, that people in eastern Finland have this tradition of not having written agreements but only spoken. We think that nothing should be done without written agreements because you have something on paper about what is agreed on. So, this sort of lack of professionalism is a challenge here” (S6)*

S7 would end cooperating if the trust is lost, economic problems are faced and if the partner faces issues in availability of its services. S8 would also cease cooperation if availability issues are faced. S9 would consider challenges in cooperation things such as, conflicts in values, inconsistency and ending of having conversations. S10 mentions having different future goals and visions and different ways of operating. S12 mentions communication issues and if the goals are changed suddenly. S13 tells that if the views start to differ and if the partner would start to

guide him too much, that will end it immediately. S16 tells a few examples of challenges and factors that could end the cooperation.

*“In general, the issues in cooperation include the quality of the equipment used at first, for instance. Like, if I would create a package with another partner for off-road-bikes, then the partners bikes must be on the same level as I do, in terms of quality and shape, because otherwise the customer thinks that why I am paying this prize when I have this bike that is worse. Also, the level of customer service has to match and the pricing which is often challenging because my prices are higher usually and I will not offer my services with a lower price.” (S16)*

The informants were asked if they would want to present an actual example where they would have denied cooperation for some reason. Most of the informants did not have an answer for this question. S4 states that managing a project from far away from the top doesn't help anything and refers to Visit Karelia in the following statement:

*“With these “morning coffees” by Visit Karelia there has been a way of discussion that is only done by reserving floors and rounds for speaking and this has not left room for open discussion, and this has been the reason why I don't participate in these events anymore. In a bigger perspective I don't feel like being part of that network because during my ten years in the field I still don't know what the main messages are here in North Karelian tourism that we want to tell.” (S4)*

S6 told that they once did not buy their office and store from a seller that had a bad reputation. They also don't cooperate with businesses that do it for fun or as a hobby, which are unofficial and that bothers S6:

*“Another thing is that we don't start that sort of cooperation, which is sort of being a hobby, because we do this full-time as our profession. And with that I mean, this kind of asking inconveniently and inconsistently something to somewhere with no clear*



*demands which we cannot do because we have our reservation systems and everything. So basically, this unprofessional and indecisive cooperation we have denied and tried to get rid of.” (S6)*

S7 tells that they have denied cooperation a few times for commitment and availability issues. S9 has denied it when another business owner has asked to provide a service which they don't want to offer anymore. S11 tells that they once denied cooperation because the values were so different.

## 5.2 Visit Karelias´ s role in the development of regional tourism

**Table 4.** Topics mentioned by stakeholders on the role of Visit Karelia in the development of the region's tourism.

Company	Visibility	Uniqueness	Responsibility	Integration	Help	International	Communication	Development
S1	x	x	x					
S2	x		x					
S3				x	x			
S4			x					
S5				x				
S6	x	x						
S7		x	x			x		
S8	x				x			
S9			x	x			x	
S10	x	x	x			x	x	
S11	x	x	x					
S12				x	x			
S13			x		x	x		
S14					x			x
S15				x				
S16	x	x	x			x	x	x

In the figure are presented the topics that the informants mentioned when asked about the role of Visit Karelia in the region's tourism network. The bottom line in the study was that Visit Karelia is the DMO of the North Karelia's tourism network. Visibility was mentioned by 7/16 informants, uniqueness 6/16, integration 5/16, help 5/16, communication 3/16, and development 2/16. These were the aspects that it would bring or allow for the region and for the businesses.

Responsibility was mentioned by 9/16 in a sense that the responsibility for Visit Karelia is significant. International (4/16) meant the fact that it allows the region to reach international markets. Often, the interviewees could not answer immediately to the question of, what is the role of Visit Karelia in the regional tourism, but then reformulating the question and explaining the terms helped them to understand and give an answer.

The informants see Visit Karelia's role as very important and considered several things that it has the responsibility of in general. Most of the informants mentioned visibility being the number one reason for significance. Also, they mostly shared that its purpose is to bring the stakeholders together and to bring up the good things about North Karelia in general and to enhance the popularity of the region (integration).

S9, S10 and S12 think that its role is to be the organization where an entrepreneur can always ask help from in anything. Visit Karelia's job is to push the region forward especially in terms of international marketing. Its responsibility is enormous, as there is no similar actor with such great ability. It should also be able to push the region forward in terms of marketing and communicating actions as well and be the actor in the region who speaks for the businesses and is always on behalf of them.

*"If we think that it's some kind of an organization that speaks on behalf of us, then I think that it should equally enhance the rights and information providing of every single tourism business and actor of this region. Communication and informing about the relevant events happening are the most important responsibilities. And also having this feeling that you are inside a network where everyone is noticed whether you are a bigger or a smaller stakeholder." (S9)*

S3 and S4 think that it has done a good job, especially S3 thinks that their work is exceptional, even better than the services that their own municipality offers. S4 however mentions that the reason why Visit Karelia is struggling is because Visit Finland has left too much responsibility for

it to handle by on their own. S7 thinks that if the funding for Visit Karelia would be better, then the struggles would not be faced anymore.

*“In North Karelia, the common goal has been to make the role of Visit Karelia crucial. – This has been how the development has been going on lately, but the voice of the businesses has not been heard very well. Visit Finland is also crucial, and it guides and cooperates with regional organizations, and that’s something they wish to do, but then the responsibility to hear the businesses is left for the regional DMOs, and it has not been working well lately.” (S4)*

S8, which was established in 2020 were not familiar with the term and only replied what they are getting from Visit Karelia at the moment and what they would want from them in the future:

*“We have got this visibility, which is important for a new business as we started just a year ago, so we are still just in the beginning of building our business. -- And from there we have got just basic support and these small tips on how to proceed with everything and like what to post on SMS and what kind of events and products to sell. Also, these so-called “morning coffees” have been great, which are open to everyone. So basically, something similar we would hope to have, to have some guidance in what kind of marketing to implement.” (S8)*

S7 and S10 think that the main focus should be in the international markets and on enhancing the popularity of the region. For these businesses it was clear that the international customers were the most important customer segment and the most important source of income as for many others as well. Many of the informants also agreed that there has not been a clear goal on behalf of the DMO that then what are the more specific international focus groups. Some told that it has changed over time and that has caused confusion in the stakeholders.

