AARHUS
UNIVERSITET

EXPLORING TOURISM ACTORS' LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT IN AARHUS 2017

Colophon

Content

AARHUS
UNIVERSITET
RETHINKIMPACTS 2017

Preface

rethinkIMPACTS reports are an important outcome of the cooperation between Aarhus University and Aarhus 2017 in contributing with new knowledge on many different aspects related to Aarhus being European Capital of Culture. The reports will convey the results of the different research – and evaluation projects that will be conducted in the upcoming of, during and after 2017 as a part of rethinkIMPACTS 2017. The aim is to make these new findings and insights accessible to a broad audience.

This report explores the role of tourism actors' involvement in Aarhus 2017. More specifically, the study wants to examine these tourism stakeholders' reasoning behind their level of engagement in the ECoC-event. Thus, the report engages with one of the key elements of Aarhus 2017, namely the 'rethinking' of the tourism sector in the pursuit of increasing the number of yearly visitors. The report is based on the final Master dissertation conducted in cooperation with rethinkIMPACTS 2017 in Spring 2015 titled 'Aarhus European Capital of Culture 2017 – Exploring Multi-Dimensional Dynamics and Sense-Making Processes that Influence Tourism Stakeholders' Level of Involvement in the Event' by Lara Valerie Tilke during her studies at Aalborg University. In this, Lara Tilke conducted interviews with 14 actors of a variety of tourism organisations in order to explore not only their level of involvement but also how they engage with the European dimension of Aarhus 2017. The result of this project can be found in the following report which is an outcome of the strategic cooperation between Aarhus 2017 and Aarhus University.

Introduction

According to the *Aarhus 2017* agenda, the event will have significant impacts on the city's cultural, social and economic sector. One integral part of this process is 'rethinking' the tourism sector. As stated on *Aarhus 2017*'s website, "*when Aarhus and the Central Denmark Region becomes European Capital of Culture in 2017, it opens new major opportunities for growth in tourism*" (www.aarhus2017.dk, 2015). Here, engaging the tourism sector, as well as increasing incoming visitor numbers is a vital component of the agenda (Garcia & Cox, 2013). *Not only does the event provide the platform for an enhanced tourism influx, but it also highlights the benefits of a cooperation between the event's cultural management and Aarhus' tourism industry. Even more, it calls for a careful consideration of tourism actors that might potentially be interested in becoming involved in – and contribute to – Aarhus 2017.* However, stakeholder involvement in any event is a rather complex issue that cannot merely be labeled by categories of 'involvement' and 'non-involvement'. Therefore, this particular study focused on a more differentiated analysis of stakeholders' motivation and expectations towards *Aarhus 2017*. In this context, attention was paid to the respective stakeholder's background, interests and deeper motives for engaging. The study investigated different levels of tourism stakeholder engagement, as well as underlying motives for their varying degrees of involvement in the event *Aarhus 2017*. Thus, it dealt with the following question:

Why does the tourism stakeholder engagement in the event Aarhus – European Capital of Culture in 2017 take place on different levels and to different degrees?

At the same time, *Aarhus 2017* is not only concerned with developing the city and region, but also with incorporating a "European Dimension" (Aarhus 2017 Strategic Business Plan, 2015). In the past, however, ECoC's have had problems implementing this rather intangible concept. It has frequently been operationalized by coproducing cultural events with European partner cities or the increased focus on a European exchange in the event context. The European Dimension as a vital part of the ECoC programme has called for a

broader framework of investigation. As it is a central item on the event's agenda, it was considered crucial to explore the extent to which tourism stakeholders relate to this concept. Therefore, the project additionally focused on the question:

To what extent does the notion of a European Dimension align with tourism stakeholders' reasons to engage in the event?

Data Collection: Interviews with Tourism Actors

In order to collect relevant data, semi-structured interviews with 14 tourism actors were conducted. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of the actors' perspective, while at the same time retaining a certain flexibility and spontaneity during the interview process. One part of the interviewees consisted of local tourism actors from Aarhus. This selection was supplemented by a range of tourism actors that are operating in the region around Aarhus (Midtjylland). This choice was motivated by *Aarhus 2017*'s goal to facilitate a closer cooperation with the regional tourism sector. Exploring, for instance, how the event is perceived by regional actors and how they see their role within this context, was expected to provide an interesting, additional angle.

