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## Rural Community Development in Sweden: From Challenging to Mainstream?

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### Introduction

During fieldwork in a rural village in the northern inlands of Sweden, an elderly woman asked about the reason for my presence, and I responded that I was there to study village development. She retorted: “You must mean abandonment” (Forsberg, 2010). For residents of sparsely populated rural areas, the term “development” connotes *urban* development, while in a rural context it has come to mean the opposite: loss of people, loss of jobs, and loss of faith in the future. This chapter focuses on what is defined in Sweden as the village movement (*byarörelsen*), local development work (*lokalt utvecklingsarbete*), and local development groups (*lokala utvecklingsgrupper*). These forms of civil society mobilization (re-) emerged as a result of the 1987–1989 rural campaign “All of Sweden Shall Live!” (*Hela Sverige ska leva!*). In 2019, more than 5000 community groups and 40 member organizations were registered.<sup>1</sup> These

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organizations work with a broad variety of issues and organizational forms, from sports associations to local parishes, from social enterprises to mutual aid associations. They engage with environmental issues, tourism, education and child care, housing, and elderly care (Herlitz, 2000). Although the organizations represent different interests, they may be considered a single, established social movement due to their distinct organizational structure, shared objectives, strategies, and activities.

The aim of this chapter is to reflect on the perspectives and values expressed in Swedish rural movements in relation to a change in structural conditions for the development of civil society that took place in the late 1980s, when new resources were made available to civil society organizations. This change was one consequence of a new direction in government policies necessitated by Sweden's integration into the expanding European Union, and, I argue, it affected the preconditions for how civil society organizations accumulated resources and how they used them. I support my position by depicting the development of the village movement over the past 40 years, focusing specifically on the national shift toward rural development that followed Sweden's signing of the European treaties in 1995; what started as a politically challenging rural movement lost its contentious character when supranational structural and investment funding became available. The development of the Swedish village movement and its consequences are also discussed in the broader context of rural movements in Europe and global transformation trends in the civil society landscape.

I retain the commonly used terms *local development* and *local development groups* to refer to the village movement and community work undertaken by local groups in rural areas. Most of these groups are organized as voluntary associations, but among them are also small-scale neo-cooperatives (coops) and women's networks. The terms *village group* and *local group* are used synonymously.

Local development work has been defined by cultural geographers in terms of place ideology (Herlitz, 2000), place-related kinship, and social movements (Berglund, 1998). Gunnarsdotter (2005) understands rural communities as kinships defined by time and space, while Ekman (2008) analyzes people's understandings of rural community in terms of rooms of experience holding collective and individual memories. With a

humanistic perspective and drawing on my own earlier fieldwork experiences and other existing research, I understand local development work and action as an existential agenda that struggles for the value and visibility of rural communities and people on their own terms (Forsberg, 2010).

The data for this study come from my own extensive ethnographic fieldwork between 2001 and 2005, during which time I carried out observations of participants' daily operations and various project activities as well as in-depth interviews with village movement activists in Trehörningsjö, a small and sparsely populated community in Västernorrlands County. Located approximately 600 kilometers north of Stockholm, Trehörningsjö is home to about 200 inhabitants. The fieldwork provided me with new perspectives and insights that became crucial to my understanding, while documentation generated by the movement, policy documents, and developments complemented my ethnographic approach. The choice of ethnographic fieldwork as the research method allowed me to explore not only the rather unproblematic (economic) development discourse but also a more politically challenging and locally grounded discourse of struggle for community, which I regard as an existential perspective.

## Rural Movements in Europe Defying the Urban Norm

Rural mobilization as local action for rural life and communities has been studied as a social phenomenon more closely at the national level than at the European level. For instance, Svendsen (2004) describes two strong agriculturalist discourses in Denmark, where a traditionalist discourse based on farmers' protectionist perspectives has been challenged by that of non-agricultural elites, featuring community, culture, environment, and active citizenship as keywords for change. At the same time, research demonstrates that the issues that underpin rural mobilization cannot be contained by the specificity of the rural experience; rather, they spill over to broader regional political agendas. Marsden et al. (2004) explored how parallel arenas for mobilization in rural regions of Finland and Wales

have formed and challenged rural and governance structures. In several developed nations, Woods (2003) identified a range of contentious mobilization around such issues as agricultural reforms, the legality of hunting, road development, and service provision as an emergent social movement that advocates for a new politics of the rural.

