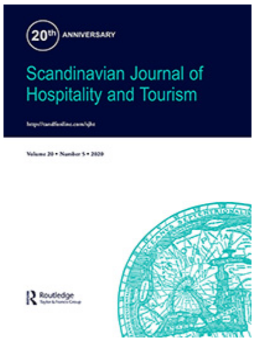
Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/sjht20



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To cite this article: Jack Shepherd & Dimitri Ioannides (2020) Useful funds, disappointing framework: tourism stakeholder experiences of INTERREG, Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism, 20:5, 485-502, DOI: 10.1080/15022250.2020.1792339

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2020.1792339

SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL OF HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM
2020, VOL. 20, NO. 5, 485–502
https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2020.1792339

Useful funds, disappointing framework: tourism stakeholder experiences of INTERREG

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ABSTRACT

Cross-border tourism cooperation is a fruitful form of engagement between borderland destinations, helping them boost their profile and minimise problems arising from operating near a border. European cross-border tourism cooperation is often supported by a European Union project funding arm known as INTERREG. Our study explores the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders involved in three INTERREG projects between tourism destinations in the Scandinavian borderland region of Jämtland-Trøndelag. The aim of the study is to understand why tourism actors in the region decide to apply for INTERREG funds, what their perceptions are towards the project framework, and how their experiences of INTERREG influence their assessment of the programme as a tool for successful cross-border cooperation in tourism. Emerging from a qualitative approach based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, we reveal that the stakeholders involved in the projects see INTERREG as a valuable source of funding in an otherwise under-funded border region, but that they experience a number of problems within the INTERREG framework. The omnipresence of short-term, supranational funded projects is perceived as detrimental to the establishment of sustainable cross-border tourism development within the study region. We recommend that tourism practitioners be more cautious when thinking of (re)applying for INTERREG funding.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 September 2019
Accepted 2 July 2020

KEYWORDS
Tourism; cross-border tourism cooperation; INTERREG; Scandinavia; European Union

Introduction

The situation on Europe's borders has become ever more unpredictable in the face of geopolitical pressures arising from Brexit, the refugee "crisis" and, recently, COVID-19, all resulting in current or potential restrictions on free movement within the Schengen Area. In spite of these events, the overarching trend over the last three decades across the continent has been one of increasingly relaxed border controls, particularly between the member states of the European Union (EU). Thus, cross-border tourism flows have increased significantly (Rozhnov, 2007). Importantly, many borderland destinations benefitted from this relaxation of controls as they became more accessible to visitors from neighbouring countries. To take advantage of this growing international tourism

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market, and simultaneously deal with common problems, tourism actors have often sought cooperative cross-border arrangements between the two sides of a border.

Investigations concerning cross-border tourism are popular in tourism studies. Originally, research focused primarily on countries separated by rigid border controls such as between Mexico and the United States of America (Timothy, 1999, 2001). Increasingly though, scholars have examined the European Union context where, especially within Schengen, border controls have been virtually eliminated. Specifically, these studies have sought to understand how cross-border cooperation (hereafter CBC) occurs when the physical presence of a border is no longer obvious (Greer, 2002; Hartmann, 2006; Ilbery & Saxena, 2011; Ioannides et al., 2006; Klatt & Herrmann, 2011; Liberato et al., 2018; Löfgren, 2008; Nilsson et al., 2010; Pinheiro, 2009; Prokkola, 2007; 2011a, 2011b; Prokkola et al., 2015; Scott, 2000; Stoffelen, 2018; Stoffelen et al., 2017; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017; Więckowski, 2018). Such studies reveal that achieving cross-border tourism cooperation is a rewarding yet challenging endeavour.

Nearly all the aforementioned scholars address the EU's involvement within cross-border cooperative efforts. The EU, through its mission of enhancing "economic, social and territorial cohesion" (The European Union), seeks to play a vital role in enabling greater cooperation across borders as part of a process of Europeanisation (Fitjar et al., 2013). To achieve this, the EU provides Structural Funds to local actors in borderlands who have initiated cross-border projects. Often, this funding comes via the INTERREG programme. It is important to mention that, beyond tourism, INTERREG projects target a broad variety of sectors including health, transport, education, the environment and regional development (Ibid.).

Several scholars have addressed the use of European funding within cross-border tourism cooperation and its role, amongst other things, in terms of cross-border tourism governance (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017); cross-border regional identity (Nilsson et al., 2010); cross-border destination formation (Ioannides et al., 2006; Prokkola, 2007); and knowledge transfer and innovation (Makkonen et al., 2018). Those who have looked at INTERREG specifically have often raised critiques of the programme, citing issues with the programme that have hindered sustainable cross-border tourism development (Hartmann, 2006; Ioannides et al., 2006; Nilsson et al., 2010; Prokkola, 2007; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017; Stoffelen et al., 2017).

In this paper, we seek to contribute to the research on the INTERREG framework by "getting personal" with project stakeholders involved in three INTERREG IV projects in a mid-Scandinavian region. To do so, we use a qualitative methodology to understand thoroughly the experience of working within INTERREG projects. In particular, we seek to understand the following issues: why do tourism actors in border regions seek out INTERREG funding in the first place; what are their perceptions of the INTERREG project framework; and how do their experiences of INTERREG influence their assessment of the programme as a tool for successful cross-border cooperation in tourism.