The list below provides an overview of the types of interviewed tourism actors:

Tourism actors situated in Aarhus:
- One guest house
- One hotel
- One restaurant
- One cultural event
- Two museums

Regional Tourism Actors:
- One hotel
- One guest house
- One tourism agency
- One regional tourism organization
- Two regional destination management organizations
- Two projects created within the framework of Aarhus 2017

Additional interviews were conducted at *Rejsen til 2017*, an event that was initiated by the *Aarhus 2017* management. The four-day long exhibition in April 2015 presented projects that are being developed within the framework of the *European Capital of Culture 2017*. This event gave an interesting additional insight into the preparatory phase of *Aarhus 2017* and the actors involved.

Analysis and Central Findings

Interviewees' responses were divided into different key themes that emerged during the interview process. Here, existing theoretical concepts helped assessing interview outcomes in the light of scholarly work. As there are various dynamics that shape stakeholder involvement, it was considered crucial to apply different theoretical angles to findings. This, in turn, was an attempt to capture the complex sense-making process of stakeholders.

Media Coverage – A barrier for Stakeholder Involvement?
This section focused on the media discourse that might influence stakeholders' perception of the event and their willingness to get involved. Amongst others, it built upon Talbot's (2007) and Hall's (2006) idea of media as a discourse that "influences all social practices". Findings indicated that the **media discourse did in fact influence actors' attitudes towards the event, but did not necessarily impact their willingness to become engaged**. Rather than the *Aarhus 2017* website or event application, the information spread in the media during the run-up to the event seems to be the most prevailing discourse. In addition, **the central theme of transparency emerged during interviews. Here, findings outlined a noticeable difference between the smaller and bigger actors with regard to the channeling of information**. Some actors suggested that the general public might have a different information demand compared to potential stakeholders. As the event is still at its preparatory stage, citizens might not need as much updating at present, whereas potential stakeholders are in a rather high demand of information.

Here, interview outcomes suggested a potential dilemma: some of the smaller tourism actors might generally be interested in engaging, but remain dependent on news spread by the media since they are otherwise not targeted by sufficient information. **Therefore, there seems to be a much higher dependency for smaller actors on media coverage as a channel, as opposed to stakeholders that are already 'engaged' in the event in some form and are**

"If they made it more specific how they are going to make 2017 important for small businesses – there are tons of small businesses in Aarhus – then I think it would be easier to get more involved" (Restaurant in Aarhus)

able to receive different types of information. As suggested by Åkerlund and Müller (2012), discourses of language seem to indeed shape actors attitudes towards the event. However, in this case, it appears to mainly be the *lack* of such a language. Some of the smaller actors seem to fall in a 'grey area' between the general public and the 'involved' stakeholders. They do not have the same information needs as the 'general public', nor are they actively targeted by specific information that might be relevant for them to participate.

Another key theme concerned actors' expectations. Here, statements appeared to be similar across interviews: **expectations have been fueled by the early election of Aarhus as the ECoC and the positive discourse surrounding the event at that time**. It seems natural that the title gave citizens and tourism actors a set of expectations since it is generally associated with a range of certain benefits. Here, stronger links to the event management seemed to make a vital difference when it came to 'receiving information' following the long period of anticipation.

"There has been a very large build-up process with all the cultural actors, all the cultural institutions. And there have been some expectations to whether or not they were to have a significant role in developing this" (Regional Tourism Organization).

