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# Learning communities and co-creative tourism practices in NGDO projects

Giovanna Bertella<sup>a</sup>  and Maria Donata Rinaldi<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Business and Economics, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway; <sup>b</sup>COSPE Onlus, Firenze, Italy

## ABSTRACT

In this study, we considered tourism collaboration for sustainable development as a co-creative practice of learning about tourism in order to achieve benefits for local communities. We focused on projects run by non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) and the challenges relating to their long-term impact. These challenges concern the projects' potential to facilitate the emergence and/or reinforcement of local learning communities. The study was conducted by an academic and a representative of the NGDO that constituted the empirical case. The empirical investigation was based on a variety of data sources and explored both the NGDO's strategic approach to collaboration and the experience gained from two projects. We identified factors that can be crucially important for the promotion of collaboration driven by local actors and extending beyond the limited time horizon of the NGDOs' projects. The paper contributes to the literature by adopting the concepts of co-creative practices and communities of practice (CoPs) to study collaboration, elucidating the evolving linkages connecting CoP constellations in learning communities. The study also presents some reflections on collaborative research with non-academics as a useful way of promoting plurality, depth and reflexivity.

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Collaboration; sustainable development; community of practice (CoP); non-governmental development organisation (NGDO)

## Introduction

Collaboration is a critically important factor in the move towards sustainability, and tourism partnerships, including with non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs), can be particularly relevant in this context (e.g. Burns, 2004; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Ruhanen, 2008). NGDOs are non-profit organisations that work to improve the capacity of a community to provide for its own basic needs with the ultimate goal of an increased quality of life (Vakil, 1997). Some tourism scholars have identified such organisations as key partners in relation to capacity building and consultancy (Ellis & Sheridan, 2014; Simpson, 2008; Wardle et al., 2018; Wearing et al., 2005). Partnerships that include NGDOs have great potential in terms of sustainability, understood as a journey during which various types of knowledge and skills are applied to achieve environmental, economic and socio-cultural benefits (Bettencourt & Kaur, 2011; NRC (National Research Council & USA), 1999; Wals & Rodela, 2014).

CONTACT Giovanna Bertella  [giovanna.bertella@uit.no](mailto:giovanna.bertella@uit.no)  School of Business and Economics, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø NO-9037, Norway.

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There are several challenges concerning tourism partnerships that include NGOs. One challenge, in relation to foreign NGOs, concerns the possible perception and risk of neo-colonialism (Simpson, 2008). The literature on NGOs reports challenges deriving from the intangibility of the effects centred on humanitarian objectives and the difficulty of measuring them, but also from the complex management of the relationships among the various and sometimes numerous stakeholders (Khang & Moe, 2008). Another challenge concerns the use of projects, which are by definition temporary. This short time horizon may be a limitation in relation to the promotion of learning in groups, since this usually involves a time-consuming process of trust building (Diallio & Thuillier, 2005; Golini et al., 2015).

We consider NGO tourism projects as facilitating factors for the formation or strengthening of local communities in relation to learning about tourism and sustainability. This is achieved by applying the practice-based concept of communities of practice (CoPs) introduced by educationist Etienne Wenger to the concept of co-creation. Practice is understood as a combination of reflecting and doing, and the term CoP is used to indicate a group of people who learn how to engage in an activity on the basis of a common vision and sense of responsibility, and who share ideas and experiences (Wenger, 1998). Recently, Phi and Dredge (2019) have proposed that tourism collaboration be understood as a value co-creation process that is dynamic, inclusive and democratic, characterised by a shared sense of responsibility and the emergence of shared value. These characteristics are reminiscent of the aforementioned aspects of the practice-based CoP approach, which we therefore consider appropriate for use to investigate the sustainability challenges that communities are called on to face together. We therefore ask the following research question: How can project-based co-creative practices among NGOs and partners promote learning communities for sustainability? Our belief is that, acting as CoPs, NGOs and partners can contribute to the emergence or strengthening of local learning communities that, in turn, can be understood as CoPs or constellations of CoPs.

This paper initially presents tourism collaboration as a co-creative practice. It also introduces the core elements of CoP theory, in general and in relation to sustainable development. This section reports on past tourism studies that have applied the CoP concept to collaboration, and the main challenges relating to CoPs. Methodologically, the current paper is based on the close collaboration between an academic and an NGO representative. This collaboration is described in the methodology chapter, which also introduces the investigated case, that is, the NGO to which one of the authors belongs. The findings of the case concern the NGO's approach to sustainable development and tourism, as well as the experience gained from two projects. The main findings are summarised in a table (Table 3) illustrating the lessons learned about establishing and implementing collaborative relationships that promote learning in local communities. The Conclusion reflects on the study's main findings, theoretical contribution, limitations and methodology.

### ***Collaboration as a co-creative practice for learning***

The adoption of a practice-based perspective on tourism collaboration may contribute to clarifying one possible way of interpreting co-creation. Phi and Dredge (2019) observed that the use of the term co-creation is relatively diffuse in the literature. Moreover, they observe that sometimes this use is quite abstract and superficial. We related co-creation to a practice-based perspective, according to which practice is an epistemology, 'a way of seeing' that acknowledges the relevance of the social, historical and structural contexts in which actions occur and includes both explicit and tacit elements (Corradi et al., 2010). A practice is a way of 'behaving and understanding that appears at different locales and at different points of time and is carried out by different body/minds' (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 250). 'Reflecting' and 'doing', through the application of tools and procedures, are among the fundamental processes discussed in practice theories (Orlikowski,

2002; Schön, 1987; Spaargaren et al., 2017). More precisely, practices concern knowing, feeling and doing, and comprise engagement and procedures linked by interactions (Corradi et al., 2010; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2005). Thus, we consider tourism co-creation as a contextual way of understanding, feeling and acting in relation to a situation (tourism development and management), using specific procedures and tools and aiming towards the emergence of a shared value (moving towards sustainability).

