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The tourism partnership life cycle in Estonia: Striving towards sustainable multisectoral rural tourism collaboration

Pilving T.[a,b,*], Kull T.[b], Suškevics M.[b], Viira A.H.[a]

[a] The Institute of Economics and Social Sciences, Estonian University of Life Sciences, Estonia, Kreutzwaldi 1a, Tartu 51006, Estonia
[b] Institute of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Estonian University of Life Sciences, Kreutzwaldi 1a, Tartu 51006, Estonia

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ABSTRACT

Estonian rural tourism partnership sustainability is analysed according to the tourism partnership life cycle model, which employs qualitative methodology. Leadership, confusing aims, decreasing communication, time availability, uncertain funding, institutional changes and lack of collaboration with urban centre – trigger deceleration of partnership and therefore influence partnership sustainability.

Social aspects play a major role in affecting partnership and include internal and external influences. While each partnership phase is important for its sustainability, the partnership can simultaneously follow different timeline paths that have formal and informal life cycles. If the partnership exists in multiple timelines, its life cycle follows a more circular than cyclical form. Community-initiated partnerships are evolving and adapting platforms where new partnership forms emerge, creating social and economic benefits for stakeholders. When collaboration is initiated by local communities, partnerships can change and alter their form more sustainably compared to situations in which they have a more centralised character.

1. Introduction

Multi-stakeholder partnerships between private, public and non-profit sector representatives are the important driving force behind the development of community-based tourism destinations (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Jamal & Getz, 1995). Tourism partnerships can emerge in different settings and are well researched (e.g. Jamal & Getz, 1995; Caffyn, 2000; Kernel, 2005; Lemmetyinen & Go, 2009; Beritelli, 2011; Czernek, 2013; Jesus & Franco, 2016; Vogt, Jordan, Grewe, & Kruger, 2016; Peroff, Deason, Seekamp, & Iyengar, 2017). Previous research (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Caffyn, 2000; Jap & Anderson, 2007; Peroff et al., 2017; Ring & van de Ven, 1994) highlights that partnerships are constantly changing and they ultimately reform or come to an end. Caffyn (2000) and Peroff et al. (2017) have studied tourism partnership life cycles and aspects that influence the life cycle of networks within the context of sustainable tourism.

Estonia can be considered a developing destination in the global tourism market (Cottrell & Raadik-Cottrell, 2015). Following the restoration of its independence in 1991, when Estonia became accessible to tourists outside of the former Soviet Union, a new era of tourism began (Jaakson, 1996; Worthington, 2001) and new tourism products and services had to be found (Mihalic, 2017). Rural life changed drastically in the transition period (adapting to the new market conditions) that followed independence. The previously dominating collective farms were privatised, agricultural land was given back to former owners or their heirs, demand for agricultural labour declined markedly, new ways for earning an income had to be found (Viira, Põder, & Värnik, 2009) and the role of tourism increased in rural development (Unwin, 1996).

Estonian rural tourism enterprises primarily constitute micro-businesses that offer a mix of accommodation, food and active holiday services. Their main challenges include low investment capacity, seasonality and a lack of qualified staff, and most investments depend on programmes co-funded by the EU (Hillep et al., 2012). Collaboration is one way of dealing with these obstacles.

Several studies have focused on the collaboration of tourism agents in the post-communist context in Europe, namely in Bulgaria, Romania (Roberts & Simpson, 2000) and Poland (Czakon & Czernek, 2016; Czernek, 2013; Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Czernek, Czakon, & Marzsalek, 2017; Kapera, 2018; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2015). However, the post-communist context varies from country to country depending on the extent of the command economy, collectivisation and private enterprise freedom during the communist era, together with the institutional reform paths chosen in the early 1990s (Lerman, Csaki, & Gershon, 2004). To our knowledge, there are no studies on rural tourism collaboration in the context of the Baltic states, where

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: tarmo.pilving@emu.ee (T. Pilving).

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agricultural production was centralised to collective farms that were responsible for virtually all aspects of rural life, and private (rural) enterprises did not exist until the end of the 1980s.

Strzelecka and Wicks (2015) studied the issues of social capital in local tourism planning within the LEADER framework in the region of Pomerania, Poland. This study investigates tourism partnership in Estonia and contributes to the comparison of these aspects in a separate post-communist destination and context.

The following criteria were used in selecting the appropriate partnership case for the study: multisector involvement in the area, a relatively long history, comprehensive documentation, local initiative and currently operating. A suitable partnership was identified in Pärnu county, Western Estonia, called the Romantic Coastline (RC). RC is a community-based rural tourism development and marketing project, a trademark and an umbrella for a local tourism collaboration network that was established in 2007 to promote rural tourism development in the coastal area of Pärnu county and involves stakeholders from different sectors (Pärnu Bay Partnership Assembly, 2015).

While the tourism partnership life cycle has been studied in various contexts (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017), there are still unanswered questions regarding partnership lifetime, sustainability and the role of the environment in which the partnership exists. The tourism partnership life cycle model (TPLCM) was used in this study as a conceptual framework (Fig. 1). Since its introduction by Caffyn (2000), TPLCM has been tested in different destinations (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017) but little is known about how well TPLCM explains the development of partnerships in regions where the tourism industry is not fully developed, e.g. Estonia (Cottrell & Raadik-Cottrell, 2015). In order to comprehend the evolvement of collaboration and its meaning to stakeholders more effectively, it is important to study in which stages and how collaboration develops in the TPLCM timeline context (Caffyn, 2000) and to focus on the motivation of stakeholders to join, participate, contribute and exit from a collaborative network (Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012). The authors of this study have assumed that the rural tourism partnership is closely related to the surrounding environment and can, therefore, have different evolvement patterns than the cyclical pattern shown in previous studies (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017). In Estonia, for example, where informal collaboration between rural tourism businesses and other community members is necessary for offering services in the short tourism season (Hillep et al., 2012), the deceleration phase of a partnership can have a different ending and continuity options than described by Caffyn (2000).