The Sponsor Event – Stakeholders Expectations and Outcomes

That section drew on theories that label sponsorship as a crucial aspect within the event context. In the context of this research, a point of departure was taken in an event held by *Aarhus 2017* in June 2014 that invited businesses and organizations to become a sponsor of the ECoC. Three of the interviewed tourism actors took part in this event. One of the main objectives here was to examine the extent to which the involvement in the sponsorship event influenced the actors' level of involvement in *Aarhus 2017.*

The findings differed in that **'being a sponsor' was not necessarily understood within the parameters of classical sponsorship theory**. Instead, the act of sponsorship seemed to be perceived as a somewhat more fluid concept that can be implemented on different levels. Dissenting from the sponsor event's main goal to 'recruit' sponsors for *Aarhus 2017*, none of the interviewed actors indicated their plan to engage in a sponsor partnership as a result of the event. Instead, **actors predominantly considered the sponsor event as a way to network and receive more information**.

In the context of sponsorship, there appear to be two influential factors at stake: firstly, actors' organization/business characteristic, and secondly their (perceived) stakeholder role. **Non-private institutions, such as a museum in Aarhus, interpreted sponsorship mostly as an opportunity to co-produce and network. For actors that were interested in making profit, such as hotels, sponsorship seemed to be associated with the return on investment, stronger network ties and an increase in tourism awareness** (Timur & Getz, 2008).

Aarhus 2017 – A Matter of Funding or being Funded?

Both interview outcomes, as well as observations made at the *Rejsen til 2017* event, suggested that the **issue of funding is by no means a straight-forward process, but a rather complex issue that involves multiple actors and that takes place on different levels**. It was found that the 'funding relationship' between a tourism actor and *Aarhus 2017* might serve as an influential factor for stakeholder involvement. Here, findings suggested that the process of funding is not unidirectional. Rather, *Aarhus 2017* serves as both a funder of projects, as well as a recipient of sponsorship funds.

In both cases, network links, a degree of dependency, as well as a certain implication of power structures appear to play a crucial role. Thus, depending on the actors' level on involvement, their relationship to *Aarhus 2017* varied significantly. Both the actors that are in some form dependent on the event's financial support, as well as the ones that contribute to the event's funding, suggest a particular bond with *Aarhus 2017.*

Cooperation with *VisitAarhus* – Gate Opener to Aarhus 2017?

The interview outcomes showed that many tourism actors had previously cooperated with *VisitAarhus*, the local destination management organization. This cooperation occurred on different levels and had varying implications for actors. Drawing on theoretical notions, such as Exchange Theory (Cook & Whitmeyer, 1992), these existing networks may impact actors' wish to become involved in *Aarhus 2017*.

Especially in the case of one small accommodation business located in Aarhus, the significance of a former cooperation with *VisitAarhus* became rather visible. The interviewee clearly referred to the high

"If we want to be represented by VisitAarhus on their website, we have to pay. [...] That means that only a small proportion of what Aarhus has to offer is presented on our official tourist website" (Guest House Owner in Aarhus).

costs of being represented on the *VisitAarhus* website. It became clear that the business' cooperation with V*isitAarhus* had led to certain expectations regarding its inclusion in *Aarhus 2017's* programme structure. At the same time, the interviewee expressed that it is slowly becoming impossible to keep paying the membership fee to be part of the *VisitAarhus*' website. This is mostly due to the high costs that are disproportionate to the business' size. **To ensure a better representation of Aarhus' small businesses, the interviewee suggested that the *Aarhus 2017* management could give some of the financial funds to *VisitAarhus* under the condition that local businesses do not have to pay to be shown on its website during the event year**. Based on the interview outcome, this specific business seemed to perceive the amount of money invested to be disproportionate to the benefits received in return. Other small accommodation businesses mentioned similar issues, such as increasing membership fees for being represented on *VisitAarhus*' website.

A regional destination management organization referred to a formal partnership with *VisitAarhus* during the last years where they collaboratively developed international marketing campaigns. The interviewee expected this partnership to grow as a result of *Aarhus 2017*.

According to interview outcomes, the cooperation with *VisitAarhus* seems to be determined by financial issues and power structures to a certain extent. Here, one striking observation could be made: the two small businesses showed stronger reactions in connection to a return on investment. One reason for this might be the actors' perceived mismatch between money invested and return achieved. Another perceived mismatch seems to concern the stakeholder roles: despite their financial contributions, they seem to remain in a 'passive' position. Overall, **it was suggested that existing links to *VisitAarhus* have a significant impact on actors' ultimate level of interest and involvement in the event**.