When related to learning, co-creative tourism practices can assume particular importance for sustainability. The practice approach to learning can be linked to the Aristotelian view of learning as a combination of knowledge, skills and practical wisdom, and to John Dewey's conceptualisation of learning as experiencing, reflecting and feeling (Eide, 2007). Practice-based learning is 'a process of giving meaning to, or seeking to understand, life experiences' (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001, p. 50). Co-creative tourism learning practices can contribute to exploring the factors and processes that integrate different types of knowledge and skills and can foster capabilities aimed at better understanding and facing complex sustainability challenges. Despite these possibilities, and the numerous contributions to knowledge management, collaboration and sustainability in tourism by the literature (e.g. Cooper, 2006; Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2005; Moscardo & Murphy, 2015; Ngo et al., 2020; Wiltshier & Clarke, 2019; Xiao, 2006), only a few studies have discussed and adopted this perspective on tourism collaboration and sustainability (Kemp et al., 2005; Lamers et al., 2017; Shaw & Williams, 2009). Of these, some focused on education, some on practices by tourists, and others on collaboration among firms (e.g. Jamal, 2004; James et al., 2019; Reinl & Kelliher, 2014).

### ***CoPs for sustainable development***

The study of tourism collaboration for sustainable development as a co-creative practice can be usefully approached by applying some of the core elements of Etienne Wenger's practice-based CoP theory. This theory, originally developed to study apprenticeship, was central to the diffusion of the CoP notion in relation to learning, work and participative processes (Corradi et al., 2010). According to Wenger, learning occurs primarily within and across CoPs, which are groups of people, often emerging spontaneously, who share a so-called domain of interest/concern for something they do and who intend to learn together how to do it better (Wenger, 1998, 2000, 2010). This learning occurs through the application of procedures and tools – and the production of artefacts – that are the tangible results of the community's engagement. In addition to such explicit components, a CoP has less obvious components, consisting of the tacit knowledge that develops during the various interactions; the CoP's identity, understood as a sense of belonging to the group and the individuals' self-development (Wenger, 1998).

A feature of CoPs that makes them suitable for sustainability issues is that their members feel a shared sense of responsibility for their activities and the related results, understanding the latter in relation to the specific context in which the community is situated. Through brokering and boundary processes involving individuals and groups, CoPs are receptive to external stimuli and develop external relationships that may support the shared interest/concern. Eventually, these relations can lead to the formation of constellations of CoPs, that is, communities with competence and skills in different fields and a common vision concerning the domain of interest/concern (Wenger, 1998). This relational and contextual way of understanding learning suits the idea of sustainable development as a type of development that respects the peculiarities of the specific community and environment, and that relies on various types of knowledge and competence.

The aforementioned element of identity also makes the adoption of the CoP theory suitable for the case of tourism collaboration for sustainability. According to Wenger (1998), CoP members define themselves not only in relation to what they do but also in relation to why they do

it and where they belong. Identity is a peculiarity of Wenger's communities that differentiates them from teams and networks (Duguid, 2005; Østerlund & Carlile, 2005; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). In this study, we understand identity not only in terms of belonging to a specific culture and community but also in terms of world citizenship. As suggested by sociological studies concerning environmental movements and collective identities (e.g. Ergas, 2010; Soron, 2010), a shift towards greater sustainability implies a sense of identity in line with principles such as democracy and responsibility. This relates to the observation by Wenger (2000) that the learning that occurs in CoPs is about becoming, described as 'opening up our identities to other ways of being in the world' (p. 239). This position highlights a sense of solidarity, justice and intergenerational responsibility that is central to the concept of sustainability. Thus, CoPs can be regarded as learning communities capable of making changes in favour of sustainability.

Given these considerations, CoPs for sustainable development can be described by referring to the following core components: domain of interest/concern (tourism as a means to sustainable development); reflections on, actions about and artefacts resulting from collaboration (tourism practices); and feelings (sense of identity, responsibility, self-development).

### ***CoPs in tourism and the challenges***

The CoP concept is broadly adopted to investigate collaboration in the management literature (e.g. Koliba & Gajda, 2009) but rarely referred to or applied in the study of tourism collaboration, especially across sectors (Albrecht, 2012; Bertella, 2011; Bertella et al., 2019; Lamers et al., 2017; Phi et al., 2017; Shaw & Williams, 2009; Thomas, 2012). However, the development studies literature has used the CoP concept to investigate capacity building in rural contexts (Bailey, 2014; Morgan, 2011) and in some cases this concept is used together with the Theory of Change (ToC), a project methodology for the promotion of social change (Valters, 2014). This suggests that the adoption of the CoP concept may contribute to deepening our understanding of collaborative tourism efforts, especially when priority is given to local communities.

The adoption of the CoP approach to tourism collaboration for sustainable development implies several challenges. One resides in the possibly conservative aspect of practices that may tend to reinforce established routines instead of innovating (James et al., 2019; Lamers et al., 2017). Although the CoP study by Bertella (2011) suggests that this may not be always the case, the possible tension between reproduction and innovation in CoPs is clearly relevant to sustainability and may constitute a problem. Other challenges are related to possible internal conflicts due to power imbalances and the difficulty or impossibility of designing and managing CoPs, as these tend to be spontaneous and informal (Duguid & Brown, 1991; Fox, 2000; Roberts, 2006; Wenger & Snyder, 2002).

A further challenge relates to the adoption by NGOs of a project's methodology. In the management literature, it is argued that projects can function as learning spaces, and Nilsen (2013) relates this to the idea of a CoP; projects that have learning as the main purpose or as a side effect have common features with CoPs. This commonality highlights the possibility that the learning that occurs in projects is not necessarily limited to the project's time horizon. Following such reasoning, we propose that tourism projects by NGOs can make two concurrent contributions to sustainable development: the achievement of the specific project objectives and, more importantly, a contribution towards a long-term vision, forming and strengthening local communities as CoPs or constellations of CoPs. This is in line with the perspective according to which NGOs focus on community development and function as open learning systems for social change (Fowler, 1996).

