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Sustainable Living in a Periphery

Interpreting Ways of Rural Mobility in a Low-Carbon World

By Pilvi Hämeenaho & Elisabeth Wollin

> You could say that the typical local in this village thinks and acts with the car. Even though public transport does exist to a certain, limited degree, I couldn't imagine […] that people would take the bus to the town if they were about to do some shopping or visit a restaurant (Swedish man, age 45).

Private driving, for those living in villages far from city centres, is such a common daily task that it goes almost unrecognized in the course of daily life. Adjustment to the local environment and to a society that promotes public transportation only in urban areas makes driving a normal and indeed compulsory part of daily living (Hämeenaho 2014; Wollin Elhouar 2014). However, in our time of increasing debate about climate change mitigation, daily ways of rural mobility seem disturbing and contradictory to the social calls for more sustainable living.

It has been emphasized that the concentration of CO_2 in the atmosphere has changed the natural processes that keep the globe warm and inhabitable and led to anthropogenic global warming that inflicts irreversible changes on nature and climate (Rockström et al. 2009; Rosa et al. 2015; Lidskog & Waterton 2016).[1] The single most important source of CO_2 is the combustion of fossil fuels, most notably coal and oil. Due to this, the low-carbon goals are firmly aimed at reducing flying and driving with their reliance on fossil fuel engines (e.g. EEA 2019). Altering the ways of being mobile is also seen as one of the main measures that individuals can take in order to slow down global warming. But how are these ideas met in rural peripheries with no alternatives for transportation?

In a globalized world, the objectives and means of climate change mitigation are mainly determined from the perspective of centres. From this it follows that the way sustainability is interpreted often represents urbanized worldviews and may drastically differ from the perceptions of those living in peripheries and rural areas (Cloke 2003; Wollin Elhouar 2014). The conflicts between macro and micro level understandings of sustainability – between regime and local levels – cannot be studied only from "above". The meanings ascribed to sustainability emanate from locally-bound everyday life experiences that occur within national and global systems. For this reason, in order to explore how sustainability transitions are understood and responded to in different loci, we need a reciprocal view of marginal daily living environments and lifestyles in relation to national and global systems (also Sassen 1996; Norgaard 2011; Eriksen 2015; Innerarity 2016). Therefore, in this ethnological study, we explore how the ideals of low-carbon societies are lived and interpreted in peripheral areas in Finland and Sweden.

In order to reach an understanding of "peripheral sustainability" we scrutinize how globally given ideas of sustainability and measures to achieve it clash with local ideas and practices at the level of everyday life. How is sustainability understood by people residing in rural areas? How are the ideas of sustainable living given meaning during the daily life course? We will answer these questions by exploring rural residents' relation to sustainability transitions, and analyse how their perceptions and thinking – emerging in and from the physical environment – reflect their relation to the national and global. The chosen viewpoint illuminates the tensions be-

tween system-world and life-world in the context of the rural North.

Towards Low-Carbon Living

The increasing awareness among decision makers of forthcoming problems related to the rise in the temperature of the globe have stimulated the development of substitutive technologies and the search for new solutions to solve problems related to the mobility of people and objects.[2] Fast solutions have often been sought "from below". Individuals' responsibilities have been highlighted and lot of attention has been devoted to citizen education about more sustainable lifestyles and consumption (Stephenson et al. 2010; Evans et al. 2013; Raippalinna 2019; also Erhardt-Martinez et al. 2015). However, it is stated that despite the policy actions and rapid technological advances that spread to the market, progress is too slow to achieve the goals of limiting global warming (Roberts et al. 2018). According to Rosa et al. (2015:1) the core problem lies in cultural, social and economic structures that have been left unaddressed and unexplored in the required depth. Failures in setting or implementing new policies ensue from clashing political, economic and ecological motivations and the lack of joint commitment to environmental goals (Stern 2007; Norgaard 2011; Eriksen 2016; Newman et al. 2018). Instead of mutual understanding of the issue and ways to solve the problems, discussion consists of competing interests and interpretations of the causes and possible outcomes of environmental changes.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016:152) argues, that the incompatibility of goals, discourses and practices is caused by clashes between the logics of large-scale systems and local-level orientations. What is considered sustainable from the perspective of mitigating global warming may be socially unsustainable from the perspective of performing daily tasks and duties (also Wollin Elhouar 2014). This study proceeds from the notion that environment and activities of people are indissolubly linked and the environment always includes the social and cultural dimension – the lifestyles, beliefs, ideas and aspirations of people (Häyrynen 2003; Dillon 2015:109; Parra et al. 2018:5). Addressing the social and cultural dimensions of the environment is crucial for studies of sustainability transitions, as the pursued changes will occur in the human realms, at the micro level of everyday life practices as well as in macro scale politics and technologies.