*“When it comes to the small businesses, the fact is that they don´t have the resources, time or money to market certain areas internationally and tell that what do we have here in this region. Hence, the significance of the DMO is very important “(S10)*

S13 on the other hand believes that the Visit Karelia has the ability to help businesses in international marketing and is satisfied with how they are implementing it at the moment:

*“Of course, they can push us forward in terms of marketing, and to help us with that as well. My view is that there are already diverse tourism industry experts working out there (Visit Karelia) and that they have strong competence on international marketing. They definitely have and should have the know-how on that area, because us small businesses don´t have that.” (S13)*

S11 Agrees with the previous statements in a sense that the smaller businesses like themselves cannot do everything by themselves. S11 also thinks that the Visit Karelia´s purpose is to bring visibility to the region and to the businesses. For S11 the websites of Visit Karelia are important, and they should be giving decent information for the travel agents and tourists about the region:

*“ There should be everything presented in the websites clearly, easily, formally, truthfully and in an attracting way – like presenting the actors and their services. Also, they should keep all the relevant information up to date.” (S11)*

S15 had a view on the Visit Karelia´s role that no other informant mentioned. S15 believed that the most important objective is to connect the businesses to cooperate in the region and that will cause several advantages:

*“ At its best the DMOs role is to connect businesses to cooperate, even from different industries, and that allows for tourists to stay longer on average in North Karelia if we think this in the bigger picture.” (S15)*

### 5.2.1. Stakeholders' operations with Visit Karelia and other organizations

The stakeholders were asked about their current situation with Visit Karelia and other organizations in general and whether they had been in touch with them in the past. In the following table there are presented the results of this topic. It was not specified however, whether these actions were considered as collaboration, but to understand what they felt like what was an actor or stakeholder significant enough to consider the actions important to see what they would think about commitment and collaboration in comparison to just being in terms or in touch with another actor in any way.

**Table 5.** List of stakeholders and operations in terms with the informants.

Company	Visit Karelia	Visit Finland	KETI	Bókun	Äksyt Ämmät	Villi Pohjola	Projects	Kolin matkailu
S1	x		x					
S2	x							
S3	x							
S4	x	x					x	
S5	x							
S6	x						x	x
S7	x		x				x	
S8					x			
S9	x	x						x
S10	x							x
S11	x			x				
S12	x							
S13	x							x
S14								
S15	x						x	
S16	x				x	x		

Most of the informants had been in contact with Visit Karelia. Also, S1 had been in touch with the municipality of Joensuu and Tohmajärvi. S2 had been in touch with the municipality of

Kontiolahti. Some of the informants claimed here, while interviewing about this topic, that they considered these actions collaboration, even though they barely had done anything significant with them, especially with Visit Karelia. Most of them said that they had something going on with them, but these actions were minor procedures with nothing concrete basis behind it, without most importantly any commitment to anything.

### 5.2.2. Cooperation and commitment in tourism network

The informants were asked what they think commitment and cooperation mean in terms of a regional tourism network. In the following table are presented the mentioned aspects by the informants that were brought up from this question. Benefit means that they were considered as beneficial. Fundamental meant they were fundamental aspects. The other aspects were acquired from cooperation and commitment.

**Table 6.** Informants' opinion on commitment and cooperation in a regional tourism network.

Company	Benefit	Fundamental	Trust	Recommendation	Quality	Communication	Agreement
S1	x	x	x				
S2	x						
S3			x	x			
S4	x	x					
S5				x	x		
S6		x	x			x	
S7			x	x	x		
S8		x	x	x		x	x
S9				x		x	
S10		x		x		x	
S11			x				x
S12	x			x			x
S13							
S14			x				x
S15		x				x	x
S16			x		x	x	

S1 considers that cooperation is not a bad thing and that it does not take away the potential customers, instead it does the opposite. S1 also thinks that commitment is obvious and fundamental and that it should not even be a question – and the meaning of it is basically sticking to your word and trusting on your colleague that it´s going to do what is promised and vice versa.

S3 thinks that it means that you cannot think only about yourself, but that you recommend everyone wholeheartedly knowing that the other one does the same, and one can feel pride from it and about the whole destination as well. S3 also shares a story about what should not happen:

*“The worst example of this comes from the last summer when a tourist couple traveling with a boat arrived at the café in a harbor and they wanted to have this traditional meal of mashed potatoes and vendace (fish) which you can get from most of the places. This entrepreneur did not serve this meal but did not tell that the restaurant next to them did serve it, however, while knowing that. This left a terrible taste for these tourists as they eventually found this out.” (S3)*

S4 adds that everyone should understand their importance, but it can only work if both parties can see the benefits, otherwise it won´t happen. S5 tells a very interesting view on this matter which is quite common in his type of business:

*“It´s an absolute necessity that the business that you recommend has the expected quality otherwise the customer will not come back to us. If I recommend this business that I know that does not offer the same quality that I do, then there´s no point of recommending it. This is because then the customer thinks that why did I recommend this if this is way worse, and that´s bad for me.” (S5)*

S6 adds that commitment means for instance participating in the so called “morning coffee” events organized by Visit Karelia, and this is the responsibility of the businesses but then Visit Karelia should commit by informing the stakeholders about everything happening in the region. In terms of Collaboration, S6 thinks that collaboration should be done in bigger terms with other stakeholders, because it’s a must as nobody can survive on their own. S7 shares the same idea that everyone should support each other, and that collaboration is important and it’s not happening enough. When it comes to commitment, S7 has an interesting opinion about businesses that are not doing the business seriously:

*“It’s important that everyone commits and supports each other when it comes to tourism and especially accommodation services. Here we have two kinds of entrepreneurs: people who make a living out of this and then the people who just rent their cottages when they are not using it – and those people are not taking all this seriously; it’s just their hobby and they don’t commit, but us entrepreneurs do.” (S7)*

S9 thinks that in their region, at Koli, the collaboration has not been obvious to most. Instead, everyone has been seen as a competitor and S9 think it’s a view that is old, because she adds that it’s better to think about the customers best as it benefits every stakeholder at the end of the day. The key that has now released Koli from this conservative thinking is thanks to the several new businesses that have fortunately brought these new thoughts.