The paradoxical feature of practices as 'something transferable, teachable, transmittable or reproducible' and, at the same time, 'not directly accessible, observable, measurable or definable'

is another challenge when researching CoPs (Turner, 1994, reported in Corradi et al., 2010, p. 267). This challenge influenced the methodological approach of this study.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this study aimed to go beyond the dichotomy in which the researcher is an academic who produces knowledge and the researched plays a passive role (Ateljevic et al., 2007). Instead, it was based on an understanding of research as an exploration of phenomena that sometimes may be difficult for academic researchers to grasp and the consequent possibility of achieving a better understanding through collaboration with practitioners, in this case from the NGDO sector. This is in line with the opportunity recognised by an increasing number of scholars to reduce the gap between research and practice (Beech et al., 2010; Font et al., 2019) and it accords with the concept of research as dialogic work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004).

The aforementioned academic-practitioner collaboration can be further described using the core ideas of para-ethnography. Wilson and Hollinshead (2015) describe para-ethnography as research that aims to minimise the top-down influence of outsider/researcher-driven 'outsight', instead optimising local/community-driven insight. This approach emphasises openness, and collaboration is sought as a valuable aid to a better understanding of a reality that is not the everyday reality of the researcher (Kincheloe, 2001). One of this study's premises is that NGOs are key actors in collaborative projects for sustainable development through tourism, and thus their members are recognised as having particularly valuable insights into such phenomena. The academic author of this study considered the NGO representatives a sort of potential "allied others". These can be described as individuals who, in conventional positivism-oriented research, would be given the role of key informants and, in the attempt to reduce the distance between academia and the field of study, can assume the role of co-researchers (Swadener & Mutua, 2008). Thus, the decision was made to involve an NGO practitioner in the following research phases: the elaboration of the main traits of the conceptual approach to collaboration, the contact with relevant informants, the access to relevant documents, the validation of the findings and the elaboration of the conclusions. The study also aimed to represent the perspective of the communities involved in the projects. This was achieved through fieldwork, including meetings and interviews with various stakeholders, and a survey.

## **Case study**

The research adopted a case study strategy. The empirical case concerned an Italian NGO, COSPE. COSPE was chosen as a relevant case to investigate collaborative projects of sustainable development through tourism because of its engagement in human rights, fair and sustainable development, and education for global citizenship. Since its founding in 1983, COSPE has initiated, coordinated and/or participated in numerous projects in around 20 countries. The choice of COSPE was also based on a previous research project on responsible tourism in which a COSPE representative collaborated with the academic author of this paper, and on the possibility of developing a similar collaboration for the current project. The COSPE employee collaborating in the current research has extensive experience in relation to international cooperation projects and, through consultation with two other COSPE representatives, identified two projects as relevant units of analysis. These are the Conservation and Development of Economic Opportunities on the Lebanon Mountain Trail project (LMT project) and the Rotas do Fogo agritourism model for the strengthening of the local organisation for sustainable rural tourism on the island of Fogo in Cape Verde (Rotas do Fogo project). The LMT project was selected due to the numerous

stakeholders involved and the opportunity it provided to evaluate some of its impacts one year after its end. The Rotas do Fogo project was chosen due to its cross-sectorial character.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Table 1 shows a summary of the data sources for the investigation of the COSPE strategic approach to collaboration, as well as for the two aforementioned projects.

As shown in Table 1, the data sources related to the LMT project are more numerous than those concerning the Rotas do Fogo project. This depends on the fact that, since it had ended, more information was available and it was possible to observe some of its impacts. The interviews used to elaborate the evaluation report indicated in Table 1 covered the following aspects: the extent to which the development objectives were consistent with the stakeholders' requirements and expectations, and the project's efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability aspects and impact. The respondents for the interviews were identified by the local association of the trail (LMTA). In order to better explore some aspects not well addressed by the evaluation report, a survey was conducted and directed to partner members, mayors and municipality board representatives, entrepreneurs, school directors and teachers, and members of various associations. The survey aimed to explore the respondents' perspectives on the project's methodology (resources, activities, tools and artefacts); their expectations, motivations and feelings about participating in the projects; and their evaluation of the project's contribution to the local communities and to their personal development. Both the interviews and the survey were conducted in the native language of the respondents when this was considered opportune or necessary. Due to the numerous conflicts occurring in Lebanon at the time of the data collection, few responses were collected (see Table 1).

A direct content analysis was performed on the texts from the various documents (Camprubi & Coromina, 2016; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These texts were first systematised according to the following categories: strategic approach to collaboration, project activities for collaboration and major challenges for tourism collaboration and for sustainable development. The data were then coded and analysed in relation to the core elements of CoP theory (domain of interest/concern, reflections, actions, artefacts, feelings) to uncover their possible relevance for learning for sustainable development as presented in the theoretical part of this paper. The results of the data analysis were reviewed by the COSPE general director to ensure the accuracy of the information, particularly in relation to the strategic approach and activities of the NGDO.

### **Limitations**

The empirical investigation had some limitations, partly deriving from the difficulties met during the data collection for the LMT project and partly deriving from a para-ethnographic approach heavily dependent on COSPE engagement. With regard to the first limitation, as already mentioned in the previous section, very few respondents participated in the survey. Consequently, the community's perspective was investigated to a lesser extent than intended.