Aarhus 2017 – An Inclusive Event?

This part examined potential differences in how interviewees perceive the inclusion of different groups of tourism actors. As mentioned previously, one of the smaller accommodation businesses perceived small businesses to be underrepresented on *VisitAarhus*' website. To this actor, ***Aarhus 2017* serves as a platform to potentially gain a stronger position within the tourism network**. Similarly, a regional accommodation business expressed that **smaller tourism actors – in this case accommodations – are not sufficiently involved in the event's planning process**. Here, the interviewee offered a concrete sugges-

tion to market smaller, more basic accommodations as a destination for a particular target group. According to him, there is a tendency now in the general tourism market for tourists to choose somewhat cheaper accommodation options. In that sense, *Aarhus 2017* could make use of this niche to attract a particular audience and thereby including smaller actors in the process. **To some of the regional actors, Aarhus' surrounding region is insufficiently informed and included, and not always used to its fullest potential**. When examining the statements by interviewees acting on a more strategic level, a somewhat different tendency can be noted. One of the regional destination management organizations questioned whether or not *Aarhus 2017* actually has to reach the whole spectrum of tourism actors. To the interviewee, the management needs to evaluate if an actor fulfills the requirements to contribute to such a large-scale event. On a slightly different note, the interviewee of a regional tourism organization stated that he does not see a great value in involving actors, such as small accommodation businesses, throughout the entire preparation stage of the event up until 2017. Rather, **smaller actors will become involved when 'the time is right' and the event is approaching**. As reflected by these statements, some of the more strategically-oriented actors seem to perceive the inclusion of smaller ones in different ways.

Examining perceptions across actors, one can notice a certain mismatch in opinions. It should be noted that there was a tendency among smaller stakeholders, including both local and regional actors, to perceive an insufficient inclusion of smaller tourism actors. Here, certain theoretical blocks help to make sense of these tendencies. Firstly, most of the small actors seemed to perceive *Aarhus 2017* as a crucial platform to develop a connection with Aarhus and its tourism scene. Here, they seem to acknowledge the event's potential as a 'hallmark event' as suggested by Getz (2008). Moreover, the power discourse introduced by Åkerlund and Müller (2012) appears to shed light on some of the actors' perceptions. As the event is continuously presented as relevant to medium and bigger sized businesses and organizations, this impression may affect and reinforce the smaller actors' existing perception. Lastly, attention should be paid to the actors' network structure. Some of the actors seem to possess a more central network position than others. According to Timur and Getz (2008), network centrality is associated with a certain degree of power and access to other actors. Some of the projects initiated within the framework of *Aarhus 2017*, appear to play a decisive role in 'bridging' various actors across the network (Timur & Getz, 2008). They mainly tar-

get medium-sized tourism actors and put particular emphasis on initiating dialogue between the cultural and tourism sector. The tourism actors outlined previously, however, do not seem to 'match' the project's objectives as they do not necessarily strive to develop cultural tourism for their business. Rather, they are mainly interested in increasing their visitor numbers. Thus, they do not seem to 'operate' under one of *Aarhus 2017*'s central notions, namely developing the segment of cultural tourism (Šebová et al., 2014). Thus, it may have been more difficult for these tourism actors to become engaged on this level. In addition, they mentioned the lack in information which contributed to 'prevent' a sound cooperation with the *Aarhus 2017* management*.*

All in all, there seems to be a conflicting perception between smaller actors and more strategically acting stakeholders in estimating the right time for small actors to become involved. Moreover, actors' wish to be considered during the preparatory stage may be rather difficult for the Aarhus 2017 management to implement. Logistics, as well as the 'selection' of relevant actors may be rather complex and costly.

The European Dimension – Reason to get Involved in Aarhus 2017

The European Dimension could be traced in many of the interviews. Tourism actors seem to relate to the European Dimension to different extents and degrees. As stated in the document European Capitals of Culture – Guide for Cities to Prepare a Bid (2014), the European Dimension is a crucial item on the ECoC's agenda, and thus justified as a central part of this research.