We seek to answer these questions through a case study of a region with an established history of using INTERREG projects in a variety of sectors, one of which is tourism. The case study region consists of the counties of Trøndelag in Norway and Jämtland in Sweden. By choosing this region, our paper is the first to investigate INTERREG-related tourism projects between the two countries. Further, it represents a rare example of examining INTERREG projects on the EU's external borders, since Norway, unlike Sweden, is not part of the EU.

The paper unravels by first examining the existing literature on cross-border tourism and INTERREG's role within its development. We then justify the selection of our study area before presenting our methods. This is followed by an analysis of our findings. We end the paper with a discussion and conclusion, including recommendations for further research.

Conceptual framework

Borders and tourism

Borders are hardly spaces one associates with tourism development. To begin with, they are tools for exercising a state's sovereignty by clearly demarcating its political space (Timothy, 2001). Agnew (2008) maintains that traditionally, borders have been perceived as "lines on a map" (p. 175) separating two national entities, each of which embraces its own individual political, social and economic system. Yet, tourism scholars agree that borders serve both as handicaps but also opportunities for the sector's development within cross-border regions (Timothy, 1999; 2001).

As handicaps for the tourist, crossing a border presents certain challenges: cumbersome customs checks, currency exchange, linguistic problems or culture shock. For those involved in tourism development, the border highlights problems such as legal or fiscal disparities between the two neighbouring countries, which cause headaches when seeking to cooperate across the border (Timothy, 2001). As for opportunities, Timothy (2001) explains how tourists are attracted to borders in different ways. For some, the border itself is the destination due to its imposing presence in the landscape, such as the border between North and South Korea. Thus, at such a border, the tourist wishes to gaze across into another country where the political system differs markedly to their own. For others, crossing a border presents the thrill of entering a new country. Likewise, many visitors travel over a border to obtain something they cannot find on their side of the border (e.g. gambling as in the case between China and Macau) or because prices of commodities and services are much lower in the neighbouring country (e.g. between the USA and Mexico). For tourists therefore, borders are not only spaces of obstruction but also of communication and hybridity (Cunningham & Heyman, 2004). Thus, for destinations within borderlands, the border represents a site of various types of opportunity. It is for this reason that the EU increasingly perceives borders as important interfaces and cluster nodes (Reitel et al., 2018), whereby through cooperation, destination development can be accelerated.

However, it is on a border that divergent systems and ways of doing things become obvious, especially for those seeking to work across them. How far these differences manifest themselves in cross-border tourism development depends on the type of cross-border interaction that exists to begin with. Martinez (1994), and subsequently, Timothy (2001), developed a typology depicting how interaction between two sides ranges from non-existent in alienated borderlands (e.g. between Syria and Israel) to cooperation and eventually collaboration in more integrated regions (e.g. between Belgium and the Netherlands). Thus, the degree to which CBC for tourism development is effective is context-dependent.

Sweden and Norway share a border where people and goods experience minimal controls. This situation, therefore, matches the collaboration and integration side of Martinez &

Timothy's typology. However, despite a long tradition of cooperation between the two countries, this does not necessarily result in problem-free CBC since, in reality, borders remain entrenched in people's day-to-day lives and working practices (Prokkola, 2009), thus creating and perpetuating difference (Agnew, 2008). In fact, various scholars have demonstrated that the absence of a physical border in the landscape can even lead to a strengthened desire to emphasise differences between people (Ilbery & Saxena, 2011; Pinheiro, 2009). This happens even in the highly homogenous region of Scandinavia (Löfgren, 2008). Thus, even in the most "borderless" of regions, CBC can remain problematic, and can merit a need for supranational assistance, such as an INTERREG project.

The benefits of cross-border tourism cooperation

Despite the challenges, several benefits emerge through cross-border tourism cooperation. First, pooling two bordering destinations' resources, marketing, staffing and infrastructure reduces costs. This improves the destinations' resilience in the face of financial risks (Carson et al., 2014; Greer, 2002; Ioannides et al., 2006; Lovelock & Boyd, 2006; Timothy, 1999). Furthermore, a jointly marketed destination offering different yet complimentary characteristics leads to regional scale economies whereby smaller destinations attain critical mass in tourism by collaborating and offering attractive packages to tourists of different backgrounds (Greer, 2002; Lovelock & Boyd, 2006; Nauwelaers, Maguire & Ajmone Marsan, 2013; Timothy, 1999).

Additionally, cross-border tourism cooperation can facilitate a sustainable approach to regional tourism development, especially in cases where the two neighbouring countries share a common resource (e.g. a wildlife reserve) (Timothy, 1999). Even though borders often impose various constraints that hinder cross-border tourism development (Nauwelaers et al., 2013; Stoffelen et al., 2017), by cooperating, destinations on either side can work towards a common vision whereby the cross-border region is effectively treated as one coherent entity for planning and management purposes (Pinheiro, 2009). Finally, close cooperation between countries, which share a border can lead to a reduction in regional rivalries, nationalism and stereotyping, all of which are factors that may obstruct the tourism potential of cross-border regions (Carson et al., 2014; Greer, 2002; Ilbery & Saxena, 2011).

INTERREG within cross-border tourism development

The aforementioned benefits encourage local, regional and supranational organisations to enhance collaborative arrangements. From entities like the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, which supports projects like the ambitious Silk Road project (UNWTO, 2019), down to municipal attempts in peripheral cross-border regions, policymakers increasingly promote cross-border tourism cooperation. Traditionally, public funds have supported regional cross-border tourism cooperation (Church & Reid, 1999; Ioannides et al., 2006; Löfgren, 2008; Prokkola, 2011b). In Europe, the EU is the most prolific financier of such projects, heavily investing in cross-border cooperation, both between EU members, and between EU members and their non-EU neighbours (e.g. between Finland and Russia) (Makkonen et al., 2018).

