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## How do community development activities affect the construction of rural places? A case study from Finland

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### Abstract

Community-based development practices have been seen as the prevailing paradigm for rural development. Rural community development practices are employed especially through local non-governmental organisations, such as village associations, to ensure that rural communities are vital and attractive places to live. In this article, we explore how community development practices affect and shape rural places. The data were collected in three Finnish villages that each have an active village association and that have adopted community development practices as their method of keeping their village viable. According

to the results of our study, the impacts of community practices on rural places can be

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classified in terms of three interconnected phenomena: the strengthening of entrepreneurial culture, the increase of networking and institutionalisation, which refers here to processes by which rural communities become incorporated in formal rural governance programmes. All of these phenomena indicate that community actions have become more goal-oriented and emphasise the responsibility of community agency in developing rural areas.

**Keywords:** community development, village, rurality, space.

## 1. Introduction

Community development practices refer to different kinds of actions and projects carried out in local communities, villages, neighbourhoods or living areas. They can be seen as an instrument to promote people's wellbeing and solve social problems, such as isolation or loneliness (Pawar 2014), or as a broader approach for rural place-based development (Horlings 2016). 'Community-based', 'place-based' or 'bottom-up' approaches, as well as 'social innovations' that aim to incorporate local people's meanings, needs, commitment and initiatives, are often regarded as sustainable means to promote rural development (Robinson and Hales 2001).

As a result of urbanisation and modernisation in agriculture and forestry and centralised service production, rural regions have to look for new strategies to maintain their viability (Lummina et al. 2012). Over the past 20 years, community development practices have been seen as the prevailing paradigm for rural development in the European Union (Ray 2000)

and in OECD countries (Krawchenko 2014; OECD 2006). In the European Union, the LEADER approach is the main instrument through which local communities are encouraged to implement bottom-up planning and projects to create new jobs and revitalise rural areas. For example, in Finland, there are (as of 2018) 54 regional local action groups (LAG) that urge rural communities to carry out community-based development projects in accordance with the national rural policy objectives. These projects involve renovating village halls and other community places, building tourist attractions, developing local services, carrying out employment projects, creating sports and recreational places, and organising festivals, art exhibitions or seminars. It can be assumed that these development activities change rural areas substantially, not only physically but also by affecting how they are perceived and experienced by the local people and visitors.

The community development approach can be considered part of the post-productivist changes to rural areas: a shift in primary production based on natural resources and associated changes in land use and an increased diversification of policy, regimes and technologies (Mather et al. 2006), as well as changes to the structures and practices of social life in rural communities. The adoption of community development practices as a way to increase the vitality of rural areas can also be seen as a part of neoliberal development and the renegotiation of the roles of the public, private and third sectors (Kumpulainen 2017; Woods 2006). Due to the centralisation of services, the role of the state and municipalities has decreased in rural territories, and the significance of local actors, non-governmental organisations and individuals has become increasingly important in organising community-level activities and taking care of local infrastructure and assets. In Finland, this is reflected in Finnish rural policy and national village action programmes (Kumpulainen

2012). According to these programmes, the community development approach is the only option to 'save' villages (Kumpulainen 2017). Since the 1990s, community development practices have been widely adopted in Finnish villages, and there has been a registered village association in almost every village in Finland (The national community development programme of Finland 2014-2020). The same trend, establishing village organisations to take agency in local development, has also been witnessed in other Scandinavian and European countries (Halhead 2006).

In recent decades, rural areas have increasingly become objects of investigation from a community development perspective (Emeh 2012; Keyim 2018; Majerova 2015; Yung-Jaan 2013). Community development or community-led development research is interested in the practices in communities that promote local development (Mtika and Kristler 2017). Rural community development research has focused, for example, on the social, economic and environmental dimensions of development practices in rural areas (De San Eugenio-Vela and Barniol-Carcasona 2015; Fabricius 2004; Lee et al. 2005), the role of culture in community development (Brennan et al. 2009; Crawshaw and Gkartzios 2016), how local practices are related to rural policy strategies (Herbert-Cheshire 2000) or how participation in development work is constructed inside rural communities (Eversole 2010).

Critical research, in turn, has studied rural community development from the perspective of governance. It has been found that the empowerment and participation of citizens in community projects is a complicated phenomenon, and it is more difficult to accomplish than usually assumed (Johansen and Chandler 2015). Increasing responsibility for local affairs does not automatically mean that local communities have more power (Herbert-

Cheshire and Higgins 2004). The increased role of rural communities also creates regional inequality, since some communities can take advantage of community-led strategies better than others (Eversole 2010; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2004). The activation of communities can also be seen as part of the politics of active citizenship, in which the state and society are released from responsibilities that are then assigned to individual citizens and communities instead (Kumpulainen 2016; Marinetto 2003; Rose 2000). While the challenges related to the more formalised community actions have been addressed, their spatial, social and structural consequences have received less attention.