For the hotels, the international development associated with *Aarhus 2017* **seems to align with their pre-existing vision to expand internationally and build awareness**. To the smaller actors, the event mirrors the characteristics of a hallmark event: here, the notion of bridging tourism seasonality is highly crucial. In some cases, it almost seems like a reciprocal partnership as projects/businesses benefit from the international platform in developing their objectives, and *Aarhus 2017* benefits from this dimension as an item on the programme agenda. For the regional tourism organization, the international dimension seems to be very much in line with their aim to implement policies and facili-

"It is actually just a [...] recognition of [...] 2017 – it has many obligations towards being European and international and by contributing to this project, we can ensure that the region is culturally developing within the international work" (Regional Tourism Organization).

tate the international dimension for regional actors in general, as well as for *Aarhus 2017* in particular. Despite the various levels on which tourism actors relate to the European Dimension, there are also common traits. One of them is reflected by the target audience that is similar across actors.

In many cases, the European idea had rather practical implications, such as an enlarged international platform, increased awareness, as well as bridging issues of seasonality. To some extent, these notions were impacted by more fundamental interpretations of the European Dimension as a set of common values that facilitate the interaction with European partners. Most actors seemed to acknowledge the significance of the European Dimension for their respective businesses, organizations and projects.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In concluding remarks, it needs to be stressed that actors' perceptions present a snapshot of the situation in spring 2015. Thus, it should be acknowledged that the role of stakeholders is fluid and that their needs and interests might change. As a next step, it will be interesting to trace stakeholders' roles over time and especially during the event year in 2017. With regard to the present study, the interviewed sample represented four groups of tourism actors:

- A group that is attempting to get more involved, but feels hindered for several reasons
- A group that has taken steps to be involved through partnering or common objectives
- A group that offers inspiration
- A group that is taking on a strategic role in implementing policies and objectives

There appear to be both internal, as well as external aspects that influence the degree of their involvement. On the one hand, there are different sets of expectations and needs that are 'influenced' by actors' characteristics (e.g. public/private), objectives that are in line with *Aarhus 2017* or previous cooperation with *VisitAarhus*. However, there also seem to be various external factors. **When examining the network of interviewed actors, the notion of network centrality appears to be crucial in the context of actor involvement**. Here, lacking links to central projects of *Aarhus 2017* can be seen as an obstacle for some actors to get involved.

Additional Perspective and Bigger Sample Size

The study's angle remained limited to the perspective of tourism actors. In order to get a more complete picture, additional perspectives need to be considered and included. The most relevant perspective that should be added in future research is the one by the *Aarhus 2017* management. Working out possible mismatches between management and the perception of tourism actors could yield interesting outcomes. Moreover, the study touched upon discourses created by smaller actors, such as accommodations. Future re-

search could use these implications as a point of departure and examine to what extent findings can be applied to similar settings. However, for practical reasons, future studies should not attempt to cover a broad range of random small tourism actors. Instead, attention should be paid to businesses that have similar characteristics as the ones in the present study sample. If findings indicate common traits across cases, this would underline the need to take action with regard to these particular groups of actors (for instance small accommodation businesses).

In addition, the notion of a regional inclusion should be expanded on. As findings suggest, the regional component is a crucial aspect of *Aarhus 2017*. Expanding on the already highlighted regional network, as well as its interconnections is highly relevant for this context. Particular focus should be paid to more 'remote' areas/towns and their perception of *Aarhus 2017*. As stated by one of the interviewees, many of them showed interest in becoming involved, but seemingly did not see the platform to do so this far.

Information Event for Interested Actors

The interview process indicated that there are some actors that neither have the same information need as the 'general public', nor are they actively targeted by specific information that might be relevant for them to participate. Drawing on implications by the *Rejsen til 2017* exhibition, it can be noted that such an event seems to contribute greatly to transparency, communication and the raising of awareness. In reaching out to potential partners, the process of 'filtering' out the ones that might be interested in becoming involved may be rather challenging. Nevertheless, an event similar to *Rejsen til 2017* that specifically targets professionals and businesses could provide an important platform for interested actors. Thereby, the event would not only reach out to the general public, but also to the business sector of Aarhus and its surroundings. Especially some of the smaller, as well as the regional businesses expressed an interest in such a general information session in order to get an idea of potential ways to become involved.