The cultural perspective that explores the meanings and interpretations given to global or daily issues also needs a nuanced definition of *sustainability*. What is meant by sustainability varies between different actors and depends on the socio-political environment where the interpretations are made (also Jamison 2001; Sayer 2013). The concept is also a product of the anthropogenic knowledge regime and immanently carries the idea of the objectification of nature (Brightman & Lewis 2017). In our study, sustainability is not used as a referent to environmental actions only but as a wider lens that also encompasses the social and cultural aspects of being in one's world. This conceptualization envisions sustainability from a human-centred perspective and as a goal that strives towards a non-destructive balance between people and between humans and

the non-human environment (also Pyykkönen et al. 2009; Murphy & McDonagh 2016; Parra et al. 2018).

Interpretations of Sustainable Living in Rural Peripheries

In recent studies on sustainability transitions Geels et al. (2017:466) have argued that sustainability transitions should lead to "a new regime, which becomes institutionalized and increasingly taken for granted." This requires new ways of thinking and doing, as well as normalization of actions and ideas now often considered alternative (Raippalinna 2019; Häyrynen & Hämeenaho 2020). Accordingly, the development should be studied from a multi-level perspective that takes account of complex relations of global and local systems and the dynamic interaction between them (also Eriksen 2015; Geels et al. 2017). It should also address the level of mundane daily actions and explore the complexity of everyday life choices and

Closed grocery store in the village centre. Photo: P. Hämeenaho.

practices and their impact on sustainability transitions.

The cultural analysis of *everyday life* illuminates the ideas and practices of people who act locally within the global. It explores the conflicting values and beliefs as well as the impact of competing interests, the complexity of social relations and unequal resources on people's choices. It also recognizes people as active agents, who do not only receive influences or carry the ideas present in their socio-cultural environment, but actively interpret, alter and produce culture (Eriksen 2015; Parra et al. 2018; Stephenson 2018). However, capturing "the everyday" is not simple due to its elusiveness. The taken-for-granted nature of the everyday hides ideas and motivations underneath daily practices and thus impedes implementing any changes that are required or hoped for. Everyday living as something "taken for granted" also allows multiple interpretations and conceptualizations occurring simultaneously without being acknowledged (Hämeenaho 2014; Ehn et al. 2016).

Thus, describing how locally formulated responses to global or national requirements are interpreted calls for an understanding of the different ways that everyday life is given meaning to. Mike Michael (2006:23–28; see also Sandberg 2014) has pointed out two different ways in which everyday life is given meaning: the good, which emphasizes the active agency people may have and utilize in their daily living, and the bad, which envisions everyday life as a locus of repetitive, unquestioned actions and stagnation.

It is noteworthy that the imaginary polarization between rural and urban is parallel with the polarization attached to everyday living. In urbanized societies, rural areas are often interpreted as a site for "bad" and unsustainable everyday living. According to stereotypes that picture urban as normal and modern, rural areas represent "the other", and are envisioned as a place of backwardness and stagnation rather than progress (Williams 1985; Cloke 2003; Hämeenaho 2018). The visions may also be positive and emphasize a "natural" or "traditional" lifestyle that is lost in urban areas but preserved in the countryside. What is common to both interpretations is that they understand the countryside as an unchanging cultural space. By connecting the countryside to its past, these visions question its significance as a part of modern, urbanized nations and the way of life pursued there (Wollin Elhouar 2014; Hämeenaho 2018).

