

THE RURAL MOVEMENTS OF EUROPE

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Abstract

This paper explores the national rural/ village movements now established in at least 17 European countries. The earliest, in Finland and Denmark, date back to 1976. Starting with a spontaneous local community response to rural decline, agricultural change, migration, centralisation and EU-accession, the village movements have built into major national forces. The national movements are currently organising themselves at EU level, to provide a voice for rural communities in Europe. This is a notable example of a structured approach to mobilising rural communities to become stronger agents of local development and participate in rural policy at local, regional, national, and EU levels. The paper utilises information gained in a recently completed initial investigation² of the national village movements in Estonia, Finland, Slovakia, Denmark and Sweden (Halhead, V. 2004).³ The information is based on interviews within the countries, and the minimal documentation available from the movements themselves. The experiences of the movements in enabling local structural development, capacity building, empowerment and action are documented, as is their work to develop strategic planning and advocacy. It identifies the motivating forces, structural and process models, activities and outcomes of the different movements. It takes account of the effects of differing national contexts, and identifies some key elements of experience and learning. The aim of the paper is to provide information about the movements, rather than detailed analysis.

Factors promoting the growth of rural movements

The participation of local civil society is a key factor in rural development. With the decline of the command and welfare state models of government, in which the state and its institutions played a strong role in meeting the needs of society, so the importance of *social capital* as a force for action has received increasing emphasis. Likewise, the reduction in *local democracy*, resulting, in part, from the increasing centralisation and scale of local administration, has become an issue, leading to a growing interest in the concepts of *participatory democracy*.

The rural areas of Europe have been experiencing often severe decline. This has resulted from trends including: the decreasing importance of agriculture in the rural economy; the forces of the EU internal market and the globalisation of markets; increasing cultural and economic urbanisation and trends of rural-urban migration, especially of young and educated people.

In most European countries, agriculture is now a relatively minor player in the rural economy, whilst other economic sectors are increasingly important in employment terms. In Finland, the number of active farms fell from 225,000 in 1980 to 90,200 in 1998⁴ and in Denmark from 130,000 to 60,000 in the same period. During the early years of independence, Estonia reported a loss of approximately three-quarters of agricultural jobs.

These factors have contributed to the depopulation of rural communities, imbalanced age-structures, regional inequalities and loss of rural services which, in turn, have reinforce the negative trends. This process has occurred at different times in the different countries. In the old industrial countries, it began in the 19th Century, in the less industrialised Nordic countries, in the 1960s, and in the

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³ Halhead, V. The Rural Movements of Europe, 2004, unpublished report

⁴ Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, (2000) 'Agriculture in Finland'

newly independent countries of Eastern Europe in the 1990s. In all European countries, the trends are continuing, though with differing regional characteristics and disparities.

One response to the processes of rural decline is manifested in the growth of the rural and village movements in Europe since the 1970s. The formation of the rural movements was not only a response to the trends of rural decline, but also to the inadequate responses of governments and the EU to these trends. The response of EU policies, in common with those of most governments, has been to focus on the role of agriculture, whilst giving little recognition to the huge structural change taking place in the rural economy and society, and the special characteristics of rural areas.

The development of the rural movements

The rural movements of Europe have developed through a number of inter-linked processes. Those in the Nordic and Eastern European countries developed from the early Finnish model, with some mobilisation by the PREPARE⁵ Programme. The movements in Western Europe arose independently but have developed connections through the medium of international networks, principally the PREPARE Network, the Nordic Network, *Hela Norden ska Leva* (HNSL) and the earlier Trans-European Rural Network (TERN). The five movements documented below provide a cross-section of the characteristics and development pattern.

