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**In Search of the Rurban Idyll?
Developing the Residential Rural Areas in Finland**

Pilvi Hämeenaho

Abstract This research focuses on perceptions of rurality in Finland. The chapter presents two different ways of delineating contemporary rural living: the approach of the Finnish Rural Policy Committee and the alternative approach arising from definitions given by the people living in rural Finland. The main aim is to study how the cultural meanings that rural residents attach to their home environments relate to the official vision of ‘Residential Rural Areas’ proposed by the Rural Policy Committee. This is done by comparing the experiential knowledge of rural residents to the official vision of future rurality. The research provides knowledge that can be used to evaluate the cultural sustainability of proposed development actions. This ethnographic research is grounded on fieldwork conducted during 2009 in rural areas of Central Finland.

Keywords Rurality, Rural development, Cultural sustainability, Ethnography, Finland

Introduction

The project of developing the rural areas of Finland into modern living environments is underway, with various actors contributing fresh perspectives. This research explores the perceptions of rurality in Finland in the context of current socio-cultural changes. The chapter presents two different ways of delineating contemporary rural living: the vision of ‘Residential Rural Areas’ of the Rural Policy Committee (a developmental actor operating under the guidance of the Finnish ministry of Employment and Economy), and the alternative approach arising from definitions given by the people living in rural Finland. The main aim is to study how the cultural meanings that rural residents attach to their home environments relate to rurality as envisioned by the Rural Policy Committee. This is done by comparing and contrasting the experiential knowledge of rural residents to the

official vision outlined in the Rural Housing Development Programme (RHDP) of ‘Residential Rural Areas’.

How do today’s rural inhabitants characterize the countryside as a place to live in? What are the most valued features of rurality? What vision of rurality forms the basis for the development programme’s definition of ‘residential rural areas’? By pursuing these questions, this chapter explores how lay and official perceptions of rurality are juxtaposed. The research thus provides knowledge that can be used to evaluate the efficiency and cultural sustainability of proposed development actions. In this research lay knowledge is understood as a part of wider local heredity, the unofficial cultural capital arising from the context of everyday life. Understanding this local heredity that embodies the values and perceptions of the local community provides a more holistic view of rurality and broadens the perspective of developmental design (Bendix 2001: 38–39; Siivonen 2007: 9).

Policy-making and development planning should enlist innovative and informed means to serve the needs of those living everyday lives; ethnographic research can be useful in revealing what such means could be. My research is grounded on fieldwork, conducted during 2009 in Central Finland as a part of my PhD research project. The main data consists of fourteen semi-structured interviews that were digitally recorded and transcribed. The themes of the interviews covered the everyday life practices of rural residents, the meanings the interviewees attached to the countryside and the significance and role of the home environment in the formation of subjective well-being. The qualitative data thus sheds light on the viewpoints of the informants, who describe modern everyday life in rural Finland from the perspective of their experiences and perceptions (see also Snellman 2003: 11; Åström 2005: 31). The interconnectedness of cultural perceptions and the physical domicile is a starting point for an analysis that seeks to provide an alternative to the vision of rurality mediated through the urban gaze of development programmes (see, for example, Frykman & Gilje 2001: 42; Knuuttila & Rannikko 2008: 15; Murdoch 2003: 264).

Context and background

The question of the viability of rural Finland is a concern of many, as current migration patterns are changing the rural demography. The 2009 census shows that approximately 35 percent of Finnish people reside in rural areas, most of them in rural areas close to cities. In

these areas population have been rapidly increasing, but in remote areas they are steadily decreasing. Diminishing employment prospects and the constant out-migration of the young, for example, have their negative effects on rural localities in sparsely populated and core rural areas. In recent years, housing development has become an increasingly important strategy for rural municipalities in search of new residents (Sireni 2011: 11). At the same time, the growth of environmentally conscious politics has led to calls for more spatially coherent rural housing programmes. Avoiding the negative effects of urban sprawl is of particular concern in development projects (RPP 2009: 40; Savage & Lapping 2003: 5; Sireni 2011: 10, 12).