INTERREG is one of the EU's main funding arms for CBC and, thus, one of the primary means for achieving support for cross-border tourism projects (Więckowski, 2018). This specific programme aims to enhance interregional cooperation across Europe by supporting project applications from regional actors with European Regional Development Funding (Faby, 2006; Nilsson et al., 2010). Initiated in 1991, INTERREG is now in its fifth reincarnation, funding projects focusing, inter alia, on tourism. It has invested in countless projects across Europe, targeting peripheral, underfunded border regions (Reitel et al., 2018).

Certain scholars argue that INTERREG and other EU CBC projects enable a situation whereby people from different (cultural, economic, political) backgrounds rally together to access financing opportunities that peripheral regions, otherwise, regularly struggle to secure (Faby, 2006; Makkonen et al., 2018). Yet others question the efficacy of INTERREG's role in facilitating cross-border tourism cooperation, maintaining that the programme's entrenchment in the public sector causes top-down tourism planning, serving the interests of European-minded regional elites over those of locals who are sceptical towards supranational region-building (Church and Reid, 1999; Ioannides et al., 2006; Prokkola, 2011b). This mismatch of interests can lead to the creation of an image of cross-border regional identity that suits the aims of the programme's funders but does not necessarily dovetail with the aspirations of local inhabitants (Prokkola et al., 2015). In the case of INTERREG, the dominance of public officials and a failure to engage in a meaningful community participatory process can result in a rapid succession of ill-conceived projects that contradict the aims of long-term, sustainable tourism planning (Church & Reid, 1999; Hartmann, 2006). Some would argue that this is characteristic of the project-driven approach favoured by the EU, which leads to "administrate short-termism" (Sjöblom, 2009, p. 165).

Undoubtedly, this situation is aggravated given that INTERREG is seen as removing some of the risks of enacting CBC for local actors, shifting the risk to supranational funding bodies. Since tourism often struggles to attain financial incentives from local governments (Dredge, 2001), actors perceive INTERREG as a desirable source of sorely needed additional funding (Scott, 2000), to support tourism initiatives that the local population might not otherwise prioritize. This situation promotes a "grantsmanship" culture, where local actors "follow the pot of money" and in so doing, abandon long-term planning which is "traded off for short-term project funding" (Dredge, 2001, p. 734; Sjöblom, 2009). This concern is compounded by the fact that European project funding in rural regions has been argued to lack sufficient oversight (Ioannides & Petersen, 2003). Moreover, INTERREG projects are critiqued for not promoting organic, sustainable tourism development, since cross-border ties created through INTERREG often fail to become self-supporting and, as such, tend to disappear quickly after the project cycle is complete and the money dries up (Stoffelen, 2018).

The apparent weaknesses associated with this programme lead to questions concerning INTERREG's benefits for cross-border tourism cooperation (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017), with some researchers advocating a (re)turn to small-scale, locally-driven initiatives as a more beneficial approach to cross-border tourism cooperation (Makkonen et al., 2018). Given this growing concern as to the value of INTERREG projects for tourism development in cross-border regions, it is pertinent that we focus on the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders who work within such INTERREG projects.

Study area

Our case study is a cross-border region consisting of the Swedish county (län) of Jämtland and the Norwegian county (fylkeskommune) of Trøndelag (Figure 1).

This region constitutes an interesting case study for several reasons. Firstly, the two counties share numerous similarities. Both Jämtland and Trøndelag are peripheral regions, similar in size (34,000-40,000 km^2 respectively) and experience similar climates with mild summers and harsh cold winters. They share a long history of cross-border contact and have often been part of the same kingdom. This shared history has resulted in close ties between the two regions. Many Norwegians still jokingly referring to Jämtland as East Trøndelag, even though over the last two centuries both regions have turned ever-more towards their respective capitals, especially following the dismantling of the Swedish-Norwegian union in 1905 (Westerdahl & Skoglund, 2013). Moreover, since Swedish and Norwegian are similar languages, communication between these two regions is facilitated because residents in both Jämtland and Trøndelag largely understand each other when speaking their respective languages. The main differences are that Trøndelag has twice the population (size and density) of Jämtland and that Trøndelag is not part of the EU given that Norway, unlike Sweden, is not a member state. Nevertheless, because Norway is part of the visa-free Schengen zone, few, if any, customs or immigration checks are conducted on the border between Jämtland and Trøndelag.

Far from their respective capitals, Jämtland and Trøndelag share disadvantages (e.g. lower GDP per capita, smaller direct investment, dominance of primary industries) (Tillväxtverket, 2019; Statistics Norway, 2019). Tourism is one tool for boosting both regions' prosperity. The sector has a long history in the region, especially in Sweden, where the