Figure 1 – The chronology of the rural movements

- 1970s – The first village action groups formed in Finland & Sweden
- 1976 – Finnish ‘Village Action 76’ Programme
- 1976 – Danish village movement *Landsforeningen af Landsbysamfund* (LAL)
- 1979 – The Dutch Association of Small Towns & Villages *Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen*
- 1981 – Finnish village movement formed – 1997 *Suomen Kylätoimintayhdistys* (SYTY)
- 1986-1999 – Scotland – *Rural Forum Scotland* (work currently underway to establish a new movement)
- 1987 – England – Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)
- 1989 – Swedish Popular Movements Council for Rural Development *Folkrorelserådet*
- 1990 – Irish Rural Community Network formed in Northern Ireland
- 1990 – The Wales Rural Forum
- 1991 – Irish Rural Link Formed in Eire
- 1992 – Estonian movement started – 1997 *Kodukant* formed
- 1993 – Portuguese Association for Local Development in Rural Areas *ANIMAR*
- 1997 – Danish Council of Rural Districts *Landdistrikternes Fællesråd* (LDF)
- 1998 – Hungarian Rural Parliament *Vidék Parlamentje*
- 1999 – PREPARE Programme started
- 2000 – Slovakian Rural Parliament *Vidiecky Parlament na Slovensku*
- 2001 – Icelandic movement *Landsbyggðin Lifi*
- 2002 – Polish Rural Forum *Forum Aktywizacji Obszarów Wiejskich*
- 2003 – Slovenian Rural Development Network *Društva za razvoj slovenskega podeželja*
- 2003 – Czech Republic – initial meetings held
- 2003 – The PREPARE Network formed
- 2004 - Lithuanian Rural Communities Union

Finland

The first of the current rural movements, and the model for many others, started in Finland in the 1970s. Stimulated by rural decline in the 1960-70s, some rural villages took matters into their own

⁵ Pre-Accession Partnerships for Rural Europe

hands, forming village committees to tackle local development. This process began as a spontaneous action in isolated villages, and the threads of this dispersed energy were pulled together in 1976, by Professor Lauri Hautemaki of the University of Helsinki, who launched ‘Village Action 1976’⁶. This project, which advocated the idea of Finnish Village Action, highlighted the need for special tools for the development of rural areas. Foremost among these was the development of *village committees* to harness the increasingly scarce human resources and to provide co-ordination and focus on the development of the village as a whole. The formalisation of the committees into legally constituted *village associations*, able to handle funds, was also advocated. The first village committees were formed in 1965, by 1990 there were 3000, and by 2003, 3935 village committees, including 2200 village associations (SYTY, 2003)⁷

In 1989, the first regional village association was formed in Lapland, with the aim of helping the villages to overcome their geographical isolation. As the villages recognised the increasing importance of the regional level in national and EU policy, regional associations were established throughout Finland. The final three regional associations were formed in 2000, completing a pattern of 19 regional village associations, reflecting the statutory regional administrative structure.

The first national structure was established in 1981 ‘The Finnish National Organisation for Village Action’. This was an association of mostly national NGOs with a rural focus, seen, at the time, as the best way to engage the interests of the larger NGOs in supporting village action. This structure was replaced in 1997 with the national ‘Village Action Association of Finland’ *Suomen Kylatoiminta ry (SYTY)*, which more closely reflects the ‘bottom-up’ nature of the village movement. It has a membership of 133 organisations, including all 19 regional village associations, 58 Local Action Groups (LAGs)⁸, and the main regional and national rural organisations.

This tiered structure has shaped the approach used in many subsequent rural movements. The principal being to form village associations at each level of government, thus enabling the civil society of the rural areas to link more effectively with the statutory authorities. The existence of legally constituted associations provides a vehicle through which the disparate rural communities can be accessed and through which planning and project implementation can be carried out.

The Finnish movement also initiated and developed the practice of village planning. This is now an integral part of the movements in several countries, with ‘nested’ plans produced at village, regional and national levels. The planning process enables villages to prioritise and organise their activities more effectively. At each level, the aim is both to provide an agreed agenda for the work of the associations and to influence the statutory plans produced by the authorities. Finland is an example of the potential of this approach, where the ‘National Village Action Programme’ forms one of the main inputs into the Government’s ‘Rural Policy Programme’⁹.

Finnish village action was awarded the Right Livelihood prize in 1992 and the UN Friendship Award in 1995¹⁰.

“Village action is local, self-initiated development work carried out by village residents to strengthen the livability, comfortability and village identity in their own home region. Village action gathers residents together regardless of profession, age, gender, political view, leisure activities or

⁶ Hyyrylainen, T. University of Helsinki, pers. com.

