

## **Network strategising trajectories within a planned strategy process**

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### **Abstract**

It is well established in an IMP context that no business is an island (Håkansson and Snehota 1989). This paper discusses findings about how a team of strategists in a firm considers existing network connections within a strategy process for selecting a new strategy. The case company, Nortura, operates with a monopoly position that probably will be radically changed by a World Trade Association agreement. The case study underpinning the findings is based on qualitative data collected between June and December 2007, the seven-month time period of the strategising activity. The Actors-Resources-Activities (ARA) model is used as a tool to analyse how network connections are considered within each strategising phase by the different strategists that participate in the process. The paper highlights three overlapping network strategising trajectories within the process and discusses how teams of strategists handle network connections through the use of tools before proposing three types of network strategising.

**Keywords: network strategising, ARA model, strategy process, trajectories**

### **1.0. Introduction**

In the industrial network perspective the strategic behaviour of actors is interconnected (Axelsson and Easton, 1992; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). The network both restricts and enables strategic action and the network sets the freedom of action just as much as the strategist does. The implication is that the strategic behaviour of business actors is embedded and interdependent (Mattson, 1987; Snehota, 1990). Strategic action involves variously coping with network connections with other actors (Blankenburg and Johanson, 1992; Blankenburg et al., 2000), managing network role and position (Johanson and Mattson, 1985; Axelsson and Easton, 1992; Gadde and Mattson, 1987; Henders, 1992), network horizon (Holmen and Pedersen, 2003) and network pictures (Ford, Gadde, Håkansson and Snehota, 2003; Henneberg, Mouzas and Naude, 2006), mobilising (Håkansson, 1992; Lundgren, 1992; Gadde, Huemer and Håkansson, 2003) and as adaptations between customers and suppliers (e.g. Brennan and Turnbull, 1999).

There is a paucity of research that considers how a team of strategists in a firm considers network connections while undertaking a planned strategy development process, however. This paper combines ideas from Industrial Networks with the strategy as practice and strategy process approaches (cf. Baraldi et al, 2007a) in investigating how a team of strategists at the Norwegian firm Nortura selected a new strategy.

Nortura specializes in red and white meat and poultry production and processing for the Norwegian market. It is formally organised as a corporation while being owned by approximately 32,000 farmers in a co-operative. The company was formed in 2006 as a result of a merger between Gilde and Prior. There are 43 processing facilities in Norway, which employ 7,000 people with an estimated production of 35,000 tonnes of chicken, and 165,000 tonnes of white and red meat (2007 data). The company has an existing strategy based on price leadership in terms of supply, brand development and consolidation of efficient operations. The case study reported in the paper covers what Nortura strategists refer to as “the first episode of strategising after the merger”.

In particular, strategising in IMP has been considered as occurring through influencing the mediating role of counterparts in order to affect the network horizon (Holmen and Pederson, 2003) or as the co-ordination of activities and combining and recombining of resources (Gadde, Huemer and Håkansson, 2003). The strategy as practice approach defines strategising as the micro activity of individual strategists acting and interacting (Whittington, 1996, 2006; Johnson et al, 2003). Therefore strategy is something that practitioners do rather than being something that they have.

There is a paucity of research within this approach that considers the role of actors outside firm boundaries (Jarzabkowski et al, 2007; Clark, 2004; Whittington et al, 2003).

In order to construct the case study of the first strategising episode, qualitative data has been collected between June-December 2007. A mixture of observation, in-depth interviewing and secondary materials have been triangulated. The case is underpinned by the sequence of six strategy activity phases as conceptualised by Nortura's strategists. Each phase and the corresponding practices such as meetings and use of tools (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington 2004) were planned in advance and cemented in a planning document in the initial phases. The actors-resources-activities (ARA) model (Håkansson and Johanson, 1984; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995) has been used to analyse how network connections are considered within each activity phase by Nortura's strategists. Three network strategising trajectories (actor, resource and activity) have been generated. Tools such as an existing internal financial model are shown to be important inputs to and outputs of the overlapping trajectories.

Taken as a whole, the paper is an attempt to investigate how network connections are considered when a firm conducts a planned strategy development process. The structure of the paper is as follows. Section two below provides some general background details to Nortura and the research methodology, before outlining the six-phase strategising process. The third section of the paper is an across-phase analysis of the case, whereby three network strategising trajectories are discussed. Section four presents the two main findings, before the paper is concluded with a general discussion. Three features are highlighted by the paper; strategising involves overlapping network strategising trajectories that are differentially emphasised by strategists over time, strategists handle network connections through the use of tools, and the importance of resources and activities in strategising practices

## **2.0. Case Study**

### **2.1. Some background details and a network context**

Nortura is owned by 32,000 farmers breeding pork, beef, lamb and chicken. The company is in a process of consolidation after the merger of Gilde (red meat) and Prior (white meat and eggs) in November 2006. At present Nortura have 43 facilities throughout Norway. The four large food retailers that are Nortura's customers are; Coop Norden, ICA, Norges Gruppen and Reitan Gruppen with its respective retail chain stores. Figure 1 depicts the network diagram mapping out the actors with which Nortura is connected. The central actors on the supply side are the farmers supplying Nortura with raw materials. This link is very strong as the farmers are also formally the owners of Nortura and have a presence in the board of directors. There are also institutional actors such as the World Trade Organisation and the Norwegian Government. The latter can almost be considered a 'partner' as Nortura has a market regulating role for meat in Norway.

The merger between Gilde and Prior resulted in a consolidation strategy. The three sub-parts of this strategy are: (i) 'End-market' (strengthening brands, product development, and developing supply systems with customers); (ii) 'Renewal of facilities and technologies'; and (iii) 'Supply' (increasing market shares in the supply market and employing a best price strategy towards suppliers). In addition, Nortura has been re-organising its facility structure in order to try and increase efficiency. Generally, the closure of one facility results in cost savings of approximately 18 million NOK. Some of the financial criteria used come from standard internal measures, e.g. a 6-7% return on invested capital. Nortura's current exclusive focus on the Norwegian market does not allow for further expansion. This has produced a gap between what the owners require in return in equity and what is possible.

