

# The Profile of the Finnish Rural Tourism Developer: An Unexplored Realm

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**Abstract:** Rural tourism plays a pivotal role in fostering regional development and sustaining the livelihood of rural areas. It is a sector shaped by both internal and external influences due to its economic, cultural, and social significance. However, the individuals responsible for developing rural tourism, who serve as key resources and facilitators of other resources, remain underexplored. This paper seeks to fill that gap by constructing a profile of the Finnish rural tourism developer. By utilizing a resource-based approach within the context of rural tourism, the study underscores the importance of these developers not only as drivers of tourism but as central figures in the efficient use of regional resources. The research investigates several critical aspects: the nature of rural tourism developers' work, their competence needs, accessible funding tools, and the topics they consider important, promising, or challenging. To address these questions, empirical data was employed, drawn from a secondary analysis of a nation-wide questionnaire distributed to developers. Additionally, qualitative insights were gathered from four regional workshops held with developers across Finland. This mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the developers' profile and their operational environments. Conducted as part of the Rural Finland Tourism Hub, a national development project funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, this study has significant implications for the future of rural tourism. The findings suggest that rural tourism development efforts should not only rely on the capabilities of these developers but also actively support their professional growth and operational environments. By highlighting the crucial role that developers play in rural tourism, the study calls for targeted strategies to enhance their competencies and to foster a more supportive environment for their work. This paper contributes to the academic discourse on rural tourism and offers practical insights for policymakers and stakeholders invested in the sustainable development of rural areas.

**Keywords:** Rural tourism, Resource-based view, Tourism developer, Regional development, Finnish countryside

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## 1. Introduction

Rural tourism (RT) plays a pivotal role in fostering regional development and sustaining the livelihood of rural areas. It is a sector shaped by both internal and external influences due to its economic, cultural, and social significance. However, the individuals responsible for developing RT, who serve as key resources and facilitators of other resources, remain underexplored. This paper seeks to fill that gap by constructing a profile of the Finnish RT developer. It utilizes the context of RT and a resource-based approach.

In the literature review, the research gap regarding RT developers is approached by seeking indirect references for the relevant roles and characteristics. Next, the resource-based approach is used to envision RT developers both as resources and utilizers of resources. Although the notion of competitive advantage is related to the resource-based approach, in this study, the competitors within a destination or the competition between rural destinations within Finland are disregarded. Instead, Finland's RT is treated as a holistic destination and RT developers are envisioned as a network of people engaged in development, coordination, and innovation activity, and representing different types of organizations.

The mixed-method study employed secondary data from an online questionnaire and four regional workshops, and grounded theory to develop theory around the unexplored topic.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Rural Tourism Development

RT in the broader sense refers to "tourism activities that occur in the countryside" (Yanan, Ismail & Aminuddin, 2024, 3). It has been actively promoted for its capacity to contribute to local economic growth and regeneration, conservation of natural resources, and socio-cultural stability around the world (Karali, Das & Roy, 2021; Ginanjar, Riani & Aini, 2024; Yanan, Ismail & Aminuddin, 2024), across Europe (Radović et al, 2024; Vinšalek Stipic, Grizelj & Juric, 2024) and in Finland in particular (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020). It has been in the focus of research for over 40 years, whereby research efforts have clearly intensified during the last two decades (Karali, Das & Roy, 2021). The different themes of RT, however, are unequally represented in research. The stakeholder theme is so far the second most important theme, however studies have mainly concentrated on the roles of stakeholders, the network, as well as entrepreneurship and funding of RT; the host community has pronouncedly captured the attention in the last decade (Karali, Das & Roy, 2021). Clearly under-

researched topics remain, among others, the assets of stakeholders and the control on tourism resources which could have decisive influence on the sustainability of RT (Karali, Das & Roy, 2021), and which also supports the need for researching the profile of RT developers. In post-covid-19 times, the resilience of RT needs to be investigated to prepare for disruption situations in the future (Karali, Das & Roy, 2021), however, as RT is not homogeneous but comprised of different interests, stakeholders, and environments (Karali, Das & Roy, 2021; Ruiz-Ballesteros & González-Portillo, 2024), this necessitates the examination of the resilience of different groups of actors, including developers as well. Research focusing on leadership in rural destinations development is also limited (Ginanjar, Riani & Aini, 2024).