In this article, by applying theories of social space and social practices, we explore how rural community development activities shape and affect rural areas as 'places' and what kinds of effects these activities have on local community agency and structure. Both theories, social space (Lefebvre 1991) and social practice theory (Shove et al. 2012), emphasise local practices and the procedural nature of social reality. They analyse the dynamics and change of everyday life from different perspectives, both structural and personal. Social space and social practice theories complement each other and reveal the processes by which villages, as post-productive rural spaces and places, are constructed and transformed. The ways to define rural spaces and communities vary in different cultural and linguistic contexts (Gkartzios and Remoundou 2018). Our research focuses on rural 'villages', which are the smallest units of rural development in Finland, often implying a reference to a certain geographical place. In Finnish rural policy objectives and guidelines, which are presented in the *Rural Development Programme for Mainland Finland 2007–2013*, a village is defined as a region that has a registered village association or a committee (Ministry of Agriculture and

Forestry 2007, p. 194). In Finland, there is a strong village action movement, which makes Finnish villages ideal associations to study the effects of community development practices.

Following Lefebvre's (1991) social space theory, we define rural space through three moments: perceived, conceived and lived. We assume that spatial change in villages happens through local practices implemented by non-governmental organisations and village associations. We consider the social practices of local village associations to be the key link between the rural development discourse produced by rural policy (conceived space) and the locally experienced and concrete village (perceived and lived space). By identifying the changes in different elements of local social practices (material, competence and meaning element) following Shove et al. (2012), we aim to show how community development activities shape rural places.

In the next section, we present the theoretical framework of our study and define rural communities through social space and social practice theories. Next, we discuss our data and methodological approach. In the results section, using the threefold categorisation of practices (Shove et al. 2012), we explore on which kinds of elements the villages' social practices are constructed and how they have changed since adopting the community development approach. Finally, we discuss key elements of the change, namely, *the strengthening of entrepreneurial culture, networking and institutionalisation*, in other words, how changes in community practices affect villages as rural spaces and places.

## 2. Villages as places of community development practices

### 2.1. Villages as places

There are diverse ways to study space and places. Research can focus on the ways people experience or give meanings to places (Tuan 1977), the semiotic construction of the representations and identities of places (Wheeler 2017) or structural factors. We apply Henri Lefebvre's (1991) social space theory because it highlights the multidimensional and processual nature of space. Lefebvre's social space theory is guided by critique of the traditional dualism of space. By recognising and analysing the social character of space, he aimed to surpass the division between mental and physical or between conceptual and material space (Anttonen 2002, p. 174; Lefebvre 1991, pp. 1–67). Defining space as a process contains both dimensions, as the ways of producing space, social structures, individual experiences and local action are seen as part of a constantly changing process (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005, p. 30).

Social space theory has been applied and interpreted in different ways when defining rural space (Frisvoll 2012; Halfacree 2006; Halfacree 2007). Both Halfacree (2007) and Frisvoll (2012) emphasise the manifold nature of rurality and recognise the changing character of rural space in the post-productivist countryside. Frisvoll (2012) emphasises the role of social actors and their interaction. Additionally, Galani-Moutafi (2013) has emphasised the critical role of agents in the production of rural space when studying the case of an Aegean island. In our study, the role of social agency is important, since village associations are community actors that produce villages as social spaces. Compared to studies that view rural space



either theoretically or through certain actors, our case study focuses on the spatiality in community practices.

Lefebvre's social space consists of three interconnected moments, the perceived, conceived and lived space, which together are called the dialectic triad (Lefebvre 1991). The first moment of the triad, perceived space, refers to local practices and structures concerning the production, reproduction and consumption of space. Different kinds of daily practices and routines define the use and activities of space. (Anttonen 2002; Halfacree 2007; Lefebvre 1991.) In our research, the spatial practices of a village entail those activities and structures that are related to the village and produce *the village* as a particular place and local community with structures belonging to the common spaces and places in a village, such as village halls and outdoor and other public places.

The second moment, conceived space, refers to official and formal conceptions and representations of space, articulated by planners, scientists, politicians and officials. They guide and control the production of space, and they are connected to the prevailing production relations and their representations but also conceptualise space in compliance with dominating scientific-ideological conceptions and models. (Anttonen 2002; Halfacree 2007; Lefebvre 1991.) In Finland, for example, the conceived village is produced especially by rural and regional policy, rural research, and community development and village action programmes as an organised community, while informal local communities may not be recognised as villages at all.

The third moment of the triad refers to the dimension of experienced and lived space (Anttonen 2002; Halfacree 2007; Lefebvre 1991; Määttänen 2007). Here, the meanings, images and symbolism of the space are assumed to affect the ways individuals and communities experience, think of and give meanings to their settings, often in non-verbal ways. This 'inner' world manifests itself especially in art, monuments, landscapes and rituals (Anttonen 2002; Halfacree 2007; Lefebvre 1991). and is reflected in local culture, place identity, attachment to place, and community spirit.