Nortura's strategists arranged an investment deal with financial institutions and in so doing had 1.000 MNOK to invest in whatever strategy decided upon. At the beginning of the strategy process, it was unclear as to whether this would involve the acquisition of one large industry actor or a series of smaller-scale acquisitions (using 200 million NOK), with the remainder for consolidation.

### **2.2. Research Design**

The research methodology used in the paper is a single case study. A single case was deemed as the appropriate way to obtain an in-depth account of how the strategy process at Nortura developed over time. Various authors provide suggestions for carrying out case research and the philosophical bases of case studies (e.g. Abbott, 1992; Easton, 1998; Ragin and Becker 1992; Dubois and Araujo, 2007). Case studies embed an object in context, allow depth, detail, and richness of data, are longitudinal by default (Easton, 1998) and are process-oriented.

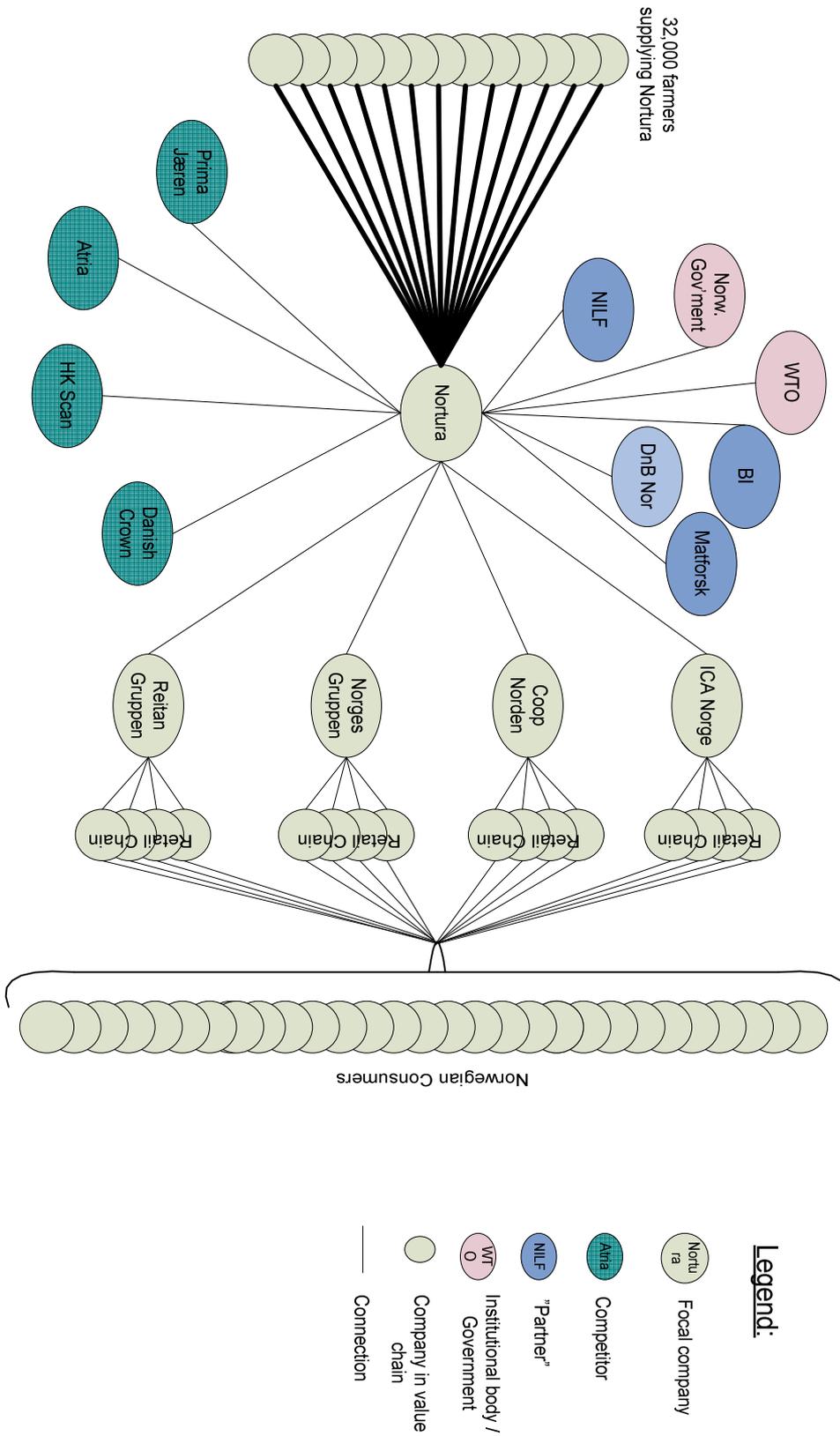
The selection of the case was based on a providential combination of ongoing research connections, access, company activity and theoretical interests (Easton, 1995; Halinen and Tornroos, 2005; Dubois and Araujo, 2007). More specifically, one of the authors is employed at a Centre within the university that has a long-standing relationship with Nortura. As part of an ongoing research project, strategists at the company discussed the then forthcoming planned strategy process with the authors. Permission was granted for a prospective research study in order to follow the strategy process, with full access to relevant meetings and associated materials. Analytical case selection decisions were then made; that a single case methodology was suitable in order to follow a process in real-time, the time boundaries to put in place and downplaying the ongoing longer-term strategy process.

In terms of data collection, qualitative material has been collected between June-December 2007, the seven month time period of the strategy process. A mixture of observation, in-depth interviewing and secondary materials have been triangulated. All the meetings of the VINN Working Group, an internal group, the Corporate Leadership and the Board of Directors (the four main strategy groups) were observed by one or both of the authors. This amounted to 22 meetings in total, sub-divided into; 2 corporate leadership, 3 Board, 8 VINN Working Group and 9 internal group meetings respectively. Four in-depth interviews with key strategists have taken place, and this shall continue during spring-summer 2008.

Extensive secondary material has also been used in order to complement the other data, such as planning documents and materials to be presented at Board meetings. The company website ([www.nortura.com](http://www.nortura.com)) provided background material regarding the product types, organisation and facilities. The planning documents were used to gain an overview of the strategy process and how the tasks in the process had been sub-divided.

