

# 8 Participation of micro-enterprises and public organisations in rural development projects

Balancing between collaboration and tensions

*Susanne Gretzinger and Mads Bruun Ingstrup*

## Introduction

Micro-enterprises, defined as enterprises with less than ten employees (Baumann and Kritikos, 2016), face many challenges in rural regions. In particular, the limited amount of internal and external resources poses a problem. As pointed out by McAdam *et al.* (2004) and Burdack *et al.* (2013), the lack of external resources is related to, for instance, pure access to knowledge, networks, and capital. To compensate for these limitations, rural micro-enterprises often collaborate with other enterprises and public organisations. Indeed, the more micro-enterprises are embedded in trustful collaborations, the more likely they are to develop sustainable business strategies (Kelliher *et al.*, 2018).

One way to collaborate and address the lack of internal and external resources is through development projects. Development projects typically involve various public and private stakeholders and help with building relationships and capabilities (Kelliher *et al.*, 2018; Andersson, 2009). However, since such projects involve participation from different stakeholders, tensions arise because of different goals, expectations, and institutional logics (Gillett *et al.*, 2019). Even if the participating stakeholders can share goals and values, have appropriate and sound management approaches, and adapt their collaboration capabilities to the context, tensions will be part of development projects (Gillett *et al.*, 2019).

Some contributions already focus on this matter (*e.g.*, Gabillet, 2015; Gillett *et al.*, 2019), but research on rural development generally misses insights on the interaction between collaboration and tensions in projects and how this affects stakeholder participation. To address this gap, we investigate how the presence of collaboration and tensions in rural development projects fertilises or hinders stakeholder participation. We do this by, first, explaining the concepts of stakeholder participation, collaboration, and tensions, and, second, by presenting a case study of a rural development project. The project is named 'Benefit4Regions' and focuses on how rural micro-enterprises can grow through collaboration with a range of stakeholders. In the end, we provide

conclusions on how to achieve strong participation in future rural development projects.

### **Stakeholder participation**

The stakeholder approach highlights that stakeholders such as micro-enterprises and public organisations depend on relationships and collaboration for acquiring resources (Aaltonen and Kujala, 2016; Eskerod *et al.*, 2015). Everett and Jamal (2004) define stakeholders as individuals, enterprises, or groups that have a stake or an interest in the performance of a collaboration. One aspect covered in the stakeholder approach is stakeholder participation, and according to Luyet *et al.* (2012), it is central to bringing together expertise and resources from diverse stakeholders. In this chapter, stakeholder participation is understood as the participation of micro-enterprises and public organisations in rural development projects.

Overall, public and private stakeholders that are internal to a region are expected to better understand the region's economic and societal problems than externally located stakeholders (Luyet *et al.*, 2012), and they participate in development projects to address these problems. Public stakeholders tend to follow the state institutional logic, which aims to increase democratic participation and community goods (Thornton *et al.*, 2012). In the wake of this, they focus on developing knowledge and solutions that match the regional context and improve human and physical infrastructure (Purvis *et al.*, 2015; Reed, 2008). According to Kearney *et al.* (2008), such efforts are based on a bureaucratic set of structures, rules, and traditions. From the perspective of private stakeholders, the motivation to participate in development projects relates to their interest in networking and improving capabilities (Burdack *et al.*, 2013). This is in line with the market institutional logic that emphasises that they interact with the purpose of increasing share price and profits (Thornton *et al.*, 2012). This can promote a behaviour that pursues 'profit-maximising objectives and a self-interested, individualistic, and arm's-length ethos' (Almandoz, 2012, p. 1382).

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is a process that involves two or more stakeholders, which interact with the aim of achieving a joint goal (Martinez-Moyano, 2006). One classical form of organising collaboration is a project (Aaltonen and Kujala, 2016), and key objectives are frequently to increase stakeholder participation and create stakeholder value (Freeman, 2010). Collaboration among various stakeholders enables pooling and combining of resources, which helps to achieve stakeholder goals (Savage *et al.*, 2010). According to Savage *et al.* (2010), collaboration among stakeholders can be described along the following three dimensions: appreciative linkages, structures, and processual entities.