⁷ The Village Action Association of Finland, ‘National Village Action Programme, 2003-2007’

⁸ Finland has ‘mainstreamed’ the LEADER approach to cover the whole of rural Finland

⁹ Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, ‘Countryside for the People’ Rural Policy Programme for 2001-2004, Helsinki

¹⁰ ‘Friends of the UN ‘Creating Common Unity’, 50th Anniversary Awards

whether one is a permanent resident, newcomer or leisure resident. Village action represents local democracy and local initiative at its best.” (SYTY, 2003)¹¹

Sweden

The Finnish model was influential in the development of a similar movement in Sweden during the 1980s. This also arose in response to rural decline and de-population and the amalgamation of the traditional local municipalities into larger districts in the 1970s. As in Finland, the villages started to form associations in advance of any national movement. In the Swedish case, the early mobilisation took place through a government supported campaign, resulting from Sweden’s participation in the European Council’s Campaign for Rural Europe in 1987.

The Swedish movement is the largest and most highly developed in Europe, it is also the only movement to receive significant government funding. The movement has assisted the formation of over 4000 village associations. Local and regional groupings of village associations were formed, and the whole movement is co-ordinated and supported by the national *Folkrörelserådet*, the Popular Movements Council (PMC), established in 1989. In addition to village representatives, the PMC has 53 national NGO members. The PMC provides support to the local actors, develops programmes for rural development and aims to influence policy. Their biennial *Rural Parliament* involves between 1-2000 village representatives, and provides a direct voice to the government.

“The Village Action Movement is an expression of peoples’ desires to engage in collective values as well as an expression of their ability to find new solutions – to reclaim the initiative. Organised collectively in democratic associations, the people develop and uphold their local communities.” (Herlitz, U. 2001)¹²

Denmark

The rural movement in Denmark developed concurrently but independently to the Finnish movement. It has its own character but parallels to the other movements are strong. The movement also has its roots in the trends of rural decline, in particular the decline of agricultural employment since the 1960s, and the 1970 reform of local government, which replaced 1388 parish municipalities with 275 much larger units. The rise of the Danish movement has been attributed in part to an influx of educated urban migrants in the 1970s (Svendsen, G. 2003)¹³ who sought to re-establish the rural way of life and traditional values. There was recognition that agriculture would not support rural areas and there was a need to seek a new rural development model, relevant to the post-industrial age.

The first national organisation, the Danish Village Association *Landsforeningen af Landsbysamfund (LAL)* was established in 1976. LAL is run by local people, it has not established a regional level, nor has it actively mobilised village associations, but has built on the strongly developed local civil society in Denmark, a feature since the time of Grundtvig in the 19th Century (*Thaning, K. 1972*)¹⁴. LAL undertakes a wide range of projects to support village action and lobbies government on behalf of rural communities. A breakaway organisation, the Villages in Denmark Association – *Landsbyer i Danmark (LID)* was established in 1978. In 1997 the Council of Rural Districts – *Landdistrikternes Feallesraad (LDF)*, was formed as a ‘rural forum’ of national rural NGOs, a strategic body working closely with government to provide a focus on the diverse interests of rural

¹¹ The Village Action Association of Finland, ‘National Village Action Programme, 2003-2007’

¹² Herlitz U, ‘Local Level Democracy in a Historical Perspective in Sweden’ University of Gothenburg, 2001

¹³ Svendsen, G. 2003, ‘The right to development: construction of a non-agriculturalist discourse in rurality in Denmark’ *Journal of Rural Studies*, in press.

¹⁴ Thaning, K. ‘NFS Grundtvig’, 1972

development. The three organisations together tackle the work of the single organisations in other countries.

Estonia

The first movement to form in Eastern Europe, closely following the Finnish model, was the Village Movement of Estonia, *Kodukant*. The first steps in forming the Estonian movement were taken in 1992, shortly after independence, by individuals working with regional rural development. The motivating force was the rapid agricultural and rural decline following independence, which shifted the national focus from the rural to the urban population. The process for establishing the movement began with pilots in two Estonian counties, twinned with two Swedish counties. This established a model based on the Swedish and Finnish concept of a ‘*village action movement*’.

Early development focussed on the growth of county level associations, and there are now independent county associations in all 15 Estonian counties. The process of mobilising village associations has taken place largely through the work of the regional associations. The national organisation *Kodukant* was established in 1997, with a board formed from the 15 county associations and a number of other rural NGOs. The county associations comprise village and other local rural groups and NGOs. In this way, the movement is very much owned by and responsive to the rural communities. This is supported by a process of strategic planning at village, regional and national levels, shaping the work and providing a basis for lobbying. A biennial *Rural Parliament* creates a platform for raising the rural profile and speaking to government. *Kodukant* is now an active partner in supporting the growth of rural movements in other parts of Eastern Europe.