Research Design

We pose our research questions on the basis of our previous work that we have conducted separately yet on highly similar issues and topics and by utilizing a similar approach and methods. Pilvi Hämeenaho's dissertation study "Everyday Networks of Well-Being in Sparsely Populated Rural Finland" (2014) explored the everyday life practices and perceptions of subjective well-being and the good life of mothers living in sparsely populated rural areas. The focus was on daily mobility and especially accessing public services as a part of the experience of everyday well-being. The research also unravelled cultural stereotypes attached to living in the countryside and how these ideas representing an urban viewpoint were reflected and utilized in identity making by rural

residents. In her dissertation "Do We Belong to the Future of Sweden?" (2014) Elisabeth Wollin Elhouar investigated how social sustainability was constructed, experienced, practised and performed in the tension between local everyday life and political discourses. Empirical themes included mobility and means of transport, work and leisure practices, and experiences of time and tempo. The specific area chosen for understanding "the local" was sparsely populated villages in the northern inland area of Sweden. The main interest was to grasp how political rhetoric about sustainability made or did not make sense to the experience of local everyday life, and how sustainability was understood from the local perspective.

In both studies, everyday actions were studied in relation to life experiences and policy-led rhetoric about well-being and sustainable development. The analyses focused on sustainability policies, environmentalism, and their implications (Wollin Elhouar) and on the provision of public services and on the ways of giving meaning to the home (Hämeenaho) in remote rural areas. As an outcome both studies produced an ethnological description on lifestyle that is strongly affected and given meanings from outside but is interpreted and re-represented by locals in the course of daily living. The results also showed clear gaps between policies and experiences related to sustainability. In order to highlight the complexities between hegemonic discourses and counter-ways of meaning making, between centre and periphery, and between policies and lived experiences, the social dimension of sustainability is stressed in our current research presented here. This emphasis is mainly intended to draw attention to uneven power relations inscribed in rural-urban and centre-periphery distinctions.

In order to deepen the understanding on the local level and to expose everyday life as a key factor in sustainability transitions, we revisited our data sets and former analyses with the keyword "periphery" and Eriksen's notion about "clashes of scales" in our minds. With this rereading of our data we aim at contributing to the need for more nuanced and deep-reaching understanding of everyday life in the context of research on sustainability transitions.[3] The themes studied are mobility in the rural environment, sustainable lifestyle adjustments and ways of understanding and interpreting periphery in relation to centre.

We explore thinking and practices related to climate change in the Global North. The original data of this study thus consist of two sets of interviews that both comprise transcribed semi-structured interviews with people living in, or near, sparsely populated areas. Both of us made several short visits to the field sites. Hämeenaho conducted her fieldwork during a period of three months, and visited all the villages separately. Wollin Elhouar made two visits to each field site, with some time in between, and stayed in general one week per visit. The fieldwork method can be seen as an alternative fieldwork to the classic long field stay, in the sense of being a kind of yo-yo fieldwork (see Wulff 2002; Karsten 2019).

Hämeenaho conducted fieldwork in 2009 and 2010 in seven villages in three municipalities in central Finland: Multia, Pihtipudas and Saarijärvi. Of her 14 informants, 13 were women and their age ranged from 30 to 55. All informants were

parents and they had experience of living in sparsely populated rural areas with school-age children. Informants were private entrepreneurs, worked in the public sector in social and health care or in schools, or were staying at home with their small children at the time of the interviews. Most of them had also lived in urban areas during their life and five were in-migrants who had been born in cities and moved to rural areas as adults. For all of them, living in the countryside was a considered choice. The empirical data used for Wollin Elhouar's study were collected from two municipalities: Strömsund (in Jämtland County) and Örnsköldsvik (in Västernorrland County), mainly in 2007 and 2008.[4] Apart from written material, the study was based on observations and interviews. Her thirteen main informants – nine women and four men – were all living in sparsely populated parts of the northern inland of Sweden. The interviewees' age ranged between 30 and 73. Several of the interviewees had a long commute between home and work in common. A few worked at home as farmers or near their home place, but had to travel far for services. All of them thus shared the experience of an everyday life marked by long distances.

Creating Peripheries

Rural mobility: exclusion from the low-carbon society?

> You know, there is a distance of 50 kilometres to the store. It's a long way to go back and forth if you forgot to buy the milk and have to go back just because of that. And expensive too (Swedish woman, age 45).

