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## Both right nearby and far away: Rural Sámi entrepreneurs' engagement with spatial contexts

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**Abstract:** This study contributes to the debate on the role of spatial contexts in rural entrepreneurship. Drawing on rural and indigenous entrepreneurship theory, we explore how four Sámi entrepreneurs from Sweden and Norway engage with their spatial contexts. We employ a multiple-case study design, an interpretive philosophy of science, and elements from indigenous research methodologies. Our findings demonstrate that the entrepreneurs engage both within and across their spatial contexts, encompassing environments both nearby and far away. We also identify drivers and practices associated with this entrepreneurial engagement. Based on the findings, we develop *The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework*. The framework serves as an illustration of how a Sámi perspective adds new insight into the field of rural

entrepreneurship and offers a comprehensive lens for understanding entrepreneurial engagement with spatial contexts in culturally rich and environmentally sensitive settings.

**Keywords:** rural entrepreneurship; indigenous entrepreneurship; spatial context; contextualisation; engagement.

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**Biographical notes:** Eva Jenny B. Jørgensen is a Professor in Innovation and Entrepreneurship, and she has a particular interest in the relationship between entrepreneurship and context. Her research includes studies of entrepreneurship in different contexts: international, academic, rural and indigenous. She is currently involved in several research projects related to indigenous entrepreneurship like 'The Sámi Way of entrepreneurship: development and implementation in different Sámi contexts '(Norway) and 'Tauhokohoko: Indigenising trade policy and enabling mana motuhake through indigenous trade' (New Zealand).

Jeaneth Johansson specialises in entrepreneurship and innovation research with a focus on business and regional development. Her expertise includes financial decision-making, business model innovation, and organisational change. She applies theoretically grounded methodologies to guide companies in their business development, bridging theory and practice. With extensive experience in education, academic leadership, and international projects, she is also a frequent evaluator of national and EU funding applications. Her research is published in leading journals, including *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Technovation*.

Vigdis Nygaard holds a full-time position at NORCE, a national research institute located in Alta in the core Sámi area. She is a political scientist with more than 25 years of experience in research. Her research interests are regional development in Arctic areas with focus on indigenous and local people and how they are influenced by global and national politics. She leads an ongoing project on Sámi entrepreneurship in Norway 'The Sámi Way of entrepreneurship: development and implementation in different Sámi contexts'. She has experienced in evaluating programs and conducts applied research ordered by Ministries and the Norwegian Sami Parliament.

May-Britt Öhman is an Associate Professor of Environmental History, and PhD in History of Technology. Her research focuses on large technical systems, water security, hydropower, energy production and consumption, mining, gender, environment, risk and safety, racial biology, climate change studies, feminist techno-science, decolonising methodologies, and indigenous methodologies.

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## 1 Introduction

Rural entrepreneurship is a rapidly growing research field (Fortunato, 2014; Masoomi et al., 2023; Pato and Teixeira, 2016; Smith, 2005; Stathopoulou et al., 2004), with an ongoing debate about what makes rural entrepreneurship rural. In this paper, we explore the role of spatial contexts in rural entrepreneurship in terms of *entrepreneurial engagement*. Rural entrepreneurs are typically perceived as entrepreneurs with a strong connection to local places, for example, in terms of being located in a rural setting, employing local people, using local resources, and selling local products (McElwee and Smith, 2014; Pato and Teixeira, 2018). However, rural entrepreneurs are also connected to non-local settings, non-local people, and non-local resources. Recent research therefore shows that rural entrepreneurs are connected to their spatial contexts, not only in terms of connections to places but also in terms of connections to space (Korsgaard et al., 2015b). According to Korsgaard et al. (2015b), who cite Tuan (2007/1977), place can broadly be understood as a fixation or pause, whereas space is perceived as processes of movement and mobility. Based on this, we understand the spatial context as the topographical, geographical, and infrastructural elements, as well as the meanings, experiences, and heritage of places [Korsgaard et al., (2015a), p.575]. Central to our understanding is the significance of movement between different places.

We acknowledge that the understanding of place and space, along with the possible relationships between these two spatial concepts, is complex. Extant research demonstrates how entrepreneurs are trying to make the best of both worlds by combining a strong connection to places and building non-local networks (Korsgaard et al., 2015a). The connection to local places has recently been understood as spatial bricolage, which is defined as making do with the resources at hand in the immediate spatial context (Korsgaard et al., 2021). How rural entrepreneurs go beyond local places to search for resources, partners, and markets has been perceived as spatial bridging (Müller and Korsgaard, 2018). Although mobilising local resources and building non-local networks are crucial for rural entrepreneurs, our experience indicates that their engagement in their spatial contexts stretches beyond a focus solely on resources and networks. We therefore argue that gaining a more comprehensive understanding of rural entrepreneurship requires a better understanding of how rural entrepreneurs are connected to both place and space.

Rural entrepreneurship has recently been reconceptualised as engagement with contexts (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2019). In this study, we examine entrepreneurial engagement, rather than resources and networks, arguing, in line with Gaddefors and Anderson (2019), that this can represent a conceptually robust approach. However, how the entrepreneurs' engagement with contexts should be understood in terms of both place and space remains rather unclear.

In this study, we rely on a multiple case-study approach of four Sámi entrepreneurs. The Sámi entrepreneurs participating in our study all live and operate their businesses in Sámi territories, specifically in the rural areas of Northern Sweden and Northern Norway. As the only recognised indigenous people within the European Union, the Sámi live across the Fennoscandian Peninsula, in the current nation states of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Northwestern Russia. There are no certain figures on the number of Sámi, and there are no reliable statistics available. Earlier aggregation of ethnic group statistics, including the Sámi people, ended abruptly after the Second World War. The Swedish state attempted to count the Sámi in the early 1970s; the account was based on reindeer-

herding registers, thus leaving out Sámi who were not reindeer owners. While still unverified, the commonly estimated Sámi population ranges between 75,000 and 100,000 distributed across the nation-state borders (Keskitalo et al., 2021; Silversparf, 2014).