The most significant challenge to rural development is the geographically unique living environment of rural Finland (Kaipainen 2011: 116). Finland is the most sparsely populated country in the European Union. Those areas of Europe that share aspects of Finland's experience (low population density, long distances, problematic infrastructure and expensive delivery costs for public transportation) tend to be found only in mountainous areas or in archipelagos (see Wade & Rinne 2008: 35). This makes it difficult for Finnish policy-makers to adopt useful existing solutions from other European countries (Kaipainen 2011: 129). Accordingly, the development of Finnish rural areas into modern living environments will entail taking account of regional and geographic characteristics, and adaptable community planning arising from local settings (Brennan, Flint & Luloff 2009: 99–100; Siivonen 2007: 16).

Given the changes in Finnish rural demography, agricultural primary production and employment opportunities, practical measures will need to be taken in order to increase permanent rural residency rates. As such, improving rural living conditions is a priority for regions hoping to attract new residents and it is also a major concern of national rural policy. The primary objective of the current Rural Policy Programme (RPP), *Countryside for Vigorous Finland, Rural Policy Program for 2009–2013*, is to promote well-being and to improve the preconditions for living in rural areas. The Theme Group on Rural Housing has been tasked with implementing one of the strategic alignments of the most recent Rural Policy Program (2009: 39): the creation of multifaceted housing areas, new spaces for functional daily living. The Theme Group's main source is the Rural Housing Development Programme's (RHDP) 'Residential Rural Areas' committee report, which outlines practical proposals to resolve the problems of

dispersed housing and incoherent area planning in response to contemporary economic and ecological demands (RHDP 2007: 5–7).

Besides the demographic and economic changes, rurality is also undergoing a cultural transformation. According to recent surveys¹, there has been increasing interest in rural living among Finns. The countryside is seen as an attractive place to live in, despite the everyday practical challenges posed by the rural environment, such as the long distances to work-places and services and the places for consumption (Nieminen–Sundell 2011). When analysing these results one should bear in mind that the ‘countryside’ is not just a physical place: it is also a socio-cultural space imbued with ideas about ‘rurality’. Thus, the concept of ‘rural’ refers both to geographical sites and to imaginative, culturally valued spaces (Cloke 2006: 18). The survey results reveal that recent interest in rural living is closely connected to widely shared cultural perceptions of rurality. The country as a residential area is associated with spacious building plots that enable residents’ peaceful and environmentally sustainable lifestyles amid beautiful scenery (Nieminen–Sundell 2011; Sireni 2011).

Developing rural areas into modern living environments will depend upon understanding those aspects of rurality that are most highly valued, as these are the ‘pull factors’ that encourage migration to the rural areas (Hienonen 2011: 27). In addition, successful development will also need to consider the views of current rural residents. As Brennan, Flint & Luloff (2009: 99) argue, local support for changes to the existing social environment is vital to ensure positive outcomes for development projects. Culturally sustainable development thus involves the consideration of cultural perspectives and lay knowledge informing the limitations of policy making and articulating the needs of municipalities (Marcus 1986: 166; Siivonen 2007: 16; Strang 2009: 76). However, despite the value of cultural knowledge, the development of rural areas has tended to be dominated by economic perspectives, which focus on local labour markets and the future of agricultural primary production. The cultural perspective has often been neglected, and the significance of the local level forgotten (Brennan, Flint & Luloff 2009: 97).

How far does the intended practical implementation of the RHDP’s proposals relate to the features of rurality that are culturally highly appreciated?

¹ Landmarks research conducted by the Finnish Innovation Fund *Sitra*. Survey data was collected twice (2009 and 2011). For results, see Nieminen-Sundell 2011.

Furthermore, even development of the 'residential rural' as envisaged by the RHDP is a key issue for rural municipalities in search of new residents, it also concerns those currently living in rural areas. What is the relationship between the RHDP's proposed 'residential rural areas' and current rural residents' perceptions and ideals of rurality? In order to answer these questions, the ways in which the concept of rurality is used and given meanings need to be analysed. This chapter examines the role of shared cultural values and perceptions in current definitions of 'rurality' and discusses how these values and perceptions should be accorded special significance for the development project.