The second limitation concerns the key role played by the NGDO representatives, including the second author of this paper, and the possibility that some choices were influenced by the NGDO's perspective and interests. In order to minimise this bias, the selection of the NGDO was guided by the academic author's experience with COSPE during the aforementioned previous project. During this previous collaboration, issues such as power relations, in particular those relevant to cases of intervention by foreign organisations, were openly discussed. The selection of the practitioner collaborating on the current study was guided by the suggestion of the COSPE employee collaborating on the previous research, who described the collaborator on this study as an experienced and enthusiastic person highly committed to the well-being of the



**Table 1.** Data sources of the COSPE case study.

Strategic approach and activities	LMT project (2016–2018)	Rotas de Fogo project (2017-ongoing)
- COSPE webpage (COSPE, n. d.); - meetings (face-to-face, Skype) and email contacts with 2 experienced COSPE representatives; - Associazione Italiana Turismo Responsabile (Italian Association Responsible Tourism) (AITR) webpage (AITR, n. d.).	- COSPE webpage, project description document (COSPE, n. d., 2016); - two week fieldwork for the elaboration of evaluation report (COSPE, 2019) (October - November 2018): 20 meetings with: local project manager, project coordinator, project education officer, 1 mayor, several sub-grantees, committee members, donor representative, trail manager; 26 interviews with 36 respondents including: 4 partner representatives and various stakeholders (one mayor, 11 grant beneficiaries, three donor representatives, 6 project staff, 4 committee representatives, one member of Active Citizenship, one academic from the American University of Beirut, and one hiker) - survey (autumn 2019), 6 respondents: one local COSPE representative, two representatives from the partner organisations, one school director, one teacher, and one guide.	- COSPE webpage, project description document, description document of related project (COSPE, n. d., 2017a, 2017b); – 2 meetings, and email contacts with the COSPE project coordinator.

communities involved in the various projects. The academic author considered such qualifications relevant to the kind of internal critique and reflexivity desirable in para-ethnographic studies (Islam, 2015). Nonetheless, it is important to note that, although being valuable “allied others”, the NGDO representatives relevant to this study belong to the same socio-cultural context of the academic author. Thus, this collaboration can be considered to have reduced but not eliminated the distance between the researchers and the field, in particular the local communities involved in the investigated projects. The two authors are aware of this and consider local partnerships, in the investigated cases and in more general terms, having the role to mitigate the socio-cultural distance between NGDOs and the communities, to mediate between different approaches, and to propose alternative collaboration practices.

## Results

This section presents the results of the COSPE case study. It follows a structure based on the categories mentioned in the previous section: strategic approach, project activities, and major challenges. It also includes a text and a table (Table 2) that describe the investigated projects so that the activities and challenges identified as particularly important for collaboration can be illustrated by some examples.

### *COSPE's strategic approach to collaboration*

The COSPE vision aims to support dialogue and achieve peace and justice. Its mission is to build a world in which diversity is considered valuable and social justice is based on equal access for everyone to the same rights and opportunities (COSPE, n.d.). COSPE understands tourism as a way to achieve benefits for the communities living in or near regions potentially attractive for tourists. Alternative tourism, sustainable tourism and eco-tourism are regarded as different terms for the same phenomenon: a form of tourism beneficial for the local communities. The pillar supporting this type of tourism is sustainable development, which is understood as transferring, at least in part, human and financial resources from the tourism market to local communities. As



noted during the meetings with the COSPE representatives, this contrasts with the dominant mechanism, in which tourists spend their money and time for the benefit of large enterprises and/or multinational firms.

Specific work methods are applied in accordance with the aforementioned vision, mission and understanding of tourism for sustainable development. This is evident in the recent COSPE strategic plan and in the use of the ToC. As described in the workshop handbook COSPE has contributed to and actively uses in its projects, the ToC is applied as 'a rigorous and participatory process during which the various stakeholders elaborate and communicate their long-term objective (impact) and identify the conditions that they consider necessary to achieve such objectives (outcome)' (ChangeLab, 2019, p. 18). Examples of activities usually performed according to the ToC are project workshops, in which the project stakeholders use backward mapping to discuss and negotiate the desired project impact and, consequently, the necessary short-term objectives and paths to follow.

As part of its approach and work method, COSPE has joined AITR, an Italian non-profit association that promotes tourism while pursuing social and economic justice in respect of the natural and cultural environment of tourism destinations (AITR, n.d.). COSPE's membership of AITR reinforces its commitment to the aforementioned vision and mission. In some cases, AITR plays a very active role in COSPE projects. For example, in the LMT project, AITR participated in several meetings with tourism enterprises and contributed to defining the criteria for the allocation of funding. AITR's attention is primarily focused on local communities, described in its strategy as 'the main protagonists in devoting sustainable and responsible tourism in their native lands' (AITR, n.d.).

The data gained from COSPE and AITR representatives and from various meetings suggested that the ideas underpinning these organisations' work are well-known and shared within the organisations and among their partners. During some meetings with COSPE representatives, the academic researcher witnessed deep reflection and commitment and, in some cases, feelings of humility with regard to interference in foreign cultures and a related sense of respect for possible political and socio-cultural differences.

### ***The projects***

Table 2 shows the projects' geographical areas, partners, main funders, objectives, activities and stakeholders. This information gives the reader an understanding of the broadness and the content of the projects.

The data from the research meetings and the survey, together with the experience of the COSPE representatives involved in the research, suggested that the crucially important activities to promote collaboration concern the selection and involvement of relevant partners and stakeholders. This was formalised in various activities in both projects (see Table 2). The following text discusses these processes, and the Results section closes by presenting some major challenges to collaboration.

### ***The partners***

In both projects, the majority of partners were local and played a central role (see Table 2). The local LMTA representatives included individuals with different competencies and skills, such as guides, scientists, teachers, hikers and environmental activists. The LMTA worked actively with COSPE and AITR in all the project phases and made its network available to facilitate stakeholder identification and involvement. The COSPE representative in Lebanon commented on this, confirming that the LMTA's knowledge of the local context and the related network was quite extensive. She also added that the network increased during the project, enabling the LMTA to obtain

Table 2. Information about the LMT and Rotas do Fogo projects.

