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# Municipalities as Enablers of Regenerative Tourism: From Projects to Enduring Practices

Virpi Pakarinen  
virpak@uef.fi

# Abstract



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In this article, I examine tourism-related project activities as a co-development process between public administration and local actors from the perspective of regenerative tourism.

Based on a tourism-related case study and an analysis of project reports from 2004–2023, I identify five key factors that can support long-term municipal tourism development:

1. increasing strategic planning,
2. fostering a positive development-oriented mindset,
3. strengthening collaboration,
4. improving opportunities for participation, and
5. securing the basic resources needed for development.

The impact of tourism projects is linked to the strengthening of foundational resources rather than to individual project actions alone. I introduce a regenerative development model for integrating projects into the strategic development work of municipalities.

# Why Does This Matter?

## Rural municipalities face multiple pressures

- Population decline and ageing demographics
- Shrinking local services and economies
- Dependence on temporary project funding
- Increasing need for resilience and adaptive capacity

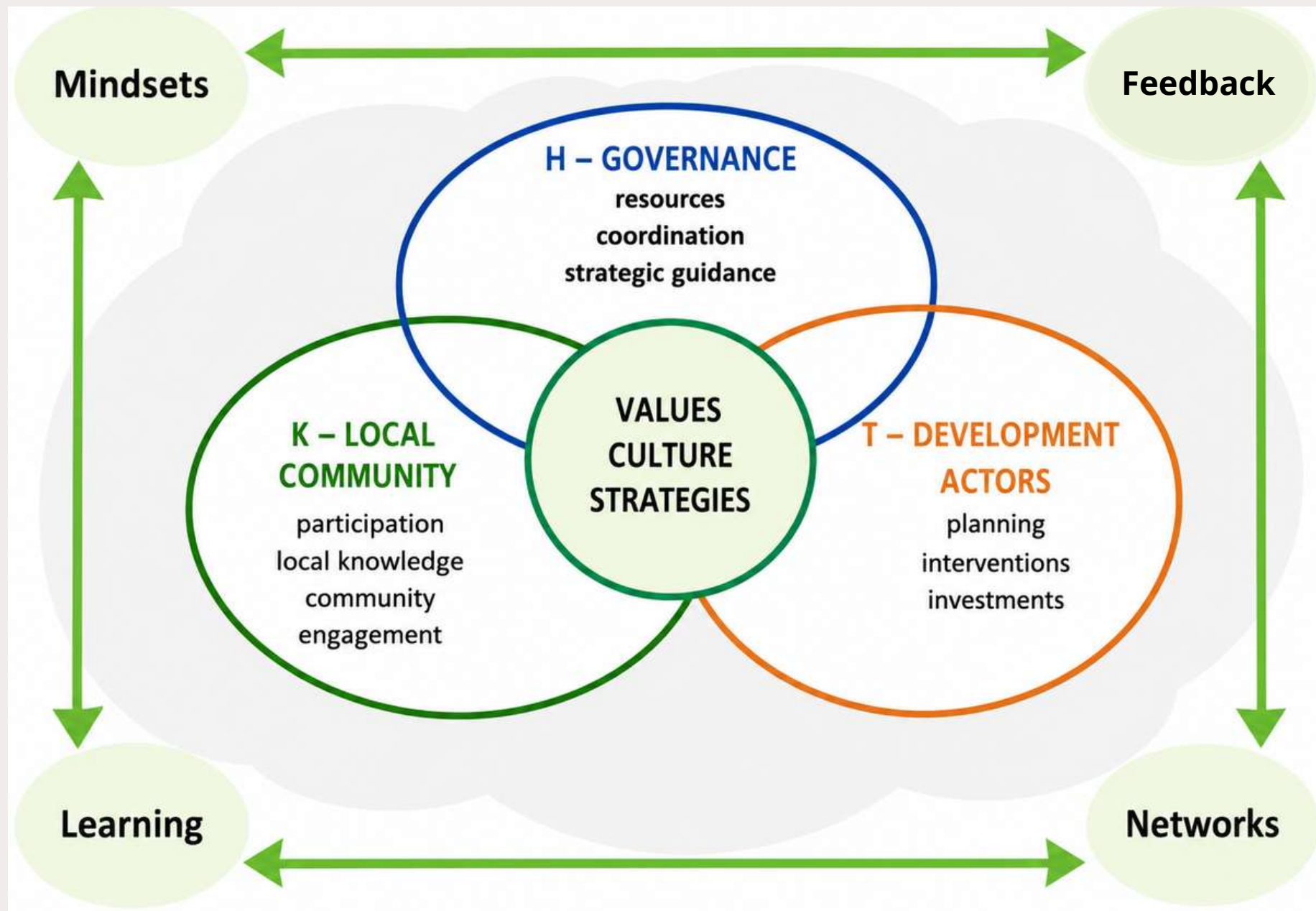
Tourism has become a key rural development strategy. Particularly in sparsely populated areas, tourism projects are widely used to strengthen local vitality and support regional development. Regenerative tourism and its emphasis on long-term internal renewal are used in this study primarily as an analytical framing rather than as a theoretical foundation.