## **2.2. Community development practices**

In rural studies, social practice theory has been used when the analysis is concentrated on agri-environmental practices (De Krom 2015, Huttunen and Oosterveer 2016; Soini and Huttunen 2018) and agri-food systems (Campbell et al. 2012; De Krom 2015), but so far, social practice theory has not been used to analyse rural community development practices. We see social practice theory, as introduced by Shove et al. (2012), as a useful instrument to analyse community practices and identify different elements of local community life from a spatial point of view.

According to Shove et al. (2012), practices are constantly changing processes that consist of three elements: materials, competences and meanings. Materials refer to physical things, objects and technologies; competences entail individuals' skills and know-how; and meanings refer to symbolic meanings, ideas, aspirations, identity and values. The elements of social practices are comparatively stable, but the ways they connect and reconnect with each other form the process by which practices change and transform (Shove et al. 2012, p.

43). The adaptation of a new practice means that all three elements need to be involved.

For example, in a community development project, the necessary material conditions must be in place: the economic resources for buying supplies and a place for people to gather.

The leaders of the development project must also have the competence to run a project, write a funding application, manage accounting and activate villagers to get involved. The meaning element consists of the value of the project: all the participants have to be committed to voluntary work, which means that they have to believe that their input is important and valuable for their village.

The task of community development practices is to create change at the local level, and studying the new characters of the villages requires analytical tools to reveal the process by which the change happens, and from which elements. Social practice theory provides a practical tool to reveal this process. Frisvoll (2012) has divided the social practices used in constructing rural space into material, immaterial and personal hubs. His classification includes the same components as our analysis; for example, the material elements could also be called a material hub. On the other hand, studying social practices through different elements (Shove et al. 2012) also emphasises the role of personal skills and competences in constructing social agency.

### **3. The role of village associations in community development practices in Finland**

The definition of village has varied throughout history but also between countries. In Finland, since the 1980s, the official land registry has not been used to determine the number or location of Finnish villages, which means that villages are now unofficial units of

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residence. Finnish rural policy defines a village as a place or area with a village association, which means that a village can be seen as a development agent and is not assigned to a strictly defined area (Kumpulainen 2012). In the past, schooling areas and village services such as shops and banks were significant factors in constructing a sense of social community. Currently, as villages have lost almost all these local services, village action has taken their place as the marker of community borders.

The village action movement was established in Finland in the 1970s. In the 1990s, the movement strengthened as Finland joined the European Union in 1995, and it was institutionalised when various village action organisations were built at the national and provincial levels (Halhead 2004, pp. 14–15). In Finland, funding for rural community development projects comes from the European Union's LEADER programme, and thus the projects conform to EU policy objectives, and Finnish village development practices can be defined as part of European-level regional and rural policy strategies. Villages and local village associations are seen as the most local-level implementer of national and EU rural policy, making them the main 'producers' of villages.

In practice, a village association is a local rural community, 'Gemeinschaft', but it is constructed differently from a traditional village community, which was based on sharing livelihoods and a certain way of life. In 2013, there were 3,074 village associations in Finland, covering most of the total of 4,235 villages in the country (The national community development programme 2014–2020). Village associations have replaced traditional means of local cooperation. Obviously, there was a lot of informal and formal collaboration in rural areas before village associations. Many associations were established in the late 19th and

early 20th centuries for diverse political or ideological purposes. However, these associations were dying out due to the ageing of the members; younger generations did not find their goals or ideologies meaningful. Village associations have been established to focus on a holistic development of rural communities without any other ideological commitments.

The integration of the Finnish village action movement with rural policy has been reflected in the four national village action programmes that appeared in the 2000s (*Kylätoiminnan suuntaviivat 2000–2002*, *Voimaa kuin pienessä kylässä! 2003–2007*, *Vastuuta ottava paikallisyhteisö 2008–2013*, *Paikallisen kehittämisen valtakunnallinen ohjelma 2014–2020*).

The objectives of community development and the responsibilities of rural communities have become more powerful with the implementation of these programmes. The programmes construct village associations as community stakeholders or agents by assigning more responsibilities and tasks to them. For example, there is an objective to enlarge village planning to include service production, infrastructure, business, cultural environment and security.

The roles of the public sector, state and municipalities have decreased in rural areas, followed by a centralisation of public services, which has emphasised the role of non-governmental organisations and local communities in taking care of the living conditions and welfare of citizens (Kumpulainen 2017). According to rural policy programme (The national village action programme 2008–2013, p. 9) “When municipalities and the state leave villages because of the municipality and service structure reform, village associations must take more responsibility in organizing local services.” (The national village action

programme 2008–2013, p. 9.) That is a strong statement for rebuilding welfare society on civil society actors.

In the past, a sense of community emerged organically through everyday life. Currently, it is often the result of organised activities and the maintenance of public places, such as community halls and local landscapes. In Finland, due to land reform and small populations, housing is very dispersed compared to many central European countries. Therefore, without any organised village actions, there would hardly be any perceived village at all. For non-locals, visitors or part-time residents, local community practices may also create the impression of a viable rural community. In urban areas, the social place is often produced through work and everyday services. In rural areas, this space is increasingly produced through leisure activities.