The case was written up after the final meeting within the strategy process in December 2007. The multiple data sources were combined to generate a basic chronology of the strategy process, using the logic of longitudinal process research (Huber and Van de Ven, 1995; Langley, 2007). There are various approaches as to how a case can be embedded in time (e.g. Jessop, 1990; Norcliffe and Bartschat, 1994). The Nortura strategists had planned an activity sequence in six main phases. This was used by the authors to structure an initial time phasing of the case.

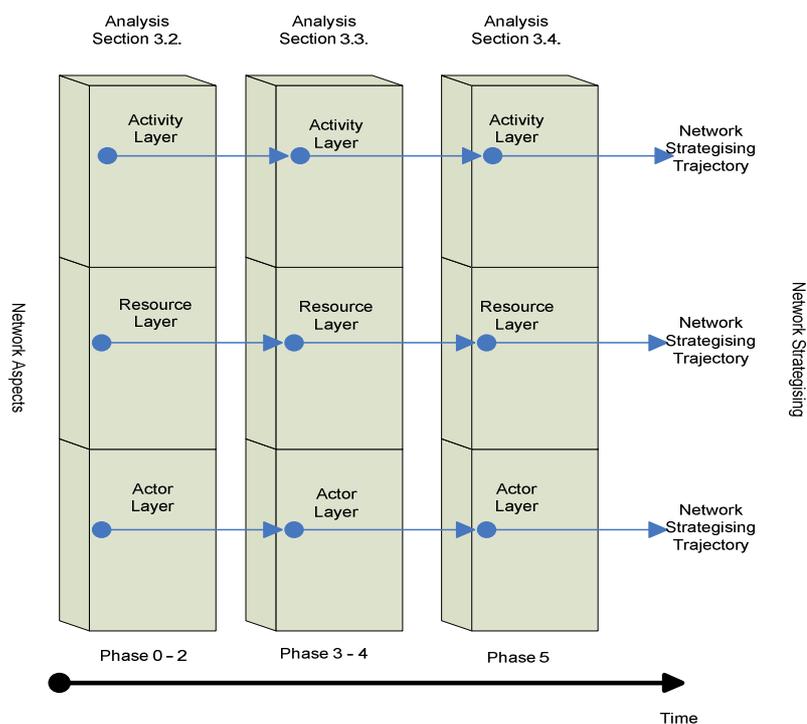
**Figure 1: The Network of Actors in the Context of Nortura**



The data collected from the various meetings, interviews and secondary sources was then divided into the six main phases. The teams of strategists involved in each phase and their formal roles were also outlined by activity phase type. For each of the phases, the chronology of actions, events and activities of the strategists was mapped out on paper and then written up. The case analysis section was undertaken by using the ARA model (Håkansson and Johanson, 1984; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995) as a tool to assess how network connections are considered within and across each activity phase by the strategists.

Three network strategising trajectories (actor, resource and activity) have been generated. The trajectories are made up of actions and events whereby network connections are discussed by the strategists. Each event/action is embedded in sequences of network connections (Araujo and Harrison, 2002; Andersson, 2003; Araujo, 2003). The emphasis varies by phase and by the different strategists which participate in the process. Tools such as an existing Nortura financial model are important inputs to and outputs of the overlapping trajectories. Figure 2 summarises the analysis approach.

The case is being used to build theory about how network connections are handled in a planned strategy process, and also for theory testing in terms of using the ARA model as a tool. The basis of generalisation beyond the boundaries of the case is to theory (Bonoma, 1985; Mitchell, 1983). Hence, our aim is to make analytical or theoretical generalisations to the existing body of research concerned with network strategising.



**Figure 2: The Structure of the Analysis**

### 2.3. An account of a strategising process

A summary of the strategising process can be found in Table 1 below.

#### 2.3.1 Phase Zero: Initiation (June-August)

*The Back-Drop: A need for a strategy process and strategy generation (June-July)*

The trigger for “the first strategising post-merger”<sup>ii</sup> was the realisation that it was necessary to expand beyond the limited Norwegian market. There were also longer term challenges such as the recognition of the ongoing negotiations of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).<sup>iii</sup> Three main strategic options were initially distinguished by Nortura’s corporate strategists; internationalisation, acquisition/merger and strengthen/reinforcement (development and innovation).

It was within this context that NILF (the key external strategist in this account) formulated a plan for the strategising project that was to be called “VINN” (Vekst, Innovasjon og Internasjonalisering, or Growth, Innovation and Internationalisation). NILF has knowledge about the food sector in general and model-based analysis in particular. The goal from NILF’s perspective was to “make concrete and perform analysis of strategic alternatives from Nortura that are related to growth and internationalisation”<sup>iv</sup>. From the start, the utilisation of a strategising tool (a computer-based simulations model) was under consideration. This was because Nortura already had a fairly complete financial model that could be used.

The VINN project was specified in a memo prepared by the Director of NILF; Ivar Pettersen, to Nortura’s top management in early July<sup>v</sup>. In this memo a possible strategising process for the VINN project was drawn up based on five main phases. The project as outlined was to build on existing tools for financial analysis using five main steps. The first two steps of the project involved setting up an initial financial model and performing a gap analysis. Step three was to develop strategic alternatives regarding growth and internationalisation goals, with the evaluation of each strategy using scenarios. Each option was to have a clear economic goal, such as % change in growth. The fourth step would be to build possible future scenarios. Finally, step five would be a scenario-based evaluation of the strategy alternatives. The main outputs of the co-operation project were to be a model and a set of presentation notes regarding the possibilities and risks involved in growth and internationalisation. The strategists involved in this phase were Katrine Karstensen (Strategy Development), Egil Olsvik (Corporate Strategy Director), Axel Krogvig (CEO) and Kristian Sævik (CFO) from Nortura, along with Ivar Pettersen (NILF).

#### *Formation of the Strategy project VINN (August)*

The VINN Working Group was formed on the 17<sup>th</sup> August. The members of the VINN Working Group were Kathrine Karstensen, Egil Olsvik and Ola Bergsaker from Nortura and Ivar Pettersen from NILF. The Working Group had a clear deadline: recommendations must be in place for the final board meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> December. In practice, it was necessary to report to corporate management and board of directors meetings by mid-November. Overall, there are four interacting groups in the strategising process; Nortura’s internal group, the VINN Working Group, the corporate management and the board of directors. Early VINN Working Group meetings were used to reach a negotiated viewpoint on what needed to be done, the sources of information required and the level of detail necessary for the simulation model<sup>vi</sup>.