As the characteristics of the people developing RT are not researched, only indirect references are to be found about the variety of people and organizations, involved in RT development. It is recognized that RT development cannot follow the same strategies as global tourism in general, but it is of crucial importance to empower local communities to use tourism for their benefit, instead of just being used by the tourism industry (Ruiz-Ballesteros & González-Portillo, 2024). Generally, RT could be developed from outside, top-down, according to the so-called exogenous model, including national governments and their policies and external resources such as European Union funding as drivers of RT development, or from inside, bottom-up, by the endogenous, community-driven approach, based on internal factors specific to the area (Biczkowski, 2020). The exogenous model is criticized for the unequal power distribution between stakeholders external and internal to the destination, as well as for the vast economic leakages, leading to concerns about RT developing as an “unintended consequence of external factors” (Ginanjar, Riani & Aini, 2024, 109). Community-based tourism is perceived as a means of benefiting the local community, building capacity of locals (Ginanjar, Riani & Aini, 2024), and sometimes even equalized to RT in total (e.g., Ruiz-Ballesteros & González-Portillo, 2024). The pure endogenous model, however, is hard to implement because of local community’s lack of relations to external actors, funding instruments, and social capital (Biczkowski, 2020). Alternatively, a contemporary neo-endogenous approach could be employed, where local development is based mainly on the activity and resources of local communities but is aided by external instruments, and the interplay of endogenous and exogenous factors is able to achieve efficiency and boost the potential of the local community (Biczkowski, 2020; Ruiz-Ballesteros & González-Portillo, 2024). This model gives the local community the role of a factor, not only a subject of development, promoting cooperation and development based on genuine needs (Biczkowski, 2020). By aiding instruments, funding could be meant. Funding for RT can come from a variety of sources, including not only local, but regional, and national authorities, international financiers, private investors, and public-private partnerships (Radović et al, 2024). At the same time, the neo-endogenous model assigns NGOs, like LEADER action groups, the role of a mediator between internal and external factors. Cooperation and networking are emphasized in this model, and development is only possible in cooperation within the local community and tourism business, and of them with external international funding agencies, NGOs, tour operators and multinational enterprises (Tosun, 2000; Popovich & Relja, 2024).

It is acknowledged that effective leadership is needed to achieve competitiveness and sustainability in the RT destination. Among the requirements to the leaders, developing and coordinating tourism in these destinations are cultural sensitivity, innovation skills, experience, networking and cooperation, decision-making, resource management (Ginanjar, Riani & Aini, 2024). Organization and planning of tourism development include versatile tasks of planning, marketing, financing and coordinating tasks of different tourism actors (Vinšalek Stipic, Grizelj & Juric, 2024). These requirements raise the questions of who and how is preparing, training, and investing in the individuals, who become leaders of RT. At the same time, inadequate implementation of development plans and strategies and lack of experts in the field of tourism have been recognized to be among the significant problems of tourism management (Vinšalek Stipic, Grizelj & Juric, 2024).

Finland’s current tourism strategy indicates the roles of different types of actors for tourism development, while at the same time underlining that rural and urban areas are not separated in the national strategic planning (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020). By this logic, the general developmental roles of each actor should also be applied to RT:

- public sector provides development services, legislation, and funding for tourism;
- Visit Finland is in charge of the image marketing of Finnish tourism and the building of international cooperation;
- regional tourism organizations have an emphasized role as developers of tourism in their respective regions, being in charge of cooperation, product packaging, and marketing;
- regional development companies provide developing services to tourism enterprises and supervise development projects;

- educational institutions provide tourism education, conduct research and development projects;
- tourism enterprises are responsible for developing their own business and participating in the tourism network (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2020).