Data sources and methodology

The main data of the research illuminates the perceptions attached to rurality by people currently living in the country. The interviews were conducted in seven villages: Iiomäki, Kopola, Kuoppala, Mulikka, Pajumäki, Saani and Sahrajärvi, in Central Finland. All these villages are situated in remote or core rural areas. In all the villages farming and forestry form a part of the locals' livelihoods and the cultivation has its impact both on visual and socio-cultural environments. Regardless of my informants' means of income, the agrarian way of life is still prominent in their daily lives. Thus, the informants' living environments aptly represent the commonly shared vision of rural Finland as a culturally evaluated space with a close connection to the agrarian heritage (Korkiakangas 2010: 82; Siivonen 2007: 12).

The research focused on families. The data consists of fourteen semi-structured interviews with rural people and their families. The informants were all female, their ages ranging from 30 to 55. As all the informants had children, mothers' ideas about the environment in which they wished to bring up their children were highlighted during the interviews. The women interviewed had close ties with their home municipalities. Four of the women were farmers while three others had a local private enterprise with no connection to agrarian primary production. Five of them worked in the public sector, in the field of healthcare or education. One of the informants worked as a reporter for a local newspaper.

The interviewees had different relations to rural living. Most of them had been born in the country and had only spent a few years of their lives in urban area, mainly while studying in vocational schools or colleges. Two of them had also worked for several years in the cities of Southern Finland, but had moved back to their home regions after

raising a family. Five of the informants represent the group of in-migrants, as they were born in the city and moved to the country as adults, in most cases to fulfil a spouse's dream of moving (back) to the country. Due to the variation in the informants' backgrounds the data opens a view of the perceptions of rurality from those whose lifestyles and values have evolved in the rural environment, those with long experience of living in both environments and those whose relation to rurality is only about a change from assumptions to experiential knowledge.

As the counterpart to lay knowledge, I studied the RHDP's 2007-2010 committee report entitled 'Residential Rural Areas'. The RHDP's initial aim is to find practical measures to control the negative ecological effects of urban sprawl, to restructure rural settlements and infrastructure and especially to increase rural population growth rates. As such, the basis for development lies in understanding what the possible in-migrants expect of their living environment: the opportunity to work in nearby cities and reasonable access to sites of leisure activities and consumption (Nieminen–Sundell 2011: 14). The RHDP's proposals stress the importance of efficient land use and the need to ensure sufficient density of settlement for ecologically sustainable power and water supplies. To support those commuting to urban areas, the RHDP proposes the connection of rural areas with municipal transport networks.

However, the Rural Policy Committee's long-term aim of sustaining the vitality of rural areas means that the RHDP also has an interest in issues surrounding the formation and everyday life of rural communities (RHDP 2007: 14). Thus the cultural precepts and values attached to country living need to be reflected upon. In this research the rurality envisioned in the programme is analysed from a cultural perspective. My focus is on exploring how rurality is acknowledged in the RHDP and what kind of rurality the programme produces at the level of ideas. Furthermore, this official vision is compared with the lay perspectives in order to reveal their similarities and differences.

Living out the 'rural idyll'

In addition to the ongoing practical changes to living conditions in rural areas, the cultural conception of rurality is also undergoing transformation. Earlier prevailing perceptions of the rural Finland – the characterization of the countryside either as a space of agricultural production or as reminiscent of an agrarian past – have marginalized the notion of rurality.

As a space for living, the rural has been contrasted with the modern urbanized environment through its association with an idyllic vision of agrarian traditions and heritage (Knuuttila & Rannikko 2008: 9; Korhonen 2010: 82–83). Even though there has been a recent shift from rather pessimistic to more positive and future-oriented perceptions of rurality, the connection with agrarian culture and lifestyle still dominates the new definitions (Hienonen 2011: 42; Nieminen–Sundell: 2011). As Paul Cloke (2003: 1) argues, the cultural precept of envisioning the countryside as an ‘idyll’ is so pervasive that it affects both thought and practice. The strength of these perceptions is evident in the ideas about the Finnish countryside expressed by potential rural residents.