The internationalization of this phenomenon has been linked to the first village action groups formed in Finland and Sweden in the 1970s, which then spread across Europe (Halhead, 2005, 2006) through cooperation and networking. In 2005, the European Rural Alliance was formed. The main characteristics of these movements were that they were structured, locally focused, supportive, informed, coordinated, influential (undertaking advocacy to influence policy at the local, regional, national, and international levels), and internationally connected through networks. Structuring the movements at each administrative level—local, regional, and national—was also a key feature. The structure of each movement reflected its national context. While the Nordic movements were based on village-level action or mobilization, the movements established in Eastern Europe (except Estonia) and in the United Kingdom were based on the model of a rural forum or network of organizations.

However, the similarities between the rural areas and national contexts of each country are greater than the differences. Halhead (2005, 2006), having studied the evolution and impact of national village movements in several countries, states that the *rural*, as a specific political perspective considered at the European level, is established and promoted by rural movements that advocate Europe-wide against a common issue: the urbanization trend. This trend, as I see it, is based on politics, structures, and ideals. Politics and development are formed on certain ideals and norms that tend to favor urbanness as modern, innovative, and futuristic while dismissing ruralness as traditional, non-innovative, or at best exotic. Halhead (2006) describes rural and village movements in Europe as a response to a continuing process of rural decline that has occurred at different times in different countries, starting in the Nordic countries as early as the 1960s and in Eastern European countries as late as the 1990s. The failure of national governments and the European Union to fully address this process, focusing too much on an agricultural agenda and

leaving aside broader structural changes and “the special characteristics of rural areas” (ibid., p. 597), has motivated these movements.

Especially interesting in Halhead’s studies, interlinking with my own, is her view of rural movements as special models of development that deserve recognition and support. As such, they can be understood as countermovements to the European internal market and the globalization of markets, which tend to put economic growth and urban development first (Eikenberry, 2009; Eikenberry & Drapal Kluver, 2004). Government is, by definition, remote from rural villages and must trust rural people to build rural communities. The role of governments is to provide frameworks and policies. In order to do so, they should communicate with rural movement bodies. Bearing the European context in mind, I present the case of Swedish rural movements in relation to resource mobilization landscapes, focusing on the reemergence of the village movement in the 1980s and its development continuing to the present time.

## The Rural Situation and Early Rural Mobilization in Sweden

Like many other countries throughout the world, Sweden underwent an enormous rural–urban transformation during the twentieth century. In 1900, approximately 75% of the Swedish population lived in the countryside, whereas 25% lived in cities. Nowadays, 85% of the population lives in cities (Statistics Sweden, 2015a). Relocation from rural to urban areas peaked between the 1930s and the 1970s. Traditionally, urbanization has focused on domestic relocation, and the urban population continues to grow, although this growth is statistically no longer accounted for solely by people relocating from rural areas; rather, the dynamics for a growing urban population combine such factors as migration and birth rate with domestic relocation (Statistics Sweden, 2015a). Sweden, with a land area of 407,000 square kilometers, a settling rate of 3% of the land area (in 2015), and a population density of 25.1 inhabitants per square kilometer (in 2018, compared to 117.7 in the 28 European Union

member states), is relatively sparsely populated (Statistics Sweden, 2015b, 2020). The trends of urbanization, the transformation of the urban population, and the dramatic decrease in population in many rural areas form a frame of reference for the village movement.

Organizing in voluntary associations to uphold rural communities has developed concurrently with a loss of people, services, and jobs. The centralization of public services and care, alongside inferior access to commercial services in rural areas, entails traveling long distances in order to obtain care and services. Village inhabitants are faced with a reality in which schools, libraries, food stores, petrol stations, services, and care are disappearing. The Swedish government has presented a local service strategy to ensure that basic levels of commercial and public services are maintained in communities “with low or very low access to urban centers” (SOU, 2015, p. 35), a description that applies to most parts of northern Sweden. This strategy is put into practice in the form of “aid” to rural people and businesses in sparsely populated municipalities (*ibid.*, pp. 18–19). Definitions of rural and sparsely populated areas, in Sweden as well as globally, differ greatly according to aim and organizational body. Regardless of how the terms are defined, people living in rural and sparsely populated areas have developed counterstrategies to urbanization and centralization.