The Sámi entrepreneurs constitute a vital but neglected group of rural entrepreneurs. Selecting Sámi entrepreneurs to explore rural entrepreneurs' engagement in their spatial context builds on two perhaps contrasting arguments. On the one hand, the Sámi people have traditionally been nomadic, following the reindeer from the inland to the coast. This has even included crossing the borders between Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. This differentiates Sámi entrepreneurs from other traditional rural entrepreneurs, such as farmers, and they are therefore a particularly interesting group to examine in relation to their movements in spatial contexts. On the other hand, Sámi entrepreneurs are strongly embedded in the Sámi culture, history, and values, which are connected to certain places and tie the entrepreneurs to more fixed elements of the spatial context. Based on this background, we explore the following research question: How do rural Sámi entrepreneurs engage within and across spatial contexts?

We find that the Sámi entrepreneurs are all strongly engaged in nearby places, and their engagement also stretches across places in various ways. Hence, we demonstrate that the entrepreneurs' spatial engagement lies both nearby and far away. We are also able to identify drivers and practices of this engagement and develop what we call *The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework*. To this end, our study serves as an illustration of how a Sámi perspective adds new insight into rural entrepreneurship and offers a comprehensive lens for understanding entrepreneurial engagement with spatial contexts. The rest of the paper is organised as follows: We start by giving an account of the theoretical perspectives forming the background of this study. We then present the methodology combining a multiple case study design, an interpretive philosophy of science, and elements from indigenous methodology. The subsequent sections present the findings, a discussion and conclusion.

## 2 Rural entrepreneurial engagement with contexts

### 2.1 Rural entrepreneurship and contexts

Rural entrepreneurship is a diverse and multifaceted phenomenon, and research on rural entrepreneurship is fragmented across a wide range of scholarly fields (Hunt et al., 2021). Therefore, it is critical that we specify how we perceive rural entrepreneurship. We build on a broad understanding of rural entrepreneurship as activities related to identifying and exploiting opportunities in newly established firms or start-ups, as well as in connection with the processes of business operations and development of incumbent enterprises in rural areas (Jørgensen and Mathisen, 2023; Leick et al., 2021). Research on rural entrepreneurship relies heavily on the contextual turn in general entrepreneurship (Welter, 2011; Welter et al., 2019; Zahra, 2007; Zahra et al., 2014). A contextualised view of rural entrepreneurship constitutes a counterweight to the Silicon Valley model because it gives a more nuanced picture of who engages in rural entrepreneurship and why and how they do so (Welter, 2011). Further, targeting interactions between entrepreneurs and their contexts can provide a stronger grounding of theory and concepts and contribute to developing more context-sensitive approaches (Ben-Hafaïedh et al., 2023). The role of the spatial dimension of the context has been important, as rural

entrepreneurship involves particular engagement within and across rural places and spaces (Korsgaard et al., 2015b). We therefore use insights on rural entrepreneurship as spatial bricolage and spatial networking as points of departure.

## *2.2 Spatial bricolage and spatial networking*

Research has demonstrated how rural entrepreneurs connect to local places, which has recently been understood as spatial bricolage. Spatial bricolage is about creating something from nothing (Baker and Nelson, 2005) and about making do with the resources at hand in the immediate spatial context (Korsgaard et al., 2021). Entrepreneurs use spatial bricolage to overcome resource constraints in rural contexts, and Korsgaard et al. (2021) find that it involves three activities: local sourcing of resources, storytelling, and community involvement. How rural entrepreneurs go beyond local places to search for resources, partners, and markets has been perceived as spatial bridging (Müller and Korsgaard, 2018). Much research has brought forward the value of these non-local connections, for example, as the idea of structural holes as sources of good ideas for entrepreneurs (Burt, 2004). Moreover, research has demonstrated that entrepreneurs are trying to make the best of both worlds by combining a strong connection to places and building non-local networks (Korsgaard et al., 2015a). Although mobilising local resources and building non-local networks are crucial for rural entrepreneurs, our experience indicates that their engagement in spatial contexts stretches beyond a focus solely on resources and networks. This study therefore builds on the need highlighted by Kibler et al. (2015) to distinguish between an instrumental place connection (using the place) and an emotional place connection (caring about the place).

## *2.3 Rural entrepreneurship as entrepreneurs' engagement with contexts*

To include the entrepreneurs' emotional connections to places and space, we lean on Gaddefors and Anderson (2019), who reconceptualise rural entrepreneurship as engagement with contexts. In their reconceptualisation, Gaddefors and Anderson (2019) underline that entrepreneurship can be understood as a relational process – a process of connecting (Anderson et al., 2012). They argue that to better understand rural enterprising, we must first look at the interactions (engagements) between the rural and the enterprising. Moreover, they emphasise that “context(s) provide the resources to which entrepreneurs connect to create value; consequently, these entrepreneurial engagements are the phenomenon, the practices that carry explanatory power” [Gaddefors and Anderson, (2019), p.162]. Thus, they argue that it is not the rural contexts that determine the nature of rural entrepreneurship but the extent, degree, and type of engagement in these contexts. However, how this engagement should be understood in terms of entrepreneurs' engagement with both place and space, remains unclear.