*“Kodukant has been essential to the development of our villages, without it we would not have had the confidence, information, contacts or organisation to proceed effectively”.*¹⁵

Slovakia

The Slovak Rural Parliament, one of the most recent movements, represents the new wave of rural movements in Eastern Europe. The factors promoting the growth of the movement are common to other Eastern Europe countries, in which independence precipitated a sudden and massive decline agriculture and public support to rural areas, and a resultant out-migration to urban centres. As elsewhere, the response of government to the problems of the rural areas was perceived as inadequate and the focus on agricultural policy too strong. In addition, the prospect of joining the EU focussed attention on preparing rural areas to influence and benefit from EU programmes. The development of civil society in Slovakia had, during the 1990s, been the focus of US aid, supporting the growth of many rural NGOs. However these NGOs were uncoordinated and lacked the profile to influence policy.

The early growth of the Slovak rural movement was supported by Sweden. The initiative was taken by the Slovak Rural Development Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture in 1994, to organise an annual Rural Forum to enable exchange between the many rural organisations. This led, in 2000, to the establishment the ‘Slovak Rural Parliament’ as a constituted organisation.

The national organisation is now well established and has made significant progress on establishing regional associations, in 4 of the 8 Slovak administrative regions. There are no village associations due to the structure of municipalities at village level. Instead the movement has concentrated on supporting the formation partnerships at micro-regional level, and has initiated a network of 48 Communication and Information Centres around the country, as the ‘grass-roots’ of the movement.

¹⁵ Village leader, Soometsa, Parnumaa, Estonia, pers. com.

Attention is now turning to influencing government policy on rural areas (*Halhead, V. & Guiheneuf, PY. 2004*)¹⁶.

“Rural problems have a strong relationship to problems in the country as a whole, however, there are big disparities between life in rural and urban areas. Rural areas are so big, with so many players, that we now realise we need support from each other. It is important to have the support of the local people and civic society behind you. The strength of the Rural Parliament is their wide support within the rural community. It is difficult for the government to ignore this”.¹⁷

The PREPARE Programme

The continuing development of rural movements in Eastern Europe, and the wider networking of the European rural movements, has been supported by the PREPARE Programme and Network. PREPARE started in 1999, as an initiative of European NGOs and government officials supporting the 10 pre-accession countries in rural co-operation. The PREPARE Programme has focussed on constructing partnerships between rural actors to strengthen civil society and promote multi-national exchange in rural development. ‘It aims to strengthen civil society in rural areas; and to promote dialogue, trust, confidence and co-operation between local actors, governments and all stakeholders of rural development, at all geographic levels’.¹⁸ The aim is to strengthen the role of rural civil society to become a respected partner with government. This is done through ‘country-specific national programmes’, promoting dialogue and co-operation between the different rural actors. PREPARE has supported the development of national programmes in Slovenia, Poland, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Romania.

Characteristics of the rural movements

At a gathering of the rural movements in May 2004¹⁹ a rural movement was defined as ‘a linking of rural people and interests who wish to create change in rural areas by working together’. Critically, a rural movement must ensure ownership by the rural people, with other organisations taking a supportive role. Rural movements arise because people show the capacity to take their own lives into their own hands. In turn, the rural movements enable rural people to take action.

The main characteristics of the movements can be summarised as follows:

Structured	organised and networked at local, regional, national and international levels
Locally focussed	rooted in the village and owned and run by village people
Supportive	mobilising, networking and supporting action for local development
Informed	connected with good information dissemination
Co-ordinated	working with a clear common purpose achieved by strategic planning
Influencing	undertaking advocacy to shape local, regional, national, EU policy
International	internationally connected through a common network

Structured

¹⁶ Halhead, V and Guiheneuf, PY, Rural Development in Europe: New Actors, New Demands: European Networks of Associations, Geysler, 2004

¹⁷ Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency (pers. com.)

¹⁸ www.preprenetwork.org

¹⁹ Swedish Rural Parliament, 2004

The structural characteristics of the rural movements fall into two broad categories: the ‘bottom-up’ *village action movement* and the more ‘top-down’ *rural forum* of national and regional organisations (Halhead, V. 2004)²⁰.