The constitution of voluntary associations in rural areas sheds some light on the driving forces behind village mobilization. The years 1945, 1970, and 1987 represented breaking points for mobilization (Herlitz, 1998). At the end of World War II (1945), the number of voluntary groups doubled. Alongside the second municipality reform (1962–1974), when small municipalities were made into bigger entities and political decision-making was centralized, the number of groups tripled. The strongest increase appeared after the 1980s rural campaign “All of Sweden Shall Live!”. As elaborated upon in the next section, the rural campaign was launched as a reaction to the continued impoverishment of rural and sparsely populated areas, and it aimed to place rural issues on the political agenda. Regardless of the circumstances, mobilizing in voluntary associations comes across as a village strategy for influence and securing rural community rights.

## The Start of the Village Movement: A Contentious Agenda with Political and Existential Claims

In the 1980s and 1990s, the overall (and still discernible) feeling in many villages was a sense that the end of village life was approaching. The abovementioned national campaign, “All of Sweden Shall Live!”, active from 1987 until 1989, emanated from a rural campaign at the European level. In Sweden, it came to play an important role in mobilizing local groups for village action. It was launched as both a politically initiated strategy to highlight the importance of rural life and as a grassroots initiative. The campaign mobilized rural actors, placed questions relevant to the rural way of life on the political agenda, and gave rise to the movement’s breakthrough. Both the campaign and the movement started out with political aims of rural change with a frame of reference focusing on enforcing local-level agency, participation, and influence.

Here, I would like to return to Halhead (2006) to briefly consider the Swedish rural movement in a broader perspective. The author states that rural movements generally aspire to influence policy at all levels. At the Swedish Rural Parliament of 2004, rural movements were defined as the “linking of rural people and interests who wish to create change in rural areas by working together” (Halhead, 2006, p. 603). European rural movements express discontent with government unresponsiveness and with the difficulties of advocacy, all the while both applying for government funding and expressing concern that receiving that funding will affect their ability to remain neutral. Halhead states: “Only in Sweden has the government played a strongly supportive role, through provision of funding, manpower and practical support” (ibid., p. 609). Engaged politicians, civil servants, and researchers played a vital role in highlighting rural voice and agency for rural development, which was initially a strong ambition within all rural movements. Support structures at the national and regional levels, partly financed by the government, contributed to something of a rural development wave with a combination of activities, actions, and organizations.

The phrase “village movement” was launched as a generic term for a new, expanding effort, a diverse mixture of organizations and associations that acted jointly for the rural cause. Starting in the 1990s, as the scope of the welfare state began to decrease, the role of civil society in welfare provision as a part of rural development increased. The village movement’s diversity, with its variety of activities and with the local community as a platform for action, separates it from traditional popular movements such as the temperance movement or the sports movement (Herlitz, 1998; see also Kings, Chap. 8 in this volume). The main characteristic of the village movement is that it acts for the community as a whole rather than for specific interest groups. Another important feature is that quite a few groups named themselves “future” groups of their communities, reflecting the movement’s spirit of mobilization and belief in a better future for rural communities (Forsberg, 2001). In addition, the focus was set on actual local (rural) questions, problems, and possibilities, regardless of actors’ political affiliations.

Village groups themselves consistently rank community events like cultural and societal activities, that is, collective activities, as the most important (Forsberg, 2001, 2010; Herlitz, 1998). Festivities, community centers, and culture in a broad sense are at the heart of the matter. The recreating and upholding of the rural community as a whole are central results of local development work but are less often discussed in the political sphere. Other issues in which groups engage include the environment, education, tourism, local markets, youth activities, study visits, roads, newsletters, sports fields, bathing places, walking and riding nature trails, information technology, schools, libraries, grocery stores, housing, business, communication, and child and elderly care.<sup>2</sup>

The demographic composition of the movement is characterized by the prominent position of women as compared to that of other social movements in Sweden. However, there are as many men as women active in the village movement, and men tend to be placed in leading positions as contact persons or association committee chairs with somewhat greater frequency (Forsberg, 2001; Herlitz, 1998; Westlund, 2007). In general, the actors are middle-aged or older persons (Forsberg, 2003). Youths are not, to a great extent, members of community associations in rural areas, and a shortage of young people has been mentioned as a problem within



the movement. However, the first project undertaken by the village movement was a youth project, and young people have begun to mobilize on their own terms with support from the movement.