Appreciative linkages can be understood as the common ground of stakeholders in terms of shared values and goals (Singh and Mitchell, 2005; Li and Hambrick, 2005). According to Savage *et al.* (2010), appreciative linkages are vital as they foster the rules and norms used for coordinating collaboration, and they support the development of commitment. Furthermore, to foster sound collaboration, stakeholders constantly need to agree upon or adjust values and goals and thereby reconfirm the appreciative linkages; otherwise, tensions can arise (Savage *et al.*, 2010).

Structures focus on how collaboration is guided by institutional settings (Prior, 2016; Ostrom, 2011; Carson *et al.*, 2006). Institutional settings consist of structural features in the form of rules, norms, and sanctions (Ostrom, 2011) as well as governance mechanisms (Carson *et al.*, 2006). While the first creates target and reciprocal behaviour, the second shapes relational contracts that align with the appreciative linkages of the participating stakeholders. While appreciated linkages emerge over time, the structural features are implemented. Savage *et al.* (2010) stress the effect of structural features on the development and coordination of projects. For example, structural features support the development of a collective project identity.

Processual entities are about trust, the supportiveness of management, and a sound climate among stakeholders (Savage *et al.*, 2010; Hoegl and Parboteeah, 2007). Savage *et al.* (2010) outline that these entities develop over time and collaborative advantages may not occur when there are tensions and a lack of trust. For the effective handling of tensions, teamwork capabilities and understanding the reasons for the tensions are necessary (Savage *et al.*, 2010). While trust and teamwork capabilities are assumed to have a direct impact on collaboration, the impact of tensions on collaboration is often indirect.

## Tensions

Many sources can lead to tensions between collaborating micro-enterprises and public organisations. In a study by Welch and Wilkinson (2005), it is stressed that incongruences in goals and perceptions provoke tensions. Additionally, Johansson (2012) explains that tensions arise because of inharmonious role expectations and demands, and Fernandez *et al.* (2014) argue that in relationships, tensions are caused by diverse views on values, goals, and strategies. Along these lines, Fang *et al.* (2011, p. 774) claim that tensions are 'two co-existing contradictory forces with conflicting goals'. They continue by outlining three types of tensions: behavioural, structural, and psychological.

Behavioural tensions stem from clashes between competing behaviours in relationships. This type of tension can be illustrated by referring to coopetition, where elements of both collaboration and competition are present (Fang *et al.*, 2011). Collaboration is when stakeholders chase the same interests and benefits as well as share resources. On the other hand, competition is when stakeholders seek to win over each other by acting opportunistically and

favouring their own interests, benefits, and resources. If an imbalance occurs between collaboration and competition, it fosters tensions, and relationships might decline.

Structural tensions concern the balance between flexibility and rigidity in relationships (Fang *et al.*, 2011). Flexibility is when stakeholders can change their structural set-up due to shifts in their environment while the unalterable investments are low. Rigidity is the extent to which stakeholders are linked to each other in relationships through, for instance, agreements and investments. A missing balance between flexibility and rigidity causes tensions and can also lead to the decline of relationships.

Psychological tensions are about which time orientation, *i.e.*, short- or long-term, that dominates in relationships (Fang *et al.*, 2011). Short-term orientation is associated with a transactional approach and a focus on fast results. In contrast, long-term orientation is the situation where a relational approach is pursued and where fast results are not on the top of the agenda. Instead, lowered uncertainty and opportunism are valued. If there is a lack of balance on time orientation, it initiates tensions and possible relationship decline.

### Theoretical synthesis

Based on the above descriptions, we are able to explore how the presence of collaboration and tensions in rural development projects fertilises or hinders stakeholder participation. The point of departure is a stakeholder participation matrix, which relies on two scales: collaboration and tensions (see Figure 8.1). The collaboration scale shows the degree to which appreciative linkages,