In assuming that there are a wide range of interconnected

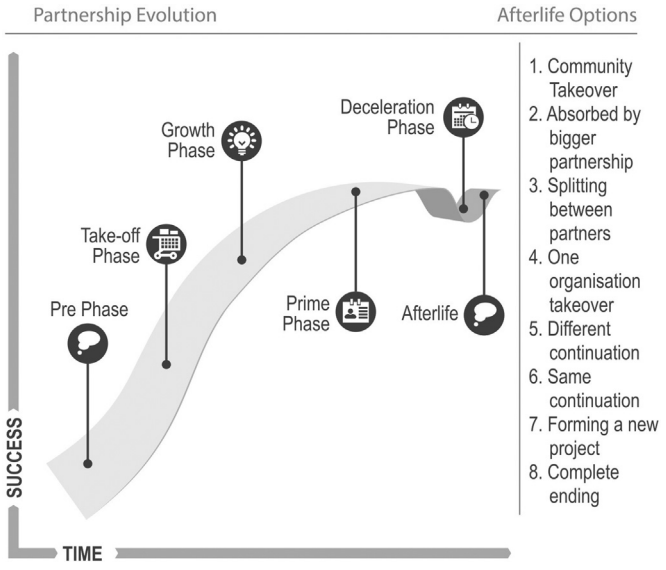

Fig. 1. Tourism partnership life cycle model (Caffyn, 2000).

stakeholders who have complex relationships with each other, a qualitative research strategy was selected for this study. This strategy allowed the authors to compare the research results with similar studies (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017). Our standpoint was that the emerging theoretical patterns should be grounded in already existing theories that are not solely derived from empirical data. Using the multi-grounded theory (MGT) as a research methodology facilitates the use of the full potential of empirical data and helps overcome the main weakness of the grounded theory – the reluctance to use pre-existing theoretical standpoints (Cronholm & Goldkuhl, 2010).

This approach allowed the authors to test the validity of TPLCM in the post-communist rural environment and find new insights to explain tourism partnership development in the life cycle context. Testing the TPLCM in a post-communist context helps to broaden the theory of the processes of partnership dynamics in different environments, helps to identify previously unknown aspects that influence the development of community-based rural tourism partnership, brings new knowledge about rural tourism partnerships in the post-communist context and helps derive practical advice for tourism developers.

This study aims to analyse the deeper meanings of the evolvement of partnerships over time for different partners, and it contributes to existing understanding by exploring the following research questions: (1) is the TPLCM adequate for explaining community-based rural tourism partnership life cycle development in the post-communist rural environment, (2) what partnership evolvement patterns may be present other than the cyclical pattern described by Caffyn (2000), (3) what are the main aspects that influence the evolvement and sustainability of multisectoral collaboration between the private, public and non-profit sectors in different partnership stages in the post-communist rural environment?

2. Theoretical framing

2.1. Rural tourism and partnerships

This study regards rural tourism as a “type of tourism where people are travelling to the rural area outside of their usual place of residence for vacation, work or another purpose” (Hillep et al., 2012, p.4). The rural area in the Estonian context is a village, borough or small town with fewer than 4000 inhabitants (Hillep et al., 2012). Many rural areas in Europe with a declining number of jobs in agriculture are nowadays being transformed into recreational and tourism areas, which places increasing importance on preserving cultural heritage and nature values (Eusébio, Carneiro, Kastenholz, Figueiredo, & da Silva, 2017). Several studies (Augustyn & Knowles, 2000; Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010; Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017) have researched the aspects that influence partnership dynamics, such as funding, partner relationships, communication, leadership and the formal or informal character of the collaboration. Tourism is a social phenomenon (Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernandez, 2016) and there could also be reasons other than economic reasons for establishing a partnership, including the nurturing of cultural heritage (Peroff et al., 2017). Therefore, aside from economic factors, social aspects also influence the success of tourism partnerships (Czernek, 2013).

The development of a tourism area requires the formation of partnerships among local stakeholders. In this study, the following partnership definition is used: “The collaborative efforts of autonomous stakeholders from organisations in two or more sectors with interests in tourism development who engage in an interactive process using shared rules, norms and structures at an agreed organisational level and over a defined geographical area to act or decide on issues related to tourism development” (Long, 1997, cited by Caffyn, 2000, p. 201).

2.2. The tourism partnership life cycle model

In her study, Caffyn (2000) compares different existing partnership

life cycle models, including Butler's (1980) tourism area life cycle model (TALC), and she develops a model suited to tourism partnerships and a theoretical framework to analyse tourism partnerships in a life cycle context (Fig. 1). The TPLCM explains that the tourism partnership progresses through the life cycle in different phases (pre, launch, growth, prime and deceleration) that follow a cyclical development pattern and finally has different options for continuity in the afterlife.

Studies on the tourism partnership life cycle (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017) suggest that tourism partnerships evolve in stages suggested by TPLCM before they finally end. However, it is still not clear what happens with the collaboration in the deceleration phase when the partnership ends or changes its form. According to Peroff et al. (2017), partnerships share similarities though they do not always follow a similar life cycle pattern. Partnerships can be temporary organisations, such as a collaboration aiming to solve a specific problem (Caffyn, 2000). However, more sustainable solutions are needed from the perspective of the development of tourism destinations (Bornhorst et al., 2010). Even where the elements required for success apparently exist during early partnership phases, partnerships in different cases (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017) still move towards deceleration and end with different afterlife options (Fig. 1). In evaluating partnership success and changes over the partnership life cycle, a strong focus must be on identifying the partnership timeline and associated chronological changes. This helps to identify when deceleration commences, since it can be unclear, even for the members, if and when the partnership has ended, particularly if there is no formal ending (Peroff et al., 2017).

2.3. Knowledge gaps in on existing partnership life cycle studies

When building a wide regional partnership network as a formal organisation, diverse interest groups and personnel must interact for a common purpose. When initiating partnerships, empathy based on personal relationships and individual contributions are key elements (Beritelli, 2011; Corte & Aria, 2014). Efficient networking through partnerships needs a high level of social capital building and accumulation. This requires good partner relations and a high level of trust between individuals (Czakon & Czernek, 2016). Coordinated networking helps partners in co-learning, facilitates value creation for better customer experience (Lemmetyinen & Go, 2009), increases trust among partners in development processes and, as a result, helps to overcome barriers in local development (Salvatore, Chiodo, & Fantini, 2018). Albrecht (2013) emphasises that the knowledge of multisectoral tourism networks remains limited.

In the last 100 years, three major structural breaks have occurred in Estonian rural areas due to political changes. In the 1920–30s, the lands of 1000 large manors were nationalised and more than 100,000 new small farmsteads were parcelled out. This contributed to the creation of a new social order with equitable distribution and individual control of property (Maandi, 2010). Between 1949 and 1952, primarily, the land, assets and animals of the private farms were collectivised into Soviet-style collective farms (Unwin, 1997). In 1991, the restitution of land to its pre-collectivisation owners and the privatisation of collective farms began (Viira et al., 2009; Viira, Põder, & Värnik, 2013).

Changing political regimes can have a major influence on trust in local communities. For example, Czernek (2013) found that the short history of democracy negatively influenced trust levels in Poland. Such an experience of uncertainty in institutions can influence the willingness of stakeholders to build trust and to invest in long-term partnerships. Rapidly changing conditions can marginalise collaboration efforts (Fyall et al., 2012) and therefore undermine partnership sustainability (Roberts & Simpson, 2000).