When it comes to the Koli region, a few agree with S9, like S6 and S10 about the fact that collaboration is important. S9 brought the conservative stakeholders’ view as it has been running during the times when things were not as good in terms of collaboration and has seen this change of mentality. It’s interesting to see this because S9’s claim seems valid and clear change of thinking has happened therefore as S6 and S10 not only think that it’s important, but it is even a must, a key to survive.

S11 agrees that in order for collaboration to work, there must be commitment and rules of action. S12 has been collaborating with a few businesses already and think that collaboration is



pushing one forward instead of harming with a competitor mindset. S13 added interestingly only that collaboration is difficult nowadays because many of the businesses don't know what commitment is and what it actually means and then they don't commit enough or the right way. S14 thinks that commitment means written agreements and that one keeps their word, as many don't stick to their promises.

*"It means that we should do actual agreements and not just talking. Like, for instance, if Visit Karelia promises to market us in an exhibition and markets other businesses as well, then I expect that our business is seen, because the thing is that a lot is said but you can't assume it's going to happen. This is how it is here to my knowledge when talking with the network's stakeholders. These basic things are still yet to be embraced, if we compare to Lapland where this is obvious." (S14)*

### **5.3 Stakeholders' knowledge on the current situation of Visit Karelia**

The informants were eventually asked the following questions to determine how aware they were of the current situation of Visit Karelia and whether they knew the organization: 1. Do you have enough information about Visit Karelia, and does it share enough about itself? 2. Do you know the people working for Visit Karelia and what they do? 3. Do you feel that Visit Karelia has a bad reputation based on what has happened before? 4. Has Visit Karelia charged you from its services? 5. Are you using or have used similar organizations services, like local and/or regional? Here are the results.

#### **5.3.1. Information about Visit Karelia**

Here are the results of the first question related to the current situation of Visit Karelia. Some of the informants replied "maybe" or similar, hence the three options were displayed here. The informants were asked whether they had enough information about Visit Karelia.

**Table 7.** Information about Visit Karelia.

Company	Yes, I do	No, I don't	I don't know
S1			x
S2		x	
S3	x		
S4	x		
S5	x		
S6	x		
S7	x		
S8	x		
S9		x	
S10			x
S11			x
S12	x		
S13	x		
S14			x
S15			x
S16	x		

### 5.3.2. Informants' familiarity of Visit Karelia

In the following table are the results related to the question regarding if the informants know the employees of Visit Karelia.

**Table 8.** Informants' familiarity regarding the staff of Visit Karelia.

Company	I know all of them	I know one or a few	I don't know anyone
S1		x	
S2			x
S3	x		
S4	x		
S5			x
S6		x	
S7	x		
S8		x	
S9			x
S10		x	
S11		x	

S12			x
S13			x
S14		x	
S15		x	
S16		x	

The ones who knew someone from the staff, did not mention the current CEO at the time, but the other employees only.

### 5.3.3. Reputation of Visit Karelia, costs, and use of similar services

Half of the informants think that the reputation is bad at the moment. The rest thought it was good or did not know whether it was good or bad.

**Table 9.** Informants' opinion on the reputation of Visit Karelia.

Company	The reputation is good	The reputation is bad	I don't know
S1	x		
S2		x	
S3		x	
S4		x	
S5	x		
S6	x		
S7		x	
S8	x		
S9		x	
S10			x
S11			x
S12			x
S13		x	
S14			x
S15		x	
S16		x	

S6 points out that it's not bad, but businesses tend to get left behind if they are not active and it's not Visit Karelia's fault. S7 also reminds that the regions situation is not to blame Visit Karelia only and they are doing their job as well as it's possible:

*“We have been offering accommodation here for over 40 years and the fact is that in here in North Karelia we are not moving anywhere and haven’t if we look the whole region. Whose fault is that – that is something where entrepreneurs should also learn to look in the mirror and be more active, not only Visit Karelia. More money should be available, as we are operating with such small amounts in comparison to Savo and Lapland -regions.” (S7)*

S9 and S10 tell that it’s bad because no one knows what they are up to, and the unclarity bothers several stakeholders. S16 thinks the reputation is bad but it’s hard to say whose fault it is.

### **Costs and use of similar services**

When asked whether Visit Karelia has charged the informants from its services, everyone told that no fees have been charged. When it comes to use of similar services and other DMOs, S6 told that they have used services of the municipality of Juuka. S13 mentioned Visit Joensuu, S14 Play Kontiolahti, and S15 Business Joensuu, KETI, and municipality of Ilomantsi. S16 has cooperated with Play Kontiolahti and with tourism association of Ilomantsi.

## **5.4 Stakeholders view on the definition of a regional tourism network**

The informants were asked how they would define a regional tourism network in their opinion. What does it include and what does it consist of geographically or in other terms and what network they are part of? The responses varied a lot and here are the results.