## *2.4 Indigenous and Sámi entrepreneurship*

To further understand both the instrumental and emotional aspects of entrepreneurial engagement in contexts, we turn to the literature on indigenous and Sámi entrepreneurship. Indigenous entrepreneurship is a relatively new research avenue that has developed since the turn of the century (Croce, 2017; Hindle and Moroz, 2010; Padilla-Meléndez et al., 2022b). Indigenous entrepreneurship can be distinguished from

mainstream entrepreneurship in terms of the context of the enterprise, the types of goals and outcomes, and the form and organisation of the enterprise (Cahn, 2008; Mahato et al., 2024). Indigenous entrepreneurship contributes in ways that sustain and develop livelihood and the growth of places in Sámi areas, and as a means of revitalisation, it has been shown to enhance self-determination, foster economic independence, and safeguard traditions in indigenous communities (Henry et al., 2018). Building on how we understand rural entrepreneurship, we also perceive indigenous entrepreneurship as activities related to identifying and exploiting opportunities in newly established firms or start-ups, as well as in connection with the processes of business operations and development of incumbent enterprises in rural areas. However, these activities must be accomplished by indigenous peoples (Hindle and Moroz, 2010). Moreover, indigenous entrepreneurship is based on indigenous knowledge and culture but can be connected to any type of sector, and its outcomes are for the benefit of both indigenous and non-indigenous people (Padilla-Meléndez et al., 2022a).

The connection to the rural spatial context has also been important in the indigenous entrepreneurship literature. For example, Croce (2017) distinguishes between indigenous entrepreneurship in urban, rural, and remote areas, where experiences, opportunities, and outcomes differ. She suggests that rural indigenous entrepreneurship is an intermediate form between urban and remote indigenous entrepreneurship. She argues that rural indigenous entrepreneurship lies between modernity and tradition, is both opportunity- and necessity-oriented, but is based on the indigenous culture, the community, and a non-profit orientation. For indigenous entrepreneurs, their connection to traditional lands is often a defining factor (Anderson et al., 2006) that differentiates them from ethnic minority groups (Anderson and Giberson, 2004). Yang et al. (2024) develop a typology of indigenous entrepreneurs by differentiating whether they operate within or away from indigenous territories and whether their identity markers as indigenous people are salient or more silent.

Existing literature on Sámi entrepreneurship is sparse and mainly focuses on reindeer husbandry (Dana and Light, 2011; Riseth, 2006; Rønning, 2007) and Sámi culture in Nordic Arctic tourism (Ren et al., 2021; Viken and Müller, 2006). However, this literature presents examples of entrepreneurs' engagement in spatial contexts, stretching far beyond the use of resources and networking. For example, reindeer herders speak about connections to their *siida* (a group of herders) and about reindeer herding as a maintenance of cultural traditions (Dana and Light, 2011). Further, research finds that Sámi tourism entrepreneurs include stories of reconciliation with their colonial past (Kramvig and Førde, 2020) and tourism as a way of expressing themselves and keeping certain traditions alive (Leu et al., 2018). The research also includes examples of spirituality in Sámi tourism (Fonneland, 2013) and vulnerabilities and a close down of a Sámi tourism venture due to the unstable and changing ethnic qualities of a place (Granås and Mathisen, 2022).

### **3 Description of Sámi people and Sápmi/Sábme**

The four Sámi entrepreneurs who participate in our study live and work in Sámi territories, specifically in the rural parts of northern Norway and northern Sweden. They conduct their entrepreneurial activities in different Sámi contexts. Those on the Norwegian side live and work in areas where the (North) Sámi language and culture have

a strong position, whereas on the Swedish side, the Swedish language dominates, and Sámi culture is somewhat less visible than in the north of Norway. The Sámi territories, known as *Sábme* in Lule Sámi and *Sápmi* in North Sámi, cover vast areas and encompass the entire Fennoscandian peninsula – the modern-day nation states of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the northwestern part of Russia. Yet, although Sámi indeed live across the entire region, only reindeer herding territories are typically referred to as Sámi territories in current times.

Sámi people were considered important partners to the Germanic/Nordic (later Swedish/Norwegian) population in the south until the establishment of the modern nation states in the 16th century. Since then, relationships have deteriorated, as the Swedish state – the crown – increasingly attempted to take control over Sámi lands and people. There were forced deportations of Sámi from mid-Sweden starting in the 17th century, which increased in the 18th century. Sámi on the Swedish side owned and managed their own lands for several hundred years, being landholders. In the late 18th century, when peasants had their rights to landholding confirmed, the Sámi were denied that right. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the lands were taken by the Swedish state; instead, reindeer herding Sámi were allowed to use the lands for grazing reindeer, with several limitations. This is also the case on the Norwegian side of the border, where a considerable influx of settlers from southern Norway suppressed the Sámi reindeer herders, who were not able to own land but had gained user rights. In 1902, in Norway, a new land sale law was passed, which meant that the Sami people could not own land or houses. Both the Sami themselves and the places had to have Norwegian names. The reindeer herding Sámi, previously able to roam in a borderless Northern Scandinavia, found themselves split by the closing of borders, first in 1852, when the Finnish/Russian border to Norway/Sweden closed, and in 1921, when herders from the Swedish side lost access to summer pastures on the Norwegian side in Troms (Labba, 2020; Riseth et al., 2016).