#### **4. Data and methodology**

As we wanted to concentrate on the effects of community development practices, we focused on those communities that have implemented rural policy objectives at the local level. The data of the research were collected from three villages that have an active village association and that have adopted community development practices as their instrument to keep their village viable. The villages are located in Central Finland, and they are Huikko with 200 inhabitants, Kynämöinen with 400 inhabitants and Ylä-Muuratjärvi with 150 inhabitants. All the communities organise local events, practise development work and take care of the village halls. The rural communities in the study have received awards for their work in the provincial Village of the Year competition (in the years 2005, 2006, 2007), which

means that they have been recognised as active community developers. These villages can be considered to represent ideal rural communities, setting an example for how to promote local development practices (Kumpulainen 2016) but also serving as ‘policy laboratories’—places to study the effects of rural policy objectives compared to the majority of Finnish villages, as these ‘policy laboratories’ are more actively adopting community development practices as instruments to promote local development.

The study is based on 12 semi-structured interviews with the chairpersons of village associations (previous and present) and on observations made in village association meetings (the associations’ board meetings and village events, 20 in total) (Kumpulainen 2012)<sup>1</sup>. The chairpersons play an important role in activating other community members to participate in local projects and events, and they are responsible for organising the project work, which makes them experts on their own communities’ development. Eight of the interviewees were men and four were women. Six of them were pensioners at the time of the interviews, and six were still working. A relatively high proportion of retired persons is reasonable because people who have ended their working career have more time to do volunteer work in their community. For reasons of anonymity, we did not classify the data, for example, on the basis of age or gender.

The interviews were structured conversations and included different themes: local history, development projects, future scenarios, local activities and events, community spirit, cooperation and networks, and challenges and difficulties in community development. The interview data were complemented by observations from local meetings and events. The data were studied using theory-oriented qualitative content analysis (Saldana 2011). We

analysed it by looking for different elements of social practices (material, competence and meaning) and their interrelations. We were interested in including in our study all the social practices and their elements that the interviewees mentioned or that the researchers observed in the villages. The practices or services that were maintained by private companies or the municipality (a village school, home care for the elderly) were left out from the analysis. The role of public services was, in general, very small in the communities, and the interviewees felt that municipality officials and decision makers had turned their back on the development of rural areas.

## **5. Analysing the community development practices of villages**

### **5.1. Material elements**

The material elements of rural communities consist of their physical location, villages as places, landscapes and buildings. Every village of the study had a renovated community hall and recreation grounds. In Huikko and Kynämöinen, the village halls are old school buildings, and in Kynämöinen, the old community hall, established by the local temperance association in 1932, was renovated by the village association in 2006. In Kynämöinen, the village association has also built a sports hall, and in Huikko, a dance hall. Most community efforts are targeted to maintaining these shared properties. Community meetings, events and parties require physical places for people to get together, but they are also objectives for community development work.



There is a long tradition in Finnish civil society to organise activities, educate citizens and establish different movements through local associations (Hyyryläinen 2000, p. 109). In rural areas, there are many old associations, for example, associations for smallholders and the temperance movement, most of which do not work actively anymore. These old organisations also own properties, such as village halls, which are offered to the new development-oriented associations as meeting places. Some old associations are even merged with village associations, which also means shifting their assets to the new community agents. Additionally, entire villages can be combined. The village association of Kynnämöinen, for example, was established to integrate three small villages that felt that they were not large enough to do development work independently in their area.

It is also common in Finland that closed village school buildings are sold or rented to village associations. This was the case in Huikko and Ylä-Muuratjärvi. In both communities, villagers tried to fight against the municipality to keep their local school, but after the school activities ended, the buildings were bought by the village association. The motivation to establish formal village associations usually comes from the need to have an official community actor that can own properties and run development projects. Village associations take over, use, and cherish those material elements already available in rural communities. Without the effort and activism of local people, many historical rural buildings would be in danger of decay.

Financial resources are also an important material element in community development practices. Village associations do not receive any permanent funding from municipalities or the state, and thus they have to arrange fundraising for themselves, for example, by

organising cultural events and happenings. European Union LEADER funding is the most important financial resource to implement development projects. The lack of permanent funding puts pressure on the chairpersons to come up with new project ideas.

Now, there is a new project period starting (LEADER funding), and I'm wondering that we should start to plan a new project. But it is really hard work, I should almost leave my job. We would probably get the money and be able to carry out the project if we could just come up with an idea and get an eager group to do it. After all, we have had many projects here: water refurbishment, village house, shooting range, broadband and village websites. (Interview 2)

LEADER funding is not granted for basic activities in rural communities but is targeted to development projects involving tasks that conform to rural policy objectives (Navarro et al. 2016). The community structure is more official than before, which transforms local practices.