**Table 10.** Informants' definition of a regional tourism network.

Company	Not limited to regions or municipalities	Limited to municipalities only	Limited to the region's borders
S1	x		
S2		x	
S3		x	
S4	x		
S5	x		
S6			x
S7			x
S8			x
S9	x	x	
S10	x		
S11		x	x
S12			x
S13	x		
S14			
S15		x	
S16	x		

S1 Thinks that the business is not included in the region of North Karelia tourism-wise but in the region of eastern Finland which includes Kuopio and Kainuu. S1 thinks tourism should not be divided to municipalities or regions politically or regionally. A smaller network that S1 believes to be part of is the Joensuu region and then from that S1 thinks in the middle is the Central Carelia (Rääkkylä, Kitee, Hammaslahti, Tohmajärvi.). S2 thinks that every municipality works on their own and if they would connect even with a few others then it would help a lot:

*"I think still that Ilomantsi's entrepreneurs and Kontiolahti, they are doing their own stuff, and if they would just combine their resources, then the operating would be much more efficient. I don't understand why we can't be more active on this matter. This culture of internal favoring has not changed. This region should be developed together, and not by doing everything secretly alone." (S2)*

S4 and S5 also don't think that limiting tourism on regional borders is good for them or the industry. S4's business is focused on the lake Saimaa -area and Visit Karelia does not talk about Saimaa and hence, S4 thinks it's not a good idea. S4 hopes instead that there would be more flexibility in that sense and that the marketing should be done with content and values being the

priority not the regions borders. S5 says that he used to belong in the regions network before much more actively but not anymore. Instead S5 feels that the business is part of Kainuu and Lieksa much more in terms of tourism because similar businesses are located in these areas only.

S7 and S8 feel on the other hand that they are part of the North Karelian network but don't mention how to define it or what does it consist of. S6 thinks also that marketwise, they are part of the international markets rather than Finnish markets. S9 thinks that the regions should be divided to much larger regions, but also says that they are part of Koli's network locally and also part of eastern Finland in international markets.

S10 answers that Koli and the Pielinen region are its own region and North Karelia another one, and they should not be divided municipality wise. S11 continues with the same agenda thinking that Southern Finland is their network and North Karelia is also but in "smaller terms". In terms of cooperation S11 thinks however that Ilomantsi is their network. S16 had a different view compared to others:

*"I think a regional network consists of organizations that benefit the stakeholders of tourism business in the area; and there can be several of them like we do. I think Visit Karelia is the DMO of the region and we have DMCs like Villi Pohjola and Äksyt Ämmät. Then we have bunch of different businesses from various sectors of tourism which are divided harshly to transportation, accommodation, restaurants, entertainment-services and to businesses that have several elements from these." (S16)*

The results here show that the stakeholders view themselves as part of the smaller networks, and they are more integrated to those. They can also see themselves as part of a larger tourism network that is not divided to the region's borders geographically; instead, the borders are perceived from the tourism perspective.

The stakeholders were then asked whether they felt like they were or have been a part of a regional tourism network. S1 tells that there has not been a need for this kind of a networking, as the only cooperation that they have done is with Visit Karelia and with only a couple projects. S2 tells that she has been in only one and during the pandemic the networking has become challenging. S3 mentions the networks of Women power and Löyhä and S4 Slow travel network and the network of Northern Saimaa. S6 tells that she created a network of women entrepreneurs. S7 tells that it has been business that prefers networking and has done it for long with local businesses, but the pandemic has ceased everything indefinitely. S8 mentions Äksyt Ämmät, Women power and Business Joensuu. S9 feels being part of the network of Koli's tourism businesses but says that does not want to network anymore because it is enough. S10 tells exactly the same thing as S9 and S11 on the other hand mentions only Visit Finland besides of Ilomantsi's entrepreneurs. S13 mentions the Koli's tourism network. S15 tells that they have being in a several networks for decades and S16 mentioned Villi Pohjola and Äksyt Ämmät.

## **5.5 Benefits of the services of Visit Karelia for the companies**

The informants were asked about how they think that they can benefit from the services of Visit Karelia at the moment. Even though many seemed that they would have something concrete to say they could not tell what the benefit was that they are acquiring. The list of benefits was small, but on the other hand the informants could give examples of what is going wrong, what has gone wrong and what they should do instead even though they did not seem that upset. Half of the informants did not mention any benefits. The informants that did not mention any benefits, were mostly the ones that did not cooperate with Visit Karelia anymore or have not. Eventually when asked about the benefits and disadvantages about cooperating with Visit Karelia, the informants could answer these benefits poorly. Instead, they responded with improvement suggestions and only a few actual benefits acquired concretely from Visit Karelia were presented.

**Table 11.** List of benefits perceived for the businesses by the services of Visit Karelia.

Company	Cooperation	Guidance	Projects	Marketing	Visibility	Funding	Resources	No benefits perceived
S1	x	x						
S2								x
S3			x					
S4				x				
S5								x
S6			x	x				
S7								x
S8		x			x	x		
S9								x
S10								x
S11		x					x	
S12	x	x						
S13	x		x		x			
S14								x
S15								x
S16								x

Interestingly, the informants in answering the first questions about the role of the DMO, mostly mentioned that they are satisfied with what Visit Karelia was doing right now, even though it was not the question. S1 stated that it brings cooperation, guidelines, and fundamentals on how to act as a business.

S4 claims that all the project-funding is directed only to particular companies and nobody else. They agree that no harm is being done, but they clearly are not happy with the situation at the moment.

*"It depends on what kind of projects there are and what kind of goals have been set for them. As we all know Visit Karelia is not a selling-platform but only a marketing-organization, which is good however, it's also positive that someone markets North Karelia collectively. -But it's still odd that all the international contacts acquired with project-funding, they are not shared with the businesses, except for (mentions by name a company in the region) to my knowledge." (S4)*



S5 gives an interesting point as the situation with S5 is quite unique. He cannot tell any benefits as he does not feel that the DMO can help the business much, because the business is internationally known, and the word-of-mouth is enough for the business to acquire more than enough paying customers.

*“We have done cooperation so far, a little bit, but I don´t know how much it actually brings customers or can bring. I believe that if the people could get to know that we can take these little groups or groups in general, that would help, and Visit Karelia could help us with that” (S5)*

The informants' answers show that half of them cannot see any benefits of working together with Visit Karelia and the rest only a little bit. They mostly are not happy about it or cannot see how to benefit from it and it explains the lack of cooperation. Clearly every business has their own goals and issues to solve, but they don´t believe that Visit Karelia can help them – hence, the lack of trust in their competence is stressed by most of the informants.