**Table 1 – The S**

Descriptor	Phase 0	Phase
Phase name descriptor	“Initiation”	“Mod Found
Time period	June – August 2007	August Septem
Strategists (and roles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ External strategist: Ivar Pettersen, NILF</li> <li>▪ Nortura: Kathrine Karstensen, Egil Olsvik, Ola Bergsaker, Kristian Sævik, Axel Krogvik, Guro Dæhlen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ext stra Ivar Pett NIL Hal NIL</li> <li>▪ Nor Kat Kar Egi Ola Ber Kris Sæv</li> </ul>
No. of meetings held (Total no of meetings held during the whole process are 22)	3	5
Main activities (central practices, development and use of tools)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Recognising (by Egil Olsvik) the a need to continue to deliver value to owners/farmers which triggers the whole strategising process initially</li> <li>▪ Presenting the existing financial model.</li> <li>▪ Identifying key business and operational performance ratios</li> <li>▪ Outlining of strategic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bui sim mo</li> <li>▪ Peri sen ana refi mo</li> <li>▪ Peri pro ana refi</li> </ul>

Abstract preview

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ a tool for strategising</li> <li>▪ Current situation as a trigger of the process</li> </ul>	<p>final mod tool stra stra</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Cur situ trig pro pro</li> <li>▪ The Pro cell 1:O</li> <li>▪ the Wo Gro cell 1:O</li> </ul>
<b>Outcome</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Four strategic options: i) Internationalisation/expansion; ii) Merger/acquisition; iii) Diversification through technological development and innovation; iv) Wait-and-See.</i></li> <li>▪ <i>A cooperative project w/ NILF ("the VINN Project")</i></li> <li>▪ <i>An agreement and a plan document w/ NILF</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Four emergent groups: the Internal group, the VINN Working Group, Corporate Leadership, Main Board of Directors</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Fir of sim mod Mod</i></li> </ul>

*Note:* Items in bold indicates that these hinges o  
Cross references in the matrix are made within s  
containing the content from which the item stem  
the column (Phase T-1: "PT-1"; Phase 1: "P1"; I  
Outcome: "Outcome"; which is the most usual d  
separated by a colon. For example, a cross refer

### *Beginning financial modelling and identification of strategic options (August)*

Within the August VINN group meetings, Kathrine presented the basic financial model. Ivar from NILF suggested that historic data (last five years) should be incorporated in the model in order to increase confidence in it. A number of key business ratios were discussed, in particular how to measure turnover in relation to revenue. The group recognised it may be difficult to incorporate an internationalisation strategy. Four strategic options were outlined and discussed: Internationalisation, acquisition/merger, strengthen/reinforcement and wait-and-see. Possible bases for internationalisation were discussed in terms of branding, breeding/genetics and geographical spread. In these meetings, the strategists were primarily Kathrine Karstensen and Kristian Sævik (Finance) from Nortura and Ivar Pettersen from NILF.

### **2.3.2. Phase One – Model Foundation (Late August – Early September)**

Meetings were held regularly throughout the latter part of August and early September. The activities can be summarised as ‘defining data needs’ and ‘building a simulations model’. Although the financial model was first introduced by Kathrine, Kristian Sævik (who built it) explained it in detail over a course of meetings. Work began to identify how to complement the internal financial model so that it could be the basis for the development of a simulations model. The use of the internal financial model as a point of departure was never questioned. There was a general view that the credibility of the analyses performed by the VINN Working Group would be enhanced by quantifying current operations.

There was limited understanding by the strategists as to what the purpose of the model was. Not least, there were different understandings of how to use a simulations model, e.g. the most interesting simulations. Considerable time and energy was spent on negotiating a common view of the purpose of the simulations model. This involved identifying the main target parameters of market conditions and shares, volumes for each product category in terms of customers and suppliers, producer/ regulator targets and price tariffs (these were later changed) and the most interesting simulations to undertake. The necessary adjustments were made by NILF.

The development of the simulations model can be said to have been done at the company, industry and the national levels. At the firm level it was a matter of specifying and quantifying operations. Issues such as capital use, ROE, internal interest rates, depreciation, investments and cost of operations were in focus. Secondly, at the industry level, the issue was to obtain the relevant parameters about prices, markets sizes and shares, regulation, import and export restrictions, trade agreements and the WTO negotiations. At the national level, demographics, consumption patterns and migration were taken into account as far as possible. An ongoing discussion cutting through the entire phase concerned what factors were relevant and the level of importance to allocate to each factor.

### **2.3.3. Phase Two – Gap Analysis (September)**

This phase covers a total of three meetings, 2 of the VINN Working group and one in Nortura’s internal group. The main strategising activities revolved around conducting a gap analysis. Ivar Pettersen from NILF was the key external strategist, and Kathrine Karstensen, with some minor assistance from Kristian Sævik (Finance) represented Nortura. The gap analysis involved two interrelated but different gaps. The first gap is a classic gap analysis, with the model operationalising Nortura’s current position using some basic parameters, and then comparing this to an ‘ideal preferred position’ 5-8 years into the future. In other words, the first gap analysis is of Nortura’s ideal position at a given point in time in the future in relation to its current position.

However, a second type of gap analysis, used to build what became the ‘base line scenario’, received considerable discussion. The simulation model was used to operationalise Nortura’s current position. This was then referred to as a ‘Wait-and-See’ strategy. Then the model was used to simulate how maintaining the current strategy/position over a 5-8 year period looks in financial terms. In other words, if no changes are made, what is the performance impact by 2011-2014? This ‘base line’ scenario was then used as a way to test all subsequent simulation/scenario alternatives later in the strategising process. It gave a very clear indication as to where a wait-and-see strategy

would take the company. It was not a desirable future: *“It will take us into the slowly setting sun, and then darkness will embrace us – we will never see the light again.”*

### **2.3.4. Phase Three – Strategies for VINN (September –October)**

The key strategists in this phase are Kathrine Karstensen, Ola Bergsaker and Egil Olsvik (Nortura) and Ivar Pettersen (NILF). This phase consists mainly of discussions regarding the range of strategic alternatives available. First, opportunities relating to the markets for Nortura’s products were discussed, categorized in terms of geographical location and product types. Secondly, possibilities relating to the business model of the company were considered, in particular brand management and opportunities for vertical integration. During early October, the VINN Working Group discussed the data required by NILF strategists in order to build several scenarios. Information was needed about investments, productivity, price for raw materials, etc. In addition, the effects of a more restrictive WTO-agreement were to be incorporated in the simulations model; *“we must be pre-emptive”*.