The broad spectrum of activities and engagement reveal that local development work is about more than economic issues. It designs a holistic community agenda with social, cultural, and economic issues running parallel to one another. Multidisciplinary research—encompassing disciplines such as cultural geography, sociology, ethnology, political science, cultural anthropology, and business economics—has shown that community development in Swedish rural areas encompasses a wide range of aims and activities for service, employment, belonging, equality, infrastructure, local democracy, social work, and the upholding as well as the reconstruction of local identity (Forsberg, 2018; Rönby, 1994, 1995; Turunen, 2002, 2010). This is interesting to compare to studies of local action in urban areas, where the organizing of everyday life through club activities ascribes certain values to a neighborhood (Kings, 2011). Local place and local identity go hand in hand.

A common problem among movements in all categories is funding their efforts in ways that allow for less reliance on volunteer work. All movements strive to become more effective in their advocacy role and therefore seek to become governmental partners rather than governmental advisors. Some of the prominent individuals in the Swedish rural campaign were the same ones who had acted strongly to push forward rural agendas in regional politics during the 1970s. They were politicians and civil servants and came to hold influential positions within the movement. Their (political) standpoints and positions formed mobilizing strategies that combined top-down and bottom-up methods, had strong democratic as well as feminist ambitions, and provided state funding initiatives that could turn ideas into action.

At the same time, the movement needed to remain independent and to give advice as a representative of civil society. The willingness to attempt to apply locally based models for service, care, and governance was present, as were strategies to support the mobilization and organization of specific target groups such as rural women and young people (Forsberg, 2013). The local level was addressed as a fourth administrative level for decision-making. The movement supported innovative models for

dialogue, democracy, and collaboration between local groups and municipalities. Methods and models that invited rural inhabitants/actors to take part in social community planning were spread to municipalities by means of several projects administered by the movement (Olsson & Forsberg, 1997). One such project led to the creation of community boards for local decision-making; a few of the community boards formed in the 1990s remain in use, for example, in Svågadalen and Kallbygden.<sup>3</sup>

## The Economic Turn in Rural Policies and Politics

Until the early 2000s, funding and projects were administered by the government as local people and groups learned new methods and invested in voluntary work for their communities. The Swedish National Rural Development Agency (*Glesbygdsverket*), a Swedish governmental body operative between 1991 and 2009, played an important economic as well as supportive role in managing research projects and producing reports that delivered knowledge of rural situations and local development work.<sup>4</sup> It presented, for the first time, a gender perspective on regional development (Friberg, 1993) and delivered studies on the role of women in rural mobilization (Bull, 1991, 1993, 1995; Frånberg, 1994). There were connections between the rural field and governmental bodies in terms of people, knowledge, and resources.

This would change as governmental bodies shifted from rural and broad perspectives toward a more limited focus on entrepreneurialism and economic growth. In 2009, the Swedish National Rural Development Agency was discontinued. In its place, new governmental bodies were launched: the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (*Tillväxtverket*) and the Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis (*Tillväxtanalys, Myndigheten för tillväxtpolitiska utvärderingar och analyser*). They complement the Swedish Board of Agriculture (*Jordbruksverket*), which has existed since 1991 to promote rural development based on the structure and programs of the European Union. The knowledge base shifted and adapted according to the European Union's growth agenda, based on the Lisbon strategy for 2000–2010 (Johansson et al. 2007; Lisbon European Council, 2000) and the Europe 2020 strategy for

2010–2020 (European Commission, 2010), both of which strongly urged economic growth. The social and cultural impacts of village activities, well known and described in research as vital for upholding community in a broad sense, were no longer in focus as important in themselves; rather, they were indirectly included in political documents as forms of social capital with importance for business, growth, and attractive environments.