In the rural north, daily life practices are moulded by long distances. Home in the countryside leads to a situation where daily tasks and duties, such as going to work or school, daily consumption and attending social events requires lengthy travels, because the sites of action are mostly situated in nearby cities. Due to lack of public transportation, daily travel primarily takes the form of private driving. The necessity of private driving was illuminated in rural residents' accounts of daily mobility. As one interviewee said: "These distances, you always have to go by car" (Finnish woman, age 43).

When exploring social sustainability in relation to infrastructure and means of transport, it became clear to us that different technologies had different roles to play in making sustainable experiences. Some means of transportation managed to tie people together, others to keep them apart. The bus, for example, appeared restrictive and therefore in that sense, a rather unsustainable means of transport. The bus was seen as inflexible due to few departures and long routes, with no viable alternative. Buses do not always drive to villages and the bus stops were accessible only by car or lengthy walks or bike rides, which was considered impossible because people had to carry groceries or had small children with them. In addition, the bus timetables were unsuitable for the daily needs of residents and only served children going to local schools.

> The nearest bus stop is three kilometres away, and during the school year there are two buses to town in the morning, at seven and at nine. And if you want to come back by bus, there is one at two or at five past four. So those who work until four can make it to the bus. But then I would still need to have some means of transport to get home from the village centre where the bus stop is (Finnish woman, age 41).

Peacefulness and privacy was considered as a key element of rural living. Photo: P. Hämeenaho.

When buses are not considered as an option for daily mobility, private driving becomes a norm. In rural areas with long distances, daily scheduling is based on private driving (Hämeenaho 2014). One of the interviewees explained:

> I am so used to driving. You can go when you need to and you don't have to wait for the timetable, like "Oh my, the bus is coming in five minutes and I'll miss it". Yes, it's easier to use your own car (Finnish woman, age 36).

Remoteness may be seen as a key signifier of periphery, which is understood in relation and as a counterpoint to centre. Centres are hubs for mobility where activities and sites of action are concentrated and periphery is the remote *other* (cf. Williams 1985; Cloke 2003). Likewise, ideals a low-carbon society are mostly established from an urban perspective, and only recognize the problems and solutions relevant in densely populated areas. From this viewpoint, the necessity of private driving and owning a car turns the countryside into an environment where it is seemingly impossible to live according to the current ideals of a sustainable lifestyle. These negative assumptions about the ways of everyday living in rural areas contribute to social remoteness, and the exclusion of rural people from urban-led discourses on sustainability (Hämeenaho 2014; Wollin Elhouar 2014).

Many of the interviewees in the Swe-

dish material voiced experiences of exclusion from the national community. A man in his fifties who worked as a school bus coordinator said, for example: "We always hear this ongoing debate that things are going well for Sweden. Well, what we then wonder, up here, is whether we really do belong to Sweden in that case." Many also pointed to the fact that local infrastructure was disappearing: "The closest grocery store is now twenty kilometres away. The grocery bus is gone. We used to have grocery store, petrol station, post office. All gone today. One gets a bit bitter" (Swedish man, age 65).

On top of this, in the neo-liberal political climate the responsibility to change one's lifestyle is often laid on local people – although cutbacks in public transportation and the concentration of services in centres, for example, are not a result of local actions (Evans et al. 2013; Wollin Elhouar 2014; Raippalinna 2019). According to our studies, people in rural areas are well aware of the contested role that the car plays in their daily living, and, on the other hand, in national policies on sustainability. The absolute necessity of having a vehicle or two is clearly tied to experiences of exclusion from the national community and lack of sense of belonging to the nation. In several of the interviews a sense of defending the cars came across more or less explicitly:

> I have two cars […] one is a panel truck, a Berlingo […] it's cheaper and more environmentally friendly. And I can load a lot in it. When I was renovating the cottage I needed construction blocks, it was really good, I could load 40 blocks in the truck. You'll have to buy it 300 kilometres away. That's why we got these types of cars; to avoid driving back and forth four times. And I think that must be better for the environment (Swedish man, age 60).

When remote location turns to social (and political) exclusion, the value-laden polarizations between rural and urban are strengthened. This kind of attitudes that intertwine with regional policies create rural peripheries, which represent backward local cultures and stagnation to carbon-based, unsustainable lifestyles. Everyday actions are thus interpreted as "bad" and local culture only as permanence and thus as an obstacle in terms of change. However, in order to scrutinize the real dynamics of change, the "good" interpretations of everyday living must also be taken into account.