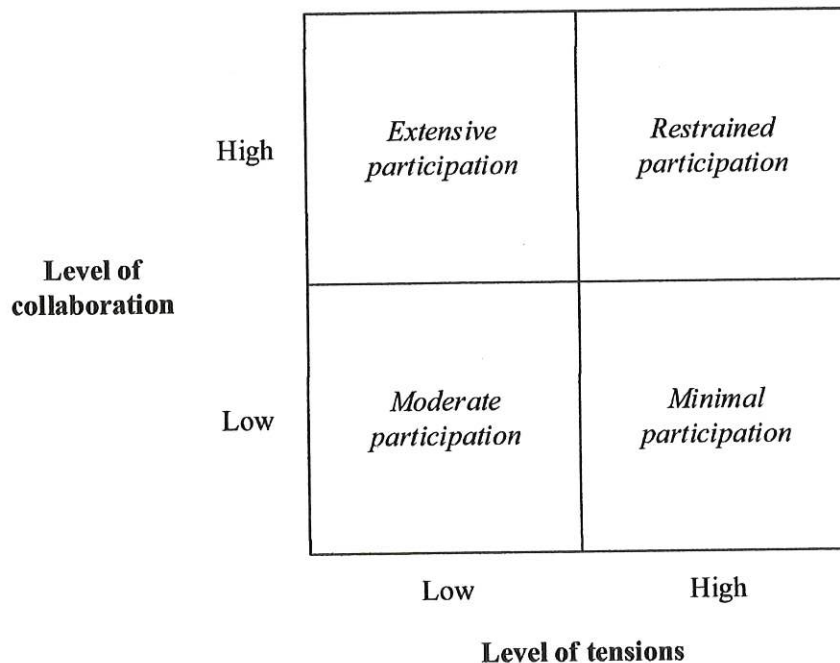


Figure 8.1 Stakeholder participation matrix

structures, and processual entities foster collaboration, and the tensions scale shows the degree to which behaviour, structure, and psychology generate tensions.

The matrix displays four distinct types of stakeholder participation and thereby emphasises that such participation comes in several forms. Extensive participation (high collaboration and low tensions) and minimal participation (low collaboration and high tensions) are two extremes, and in between them are restrained and moderate participation. Moreover, with this matrix, we indicate that the dimensions of collaboration (appreciative linkages, structures, and processual entities) and the types of tensions (behavioural, structural, and psychological) can co-exist and influence each other. This will be illustrated later in the chapter. Next, the empirical context and research methods are outlined.

### **Empirical context**

This study relies on the Danish–German cross-border region, which is rural and organisationally thin. Such regions are known for shortcomings in their resource endowments, such as knowledge, networks, and capital, which hinder their development (Tödting and Tripl, 2005; Isaksen and Karlsen, 2016). The region is home to approximately 700,000 citizens and connects the southern part of the Danish region of Southern Denmark with the northern part of Schleswig-Holstein, Germany. The major regional specialisations are tourism, logistics, food, energy and clean-tech, and mechanical engineering.

Within this region, an EU Interreg project named ‘Benefit4Regions’ ran from 2016 to 2019 and focused on how the region, including its stakeholders such as micro-enterprises and public organisations, could develop. The idea was that the project, with participation from Danish and German stakeholders, would initiate knowledge exchange and learning, which then would stimulate relationship and capability-building. To organise this effort, ten project teams were established within the following areas: food, tourism, CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral heating, funding, accessibility, recruitment of labour, broadband, networking and exchange, digital infrastructure, and mobility.

In each project team, various stakeholders took part, such as micro-enterprises, municipalities, public consultancies, and universities, and most of the teams consisted of seven to ten stakeholders. Under the guidance of a project team manager, each team identified some problems in the region that related to their focus area. After defining the problems, the teams were to agree on a set of goals and develop and implement an action plan to handle the identified problems.

### **Research methods**

The empirical investigation is based on a case study (Stake, 2005) of how micro-enterprises and public organisations participate in two of the ten teams in the Benefit4Regions project. The case study approach was chosen since it

allows for examining social phenomena, such as collaboration and tensions, which are not easily separable from their context (Easton, 1995; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005). The nature of the case study is comparative since stakeholder participation is portrayed and compared across two cases: a case with high collaboration and low tensions, and a case with low collaboration and high tensions. Thus, the selection of the cases was guided by the maximum variation principle and our knowledge from participating in the project.

Data for the case study were primarily collected through 15 in-depth, semi-structured, and face-to-face interviews conducted between autumn 2018 and spring 2019. The interviewees came from the two chosen project teams, and they were mostly representatives from micro-enterprises and public organisations. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Furthermore, participant observations were made at different project events, such as meetings and trips, and they were documented in a field study guide. To avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations, we continually compared and discussed the observation notes with each other. While the data collected from observations were used to understand the underlying dynamics of the project teams, *e.g.*, diversity, structure, and management, the interview data were used to understand the reasons for and outcomes of stakeholder participation, including how collaboration and tensions influenced the progress or lack of progress in the project teams.