Informants from near Juuka, Lieksa and Koli were trusting the local DMOs like Kolin matkailuyhdistys Oy and other local projects. This was the connecting factor for these informants to not see the benefits of Visit Karelia. Also, the unknown businesses that used to cooperate did not see the benefits for most of the cases, but some of the newest businesses were able to see a few. Also, those who could not feel being part of the regional network, but the local, or something else, were not able to see the benefits. The motivation to not want to cooperate was connected to the ability to see the benefits from the services of Visit Karelia. These results can be seen from the upcoming chapters. Also, the will to believe on the benefits was linked to how new the company was as the older businesses tended to believe on them much less.

S9 told that there can be no benefits if the region´s DMO is operating under a bigger authority. The communication in the region has been very poor in the recent years but a change is probably happening now.

*"If there 's too little resources and the right-minded people that could see things from an entrepreneur's standpoint, then there are no benefits. I also believe that if the DMO is funded and led by another organization then it unfortunately impacts the decision-making negatively. Everyone will agree with me about the fact that the important decisions are being made somewhere else inside closed doors from the businesses." (S9)*

S10 and S16 agree with S9 about the fact that the goals have been unclear. S16 wants to see that the promised goals will be achieved, otherwise there is no point in collaborating. S10 says that it does not give any benefits, and that it is impossible to know what the role of the DMO is and what it is capable of. S10 says also that every project that is going on in North Karelia is focused on achieving the same goals at the end of the day which is not useful.

*" Especially if we consider the development projects of the municipalities like Lieke for instance, it 's hard to understand what it is and what are their goals. Every other similar instance has the same functions and goals and procedures but with different names. On top of that, the benefits and the results of these projects are not utilized or shared with anyone." (S10)*

S11 and S12 still believe though that there are actual benefits like consulting, contacts, additional resources, and guidance. They also agree that if the websites of Visit Karelia display false information and if its general situation is unstable, it would not be beneficial for the businesses and would prevent cooperation.

S15 believed that the benefits are as great as the stakeholders is willing to commit. S15 is thankful for the DMO for various reasons and the view is totally different from other experienced stakeholders. S15 thinks still though that harm is caused if there would be multiple DMOs in a region simultaneously, because it would cause conflict and several disagreements – and therefore ideally it would be desirable to trust only one DMO at a time.

*“The benefit is always as great as the company’s will to commit. In my opinion the more you participate and be active, the more benefit you get. Of course, the businesses personal goals should be considered as well and they (Visit Karelia) support the businesses in many ways also, so then the passive actors benefit as well though, as a matter of fact.” (S15)*

S16 considers that the benefit-level has been on a negative level. He was never aware what the goals were, and the goals were never met while several goals were set without anyone having the responsibility to achieve them.

*“I was never sure what was happening; sometimes we were going to conquer the central Europe and sometimes the Chinese markets. I would love to be part in their projects and such, but only if they are actually useful – otherwise it’s a waste of time and energy.” (S16)*

### **5.5.1. Stakeholders view on the benefits of cooperation**

The informants were asked on this topic if they felt that cooperation with other stakeholders would be beneficial and could it bring new opportunities, what are reasons why they started cooperation, and what happens when the cooperation is achieved. The results are presented in this chapter and the mentioned perceived benefits that were brought up from these questions are presented in the following table. The informants did not see as many benefits when asked what the benefits of cooperation are. The benefits were brought up from the different questions and the responses were different in every question. Most of the benefits were seen in the last two questions. It was interesting that the informants did not bring the benefits up until it was asked what initiates the cooperation and what happens when cooperation is achieved, not when asked what the benefits of it are. This can be because of the order of the questions, even though the questions were related to the same topic. Also, the later questions did allow to answer more concretely which allowed that to happen.

**Table 12.** Perceived benefits of informants on cooperation.

Company	Customer flow	Mutual products	Mutual employees	Mutual projects	Help/recommendation	Flexibility	Communication
S1	x		x	x	x		x
S2	x	x					
S3		x	x		x		
S4			x	x	x		
S5						x	
S6				x	x		x
S7	x	x			x		x
S8					x		
S9	x	x		x			
S10	x	x		x	x		
S11	x	x			x		x
S12	x						
S13	x	x				x	x
S14		x	x		x		
S15					x		x
S16	x				x	x	

S2 thinks that cooperation is useful always because it brings attractiveness to the region. S4 says that it can be helpful, and they also for instance have mutual employees with another business and they also have been in several cooperative projects with other businesses. S5 brings up its issue again with cooperation, which is that they don't need it. Otherwise S5 thinks that it would bring flexibility but at the moment it cannot be done because the level of quality is so different compared to others. S6 brings a positive insight as it says that they have been able to cut their marketing expenses with marketing cooperation. S6 says that with cooperation it's possible to stay up to date of what others do and what are the current trends and that helps to plan themes for certain period of time.

S7 tells that the situation in the KETI-region is improving and that is important to them, because S7 is recommending other even though not everyone does it. S8 adds that they also recommend others, and that cooperation allows campaigns to happen with DMOs and other businesses. S10 tells that cooperation is beneficial, and why they want to recommend others and why it's useful:

*"I don't see that Visit Karelia has helped us with those (networking, cooperation) at all. I can see the benefit for everyone coming from the fact that if we offer only accommodation and restaurant services, then people here want to do something also, and we don't have an interest to grow our business and provide entertainment and experiences and activities. Instead, we collaborate with others and recommend those who offer these activities, and this gives the best end-result for the whole destination."*

(S10)

### **5.5.2. Causes for the initiation of cooperation**

S1, S3 and S2 agree that the businesses cannot survive on their own, especially. S1 thinks that they don't have enough information and knowledge, and also it allows for you to have more relationships and it gains more visibility for the business. S7 shares an example about the initiation, and it begun once for them with another business where they wanted to have a change in their selection of amusements, and this allowed for them to have a different selection since then because this other business had something that S7 didn't have. S8 tells that they began cooperation because they felt that they would gain more visibility and were able to get more valuable tips and help from more experienced businesses. S9 told an interesting reason, which could have helped other as well:

*"We have gained like this sort of courage for this thanks to this project related to development of businesses by ELY-keskus. This is because the employee is phenomenal and because they can see the situation from an outsider's perspective. She has been here and tried to get to know the businesses and we have had meetings together, and basically these facts that she was an outsider and had the will to get to know us and because she was the right-minded person for this, is the reason why we begun cooperation."* (S9)

S10 tells again that the reason for cooperation was that they could offer more services to the customer by the destination, not by themselves and because this allowed for the destination to have a more sustainable future ahead. S11 tells that the only reason for cooperation was to have

visibility through Visit Karelia and then to get the websites to their websites. S16 told that the reasons for beginning cooperation were a bigger customer flows, need of resources and staff. S16 told that he is then able to get something that they don't have and that is fine because you should not get everything by yourself. You can utilize your partners and then other part benefits as well, and everyone after all.

### **5.5.3. Consequences after joining cooperation**

The informants were asked about their views on what they think will happen if cooperation happens in general; what will transpire and what are the consequences.

S1 thinks that the business becomes more visible, and that help is available more easily and that it's easier to attend events for instance when you know people. S2 said only that it brings consistency on the customer flow. S3 said that it brings more flexibility on some level because then they are able to have more reserve staff. S6 said that then they are getting recommended by others and this causes a snowball effect where everyone recommends everyone and therefore the region develops.

S7 told that it brings change of information, new products and more resources to sales and marketing. S7 highlighted that cooperation is being done to get more sales. S8 said that it enforces the businesses, and the region improves for the better for the people and businesses and this brings more visibility and visitors. S9 answered that then the customers can get a better overview on the services that are available in the region. S10 said that then the business grows, and the on-season can be extended. S11 thinks that then it's possible to get on track on what is happening in the region and learn new things and get to know other entrepreneurs.

## 6 Discussion and main findings

The purpose of the study was to increase understanding of companies' potential obstacles for collaborating in a regional tourism network and particularly with Visit Karelia. By understanding the issues, Visit Karelia could make enhancements on how to be more attractive for the companies to want to collaborate. The study was implemented as an intrinsic case study, with 16 interviews being conducted with the North Karelian tourism business entrepreneurs. Here, the main findings of the study are presented in relation to the research questions.

### 6.1 Reasons for denying cooperation and networking

Several researchers have studied the formation of collaboration and why it's important to happen. The general reason why tourism businesses collaborate and pursue to do that and should, is because it provides everyone the possibility to overcome challenges that can't be dealt alone while also providing endless possibilities for business and destination development and is therefore always considered as positive rather than negative in every aspect. (Komppula 1996, Komppula 2000, Krolikowska et al. 2019, Dredge 2006, Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino 2017, Burgos & Mertens 2017, Bichler & Lösch 2019, Konu & Tuohino 2014, Cehan, Eva & Iatu 2021, Keyim 2018, Ammirato et al. 2015, Saito & Ruhanen 2017, Chimirri 2020, Krakover & Wang 2007, Ihm & Castillo 2017.) The situation in North Karelia wasn't as it should in terms of collaboration and Komppula (1996/2000) has studied the reasons why it can fail.

The results of this study show that there are several differences on how entrepreneurs see the benefits of collaboration or at all, and hence is the reason why some businesses don't collaborate in the region. The reasons why the businesses wouldn't collaborate are partly similar to the previous research by Komppula (1996/2000). The informants brought up possible obstacles for collaboration to not happen in the region as follows: financial issues, social bonds (personal chemistries, jealousy), conservative operation culture, fear of change and competition, unsimilar values and quality of service and products, lack of time, trust issues, lack of written agreements, lack of long-time clear goals and strategy, lack of getting your voice heard and

unprofessional business procedures. These are somewhat similar to the previous research done in the region by Komppula (1996) who concluded the reasons for collaboration to not happen to be: lack of trust between people, jealousy, fear of conflict, disappointment and extra work, lack of resources and not being interested about collaboration, political unbalance, exchange rate, inflation, international relationships and/or structure of the market and lack of information of the company. (Komppula 1996, 45 & 138-139).

Some of the informants have been cooperating before but not anymore, as there are reasons why cooperation can cease after it has been initiated. The informants revealed reasons for that to happen as an actual instance or as an example for that to happen. The reasons were economic challenges, unequal work sharing, ceasing to stick to the agreements, lack of communication, loss of trust, change of agreed goals and services. These mostly differ on the previous research done by Komppula (1996) as the research done revealed the reasons to be: cultural issues, slower decision-making, disagreements on sharing the profit and on sharing the funding sources as well as the tensions among staff are some of the reasons, disagreement on investments, lack of trust, lack of certainty and lack of customer satisfaction (Komppula 1996, 50).

## **6.2 Stakeholders contribution to the network's collaborative actions**

Based on the results of the study, the contribution by the stakeholders to the regions tourism network is not done because the benefits are not seen. Also, the reason is that North Karelia is not considered as a network in terms of tourism. The entrepreneurs see the networks being these smaller networks inside North Karelia or North Karelia being part of a bigger region/network. The lack of unity and not knowing where to belong and who to trust and who leads the way, are the main reasons for these actions not to be taken. When asked about how the informants would define a regional tourism network and what is included in North Karelia's network, the scattered image is clearly seen as the responses differ so much.



Previous research indicates that the goal of the tourism networks and their collaborative action is to provide the end-product of the destination/region together as a group. (Johns et al. 2004, Jenkins et al. 2011, Wang & Xiang 2007, Baggio et al. 2007, Pinto & Kastenholtz 2011, Zach & Hill 2017, Komppula 2000). This attitude is mostly not seen in the results and enforces the fact that the region is scattered and why services of Visit Karelia are not utilized. The diversity of businesses can cause trouble, however, because their goals differ so much, especially in a such large tourism network like North Karelia, and hence their actions can be understood. (Chimirri 2020, Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino 2017, Pinto & Kastenholtz 2017 Pilving et al 2021.)