When we asked rural residents, the idea of local culture as stagnant was modified. People we met during our field trips supported the idea that their living and lifestyle differ from urban life. Yet they did not accept the idea that their ways of living are solely unsustainable; they emphasized counter-viewpoints. Driving may not be a low-carbon practice, but it was emphasized that it cannot be understood only as a choice of individuals. Most of the people were very careful in planning their daily drives. They limited the amount of driving by trying to combine all the daily tasks and duties in commuter travels (Wollin Elhouar 2014; Hämeenaho 2014, 2019).

> And quite often we combine the drives, when we have some hobbies [in the town] we go to grocery store at the same time. My husband likes to go jogging, and in wintertime he goes skiing to town because there are lights. Here [in the village] we do not have any streetlights. So, when we go to the town he goes skiing. Doesn't have to ski in the dark (Finnish woman, age 42).

On top of this, the meaning of private driving is much more multifaceted than

being just about transportation. From a social perspective, the car was the most prominent maker of sustainability for the locals. A private car cannot be considered only as a tool to be mobile with, but in remote areas it also becomes an important space to spend time with other people and offer care for them (Wollin Elhouar 2014; Hämeenaho 2019). Giving rides to family members and other locals formed an important part of local ways of mobility. Car pools and shared rides were common examples of socially sustainable practices related to mobility (Hämeenaho 2014; Wollin Elhouar 2014). We were told about helping elders and other people unable to drive.

I consider this as a strength of a village life, that we have this kind of practices. I give her [an elderly woman in the neighbourhood] a ride to town when she has a doctors' appointment, or take her to shops or something. I may just drive to her house, see if there are lights on and just ask would she like to join me when I go to town (Finnish woman, age 43).

Nobody in the village goes to the store just by herself. We always ask others that are home if they need anything, any groceries. It's the way of doing it, it comes naturally. To go by yourself, without asking, hardly ever happens (Swedish woman, age 56).

On the other hand, a car also serves as a place to rest and as a site of transition between various daily roles and responsibilities. Commuting may thus become a private time to think and may provide a much-needed break between work and family life. One interviewee, a mother with children and a daily job in town, explained:

During the drive you have time to put your mind in a certain mood. When you leave work, you can think through work stuff and then move on to domestic things. And, of course, the same thing in the morning (Finnish woman, age 41).

A big car also provides shelter and ability to withstand car accidents due to snow, slippery roads, long distances, road kills and bad visibility, thus making a car synonymous with safety.

The lengthy rural roads. Frost heave 14 kilometres. Photo: P. Hämeenaho.

Last winter, when our neighbours moved here just before Christmas, they changed their car, bought a four-wheel-drive because they just couldn't get up that road (Finnish woman, age 34).

You would want a big, real car, you want to have a safe car, if something happens, so you don't get smashed immediately (Swedish man, age 60).

Overall, the question of daily mobility in rural areas serves as an example of the otherness of rural in relation to urban areas. From the perspective of daily living in more densely populated areas with possibilities to use public transportation, a private car is often seen as environmental villain number one that should be replaced with other means of mobility. From a rural perspective, however, a private car is a tool that makes it possible to participate in society: to go to work, consume and have a social life outside the immediate home environment. It makes it possible to live in villages and enjoy the rural setting (Hämeenaho 2014; Wollin Elhouar 2014).

Cultural adjustment and the emerge of social sustainability

We always help each other here in the village, we don't just think about ourselves, we think of each other, do you know what I mean? For example, if someone is going to the store to buy something, he or she always asks the neighbours if they need anything, milk or bread or whatever. In the city you don't do that, right?" (Swedish woman, age 55).

Being remote is not just living far from centres and sites of daily activities, but it also encompasses the social and cultural dimensions of local living. Accordingly, periphery is not just about geography but may be understood as a distance from the ideals and mindscapes that represent the urban centres, and which exclude rural areas from the urban norm (Wollin Elhouar 2014; Häyrynen & Hämeenaho 2020). The remoteness from urban centres thus forms a local environment where peripheral lifestyle emerges.