All the interview transcripts and observation notes were read, coded, and interpreted in relation to theory on stakeholder participation, collaboration, and tensions (Myers, 2020). To link the interview and observation data to the theoretical synthesis and confirm and add empirical richness to the stakeholder participation matrix, the method of typology building was applied (Kluge, 2000; Kelle and Kluge, 2010). The method can be used for systematic clustering of qualitative data to develop and confirm typologies. In practice, we followed the following four steps of Kelle and Kluge (2010): define key dimensions for comparison, compare and group data, identify behavioural types, and characterise and describe the types. First, collaboration and tensions were chosen as dimensions for comparing the data. In the next step, we grouped the data based on the chosen dimensions, and in the third step, we identified four types of stakeholder participation, which confirmed the stakeholder participation matrix. Finally, the four types were characterised and described.

### **Case presentation and analysis**

In the following, the two chosen cases from the Benefit4Regions project are presented and analysed. Case 1 illustrates a project team with high collaboration and low tensions, and case 2 portrays a project team with low collaboration and high tensions. In Figure 8.2, both cases are positioned within the stakeholder participation matrix.

In case 1, micro-enterprises and public organisations from both sides of the Danish–German border teamed up. While the public organisations were

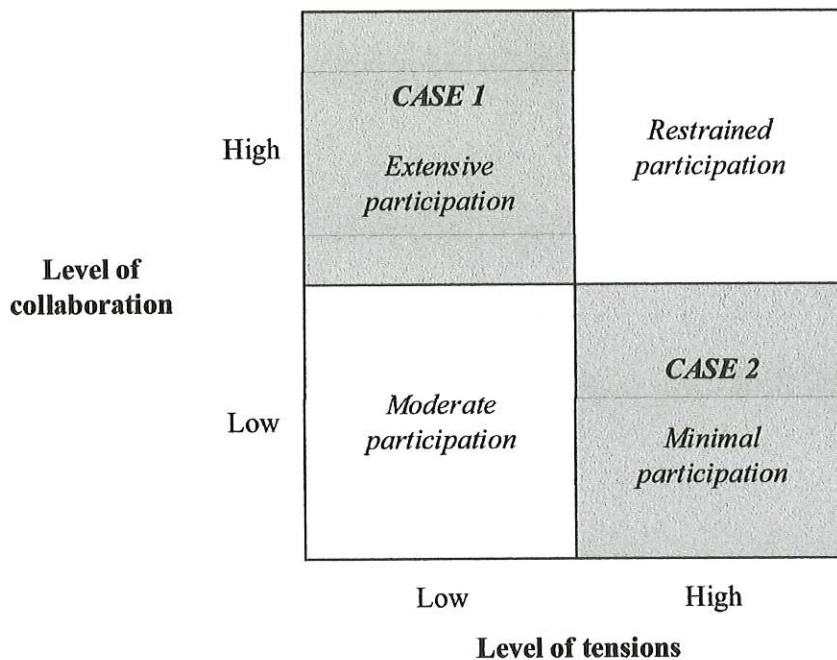


Figure 8.2 Position of cases

motivated by fulfilling the goals expressed in the project application, such as improving the regional infrastructure and implementing a better model for knowledge exchange and learning across the border, the micro-enterprises were more interested in strengthening their own relationships and capabilities. These motivational differences were discussed early on at one of the project team meetings, and to create appreciative linkages among the stakeholders, the project team manager suggested including a broader range of goals than originally planned in the project application. Another issue that was discussed early on was the asymmetric resource allocation in the project since the public organisations were paid per hour spent on the project whereas the micro-enterprises did not receive any funds. This variance was handled by the project team manager by stating that the micro-enterprises were not expected to invest the same amount of time in the project as the public organisations. This decision minimised behavioural and psychological tensions and laid the foundation for collaboration. For example, the stakeholders collaborated on arranging professional and social activities, such as visits to a group of agricultural enterprises that have managed to build a regional food brand and informal coffee meetings that support knowledge sharing and cohesiveness.