As the perception of the rural environment as a place exclusively for agriculture has waned, other features of rurality have received more attention and the consumption of countryside as a culturally evaluated space has evoked. According to surveys (Nieminen–Sundell 2011), potential residents do not see rural areas simply as places in which to live but a space in which to consume rurality (see also Bunce 2003: 25; Kuisma 2005: 125; Macnaghten & Urry 1998: 120–121). In general, the perceptions of rurality expressed in the surveys seem to follow quite traditional ideas of a ‘pastoral myth’ or ‘rural idyll’. This cultural construction of rurality emphasizes the significance of nature and rural lifestyles founded on ‘traditional’ values. It is noteworthy that envisioning countryside as a space for ‘pastoral’ living and lifestyle is based on observing the rural environment from the viewpoint of urbanites rather than of countrymen (see, for example, Bell 2006: 158; DuPuis 2006: 126; Short 1991: 28, 30; Williams 1985: 20).

Yet no matter how nostalgic and idyllic this vision may sound, it is not simply an idea – it is also part of the everyday experiences of rural residents. The experience of ‘living out’ the idyll was widely shared by my informants. The interviews clearly show that for rural residents the surrounding natural environment moulds their perceptions of rurality and is among the most important factors associated with personal well-being (see also Siivonen 2007: 8–9). Among the main characteristics of the culturally constructed rural space is the landscape that visually frames everyday life (see also Wylie 2003: 146). One of my informants described the meaning of various kinds of scenery for her personal well-being:

‘So much free sky, here on the top of the hill where we live. This scenery, we can watch how the clouds go, and the sun: the rising and the setting of it. My sister-in-law has a summer place

just there, under the hill. So we go there, watch the sunset and when we come back here we can watch it again!’ (church musician, 55 years old).

The importance of peacefulness and natural surroundings was stressed during the interviews. All the interviewees spoke first about privacy and having their own space, and used strikingly similar expressions in their discussions. One of the mothers interviewed explained the significance of her home location to her everyday well-being by highlighting the value of the privacy provided by the rural environment:

‘It’s so peaceful here, we have this privacy. When I come home after the day at work [in the town] I can do whatever I want, just be here, and no neighbours watching us. For me, it’s the most valued thing about living here.’ (social worker, 36 years old).

The family’s nearest neighbours are only a half a kilometre away, but the dense forest between the houses makes them seem further apart. While the American dream may be the single-family home surrounded by its own land (see Cadieux & Hurley 2011: 299), the Finnish rural dream also entails extensive privacy and a connection to (unspoiled) nature (see, for example, Siivonen 2007: 8; Sireni 2011). The dream of living in fresh, unpolluted natural surroundings is often associated with the idea of one’s own house in the forest, with the wilderness just beyond the back hedge. As one of my informants described ‘the everyday life idyll’:

‘Why do I like living here? I always say that on a fresh summer’s morning, it’s so nice to go out onto the porch in my pyjamas, have a cup of coffee and there’s nobody else around. That’s the main point; there is nobody else, no disturbance.’ (social instructor, 41 years old).

The natural environment is given such prominence as part of rurality that it serves as a starting point for the ‘rural’ lifestyle (see also Murdoch 2003: 264). It is assumed that living in a rural environment also entails leading a rural lifestyle. Yet living in the country is thus not just about passively enjoying rurality, but also actively producing it. The countryside was described as a space where the idyllic vision can be made real. One of my interviewees, a former city-dweller, had lived less than a year in small village at the time I met her. She admits how she had romanticized ideas about country living, but also notes how her lifestyle had changed in reality:

‘I had this idea, as if I had been looking through rose-coloured glasses. I had this nostalgic or, how to describe it, romantic vision that here in the countryside I would walk around with a scarf around my head, carrying a basket in my hand. But really, somehow my life has actually changed a lot. It is so different to live here than in a city flat. I have started to bake bread in our oven, which I had never done before, and we are building a cellar for potatoes, those potatoes that we are growing in our back garden. So we have changed our way of life, and it has been mostly deliberate.’ (schoolteacher, 34 years old).