We were welcomed [to the village] very warmly, there has been such a positive atmosphere everywhere I go here or whichever activity group I want to join. It is so different from the city. And overall, all the people here, I think they really are such people, you know what they say about country people? They are open and warm (Finnish woman age 34).

The interviews also illuminated how a meaningful life is tantamount to a life in the home village and among other locals. In addition to being a site for habitual practices and repetition of mundane actions, everyday life appears as a site for active agency, critical thinking about (urban) norms, resistance and change (see Michael 2006:22). The persistence of daily practices is not a matter of stagnation but a culturally sustainable way of adjusting novelties to established everyday life perceptions and practices (Damsholt & Jespersen 2014:27; also Löfgren & Ehn 2010). In search of a sustainable life balance, adjustment is central and the place-bound lifestyle consists of strategies and practices as well as ideas about good living, which are adjusted to local as well as national and global environment(s).

Adjustment is not only coping with the challenges or responding to requirements determined by outside localities, but it is primarily active being and "living out rurality" (Hämeenaho 2014; Wollin Elhouar 2014). For example, the rural environment and village life were often considered superior to urban life: "If you have a family with small children like I do, living in this village is far better than the city, safer for

the kids, more harmonious" (Swedish woman, age 32). Interviewees also mentioned the impact of being far from cities on the ways of consumption. They emphasized the self-sufficiency of their families, and many told about how they grew their own vegetables, had berry bushes in the garden and baked their own bread.

> [Since we moved to live in the country] my life has changed a lot indeed, living here is so different from a city flat. I have started to bake bread in the oven, which I have never done before, and we are building a cellar for potatoes that we are growing in our back yard. We have changed our way of life, and it has been mostly deliberate (Finnish woman, age 34).

Lack of shops in the village did not matter, because people told how they had learned to live outside consumer (urban) culture. One interviewee emphasized as follows the cultural and social distance from the lifestyle considered as urban:

> Really, you really do not need so much stuff, maybe it is no wonder that [city dwellers] spend so much money, everything is available there all the time. Shops are always crowded. But here, you just realize how you can cope without buying hardly anything. A month may go by, and we only need to buy toilet paper and detergents. Really, that is all (Finnish woman, age 55).

Everyday living in a rural environment also produces new interpretations of periphery. The core ideas of the polarizing stereotypes of urban and rural are enduring on the one hand yet changing on the other. Raymond Williams (1985:12) has noted how these perceptions are constantly adjusted and reinterpreted to meet the needs and goals of changing topical discourses. In the age of heated discourses on climate change, the images of rural as a place of developmental stagnation has been strengthened once again. At the same time, rural residents, very much aware of the stereotypes, offer counter-interpretations.

Sustainable ways of living are represented in perceptions of good living. In their narratives, people brought up stereotypes that represent their conception of rural reality in a positive way. For example, lack of jobs is considered as a major problem and a signifier of the decline of rural areas. Though a job was given a natural meaning in the narratives, other domains of the everyday were also given a certain meaning, such as home, family, nature, land, leisure activities and local community (Hämeenaho 2014; Wollin Elhouar 2014). Especially leisure activities played an important role and people accepted the situation caused by lack of workplaces.

> If there were enough jobs here, 75 per cent of the people who once moved would be moving back. […] Maybe people who were born here have other hobbies than people in the city. I mean, here it's all about nature, hunting, fishing, those kind of things… scooter driving in the wintertime. And you cannot really do that if you live in the south or in a big city. When I lived in the south I was all right at first, it was exciting. But after a while I started to miss the lifestyle up here (Swedish man, age 60).

A key feature that was brought up both by Swedish and Finnish informants was the rural environment itself, which was considered to offer a living environment superior to urban areas. "It is so peaceful here, we have this privacy. When I come home after the day at work I can do whatever I want, just be here, and no neighbours watching us" (Finnish woman, age 36). Besides being peaceful and private, the periphery and the lifestyle it entails has its effect on time usage and even more broadly to the tempo of living. Rural areas form their own specific time-space, where environment and geographical distances im-