Changing institutional conditions can also have a positive effect (new clients and investment options) on tourism, such as in 2004 when Estonia became a member of the EU (Jarvis & Kallas, 2008). Previous partnership life cycle studies (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017) do not offer clear answers about the outside influences on partnership sustainability in the life cycle context. The fast-changing rural institutional environment can acutely influence the sustainability of the partnerships in still-developing destinations, such as Estonia. Evaluating the existing partnership in the post-communist environment using the TPLCM can highlight partnership change with the surrounding environment over different phases.

The evaluation of a partnership's performance can play a critical role in partnership sustainability. Without measurable targets, partnerships can exist but will eventually fail when trust is gone (Roberts & Simpson, 2000). The lack of impact evaluation can negatively affect trust building within the network (Czakon & Czernek, 2016). Uncertainty can weaken stakeholder motivation to participate in collaborative activities and negatively affect the creation of shared responsibility (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017). When the aims of the partnership are confusing and the large networks fragment, it can be difficult to re-vitalise the existing partnership to its former glory without new content and trust building (Caffyn, 2000). However, this can be difficult since collecting sufficient data can be time-consuming and places an extra workload on stakeholders (Peroff et al., 2017). Monitoring progress is important at every partnership stage. This must be one of the tools for achieving strategic goals. The lack of clear performance indicators can raise doubts about where the partnership is heading, leading to uncertainty among stakeholders (Caffyn, 2000). Also, communication plays an important role, as the clarity of goals for all stakeholders is important in maintaining partnership sustainability (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017). Knowledge is limited regarding collaboration entity communication to partnership members and how multisector stakeholders relate to it in different partnership phases. The clear meaning of the partnership can be important for the sustainability of the collaboration.

Another aspect that is often overlooked in tourism partnership life cycle studies is that rural tourism can often be classed as lifestyle entrepreneurship. This effectively means that the entrepreneurs are not focusing solely on income but rather on the fulfilment of their lifestyle preferences. In the lifestyle entrepreneurial setting, partnerships are mostly informal and personal relationships have a major role (Bredvold & Skalen, 2016). This can influence the motivation of stakeholders to join the rural tourism partnership and take part in different partnership activities. It is not known how this affects tourism partnership life cycle development and sustainability in post-communist destinations.

Previous research (Caffyn, 2000; Öberg, 2016; Peroff et al., 2017) has stated that partnership formalisation can make existing informal collaboration more sustainable. Formal partnership organisations should also be appropriately convened where all stakeholder interests are constantly facilitated (Kernel, 2005). Jamal and Getz (1995) have highlighted the fact that local municipalities can provide suitable convenorships for partnerships. Formalising allows for assessing and assuring the collective will and aims of the collaboration in a more organised way (Selin & Chavez, 1995) and can, therefore, help to lead stakeholder relations towards more stable and clearer paths. Goal setting is important in the early stages, and the expected outcomes of the collaboration must be clear to all stakeholders. Otherwise, they can lose interest in collaboration (Peroff et al., 2017). Of course, the results can also be the opposite, i.e. formal partnerships can divide into informal partnerships. It is still not clear which collaboration development has more of an effect on partnership sustainability.

The sustainability of the partnerships in the tourism destination has clear importance for stakeholders. To be effective, the inter-organisational relationships go through multiple stages during which mutual trust is created. In the final stages, this process can transform into a stable and sustainable network. For strategic collaboration, long-term personal relationships are necessary. The process must involve capital and management as resources that are aimed to create a collaborative advantage (Webster, 1992). Trust building between the stakeholders in the collaboration is considered extremely important, but the process can be time-consuming and long-term solutions are required. From the

Fig. 2. Pärnu county in Estonia (Land Board, 2018).

rural tourism perspective, long-lasting multisectoral networking and collaboration are mandatory because different natural assets are jointly owned (beaches, parks, lakes, forests) by different stakeholders. Furthermore, long-term solutions in the collaboration relationships ensure high trust levels among the stakeholders (Fyall et al., 2012). This aspect can be highly important in the post-communist rural context, as these areas have gone through rapid socio-economical changes in recent decades.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Romantic coastline overview

The RC is located along the 250 km long coastline (Fig. 2) of Pärnu county in Western Estonia (Romantic Coastline, 2018). The total area of the county is 4810 km^2 and it had 82,535 inhabitants as of 8 May 2017 (including the town of Pärnu) (Statistics Estonia, 2017). The major tourist attraction in the area, the town of Pärnu, is not a part of the RC project because the project focuses solely on coastal rural areas (9 municipalities as of 2017). The municipalities located within the inland area of the Pärnu county belong to a different LEADER local action group and are therefore not members of the RC.

These 9 local municipalities formed the Pärnu Bay Partnership Assembly (PBPA), a rural coordinating and development organisation and LEADER local action group (the RC owner). PBPA, established in 2003, aims to develop a balanced, sustainable rural life by developing small enterprises and using EU funding as a tool. Their main activities and objectives (Table 1) are related to rural development, business support, tourism development, creating a marketplace for selling local products and assisting stakeholders in applying for EU funding (Pärnu Bay Partnership Assembly, 2015).

From a tourism development perspective, PBPA can be considered a destination management organisation (DMO) with two major functions: enhancing the social and economic well-being of rural communities and assisting rural tourism stakeholders in providing better experiences for their customers (Bornhorst et al., 2010). PBPA's legal form is non-profit, which means that its members give a mandate to the board to represent their interests. The board members are representatives of rural municipalities and the day-to-day activities are the responsibility of the executive director and support team. PBPA's strategy of regional development represents the stakeholders' collective will (Pärnu Bay Partnership Assembly, 2015). According to the PBPA strategy, tourism must support other entrepreneurial activities and sectors in the region, stimulate entrepreneurship beyond the sectoral boundaries, offer benefits to wider circles of community members and include different social groups in entrepreneurial activities. There is a strong focus on local food and the promotion of the rural coastal region through related events.

The RC has 205 organisations as potential members (Pärnu Bay Partnership Assembly, 2015) but its actual membership policy is unconventional. At the beginning of the RC, leaders held awareness-raising meetings and face-to-face conversations with possible interested parties; whilst doing so, they listed potential actors who were then considered members in forming the RC network. There was no formal membership agreement. If the organisation was registered in the RC area and offered services connected to the goals of the RC, it was considered part of the RC network (passive membership). Being a member of the RC is free of charge, but members pay the event participant fee and marketing materials (posters, flags etc.) for joint marketing and when using the RC trademark. In 2011, there were 59 RC brand users (Kaldoja, 2011). In recent times, a voluntary goodwill agreement has been established between RC and its members to make the partnership more formal.