Reindeer herding has been and is still an important part of Sámi culture; however, Sámi who do not herd reindeer have always existed. Sámi were famous as ship makers during the Viking era (Larsson, 2007), and on the Norwegian side, the Sea Sámi are known as fishermen since the 9th century (Pedersen, 2012). The Sámi were a visible part of society, at least until the 18th century, serving as vicars, sextons, teachers, members of court, and bailiffs (Nordin, 2018). It is mainly over the past 120 years, because of the increasing colonisation and domination of the Sámi northern territories by the colonial states, that the Sámi have become both depicted as inferior, primitive, and made invisible. Highlighting one's Sámi identity however remains discouraged, and therefore Sámi sometimes tend to keep a low profile (Öhman, 2020; Åhrén, 2008). Despite long-standing attempts by these nation-states to eradicate the survival and use of Sámi languages, nine languages remain spoken, due to both continuous use among the Sámi and ongoing language revitalisation projects (Sarivaara et al., 2013). Sámi communities have always been heterogeneous, with diverse cultural practices, occupations, and languages. A nomadic way of life was part of reindeer herding, but it was also the result of state policies – such as forced labour in mines or military drafts to the many wars fought by the Swedish state – that pushed some Sámi to move away to avoid trouble. The early 20th century saw the beginning of a still ongoing Sámi political movement, a resistance movement against ethno-nationalism and assimilation of Sámi. The Sámi people started establishing specific Sámi organisations to challenge colonial industrial destructive



intrusions, loss of rights, racism and race biology, lack of proper education, and theft of land.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 *Research design*

To achieve a better understanding of how rural Sámi entrepreneurs engage within and across their spatial contexts, we adapted a multiple case study design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2018). Furthermore, we adopted a qualitative approach, aligning with an interpretivist philosophy of science and elements from indigenous methodologies. Entrepreneurship research often advocates for comparing multiple cases, particularly when emphasising the importance of heterogeneity (Van Burg et al., 2022). This is especially pertinent in situations where entrepreneurs contend with vastly different circumstances within diverse spatial contexts. The qualitative approach can enable us to comprehend context, allowing us to delve into the situated and nuanced nature of entrepreneurial practices. Contextualisation serves as a lens through which we can gain a deeper understanding, revealing the particularisation of how entrepreneurial activities unfold in specific settings (Hlady-Rispal et al., 2021). Our approach aligns with Gaddefors and Anderson's (2019) investigation of rural entrepreneurship as engagement with contexts. Finally, and of particular importance in carrying out this study, we combined these Western academic approaches with indigenous research methodologies (Kovach, 2021). Indigenous methodologies are not connected to clear research strategies; however, some contemporary issues are related to the researchers' positions and reflections on who will benefit from the research, emphasising dialogue and collaboration with the participants and integrating indigenous ways of knowing and being (Virtanen et al., 2021). All four researchers behind this paper live and work in Sápmi, and two of the researchers position themselves as Sámi. We link our research to the Sámi communities clearly expressed need for more knowledge on rural Sámi entrepreneurship and the need to develop better business policies and support. We emphasise developing long-term and deep connections to our participants and respectfully attempt to integrate the Sámi ways of thinking, knowing, and doing into our research.

### 4.2 *Selection and presentation of participants*

For this study, we carefully chose the cases of four Sámi entrepreneurs. Sámi entrepreneurs constitute a vital part of rural entrepreneurship in northern Sweden and Norway. However, in research, they still represent a neglected group of entrepreneurs, with a clear potential to shed new light on important aspects of entrepreneurial activity in rural areas. Selecting Sámi entrepreneurs to explore rural entrepreneurs' engagement in their spatial contexts builds on two arguments. On the one hand, the Sámi people have traditionally been semi-nomadic and are on the same ti strongly embedded in the Sámi culture, history, and values, which strongly connect them to certain places. The selection of participants for the current study was based on the heterogeneity in the context in which they operate (type of business, traditional, or new industry, place, and country). The participants were relatively homogeneous in age, all middle-aged, while other

characteristics were relatively heterogeneous (gender, education, their Sámi background). Table 1 summarises the background information on the four entrepreneurs.

**Table 1** Background information of the entrepreneurs

	<i>Entrepreneur 1</i>	<i>Entrepreneur 2</i>	<i>Entrepreneur 3</i>	<i>Entrepreneur 4</i>
Age (in 2023)	>40 years	>55 years	>40 years	>45 years
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Male
Rural location	Lives in a village in Northern Sweden	Lives in a village in Northern Sweden	Lives in a small town in Northern Norway	Lives in a small town in Northern Norway
Sámi background	Born and raised in a reindeer-herding family	Born and raised in a reindeer-herding family	Sámi and Kven* origin	Born and raised in a reindeer-herding family (which shut down their activity in the early 1990s)
Educational background	9 years elementary school + Sámi education centre	University degree, teachers' education	Craftsman	International master's degree
Type of business	Reindeer herding, tourism	Reindeer herding, technology for tracking animals	Family business	Technological start-up
Start-up year	1996	2000	2016	2015

Notes: \*Kven = a minority in Norway. Kvens are descended Finnish peasants and fishermen who emigrated from the northern parts of Finland and Sweden to Northern Norway in the 18th and 19th centuries ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kven\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kven_people)).

### 4.3 Data collection and analysis

In this study, data were collected from two cases from the Swedish side of Sápmi and two cases from the Norwegian side. The data were gathered through processes in which we added data when needed. On the Swedish side, the case analyses were based on interviews with Entrepreneur 1 and Entrepreneur 2, podcasts, and films in which the two entrepreneurs participated, as well as newspaper articles and presentations at seminars and conferences. The researchers in Sweden have been in contact with and followed Entrepreneur 1 since 2002 and Entrepreneur 2 since 2010. On the Norwegian side, the researchers have, since the beginning of 2022, been in contact with the entrepreneurs. One formal interview was conducted with Entrepreneur 3 and two with Entrepreneur 4. We also listened to one podcast (Entrepreneur 3) and read newspaper articles. Information was also gathered from the companies' homepages and through open posts on social media. One of the researchers also used Entrepreneur 3's company as a real-life case in connection with teaching.