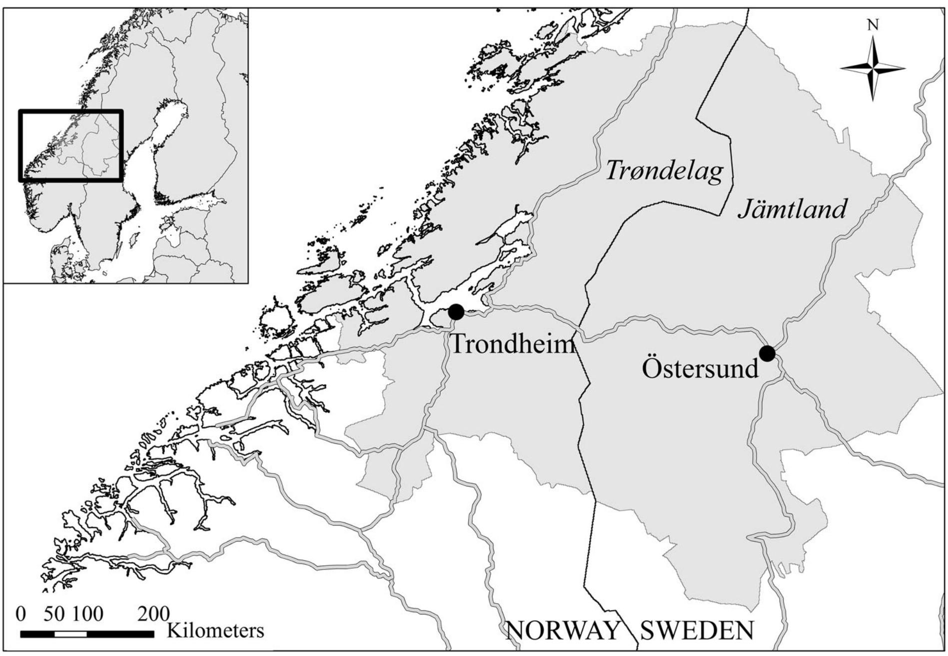

Figure 1. Map of Jämtland and Trøndelag. Credit to Arie Stoffelen.

skiing destination of Åre has operated for over a century. In terms of tourism offerings, Jämtland and Trøndelag provide fantastic opportunities for outdoor activities like hiking, fishing, skiing and biking. Despite this potential, tourism in both Jämtland and Trøndelag remains dominated by domestic arrivals, with less than a quarter of all tourists coming from outside each respective country, leading to a strong desire to attract more international guests (Innovation Norway, 2019; JHT, 2019). CBC is seen as one way of boosting the region's profile to attract additional international tourists in order to promote regional development.

The region has a tradition of cooperation supported by international organisations like the Nordic Council and the EU. This makes it a rare example of a region on the EU's external borders where cooperation with a neighbouring non-EU state is deep-rooted. Most studies of EU funded tourism projects occurring on the EU's external borders have focused on regions such as Russia and Finland where cooperation is nascent or has remained under-developed (Makkonen et al., 2018). INTERREG is one recurrent avenue for Swedish-Norwegian cooperation in the region. Despite not being an EU member state, Norway can participate in INTERREG projects (unlike most states on the EU's external borders, which partake in the European Neighbourhood Initiative). INTERREG's recurrent use in our study region suggests that although CBC is well founded, such cooperation is in clear need of financial or systematic support.

We selected three INTERREG projects in our cross-border region. These projects were part of INTERREG IV Sverige-Norge, which was the third round of INTERREG available to Sweden and Norway. It ran between 2007 and 2013, and received around €321 million in total (INTERREG IVC, 2015). All the examined INTERREG projects are located within the cross-border region labelled "Nordens Gröna Bälte" (The North's Green Belt), much of which is composed of Jämtland and Trøndelag.

We chose these projects since they incorporated elements focusing on increasing tourism to the area. The first is "Regionprojekt Vaajma" (Regional Project Vaajma), which ambitiously aimed to create a pilot region for CBC, comprising of two Norwegian and two Swedish municipalities. Its tourism component sought to celebrate the triad of cultures in the region (Norwegian, Sami and Swedish) by creating a cross-border destination called Destination Vaajma. Harmonising rules and regulations, creating cross-border mapping and marketing "the heart of Scandinavia" were key goals of the tourism component of this much wider project. The project resulted in the establishment of Destination Vaajma, the creation of a cross-border hiking brochure and led to a tourist tax that helped pay for beautification of the area's villages.

Secondly, we examined "SÖT: ett samspel mellan Sundsvall, Östersund och Trondheim" (SÖT: an interface between Sundsvall, Östersund and Trondheim), which envisaged sweeping cooperation between the cross-border region's three major urban centres. We focused on the tourism aspect of this project, which sought to develop the S:t Olavsleden pilgrims' path, which links all three cities. At 580 km long, the trail links the Swedish (Baltic) and Norwegian (Atlantic) coastlines, following the footsteps of St. Olav who marched his army from coast to coast to reconquer Norway. The project sought to make the path navigable for tourists and encouraged local people to offer their homes as pilgrim accommodation.

The third project was a joint effort between the Swedish ski resort of Funäsdalen and the historic Norwegian mining town of Røros called "Direktflyg till Röros/Funäsdalen"

(Direct flight to Röros/Funäsdalen). This aimed to attract additional tourists through direct flights to the airport in Røros that would benefit both destinations. It also envisaged marketing the region as a cross-border tourism destination under the slogan "En resa, två länder" (One trip, two countries). This succeeded in bringing flights to Røros from Zurich, Stockholm and Trollhätten (Sweden) during the second half of the project. Work was initiated on creating an "En resa, två länder" marketing campaign.

Method

Prokkola (2011a) laments the absence of a people-based approach in most tourism-related studies on borders. Thus, we chose to place people and their personal experiences at the forefront of our understanding of how INTERREG works for those operating within cross-border tourism cooperation. Comprehending the working relationships of individuals, ultimately demonstrates how effectively the structures they develop work or not. To achieve this, we chose a qualitative methodology, allowing us to thoroughly examine the human experience of the studied phenomena. Our approach involved a process inquiry, whereby we placed emphasis not only on what people do but how they do it and their experiences of doing it (Patton, 2002).