A ‘**village movement**’ is an organisational expression of local village action for rural development. It is a way of bringing together the people actively involved at the most local level of rural society, and supporting their efforts at regional and national levels. It is mobilising rural communities to address their own futures, influence local and national policy and build local, national and trans-national rural networks.

The ‘**rural forum**’ is a mechanism for providing a co-ordinated response to the needs of rural communities, on the part of the many organisations that, individually, represent aspects of the wider rural sector. The role of a rural form is to develop a co-operative and integrated approach and to work with government to address rural issues.

A key feature is the structuring of the movements at each administratively significant level – local, regional and national. This provides a logical mechanism to connect civil society and link it to the governmental system. It reduces the complexity that is inherent in community groups and NGOs, and helps them to co-operate more efficiently. The *Rural Parliament*, or national gathering of all rural interests, villages, NGOs and authorities provides a voice for rural communities and a focus for national strategy making

The structure of each movement reflects the national context in which it operates, the objectives and values of its initiators, the process by which it was mobilised, its age and maturity. Each movement displays its own characteristics, but there is a difference of emphasis between the Nordic movements and those of East and West Europe.

The Nordic movements are principally *village action movements* and have focussed on mobilising the village level. This reflects the Nordic culture of participatory democratic values and traditions of local volunteer work. The concept of the Rural Parliament originated in Sweden and has similarities to the Norse concept of the ‘*Thing*’ or parliament based on the principle of participatory democracy.

The movements being established in Eastern Europe, with the exception of Estonia, and those in Western Europe, are based more on the model of the *rural forum*. An important focus of these movements has been linking the activities of the rural NGOs and providing a focus for influencing policy. The establishment of the ‘grassroots’ level and connections has often proved problematic.

“*The national association was formed in order to integrate sectoral interests, at local and national levels, to strengthen the involvement of village people and to bring their interest groups together. If we wanted to get support for these village groups we needed a body that was fighting for this at national level.*” (Uusitalo, E.)²¹

Locally focussed

“*The home place is important to people – we need to know where we came from and our history, to know where we are going.*”²²

The movements that can be classified as *village movements* are strongly rooted in the notion of the ‘village’ or ‘homeplace’²³. The village is closely connected to historical, cultural and social roots. It

²⁰ Halhead, V, ‘*The Rural Movements of Europe*’, unpublished report

²¹ Eero Uusitalo – Chairman of the Village Action Association of Finland - pers. com.

²² Village Leader, Jani Village, Estonia, presentation to the Estonian Rural Parliament, 2003

²³ the name chosen for the Estonian village movement ‘*Kodukant*’

goes back into the earliest history of the rural areas and has, at different times, been a local administrative unit. The traditional connections between people and place are strongly respected in all of the movements, this applies not only to the village but also to the parish and county levels.

The President of Estonia referred to the spirit of Estonia's villages having kept alive the Estonian national identity and culture during many centuries of occupation. *"The heart of Estonian culture and economy has been a village. It started to flourish again when Estonians mastered their state and land again. Like in a real heart our most precious principles and values were fixed there"*.²⁴

By the same tradition, the concept of the village movement is that it belongs to the rural communities. It embodies the spirit and values of the villages and is driven by a passion to retain rural life and traditions. It is a voice and market place for rural people and a uniting force for the many dispersed rural communities. Most importantly it is 'bottom up', owned by the rural people and a source of great pride to them, and is run with evident energy and enthusiasm, by many hundreds of rural people. It is also respected by many in national and local government for its success in mobilising the rural communities.

The formally constituted village associations, promoted by Finland, have been found to be an effective model for enabling rural development, but take time to mobilise. They have been found, through research, to evolve as they move forward and grow in confidence and capacity. This is described²⁵ as the 'first generation' of working with cultural, social and environmental projects, the 'second generation' of taking on aspects of local service delivery, and the 'third generation' of undertaking economic development.

Supportive and informed

The movements undertake a wide range of activities in support of rural communities. These focus on building the capacity of the villages to become organised, plan their priorities, raise and manage funds, undertake projects, and link with other villages and organisations. Production and dissemination of information is an essential pillar, and each country has a range of information tools by which it achieves this: newsletters, websites, information days and training. In Slovakia a network of local Communication Centres has been established, as the focus for the support and information services.