## 2.2 Resource-Based Approach

Coined by Barney (1991), the resource-based view (RBV) is usually applied to a company. In tourism, however, production relies on the totality of resources of the highly networked destination instead of on those of a single company (Turunen, 2006). The RBV concept is related to the internal part of SWOT analysis (strengths and weaknesses) and relies on the understanding that competitive advantage is accomplished by implementing strategies that maximize internal strengths in response to opportunities emerging from the environment, while neutralizing external threats and avoiding internal weaknesses (Duarte Alonso, 2016). The existing literature indicates that a competitive advantage could be perceived as the implementation of strategies for value creation which are not simultaneously used by competitors (Duarte Alonso, 2016, citing Barney, 1991) and as the relationship between internal organizational characteristics and the performance of the economic unit (Massukado-Nakatani & Teixeira, 2009). In the context of competitive advantage, the RBV is based on the principles of heterogeneity and immobility of resources. Heterogeneity means that superior productive factors with limited supply are present, while immobility indicates that resources are difficult or impossible to trade (Duarte Alonso, 2016). Some studies (Turunen, 2006; Duarte Alonso, 2016) explore the resource attributes for sustained competitive advantage in the context of tourism:

- valuable – associated with niche market products, emphasizing on authenticity
- rare – not possessed by a large number of competitors, organized in destination-specific bundles
- imperfectly imitable – not duplicable by competitors, tacit, often containing historical and geographical features, people-intensive and skill-based
- non-substitutable – experiential, embedded in the local context.

The resources can be divided into tangible, financial and physical, which are measurable in a balance sheet, and intangible, related to the skills, capabilities, and reputation of the organization (Massukado-Nakatani & Teixeira, 2009; Turunen, 2006). The bundle of tangible and intangible resources is seen as a source of competitive advantage (Turunen, 2006). The categorization of resources is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Categories of resources (adapted from Massukado-Nakatani & Teixeira 2009; Turunen, 2006)**

Category	Subcategory	Description
Tangible	Physical	Installations, infrastructure, equipment, physical technology, geographical location
	Financial	Assets, royalties, rents, loans, grants, invoicing
Intangible	Human	training, experience, judgement, intelligence, professional work, management
	Organizational	organizational structure, personnel, controlling mechanisms, coordination, planning, organizational culture, internal and external relationships, networks and network embeddedness, cooperation
	Reputation	image of company, destination, country, networks, etc.
	Skills and capabilities	general and industry-specific skills, capabilities, competences

Developers are not the subject of research, either in the context of RBV or in relation to tourism. Only indirect references could be found. Turunen (2006) states that different types of organizations, multiple industrial sectors, and public actors come together in the destination. She also points out that the destination structure could be improved and renewed by creativity, highly trained specialists, and tourism-specific know-how. Thus, these are resources that should be utilized in tourism development. Farida et al (2022) point out that the development of RT is based on local culture and sustainable environment which would be impossible without involving a variety of stakeholders, such as local communities, governments, NGOs, the private sector. Thus, when we are speaking about the developers of RT, this encompasses heterogeneous and cross-sectoral representation. Both in terms of social sustainability and competitiveness, the community must be involved in

decision-making, including development, of RT (Farida et al, 2022), however power relations should be considered. Within the framework of community-based tourism, it is widely studied that the local community is usually dependent on the resources of others – competence of NGOs and funding of public and governmental actors – making the power disproportionate (Ginanjar, Riani & Aini, 2024; Farida et al, 2022).

On the one hand, developers themselves could be perceived as organizational resources, but on the other hand, they are also utilizing and facilitating the use of all other types of resources, both tangible and intangible. The ability to combine and mobilize resources leads to the creation of core competences, which are the main drivers to develop a sustainable competitive advantage (Turunen, 2006). Consequently, the developers both as a crucial resource and as resource facilitators have a key role for the competitiveness of RT. Tourism actors must renew their competences continuously to accomplish coherence with their environment (Turunen, 2006). Some studies indicate that available resources are often not used or inefficiently used in value creation (e.g., Massukado-Nakatani & Teixeira, 2009). By acquiring more information about developers’ characteristics and how they relate to value, rarity, imitability, and non-substitutability, it is possible to assess what is needed to further improve their performance in terms of value creation.