To do this, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews, aiming to glean information from informants who were intimately familiar with the projects in question. Although we used certain pre-determined questions to steer the respondents towards the aims of our study, we allowed them considerable leeway to discuss issues that they regarded as important, which we might not have anticipated.

In total, we conducted thirteen interviews between February and April 2016. Twelve were conducted face-to-face, with one interview conducted via Skype. Using a purposive sampling approach, we selected participants based on their involvement in the projects addressed in the study. Some respondents held positions like project leaders, whilst others were responsible for implementing parts of the projects in question. In this way, we used "expert interviews", choosing interviewees due to their role as representatives of their respective organisation (Flick, 2009). Broken down, these interviews involved three local destination management organisations (DMOs), three hotels, two museums, two pilgrim centres, one regional DMO, one municipality and one regional development organisation.

As well as ensuring they had expertise relating to the projects in question, we also sought a balance in terms of nationality and gender, ending up with seven interviews in Norway and six in Sweden, and seven participants who were female and six who were male. The interviews were conducted in English since: (a) neither of us is a native Swedish or Norwegian speaker; and (b) all respondents were comfortable with English. Although this limits somewhat the depth of interview responses, our positioning as being "in-between" (Miraftab, 2004), that is neither Swedish nor Norwegian, meant that our respondents considered us less immersed in national biases or stereotypes. This "in-betweenness" stimulated a mutual interest, making the interview process more relaxing and enjoyable for all involved. We should add that our knowledge of Swedish was sufficient for us to understand all the project related material we gathered.

Furthermore, by visiting most of the participants, we obtained a better understanding of their working environment and their terminology (Creswell, 2003), while simultaneously gaining the opportunity to collect project-related documents. Cross-referencing promotional material and project reports with interview data was complimentary to our interview data. From promotional documents and the initial interviews, we quickly learned the common language of those involved in cross-border collaboration and used it in later interviews, thus improving the data's quality (Patton, 2002).

We recorded our interview after gaining the consent of the respondents and guaranteeing their anonymity. After transcribing the material, we used a thematic analysis as per Patton (2002), which enabled us to develop thematic codes. Our approach led to the identification of several repeated themes, thus allowing the formulation of answers to our respective research questions.

Results

Rationale for INTERREG projects

It appears that the overwhelming rationale for applying for an INTERREG project stemed from the funding available from the programme. Stakeholders in all three projects extolled the value of this considerable funding source to their underfunded peripheral regions, especially in the context of tourism, which municipal governments and voters often regard as a frivolous expense. Surprisingly, our respondents made this rationale explicit. For example, a Norwegian local DMO admitted that their application for INTERREG was more to do with a desire for funding than a wish to foster cross-border relationships: "*I think INTERREG is one of the reasons why we have worked together because you kind of follow that flow of money right*". Interestingly, it seems that the INTERREG framework itself is not appreciated as much as the funding it provides. One Swedish stakeholder in the SÖT project explained that now they had found alternative national funding to continue their work, they would back out of a reapplication for INTERREG funding. This was because it was considered easier not to depend on cross-border partners. As our respondent put it, "*So now we have the money, it's probable we'll skip them*". Again, this suggests the funding is more important to INTERREG's appeal than anything else. Stakeholders considered INTERREG funding as especially valuable because: it could supplement sources of income from national actors (the state, municipalities etc.); they viewed it as less competitive than some national funding opportunities; and it is designed specifically for cross-border work.

This is not to suggest that the stakeholders did not have good intentions as to how to use the funding. All three projects had their individual aims relating to cross-border tourism cooperation that led them to apply for INTERREG funding. We elaborated these aims earlier in our paper where we explained that they largely revolved around using INTERREG funds to widen their collective marketing reach and develop new tourism offerings. All the stakeholders felt that cross-border tourism was something worth investing in, especially when appealing to the international tourism market. They spoke of the attraction for tourists "*to pop over*" the border as the marketing slogan "*En resa, två länder*" suggests in the Direktflyg project; of walking "*coast to coast*" on the S:t Olavsleden trail; or visiting "*two countries, three cultures, in one*" within Destination Vaajma.

The stakeholders also made it clear that the presence of the border itself hampers cross-border tourism development efforts. Respondents on both sides reflected that while the border is largely invisible, practical divisions created by its presence complicate the harmonisation of tourism production and management in the region. Phrases like "*even if you can't see the border, there is a border*" and "*mental barrier*" summarise such sentiments. Respondents listed imbalances that the border creates like: different ways of mapping; different regulations governing nature-based activities like snowmobiling; varying levels of taxation and wages; and diverse working practices and attitudes. However, they recognise that the border neither mentally nor physically impedes tourists. Thus, they regard cross-border tourism development as suffering from a mismatch between tourists' nonchalant attitude towards the border and the various obstacles to providing cross-border tourism services, which the border itself creates when seeking to collaborate across it. For example, a stakeholder in the Vaajma project highlighted that whilst tourists wish to hike the region's cross-border trails, they must buy at least four maps to do so, due to different mapping formats on either side of the border. Their hope was that INTERREG would help them overcome such practical divisions.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that one of the reasons why stakeholders in the region applied for INTERREG funding was because they were confident they could easily work with their counterparts across the border. The region's long history of CBC was mentioned regularly, as was the fact that they share similar languages, cultures and working practices. This, together with the calm political situation in the region, encouraged stakeholders to pursue engagement in a multi-year cooperative project.