Now, it is much more disciplined today, and of course it also has an effect that we operate as an association. We have the obligation of book-keeping etc. We try to be as transparent and well-documented as possible. (Interview 11)

The rural communities in the study have more financial responsibilities than before.

Development projects make village associations' budgets larger, and the maintenance of village halls requires income and fundraising.

Digitalisation affects rural community practices by introducing entirely new elements to village action. When some of the face-to-face interaction is replaced by internet-based tools, it not only makes communication more effective but also changes the nature of these practices. For example, webpages and social media enable the marketing of village events to larger audiences without large financial investments. The data of the research were collected in 2006–2007, which means that the effects of digitalisation on community development had just started to show. All three village associations had webpages and used email and text messages for communication, but the use of social media was not yet adopted on the scale that it is now used ten years later. If these communities were studied again in 2018, the role of digital technology would probably be much more significant. The internet and new technology make some processes easier, for example, cooperation and networking with other communities and authorities, which increases opportunities for networking. On the other hand, they also increase the demand for competences to know how to utilise these new opportunities.

## **5.2. Competence elements**

Community development practices require particular competencies and skills from community members. The national Village Action Association and regional village associations have an important role in educating rural community members in, for example, how to make village plans and gain publicity for village events. With the help of LEADER funding, communities and other local or regional rural development agents are also encouraged to implement communication and educational projects for local people.

Development activities are increasingly based on the logic of the market economy.

According to Woods (2010), the new rationality of place-based development requires entrepreneurial skills from local people, i.e., competence to find new and innovative ways to succeed in the global economy. All three village associations in the study had made village plans, including an evaluation of the risks of local development. According to Rose (2000), the calculation of risks is part of active citizenship politics, where individuals and communities are expected to take more responsibility for their life by applying an entrepreneurial attitude to the difficulties and challenges they face.

The marketing and commercialisation of village events, landscapes and heritage represent practices that rural communities have adopted from business culture.

Probably for permanent and leisure residents at least, all these events publicise the village. The midsummer festivals draw visitors from further and further away. Yes, it says that we have been able to make our village known. (Interview 3)

The chairpersons of rural communities value local events as part of constructing a public image and branding for the village. The success of the events reflects the villages' competence to view their community action from economic and marketing perspectives.

The images of villages have become more important, which shows, for example, in the proliferation of villages' own websites. According to Storey (2010), the promotion and commodification of places is a central part of the 'local turn' in rural development.

Digitalisation intensifies the meaning of place branding, and it also puts pressure on local actors to develop their marketing and communication skills in the internet environment.

Woods (2010) talks about the 'global countryside' and how rural development and transformation reflect a response to the globalisation process, especially to the challenges caused by the global economy and increased competitiveness. The transformation emphasises the significance of partnerships between different sectors, and in the case of village associations, this is realised through cooperation with municipal authorities and local private companies. The chairpersons in the study stressed the importance of networks and lobbying. The negotiation skills of rural community leaders are an important part of the competence required when acting in different networks. New digital applications can also offer new tools for local communities, for example, to make their local culture and history visible (Beel et al. 2017). They demonstrate that globalisation means not only that places and communities have to readjust to global trends but also that they have new opportunities to build and represent their community.

The change in the local community structure when village associations get involved in community development practices, means more demands on community actors. One elderly interviewee believed that he could no longer handle the new requirements of running a village association.

At one stage, I was really scared about this renovation project. How would they manage the money issues? But yes, they managed them. All the bills have been paid, and the house is debt free. It requires courage. It demands skills and all these modern computing devices, etc. I don't have them, and I'm not planning to get any.

(Interview 7)

In addition to digital competence, project work requires local actors to be able to engage in strategic financial planning and fundraising. On the local level, increasing formality in the structures and mechanisms of the social system and more strategic community practices also make the chairpersons of village associations leaders of community-led strategic development and planning. While adopting this role, the chairpersons also criticise the current development and increased responsibilities. For example, managing development projects is found challenging as well as frustrating.

For those who are not professionals, it is quite difficult to manage a project. There is an impossible amount of paperwork. (Interview 2)

The formality of community action was also seen as a threat to local activism if people experience it as less attractive or too stressful. The more professional skills that a community action requires, the bigger the risk that there are fewer competent volunteers available, especially when the population in rural areas is ageing.

### **5.3. Meaning elements**

Different projects, for example writing village books, cherishing traditions and renovating old village halls, produce village symbols and renew the local culture, which construct individuals' sense of place and local identity. Culture has a significant role in community development (Brennan et al. 2009), and in addition to attracting tourists, it also affects how people experience their own home village. In all three villages of the study, the village

activists produced local history books, cherished old community buildings and organised village events. These practices are presented especially in their webpages.

For village associations to adopt community development practices as their 'big mission', the new practices must conform with local people's values and images. For example, assuming more responsibilities and an entrepreneurial attitude requires that they are in accordance with the already existing values and meanings in rural communities. The renovation of village halls is a good example of using the LEADER approach to cherish something important for villagers. The meaning element changes slowly, which is reflected in how the interviewees used traditional peasant discourse in their speech.