### **2.3.5. Phase Three Mark 2 – Model the growth / internationalisation alternatives (October)**

This part of phase three took place just before the board meeting on the 8<sup>th</sup> October. The activities centred upon setting the parameters for modelling several growth and internationalisation alternatives. The drivers of profitability in Nortura were debated, in terms of volumes, prices and the cost of capital. There were some additional discussions about documentation and data needs. The most important of these was make investment data as accurate as possible, and to extend the time horizon in the simulations model to 2020. The result was the creation of a number of simulated alternatives which could form the basis for the development of full-fledged scenarios.

### **2.3.6 Phase Four – Scenario Development (October-November)**

The key activities in this phase were in developing and analysing three scenarios and building support between the VINN Working Group and the Corporate Leadership. The development and analysis of scenarios using the simulations model (with ongoing adaptation of the model) took place over three VINN Group meetings in October.

#### *Developing and analysing three scenarios*

In the first VINN meeting, the morning session was spent on the inputs and calculations for the ‘basis scenario’. The meeting worked with the assumption (introduced by NILF) that the simulations model will be used to run three scenarios; *Strengthen/reinforce*, *Wait-and-See* and *Move* (operations abroad). In terms of generating data for investments and restructuring, the ‘basis’ scenario will require a 600 MNOK investment. The ‘reinforcement’ scenario will require a 900 MNOK investment. The discussions were explicit in terms of what each line of investment refers to, e.g. the facilities that can be restructured or closed. The key variables are market shares and volumes up to 2020, internal and external growth and the WTO agreement. The strategists decided that the NILF strategist and Nortura’s financial specialist should put in place the most complete version of the simulations model. Then a discussion about competitors in Norway occurred.

After lunch, Egil Olsvik joined the team of strategists. This quickly resulted in a clashing of two perspectives. Egil’s interest was *“how far have we come to begin to talk about the strategic issues based on the simulations model”*, whereas the meeting so far has focused on the details of the model itself, as encapsulated by the NILF strategist: *“there are a number of things, input variables to the model, reinforcements in investments, etc.”*

The discussion moved on to the three scenarios under development. The ‘Strengthen/reinforcement’ scenario was considered, in particular in terms of what price must be paid to maintain market shares by product type. The reinforcement scenario included the consolidation of operations (from 43 to 24 facilities), investments between 2009 and 2015 (1.7 billion NOK for building market share and re-organising buildings, systems and transportation), leading to projected cost cuts of 650 MNOK per annum from 2015 onwards.

The strategists then considered ‘how do we present this’ to the board of directors the following week. This is to be the first time the model is to be presented outside of the VINN

Working Group. The idea was to present the dire statistics of the baseline scenario. Then the reinforcement scenario will be suggested. Hence, the model is being used as a tool to convince the board of the necessity to select a new strategy.

Afterwards, the strategists began to consider the ‘move scenario’. The NILF strategist pointed out that he needed considerably more data in order to set up the simulations model for running this scenario. In addition, he commented “*I think it costs about 100 MNOK to buy into a joint venture in a foreign country, 3-5 MNOK annually to run it with representation on the board and some people there, and it will give no revenue for the first 10 years*”. Everybody agreed with this and the meeting ended.

#### *Building support between the VINN Working Group and the Corporate Management*

The strategists included the members of the VINN Working Group, along with the directors for finance, IT, property, innovation, personnel and communications and the managers for quality control, sales and marketing, white meat and egg, and red meat and processing. The meeting started with the strategist from NILF presenting; (i) Nortura’s current strategy; (ii) the simulations model that has been developed; and (iii) the scenarios based on the model and the consequences of each scenario. He concluded that there is no immediate need for a new strategy, but there are some challenges ahead.

He then outlined three possible strategies and discussed the main assumptions built into the model. The first possible strategy is ‘*Strengthen*’, which for example will require sustaining the ‘best price to producer’ in order to defend shares of raw material. Then the ‘*Move*’ strategy was outlined. The advice given was to concentrate on being close to customers at one end of the vertical production chain, or close to the basic technology at the other. There are also many opportunities to move horizontally, for example through acquisitions and mergers. The third possible strategic option introduced was ‘*Wait-and-See*’ (the ‘basis’ scenario). A central member of the VINN Working Group intervened by proposing that being strong in the home market and preparing for a merger with a Nordic meat actor is possible (i.e., the merger option is mentioned again).

The meeting continued with the NILF strategist presenting the investments in the model that are already being implemented and the planned investments for Nortura in various facilities. The VINN Working Group was attempting to persuade the corporate management based on the logic of investment returns, as well as costs. A general discussion of the three strategic options, the actual and planned investments in place and the assumptions built into the model occurred.

The participants then discussed ‘internationalisation’ as a solution to the WTO agreement. This would require an additional billion NOK in investments *on top of* the 1.275 MNOK already allocated in the model for the ‘strengthen’ strategic option. This produced some sighs from members of the corporate management team. A central strategist from the VINN Working Group then commented “*to go for an international strategy immediately – one billion NOK in acquisitions directly – is not what we think of anymore. It is not feasible, either financially or academically*”.

He went on to remark “*we shall make a story about this during the next two three months before we wing this! We must get the message in place so as to create trustworthiness for us not only financially but also – and maybe more importantly managerially*”. The innovation director then commented: “*the discussions we have just participated in indicate that strategy at Nortura is focused on raw materials and facilities. Other organisations in the food industry are much more concerned with brands. In which facilities the food is produced is not important! Nortura is very much concerned with the raw material*”. The NILF strategist concurred: “*Nortura stands with its feet deeply buried in the production operation, the facilities and the raw material. That is quite clear!*” The innovation director replied “*I find this discussion very much technical and financial, and for the board seminar, I would like to have a more market oriented and policy influenced language. We need to get away from the technicalities and the financial nitty-gritty, when communicating this to the board*”.