Her relationship to the countryside is nostalgic, yet at the same time she is transforming these idyllic visions into reality. The idea that one’s lifestyle can be changed by moving to the country is widely shared by Finns (Hienonen 2011; Nieminen–Sundell 2011). Current (political) ideologies, especially environmentalism, strong criticism of consumerism and the increased pace of urban living have led some to seek out an alternative lifestyle. The new, positive view of rural Finland can be interpreted as a search for a ‘new’ lifestyle through counter-urbanization, that is, migration (or dreams of migration) from urban areas to more natural spaces (Fielding 1989: 60, 62; Mitchell 2004: 28). Rural areas seem particularly attractive to so-called LOHAS (the lifestyle of health and sustainability) consumers, for whom the rural areas seem to offer a lifestyle of well-being in its more communal and slow-paced rhythm (Hienonen 2011: 22–24).

One of the primary goals of the RHDP is to deliver practical solutions that enable urbanites to turn these dreams into reality. Accordingly, seen at the level of cultural meanings, the ‘future rural’ is outlined in a traditional, nostalgic way in the RHDP, as spacious natural surroundings and close-knit, local communities are presented as a characteristics of rural living. These ideas repeat the division between modern urban and peripheral rural, and keep the vision of an ‘agrarian idyll’ alive (Cadieux & Hurley 2011, 297; Mitchell 2004: 24; Short 1991: 30–31). Yet the reality, especially on the rural-urban fringe, does not reflect this division. As the rural areas close to cities become more crowded, the problems of suburbia begin to emerge in the rural environment. Fringe areas suffer from problems such as overcrowded schools, lack of local services and poor public transport services. Singular constructions outside the areas’ building plans have affected the landscape in undesirable ways and the existing road network is not conducive to daily commuting to cities (RHDP 2007: 30–31; see also Woods 2005: 119).

As such, the question of land use is a key issue for the RHDP – ten out of fifteen main proposals target more coherent community planning, the construction of new housing areas or the renovation of existing buildings in order to form densely populated villages close to traffic hubs and urban centres. In practice, the creation of new residential rural areas actually creates hybrids of socio-cultural spaces that combine the elements of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ on sites that are geographically in-between (see also Bell 2006: 158; Murdoch 2003: 275.) Within this process lies a significant question concerning the cultural sustainability of the development programme. Combining the elements of two disparate environments, rural and urban, is a major challenge for the development of residential rural areas, given that the cultural perceptions of the two environments are often polarized (Korkiakangas 2010: 84; Kuisma 2005: 123).

The rural-urban dichotomy

The widely shared idea of the role of the countryside as an idyllic environment of yesteryear emphasizes its character as a place where ‘non-urban’ scenery and lifestyle still exist. Accordingly, the countryside often carries meanings drawn from this polarization. (Bell 2006: 158; Macnaghten & Urry 1998: 187). The dichotomy of rural and urban was also used extensively by my informants. The idea that living in the country is more humane and basically better than life in urban areas was often reiterated. Such a comparison of rural living to its urban counterpart was the most common way of explaining what kind of home environment rural Finland provides.

Even the reasons for living in the country varied between the informants, the happiness occasioned by the opportunity to live in the country was common to all of them. Most of the women with rural backgrounds clearly stated that they had always wanted to live in the country and knew that they would move back immediately after their studies in the city were over. However, some of them described how at that stage of life they had never thought about ‘going back there’. Maternity had changed their perspective. They were all sure that living in the country is a better environment for children to grow up in despite the problems like the lack of playmates or fewer opportunities for hobbies. Perceptions about quality of life were closely connected to a rural environment that not only offers beautiful landscapes, but is also seen as an inspiring and safe space for family life and bringing up children. Providing their children with safety and a change to learn

how to live close to nature valued more by the mothers than possible leisure facilities in an urban environment.

‘Our kids have often told us how they like to drive mopeds or maybe field-cars and everything like that. Everything that you can’t do in cities, while living in apartment block, like going biking and driving a motor sledge. Here we have this nature and space surrounding us. I could not imagine living in some apartment block with a family like this.’ (public health nurse, 42 years old).