### 6.3 Being part of the network

The next research questions were: How do the companies perceive their role in the regional network and why do they perceive their role in the network in the way they do? The informants don't feel being part of the North Karelian tourism network because they don't recognize it existing as it can be seen in the previous chapter clearly. They cannot describe clearly the definition for a regional tourism network and as seen before, they feel belonging to other tourism networks that is not the North Karelian tourism network. They don't feel belonging to the network because of based on their responses, they feel separated from the communication and influence of Visit Karelia. This is partly in relation to the study by Komppula (2000) which also was related to the region where it is stated that every business and actor in the region belongs to different local and product-related networks that are smaller and based inside the regional tourism network. –These smaller networks then actually form the actual regional tourism network. (Komppula 2000, 49.)

Some do have positive feelings, and some don't because others are remembered and others feel forgotten since they are not contacted and therefore feel as they have to go on their own or contact other helping organizations, as their own municipality for instance. The opinions are so divided and polarized there cannot be seen any unity in the region as the area is geographically so large which makes it difficult for Visit Karelia. It also has caused the situation that these smaller networks inside North Karelia are the ones where open discussion and networking is

happening. Some of the informants still wanted to highlight their own responsibility and not blame Visit Karelia for all that is happening, as the businesses are also to blame for this in some people's minds.

#### **6.4 Enhancing actions to allow the companies to commit and collaborate**

The final research question was what would facilitate the North Karelian tourism companies to commit and collaborate with Visit Karelia and with the regional network?

From the study it's possible now to understand why the companies behave like they do.

Why companies collaborate and commit to the networks is because the companies commit to networks rather than companies. Secondly, the attributes and goals of the company matter to the company that is deciding whether wanting to commit and cooperate with the company. (Komppula 2000) Also, commitment has to be considered as an absolute necessity to have if wanting to commit, otherwise it's not happening. (Gil-Saura et al. 2009). The companies also want to be part of decision making, and therefore coordination and equal share of information and power between everyone is important. (Ladkin & Bertamini 2002). This is simply because the nature of the industry is so vulnerable because of the large number of stakeholders and diversity of them. (Ladkin & Bertamini 2002, Komppula 1996, Burgos & Mertens 2017).

The aforementioned points are important for companies' motivation to commit and collaborate and those requirements must be fulfilled if that is expected to happen. Based on the results of this study, the requirements are not met. The study is in line with Komppula (2000) when it comes to network commitment, as the informants are seen to be willing to commit to their own networks much often rather than specific companies or DMOs like Visit Karelia. The attributes and goals of the company were also considered important and hence, the lack of clear goals for Visit Karelia and for the whole region in general was highlighted. The companies also didn't feel the commitment to be absolutely necessary, as they felt that cooperation was important but the culture of believing to survive on your own was highly common. Some of the informants felt left alone and the lack of belonging and communication, and the feeling of not mattering can also be

seen in the results of the study. Based on the results of the study and previous research, the keys for the stakeholders to commit and cooperate in the region of North Karelia would be: 1. Enhancement of communication where every stakeholder is contacted by Visit Karelia, and a change of attitudes for the stakeholders when they would activate themselves to take action to get inside the networks. 2. Having clear goals and strategy would make the stakeholders collaborate and commit as many stress the fact that development and competitiveness are not seen and have not been seen in years compared to other regions. 3. A strong leader that can involve everyone and present believable goals which would make the stakeholders believe for an actual development in the region. 4. The stakeholders should get involved in decision-making more often and equally.

## **7 Conclusions**

### **7.1 Theoretical conclusions**

The possible reasons why cooperation can be declined in the region were based on trust, commitment, and communication issues, but values and chemistries between people were also important factors in the matter. However, the benefits of cooperation were considered as being able to get help, mutual products, recommendations, and more customers. Benefits were rarely seen with being in cooperation with Visit Karelia. Komppula (2000) argued that the regional network was built on networks that were local and based on products or services rather than individual actors. Also, the regions' operating actors included only a few larger companies with bigger resources and from local and matter-based networks. Therefore, the goals of the region should be built on the goals of the local networks. (Komppula 2000, 249.)

The findings of the study are in accordance with these conclusions as the companies would not see the region of North Karelia as a network itself in any terms. The companies consider their local networks as networks and more significant and wanted to commit on them much more. The companies were not aware of the operations and competence of Visit Karelia and were expecting it to be the actor taking action in terms of initiating cooperation. The companies were

polarized to parties where the other side was on the side of Visit Karelia and the other not. Still the benefits of it were not seen, even though cooperation was considered beneficial. The operating culture was emphasized and based on it the cooperation has not been popular and fundamental way of acting in the region. New companies, however, are changing the way of thinking about surviving on their own and seeing others as competitors.

The study offers new information for the region and updates the current situation as similar issues have been studied over twenty years ago, when partly similar findings were discovered. However, even though that information is partly still relevant, this study offers new insights and reveals what the situation is at the moment. The times have been different during both of these studies and this study shows that the region is still partly living in the past and has not developed in terms of collaboration and commitment. However, new possible barriers for collaboration to not happen were still found. The new possible barriers were related to lack of direction, strategy and goals, but also to not getting noticed and not having similar values or quality of services. In the previous studies, collaboration was not considered meaningful itself and also fear of additional work and effort were brought up, but not in this study, however. Personal chemistries and lack of trust were still a relevant issue. The new possible obstacles show that collaboration is not embraced in the region as new possibilities have been found to not collaborate even though some previous obstacles are not considered anymore. New ways of thinking can be seen as collaboration benefits are recognized, but not with Visit Karelia. Hence, the study shows that collaboration is seen as positive, and the companies would want to collaborate but with an organization that does not have the attributes that fall into the category with the preventing factors for collaboration.