"We are not willing to regard economic values as more important than the quality of life. We don't believe in development through centralised structures for decision-making and services. Instead we believe that people should control their own lives." (SYTY, 1995)²⁶

Co-ordinated

A notable feature of the established movements is the level of strategic thought that has gone into their organisation. In the most developed movements, not only are they structured at each significant level, they also undertake strategic planning at each of these levels. This is used to drive the activities of the movements at local, regional and national levels, and also to influence statutory policy at these levels.

"Village action has organised into local, regional and national activity, and international co-operation is increasing. Each level has its own responsibilities and each is needed to promote

²⁴ Arnold Rütel, President of the Estonian Republic, Speech to the Estonian Rural Parliament, August, 2003

²⁵ Uusitalo, E. Chairman of the Village Action Association of Finland, pers. com.

²⁶ The Village Action Association of Finland report, 1995

village development. This is recognised in the programme, where there are responsibilities for each level.” (SYTY, 2003)²⁷

Influencing

An increasingly important role of the movements is advocacy to shape local, national and EU policy. A central focus of all movements is to promote integrated policies which better reflect the changing circumstances of rural areas, their diverse character and needs, and to modify the traditional focus on agriculture. This is a skilled job, requiring experience, knowledge, connections and credibility, and is one of the later activities to develop. It is however a critical role in achieving the aim of integrated rural policy, and is of high priority for all the movements.

*“The relationship between the state and the local level is that the state is like a giraffe, looking down from a great height – it does not see the details at local level. So the state needs the villages. It is important to recognise and work with the village identity from the inside”.*²⁸

International

International links are an important feature of all the movements. They are networked and helped each other by transfer of experience. This has also increased the confidence and status of the movements, both at home and in the EU. Linked in a common European network, the national village movements are now actively working to influence EU policy for the next programme period, after 2006. They are also currently addressing the possibility of a ‘European Rural Parliament’, to provide a formal platform through which to address the wider needs of rural areas in a EU context.

Impact of the rural movements

Developing rural capacity and civil society

The movements are a tool for promoting endogenous development. They play a critical role in promoting rural identity within the wider society and increasing the confidence and pride of rural communities, by giving them a voice and supporting rural heritage. A key part of this process is building formal structures, through which small and scattered communities can address their own development in a more integrated and effective way, and network with similar communities to address mutual needs and wider issues. The movements also provide training to enable the associations to be effective planners and deliverers of rural development. This is a civil system for meeting the needs of rural areas, which the State is unable to meet.

Building participatory democracy

The weakening of local democracy by administrative centralisation has been very noticeable across Europe. This ‘democratic deficit’ was undoubtedly a major factor in the growth of the Village Movement. *“When society ‘left’, the inhabitants formed village action groups to work for the development of their community.”*(Herlitz, U. 2001)²⁹ The rural movements are one force that is working in the opposite direction, not through the formal democratic system, but by mobilising the organisation and involvement of local people and transferring their issues, needs and ideas into the formal statutory processes of policy making. This has been referred to in Sweden as *‘place-based democracy.’*(Herlitz, U. 2001)³⁰

²⁷ ‘All the Power of a Small Village’ – Finnish National Village Action Programme 2003-7

²⁸ Kodukant village workshop report, Estonian Rural Parliament, August 2003

²⁹ ‘Local Level Democracy in a Historical Perspective in Sweden’ Ulla Herlitz. University of Gothenburg, 2001

³⁰ ‘Local Level Democracy in a Historical Perspective in Sweden’ Ulla Herlitz. University of Gothenburg, 2001

Increasing social capital

All movements are seeking to increase the participation of civil society in the planning, decision-making and implementation of rural development. Village action plays a critical role in building local confidence, pride, relationships, capacity and integration. This is building on the long established traditions of village action, which are part of all rural areas, and providing a new framework and focus for this within the context of modern society. The importance of social capital in supplementing reducing public resources and services is recognised in all countries, and is an incentive for government support. The loss of population, weakening of the welfare state and transition to a monetary economy has affected rural communities adversely. The rural movements provide inspiration and motivation to build social capital to address rural community sustainability. The many creative ideas and solutions to local problems become common property as part of a collective movement. These can be traded for external funding and translated into contracting local service delivery and economic development.

In Sweden it was calculated that in 2001 the village action groups were responsible for 4.4 mill. hours of volunteer work, corresponding to €72 mill. and invested €22 mill. of their own capital³¹. A similar survey in Finland in 2002³² found that in one year, 1.6 mill. volunteer hours were invested, totalling €16 mill. €3.2 mill. independent funding and €31 mill. public project funding were raised by the village associations and 8000 development measures were implemented, 2600 village halls/community centres were constructed or repaired and 1000 village plans produced. In total they calculated over 2.5 mill. Finns were assisted by village development work.