pact on daily actions and the ways in which people schedule their lives (Wollin Elhouar & Hansen 2011; Hämeenaho 2014, 2019). Rural time-space also differs from its urban counterpart, as the means to be mobile are different even if the reasons for travelling should be similar. Commuting or consuming take more time in remote areas. Rural time-space is also connected to the prevailing negative notions that rural areas are old-fashioned and slow. These ideas also have an influence on local self-images and practices (Wollin Elhouar 2014; Hämeenaho 2014). To objectify time in narratives, people get a possibility to reflect on their everyday life (Wollin Elhouar 2014). A Swedish woman (age 50) who had been moving from Stockholm to a small village in the northern inland said it took her quite a while to get used to the calmness she experienced at first due to the hectic urban tempo she was used to: "I just wanted to sit on a stump in the forest and do nothing, hear nothing."

The slow pace of rural living is in turn related to modernity's focus on speed. In the narratives, the interviewees tend to distance themselves from urban time and associate urban speed with disharmony and stress-related issues. Lack of urban facilities, such as shops or services, was not considered significant in terms of everyday well-being. On the contrary, everyday life in rural areas was considered as a major source of private well-being. Informants did not attach much value to the possibilities that urban areas have to offer, such as places for consumption or more options for hobbies and leisure-time activities.

> I do not think living in a city would make me happier. Like really, does something like going to the movies or hanging around in town make a person happier? Or shopping, I do not think I would like to spend too much time shopping anyway (Finnish woman, age 55).

The urban centres were not considered central in one's living, as the place called home and the surrounding local community were at the heart of everyday life. Remoteness from the major centres supports close social relations with other local residents. Collaboration with others and mutual help were an important part of living in remote areas, as people are bound to similar challenges related to mobility, for example. Living in the rural north leads to a lifestyle that consist of ideas, practices and attitudes that are adjusted both to the local environment and to the conditions established by state policies. These components of rural lifestyle may be interpreted as a cultural capital, a local strength that enables rural residents to adjust their living to the ever-changing political and social environment (Wollin Elhouar 2014). As one interviewee stated:

> The countryside is a great place to live as long as you are able to accept the differences [related to urban living]. A person who expects everything to be available right there when you open the door cannot live here. Here you cannot expect services to be available within five minutes, you have to prioritize, you have to think through what the most significant issues in life for you are (Finnish woman, age 55).

When seen from the perspective of those committed to this rural lifestyle, the periphery is everything but stagnant or lagging behind development. It is also closely connected to urban centres as well as the wider environment. The so-called local living is attached to national and global cultural and eco-political spaces.

By taking account of the social and cultural as well as the physical and institutional environment, we have learned about the gaps between regime-level ideals and individual-level actions related to sustainability (also Eriksen 2016). The analysis above also shows how the periphery consists of two dimensions. Firstly, it is attached to geographies and practical ways of dealing with distances that separate it from the centres. At the same time, the periphery occurs in mental landscapes formed by polarizations and meaning-makings (also Norgaard 2011:xix). Locally conducted daily actions, such as using a private car for commuting, occur in this wider environment and illuminate the dynamic relation of everyday living to macro-scale policies.

Everyday rural life is active and people are constantly adjusting and finding novel solutions to address changes, for example, in the service network or in policies that affect their living in far-reaching ways, such as the taxation of fossil fuels. The periphery is constantly influenced by centres and regime-level policies, but the outcomes may differ from those expected or intended by policymakers. Accordingly, the periphery should be understood as a space where values and practices differ from the urban norm and challenge its ideas of sustainability. At the same time, the periphery is a place for active citizens who constantly develop and innovate instead of just reacting.

Conclusions: The Periphery as a Centre for Sustainable Everyday Living

What we have presented here is an ethnological description of rural interpretations of sustainability and the lifestyle that emerges in a periphery. As pointed out by Eriksen (2016:3) perceptions related to global issues, such as climate change, are constructed and represented at the local level. In this vein we argue that everyday life is a core for transitions towards sustainable lifestyles. By emphasizing the everyday life practices that differ between rural and urban environments, we have aimed to draw attention to uneven power relations inscribed in rural-urban and centre-periphery distinctions. By highlighting the often marginalized perspective of rural residents, we have shed light on the clashes between national and local thinking, and we have shown how ideas of sustainability that are posed from an urban perspective do not always fit rural realms and thus cannot lead to expected outcomes in people's behaviour or thought.