This interviewee emphasized the leisure opportunities of the rural space and also pointed out how the family’s lifestyle would not fit into an urban environment. She had lived in the city during her studies in vocational school but underlined how she never thought of staying there as she had found city life most disagreeable. For most informants, life in urban areas was considered to be too hectic, unsocial and filled with dangers. In many cases, the attitudes of my informants towards urban living were extremely negative. The manner of attaching positive attributes to rural living and almost demonizing the urban was a common feature of the interviews. The point at which the rural-urban dichotomy was most emphasised was when the idea of ‘one’s own peace’ was understood in terms of security. A mother who had lived and worked for years in the Helsinki area made a clear distinction between the two differing living environments, and highlighted the safety of the country:

‘There in Helsinki, I saw it all: junkies and crooks are everywhere. Here, instead, it is safe. I do not have to be afraid, I can send the kids into the garden, and I do not have to worry that someone will kidnap them or they will be run over by some car.’ (youth worker, 32 years old).

These perceptions of rural and urban follow the escapist logic of counter-urbanization, in which the ‘rural idyll’ is seen to offer refuge from the insecurity and anxiety of urban life (DuPuis 2006: 125; Mitchell 2004: 28; Short 1991: 31). The question of rural/urban polarization becomes especially important when the rurality envisioned by the RHDP is explored from this perspective. It is noteworthy that rurality as defined by this programme is based on the fantasies and ideological values of urbanites (see also Macnaghten & Urry 1998: 191; Siivonen 2007: 11, 14). Furthermore, the development initiatives are targeted at the rural-urban fringe, the rural areas close to cities where most new rural residents

settle. (RHDP 2007: 6, 12.) This focus naturally allows more coherent community planning of these residential areas and the implementation of connections to urban centres of activity.

Yet, in terms of cultural meanings and perceptions, these areas represent the space in which romanticized visions of the Finnish countryside and the reality of daily living in rural areas collide. The cultural idea of the 'pastoral idyll' is strongly present in the RHDP, but as a committee report, it strives for practical changes that will provide (new) rural residents with work and leisure opportunities similar to those enjoyed by urbanites. How are the two differing perceptions conflated in reality? How can the juxtaposition of rural and urban within lay perceptions be combined with the hybrid rurality of the 'Residential Rural Areas'?

Towards rurban realities?

One of the main goals of the RHDP is to mitigate the negative consequences of urban sprawl through coherent community planning, thereby serving both present and future residents. Uncontrolled migration to areas close to cities threatens the visual image commonly associated with the Finnish countryside (RPP 2009: 40). At the same time, spatial development practices and land use in line with modern living requirements may also result in a rural landscape that does not conform to idealized visions (see also Cadieux & Hurley: 2011: 299; Macnaghten & Urry 1992: 201). From a wider perspective, both urban and rural areas are affected by global and nationally governed economic and migration practices and trends. Such changes affect cultural values and perceptions, leading to increasing similitude between the rural and the urban as both politically and culturally valued spaces. (Cloke 2006: 18–19; Knuuttila & Rannikko 2008: 18.) According to Andreas Hompland (1991), this process of cultural exchange and adaptation of the rural and the urban is two sided: it can be perceived both as urbanization of the rural and also as ruralisation of the urban. The outcome of these processes is an intermediate socio-cultural entity, *a rurban space* that has features from both extremes of the polarized distinction between urban and rural (see also Olsson & Ruotsala 2009: 10).

By combining idyllic, spacious rural living with modern city life, the development of 'Residential Rural Areas' in practice aims to create a cultural hybrid, rurban space representing neither the urban nor the rural. The practical application of the

idea of densely populated centres runs counter to ‘traditional’ conceptions of Finnish residence patterns. Traditionally, Finnish farms, especially in Eastern Finland (and in the areas of Central Finland from which interview data was collected) were remote from each other. The main farmhouse would be built in the middle of extensive farmlands and so neighbours could easily be some kilometres away from each other. The plan for ‘Residential Rural Areas’ involves spacious residential areas, in which private houses have large gardens but are still close to each other. The new residential areas envisaged by the RHDP are also situated near cities, sometimes so close that the geographical division between suburbia and village becomes indistinct.

Developing the residential rural and limiting urban sprawl by controlling the location and density of new types of housing also has cultural implications. However, development should not disturb the ‘essence’ of the rural space that is so attractive to potential rural residents. And because rurality is not just rural land and landscape but the lifestyle associated with it, culturally sustainable development needs to focus especially on social spheres of living (see also Savage & Lapping 2003: 5). A sense of community is among the features of rural living that most appeal to potential rural residents (Hienonen 2011: 51–52), and it is also highly valued in the RHDP. In the interviews the significance of local community was also raised as a positive feature of everyday life.