	LMT project (2016-2018)	Rotas do Fogo project (2017-ongoing)
<b>Place</b>	Lebanon, North District: 3 villages and surrounding areas	Cape Verde: Fogo island
<b>Partners</b>	Lebanon Mountain Trail Association (LMTA); AITR	Association of guides; municipalities; Natural Park of Fogo; Spanish NGDO International Center of Rural and Agriculture Studies (CERAI)
<b>Main funder</b>	EU	EU
<b>Objectives</b>	<u>Overall objective:</u> contribute to improve socio-economic opportunities of the rural communities in selected sections of the LMT, through conservation of the cultural and natural heritage and tourism activities. <u>3 Specific objectives:</u> 1) Make the local aware of the importance of the local resources and able to develop sustainable action plans. 2) Improve and develop the conservation, biodiversity and cultural heritage in collaboration with local stakeholders. 3) Sensitize the local schools and start activities oriented to conservation and development of the local heritage.	<u>Overall objective:</u> improve the socio-economic conditions and the environmental protection in the rural areas of the island of Fogo. <u>2 Specific objectives:</u> 1) Promote rural tourism through the diffusion of the agri-tourism model; improve the quality of the services by the local associations and producers. 2) Improve the participation of the civil society to territory planning and local management focusing on rural tourism activities through inclusive participatory methods of promotion and management.
<b>Activities</b>	<u>3 sets of activities:</u> 1) Stakeholders mapping; workshops and on-the job coaching of municipalities and local stakeholders; development of municipality integrated action plans; creation of the Committee for Conservation and Sustainable tourism; seed money and technical support to local tourism business initiatives. 2) Mapping of the biodiversity and the cultural heritage on 2 sections of the LMT; Maintenance of the trail; Memoranda of Understanding with municipalities for the trail maintenance. 3) Schools mapping; Memoranda of Understanding with schools; education programs in 6 schools.	<u>2 sets of activities:</u> 1) Identification and development of rural tourism routes; identification of 3 enterprises to develop the agri-tourism model, training of relevant individuals and development of a good practice handbook; technical assistance and training for the production of cheese and fruit following organic agriculture principles; restructure of a building and development of a rural park including workshops and material production (educational brochures). 2) Trainings and workshops about participatory approaches; give a formal structure to the network of participants, establish an information office and promote the tourist offer of the island; meetings with the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment and the General Directorate of Tourism to discuss and formalize the agri-tourism model as a tool of rural development within the municipal strategy.
<b>Stakeholders beneficiaries</b>	Local associations for the development and heritage conservation; local associations of women, farmers, guides, tour operators, entrepreneurs in various areas; UNESCO Heritage Committee; public and private schools.	Local associations of guides, farmers and women in various areas; representatives of the interested municipalities, the Natural Park of Fogo, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment; local tourism operators and schools.
<b>Stakeholders beneficiaries reached by the project</b>	80 municipal members; 14 local guides; 5 tour operators; 13 local development and conservation associations' representatives and environmental activists; 21 representatives from women cooperatives and farmers; 52 local entrepreneurs; 30 organizations' representatives working in tourism sector; 9 public schools (educational programs "Trail To Every Classroom" and "Mountain Explorer", LMTA's Environmental Championship camp, various outdoor educational activities).	Not available (project ongoing)

**Table 3.** The aspects of the CoP core components identified as particularly important for the CoP constellations.

Domain of interest/concern	Vision of tourism for sustainable development: tourism for the local communities' sustainable development; tourism as an option; focus on benefits for the local communities, regardless differences concerning the specific type of tourism; local communities as protagonists of change and not objects of commodification; priority given to long-term benefits for empowered local communities.
<b>Reflection, actions and artefacts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This view is shared among the NGDO, partners and stakeholders that are viewed as “allies” and “pioneers”.</li> <li>• Identification and involvement of project participants that already share this vision.</li> <li>• Partnerships dominated by local actors.</li> <li>• Local perspective and practices prioritized to the extent that they are not in conflict with sustainability principles such as environmental protection; education to achieve cultural changes (in the long-term) and competence; involvement of external competent actors.</li> <li>• Exploitation of synergies with other projects (time saving and cross-sectorial).</li> <li>• Boundary and brokering processes.</li> <li>• Constellations evolve as a “chain” to which each project can potentially add a link.</li> <li>• Work methods applied in the projects are transferable to other projects, contexts and sectors.</li> <li>• Jointly developed artefact, such as handbooks, partly transferable.</li> </ul>
<b>Feelings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of responsibility for the future generations of the specific areas expressed in particular by school employees.</li> <li>• Sense of responsibility as world citizens, respectful and humble attitude by NGDO representatives.</li> <li>• Sense of empowerment by small operators as a basis for future initiatives.</li> </ul>

very detailed knowledge of the context. This was possible thanks to the activities funded by the project and the consequent opportunity to invest in human resources.

The benefits for the LMTA from the project included improvements in project management capacity, community development awareness, and planning and budgeting skills (COSPE, 2019). The project contributed to making the LMTA staff ‘more aware of their own different skills and complementarity, valuing more their internal diversity’ (COSPE, 2019, p. 3). The LMTA representative responding to the survey reflected on the learning outcomes for the association, reporting that the work methods used during the project on selected sections of the trail had since been applied to other sections. Specific methods used during the project that the LMTA representative considered valuable for possible future projects were crowd mapping and mental mapping. In general, she expressed her appreciation for, and belief in, participatory processes for sustainability: ‘Many lessons [from the project] have been learned and additional validation obtained that a community-based approach *is* the answer for sustainability.’

With regard to the Rotas do Fogo project, the local partners included an association, a municipality and a park. The CERAI, a Spanish NGO specialising in organic agriculture, was involved as a partner to supplement the limited local competence. Otherwise, all the partners of this project had been involved in another project, ‘Fogo, Água, Terra, Ar’ (FATA), focused on the improvement of tourism-related competence and skills for local operators and public agencies (COSPE, 2017b). The COSPE representative involved in the FATA project was the same person working on the Rotas do Fogo project.