### 3. Methodology

The research problem of defining the profile of Finland’s RT developer arose during the collection of empirical data for the national Rural Finland Tourism Hub Project. As part of this effort, developers were invited to complete an online questionnaire exploring the current state and future directions of RT in the country. The research problem was formulated only after the questionnaire has been designed and launched. Thus, the study relies on the secondary use of questionnaire results. While questionnaire results were fully accessible, the study was unable to influence the design of the questionnaire. In addition to the questionnaire, the inputs of four regional participatory workshops were utilized. The free-entry workshops, which targeted developers emphasizing on the broad definition of RT, were conducted as part of the project’s kickoff tour and were designed to complement the questionnaire, delving deeper into more complex questions of the same topic. The workshop results were also used in this study as secondary data.

All the empirical data was collected in September-November 2024. The questionnaire was offered both in Finnish and English, distributed by the communication channels of the organizations implementing the project, and altogether 86 responses were gathered. The has engaged responders from all 15 development regions (n=82), by the division of the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (2024), with 5-14% of the responders operating in each of them. Only Southern and Northern Savonia, Häme, Southeast Finland, and Kainuu were underrepresented (1-4% of responders from each). Only one person used the English version of the survey, while all the rest responded in Finnish. The workshops were held in Finnish and a total of 69 target group representatives participated. The results were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively with an accent on the narrative approach, leading to the creation of the typical profile of RT developers.

The study used grounded theory, whereby the theory emerged from the data instead of starting with a hypothesis. The method was particularly chosen because of the qualitative approach and little prior knowledge on the topic, which makes the research broad and exploratory.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Results of the Questionnaire

The developer of RT in Finland is well educated, with 91% of respondents (n=84) having at least a bachelor’s degree. The vast majority of developers are women (88,2%, n=85). They are typically of middle age (Table 2), but the youngest respondent reported the age of 26, and the eldest was 75-year-old.

**Table 2: Age of rural tourism developers in Finland (n=79)**

	Min	Max	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
years of age	26,0	75,0	49,2	50,0	11,5

The scope of expertise of RT developers is regional, which supports the existing literature. Almost half of the respondents (40%, n=85) admits not being familiar with Finland’s current national tourism strategy. The majority’s development work is, however, driven by a regional tourism strategy (82%, n=71) or a tourism-related development plan (51%, n=71). Responders also mentioned other documents, non-specific to tourism, to be relevant to their work: LEADER-strategy, provincial strategy, association strategy, funding programme

documents, regional or company-specific business plans, municipal policies, as well as international conventions on aspects of sustainable development. The objectives before the rural developer are various and complex:

- strategic – deriving from regional or local tourism strategies, master plans, etc.
- project-specific – related to strategic goals but bound to the project requirements
- performance-related – increase in number of tourists, number of new routes, products, revenue, number of new jobs, number of company visits
- functional – marketing-related, communicational, accessibility-related, cooperation-related, development of services, internationalization, acquisition of funding, etc.
- local, regional, more rarely national, international
- personal – to make a living, to increase one’s competence
- non-specific to tourism – where tourism is a means of regional development or a single target of development among others

The developers only have little time resource at their disposal to implement their RT related tasks. The reported share of worktime reserved for RT development was 25% on average (Table 3). For some respondents this was a difficult estimate, as (rural) tourism in some cases is not a strictly defined task for them or their tasks vary depending on customer needs. Besides (rural) tourism development, the respondents reporting performing the following tasks: regional development, other development, teaching, research, keynote speech delivery, forecasting, daily coordination and marketing of tourism, public administration, project planning, business advising, cultural designer tasks, environmental expert tasks, office work, farming, communication, tasks related to sports, youth, culture, development of air transport, supervisor work, event production, entrepreneurship, funding advice. Among these answers were also “livelihood” and “paid work” which suggests that not all RT developers get paid for the development tasks.

**Table 3: Proportion of working time reserved for the development of (rural) tourism (n=67)**

	Min	Max	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
%	0,0	100,0	41,6	25,0	36,9

One cannot recognize the RT developers by their title. In terms of job titles (n=79), only six respondents’ titles contained the word “tourism” (7,6%). The most common job titles (Table 4) were project (30%) and research & development related (19%). This is not a surprise, as RT development is heavily dependent on project funding (Table 5). It also corresponds with the typical tourism development tasks indicated in literature.