Acknowledging Previous Partnerships with *VisitAarhus*

To some of the interviewed tourism actors, a previous cooperation with *VisitAarhus* had a significant impact on their wish to become involved in *Aarhus 2017*. In this context, one could take up the idea by the Guest House in Aarhus. The interviewee suggested that the *Aarhus 2017* management could al-

locate part of its budget to *VisitAarhus*, so that small businesses could be represented on its website for free during the event year. Some of the businesses feel that over the years, they have invested a disproportionate sum in being part of *VisitAarhus*. Taking up the interviewees' suggestion, 'awarding' them with a year-long, free membership could acknowledge their investment over the years. In addition, this initiative would provide an opportunity for interested actors to partake in *Aarhus 2017*.

More Transparency during the Run-Up to 2017

Some of the interviewees that agreed to some form of formal partnership with *Aarhus 2017,* referred to a sense of impatience and expressed the wish to be updated more regularly during the run-up to the event. This wish was partly fueled by the long period between the election of Aarhus as the European Capital and the actual event year.

Even though it is rather challenging to keep involved actors updated on the preparation of *Aarhus 2017,* a certain amount of information might be necessary to keep them 'in the loop' and preserve the event's development and relevance until 2017. In this context, interviewees expressed that they did not necessarily want to be informed on every detail. Rather, they would like to be briefed on their concrete role and task in 2017. This briefing becomes especially crucial in the more proximate preparation phase, like in the course of 2016.

Focus on European Dimension

Evaluating the European Dimension in the context of *Aarhus 2017*, it appears to entail a dual function: on the one hand, it has a certain impact on actors' wish to become involved in *Aarhus 2017*; on the other, it also is a 'by-product' of actors' projects as some contribute to the event's international dimension by facilitating European co-work.

Thus, the European Dimension seems to already play a significant role in the build-up to the event. Expanding on existing partnerships and cooperation may strengthen this aspect event further. Here, attention should be paid to the focus on the European, instead of a mere international context. In this context, it might be especially interesting to work out what spectrum the European Dimension actually covers; ranging from a common set of values to a convenient framework for cultural cooperation. As shown by interviews, there are certain aspects of the European Dimension that actors perceive similarly. At the same time, there do seem to exist some differences. Examining these