An economic approach is also stressed in the European Union's structural funds, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF, 2013), and the European Social Fund (ESF, 2013). Co-financed national programs have made the funds available to local development groups. However, the Swedish bureaucratic system has made it difficult for village groups to receive such funding (Forsberg, 2009, 2010). EU countries prepare their own rural development programs to meet national and regional needs within the framework of the EU. The Swedish Rural Development Program 2014–2020 was co-funded by the European Union and Sweden, with the intention to promote growth, competitiveness, entrepreneurship, and employment (European Commission, 2019; Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2015). The program administered a total of 36 billion SEK (3.8 billion Euro) and was managed by the Swedish Board of Agriculture. Like other European structural funds, the Rural Development Program in Sweden took on a rather bureaucratic structure with an overall goal of "smart and sustainable growth for everyone," in line with the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2010). The Leader program/method, whose nationwide implementation is suggested in the final rural report (SOU, 2017:1), is part of this context.

Politically and policy-wise, local development work in rural areas has become defined from an economic perspective and interpreted in terms of growth and development. Some attention has been given to village actors as innovators of local democracy, for example, creating new, locally based forms of governance and collaborative models for dialogue between community inhabitants and municipalities (Olsson & Forsberg, 1997; SOU, 2012:30). However, these innovative forms of mobilizing and organizing community are no longer part of any public debate and are generally, I would think, little known at national, regional, and local decision-making levels. All in all, policies and programs advocate for a

business growth agenda rather than taking into account the deeper, more complex structural and existential perspectives of rural experiences and contexts.

## Rural Movements Entrepreneurialized

Since 1995, as Sweden entered the European Union, voluntary work combined with European funding has been a commonly used model for rural community projects. I think it is accurate to say that projects have become *the* rural political strategy and development model. The overall European Union program structure with its economic growth policy sets a frame of reference for the funding of organizations at the national level as well as for village action at the local level. To obtain support and funding, local groups adapt to the European Union's framework, and the broad community perspective tends to yield to economical and entrepreneurial ventures (Forsberg, 2009, 2010). In this chapter, I demonstrate that as conformity (local development) takes the place of conflict (struggle for community), the political aims and claims of the early Swedish village movement and its local groups weaken. I look closely at the organizational institutionalization of the movement and affiliated initiatives that developed parallel to or in cooperation with the rural movement.

As mentioned above, in 1989, following the success of the village movement, a national body was formalized with the same name as the campaign slogan, "All of Sweden Shall Live!". In 2007, the national Popular Movement Council (*Folkrörelserådet Hela Sverige ska leva*) became a membership-based organization that is now called Rural Sweden. Rural Sweden still helps to raise the voices of rural inhabitants and to spread knowledge about rural issues to authorities and the political realm. As an organization, it is structured in several societal levels: national, regional, and municipal. It describes itself as "a national civil society organization for rural development," but more importantly, its 5100 registered local groups are emphasized as the "the oxygenation and bloodstream of our organization" (Hela Sverige, 2020).

From its beginnings, Rural Sweden has held national Rural Parliaments at varying rural locations every second year, with the aim to assemble

rural actors, strengthen a sense of rural fellowship, and put rural issues on the national political agenda. The organization has also formed rural programs with suggestions for rural development and politics. The overall goal and distinguishing feature in the latest rural program for 2018 is “balance between the rural and the urban.” Balance will be reached when there are equal possibilities for development in rural and urban areas. The program states a need to stop the centralization trend and the prioritization of cities, and it advocates for a new understanding of ruralness that does not spring from urban norms.

Hence, Rural Sweden has kept its role as a voice-giving organization with a vision of vibrant local communities all over Sweden and a broad perspective on both social and economic questions. However, the characteristics of a protest movement against the depopulation and dismantling of rural and sparsely populated areas have tapered. The radical political tone from the 1980s and 1990s, advocating for a new social order based on community decision-making at a fourth administrative level, has been diluted in favor of more consensus-like terminology. With the promotion of such concepts as growth, diversity, reconversion, and sustainability, the village movement now places itself in a rather uniform and standardized European development context (Forsberg, 2018).