### **The stakeholders**

The identification and involvement of the relevant stakeholders derived from relationships established during other projects – a feature common to this and previously conducted research into COSPE and responsible tourism. For example, COSPE has operated in Cape Verde, on various

projects, since 1988, and on the island of Fogo since 1998. The COSPE representative in Cape Verde explained that the Rotas do Fogo agritourism project originated from, and partly overlapped with, two other projects: the aforementioned FATA and another project concerning wine production. During the FATA project meetings, the core of Natour-Fogo emerged spontaneously. Natour-Fogo is a network of operators and public institutions (municipalities, police and ministries) with approximately 45 members. It has played an active and important role in the development of agritourism. According to the COSPE representative, the network may have emerged because the meetings during the FATA came to be perceived as particularly useful, since they were oriented towards problem solving and, importantly, gave the operators, mainly entrepreneurs with small companies, the opportunity to raise questions and have discussions with the public authorities. The latter tend to be perceived by small entrepreneurs as distant and unreachable. The meetings were often arranged in response to the participants' proposals about possible topics for seminars and courses. As noted by the COSPE representative, this can be important for the tourism entrepreneurs in Cape Verde, who often need to be oriented towards global tourism trends and trained in relation to practical aspects of managing a business.

As commented on by the COSPE representatives and shown by the project description, since the Rotas do Fogo project is centred on the development of agritourism, the involvement of the authorities was particularly relevant for the relevant legislative concerns. This was important for ensuring that the developed tourism was not a generic form of rural tourism but was based on a combination of agriculture and tourism that could contribute to reinforcing traditional activities from the primary sector and exploiting the synergies with the tourism sector.

The involvement of stakeholders from the public sector, such as the municipalities, has been mentioned as particularly important for the LMT project in general, but also in relation to some practical tasks. Some examples of the latter were promotional activities, the preparation and installation of information signs for the trail, and the maintenance of the trail. In particular, the LMTA representative mentioned the case of two municipalities that declared two annual LMT hiking days in their villages and, in relation to this, established two committees that are still active.

Through the municipalities and the various contacts with the local communities, schools became involved in projects for sustainable tourism. The COSPE representatives agreed that the schools are crucially important for the project impact in terms of sustainability and, in general, for spreading knowledge and a sense of responsibility and empowerment among the younger generations. Working with the schools is perceived by the COSPE representatives as particularly rewarding on a personal level. In one of the email exchanges during this research, the Rotas do Fogo COSPE representative wrote, 'Yesterday I organised an activity at a high school with 100 students. We talked about sustainable tourism, the environment and sex tourism. It was really nice and I love to work with young people!'

The involvement of the schools was central to the LMT project. The answer to the survey by the LMTA representative reads as follows: 'Working with young people and educators is at the heart of the LMTA focus. In fact, the LMTA believes that nature and heritage conservation is a culture that needs to start from a very early age.' The educational programme 'Trail to Every Classroom' is still running and aims to provide educators with the tools for activities with which to stimulate students to explore the trail. As observed by the LMTA representative, the programme helped to 'foster a broad sense of responsibility among the students, developing school projects linked to the local needs, as well as to the needs of the society'. The school director who responded to the survey observed that the programme contributed to making the students 'aware of the importance of nature in their daily lives. It also gave them experience in the environmental field, especially in the extra-curricular projects whereby students went out into nature, and thought about how to conserve it [nature] and how to encourage environmental tourism.'

The school director's comment indicates some signs of a sense of belonging and identity. The school director reflected on her own identity, mentioning that she belonged to the village and

was motivated to join the project by her interest in ‘making my children [the school pupils] belong to it [the village]’ and on ‘enabling the new generation to stay in their villages and have some new job opportunities’. Job opportunities were also mentioned by the school-teacher, who also highlighted the school’s role in building a future for the new generations. She commented thus: ‘The school is part of the community and we have to combine efforts from all sides for the success of any project [that can contribute to the community, now and in the future].’ During the research meetings, the COSPE representatives also said that educational programmes in schools can be useful for the teachers. It is quite common for schools in rural areas to employ teachers from more urbanised areas. Educational programmes may be important for educating non-local teachers and encouraging them to include elements of heritage protection in their teaching, both in the specific disciplines in which they were employed at the time of the project and in other areas in which they might work in the future.

Finally, with regard to stakeholder involvement, the LMT project evaluation report refers to the lack of a specific focus on women and girls, noting that while they attended the arranged courses, they did not apply for sub-grants. This aspect emerged from the project but was not properly addressed (COSPE, 2019).

### ***Major challenges to collaboration***

One aspect that emerged from the research meetings with the COSPE representatives was that the relatively short time horizon of the projects can pose a challenge and, sometimes, a barrier to making changes linked to particularly problematic issues. This was also evident from the LMT project evaluation report: an activity that was evaluated as important and particularly time consuming was the management of the grants, including the selection process (COSPE, 2019). Time was also necessary for cultural changes; changes in attitude towards environmental conservation and gender issues were particularly highlighted by the report. The LMTA representative commented on the need to dedicate time to ‘creating the culture of trails, hiking and tourism, valorising them to sustain it’. In addition, in the Rotas do Fogo project, time was mentioned as a fundamental element for bringing people together, so that they could ‘start talking’, the COSPE representative observed. When asked what it took to achieve a satisfactory result, in terms of the number of participants in the project meeting and the Natour-Fogo network, and their value in relation to collaborative efforts, the COSPE representative clearly indicated time and commitment as the key factors.

Time could also be important in relation to the need to identify and contact possible relevant stakeholders. The COSPE representatives agreed that identification of some stakeholders as ‘allies’ could help. For the LMT project, some municipalities were described by the local COSPE representative as ‘pioneers’ and, consequently, valuable allies for the projects. In her responses during the interview, she expressed some doubts about the contribution of the project to promoting a value-chain view of tourism development and management. In her perspective, the municipalities involved in the project already had such an understanding of tourism, so the project contributed more to provoking a deeper reflection on already-existing ideas. She argued that, in the absence of a shared vision, collaboration might never occur. This can be related to the observation in the LMT project evaluation report about extraordinary challenges in terms of collaboration (e.g. hazardous practices, such as poor waste management and illegal hunting) and possible conflicts with the economic interests of large companies and landowners. As observed by the COSPE representatives, other major challenges to collaboration that are completely outside the control of the NGOs are wars, political tension and global perceptions of the safety of the specific country or area.