**Table 4: Job titles categorization and share (n=79)**

Category	Number of titles related	Share of answers
project-related	24	30%
R&D	15	19%
specialist positions	11	14%
consulting & advisory (both private & public)	9	11%
entrepreneurs	7	9%
leadership positions	6	8%
educators	3	4%

The average estimated share of project work in RT development is 70%. RT development is reportedly funded predominantly by European Union funds, mainly the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (87%, n=82), as well as by direct municipal and provincial funding (29%).

**Table 5: Estimation proportion of the development of rural tourism implemented as projects in the operating area of the respondent (n=67)**

	Min	Max	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
%	0,0	100,0	62,4	70,0	28,9

The typical employer of a RT developer (Table 6) is a development organization (23%), a municipality (16%), or an education institution, but it is not uncommon for private companies, village associations, and LEADER groups to include such functions. Surprisingly, only a few members of regional tourism organizations' personnel have identified themselves as RT developers: these organizations typically coordinate tourism on regional level, including several rural destinations, sites and attractions, although they are operating city-led. This contradicts Finland's tourism strategy's intent to develop RT integrally. Many respondents marked more than one employer or shared that their employers change often, they are currently between employments, or they are self-employed. This paints a picture of the ephemerality of RT development positions, which could be equated to freelance work.

**Table 6: Types of organization employing (rural) tourism developers (n=85)**

Organization type	n	Prosentti
development company / organization	23	27,1%
municipality	16	18,8%
education institution	15	17,6%
tourism association	11	12,9%
private company	10	11,7%
village association	9	10,6%
LEADER-group	5	5,9%
regional tourism organization	5	5,9%
other association	4	4,7%
other public organization	2	2,4%
advisory organization	2	2,4%
foundation	2	2,4%

Individual respondents reported work titles such as “landlady” and “farmer” which added to the village association and LEADER group employment define a significant share of the developers as local community representatives, confirming the neo-endogenous development approach.

The needs for competence strengthening of RT developments (n=86) are as versatile as their work and comply with the forementioned requirements for leadership of sustainable RT development. The top three competence needs are future and forecasting skills (60,5%), productization and development of tourism experiences (57%), as well as travel trends and research (53,5%). Networking, cooperation and involvement of stakeholders in development (48,8%) do not fall far behind. The respondents have identified having needs for competence strengthening in every suggested item of each of the categories: marketing and sales, digital communications and technology, responsibility and sustainability, funding and projects, and other competence. The least requested competence topics were customer service (7%) and project management (20,9%). Important topics raised by the respondents in this respect were also safety and security, peer learning and benchmarking, acquiring and utilizing feedback and recommendations.

#### 4.2 Results from the Workshops

Females dominated the workshop participation, where only 9 male participants (13%) were observed. This confirms the gender distribution of developers observed in the questionnaire.

The workshops explored more complex questions that the questionnaire such as current state, changes and future of RT development from the point of view of its developers. Although the workshops were regionally implemented, there were only little region-specific details in the raised topics, opportunities, and challenges, while most of the concerns and observations of RT developers were shared. The workshop results, summarized in Table 7, emphasize the need for cross-administrative networking and cooperation not only on business level but also among developers and funding institutions enabling development. Many of the challenges, such as asymmetrical distribution of funding, geopolitical events, EU funding conditions, national policies, cannot be directly approached and affected by the RT developers. Some of the important topics characteristic for RT development are broader and structural, concerning the whole society and Finnish culture, e.g., lack of cooperation, generational change, wellbeing, predominant project-based development. In this difficult

environment and amid societal change, however, the RT developers retain their focus on opportunities and their positive view of the future.