The village activism, which grew gradually over the years. This activism has to be milked, then, it kind of just clicks. (Interview 12)

For example, money is not important in itself but as an instrument to support the village and promote more important objectives, for example organising leisure activities for local children or cherishing the local cultural heritage. It is not so much the case that the chairpersons of village associations have adopted an entrepreneurial identity, but rather that the new calculative orientation is connected to the traditional peasant attitude, the proud of being independent and achieving things through hard work and community effort (Kumpulainen 2016).

Village action develops and activates the countryside, although it has always been active. But the activeness is different. Before, neighbours were helped and there were joint projects. Every house had cows and was self-sufficient. When some people did not manage by themselves, they were helped. Today the effort is made for the community. (Interview 12)

In rural communities, networking and the more open orientation are connected to the traditional way of helping neighbours, but now it has become broader in scope. Networking requires openness from local people, which is particularly apparent with respect to their hospitality to new residents, summer residents and tourists. The village events and surroundings are not only meant for those who live in the community but for all who are interested and sometimes also for paying customers. The increased cooperation is reflected in people's attitudes towards neighbouring villages.

In my childhood, I had the image that we had strict boundaries between villages, and there were also some kinds of struggles. The borders were based on old school districts, and they were clear. Now they are no longer visible. They don't mean anything anymore. It is also a good thing that they disappear. They might also prevent progress. (Interview 9)

The decreased boundaries between villages do not necessarily mean a weaker community spirit. The logic of building the uniqueness of a place has changed; rather than based on the social interaction inside the community, it is constructed more strongly through the promotion of the place.



Rural communities committed to development activities do not define their action only in terms of doing things or 'hanging around' together as a community; they also have clear objectives, which are often also stated in village planning documents. The process of institutionalisation manifests in how the chairpersons view community action.

Well, maybe it is true that associations have brought a specific formality. In the early days, it was just about trying to get people together and to blow enthusiasm into them. We had, for example, a betting circuit, and it was more like spending time together. Now, it is perhaps more like an official channel for many people. And something to take more seriously now. (Interview 9)

As a result of strategic development work, rural communities become more official and political by nature. They are not only social communities anymore but also political instruments to promote local development. The strengthening of local community structures brings more responsibilities to local people and constructs non-governmental organisations as more powerful community actors (The national village action programme 2008–2013). The reason that villages are willing to adopt this more official orientation in community practices is based on the meaning element, on the strong commitment and sense of belonging to their home village.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Entrepreneurial culture, networking and institutionalisation

Altogether, our results suggest that the changes in rural communities brought by community development practices can be characterised in terms of three interconnected phenomena or processes: the strengthening of entrepreneurial culture, networking and institutionalisation, which refers to the incorporation of rural governance practices.

*The strengthening of entrepreneurial culture* refers to how the norms and values of the market economy have become part of local community practices. This is reflected in how an entrepreneurial attitude towards the development of their village has been adopted, for example, by making a risk analysis a part of the village planning process, marketing village events for tourists and evaluating the success of the community events by talking about the economic gain. The new elements of entrepreneurial culture are integrated with existing practices and traditional community efforts derived from peasant culture. People in rural communities are used to hard work and take responsibility for their own lives as well as for the wellbeing of other members of the community.

Entrepreneurial culture is in line with how the national village action programmes represent local values for villages. In addition to traditional rural values, the programmes emphasise values related to community, entrepreneurship, locality and active citizenship. There is a transparent commitment to promoting entrepreneurship culture in villages and taking responsibility for individuals and communities. Changes in villages are represented as an

inevitable part of progress and internal development challenges. Villages have a moral obligation to respond to them, and adopting an entrepreneurial attitude is part of the solution. (Kumpulainen 2017.)

The second phenomenon is the increased significance of *networking*. The villages engaged in community development practices are not isolated, but spaces closely network with the surrounding world. The borderlines between villages have become blurred, and digitalisation has increased the possibilities for communication. Rural tourism and leisure residents are one example of how people other than those who live in a village produce, consume and experience the village through their activities. These changes construct villages as more open spaces than the traditional rural communities. On the social practices level, traditional hospitality and willingness to help neighbours are extended to visitors and part-time residents. The openness, networking and adoption of the norms of the market economy demonstrate that villages are part of global and neoliberal development. Post-productivist rural places are part of the 'unsafe capitalist world' (Bauman 2001).

The third phenomenon recognised in the study is the change in the local community structure by which village associations become increasingly *institutionalised*, i.e., part of the rural governance programmes. The process of institutionalisation is built on the already existing civil society structures, i.e., the ways of organising local affairs and managing assets through associations. However, compared to the previous associations and formal collaboration, the village associations are more experienced, more official agents. The importance of the economy is connected to the strengthening of entrepreneurial culture as well as to the more institutionalised mode of local action. The entrepreneurial attitude, the

willingness to take risks, also strengthens the institutionalisation process. Through association activities and development projects, governmental and economic structures and goals have also gained a presence in rural communities. Development practices bring a new approach and especially a strategic attitude and values concerning the reasons and ways of doing things. Above all, this entrepreneurial attitude means that communal activities must be more goal-oriented than before.