## Discussion

We advanced the idea that the co-creative practices of NGOs and project partners can influence existing or emerging local learning communities. In this section, we discuss the results of the investigated case study to explore how this could occur through collaborative projects.

### *Reinforced/emerging local learning communities*

The first step in the discussion is the identification of local CoPs or constellations of CoPs that might have emerged or have been reinforced by the practices related to the projects. The results pointed to two groups that could be considered as new or renewed learning communities: one was the LMTA and its broad network, partly pre-existing the project, and the other was the Natour-Fogo network, which is still embryonic and informal. Common to both constellations was that their development was not designed and managed by external organisations but instead in the hands of the individuals involved. This aligns with the idea of CoPs and CoP constellations as spontaneous groups (Wenger et al., 2002), a feature worthy of examination in light of one of the main challenges about CoPs identified in the literature (Duguid & Brown, 1991; Fox, 2000; Roberts, 2006; Wenger et al., 2002), namely, the immense difficulty involved in designing and managing them. The case study showed that, through projects that coordinate actions and make resources available, it is possible to create the conditions that might favour CoPs' strengthening or emergence.

To investigate how project-related co-creative practices may have been relevant to the emergence and reinforcement of the identified learning communities, the findings are discussed here with reference to the CoPs' core elements and in relation to the challenges relevant to learning new practices, as well as to the projects' contribution to learning and sustainability. The discussion is structured in the following parts corresponding to the core CoP components: (1) domain of interest/concern regarding tourism for sustainable development; (2) reflections on and actions for collaboration as a process, and on artefacts as transferable project results; and (3) feelings about collaboration for sustainable development. Table 3 presents the main points of this discussion, highlighting those elements and processes that were particularly relevant for the local learning communities.

### *Domain of interest/concern regarding tourism for sustainable development*

A shared domain of interest/concern is one of the core components of CoPs and CoP constellations (Wenger, 1998, 2000, 2010). The data about COSPE's strategic approach showed that the understanding of tourism as a means of sustainable development, as indicated in the literature (Moscardo, 2008), was shared with AITR, selected by the NGO as the partner for projects that included a tourism component. The results presented in the previous section suggested that the focus of the NGO, its partner in tourism projects and the partners of the investigated projects was clearly on the benefits for the local communities and not on the growth of the tourism sector. The focus and priority were a form of tourism that would be beneficial for the local communities in the long term.

A shared concern about possible developments that might push local communities away from sustainability was observable in the findings. This concern involved the possible commodification of the local heritage, specifically of the people and their culture. In this regard, local communities were considered by both the NGO and the AITR as determining the legitimacy of developing and managing tourism in relation to the achievement of socially desired goals, rather than as 'objects' upon which the power of multinational companies would be imposed or as subjected to global trends.

The results concerning the two projects suggested that, when searching for local partners and stakeholders, it was of paramount importance to find individuals and organisations that already shared the aforementioned understanding of tourism or at least a similar understanding. These were described as 'allies' and 'pioneers'. On the one hand, this shows the importance of a shared vision, and, on the other, it can be considered in light of CoPs' or CoP constellations' possibilities and limitations for innovation, as discussed in the literature (James et al., 2019; Lamers et al., 2017). The findings indicated no attempt to introduce a radical change of perspective on tourism by the NGDO, since collaborators were chosen according to existing similarities.

### ***Reflections on and actions for collaboration as a process, and artefacts as transferable project results***

According to the practice theories, including CoP theory, learning is relational and contextual (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2005; Wenger, 1998, 2000, 2010). The results show that collaboration on the project relied heavily on the engagement of local people and organisations. The importance of local participation was mentioned in the previous section in relation to the shared understanding of tourism for sustainable development. What can be added here is that, as suggested by some studies reported in the theory section (Moscardo & Murphy, 2015; Tosun, 2000), local communities are not always competent and/or aware of sustainability-related issues and/or willing to give up short-term benefits. In relation to this, NGDOs can promote improvements in sustainability by involving competent external actors, as in the case of the Spanish NGDO in the Rotas do Fogo project, and by promoting education directed at schools. Such inputs of new knowledge and skills in the local context can be particularly relevant to established and widespread practices that conflict with sustainability. In the long term, this may lead to a more diffuse shared vision that can constitute the domain of interest/concern as the basis for future collaboration, as discussed in the previous section. In other words, collaborative relationships with external actors, municipalities and schools, along with the arrangement of training and educational programmes, can provide fertile soil for planting some seeds of change.

Among the actions for collaboration, the exploitation of synergies between projects was found to be important. Such synergies were considered by the NGDO representatives as useful in the short term, allowing considerable time to be saved, and in line with balanced and responsible development, possibly across sectors. The results from the Rotas do Fogo project and the COSPE representatives' experience suggested that links between projects can be based on interpersonal relations and can develop through boundary and brokering processes that, eventually, can provide the basis for the formation and evolution of constellations (Wenger, 1998). Adopting a dynamic perspective, the emerging constellations can be conceptualised as an evolving 'chain', in which the 'links' are the projects and the formal or informal processes and relations deriving from them. Such a dynamic perspective also relates to the idea of transferability, through the learning of working methodologies, such as crowd mapping, and artefacts, such as jointly developed handbooks.