The main theoretical perspective is grounded in projectification research, which addresses the inherent tension between the pursuit of long-term developmental impact through projects and the simultaneous reliance on temporary funding structures and project-based organizational forms.

## Key question

How can municipalities transform temporary tourism projects into enduring development practices?

# Background- 1



Previous research has shown that the sense of community and the feeling that local people can influence the well-being of their municipality and local community are rooted in shared local values and strategies. The success of development processes depends on the interaction between governance, the local community, and development actors. Key success factors include learning, a shared mindset, giving and receiving feedback, and collaborative network-based approaches.

See more:

- Kattilakoski et al. (2022)
- Makkonen & Kahila (2021)

**Figure:** The illustration is based on the idea that long-term local development emerges through the interaction between governance structures, local communities, and development actors. It emphasizes that shared values, participation, learning, feedback, and collaborative networks form the foundation for adaptive renewal and community resilience. The illustration draws particularly on community-based development research and approaches that stress locally embedded cooperation, trust-building, and collective capacity-building in rural development contexts

# Theoretical Base

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## **Regenerative tourism**

Regenerative tourism moves beyond sustainability by focusing on:

- strengthening local capacities
- resilience and renewal
- participation and collaboration
- long-term community well-being

- Dredge (2022)
- Bellato & Pollock (2025)
- Buckton et al. (2023)
- Bui et al. (2020)

## **Projects as institutional support structures**

Tourism projects can function as:

- experimentation spaces
- learning environments
- coordination mechanisms
- platforms for collaboration

- Jacobsson & Jalocha (2021)
- Gunderson & Holling (2002)
- Kattilakoski et al. (2022)
- Makkonen & Kahila (2021)

## **Central idea**

Municipalities can act as institutional anchors connecting short-term projects with long-term development.

# Aim of the Study

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## **Research focus**

This study examines tourism-related project activities as a process of co-development between municipalities and local actors.

## **Perspective**

- Regenerative tourism
- Community-based development
- Municipal governance and continuity

## **Research Questions**

1. Under what conditions can the structures and forms of collaboration developed within projects become embedded in municipalities' strategic development practices?
2. How are the roles of local actors formed during project implementation, and in what ways do they influence the continuity of activities?
3. How does the adaptive renewal framework conceptualize the significance of projects in small municipalities?

# Data and Methodology

## Case study

Tourism development in a rural Finnish municipality: *Satamahanke*



- Four thematic interviews conducted during the final phase of the harbour development project (2023)
- Two resident surveys linked to the municipality's strategy update process conducted in summer 2024
- Longitudinal analysis of project reports from 6 municipalities in the Eastern Finland (2004–2023), complemented by comparative project statistics and development data

## Method

Qualitative content analysis focusing on:

- continuity
- collaboration
- participation
- institutional learning
- local development capacity

# Finding 1: **Strategic planning**

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## **Long-term development requires continuity**

Successful tourism development was supported by:

- shared strategic direction
- continuity between projects
- cumulative learning
- integration into municipal strategies

## **Key observation**

Projects became more effective when connected to broader municipal and regional development goals.

# Finding 2:

## Development-Oriented Attitudes

### Local culture influences development capacity

Positive development-oriented attitudes supported:

- experimentation
- cooperation
- openness to new ideas
- trust between actors

**Important insight:** Municipal vitality is not only economic. It is also socially and culturally constructed.

# Finding 3:

## Collaboration and Coordination

### **Networks matter more than individual projects**

Long-term impacts emerged when municipalities, entrepreneurs, associations, residents, and regional actors collaborated continuously.