In the analysis, we applied the interpretive sensemaking method as a way of theorising from our cases (Welch et al., 2011). Following this method, we put weight on describing and understanding the context. Researchers in this tradition embrace context, narratives, and personal engagement, to provide 'thick descriptions' (Stake, 2005). The members of the research team in this study are, in the same way as the entrepreneurs, strongly embedded in the rural Sámi context. This has given us an insider perspective and engagement that have been valuable in the analysis. We have placed emphasis on

understanding each entrepreneur's subjective experiences with the context. To conduct the analysis, the research team met regularly through digital sessions between August 2022 and March 2024 (around 15 times), discussing and trying to make sense of our data. During the first of these meetings, we developed a guide for analysing the data. This guide included the following topics: engagement in relation to whom or what (as for example to specific actors, places, families, traditions and histories or aspects of sustainability), motivation for engagement, strength of engagement, aspects of engagement and content of engagement (related to certain practices or activities). Further, to ensure the quality of our research, we have all the way emphasised quality criteria in line with our interpretive philosophical orientation, like credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). During the analysis and based on an open interpretation of the different case data, some specific topics connected to the entrepreneurs' engagement emerged: drivers, strategies, and practices of engagement. These three aspects appear to represent how rural Sámi entrepreneurs engaged with their contexts, and in the finding section below we will provide a 'thick description' of them. Through further analyses and discussions within the team, we developed *The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework*, conceptualising how Sámi entrepreneurs dynamically engage in spatial contexts, including both engagement in local places and in movements beyond these places.

## 5 Findings

### 5.1 *Entrepreneurial engagement within context – connecting business ideas and local places*

We find that the entrepreneurs' engagement in the nearby places starts with and is integrated into the entrepreneurs' business ideas. Entrepreneur 1 is an active reindeer herder, building on strong Sámi knowledge and tradition. His business is strongly connected to local nature. He follows the reindeer throughout the year, in all weathers from the cold winter to warm summer, both in darkness and in daylight. For him, reindeer herding implies being strongly connected to local nature – that is, the land, the wood, and the mountains where the reindeers live and wander. His entrepreneurial engagement also involves protection of the reindeers from predators, such as wolves and bears. Entrepreneur 1 calculates that altogether, between June and October of 2020, 58% of the calves born in that year were killed by predators. Moreover, there are times when the animals cannot find food by themselves, and it is necessary to feed them. There can be too much snow for the reindeers to find food or the land can be too dry. Such circumstances cause high costs for the entrepreneur, emotional challenges and suffering for both the entrepreneur and the reindeer. Entrepreneur 1's engagement with his reindeer and this rural landscape is also connected to positive aspects, and he expressed the feeling this way:

“I experience freedom by living close to nature, engaging with the animals and the surrounding nature, and perceiving it as a good way of living.”

Entrepreneur 2 shares the same background as Entrepreneur 1, and her business idea is also connected to reindeer herding and local nature. The business idea entails what we can call an indigenous innovation, a new business idea related to technology for

surveillance of reindeer. She explored the idea together with another Sámi reindeer herder woman from the same local community, making use of local reindeer herding knowledge. The technology includes mobile phone applications that provide real-time navigation assistance to reindeer herders. These products have transformed and innovated reindeer herding practices while respecting culture and strengthening community values. Here is how the entrepreneur expressed it:

“I grew up within a reindeer herding family. As a female reindeer herder, I saw the need to develop help for the hard, practical work with herding – a technology that would function in our harsh climate, and big areas, areas without cell phone reception.”

The technology enhances the efficiency, health, and safety of reindeer herders while reducing the need for motorised transport, which involves long days at the snowmobile or all-terrain vehicle (ATV). Using snowmobiles in a cold climate can have negative effects on the health of reindeer herders, who often grapple with back problems. The technology developed by Entrepreneur 2 is used in reindeer herding as well as for other purposes, including tracking wild and domestic animals, not only in the Swedish market but also internationally.

In 2016, Entrepreneur 3 and his family took over an existing company. The main business activity is to produce and sell traditional Sámi tents, called lavvos. Building on traditional Sámi knowledge, the company produces modern, durable, lightweight lavvos for comfortable living and easy transport. Entrepreneur 3 is also developing bigger tents for the venue/conference outdoor market, scaling up the traditional Sámi lavvo, reaching beyond the traditional group of customers. The entrepreneur has gradually engaged in developing more modern outdoor-life equipment, such as the PopUp Sled (a sled with an integrated tent) and the Aurora Sled (a luxuriously mobile hotel room), both of which could be transported to remote areas with snowmobiles. In addition to using local knowledge in new and innovative ways, the business connects to local places by being located in a Sámi village and employing experienced peoples producing lavvos for decades.

Finally, Entrepreneur 4 builds his business on an innovative business idea, developing apps and digital games based on Sámi folk stories and legends. One of the games is about a Sámi shaman girl. The game is strongly based on the Sámi culture, a story about a heroine, which is intended to have a global appeal for all girls between the ages of 8 and 13. Some of his products are commissioned by the Norwegian Educational Directorate for use in schools to educate Norwegian children about Sámi culture as a part of the curriculum, as well as to give Sámi children games in Sámi language and develop stories based on their own culture and tales, to which they can relate.

## *5.2 Entrepreneurial engagement across context - connecting business ideas and local places to the world*

Our finding reveals that our entrepreneurs' engagement also stretches across places, sometimes far away. We find that the core of this engagement is mainly about connecting business ideas and local places to the world.

The Sámi entrepreneurs engage across places, and this differs from many other rural entrepreneurs, such as farmers who operate in a much smaller geographical space. The Sámi entrepreneurs engage in considerably larger spatial areas. The traditional way of life

for a Sámi reindeer herder, as for Entrepreneur 1 and 2, is to follow the herd migrating from winter to summer pastures and back, every year, the same route, continuing the nomadic life with the family. They can travel up to 1,000 km utilising the pastures known by the family for generations, connecting to specific places along the trekking route. These can be holy mountains known from storytelling, lakes, or rivers for fishing, and good hunting grounds for game, berry picking, and harvesting materials for duodji (Sámi handicraft). Nowadays, this journey is made via snowmobiles, ATVs, boats, or even helicopters. Entrepreneur 1 is familiar with this traditional way of life. As a reindeer herder, he is engaged in several places along the traditional trekking route. It can be difficult to move forward in the landscape due to snow, water, coldness, stormy weather, or other aspects related to nature and weather conditions. There are no roads, and the landscape may be difficult to get through. It is still necessary to move around in remote areas, following the reindeers and keeping track of them. This is an engagement in context that encompasses movements across places in Sápmi/Sábme, which also sometimes involves crossing the national borders between Norway, Sweden and Finland. The business of Entrepreneur 1 also includes tourism, mainly aimed at covering expenses associated with the reindeer herding. In this part of his business, the entrepreneur connects incoming non-local visitors, often international tourist, to experience the authentic Sámi way of life.