#### **2.3.7. Phase Five: Evaluating alternative scenarios and a choice of future strategy (end of October-December)**

The main activities that occurred in phase five were ‘testing, feedback and consensus building’, and the ‘choice of a strategic option’. The key input into the board meetings was the main product of the VINN Working Group: the simulations model regarding the alternative strategy scenarios. The first board meeting in November was attended by Nortura’s 14 board members, the CEO, two Nortura members of the VINN Working Group and Ivar Pettersen from NILF. Ivar presented the scenarios that have been developed over the past few months, and recommended the ‘Strengthen/reinforcement scenario’. Several board members cautioned that the raw material suppliers were the main contributors to value in the first five years. One problem may be that these suppliers can leave Nortura and deliver to a competitor. Overall, the board members were positive towards this scenario:

*“I don’t think it is very hard to get consensus around this table that we need to go into the strengthen scenario”.*

*“I make this conclusion, that given the assumption the strengthen scenario is the one alternative giving the best economic result, and we can make it with a limited and controlled risk, especially with regard to the WTO”.*

*“The choice is pretty straight forward, we need to chose the strengthen alternative. And for those working here, a wait scenario is not very nice, not nice to work with something that goes down eventually, and that everybody knows will do so.”*

One of the VINN Group strategists commented that the risks associated with the WTO issues could also be handled by adopting elements from the ‘move scenario’. This would mean putting in place a fund for making investments internationally in order to hedge risk: *“the question is how we can join forces with some partner and then it is a question of how to become interesting and valuable to such a partner”*. The ‘strengthen/reinforcement’ strategic option was formally voted for in the December board meeting. This decision solidified the strategising process into what is now referred to as “Nortura’s strategy plan”<sup>vii</sup>.

### **3. Case Analysis**

The purpose of this section is to highlight three network strategising trajectories that are present during the strategy process. The text below will consider the trajectories as sequences of actions and events, how they overlap, how they are activated throughout the process, which strategists represent or emphasize ‘actors’, ‘resources’ and ‘activities’, and not least how tools (the financial models) are used to represent the ARA layers .

#### **3.1. Actor Network Strategising Trajectory**

This trajectory concerns actions undertaken in the discussions that represent and emphasize the actor dimension. One outcome of Phase Zero was the decision to use the financial model as a point of departure. In Phase 1, the VINN Working Group reshaped it into a first version of the simulations model and used this to create a base-line scenario. Actor bonds are in place within the models, but as both causes and effects of connections with other actors, rather than connections per se. Nortura’s internal financial model is complemented with data on suppliers, customers, financial institutions and the WTO, as they were all considered significant actors impacting the behaviour of the simulations model to be used.

Emphasis was placed on various actors during the process, but in particular on the supply side, with relatively little consideration of customers. The discussions around building the simulations model included regulatory issues, which is because of Nortura’s dual role as both a producer and a regulator of the meat sector in Norway. Here, the strategists from NILF played an important role as they are experts on the agricultural sector.

In Phase 2, actions took place that compared an ideal position with both the current and a simulated base-line position. The positions and roles of other actors in the network were into account from Nortura’s strategists’ perspective. The actor layer was also emphasized during Mark I

of Phase 3, with the formulation of two key strategies, ‘growth’ and ‘internationalisation’. This was based on an overall analysis of the business model of Nortura and its identity in the network. The two strategic developments were later turned into scenarios that assessed their feasibility vis a vis the current identity and position of Nortura from the perspective of the strategy team.

Furthermore, the WTO was discussed as an important actor in the network. Its strategic role was assessed and taken into consideration when formulating the two main strategies. Mark II in phase 3 comprised the setting of parameters in the simulations model that included the impact of a new trade agreement by the WTO. Discussions about prices also dominated the strategising activity. These were an important effect of the supply side network connections, in terms of the supplier structure and Nortura’s role vis-à-vis its suppliers/owners.

In Phase 4 (simulation), the actor layer was related to the three scenarios as three possible network positions in possible future networks, as embodied in the parameters of the simulations model. One of the strategists in particular (Egil Olsvik) emphasized the importance of understanding the strategic identity of Nortura, even though most of the work of the VINN Working Group up to this point had focused on putting in place the effects of activity and resource connections in the simulations model. He wanted to discuss the strategic actor issues based on the model, not the model per se. In other words, the model is a tool. However, the rest of the VINN Working Group team continued the activities involved in adjusting the model parameters.

The actor dimension is again emphasized in Phase 5 when the scenarios simulating possible network positions were presented. The dependency on supplier actors and their future role and influence in the network raised some concerns.

### **3.2. Resource Network Strategising Trajectory**

In Phase 1, the financial model was supplemented and adapted to incorporate data on the current resource collection. This included current operations, type and character of the facilities used, and the various current investments. Discussions occurred about the possibilities for consolidating certain facilities and how that would impact the resource collection. One example is a discussion of a more efficient slaughtering line for beef by the co-location of some facilities. Some of the possibilities were already accounted for as planned investments. However, others were purely speculative and served only as a way to adapt the initial financial model with the necessary parameters to handle investments in the simulations. In Phase 2, the strategising activities involved identifying the gap between the ideal resource collection and the current and simulated resource collections.

When the two possible strategies of growth and internationalisation were formulated, the resource dimension was related to these in the first part of phase 3. The gap between the two and Nortura’s current resource collection was considered as important in exploring the feasibility of each. The next step involved setting parameters in the simulations model so as to enable the modelling of re-organisations of resource collections within each of the three scenarios. For example, the emphasis on volumes relates to the resource layer as the sheer volume of resources channelled through one point in the network could create economies of scale.

In Phase 4 the resource layer is emphasized through the simulation of the three possible resource collections and resource constellations. Not least, the resource layer is heavily emphasized by the strategists in the VINN Working Group because considerable time was spent on getting the parameters in place. The initial internal financial model had to be updated with data on the character and functioning of Nortura’s internal resource collection but also on the resource constellations of the wider network, and how potential changes in these (such as a WTO agreement) could alter the resource context for Nortura. This work (as well as for the activity structure data discussed in section 3.3.) and the time spent on it causes Egil Olsvik to react and ask when it is time to begin to use the model, rather than fine-tuning it. Egil emphasized the actor layer consistently, and wished to discuss concrete alternatives. This produced a clear but intermittent clash of perspectives between him and the other strategists.