During the project, the micro-enterprises and public organisations got to know each other and discovered a number of differences that influenced their collaboration. For instance, most of the Danish stakeholders welcomed open discussions during meetings to get everybody involved and engaged. However, most of the German stakeholders were not used to navigating in such meetings. Based on a proposal from the project team manager, it was agreed that

a minimum structure was needed to run meetings so all stakeholders could feel comfortable and that possible behavioural and structural tensions could be avoided. With the aim of handling such and other issues, it was also decided to apply structural features in the form of a set of rules that was appropriate for addressing problems due to different goals, expectations, and institutional logics. One example is the rule of collegial consultation. The main idea is that each stakeholder should be able to bring up ideas and critiques and that the other stakeholders should have the discipline to listen. Criticism should always be to the point and not personal.

Overall, the institutional setting made collaboration grow between the micro-enterprises and public organisations in the project, and tensions were minimised. Because of this, processual entities in the form of trust and understanding bloomed among the stakeholders, which had the consequence that the project team manager did not use a lot of time on assigning tasks and controlling deadlines. Instead, the focus was on building relationships and capabilities. The project team succeeded in fulfilling the goals from the project application and managed to foster collaboration that continues today.

In case 2, micro-enterprises and public organisations from both sides of the Danish-German border teamed up. From the start, the project team manager tried to implement, in a top-down manner and without a mandate from the stakeholders, a set of goals and rules to guide collaboration within the team. However, it turned out that the goals and rules did not resonate well with the priorities and interests of all the stakeholders. They lowered the stakeholders' flexibility, and they did not favour a relational approach, which was important for most of the stakeholders. This gave birth to behavioural, structural, and psychological tensions and led to discussions on, for instance, the role of the project team manager, the direction of the project team and what professional and social activities should be pursued. Additionally, the project team manager was eager to assign tasks and control deadlines to foster progress, but this way of managing a team was viewed by most of the Danish stakeholders as an extreme German approach, which did not offer flexibility and involvement. The outcome was even more tensions.

Since the project team manager was focused on assigning tasks and controlling deadlines to fulfil the goals expressed in the project application, such as improving the regional attractiveness and encouraging citizen participation, he did not pay much attention to relationship and capability-building. Therefore, processual entities in the form of trust and understanding among the stakeholders had difficult growth conditions, which affected the functioning of the team negatively. Primarily behavioural tensions emerged, and after some time, the project team split into two sub-teams. Each of the sub-teams had dissimilar expectations of what goals should be pursued and how, but in the end, one of the sub-teams suppressed the views of the other. Despite some growing collaboration within the sub-teams, this fostered a situation where collaboration at the project team level, among all the stakeholders, was impossible.



In general, the approach of the project team manager as well as the lack of appreciative linkages, structures, and processual entities caused high tensions and minimal collaboration. Instead of collaborating and performing activities together, the stakeholders arranged activities on their own or in their sub-teams. In spite of these shortcomings, the project team fulfilled some goals stated in the project application, but the micro-enterprises and public organisations are not collaborating after the Benefit4Regions project.

Looking across the two cases, it is evident that in case 1, common ground was found among the micro-enterprises and public organisations, and appreciative linkages, structures, and processual entities emerged and fostered relationship and capability-building. This accomplishment was facilitated by inclusive and compromise-seeking project team management, which minimised tensions. In contrast, in case 2, behavioural, structural, and psychological tensions were high and did not leave much room for the development of trust and understanding, which affected collaboration between the stakeholders negatively. Indeed, the institutional setting combined with the approach of the project team manager of assigning tasks and controlling deadlines did not lower the level of tensions, but the contrary. In Table 8.1, the main reasons for collaboration and tensions are briefly outlined for each of the two cases.

### Concluding discussion

In this chapter, we looked into how the presence of collaboration and tensions in rural development projects fertilises or hinders stakeholder participation.