Adjustments to the European entrepreneurial and consensus-oriented context reflect an organizational change that is especially evident when explored together with the change in affiliated women’s networks and neo-cooperatives (Forsberg, 2001). It is important to note here that neo-cooperatives and women’s networks came into prominence as significant actors in rural social mobilization during the early 1990s. They were present in urban areas as well, but in rural Sweden they offered new forms of engagement, community work, and entrepreneurship essential for the survival of the rural social economy. Special organizational structures with development advisors on the regional and local levels were formed within “All of Sweden Shall Live!” to support economic associations and women’s business initiatives—Coompanion and the National Resource Center for Women, respectively. These organizations were partly government-funded, built according to local requirements, and aimed at supporting community initiatives and empowering women. By 2000, there were some 100 regional and local resource centers throughout

Sweden (Hela Sverige, 2014) as well as cooperative advisory agencies in every region (later collectively named Coompanion).

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the neo-cooperative field diversified. With support from the national body, Coompanion, and its regional agencies, a shift of focus took place, moving from cooperatives as models for enterprising and community organizing in a broad sense to a primarily business-oriented form represented in approximately 300 branches of industry. The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth has been essential for the building and upholding of support structures for neo-cooperatives with coordinating bodies that still exist on national, regional, and partly municipal levels. For example, governmental funding enables Coompanion to give free counseling to groups that are interested in starting cooperatives. Coompanion helps to start 500 new cooperative businesses a year and supports local solutions for regional development.<sup>5</sup> However, funding goes hand in hand with other developments. The holistic approach of the 1980s and 1990s, considering neo-coops as a means of empowering and strengthening local communities, has yielded somewhat to an economic approach with an entrepreneurial and economic growth agenda. In my analyses of a Coompanion project focusing on the cooperative model, counseling, and ideas in an entrepreneurial context, counselors gave voice to this particular change, asking themselves reflectively: “Where do we belong?” (Forsberg, 2011). The societal approach is most strongly reflected in the development of work-integrated social enterprises (WISE), with the goal of integrating people outside the labor market (Hedin et al., 2015).

The active position of women in community rural development has diminished with the increased focus on economy and growth. For example, the project period for the partially government-funded women’s resource centers ended during this time. When the project was prolonged, the decision was made to include the resource centers’ activities in the former NUTEK, a governmental agency focusing on growth. The focus shifted from a broad-based societal to an enterprising and growth approach that now operates under the name of Winnet, aiming for equal growth. A review of 30 years of gender equality work in the county of Jämtland, a pioneering region in terms of the development of women’s networks and resource centers, shows how women’s cooperative work

became a threat to power structures. As a result, the grassroots women's movement died out. Women's opposition in plans, practice, and networks, when it became too dangerous, was redefined, repositioned, and incorporated by power structures such as the economic growth model (Lundström & Lindgren, 2015).

## The Future of the Rural Movement in Sweden

This chapter has described the development of the Swedish village movement as an evolution from a broad-based, holistic and politically challenging form of mobilization to a uniform, mainstream, and growth-oriented one. This development mirrors, to a large extent, the shift in governmental politics and funding with respect to the rural as Sweden entered the European Union.<sup>6</sup> Although the degree of the Europeanization of civil society (Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2019) has been widely discussed, it has clearly penetrated both Swedish rural policies and the village movement as such. The perspective of the European Union on entrepreneurship and economic growth, adopted by the Swedish government, outmaneuvers the broader and more complex rural existential perspective expressed by and in the village movement. An economic outlook is accompanied by governmental expectations of civil society actors as a "local force," that is, voluntary work as a convenient and cheap solution to societal problems (Forsberg, 2010). This process of increasing governmental demands on voluntary actors has been strengthened by recent suggestions of contracting, also within a rural discourse (SOU, 2017).

As mentioned above, Halhead (2006) stressed the importance of European rural movements as special models that need recognition and support on their own terms. Official rural politics and the funding of the rural movement in Sweden from the 1980s until the present have not lived up to this need. In European comparison, the Swedish rural movement has experienced strong support from, and cooperation with, the government. While increasing its potential access to resources, this makes the movement vulnerable; when partnering with or adapting to governments in order to obtain funding and strengthen their advocacy roles,

movements potentially risk their independence as civil society actors (Reuter et al., 2012; Trägårdh, 2007). This is illustrated in the present case: the rural movement adjusted to the shift in policy and funding and thereby evolved, moving toward a less threatening entrepreneurial context in which political claims of rural issues and perspectives have been diluted. In addition, the slogan of Rural Sweden, “All of Sweden Shall Live!”, has been rephrased by researchers as “Can all of Sweden live?” (Edman & Lindvall, 2002) and “Shall all of Sweden live?” (Johansson, 2008). The rural, as a specific and challenging perspective to be considered at the national and European levels and advanced by rural movements, cannot be taken for granted. This development offers new insight into a question that social entrepreneurship researchers have raised before: are local actors innovative challengers or amenable followers (Gawell, 2013)?