## **7.2 Managerial conclusions**

Visit Karelia can utilize this information in a way that, as mentioned in the findings, many companies felt forgotten as they are not contacted. However, companies should also take the initiative for the discussion and collaboration. Hence, companies in the region can now understand the opinions of others and how they perceive their situation, and hopefully that can

bring up discussion and new thoughts on this matter. Visit Karelia should focus on having clearer and more believable goals and commit to them as many still seem not knowing where the region is going and what are the long-term goals. The companies should also be integrated to the decision-making and get more informed about what is happening. It should be understood that every local network's goals should be considered as their own and take those into account when planning the long-term goals for the region.

From the study, it can now be seen that the whole region is also too large geographically for one DMO to have responsibility of, especially if its resources don't match with the amount it would need. The funding, people and the attitudes are so divided physically, which causes that the mentality and togetherness is missing. The potential is right there, but without the funding, change of attitude and willing people, change will not be seen. The solution could be having a local DMO in the smaller regions inside North Karelia.

### **7.3 Evaluation of the study and suggestions for future research**

When it comes to the trustworthiness of the study, in terms of credibility, the informants were not always aware of all the terms, even though they were explained multiple times. The questions brought up a lot of emotion and it was presumed that the informants would not want to share everything they knew or not want to respond to all the questions. However, most of the questions were answered, and "hiding" from the questions was not seen for the most part. The informants were aware of the responses publicity and who would be able to see them, and that for the commissioner the responses would be anonymous. They knew that Visit Karelia would see the answers as anonymous and hence thought that their opinion is important and wanted to have an influence. It was also positive that the sample was geographically divided in terms of transferability. The study was focused on one region and case only which makes the findings to only apply to the region's situation. The sample was in terms of confirmability not as neutral as most of the informants were not from older companies. Instead, they were younger or ones that were mostly unknown. Companies that tended to be active in terms of collaboration, but not anymore were not interviewed as much that was needed. This matters in terms of dependability

because their responses would have affected the findings. These companies were sent requests for the interviews the same as the others, but they were not willing to accept or respond.

### **7.3.1. Future research**

Similar research would be needed on other regions to see what possible obstacles for collaboration in other regions there are and what could be the enhancing procedures. Also, it would be useful to study the possible obstacles in smaller networks and in the local tourism networks. Also, a study with municipalities that were not present in this study would be useful to have with the municipalities of Heinävesi and Nurmes. This is because these municipalities were not part of the study as representatives from those municipalities were not able to participate as interviewees. When it comes to Southern Karelia, Northern-Savonia and Kainuu, it would be useful to know whether those regions see themselves as networks in terms of tourism. On the other hand, a generalizable study including several regions would also be useful.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Outline of interview questions in English.

- 1.1 Informants name and position.
2. Obstacles for collaboration with Visit Karelia and with the network.
  - 2.1 What problems or challenges can be faced after joining cooperation?
  - 2.2 What could be a possible obstacle for cooperating with Visit Karelia?
  - 2.3 Has there been an event where you have declined cooperation for some reason, for instance a particular event, company, or a person?
3. Companies perception of their role in the regional network.
  - 3.1 What is the role of Visit Karelia in developing the regions tourism?
  - 3.2 Have you been in any contact with Visit Karelia?
  - 3.3 What does commitment and cooperation mean in your opinion in a tourism network?
  - 3.4 How would you define a regional tourism network?
  - 3.5 Do you feel belonging or have belonged to any network at all?
4. Benefits of cooperation, network, and Visit Karelia.
  - 4.1 How do you see Visit Karelia benefitting the tourism companies?
  - 4.2 Do you think that cooperation can be beneficial, or can it bring new possibilities?
  - 4.3 What was the reason you started to cooperate?
  - 4.4 What do you think will happen when you have reached cooperation?
  - 4.5 Do you have enough information about Visit Karelia?
5. Additional questions.
  - 5.1 Do you know the staff of Visit Karelia and what are their responsibilities?
  - 5.2 Does the services of Visit Karelia have a cost?
  - 5.3 Are you using services from another similar service provider like Visit Karelia?

## **Appendix 2. Outline of interview questions in Finnish.**

1.1 Vastaajan nimi ja asema yrityksessä.

2. Mahdolliset esteet yhteistyölle Visit Karelian tai alueellisen verkoston kanssa.

2.1 Mitä ongelmia tai haasteita yhteistyössä voidaan kohdata?

2.2 Mitä haasteita voisi ilmetä yhteistyöstä Visit Karelian kanssa?

2.3 Onko vastaavaa tapahtunut aiemmin, joka olisi estänyt yhteistyön, kuten tietty henkilö tai tapahtuma?

3. Yritysten mielikuva roolistaan osana alueen matkailuverkostoa.

3.1 Mikä on Visit Karelian rooli alueen matkailun edistämisessä?

3.2 Oletteko olleet tekemisissä Visit Karelian kanssa?

3.3 Mitä sitoutuminen ja yhteistyö tarkoittaa mielestänne matkailuverkostossa?

3.4 Miten määrittelisitte alueellisen matkailuverkoston?

3.5 Oletteko kuuluneet johonkin verkostoon?

4. Yhteistyön, verkoston ja Visit Karelian hyödyt.

4.1 Mitä hyötyä Visit Kareliasta on matkailuyrityksille?

4.2 Onko yhteistyöstä hyötyä matkailuyrityksille tai voiko se tuoda uusia mahdollisuuksia?

4.3 Mikä oli syy yhteistyön aloittamiselle?

4.4 Mitä mielestänne tapahtuu, kun yhteistyöhön on päästy?

4.5 Onko teillä tarpeeksi tietoa Visit Kareliasta?

5. Lisäkysymykset.

5.1 Tunnetteko Visit Karelian henkilökuntaa ja mitkä ovat heidän vastuualueensa?

5.2 Onko Visit Karelia perinyt maksua palveluistaan?

5.3 Oletteko käyttäneet muiden matkailuorganisaatioiden palveluita?