‘Of course, when people know each other, then it is easy to get help from them. And, in a sense, it is the sense of community, we have that, we take care of each other. For example, that neighbours bring up the other neighbours’ children, look after them, that’s how it goes.’ (social instructor, 41 years old).

In addition to the positive impact of unofficial communal practices on everyday life, a sense of belonging to a local community is in itself highly valued. The maintenance of this social capital and even its development is among the RHDP’s key endeavours (RHDP 2007: 38). But because the practical proposals are mainly concerned with the development of infrastructure and coherent settlements, the socio-cultural dimension of future rural reality is largely neglected. Although at the level of ideas about rurality the RHDP shares many of the values expressed by rural residents, its practical proposals tend towards a quite different rural reality.

Living in the rurban village

The ideas and actions of local communities are often based on certain expectations about how new localities will function as social entities. This vision follows stereotypical perceptions of 'rural communities' and their cultural and social persistence. 'Rural' is mainly seen as a natural space where the phenomenon of the 'social' is subordinated to the characteristics of natural processes (Murdoch 2003: 263; Short 1991: 30). These cultural ideas can be viewed as one of the key attributes that characterise the commonly shared vision of rurality. However, among development processes such stereotypes should be considered with caution as they do more to illuminate the idea of community attached to an idea of countryside than the reality of modern rural living (see also Korhonen 2010: 75–76).

The development of residential rural areas will entail significant socio-cultural changes. According to the programme, life in the new residential areas should follow both the communal solidarity associated with rural living and the viable, active lifestyle associated with urban living and its vast social networks (RHDP 2007:12). Interestingly, this vision of development is remarkably similar to a process that conservers of the culturally appreciated countryside have identified as a cause for the disappearance of the 'rural'. When the characteristics of *Gesellschaft* are merged with the practices and values of *Gemeinschaft*, the former 'rural way of life' is generally expected to fade away (see, for example, DuPuis 2006: 126; Panelli 2006: 68).

Even if the current development does not lead to a situation of 'rurality lost', the programme's key development ideas themselves pose a practical threat to the formation of strong local communities. It is noteworthy that the same people who migrate to the country in search of a rural lifestyle are at the same time the cause of its transformation. Urbanites bring their own ways of life to their new places of residence, and the everyday life culture of villages is altered by the practices of new forms of neighbouring and networks (Savage & Lapping 2003: 10). The in-migration of urbanites and the strengthening of the infrastructure (including the promotion of public transport services) connect the new 'rurban village' more closely with the cities and enable more efficient private mobility between these two environments (RHDP 2007: 39, 41; see also Mahon, Fahy & Ó Cinnéide 2012: 269). Not only are rurban village residents likely to work in the city, but they may also undertake leisure activities in the city rather than in

local settings. When the city is the site of so many everyday life practices, how can a sense of community be fostered in the village?

Phenomena like community spirit cannot be designed and implemented through policies as such. As the development of residential rural areas proceeds, there is a need to consider strategies to enable and promote the communal lifestyle envisioned in the programme. New forms of activity are also welcomed, but the most important issue is to attract the newcomers to local activities. Examples of this kind of activity came up in the interviews. The expectations of a former city dweller of rural living, the quality of social life and the warmth of the local community had proven to be true:

‘We were welcomed [to the village] very warmly, it 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.’ (schoolteacher, 34 years old.)

The merging of urban and rural should not be considered solely as threat but also as a potential source of new cultural exchanges (Hompland 1991 cit. in Villa 2000: 474). The increasing scope of individuals’ social networks and mobility may inhibit the feeling of belonging to a spatial location, but it does not lead to the loss of all sense of belonging. Instead of being bound to specific geographical sites, ‘local’ communities are increasingly constructed within the social spaces of ideas and multiple identities (Knuuttila & Rannikko 2008: 15; Massey 2005: 184–185). The process of rurbanisation may itself turn out to be a solution, by preparing the ground for new kinds of communal feelings. Rural residents will have new opportunities to incorporate elements of the formerly polarized entities of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ within their desired lifestyles (Villa 2000: 474; also Mahon, Fahy & Ó Cinnéide 2012: 269).