Looking ahead, the experiences of invisibility and not being taken seriously expressed by rural inhabitants and local development groups (Forsberg, 2001, 2003, 2010, 2013) have of late been somewhat acknowledged in national political documents. This failing at the national level, as well as the requirement of a coherent politics for rural areas, was mentioned in Swedish Government Official Reports as early as the beginning of the twenty-first century (SOU, 2003:29): “Towards a new rural policy.” Furthermore, the title of the Rural Commission’s final report in 2006 can be interpreted as an appeal to render the rural more visible (SOU, 2006:101): “See the countryside!”. But it took ten years from that point to formulate a new final report for a coherent rural policy, presented by the parliamentary rural committee: “For Swedish rural districts—a coherent policy for work, sustainable growth and welfare” (SOU, 2017:1). The report recognizes that there is, thus far, no coherent policy for rural areas; it also states that people in rural areas contribute to building the society as a whole and are therefore entitled to good living conditions and equal opportunities. The rural policy of 2017 has the status of a directional and parliamentary decision; it has yet to be implemented.

However, political acknowledgments of rural neglect are still interpreted from an urban perspective, with elements of rural exoticism and narrowing down. Ruralness is valued in terms of production and for



Sweden as a whole: it is good for the development of businesses and industry because of its natural resources, cultural environment, and tourism. This was underlined at a press conference in March 2018 at which the Swedish prime minister presented the rural report. When asked if he considered urbanization to be a problem, he responded (Regeringen 2018):

If we don't seek to make politics conscious of possibilities for the whole country, this [the urbanization, author's comment] will escalate. I am totally convinced that we all want the rural to survive, not least as a place for urban citizens to visit and maybe relax. For this to occur, things have to work in rural areas. (author's translation)

The statement was disputed for its reference to rural areas principally as places for urban citizens to visit rather than as places valuable in themselves.

The making of the rural in contemporary Swedish national policy can be analyzed and discussed as an adaptation to urban norms (cf. Rönblom, 2014). Urbanization is surely another trend or tendency that can be added to the list of civil society transformations that require increased awareness. The Swedish rural campaign of the late 1980s, the mobilization of a village movement, the growth of rural community groups, and the formation of multi-level support systems have all played important roles in highlighting rural issues and eliciting hope for the future. It remains to be seen what the latest governmental rural policy will bring in terms of improving the balance between the rural and the urban, a theme also addressed by Rural Sweden and other rural movements in Europe.

## Notes

1. The development groups are registered by the membership-based national organization Rural Sweden ([www.helasverige.se](http://www.helasverige.se)), located in Stockholm. Many additional, non-registered groups also work for their communities, so in practice the number of groups is larger than the figure presented.
2. Surveys of the village movement were implemented at the end of the 1990s (Herlitz, 1998) and in the early 2000s (Forsberg, 2001). Follow-up

- studies are needed to obtain more and up-to-date facts about the situation for local development groups in rural communities as well as additional knowledge on the national organizational and regional levels.
3. Svågadalen has been a self-governing community since 1996. It holds a non-party political board within the municipality of Hudiksvall with members from the community elected on the basis of personal trust. Likewise, since 1998, the small communities of Kallbygden have an elected community board that deals with school-related and caregiving questions within the municipality of Åre. For more information on these indirectly elected boards, see SOU (2012, p. 30, pp. 200–201) or [www.helasverige.se](http://www.helasverige.se)
  4. During the period 1991–2009, the Swedish National Rural Development Agency monitored issues of rural and sparsely populated areas. It also launched projects and programs to favor rural development, targeting, for example, women, youth, and community work.
  5. <https://svenskkooperation.se/goda-affarer/coompanion/> In addition to governmental funding, Coompanion receives financing from organizations, the public sector, consultant fees and benefits, and EU funding.
  6. Notably, in comparison to Rural Sweden, Coompanion and Winnet do not define themselves as movements.

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