Whereas Entrepreneur 1 moves across places in Sápmi/Sábme himself, Entrepreneur 2 and Entrepreneur 3 develop and sell products that make movements across places easier for their customers. Entrepreneur 2 developed a surveillance technology, illustrating how experiences of overcoming spatial challenges in reindeer herding are brought into developing new technology for wider use. For Entrepreneur 3, who produces lavvos and other outdoor equipment, his engagement in space is about connecting customers to outdoor recreation and possibilities of moving and staying in remote and pristine nature.

Entrepreneur 4 develops digital games based on Sámi storytelling and culture also for an international market. His main goal is to spread the Sámi culture and values to a larger audience worldwide, particularly young gamers, as an alternative to mainstream games. The entrepreneur's main partner is in southern Finland, and he has a network of commissioned partners working to adapt the games to various languages and sell the product on the global digital markets, with Brazil currently the largest market. Entrepreneur 4 is not only engaged in the nearby Sápmi area but is spreading the Sámi culture and tales to the unlimited digital world.

### *5.3 Drivers of entrepreneurial engagement with context*

Our findings also point to the significance of forces driving the entrepreneurs' engagement with context. The most important drivers of engagement are related to Sámi identity and culture, emotional place connections, combinations of local resources and global technology, and entrepreneurial mindsets. Because of the entrepreneurs' Sámi identity and belonging to the Sámi culture, they connect their businesses to Sámi traditional knowledge, transferred from generation to generation over millennia, and to the Sámi land. Entrepreneur 1, for example, is driven by a wish to be a reindeer herder from he was young. Entrepreneur 1 expresses this as follows:

“I knew in kindergarten what I wanted to be. What Grandpa, Dad, and I have always done. I never thought about anything else. As long as I can remember, I spent my spare time in the woods. I knew what I wanted to be and said, “I don’t need this and that, I am going to be a reindeer herder”.”

Other examples are Entrepreneur 3 who uses traditional Sámi knowledge about staying and moving in the rural and remote landscape to develop both traditional and new outdoor life equipment, and Entrepreneur 4 who is driven by the Sámi way of telling stories. Due to the entrepreneurs’ Sámi identity and embeddedness in the Sámi culture, they report quite emotional involvement within and across their contexts. For example, Entrepreneur 1 works for the everyday survival of the reindeers and the protection of reindeer herding, both in the short term and in a long-term perspective. He has also the ambition and desire to live a Sámi way of life.

We also find that the identification of business opportunities in the combination of local resources and global technology is an important driving force for the entrepreneurs. This is especially prominent in the cases of Entrepreneur 2. Entrepreneur 2’s engagement in developing the surveillance technology, building on her own experiences of reindeer herding, presented the difficulties of combining reindeer herding with family life and other occupations. Her engagement is driven by a wish to deal with nature and remoteness through the development and use of innovative technology. Using this technology, reindeer herders can keep track of the reindeer and do not need to move around with the animals as much as they need to do otherwise. Entrepreneur 2’s motivation for this is to facilitate reindeer herding today, in remote areas far from internet connections, making it possible to combine herding with modern everyday life.

As the final driving force of contextual engagement, we identify an entrepreneurial mindset. One example of this is Entrepreneur 4 who is motivated by what he comprehends as a special Sámi entrepreneurial spirit. He expresses this through the following quotation:

“It has always been in me, that one day I would like to start (my own company). Whether it’s genetic or that I’ve been damaged by the environment (...) My parents have been in reindeer herding, and my mother has been doing duodji all her life (...) So they’ve really had that entrepreneurial spirit (...)”

#### *5.4 Practices of entrepreneurial engagement with context*

Our findings also point to the significance of the practices that are related to the entrepreneurs’ engagement. The entrepreneurs’ engagements are connected to practices in quite different ways, and we identify business development between preservation and innovation, activism, knowledge-sharing and storytelling, and international collaboration as the main categories.

Based on our data, we can see that when developing business ideas in the combinations of local resources and global technology, rural Sámi entrepreneurs often balance dual roles as both cultural preservers and innovators. They offer traditional products as for example reindeer meat and tourism experiences but also very innovative products, such as reindeer surveillance technology, luxuriously mobile hotel rooms, and digital games based on Sámi folk tales. Closely linked to strong emotional drivers of the entrepreneurs’ engagement are practices that we can call activism. For example, Entrepreneur 1 explains that he does not necessarily wish to be an activist, but he has become one out of necessity; otherwise, the Sámi reindeer herding way of life might be

destroyed through outside intrusion, such as mining, wind power, and large-scale forestry. He takes part in protests, engages with environmental and human rights groups, and writes about his struggles in social media. Here is one example of how he expresses this on Facebook:

“You get scared of the dark when you think about how the explorer is allowed to take the whole pasture. Whatever we say, we will lose in court. It is absolutely sick to see the rate at which our pastures are now becoming industrial landscapes in the name of the green transition.”