3.2. Research approach

Partnerships can be complex and there are various theories related to them (Fyall et al., 2012). Combined theory approaches in the co-working analysis are hard to carry out systematically because partnerships don't always follow purely rational theoretical principles (Beritelli, 2011). On the other hand, Fyall et al. (2012) highlight that focusing too much on one theoretical approach at an early stage of a study can set limitations on the overall research. Using the MGT as methodology provides a necessary tool for analysing qualitative empirical data, formulating emerging theoretical statements and helps in overcoming issues related to the grounded theory, such as over-generalisation and introvert theorising, which can cause a “reinventing the wheel” effect. The MGT helps to have a critical view over existing theoretical statements, contribute to the forming of new theoretical statements and maintain a broad perspective over the research structure and emerging grounded theoretical viewpoints in the different stages of the research (Cronholm & Goldkuhl, 2010).

Purposive sampling was used in this study. A key principle of purposive sampling (Flick, 2014) was the inclusion of participants from each municipality, all three sectors, project leaders/managers, active/passive and new/old members. The interview questionnaire sought responses on three broad themes: (1) the participant's initial involvement with the RC, (2) issues surrounding their continued involvement, (3) the participant's visions regarding the RC's future.

Semi-structured interviews were the main data collection method used in this research. 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders from the following sectors: private – 15, public – 5 and non-profit – 7. At the time of the interviewing, the RC area was governed by 9 local municipalities. Because of the unconventional membership policy described above, it is difficult to say how many non-profit and private sector organisations are members of the RC. The managers of the RC mention that they try to work with all tourism stakeholders in the RC area because the RC is meant to be promoting the whole region. They estimate that there are around 60–70 active private and non-profit sector stakeholders who also use the RC brand.

The document analysis was used as an additional method. In the document analysing process, different strategy, planning and marketing documents about the RC were examined to find traces of the different partnership stages and life cycle development.

The interview questions covered a wide range of topics including the participant's role, motivation and benefits, the leader's role, project management, the forming of partnerships with others, the participant's willingness to invest their own resources in different partnership activities, EU funding, the changing role of the RC in the region, future perspectives, etc. The interviews lasted from 45 min to 2 h and were

Table 1
Pärnu Bay Partnership Assembly main objectives and activities (Pärnu Bay Partnership Assembly, 2015).

PBPA objectives	PBPA activities
Improving and developing the living environment in villages	Activities related to developing community and visitor infrastructure (community houses and the RC cafe)
Attracting young people into community development	Providing local students summer jobs and internships
Raising competitiveness of businesses	Collaboration, training and communication activities (workshops and courses)
Microbusinesses development based on local resources	Encouraging community members to participate in entrepreneurial activities (festivals, fairs and community days)
Stimulating tourism development	Tourism-related marketing and learning activities (workshops and courses)

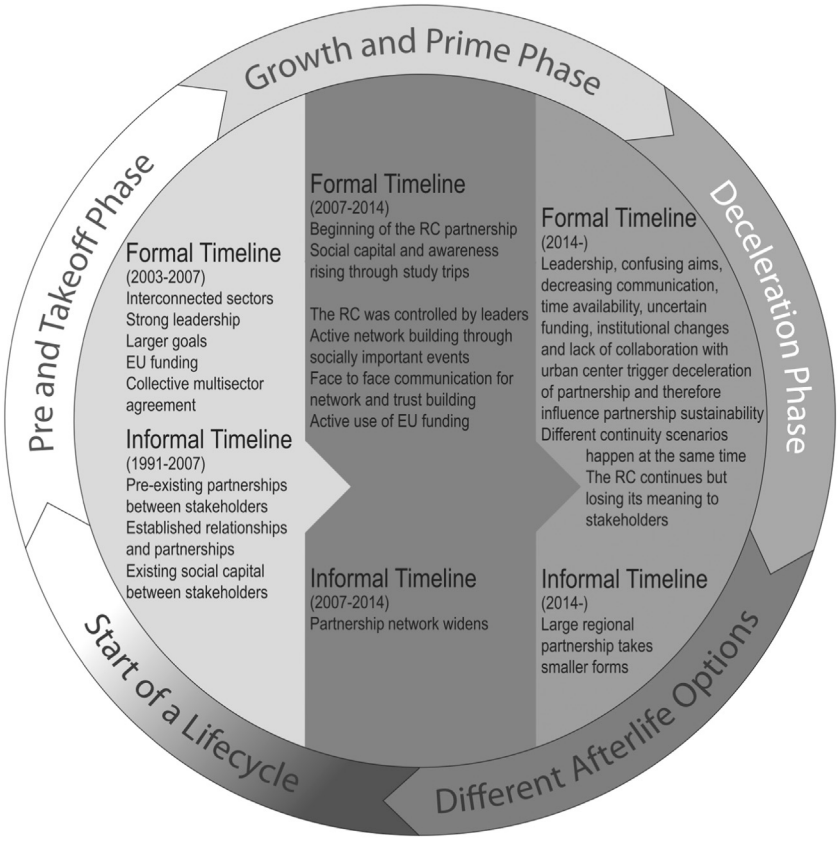

Fig. 3. Romantic Coastline partnership life cycle.

conducted between April and May 2017. All the collected data were transcribed, coded and analysed using a four-step analysis process: initial coding, conceptual refinement, pattern coding and, finally, theoretical condensation (Cronholm & Goldkuhl, 2010).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. The tourism partnership timeline

Caffyn (2000) and Peroff et al. (2017) indicate that partnerships exist on a single timeline in the TPLCM phases, and Peroff et al. (2017) showed how important it is to establish a timeline for interpreting the results. Our results expanded on the subject and revealed that the partnership can simultaneously exist in multiple timelines (Fig. 3). The TPLCM phases can be identified in the strategy of the RC (Fig. 3). However, the results revealed two different timeline patterns: first, where the partnership is formalised, and second, where it exists informally.

The timeline of the formal RC partnership is stage-based and corresponds to the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 EU funding periods (Pärnu Bay Partnership Assembly, 2015). The other (informal) timeline consists of spontaneous collaborations between the stakeholders. The main aim of the RC was to bring existing informal collaborations under a single umbrella as a broad cross-community, cross-sectoral network. Informal collaboration (a collaboration between accommodation, catering and active holiday services, local markets and other small-scale events) between the rural tourism stakeholders in the study area began to evolve in 1991 when Estonia regained independence. There have been several attempts to develop a cross-regional partnership, but these attempts never reached the level of the RC. Overall, we conclude that the informal collaboration and its timeline are always present and the formal partnership with its parallel formal timeline can strengthen the informal collaboration to help it attain a new level.