Experiencing the INTERREG framework

Generally, the interviewees praised INTERREG as an excellent tool for encouraging stakeholders on either side of the border to look beyond their own borders. They found that INTERREG enabled them the planning space to start thinking collectively about how to challenge current problems in CBC. In the Vaajma project, for example, the stakeholders mentioned how the cross-border framework of INTERREG enabled them to discuss mutual challenges and create common responses such as the tourist tax, which helped improve the area's appearance. In the Direktflyg project, INTERREG was seen as the right framework for enacting a plan whereby a Norwegian airport's (Røros) growth in direct flight arrivals would, in turn, boost tourism to a Swedish ski resort (Funäsdalen). This said, their positive experiences of INTERREG, together with their rationale for applying for the project funding, tended to centre on the financial stimulus provided. These finances enabled many of the aims of the projects to get off the ground, most notably in the SÖT project. Here, the S:t Olavsleden trail became a success story shortly after the project's end, thanks in no small part to the funding provided by INTERREG, which enabled the trail to become an identifiable feature in the region's landscape.

Despite these positive experiences, the interviews moved quickly towards the stakeholders' grievances regarding their experience of working within their INTERREG projects. To begin with, participants struggled with the stipulations of the project application itself. The projects required several partners either side of the border to pool their resources together to pitch for the INTERREG project.[1] These partners represented several sectors, of which tourism was only one component part. This contributed to numerous opinions and priorities weighing on any of the three projects. The situation was further complicated since each project required a "lead partner", placing a greater deal of responsibility upon a single stakeholder. This caused conflicts in our study area whereby those assigned "leadership" status often questioned their partner's commitment to the project. As one respondent from a Swedish municipality put it: "*That makes me totally nuts … they don't take it seriously*".

There appeared to be a division amongst respondents in how they viewed INTERREG projects. Whilst some saw the project as crucial to regional development, others considered it more of a financial tandem treadmill, on which the partners run collectively to attain additional funding, even if they believed that these projects rarely produce lasting regional development. For those seeing the project as crucial to their destination's future, a sense of exhaustion was tangible. This was exhaustion at the lack of commitment by other stakeholders, and towards the prevailing "project syndrome", whereby European projects are routinely applied for yet rarely achieve concrete results. As one partner in a local DMO within the Direktflyg project said: "*It's all very nice ideas and stuff but rarely turns out into something that lasts*".

These concerns were aggravated due to the structure of the project's financing. As with the imbalance apparent in responsibility mentioned earlier, there was also an imbalance in financing. In the SÖT project, for example, there was a mismatch of almost 4 million Swedish kronor (~€400,000) in the contribution between the Swedish side (comprised of mostly municipal funding and buoyed significantly by EU funding), and the Norwegian side (also comprised of mostly municipal funding and a comparatively smaller Norwegian state contribution[2]). Furthermore, the funding structure meant that the vast majority of the project funding could not actually be spent cross-border, despite the fact that the INTERREG projects demand cross-border work. As our respondent at one of the pilgrim centres in Norway said somewhat euphemistically, "*the whole [financing] construction is a bit weird*" in this regard. Project stakeholders were permitted to spend a portion of the money across the border, but first had to gain permission to do this. Mostly, money remained trapped on other side of the border. This is reflected in statements such as: "*There's actually no money in Norway to do anything in Sweden*" and "*It was only on paper; in practice there was no money going back and forth*". Consequently, stakeholders were left frustrated, feeling that despite working towards cross-border tourism, the financing structure meant that little cooperative work was achieved across the border and that project activities would often remain within each respective country.

The problems relating to the financing structure were aggravated by the fact that most partners within the INTERREG projects are, on a daily basis, more used to working on nationally routed issues. For example, despite being a key stakeholder in the development of the S:t Olavsleden pilgrimage trail, the Norwegian National Pilgrim Centre in Trondheim, where the trail ends, has no purvue to work on a cross-border basis. Our respondent there stated, "*our mandate is first hand only in Norway*". This was reflected in a map featured on the centre's website at the time of data collection, which showed all the Norwegian pilgrimage trails ending in Trondheim, but omitted the cross-border S:t Olavsleden path.

A similar mismatch was noted in the case of a Swedish DMO in the Direktflyg project. Despite Funäsdalen capitalising on its proximity to Norway to promote the "En resa, två länder" experience, we witnessed no evidence at the town's tourist office of cross-border tourism promotion. Instead, we noticed a brochure marketing the destination as "a part of Sweden", which suggests a Swedish-centric branding effort in a destination that is simultaneously trying to sell itself as a cross-border tourism region. This seeming reluctance to take advantage of the possibility for a cross-border destination was echoed across the border in Røros. One respondent, for example, at a hotel heavily invested in the Direktflyg project, spoke of serious doubts as to the feasibility of a cross-border destination, citing the apparent incompatibility of the two destinations' target markets.

Another key critique from stakeholders was that the project approach rarely provided time for the idea of a cross-border project to grow roots in local consciousness. INTERREG's timelines stipulate what must be achieved within a constrained time-period. This led stakeholders to feel pressure to provide quick fix results, commonly in the form of online promotional material and leaflets, giving a false impression of progress. Such pressures also resulted in the burnout of committed project participants. Many left their roles once the project timeline was up, blaming their departure from cross-border cooperative work primarily on the stress of the project. This, in turn, resulted in the loss of established cross-border connections. This was one of the main downsides of the project approach since the establishment of personal relationships in the region was seen as crucial to successful cross-border cooperation. One regional Swedish DMO representative stated: "*It's all about relationships, so new people have to build everything up again and bridge over all the administrative difficulties. So it takes time; and then you've got it running and people get changed again"*.