Those in-migrants who are committed to their locality may become important agents of development. Often they not only have the will to preserve the idyll for which they moved to the country, but can also advance the most valued practices and ensure the maintenance of community spirit. ‘Living out the dream’ – deliberately following and strengthening the most cherished features of rural living – involves the social sphere as well as private everyday practices. Thus, there are positive indications that a rurban sense of locality can indeed be formed.

The role and significance of the developmental policy work thus lies in the creation of an environment in which locals can become involved in the development process. The RPP's aim to keep rural Finland viable requires that rural localities cooperate with municipalities and civic organizations in order to take care of local issues and development. Whereas the 2007–2010 RHDP focused largely on the development of built environment and efficient zoning, the latest four-year strategy for rural housing² places more emphasis on taking account of the socio-cultural aspects of migration and rural living as part of development. In practice, local residents should be offered opportunities both to preserve and to reform their rural areas as spaces for daily living according to their own interests and preferences.

Conclusions

Developing the residential rural requires careful balancing of rural and urban features of living and lifestyles, as well as negotiation of the culturally shared visions and values associated with these disparate spaces. This research contributes to the process of developing the Finnish rural areas into a modern living environment by exploring differing perceptions of rurality. Rurality as envisioned by the Finnish Rural Policy Committee and its Theme Group on Rural Housing is compared with the perceptions of people living in rural Finland about their home environment. As an outcome this ethnographic research shows how lay and official perceptions of rurality dovetail on the level of ideas but become more versatile when they reach the level of everyday life practices in rural environment.

Developing rural Finland into residential rural areas entails recognizing the regional and areal characteristics. Long distances, and the vastness of remote areas are challenges for efficient, ecological zoning. In terms of developing the material environment in residential rural areas the RHDP has a clear vision of how to achieve its goal. Accordingly, the outcomes of the implementation related to zoning and renewing the existing village infrastructure have been successful. However, when the focus is on issues of lifestyle or subjective well-being, the development process becomes more difficult.

The research presented in this chapter reveals that lay and official perceptions of rurality have much in common. Both are based on nostalgic ideas of an idyllic rurality. But when the practical outcomes of the development envisaged by the

² Confirmed at the end of 2011.

RHDP are compared with the informants' descriptions of rural areas as a daily living space, these two perceptions seem to be almost diametric opposites. The practical development of rural areas is mainly grounded on solving the economic and infrastructural problems of the rural areas, whereas potential rural residents dream about a pastoral idyll.

In all the interviews conducted, the most appreciated features of rural living were the natural surroundings and the peacefulness they afforded. Urban living was mentioned as a negative counterpoint to highly valued rurality. Yet rather than building the new rural environment on the attributes of idyllic rurality, the RHDP's proposals place considerable emphasis on the transformation of the rural areas into modern living environments by combining rural and urban elements. Accordingly, the impact of cultural changes at the level of everyday practices has been largely unaddressed. The model of dense housing with close connections to urban living does not correspond to my informants' visions of the peaceful, spacious countryside with strong social ties among locals.

What is shaping rural futures in Finland? It has been argued (Kuisma 2005: 121) that when the urban gaze attributes meanings to rurality, the rural landscape becomes the other, the wide open spaces between the cities, cultural gaps to be filled with visions and fantasies. The RHDP aims to bridge the geographical and cultural gaps with its vision of 'Residential Rural Areas'. It seeks to combine pastoral landscapes with the requirements of a modern, functional living environment comparable to that found in urban areas.

Accepting the practical framings of rural areas is important. Beyond this, the cultural perspective needs to be borne in mind. Solving the practical problems of, for example, commuting and zoning are not enough to ensure the successful development of the rural village; it should also address quality of life in terms of the cultural values and perceptions attached to the countryside. This could be done by conserving the most valued aspects of rurality – the natural environment, the landscape and the sense of community – in order to meet the expectations attached to rural locations as living environments. The addition of local residents' perspectives to the discussion of future rurality adds depth to the dialogue between official and lay knowledge, and thus advances the development of rural areas in culturally sustainable ways.

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