The gaps between ideas and actions in relation to climate change mitigation will not be bridged solely by educating citizens, because daily-level needs and motivations that emerge in certain environments may not equal those of political decision making on a national or global scale (also Evans et al. 2013; Raippalinna 2019). Household recycling, eating more vegetables instead of meat or cutting down holiday flights is relatively easy compared to cutting down one's private driving, especially in sparsely populated countries like Finland or Sweden. In many ways, circumstances other than individual one's control people's daily actions. This can be linked to policies that promote centralization – in the name of climate, economy or services, for example. Based on our studies, we argue that urban time and tempo can be understood as processes that

Just as residents, also rural researcher should remember to fuel her car in a nearby city. Photo: P. Hämeenaho.

have colonized everyday lives, also in the countryside (also Wollin Elhouar 2014). To travel long distances takes time, and this is often experienced as unsustainable. When infrastructure in the rural is scaled down, people have to travel further, which is hardly sustainable from any point of view.

Rural areas may be considered remote from the ideals of a low-carbon society, but the peripheral lifestyle includes various ways that are sustainable. According to our studies, remoteness as a feature of rural areas was given positive meanings in relation to sustainability by rural residents. For example, the slowness of living, manifesting social capital in the utilization of local networks and consciously created distance from consumerism may be regarded as positive values linked to

sustainability. Sustainability in ways of living was also represented in daily practices such as the methods of being mobile and in consumption habits and, in a way, how work and leisure were valued. The results reveal the vastness of sustainability, how it encompasses social and cultural as well as ecological aspects of daily living (also Parra et al. 2018).

From an urban perspective, however, rural living is sometimes interpreted as a failure in reaching the "commonly shared" sustainability goals (i.e. Wollin Elhouar 2014). For this reason, people living their locally bound life are excluded from the society that offers solutions to global issues – but only from the narrow perspective of urban lifestyles. Our analysis of the outcomes of this exclusion illuminates the difference in how rural living is interpreted at the national and local level. The gaps between local and national understanding make the straightforward implementation of macro-scale ideas at the grass-roots level of everyday life difficult or even impossible. The implementation fails due to mismatches in orientation – global or national ideas are not adjustable to everyday life practices.

Based on our research, we argue that sustainability transformation could be promoted by creating a more dynamic and reciprocal relationship between centres and peripheries. It is noteworthy that the feeling of being different or even excluded from society does not lead to stagnation, but to the creation of locally bound lifestyle and conceptions that promote the centrality of a periphery. Locals and localities do not only adjust, react or respond but also create and innovate from their own perspective and based on their own daily needs. The sustainable components of rural lifestyle have evolved as responses to requirements and ideas from the regime level. It is thus crucial to understand the "mundane" everyday life as a locus of opportunities, active agencies and change (also Michael 2006).

Keeping in mind Williams's (1985:12) notion that rural-urban relations are constantly adjusted and reinterpreted, we conclude by emphasizing the need to rethink the ways in which sustainability is understood in relation to differing living environments. On top of this, the notion of periphery should also be understood as a dynamic concept, whose relation to centres or urban norm is not monolithic. To reach a balance with one's perception of good living and what is good for nature requires steering different ways of interpreting sustainability to meet the hopes and needs attached to it. Lifestyle adjusted to peripheral conditions has features that are sustainable in an ecological, social and cultural sense. When sustainability is understood holistically and as a human-centred goal that strives towards a better human-nature balance, learning from the lifestyles emerging in rural areas may benefit us all.

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Notes

1 Also the reports by IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, launched in 1988.
2 Global knowledge had been spread in the United Nations led annual Climate Summits and Climate Change Conferences in 1979, 1990 and 2015, for example.
3 The current study is part of the project "The Frontier of Sustainability Transitions: Cultural Adaptations of Sustainability Policies in European Peripheral Regions (Academy of Finland 2016–2019).
4 The data were produced more than ten years ago. A lot has changed in relation to the sustainability debate since then. One major effect of that, which is worth mentioning here, is that the concept of sustainability has gained in public awareness and understanding. In 2007 the majority of the Swedish informants were not aware of the concept of sustainability to any large extent. Today one can assume that they are, due to public debates and political implementations.

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