Municipalities played a central enabling role, they functioned as:

- coordinators
- facilitators
- network builders
- providers of continuity

### **Key insight**

Regenerative tourism depends on institutional capacity for collaboration.

# Finding 4: Participatio

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## **Participation strengthens local ownership**

Projects became more effective when local actors:

- participated in planning
- shaped priorities
- contributed local knowledge
- became active co-creators

Regenerative perspective

Participation is not only consultation.

It is a process of strengthening local agency and capacities.

# Finding 5: Foundational Resources

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## **Tourism projects alone do not create vitality**

Their impacts depend on local foundational resources such as:

- people and skills
- local leadership
- trust and networks
- municipal support
- infrastructure and services
- places and facilities

## **Central conclusion**

Projects strengthen vitality only when they reinforce local development capacities.

# Key findings I

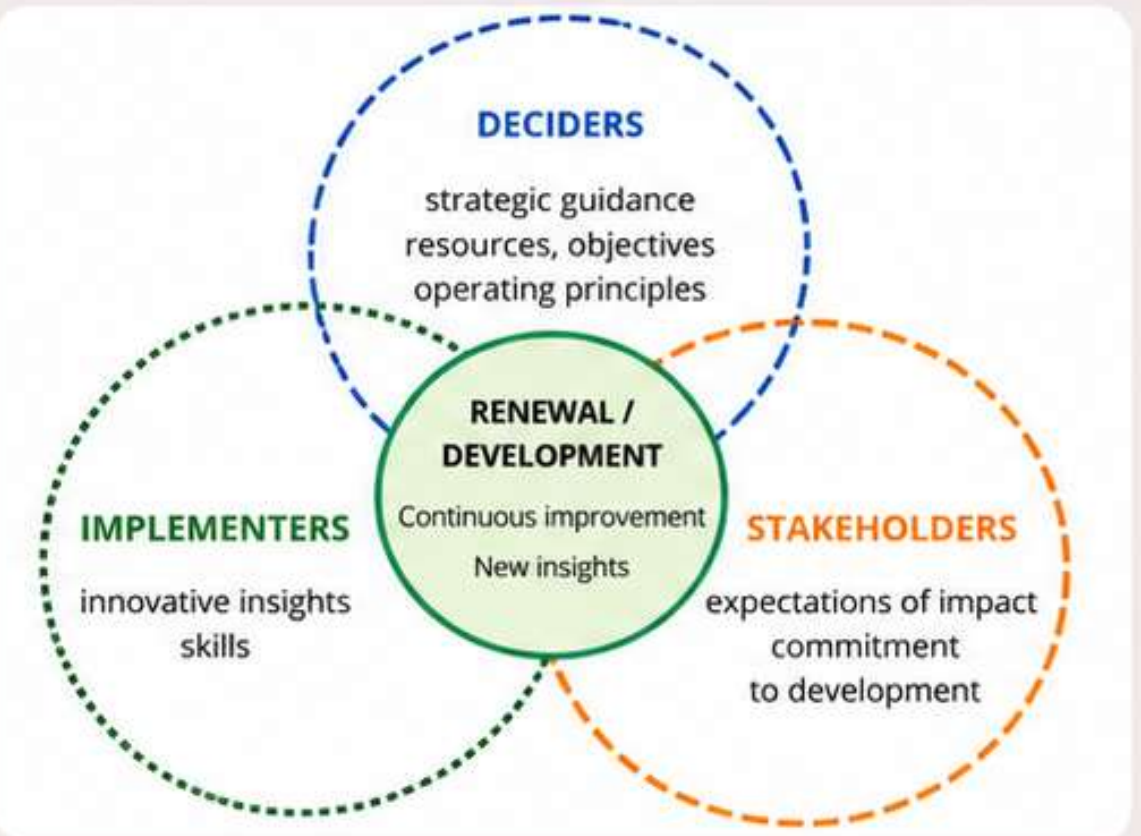
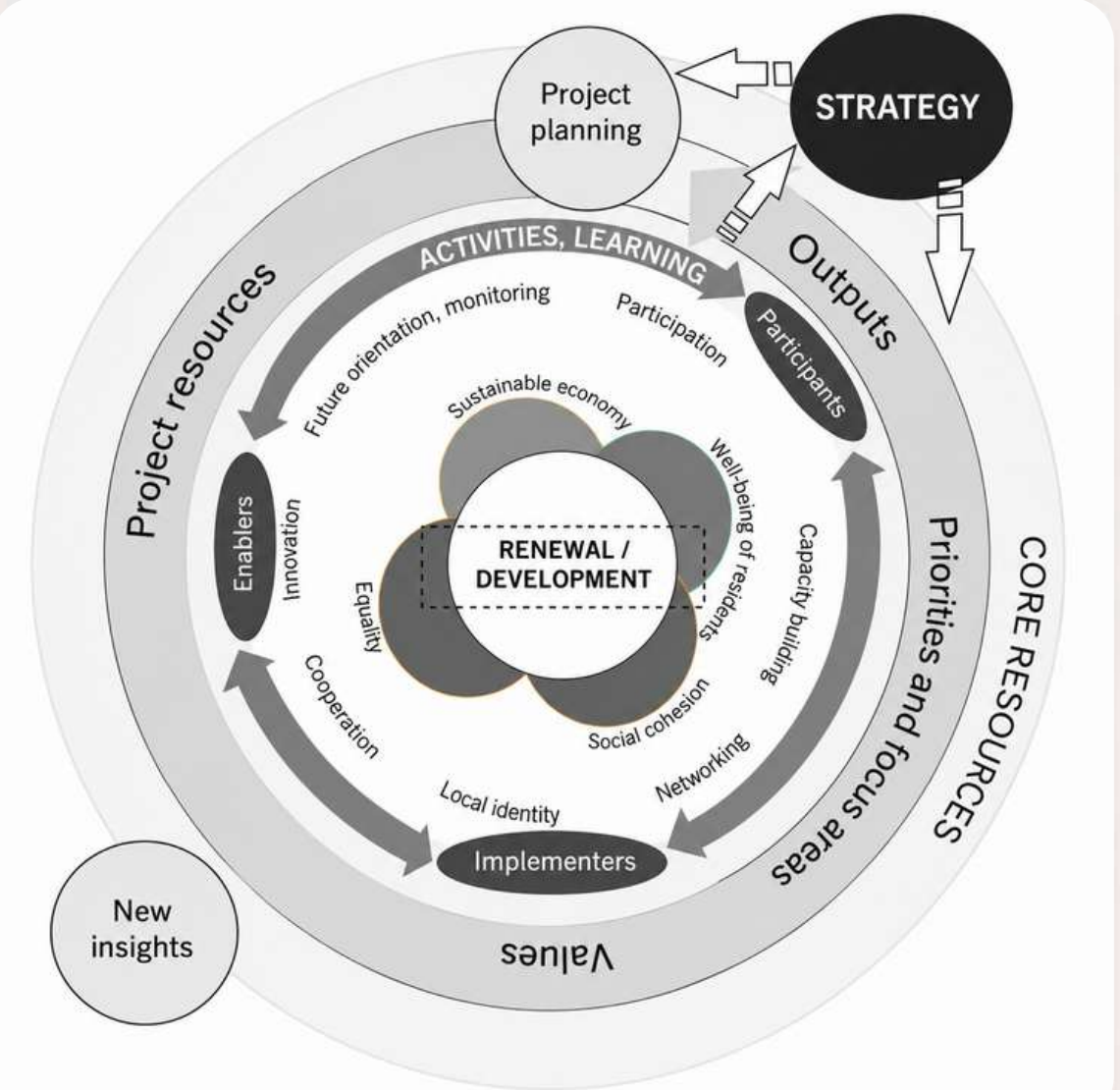
In a project-based development phase, the project and the municipality's ongoing operations are shaped critically through interactions between different perspectives.

Progress is built upon a balance between structural and individual perspectives.

Digital tools can support development efforts, but they should not become the sole basis for them.

Successful renewal requires project activities to connect with local resources, municipal management structures, and guidance frameworks in an interactive way.