These three phenomena transform the community life in villages and the ways in which the local community and the place are defined and experienced. The more active rural communities are, the more they become defined through the development discourse and practices. Individual citizens' sense of responsibility to become involved in community development practices depends on the community spirit and individual villagers' attachment to their home village. They construct the moral texture that binds individuals and village associations to development practices. It makes lived space the most important moment of space in constructing a sense of responsibility and moral commitment. (Kumpulainen 2017.) The lived space can also be viewed as the meaning element of community practices that combines different elements and processes in constructing villages as post-productive rural places.

Different elements of social practices, material, competence and meaning, can be identified inside the three phenomena. For example, entrepreneurial culture consists of material (property), competence (fundraising and management skills) and meaning elements (the proud to be independent). In institutionalisation, the material element is a combination of rural policy instruments and traditional village structure. The competence element consists

of different skills and how to make use of them. In networking, digitalisation has changed the material element considerably, which also emphasises the importance of the competence element. The motivation to act is created through “village spirit”, which means that place-related meanings are the most important element in all three phenomena, and it combines all three processes.

The objectives of Finnish rural policy, entrepreneurship and institutionalisation of villages are well reflected in local practices and the meanings the chairpersons give to their villages, and in that way, they have started to change the way villages are perceived and lived.

However, there are contradictions between conceived and lived space. The increased standards of the market economy and formal rules are sometimes seen as frustrating and difficult, which suggests that they are not in accordance with local values but also that there are deficiencies in the competences required in project work.

## 6.2. Two sides of the community development practices

Our study suggests that community development practices may support the viability of villages in the short term. To achieve far-reaching results, development projects should increase social capital and create new practices and solutions for local problems (Bosworth et al. 2016.) Social innovations require good networks, which is in line with our results. The more open atmosphere and cooperation in the villages create space and opportunities for innovations. In addition, the entrepreneurial attitude encourages creative thinking and finding new solutions to respond to local challenges. However, if the need for financial

resources is the main driver for organising activities, it might also affect the choices made for example in planning summer events.

The same risk can be observed in the institutionalisation process. If the community effort is focused on maintaining the existing social structures, which was found time consuming by the interviewees, is there any energy left for new ideas and innovations? There is a paradox when the rural policy tries to get local communities to have more responsibility and at the same time encourages them to be more innovative. The project work and development action can sometimes be more about survival than about social innovation. (Bosworth et al. 2016.)

However, institutionalisation in the form of increased formality and more complicated ways of action may also decrease local people's willingness to participate in community affairs. In rural communities, elderly residents in particular have the time and motivation to take responsibility for the development of their home villages, but they do not necessarily have the skills required, for example, in marketing and strategic development work. On the other hand, the ambitious objectives that are produced in conceived spaces for local communities are not necessarily carried out if villagers are not committed to taking responsibility and developing their village.

There is, thus, a critical question to be asked: Do all the villages or villagers have the competence and resources to construct these strategic communities (Eversole 2010; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2004)? There are villages that may lack people who are willing and able to take responsibility in these practices. Vulnerable people, who would need the

local community and services most, do not necessarily have the resources to participate in the activities or produce or maintain the village, as expected.

### 6.3. The future of community development practices

The prevailing rationality in community development discourse emphasises the importance of village associations not only as organisers of local community activities but also as producers of villages as places. In post-productive rurality, local communities are being transformed into development-oriented strategic communities, focusing on preserving the vitality of villages in the future. In the era of productivism, villages were rural spaces based on a shared way of life and livelihood, agriculture and forestry, but in post-productivism, they are constructed as development-oriented spaces.

Development-oriented rural communities can be regarded as an example of neoliberal governing where responsibilities are transferred to individual citizens and local communities (Kumpulainen 2016; Marinetto 2003; Rose 2000). In Finland, the rationality of community development has been widely adopted as the norm to 'save' the villages in rural areas. The villages that we have studied can be considered the most active, but there are a number of small villages that are not involved in any community development projects. In those villages, community development practices have not been integrated with local competence and meaning elements, or in other words, the conceived village is not reflected in the perceived and lived space. According to the rural policy discourse, these villages are predicted to "disappear" in the future (Kumpulainen 2012).

Even if this study has concentrated on the active villages, other rural communities are also expected to adopt place-based policies to maintain the vitality of rural areas. The institutionalisation process of local communities is not, however, sustainable if there is not adequate support from the public sector. For example, the municipality level should be more involved in constructing rural place-based policy, the implementation of which currently depends heavily on civil society actors. The other conclusion from our research is that there should be more emphasis on promoting peoples' welfare and local culture. Especially when participation is dependent on volunteer work, there should be more concern about how to build and increase people's attachment to their home places and their sense of community.