Caffyn (2000) and Peroff et al. (2017) point out the temporary nature of partnerships. This study shows that partnership sustainability is closely related to the working mechanisms of regional tourism and larger institutional changes in rural life. If the collaboration occurs at the same time in formal and informal ways, the mutual coexistence of these forms can be achieved. This gives the tourism partnership a chance to overcome the problem of temporary existence without completely losing its original focus. A formal partnership was required in the RC, but it eventually gave the informal partnership more strength and opportunities to grow.

4.2. The pre- and take-off phase

Informal partnerships began to evolve in the RC area after Estonia regained its independence and long before the idea of the RC was conceived. Rural tourism moved strongly into focus in the early 2000s when it became clear that Estonia would become a member of the EU and new funding options for rural development would be available. Estonian tourism experienced major growth at that time (Jarvis & Kallas, 2008). A local activity group recognised an opportunity and pushed the existing informal collaboration forward with the aim of establishing a regional partnership to strengthen rural tourism in the RC region.

The pre-partnership phase of the RC (Fig. 3) is easily recognisable, as it was clear to the activity group from the outset that a collective agreement between the rural tourism stakeholders, local municipalities and community members was needed to develop rural tourism in the region. This collective agreement affirmed that tourism was tolerated and accepted, and everybody who wanted to participate in the collaboration was included. Existing social capital enabled a rapid start-up period.

Expectations towards collaboration differ between sectors (Viren, Vogt, Kline, Rummel, & Tsao, 2015). Motivation among the public and

non-profit sector for participation in the RC included an increase in jobs, visitors and businesses, and the sharing of tourism-related tasks. Fairs, festivals and community houses are viewed among the RC partners as local business incubators, a means to unify communities and give microbusinesses a chance to collectively use shared resources and social capital. Fyall et al. (2012) point out that such diversity of reasoning can impact partnership governance and legitimacy.

Strzelecka and Wicks (2015) highlight that local political leaders and business owners in Pomerania, Poland, were competing with each other in the LEADER local action group and the projects submitted by local leaders were approved more easily than the projects submitted by local businesses. The private and public stakeholders do not compete like this in the RC. The reason for that is the high level of interconnections between the private, public and non-profit sectors. Strong public sector control over a partnership can be a problem for partnership sustainability (Augustyn & Knowles, 2000; Caffyn, 2000). A high level of interconnectivity enabled the RC to progress across three sectors. The RC stakeholders noted that network creation, establishing relationships and building trust was easier to achieve in this context because members already knew the inner workings of the different sectors. One interviewee (entrepreneur) noted the following:

> "I think that all of our active community members have several occupations across different sectors. This is modern rural life in small communities and one job doesn't offer you a sufficient living. I consider this a good development because this interaction makes our community stronger, people don't cocoon themselves into small groups and decisions are much more transparent. We are developing our community together and trust each other".

The RC officially started in 2007 and had a very successful take-off phase. It was clear that real change could only be achieved through collective effort in which as many community members as possible participated. Participants agreed to join because they were already collaborating informally with others.

At the time, the partnership management was entrusted to two local leaders who were the main driving force behind the local activist group and spread the idea that tourism could be a new vision for the area.

EU funding was available for strategy implementation. The reasoning of stakeholders regarding the RC take-off phase concurs with the conclusions of Caffyn (2000) and Peroff et al. (2017): while there can be many ideas, it is impossible to implement them without funding.

4.3. Growth and prime phase

In the growth phase, the collaboration network began to enlarge and many of the informal partnerships could now be identified as members of the RC partnership. The quick growth was achieved because the majority of the stakeholders were ready for new ideas, and the leaders were constantly encouraging partners to act. The leaders organised study trips inside the RC area and abroad in order to build social capital among partners, establish relationships, raise awareness and broaden the network. A lot of explaining was done by the leaders about the RC because the name and the entity were causing confusion among some of the PBPA members. Nevertheless, some local stakeholders remained sceptical about the RC. Especially, stakeholders who were collective farm leaders in the Soviet era and still have authority in the region.

Events (local fairs, festivals and workshops) were created to build stronger communities and include locals in entrepreneurial activities. Regular communication was provided through a range of events, but the most important was that the events created the atmosphere of face-to-face communication. This was highlighted by an interviewee:

> "Collaboration in rural tourism favours a personal approach".

When interviewees were asked about the benefits of partnership networking, no one mentioned expected financial gain as the sole reason. The responses mostly concerned about social aspects and joint marketing, and examples include:

> Entrepreneur: "It is interesting to participate and see what others are doing".
>
> Head of the local municipality: "Everything that is taking place in the countryside is beneficial. I really like the workshops and being part of something".
>
> Entrepreneur: "I like joint marketing because one small company doesn't have a big marketing budget. It is nice to be part of something because living in the Estonian countryside can be lonely in the low season".
>
> Manager of the local community house: "The events are the main benefit for me. I just like to participate and see what others are doing".

Leaders wrote different project applications in the growth phase, and local municipalities paid their own share to the PBPA, which was used as co-financing in the RC development. In this way, many establishments were built, events created, joint marketing conducted, and festival networking started. Through the RC, municipalities could also finance their own activities focusing on community development. All of this helped to widen the existing informal partnership network in the growth phase.

Within the prime phase, social aspects began to dominate alongside entrepreneurial elements. The partners enjoyed the RC as a social movement, but several interviewees pointed out that the idea of developing the RC as a unified tourist route remained in the background due to the confusing aims. In expanding the conclusions of Peroff et al. (2017), this implies that social benefits to stakeholders and local communities in a post-communist environment can have a significant role when partnership success is evaluated.

One strategic aim of the RC is to develop a marketplace where stakeholders can offer their locally produced products. Interviewees highlighted that the development of the festival network as a marketplace was one of the main benefits founded under the RC umbrella. A number of studies (Augustyn & Knowles, 2000;Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017) highlight the importance of proper funding in partnerships but not much is known about partnership self-funding. The festival network that was created under the RC umbrella is an example of how self-funding can be achieved in the partnership process. While EU funding was initially used, the majority of the festivals no longer require it today. Festivals are important in many respects: they provide a marketplace for locals selling their produce, community members cooperate for common goals, feelings of home and importance are strengthened, visitor numbers increase, they provide greater visibility and recognition, and many families come together for the duration of the festival.