With regard to the debate about CoPs and innovation (James et al., 2019; Lamers et al., 2017) briefly discussed above with regard to similarities among the selected project partners, it can be said that learning to collaborate for sustainability, rather than learning about behaving sustainably, is the innovative element that can emerge from NGDO projects. Changes in procedure can be learned 'by doing'; thus, the learning that occurred within the projects may be described as a form of learning to collaborate through the application of specific methodologies and the production of artefacts in part transferable to other cases. This aligns with CoP theory, including its application in the project literature, as well as with a previous study about COSPE and community benefit initiatives for responsible tourism (Nilsen, 2013; Wenger, 1998, 2000, 2010).



### ***Feelings about collaboration for sustainable development***

The feelings-related aspect of CoPs was described in the literature as referring to a sense of identity, belonging and self-development (Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). As presented in the theoretical part of this paper, such aspects can be relevant to CoPs in the context of sustainable development in relation to collective identities and such values as democracy, responsibility and environmentalism. In the case of collaborative tourism projects, they can be linked to a sense of attachment and belonging to the specific destination and to a process of becoming a more responsible person. Some of the results can be understood in relation to such features, suggesting that school employees may be particularly sensitive to their and the communities' futures, potentially triggering commitment to collaboration for the common good.

We proposed that the sense of responsibility and belonging of CoPs might be felt in a broad sense in relation to the specific destination and community, but also to world citizenship. The results from the meetings conducted during this study suggested that this might have been the case for the NGDO's representatives. The results, restricted by practical challenges related to the survey, did not show whether this feeling was shared by the partners and stakeholders involved in the collaborative projects.

Finally, feelings, particularly feelings of empowerment, were noted, especially in one of the investigated projects in relation to the likelihood that small operators would have to interact and collaborate with actors such as the public authorities. The considerable freedom that the local participants had to decide about project meetings that were oriented towards problem solving could be seen as relating to the perception of having the opportunity to decide their own futures. This sense of empowerment could be considered as a necessary condition for future collaboration driven by local actors.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated tourism collaboration for sustainable development as a co-creative process, focusing on the core components of CoP theory (i.e. a domain of interest/concern, reflections, actions, artefacts and feelings). Identifying NGDOs as particularly relevant actors, it asked how project-based co-creative practices of tourism development among such organisations and their partners can facilitate the emergence or strengthening of local learning communities for sustainable development. The underlying idea was that the strategic approach and practices of NGDOs and close partners during the collaborative projects were the premises and, to a certain extent, the blueprint for the emergence or reinforcement of local learning communities relevant to long-term impacts.

The results suggested that projects by NGDOs can contribute to creating the conditions under which CoPs or constellations of CoPs can emerge and grow, and can promote innovation in the sense of learning to collaborate for sustainability. Some factors emerged as particularly important for projects that aim to foster collaborative relationships that extend beyond the limited time horizon of the projects and are managed by local actors. These factors are the identification and involvement of partners and stakeholders that share the same vision; synergies with other projects and sectors; and the use of participatory approaches, work methods and artefacts that promote a sense of empowerment and enhance continuity in the efforts of the local people to move towards sustainability. The results also suggested the importance of the long-term impact of educational programmes, especially in relation to any unsustainable practices rooted in the specific context.

With regards to its theoretical contribution, this study furthers the understanding of collaboration with the introduction of the concept of co-creative practices, in line with the main characteristics of CoPs. The adoption of CoP theory directed the focus of the research towards the learning and relational aspects of the value emerging from collaboration. This study adopted a

dynamic perspective, which consisted of conceptualising the investigated co-creative practices relating to tourism projects by NGOs as 'learning-by-doing' platforms and as trigger mechanisms for the emergence and/or reinforcement of local learning communities. Learning communities for sustainability can thus be thought of not only in terms of CoP constellations that include different practices but also as 'chains' that evolve over time.

Methodologically, this study applied an approach inspired by para-ethnography and characterised by close collaboration across the academic and NGO sectors. The lesson learned in this regard is that the considerable knowledge of NGO representatives, their respectful approach and attitude, and their commitment to improving challenging situations are extremely valuable for academics, both professionally and personally. Engaging in such research can add depth and plurality to the scholarly literature and can contribute to researchers' awareness of their own limitations. During this research, the following quotation concerning para-ethnography often came to the mind of the academic author: 'there is very little one can think or imagine in the confines of academic study that is not already thought in some version, expression, or venue in sites and scenes of fieldwork' (Rabinow et al., 2008, reported by Islam, 2015, p. 238).

Because of the difficulties encountered during data collection, resulting from the challenging situation in the area of the project that was selected for deeper investigation, this study did not manage to explore the emotional dimension of collaboration in depth. This can be considered as a limitation that might be overcome by future studies. Another limitation concerns the dominant role played in the research by the NGO's perspective. This may have led to a partial view on collaboration for sustainability, by failing to give sufficient weight to possible alternative perspectives on sustainability and/or collaboration by stakeholders other than the NGO employees and close collaborators. Future studies could overcome this limitation by systematically including local stakeholders' representatives in the research team, arranging periodical open meetings for the local communities and in-depth focus groups to present and discuss the project activities, in general and in relation to the research component of the project. In particular, monitoring which local actors do not attend such meetings would be useful. Although non-attendance is not always used to express disappointment or conflict, the reasons for it could be investigated and might give some insights about possible conflictual perspectives on tourism and sustainability, and other challenges for establishing collaborative relations. Another field of research for future studies by academics and practitioners from the NGO sector could focus on the development of possible synergies and conflicts in cross-sectorial projects relevant to the sustainable development of communities. These longitudinal studies would contribute to the emergence and reinforcement of mutual understanding and durable partnerships between academia and the NGO sector.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

*Giovanna Bertella* is Associate Professor at the School of Business and Economics, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø. Her research interests are: management, marketing, entrepreneurship/innovation, tourism and leisure studies, food studies, futures studies.

*Maria Donata Rinaldi* works for COSPE Onlus. Her working experience includes the planning, management, coordination and evaluation of numerous international projects for sustainable development.

## ORCID

*Giovanna Bertella*  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5530-8588>

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