A reindeer herder’s understanding of his own self-esteem is very closely tied to reindeer herding as a part of the identity. Therefore, Entrepreneur 1 views threats to reindeers as threats to his own selfhood: a violation of and a deeply personal attack against him and his family – their autonomy, their freedom, and their value as indigenous people and human beings. We place Entrepreneur 1’s activism in this context. He does not fight simply for survival or the financial viability of his livelihood but also for his own sense of self and for the rights of his family and his descendants to continue traditional livelihoods – the right to see his reindeer and his tradition pass on to the next generation.

While all the entrepreneurs in this study collaborate at local, regional and national levels, we find the practices connected to international collaboration especially important as a way of connecting business ideas and local places to the rest of the world. In the case of Entrepreneur 4, the games are launched internationally, and so far, they are available in the Sámi, Norwegian, English, and Portuguese languages. On the production side, the entrepreneur collaborated with a Finnish company that also shares the Sámi values and philosophy. He illustrates this as follows:

“And this is how it is in the game industry because it’s mainly game technology that we work with. In that industry, you must think globally right from the start. For example, it is much easier to distribute games globally today than it was 20 years ago. Because then you had to have a physical product, in covers and all that. Today, everything is in the cloud, so you just download it directly to, either to the console that you have connected to the internet or computer, or mobile phone.”

A common attribute among all the entrepreneurs in this study, seems to be a strong wish to share their experiences and knowledge, such as with younger generations, with their local communities, nationally, and even internationally, as in the case of Entrepreneur 4. Also, Entrepreneur 1 is sharing knowledge about reindeer and reindeer herding with tourists. The tourists are given the opportunity to take part in reindeer herding practices, participate in cultural events, learn about nature, and gain insight into deep-rooted traditional knowledge of the Sámi people. To share knowledge, the entrepreneurs use social media or other digital tools as channels to mediate their engagement. Using social media to express engagement is a common way for today’s entrepreneurs to reach out. However, we observe that these entrepreneurs’ engagement within the local context give their messages a unique content.

## 6 Discussion

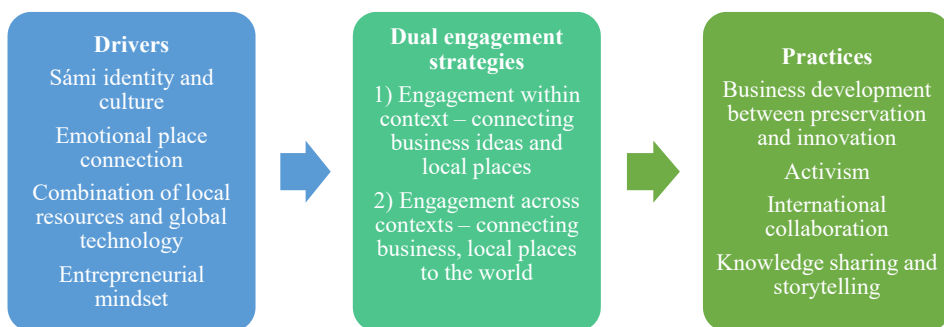
In this section, we summarise our findings and attempt to answer our research question about how rural Sámi entrepreneurs engage within and across spatial contexts. We have

shown that the entrepreneurs are all dually engaged in both nearby places as well as in spaces that stretches across places, sometimes far away. The entrepreneurs' engagement within places was mainly based on connections between their business ideas and local places. We found that engagement in space encompasses the entrepreneurs' movements across places, connecting business ideas and local places to the world. Based on data from our entrepreneurs, we also identified drivers and practices of the entrepreneurs' engagement. Building on our findings, we have developed *The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework* which we will explain in more detail below.

### 6.1 *A framework of entrepreneurial engagement with context*

*The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework* serve as an illustration of how a Sámi perspective can add new insight into rural entrepreneurship, not only in forms of instrumental connections but also in forms of emotional connections to context (Kibler et al., 2015). The rural Sámi entrepreneurs in this study do not only perceive their business as work and earning an income but also as a traditional rural way of living. Further, we show how our entrepreneurs are strongly connected to places in the rural landscape and their traditional lands (Anderson et al., 2006), and how their engagement encompasses arranging for themselves and others to stay and move in remote and pristine nature. This is closely linked to the use of nature-based and traditional Sámi knowledge, which is passed down from one generation to the next. For the entrepreneurs, digitalisation and new technology enabled the Sámi culture and the sense of the rural to reach out internationally. The *Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework* outlines what we perceive the entrepreneurs' engagement as processes with three core elements: the drivers, the dual engagement strategy and the connected practices. It highlights how Sámi entrepreneurs dynamically navigate both place and space (Korsgaard et al., 2015b) by an interplay between businesses and local places, as well as by connecting businesses and local places to the rest of the world.

**Figure 1** *The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework* (see online version for colours)



First, the framework highlights the entrepreneurs' dual engagement strategies. This dual strategy includes:

- 1 an engagement within context connecting business ideas to local places
- 2 an engagement across contexts connecting business ideas and local places to the world.



Sámi entrepreneurs maintain strong local ties while extending their activities to regional, national, and global contexts. This dual engagement illustrates how they balance local rootedness with broader outreach, showcasing the dynamic nature of their entrepreneurial practices. The first of these strategies includes engagement within context which entails connecting the entrepreneurs' business idea and local places. In line with existing rural entrepreneurship theory on how rural entrepreneurs are connected to local places (McElwee and Smith, 2014; Pato and Teixeira, 2018), we find that our entrepreneurs sell local products (for example reindeer meat and lavvos), using local resources (especially traditional Sámi knowledge) and employ local people. This represents a more instrumental side of engagement within context that relates to spatial bricolage (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Korsgaard et al., 2021) and to the Sámi business philosophy around *birgejupmi* (to manage with what you have). However, our findings also point to a more emotional side of engagement related to for example the connection to sacred places in the local nature and to traditional Sámi folk stories and legends passed on from the elders. The second engagement strategy stretches across contexts and represents a novel perspective on how rural entrepreneurs connect to context that goes beyond the concept of spatial bridging (Müller and Korsgaard, 2018). The main characteristic of this strategy is that it connects businesses and local places to the world. In our cases, we find that this strategy is about connecting places in Sápmi/Sábme, international tourists to local places, customers to nature and the Sámi culture to an international audience.