**Sustainable renewal depends on strengthening resources, improving coordination practices, and aligning strategic commitments among stakeholders.**



**Model for sustainable renewal**

# Findings II



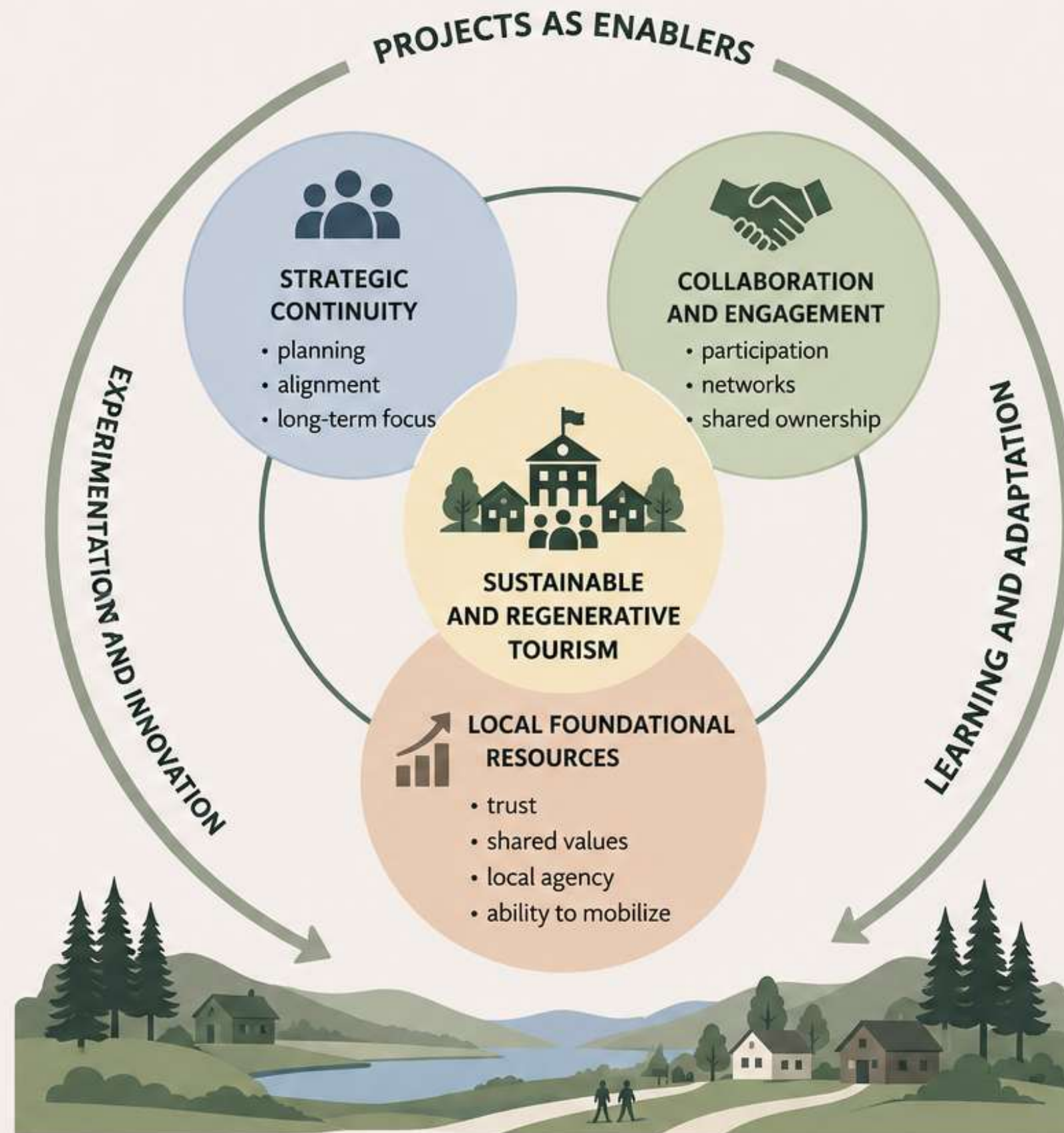
## Opportunities – strengthen these

- 1 supporting strategic continuity
- 2 fostering a development-oriented mindset
- 3 strengthening collaboration and coordination practices
- 4 improving opportunities for participation and engagement
- 5 identifying and reinforcing local foundational resources



## Development challenges

- 1 fragmentation of development activities
- 2 weakening of strategic continuity
- 3 concentration of responsibility among a limited group of actors



## Foundational resources = local capacities

trust, shared values, the ability to bring people together, and community-driven agency

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