In phase 5, the resource dimension was emphasized through the presentation and explanation of the scenarios produced by the simulation of various re-organisations of resource collections of Nortura and its connections to resource constellations in the network.

### 3.3. Activity Network Strategising Trajectory

The activity dimension is activated in Phase 1 when the financial model was complemented with data on the effects of linkages within the activity structure at Nortura. Discussions took place as to the effects of the activity links with suppliers of raw materials. The adapted financial model formed the basis for the strategising in Phase 2. Here, the activity dimension (as for the actor trajectory above) concerned the identification of the gap between the current and the ideal activity structure, and between the ideal and the 'base-line' activity structure.

In the first part of Phase 3, the main issue was how to model a strategic re-organisation. Discussions took place regarding the current activity structure, existing projects, possible closures and planned new investments. Afterwards, the strategising activities centred around implementing these discussions by setting parameters in the simulations model in order to model various re-organisations of activity structures and chains. Hence, the activity structure was dimensionalised into a series of effects, e.g. production volumes.

The next set of activities in the strategising process emphasizes the activity dimension. Simulations of three different organisations of activity structures and chains occurred, and were related to the three scenarios under development. The simulations of these scenarios were based on the fine-tuning and adaptation of parameters concerning the functioning, character and organisation of the activity structure and various activity chains. For example, Nortura co-owns a line for processing chicken together with Prima Jæren, and this impacted on how to model the capacity of Nortura in the simulations model. The detail of the representation of the activity structures in the simulations model was time consuming. The emphasis on this resulted in a clash of perspectives within the VINN Working Group (see section 3.1).

In Phase 5, the activity trajectory mainly concerned the presentation and explanation of the scenarios. During one of the corporate management meetings, the emphasis on the effects of the simulated activity structures (along with resources) was questioned.

## 4.0. Findings

### 4.1. Comparing a One-Dimensional Reality with an Interactive Model View

In terms of network strategising, the ARA model informs us that strategy development concerns the activity pattern, the resource constellations and the web of actors (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995, p.47; Håkansson and Snehota, 1989). From the perspective of the individual firm, strategising involves the active and systematic linking of activity structures among a web of actors, in order to utilise resource constellations that are dispersed in the network (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995, pp. 47-49, Håkansson and Snehota, 1989). The model would expect an emphasis in the case reported above on activity links, resource ties and actors bonds that connect various actors to one another at the dyadic level. Furthermore, attention to the activity patterns, resource constellations, and web of actors in the resulting network structures emerging from these connections would be expected. What is interesting is that we see none of the latter and only scant accounts of the former.

In the three trajectories taken together, the strategising undertaken at Nortura is very company-centric. The almost exclusive focus is on the internal activity and organisational structures, and resource collections. Moreover, the use of a simulations model as a strategising tool represents a choice made by the strategists regarding what is and is not taken into account. The model itself is based on internal financial and resource flows. As such, it is concerned with the *effects* and the *outcomes* of activity, resource and actor connections, but not the *actual connections in themselves*. This is not uncommon as a computerised model based on quantifications of a company's resource transformation operations seldom takes the actual connections to external entities into account. However, the simulations model at Nortura was used as a strategising tool in itself, which imposed some clear restrictions on the strategising process as it became myopic and one-dimensional.

In the ARA model, the three layers of substance are complemented by three important functions; for the firm, dyad and the network respectively (Håkansson and Johansson 1992; Håkansson and Johansson (1993). In the Nortura example, the strategising process revolves around the company and the function that a connection can have for the company itself, paying only scant attention to the dyadic function and completely ignoring the network function. For instance, when the strategists discussed how to model production volumes of chicken they focused solely on the internal organisation of slaughtering lines, the resource collections available, and the activity structures in place in Nortura. Only once did a temporary shift occur as one strategist realised that Nortura actually co-owns a slaughtering line with one of its smaller competitors. Afterwards, the focus was on how to handle this in the simulations model. The only way to do so was via one of the input parameters; the price paid to the farmers for the meat. The model itself simply could not accommodate such a substantial connection in any other way. In other words, the strategising tool could not encompass the substantial connection in terms of the activity links and the resource ties that existed in that particular setting in any systematic way, and the focus of the strategists therefore soon shifted back to Nortura's internal flows and organisation.

It is therefore possible to characterize the strategising process described in the case as one-dimensional. The ARA model suggests at least three main dimensions that are of importance to strategy development (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995, p. 47; Håkansson and Snehota, 1989), what have been called functions of business relationships (or network connections), as indicated above. The two latter dimensions are very much absent in the strategising process of Nortura, and when the dyadic dimension does occasionally appear, it cannot really be handled by the tool that is used. In sum, the decision to select the 'strengthen/reinforce' strategy essentially deepens the existing structures.

#### **4.2. Network Strategising Trajectories and Tools**

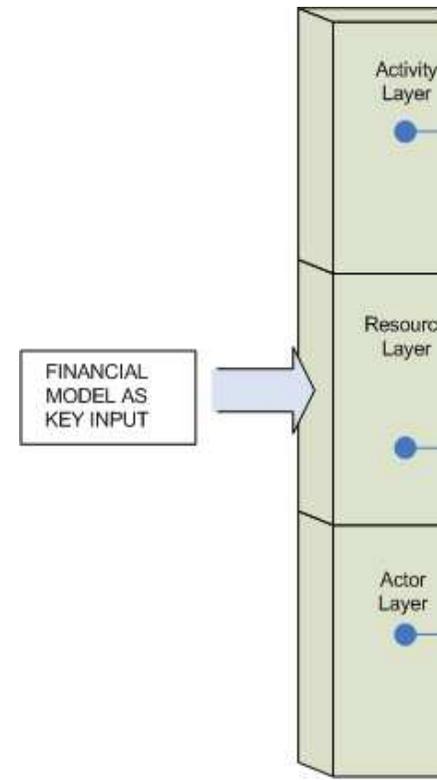
Figure 3 below illustrates how the strategising process is intersected with the inputs and outputs of each phase. The inputs and outputs the various phases of the strategising process can be seen as network tools. The case described above provides an account of how some strategists' emphasized particular network trajectories by using the simulations model and scenarios. For example, Ivar Petterson (NILF) and other members of the VINN Working Group used the Strengthen/Reinforce scenario to emphasize the resource and activity dimension, while Egil Olsvik used the Merger scenario to underline the actor dimension (in particular in phase 5).