The RC received recognition several times during the prime phase, and many study trips were organised for others to see and learn how the cross-sectoral partnerships worked on a larger scale. Even though the RC was considered a success story slowly the partnership began to stagnate.

4.4. Deceleration phase

Our results confirm Caffyn's (2000) findings on the role of leaders in keeping the partnership running, but the actions of the leaders can also start the deceleration. Due to the increasing internal conflicts (disagreements between the leaders of the RC and some of the PBPA members), one leader left the RC in 2010 and the other in 2014. Beritelli (2011) and Fyall et al. (2012) point out that personal relationships can strongly influence partnership development and collaboration.

Interviewees reported that the RC is no longer what it used to be,

suggesting that the RC has entered a downward spiral even though some outcomes of the RC were considered a success. Through the RC, something more valuable than merely the RC partnership has been created. The partnership network in which three sectors work together still exists, but it has moved away from the original idea. While stakeholders want to maintain the created value, they feel that the RC no longer has the same regional impelling force.

Although the RC continues, its identity and essence have changed. Common identity generation is highly important in partnership development. Identity building is process-based and can take a long time to move through all the phases of the partnership. The identity generation in the RC was necessary to provide a diverse set of stakeholders with something that they could own in common, but it resulted in a different form than was initially planned.

In Caffyn's (2000) case, the common identity was considered one of the most important achievements of the collaboration to affect partnership sustainability. It is hard to sustain partnership longevity when the main idea carriers leave the collaboration before the majority of the stakeholders achieve full connection with the identity. The partnership starts to weaken, and collaborative achievements take smaller and less complex forms.

In the decline of the RC, the region-wide formal partnership started to divide into more local events, and service packaging between partners became more important (than the RC as a regional tourist route) to the stakeholders (Fig. 3). Originally, it was planned that events were part of the RC physical presence in the area. Instead, they started their own life without a strong RC identity.

Theoretically, it is possible to end the partnership in the prime phase, but it will start to decelerate at some point if it continues. There are numerous reasons why partnerships start to decline (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017). This study shows that if a partnership exists simultaneously in multiple timelines, the differences between prime, deceleration and afterlife phase are not that clear. The formal partnership was slowing down at the end of the prime phase. Formally, the RC is still operational. The interest of stakeholders in it has declined because they couldn't properly relate to the essence of the RC. However, they are still strongly motivated to participate in the local informal collaboration. With the self-financing local event network, regional partnerships have now started another life cycle that is moving in parallel with the declining RC. This indicates that the RC helped to bring informal collaboration and rural tourism to the next level. Local stakeholders need a new formal regional partnership in order to take the next leap in rural tourism development.

> Entrepreneur: “Rural tourism stakeholders will always collaborate. The RC was a good accelerator and the EU funding helped to push rural tourism forward, but these big partnerships will always end someday. How we continue is important. When the RC finally ends, it will leave behind stronger connections and collaboration between local stakeholders and this will be a good ground for new, big partnership projects. In my opinion, we need to forget the RC and make a new project to properly collaborate with the city of Pärnu”.

> Local municipality representative: “The RC was a good start for us, and we learned how to collaborate more successfully, but these partnerships must evolve into new partnerships. We must take all that is important from each partnership and pass that on to future partnership projects”.

> Entrepreneur: “Without the RC we would have never started with the local festivals, and right now we need to focus on the festival network development, such as making a tourist route that really works and offers something in the low season. If somebody comes up with an interesting new partnership idea, I will most certainly join. I collaborate with other businesses in our village in everyday business activities, but it is important to be part of something bigger”.

According to the TPLCM, different continuity scenarios are possible in the deceleration phase (Caffyn, 2000). This study discovered that continuity scenarios can start much earlier, and there is no need to reach the end of formal partnership for a change to happen. When comparing different RC afterlife possibilities, it unexpectedly emerged that several continuity options could occur simultaneously while the partnership was still operational. It seems the RC network has already started another life cycle based on regional community events like festivals, fairs and occasional packaging, implying that the RC was slowly dividing into smaller parts in the deceleration. It can be said that the informal collaboration that existed before the RC was taken to the next level by the RC. Without the RC, this outcome would never have been attained. Implementing this vision required additional funding and expert knowledge offered by the RC network.

From a TPLCM perspective, this outcome suggests different simultaneous after-life options. Although the RC idea came from the leaders and spread to other community members, the new life cycle process is not exactly a community takeover during the partnership afterlife as described by Caffyn (2000); instead, it represents stronger community involvement in a multisectoral collaboration that initially existed. When tourism at the regional level is based on partnerships initiated from local communities, then collaboration can develop and change into different forms in a more sustainable way compared to more centralised partnerships (Caffyn, 2000; Peroff et al., 2017).

The future of the RC owner organisation (PBPA) is uncertain. Interviewees noted that the PBPA will lose its meaning in the region if EU funding decreases. Stakeholders are willing to invest their own resources in joint marketing and a festival network, but funding for a DMO must come from elsewhere. Partnerships that are based on EU funding are, in essence, temporary when other financing instruments are not properly implemented before the funding changes. The partnership sustainability depends on clear planning where assessment and constant clear funding have a high priority (Caffyn, 2000).

4.5. Key aspects precipitating the RC deceleration

Several indicators may indicate the starting point of the partnership deceleration (Caffyn, 2000). We found seven aspects precipitating deceleration of the RC partnership.

4.5.1. Absence of any proper evaluation of RC benefits and influence

The ensuing debate in the PBPA questioned spending on tourism when it was impossible to link this to the growth of regional visitor numbers. Without measurable benefits, stakeholder scepticism can rise (Czernek, 2013). Visitor numbers in Pärnu county have been growing steadily since 2007 (Statistics Estonia, 2017). However, the impact of the RC as a tourist route to these numbers was never assessed. According to the opinions of the interviewees, the direct effect of the RC on visitor numbers is marginal. The interviewees' highlight that despite the extensive marketing that was undertaken over the years to promote the RC as a tourist route, the idea never gained traction and visitors don't know what the RC is.

> As explained by one entrepreneur: “I have been a project member from the beginning, but I cannot say that there are many clients coming through the RC. There are more important channels, such as booking.com. Sometimes my clients ask about the orange tree logos that are the RC trademark, but they know nothing about the RC. This trademark or tourist route doesn't bring me any clients”.

> Another entrepreneur noted: “Of course, local events are really popular, and I see more and more visitors every year at festivals, but local organising committees do their own marketing. The idea of the RC as one unifying roof or umbrella never began to work properly, and the workshops and meetings didn't help in solving seasonality. So, for local tourism businesses, the impact of the RC is not noteworthy today”.

Public sector representative: "The festivals nowadays attract visitors, not the RC. I think that we must change our focus".