Furthermore, most respondents felt that the INTERREG framework was not designed to adequately engage those who would implement many of the aims of the project, namely the local citizens and the private sector. In other words, they regarded the framework as too top-down in nature. Project leaders admitted that local businesses were often unaware of the developments happening within the project, with most of the work being done by public officials. Within Vaajma, clearly the local community was insufficiently involved within the project. As one of the project's stakeholder's put it:

> They didn't hop on the train, not at all. When someone from above goes down and tells you 'This is good for you, you should do this, maybe you should be at this fair, maybe you should do this marketing', some of them will see the benefits, but most of them, the people who are actually going to do it, they will say 'I don't have time, I don't have money, I don't understand why'. It doesn't work!

Even if the aims were well-explained within each project application, the stakeholders in the project believed that local citizens and businesses regularly failed to understand the main concept. This reduced the support for such projects. As one Swedish local DMO respondent put it: "*The project management would be doing quite a lot of work that never came down to those who actually were supposed to do it; it was a project and not a process*".

A consequence of this failure to get the private sector and local actors involved was the near total collapse of two of the projects once the project timeline ended. None of the interviewees had created long-term plans extending beyond the lifeline of their respective INTERREG projects. Despite a willingness to continue their CBC, they felt that without applying for new funds to continue their project work, they would be unable to get the ball rolling again. The alternatives mentioned were either to begin a completely new INTERREG project application, or give up entirely. There was an undeniable sense that because the communities had borne little risk, there was no urgency to ensure the projects' survival. As a Swedish DMO representative in the Direktflyg project said:

> "You have to take some risk by yourself, the companies, the people out there selling the strategy had to be that 'we have to fill these seats otherwise it costs us money'. And when you have a project, you don't have to worry because somebody else is taking the risk".

Finally, while several national differences (cultural, economic and environmental), which were created by the border itself, were key the stakeholders' rationale to apply for INTERREG, it appears the projects were unable to assist in overcoming many of these disparities. On a cultural level, despite the obvious similarities between Norwegians and Swedes, the respondents regularly attributed a project's failings to national differences. Respondents often commented how they realised how different Swedes and Norwegians were whilst working on the project. For example, Norwegians and Swedes differed in their approach to how meetings should be conducted and the importance of the social aspects of cooperation. Furthermore, there was a lack of emphasis on face-to-face meetings within the project framework. Since distances in our study region are large, the creation of close networks and personal relationships became difficult. Therefore, it was easy to attribute blame to someone far away with whom the interviewee had limited contact. On a practical level, respondents often mentioned the failure of the projects to overcome some of these deep-seated differences, whether they were in wages, environmental regulation, mapping technology or bureaucratic red tape that inhibited the creation of cross-border tourism experiences. No framework seemed to exist that supports both sides in overcoming these issues.

Discussion

Reflecting on why tourism actors in Jämtland-Trøndelag seek out INTERREG funding, it is clear that their reasons match many of those found in other case study regions. Firstly, they applied for such projects to overcome the impediments for organising tourism, which the existence of the border itself creates. Many of the obstacles brought up by the stakeholders such as imbalances in wages, differing environmental regulations and cultural differences were alluded to in our conceptual framework (Ioannides et al., 2006; Timothy, 2001). Interestingly, this study demonstrates that despite several similarities between Norway and Sweden, these differences are still serious enough to warrant external assistance in the form of an INTERREG project, and are even alluded to as reasons for project "failure". This furthers our understanding that borders where controls are minimal do not necessarily translate into regions with more successful CBC (Ilbery & Saxena, 2011; Pinheiro, 2009). Another rationale for applying for INTERREG derives from the perception that cross-border tourism cooperation will lead to increased tourism in border regions. This mirrors closely Timothy's (2001) view of borders as destinations in and of themselves, and also, that borders are a tourism resource to be used, to create exciting cross-border destinations in the age of the "tick box tourist". All three of the projects played on their "cross-border" potential to attract more tourists to the region. As in other contexts (Makkonen et al., 2018; Nilsson et al., 2010; Stoffelen et al., 2017), European project funding was seen as a natural ally in this quest.

However, one significant finding in these results is that it would appear that the major incentive to apply for an INTERREG project stems from an acute need for funding, rather than from a belief that the framework represents the most effective tool for facilitating cross-border tourism cooperation. The latter point mirrors Dredge's (2001, p. 734) experience of project applications in Australia where local tourism actors will "follow the pot of money" instead of focusing on long-term strategic tourism planning. This quote was strikingly repeated almost verbatim by one of our respondents. Another significant finding was that when sources of national funding became available, tourism stakeholders preferred to avoid applying for INTERREG funds. This, again, suggests that INTERREG's main attribute is its funding rather than its potential to assist in fulfilling various CBC-related goals.

Regarding their experiences of the framework itself, it appears that despite their obvious gratitude towards the INTERREG funding for the opportunities it fostered, the stakeholders were disappointed by some of their project experiences. Firstly, they felt the top-down nature of INTERREG projects left little scope for the involvement of local entrepreneurs and residents. This reflects a recurring finding in studies of cross-border tourism cooperation (Church & Reid, 1999; Ioannides et al., 2006; Prokkola, 2011b; Prokkola et al., 2015). This, in turn, was considered one of the reasons why projects failed to survive beyond their timeline. These timelines were also felt to constrain the development of sustainable cross-border networks. Consequently, this caused stakeholders to feel pressured into producing quick-fix solutions, like online promotional materials, to impress funders and hopefully obtain future funding. This somewhat disingenuous tactic mirrors the argument of Prokkola et al. (2015) that playing up to a potentially absent cross-border tradition in order to obtain funding is evident in certain European projects. These timelines were also one of the reasons for personnel burnout, which hampered the continuation of cross-border conversations.