Overall, considerable time was spent discussing issues concerning the activity structures and resource collections of Nortura and how to implement these in the simulations model. One example is the discussions about consolidations among certain facilities and how that would impact the resource collection and the connections between them in Phase 1. Although some of the consolidation measures that were discussed will perhaps never be implemented, they did play an important role. They served as a way to stretch the event horizon in the strategising by creating boundaries for the measures that could be taken and what consequences they might have. Eventually, some of the issues raised in the discussion from this phase became accommodated in the simulations model.

Furthermore, at the start of Phase 3, the two possible strategic alternatives (growth and internationalisation) were not concretely related to the simulations model. They functioned as springboards for the further development of the simulations model as a strategising tool. Indeed, the model as a whole can be seen as a way to embody knowledge and experience from Nortura's general business model, operations and practices, as well as from the Norwegian and the Nordic meat sector in general. This knowledge was embodied in the mechanisms and parameters controlling the simulations as they were run, but also in terms of the basic set-up of the base-line scenario. For example, Nortura's dual role as both regulator and producer required considerable efforts to accommodate in the parameters within the simulations model. The internal financial model was an important starting point for the development of the simulations model.



Abstract preview



Phase 0 - 2



- Legend:**
-  Input /
  -  Net Traje
  -  Network

## 5.0. Discussion and Conclusions

The main finding of this paper is that the ARA model can be used as a tool to analyse how network connections are considered during a strategy process. More specifically, three network strategising trajectories were identified, which overlapped and were emphasised by different strategists in the various phases. Furthermore, strategists were found to handle and emphasize network connections when strategising through the use of analysis tools. The simulations model here is a strategising tool. What implications can be drawn regarding network strategising?

### *Three Forms of Network Strategising*

In this study we can identify three basic forms of network strategising. First, it can take the form of ‘isolated strategising’. This is the form of strategising that Nortura primarily performs based on a focus on the activity structure, resource collection and organisational structure. We call this isolated strategising because it treats the company as an island, self sufficient, self contained and in control of its own destiny. The tools used models the company, its internal flows of resources and organisation and structure of activities. Network connections are handled, if at all, as effects, outcomes and inputs relevant to the company’s resource transformation process.

The second form can be termed ‘relating strategising’. This is a form of strategising in which the network connections in terms of the activity links, resource ties and actor bonds are in focus. The tools that are used models the adaptations of activity structures to fit counterparts, the utilisation of resource collections of others, and the mobilising of other actors. The second function of network connections are acknowledged and handled on this basis, making the strategising more relational.

The third form of network strategising can be termed ‘mediating strategising’. This form highlights the mediating aspects of a company and its relationships to others, as these connections are connected to other relationships. A connection mediates between one node and other nodes and connections creating indirect connections. The tools that are used model the impacts of networked activity patterns, of resource constellations and of actor webs as they are mediated to the company via its relationships to others. Such strategising comprises many dimensions and the resulting strategy becomes mediating in character.

In a true form, network strategising is thus multi-dimensional. In other words, while having the individual company as a point of departure, both relating and mediating aspects are taken into account. Network strategising thus accounts for not only the company itself, and its flows and conditions, but also its context in terms of its connections to other actors in a dynamic network context (Gadde et al, 2003).

The strategising process of Nortura and the tool that is used carries many traits of classic business policy type strategy. For many years, Nortura have in effect enjoyed a monopolistic position in the Norwegian meat sector. In this sense, it is less surprising that the strategy process takes the form of isolating strategising. From the perspective of the ARA model, the presence of more dyadic and network dimensions would be expected. The absence of relational and mediating forms of strategising and the absence of the dyadic and network dimensions in the strategising of Nortura is troublesome as it cannot be self sufficient in the long run – no company can, and the network in which it exists determines its strategic position just as much as it does itself (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989; Gadde et al, 2003).

Applying the ARA model as a network tool in the strategising process ensures a focus on not only the company in question, but also on the connections to other actors and the network structures that these connections give rise to. Thus it ensures a focus on all three functions and on the layers of substance. The activated activity links drawing on networked activity structures, the utilised resource ties drawing on networked resource constellations and the mobilised actor bonds drawing on networked actor webs are the real strategic issues to be discussed and analysed in such a network strategising process. Only through such a process can a company hope for a more systematic way of strategic manoeuvring, while all the time exposing itself to ever more influence from others and to increased inter-dependence. It is a matter of identifying the network horizon (Holmen and Pedersen, 2003) and sometimes to stretch it. In the case above, the simulations are not “just” in the model, but are also ways of stretching the network horizon.

This embedding of the company into the network is very much a strategic issue and comprises clear strategic components, the best way of handling, is through an ongoing network strategising process. Hence network strategising is not something a company does for a short period of time, followed by some “implementation” phase. This is because strategising in network contexts is a process tightly linked to the every day nitty-gritty of the ongoing business operations and the resource connections, exchanges and transformations in complex business networks. These activity and resource structures are an important part of the practices of strategising when solidified in the shape of tools. In other words, the practices underpinning strategising praxis should take the network context into account, something that appears lacking in the strategy as practice arena.

#### *Limitations and suggestions for future research*

The limitations of the paper in terms of the data used are that Nortura simultaneously has a role as a producer and a market regulator in its monopoly position in the Norwegian market. The strategists consider a forthcoming WTO agreement as a serious threat to this position. Nevertheless, the monopoly position is likely to at least influence the isolated strategising reported in the case study. There are also limitations in terms of generalisability, because the paper is based on one example of how to handle network connections in a planned strategy process. The findings can be generalised analytically to current theory regarding strategising in networks; we make no claims as to the statistical prevalence of the findings.

One interesting angle for future research would be to continue to observe the processes within Nortura now that a strategy has been chosen. In particular, how is a ‘strengthen/reinforcement’ strategy implemented within the firm in terms of deepening existing relationships, and not least in creating new relationships. Over time it might be that Nortura begins to strategise at the network level. Research could also investigate how network connections are handled in planned (and indeed emergent) strategy processes within other firms. This would facilitate a comparison of the use of network tools and the existence of overlapping network strategising trajectories.

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<sup>iii</sup> Interview with Egil Olsvik, 2007-11-14.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

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