Developing co-operation and synergy

The movements play an important role in creating synergy between villages and NGOs so that they avoid competition and increase their mutual capacity to meet rural needs. It is also apparent that the rural movements utilise the principles of a trade union in the development of a strong and grassroots membership, able to exert influence in advocacy with the authorities.

“Collective power is an impressive device. Organisation into a true social mass movement is the uppermost challenge for rural developers.” (Salomaa-Santala, R. 2003)³³

Influencing change

All movements aspire to influence policy through advocacy and partnership. The impact of the movements on policy development has not however been measured in any of the countries. They provide a unique function in opening up the views and needs of small rural communities to the distant policy-makers, and by linking many rural organisations they provide a useful partner for government. The strategic planning process, developed by some movements, is an important tool. In Finland this has succeeded in directly influencing national policy, though elsewhere ministries and regional authorities express the view that the movements are not effective lobbyists. All movements express dissatisfaction with the responsiveness of government and the difficulties of advocacy. All also expressed their concerns about compromising neutrality through receipt of government funding, though all seek to gain this. Though notable achievements can be seen, these are still considered to be much less than is required. However, recognition of the importance of the movements is shown, for instance, by the attendance of the President and Prime Minister at the Estonian and Swedish Rural Parliaments. In Finland the close connection to rural policy is a notable

³¹ ‘Local Level Democracy in a Historical Perspective in Sweden’ Ulla Herlitz. University of Gothenburg, 2001

³² ‘All the Power of a Small Village’ – Finnish National Village Action Programme 2003-7

³³ Salomaa-Santala, R , ‘Rural contract and political commitment, the keys to rural development’, in *Maaseutu Plus* SYTY 2003

exception, and only in Sweden has the government played a strongly supportive role, in provision of funding, manpower and practical support. There is also a growing link between the rural movements and the EU, based on the perceived need for an effective, integrated rural voice in Brussels. This has had recent success in influencing EU policy.

Future directions

The future of the rural movements in Europe holds great potential. As the trends of rural decline continue, the need for a countervailing force increases. At the same time, the pressure for change in EU and national policies towards rural areas is showing signs of success, and it is likely that there will be moves towards a more integrated approach to rural policy. This will require continued pressure from rural lobbies, other than the agricultural lobby. The rural movements are now strongly placed to take on this role.

The role of civil society in rural development is likely to increase as the welfare state decreases. Therefore the role of the rural movements in mobilising, organising and networking the greater potential of civil society is of increasing importance. This has already been recognised by some national Ministries.

The relationship between the movements and government requires consideration. All movements have identified the need to become more effective in advocacy. They are seeking to become 'partners' with government, rather than adversaries, however the need to retain independence and the ability to act in an adversarial capacity is critical to performing an effective function in representing the needs of civil society.

The networking of the rural movements, provides the opportunity for increasing the speed of their development and perfecting the structures and processes they employ. Each movement displays strengths and weaknesses, which are a lesson to others. The similarities between the rural areas and national contexts of each country are far greater than the differences, this will only increase through wider membership of the EU. It is therefore often appropriate to adopt similar solutions within different countries.

An outstanding problem for all the movements lies in resourcing all this effort in a sustainable way. It is clearly not sustainable to rely on volunteer labour to the extent that they currently do. The true value of this activity requires greater recognition from governments. Recent statistics provided by the Finnish and Swedish movements show the extent of this contribution to society. This requires to be documented in all countries. The movements themselves must develop efficient frameworks for maximising the use of scarce resources and targeting action into the most effective channels.

There is a wider question about the extent to which European society wishes to accept the inevitability of the further urbanisation of its society and cultures, and the consequent effect on rural communities. It will be necessary for governments to work with rural people to develop the most effective solutions, building on their knowledge of the rural areas. Government is, by definition, remote from the rural villages, and this is an issue in all countries. It does not have the detailed knowledge needed to build rural communities, but must trust rural people to do that, by providing a supportive and appropriate framework and policies. This is the great strength of the rural movements, they gather together the rural people and provide a clear forum with which government can work, at all levels. It is a logical and streamlined model, deserving of recognition and support.

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