**Table 7: Topics raised by the rural tourism developers**

Important topics of RT development	Opportunities	Challenges
<b>joint marketing</b> <b>building of cooperation, especially across administrative borders</b> <b>generational change in businesses</b> <b>shortage of manpower</b> <b>wellbeing of rural inhabitants and entrepreneurs</b> <b>continuity and consistency of development work</b> <b>cross-regional development and cooperation</b> <b>digitalization of tourism business</b>	nature resources and activities cultural and historical resources exotic characteristics of Finnish countryside – darkness, coldness, walking on ice, slow travel, sauna, aurora borealis flexible LEADER-funding sustainable development alternative tourism innovativeness heat-escape tourism bleisure tourism and digital nomadism increase in domestic leisure tourism after COVID-19 families with children as a target group of RT immigration local food and food tourism transformational travel wellbeing from nature strong tourism education third sector as service providers cleanliness of Finnish nature and food	lack of resources in the countryside efforts and funding with asymmetrical distribution lack of continuum in development related to project work concrete needs and challenges but only general, untargeted solutions in offer multitasking and multiple responsibilities lack of control of RT interests nationally sufficient and need-fitting funding lack of productization to benefit from resources global and regional geopolitical events development events mainly online, lack of networking, visits, study trips ease of access to knowledge and information EU multiannual funding programmes' slow start and unclear conditions accessibility of Finland and of rural destinations within survival vs. development in tourism business difficult acquisition of private funding for RT development

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

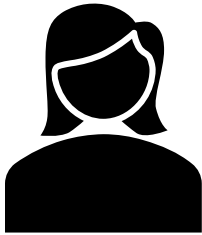
Table 8 summarizes the profile of the RT developer, built based on the dominant responder characteristics. The vast variety and fragmented nature of the characteristics observed, however, should not be neglected.

The limitations of the study include factors like the lack of Swedish version of the questionnaire and the implementation of the workshops only in Finnish. The difficulty reaching developers with minority, immigrant or international background might have left additional significant profiles out of the results. This, however, does not diminish the significance of the established profile. In addition, the constraints of secondary data have left many topics related to the developer’s profile unapproached.

The results paint a picture of the RT developers, on the one hand, as a super-human juggling with a multiplicity of complex objectives and a broad scope of work, but on the other hand, the needs and challenges of RT development are evidently dependent more on external factors than the input of these developers. Help is needed from outside – in the shape of policies, national forums, funding practices, streamlining cooperation to enable the work of RT developers.

**Table 8: The profile of Finland’s rural tourism developer**

Gender:	Female
Age:	50-years-old
Language:	Finnish
Education:	Bachelor’s degree or more
Expertise:	project management, business development, funding

	Work title:	Project Manager
	Work level:	operational
	Work scope:	local /regional, strategic, rural-specific, non-specific to tourism
	Work mode:	freelance, self-employed, changing employers often
	Focus on RT:	part-time, approx. 25%
	Competence needs:	forecasting, productization, trends and research, networking, cooperation, stakeholder involvement

The importance of RT developers lies in the fact that they are a human resource, but they are also enablers and facilitators of all the other resource categories concerning RT development: physical, financial, reputational, organizational, and skill related. Hence, they should be valued and supported to maximize the development results. Special attention should be paid to the competence building of developers, whereby more efforts and funding should be focused on building and maintenance of their capacity to develop RT and the rurality through tourism. When given broad tasks and responsibilities, they should be provided appropriate training, time resources, and access to sufficient knowledge to tackle the challenges.

In the framework of RBV, developers of RT contribute to the competitive advantage by the heterogeneity factor, being highly skillful, superior to the production, and limited, hard to obtain. However, the ephemerality of funding and job positions do not support the second element of competitiveness, namely immobility of resources. Developers are let exit their working environment too easily, not allowing them to build continuity and consistency neither from the point of view of their own work and wellbeing, nor from the perspective of the topic they are developing. This is evidence that their employers or customers do not realize their non-substitutable character, which becomes clear at latest when a new project starts, and everything needs to be built up again from ground zero. The evidence of many local community members' involvement in RT development in combination with some urban-led development supports the contemporary neo-endogenous approach. Authenticity of local developers makes them valuable resource. Their networks and tacit knowledge assign them rareness and non-imitability. Realizing these attributes of competitive advantage carried by the developers would benefit RT development greatly.

By highlighting the crucial role that developers play in RT, the study calls for targeted strategies to enhance their competencies and to foster a more supportive environment for their work, with the expectation that the offered recommendations are valuable for policymakers and stakeholders focused on sustainable rural development.

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