Table 8.1 Cross-case comparison

	Case 1	Case 2
<i>Reasons for collaboration</i>	Development and implementation of shared rules among stakeholders Emergence and spread of mutual trust and understanding among stakeholders An inclusive and compromise-seeking project team manager	Stakeholders interested in the area of the project team Relationships within the sub-teams
<i>Reasons for tensions</i>	Motivational differences for engaging in the project Asymmetric resource allocations between the stakeholders Clashes between cultures in relation to management approaches and meetings	Missing agreement on goals and rules among stakeholders Project team manager has a top-down approach, assigns tasks, and controls deadlines Opportunistic behaviour when performing diverse activities Clashes between cultures in relation to management approaches and meetings

We found that collaboration and tensions are two co-existing elements in such projects, and whether they fertilise or hinder participation is mainly up to how well project managers form appreciative linkages, structures, and processual entities and combine dialogue and compromises to lower behavioural, structural, and psychological tensions. In particular, the investigation stresses that to ease stakeholder participation, project managers should understand how appreciated linkages and structures stabilise collaboration as they foster shared goals and rules, which after some time can lead to processual entities in the form of trust and understanding. Moreover, to encourage participation it is of importance for project managers to understand how stakeholders' priorities and interests manifest in tensions as well as how their own management approach can increase or decrease tensions.

These findings can be explained in more detail by looking into how each of the three dimensions of collaboration relates to each of the three types of tensions. Starting with appreciative linkages, it becomes clear from the cases that implementing project team goals that do not resonate well with the priorities and interests of all the stakeholders can lead to behavioural tensions. Goals can also foster structural tensions if they lower the flexibility or perceived flexibility of the stakeholders about, for instance, which activities should be pursued and how. Finally, psychological tensions can grow if there is disagreement between the stakeholders on whether accomplishing goals should cause short-term transactional or long-term relational results.

On structural features, it is discovered in the cases that clashes between competing rules among the stakeholders on matters such as how to run project teams and team meetings can lead to behavioural tensions. Furthermore, it is portrayed that a lack of dialogue and compromise between the project team manager and the stakeholders can cause structural and psychological tensions in situations where the rules are not flexible enough to include all stakeholders. Without a balancing mechanism, neither flexibility nor inclusion can be achieved, and long-term relational results are hard to produce.

Lastly, the cases provide examples of where missing processual entities in the form of trust and understanding among the stakeholders can cause behavioural, structural, and psychological tensions. An example was when one of the project teams splits into two sub-teams since the stakeholders lacked trust in each other, which increased existing behavioural and structural tensions. Moreover, due to the absence of a sound climate among the stakeholders, they began to act opportunistically when performing activities. This fostered psychological tensions and made it difficult to build long-term relational results.

Additionally, we bring awareness to project managers in rural development and how they can act as a balancing mechanism. In doing so, the findings add to Gnyawali and Park (2009), who point to the fact that managers in general can use tensions as triggers for constructive discussions, which can lead to new solutions and competitive advantages. Thus, tensions are not negative *per se*, as they can lead to learning if handled properly. As exemplified in case 1, an inclusive and compromise-seeking approach from the project team manager

minimised tensions in favour of forming appreciative linkages, structures, and processual entities. In sum, this balancing role of project managers makes it possible to turn up and down for the dimensions of collaboration (Savage *et al.*, 2010) and the types of tensions (Fang *et al.*, 2011) and foster participation.

In relation to the above, we highlight that involving stakeholders through dialogue and compromises makes it more likely that they internalise the goals and rules set out to guide the project and make sure that they are flexible. Goals and rules that are not internalised and flexible are shown in this study to be less helpful to develop, for instance, trust and understanding among the stakeholders, compare with case 2 and the establishment of two sub-teams. On flexibility, specifically, Fang *et al.* (2011) and Gnyawali and Park (2009) argue that balancing collaboration and competition is key for turning tensions into competitive advantages. The better competing priorities and interests are balanced with collaboration, the greater the chance for knowledge exchange among the stakeholders and that participation will emerge.

Finally, these findings can inspire further research. First, it is advisable to study how the findings relate to other rural contexts to investigate their transferability. Second, research should also look more into the role of project managers in rural development, including their management approach and how it is operationalised. Third, additional research can be useful in further unfolding balancing mechanisms in general to become more knowledgeable about how to increase participation from micro-enterprises and public organisations in rural development projects. Fourth, to get a broader picture of what fertilises and hinders stakeholder participation in rural development projects, it is relevant to analyse project external relationships as they might influence collaboration and tensions in projects.

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