The majority of the visits take place in the local hotspot of the town of Pärnu (not part of the RC), and almost all of the interviewees note that the town is attracting a completely different tourist segment (spa and beach visitors) to whom it is difficult to offer rural tourism services. Several interviewees point out that they tried to offer services to the city's visitors, but these attempts failed.

In this case, members who did not understand tourism benefits initially agreed with the stakeholder majority but, in the absence of clear measurable results, they voiced their concerns which lead to embarrassment. A salient minority who are not satisfied with the results but has great power can have a significant impact on organisational development (Fyall et al., 2012) and a major influence on achieving necessary consensus among stakeholders (Saito & Ruhanen, 2017). As a result, the power relationships inside the RC became unbalanced.

4.5.2. Lack of proper supportive team

The leaders of the RC focused on management without a proper support team and were the main carriers of the original idea. The belief of the leaders in success was so strong that it provided the spark to stimulate others, but the concept of such a non-material entity like a network or partnership is hard to grasp. Even the hard work of explaining the idea did not help to reduce the scepticism of several stakeholders of the PBPA. The interviewees noted that the RC has fulfilled its purpose, aims and that momentum has gone into broadening the original agenda or finding a new focus on the same project. In this case, the collective responsibility on a large scale was not achieved (Peroff et al., 2017) and even when the RC reached some of the main objectives (region-wide partnership and festival network) the stagnation continued. As explained by one entrepreneur:

"Much was achieved through this project but now it is time to move on. Another thing here is that not everybody who lives in our community is suited to participating in tourism. I think that we need to focus more widely than just on tourism".

Diverse interest groups can be an obstacle in collaboration (Czernek, 2013) and it is essential that different interests are brought together (Kernel, 2005); otherwise, stakeholder interest in participating in voluntary collaboration activities decreases and this reduces the levels of shared responsibility (Peroff et al., 2017). The RC consists of many interest groups that are difficult to unite under one specific idea and is mainly managed by two local leaders. For example, the focus of the RC was moving more towards local food, and handicraft makers felt that they didn't receive enough attention.

4.5.3. Dependence on external funding

Despite self-financing being achieved in some local partnership activities (festivals and fairs), the local action group PBPA is still dependent on EU funding. There is an uncertainty about developments after 2020 when the current EU funding period (2014–2020) ends, and thus the future prospects of the PBPA are unclear. The respondents highlight that it is almost impossible to get a bank loan or venture capital into the rural tourism sector, and the EU funding helped to create infrastructure for public use and develop non-profit activities in local communities. The stakeholders worry that the quality of rural life could decline without extra funding. They are also concerned that rural areas can't remain dependent on EU funding and more sustainable solutions are required.

4.5.4. Lack of time for participation in voluntary activities

Stakeholders in rural areas are engaged in so many different activities that finding time can be a real issue in participating in voluntary partnership activities. This has a major influence on the ability and will of stakeholders to participate in region-wide partnerships. In addition to being active with tourism activities in the summer, many stakeholders have primary or secondary employment elsewhere, e.g. in the public or non-profit sector. This limits their available time and ability to participate in voluntary activities. Interviewees preferred voluntary activities that they see as having clear benefits for their community, provide opportunities for socialising with other people or where they can offer services or products to clients (local festivals).

4.5.5. Lack of communication

Communication levels fall after the departure of leaders. "Communication intensity and ease of getting in contact support trust and understanding" (Beritelli, 2011, p.623). Due to the lack of communication, many stakeholders started to feel confused about the status of the RC, which consequently created distance between stakeholders and the RC, with some participants now feeling insufficiently involved. Communication is not only about partnership development; it also has a social value. Some members see the RC as a club where they can regularly meet with others. When meetings become less frequent, they lose interest. Communication is a key element in collaboration, and a lack of confidence in the future can develop and affect trust without it (Caffyn, 2000).

4.5.6. Institutional changes in rural life

The interviewees indicated that municipal reform will have a big influence on rural regions because local community governance is being centralised and is moving away from villages into the county centre. This was compared to Soviet times when collective farms were formed, and the decision making became more centralised, thereby lowering trust in officialdom. According to Czernek (2013), the short history of democracy influenced trust levels in Poland. Recent municipal reform in Estonia has been compared to the Soviet time when political decisions led to increased centralisation. This reduces trust levels in government and makes rural life, in general, more unstable, which can have a long-term impact on rural tourism and partnerships.

4.5.7. Lack of collaboration with the urban centre

Collaboration between the town of Pärnu and the RC has never functioned properly. Pärnu is a popular tourist destination, but it attracts a completely different tourist segment (spa and beach visitors) who are not interested in visiting neighbouring rural areas. When Estonia regained independence, the county and town were going in a similar direction (focusing mostly on tourism) but at different speeds and without a proper joint strategy.

4.6. Circular development of the partnership life cycle

If a partnership exists in multiple (informal and formal) timelines, its life cycle follows a circular rather than a cyclical pattern. If the pre-existing informal collaboration becomes part of the larger formal partnership in a starting phase, the formal collaboration divides again into smaller informal collaborations during the deceleration phase. This latter phase of the process can be considered the beginning of a new life circle, where the informal collaborations will exit the formal partnership with more social capital than at the time of their entry. Furthermore, informal collaboration can only evolve to a certain level. To overcome the barrier of development, the formation of a new large partnership with new aims is necessary. This process is circular – formal partnership starts creating value for stakeholders and empowers the informal collaboration required for tourism development. When the formal partnership has fulfilled its aims, it decelerates. When the time is ready, a new formal partnership starts with a new life circle that aims to create new value for the stakeholders and informal collaboration. One interviewee (entrepreneur) explains:

"The RC was launched in order to take local rural tourism entrepreneurship to the next level, and I think that this was a success.

It was good to use the EU funding and create extra value for the region. But the market conditions have changed. The RC was established a long time ago, and today it would be wise to exit the project and think about a new cross-regional partnership that is more customised to our current needs and market conditions and less dependent on EU funding".

Formal regional partnerships evolve more easily in the phase where ending or change is necessary because they are influenced more by the surrounding unstable institutional environment. This study shows that the start of the formal regional partnership network in the rapidly changing and unstable post-communist rural conditions takes place when there are favourable conditions in the surrounding environment and decline when this environment changes. There have been several major institutional and political changes in recent decades that have had a major impact on rural life in the study area: further collective farm aggregation in the 1970s (Tõstamaa, 2018), Estonia regaining independence, ownership, land and agricultural reforms, Estonia becoming an EU member and the opening of LEADER funding, the financial crisis, confusion about EU funding after 2020 and municipal reform.