Second, our framework identifies drivers of the entrepreneurs' engagement. Based on our data, we can see that drivers are forces that motivate and initiate the entrepreneurs to engage in their local and global environments. In *The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework*, we emphasise four driving forces: Sámi identity and culture, emotional place connection, combination of local resources and global technology, and entrepreneurial mindset. The entrepreneurs' *Sámi identity and culture* creates deep connections to Sámi traditions, knowledge and land. Culture shapes deeply ingrained values and worldviews which guide entrepreneurial activities. These emphasise sustainability, respect for nature, and interdependence within the community, reflecting the Sámi philosophy of living in harmony with the environment. *Emotional place connections* supplement but goes beyond the more instrumental place connections that we find in spatial bricolage and spatial bridging. The emotional connections combine business activity with cultural pride, personal connection, and proactive efforts to protect and promote Sámi identity, rights, and traditions. *The combinations of local resources and global technology* gives the entrepreneurs in this study some unique business opportunities and we identify the wish to exploit them as an important driving force. Finally, we identified an *entrepreneurial mindset*, or a special Sámi entrepreneurial spirit as an important driver of engagement with contexts.

Third, *The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework* includes practices. These practices represent the ordinary, everyday way in which the entrepreneurs relate themselves to the context (Welter et al., 2017). Sámi entrepreneurs often embody dual roles as both cultural preservers and innovators, navigating the delicate balance between safeguarding traditional knowledge and embracing modern entrepreneurial opportunities. *Business development between cultural preservation and innovation*, involves safeguarding Sámi traditions while adapting them for modern products and markets. The entrepreneurs merge traditional practices with technology, such as creating digital games based on Sámi folklore or developing reindeer tracking systems, ensuring cultural continuity alongside market relevance. These indigenous innovations represent novelty

informed by traditional knowledge and practices in products that are developed and implemented by the indigenous people in accord with their culture and knowledge (Grmusa, 2021; Padilla-Meléndez et al., 2022b). In this way, the Sámi entrepreneurs' engagement practices include and fall between tradition and modernity (Croce, 2017). Further, we identified activism as a central practice connected to entrepreneurial engagement with context. Activism includes public education and policy engagement that enable the entrepreneurs to advocate Sámi rights, educate broader audiences about Sámi culture, and influence policies affecting their communities. As important practices related to the entrepreneurs' engagement in context, we identified *international collaboration and knowledge sharing and storytelling*. The international collaboration practices are closely linked to engagement strategy no. 2) connecting businesses and places to the world. Knowledge sharing and storytelling via social media and other digital tools are a way of putting this into practice.

## 7 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore how rural Sámi entrepreneurs engage within and across their spatial contexts. By employing a multi-case study design, combined with an interpretive philosophy of science and elements from indigenous research methodologies, the findings demonstrated how the entrepreneurs engage both within context by connecting business ideas with local places and culture and across context by connecting places and culture with the world. In addition, both drivers and practices related to this entrepreneurial engagement are identified. Based on this we developed *The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework*. The framework offers a comprehensive lens for understanding entrepreneurial engagement in culturally rich and environmentally sensitive settings. By blending cultural heritage with contemporary business practices, Sámi entrepreneurs preserve traditions while fostering sustainable and resilient entrepreneurship. Key tensions emerge in balancing cultural preservation with mediation and sustainability with economic growth. Sámi entrepreneurs creatively leverage local traditions and resources through practices like bricolage and networking while maintaining a strong emotional connection to place. This connection reflects care for their cultural and environmental heritage, offering a distinct model of entrepreneurship compared to urban or non-indigenous practices.

The insights from this study have practical implications for policymakers and actors in the rural support system (e.g., business parks and incubators), fostering an environment that values and sustains rural and indigenous entrepreneurial initiatives. However, these sources of support are limitedly devoted to the specific rural and ethical contexts described in this paper. In particular, the support system seems to be directed mainly towards the business aspect of the entrepreneurs' engagement and not so much towards other aspects, such as the combination of business activities and the Sámi business philosophy of *birgejupmi*. In addition, our study points to the fact that business activities across places are significant to rural entrepreneurship and should be better supported. Our study may also have implications for rural entrepreneurs, and particularly rural Sámi entrepreneurs. One important implication is that their engagement in and across spatial contexts largely defines and explains what they are and their contributions to their communities.

This paper is not without limitations, and further research is therefore needed. *The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework* provides a perspective for analysing entrepreneurial engagement in culturally rich and environmentally sensitive settings. However, only further research can help to define the scope conditions related to the framework. Although our findings offer initial and valuable insights into the intricacies of rural Sami entrepreneurs' connections with their local contexts, the imperative for additional data is evident. One particularly interesting research avenue is how rural entrepreneurs connect across places, as for example in relation to internationalisation. Additionally, we need more information on how rural Sámi entrepreneurs perceive transitions in their spatial surroundings and the consequential impact on their engagement. Further investigation and theorising into the various strategies of engagement, encompassing drivers, practices and other dimensions, is paramount.

*The Sámi Entrepreneurial Engagement Framework* highlights the critical role of contextual engagement in shaping rural and indigenous entrepreneurship. Rural Sámi entrepreneurs exemplify how bridging local traditions with global opportunities creates a unique balance between cultural preservation and innovation. As our rural Sámi entrepreneurs clearly demonstrates: Innovation grounded in culture and traditions is not just about preserving the past; it is about building a sustainable future.

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