## **7. Conclusions**

The objective of this article has been to increase the knowledge of how community development rationality transforms rural communities and places. By combining social space and social practice theories, we have revealed the characteristics that have been intensified in Finnish villages since adopting a community development approach as a means to promote viability in rural areas.

In addition to studying the changes in villages as spaces, our results also reveal the transformation of local communities at a more general level. The meaning of communities in late or postmodern societies has been questioned, and some scholars have criticised the communitarian longing for strong local communities based on traditional and romanticised ways of seeing communities. In our view, even if individuals' commitment and social ties are



weaker than they used to be, there still exist strong local communities with an important role in people's lives. Development-oriented local communities are not based on a shared way of life or values but rather the shared goal to develop a certain place in which to maintain a sense of belonging and community.

The changes in the nature of rural communities, caused by the increased significance of development-oriented work and norms, put pressure on all rural communities to adopt these new practices to be able to keep their villages viable in the future. Even if our study concentrates on the ideal rural communities, the results also reveal the rationality that constructs the structural frame for all rural communities in their development. There can also be alternative local communities, such as ecovillages, but they all have to face the same challenges: how to finance community life, make use of digital tools (or ignore them), create community spirit and construct relationships with the surrounding society. Compared to rural areas, citizens living in urban areas may not necessarily feel equally high pressure to take responsibility for their local communities. Nonetheless, they do promote local affairs via neighbourhood associations and community work. Also in cities, the partnerships with the public sector importantly enhance active citizenship.

According to our study, there is a need for further studies on local communities, both rural and urban. Globalisation and politics change the nature of local communities, and we need more information about their characteristics to be able to see clearly what their role could be in future societies. The European Union LEADER approach has been an ambitious project in empowering local communities and place-based development. There have been many good results but also many critiques about the long-lasting effects of the project world. This

is the question that should be the focus of developing future rural policies to promote the sustainable viability of rural communities.

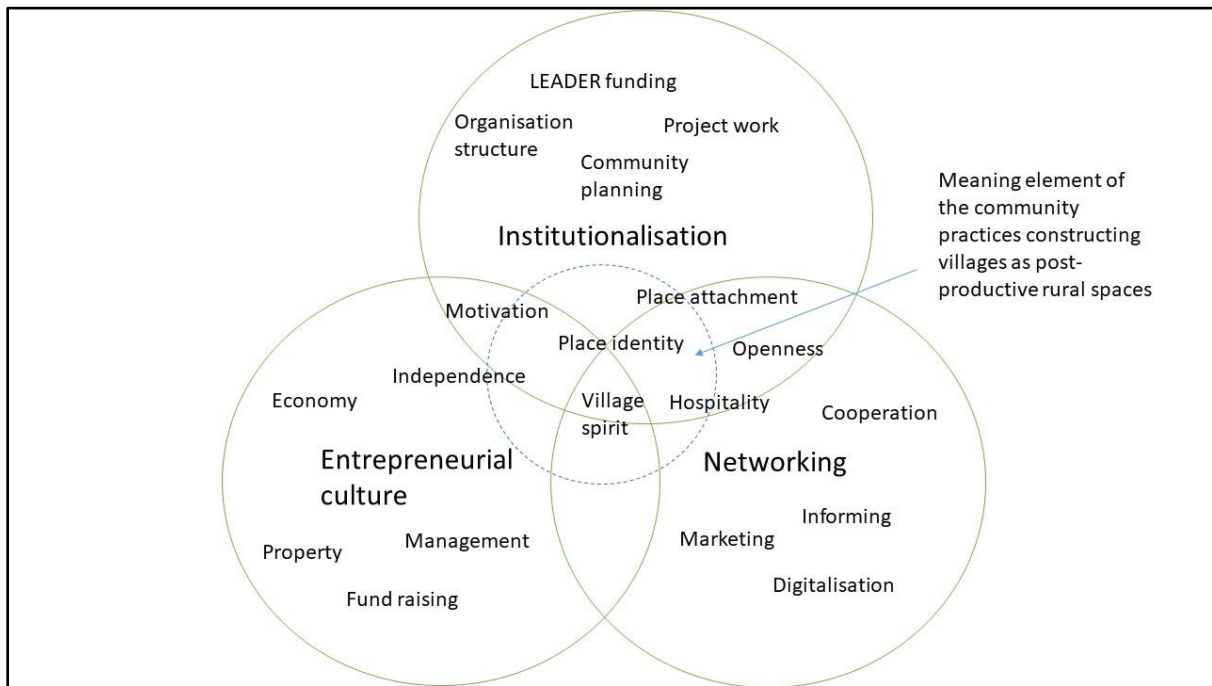


Figure 1. The changes in community practices.

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<sup>i</sup> The data was collected in 2006-2007 as a part of a doctoral thesis project (Kumpulainen 2012).