A major change in the institutional environment can have a quick and positive impact on tourism, such as Estonia's accession to the EU created an accession effect and accelerated the development of the tourism industry. However, the effect did not last for long (Jarvis & Kallas, 2008). This example shows that these major institutional changes can have a turbulent influence on the rural environment. Of course, the influence can also be negative, as interviewees highlighted the municipal reform and its influence on destroying the home feeling. It follows that resources required for informal collaboration (personal relationships, social capital and trust between local people) are more constant (because people in the area remain the same) compared to the major institutional changes. If these resources exist at a high level in the rural community where the partnership takes place, then the collaboration will develop more sustainably.

Local resources including local human and social capital, nature, culture environment and identity form the core (pre-conditions) for tourism collaboration. Formal partnerships develop and evolve around this core. The resources inside the core affect the success and stability of these partnerships. For example, existing strong informal collaboration, a strong local identity and cultural values are a good starting point for establishing formal collaboration.

At the same time, formal collaboration is influenced by the surrounding institutional and political environment (e.g., municipal reform, a reduction in EU funding, etc.), along with management and leadership of the partnership. The rural tourism partnership that is initiated by local communities but is framed in an outside institutional environment (in this case, LEADER funding) can use the benefits offered by this environment, act as a tool to bring the informal collaboration to the next level and strengthen the resources inside the core.

When the partnership has fulfilled its aims and the outside environment changes, the partnership decelerates because the marginal benefit of the partnership to the resources inside the core becomes lower. This implies that the stakeholders need a new formal partnership project that is more adapted to the changing conditions and starts to add new value to the resources inside the core. This is the point when the circle closes and starts another loop.

5. Conclusions

This research analysed a community-initiated rural tourism partnership life cycle and its sustainability in the post-communist environment in Estonia. The results indicate that the partnership network can simultaneously follow different timeline paths (formal and informal). Every partnership life cycle stage can be significant for sustainability. Partnership continuity scenarios can start in different timeline phases before the partnership declines.

The tourism partnership initiated by the local community in a developing post-communist destination exists in multiple timelines and evolves in a more circular than cyclical form. Thus, for a better comprehension of partnerships in different contexts, awareness of the existence of multiple collaboration layers and timelines must be considered to understand the phenomena more comprehensively.

There are also internal (e.g. measurable targets, time availability and personal relationships) and external (e.g. EU funding and political decisions) aspects that have a major effect on partnership sustainability. Formal partnerships are influenced by outside institutional changes and are in essence temporary. Partnerships can only be as strong as the frame of extra values that they deliver to the members. Partnerships can help to raise local informal collaboration to the next level, create a new entity for local rural tourism and strengthen connections between local stakeholders. When the partnership aims are fulfilled, they will decelerate and at that point, a new formal partnership is necessary for entrance to the next level.

The vulnerability of a partnership increases when: (1) implementing the idea is strongly based on leading individuals, (2) the aims are confusing, and the results are not measured, (3) communication decreases, (4) stakeholders lack time to participate in voluntary activities, (5) funding is uncertain, (6) institutional changes raise uncertainty in rural areas, (7) lack of collaboration with urban centre.

Regional tourism partnership networks focusing on community interests can exist simultaneously in both formal and informal forms as a type of evolving and adapting platform system where new partnership cooperation emerges, creating social and economic benefits to both stakeholders and local communities alike. Different continuity scenarios can occur at the same time when the partnership is in decline. In this case, the partnership network begins to sub-divide into smaller partnerships during deceleration, with each of which commencing their own new cycles.

The influence of tourism in a rural region can be wider than for the tourism sector itself. Tourism in such cases offers social benefits that are as important as the partnership outcomes: empowering vulnerable social classes, uniting community members and families, giving residents a sense of place and feelings of homeliness, gatherings for social entertainment and making rural people feel useful and needed.

If there is additional funding available in the early partnership stages, this can help to achieve partial self-funding.

This research has limitations. The study is based on one regional case and focuses on one particular partnership. Further cases should be analysed in different contexts in order to establish a more general theory about the evolvement of the circular partnership life cycle. The tourism partnership life cycle model needs to be tested in different environments in order to accumulate more knowledge about the aspects that influence partnership development in multiple timelines and the impact on partnership sustainability.

Author contribution

Tarmo Pilving: Main author. Produced main conceptual ideas, literature review, research design and planning of the data collection, table and figures, collected and analysed data.

Tiiu Kull: Contributed to the development of conceptual ideas, research design and planning of the data collection, table and figures.

Monika Suškevičs: Contributed to the development of conceptual ideas, research design and planning of the data collection, table and figures.

Ants-Hannes Viira: Contributed to the development of conceptual ideas, research design and planning of the data collection, table and figures.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2019.05.001.

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Pilving, T is a PhD student in the Institute of Economics and Social Sciences and junior researcher in the Chair of Biodiversity and Nature Tourism in Estonian University of Life Sciences (EMU). His research focuses on multisector tourism collaboration and partnership networks and community, rural and social entrepreneurship in rural and nature-based tourism. He teaches environmental sociology, global nature tourism and tourism research methodology. He is involved as a teacher and project partner with several European Union Erasmus+ learning projects e.g. Social Entrepreneurship for Local Change and Community Learning for Local Change.

Kull, T is a professor in biodiversity and nature tourism in Estonian University of Life Sciences (EMU), Institute of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. Recently a successful doctoral project was completed on her supervision titled "Virtual reality in support of sustainable tourism: experiences from eastern Europe". For ten years she has been responsible for teaching nature tourism at BSc and MSc levels in Estonian University of Life Sciences. Throughout her career, her research has focused on biodiversity conservation, plant population biology, also on carrying capacity of ecosystems and in more recent years on nature-based tourism.

Suškevics, M is a lecturer and post-doctoral researcher of qualitative methodologies and participatory environmental governance at EMU. In her PhD (completed 2014) she compared case studies on multi-level ecological network governance in selected countries across the European Union. Via two systematic reviews, her post-doctoral research focused on the impact and outcomes of different learning approaches (such as social learning, transformative learning or policy learning) on natural resource management. Currently, she is studying participatory approaches around the Green Infrastructure planning and its interfaces with the ecosystem services concept.

Viira, A H is a senior researcher of agricultural economics at the Institute of Economics and Social Sciences of the Estonian University of Life Sciences (EMU). He has worked on the issues of structural development of agriculture and rural economy, and agricultural and rural policies for 10 years. His main research interests have been related to the socioeconomic determinants of farm growth, decline and exits, and competitiveness of the dairy supply chain. In recent years his research has focused on the role of innovation policy in the sustainable development of agriculture.