differences in more detail could shed light on areas of the European Dimension that are crucial and relevant for different actors.
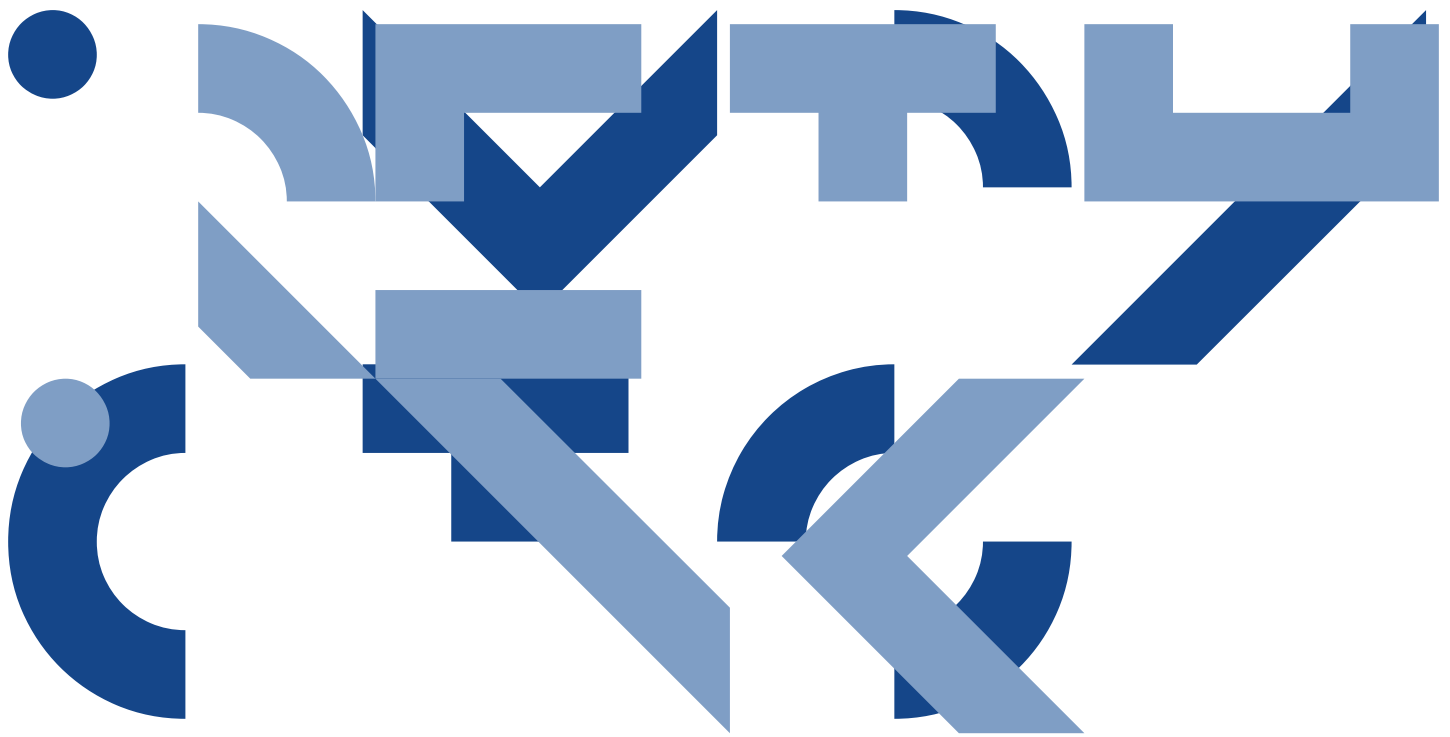
As *Aarhus – European Capital of Culture 2017* is still in the run-up phase, the benefits of assessing stakeholders' interests and needs at the current stage are evident. As the focus on tourism development is one of the event's central objectives, this study puts emphasis on exploring tourism actors' sense-making processes. Here, the central aim was to unravel patterns of reasoning that influence different levels and degrees of stakeholder engagement in *Aarhus 2017*.

In order to collect data, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The sample consisted of 14 actors from a wide range of Aarhus' tourism sector, including hotels, museums and destination management organizations. In addition, as the regional inclusion is a central objective of the event agenda, actors located in the Midtjylland region were also included in the interview sample.

Based on findings drawn from collected data, one can suggest four 'groups' of stakeholders represented in the analyzed sample: a group of tourism actors that tries to get more involved, but feels impeded for several reasons; a group that is linked to the event context through partnering or common objectives; a group that offers inspiration to the *Aarhus 2017* agenda; and a group that is taking on a strategic role in implementing policies and objectives.

In essence, factors like stakeholder characteristics, position in the stakeholder network, common objectives with the event agenda and previous engagement with Aarhus appeared to significantly influence the level of actors' involvement. Moreover, the setting of this study highlights its high context-dependency. As the event is in its run-up phase, it is likely that certain issues might be relevant at present, but may be redefined until the event year. This points to the fluidity of the event context that may shape actors' social identities in a given time and context. The study's findings have crucial implications for approaching and involving groups of tourism stakeholders both in the run-up to 2017, as well as in the course of the event.

Lara Valerie Tilke carries a Master Degree in Culture, Communication and Globalization, Aalborg University (2015). The report 'Exploring Tourism Actors' Level of Involvement in Aarhus 2017' is based on her final dissertation titled 'Aarhus European Capital of Culture 2017 – Exploring Multi-Dimensional Dynamics and Sense-Making Processes that Influence Tourism Stakeholders' Level of Involvement in the Event' where her research was based on Stakeholder Theory and Network Theory supported by data collection consisting of interviews with different tourism actors who are engaged in Aarhus 2017.

Contact Lara Valerie Tilke: lara.tilke@gmail.com.