Furthermore, our respondents perceived INTERREG as inefficient in combatting the inherent imbalances the border creates. Either this demonstrates INTERREG's weakness in terms of helping overcome such imbalances, or the strength of the nation state in dominating the way tourism is managed and developed (Prokkola, 2011a). Certainly, the results relating to the problems created by INTERREG's funding structure, a structure involving a multitude of different financial contributors and which does not permit the smooth flow of funds across the border, can be attributed to INTERREG

Additionally, it was apparent that the INTERREG framework, which works off innovative, exciting short-term projects, resulted in a lack of long-term planning and the slow, organic development of an idea. This reinforces a persistent argument about European cross-border projects (Church & Reid, 1999; Hartmann, 2006; Klatt & Herrmann, 2011; Scott, 2000; Sjöblom, 2009; Stoffelen, 2018). Despite all this, it is worth considering that many of the critiques voiced by stakeholders, in particular ones related to project timelines and the dominance of the public sector, could be valid for any type of European or indeed, national project, as evidenced in the work of Sjöblom (2009).

One of our key findings was that despite disappointments with the INTERREG framework, most respondents were open to apply for yet another INTERREG project. Their negative experiences of the INTERREG system, therefore, does not seem to have put them off the thought of reapplying for INTERREG funds. Rather, there appears to be a 'project syndrome', whereby stakeholders consider project funds, often INTERREG funds, as the sole way to keep hopes of cross-border development alive, despite the fact that these rarely lead to major tangible results. This reinforces the idea that project proliferation in the EU fails to promote sustainable development (Sjöblom, 2009). As of today, only one of these projects has had a recognisable lasting achievement with regards to tourism in the region. Yet despite this fact, INTERREG remains a commonly sought after source of funding for cross-border tourism projects in the region. This cleavage between applications and visible results merits more exploration by tourism scholars.

Conclusion

Our investigation of why stakeholders in our study region applied for INTERREG funding and of their experiences in using the framework leads to the following conclusions. Despite INTERREG's clear financial value, stakeholders were unimpressed by its contribution towards improving cross-border tourism cooperation. Our focus on stakeholder's perceptions and experiences of INTERREG helped us look beyond the somewhat propitious assessments of projects found in INTERREG's final reports. Whilst our findings, just as those of other scholars (Ioannides et al., 2006; Liberato et al., 2018; Nilsson et al., 2010; Prokkola, 2007; Prokkola, 2011b; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017; Stoffelen et al., 2017) lead to critiques of INTERREG, we recognise that many of the apparent failings suggested by stakeholders could also be explained by poor project management or design. Alternatively, they could be failings inherent to projects more generally, rather than INTERREG specifically. Our conclusion is that the popularity of INTERREG, the "project syndrome" alluded to, speaks more to a need amongst tourism stakeholders for funding, which is often hard to entice in peripheral border areas. The decision to avoid INTERREG in cases when other funding sources were available speaks volumes as to this situation.

Based on these findings, we can make several recommendations. Firstly, whilst INTERREG represents hugely valuable funding and cooperative encouragement, it is worth considering whether it is the best framework to assist stakeholders in border regions. A greater focus on bottom-up, organic cross-border initiatives, created locally with the support of local citizens and businesses, might prove more resilient to stand the test of time than short-term, lucratively financed projects. We also see a clear need for national and local governments to support cross-border tourism cooperation with consistent funding and an open-mind to create effective cross-border regions, rather than leaving it up to European projects to keep such cooperation alive. Finally, we would recommend that the European Union works to ensure that INTERREG project funds are more easily spent across Europe's borders, so that CBC-agreed goals are supported by CBC-targeted funds.

Naturally, our study has limitations. Our focus was quite specific, honing in on one, open-border region within Scandinavia. The transferability of the results to other European contexts is, therefore, questionable. The modest number of interviews corresponds to the small-scale nature of cross-border cooperation in the region. That said, by focusing on the oft-ignored lived experiences and perceptions of those involved in INTERREG projects, we have provided considerable support to other critiques found in the literature, giving them a human voice. We hope that our results stimulate more discussion on the role of INTERREG in cross-border tourism cooperation. Potential future research avenues could include comparative studies as to whether or not INTERREG is perceived as more effective in contexts where there is a history of harder borders compared to softer borders as was our case. Additionally, researchers could question whether the ambitions of INTERREG-led tourism projects have become even harder to achieve in an era where Schengen has become increasingly re-bordered in the context of an on-going refugee "crisis" and, most recently, COVID-19.

Notes

1. Since INTERREG III (2000-20006), it has been a stipulation that all projects must be co-financed by the two countries involved alongside the EU and that two project partners must be found on both sides of the border (Reitel et al., 2018). Indeed, INTERREG (2019) stipulates that the ideal number of partners range between five and ten!
2. Although Norwegians may partake in an INTERREG project, the funds from the EU are channeled through the Swedish partners in the project. In response to this, the Norwegian state provides additional funding ("*IR-Midler*") to support the Norwegian side of the project.

Acknowledgements

Most of all, we would like to thank our respondents for sharing with us their experiences. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editors for their comments that greatly improved this work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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