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Political community resilience in declining rural areas in Finland

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Abstract In this article, we study how declining rural communities build political resilience in Finland. Community resilience is an adaptive process through which rural communities try to maintain their viability in changed circumstances. This process does not entail a submissive attitude, but rather active agency and an effort to influence matters concerning the community's well-being. We focus on the political dimension of resilience by identifying different local tactics that rural communities adopt to promote their own development following municipal mergers. We classify these tactics into three categories: cooperation, conflict and community-led development. The significant differences between them lie in how the community relates to the new municipality and communicates with its officials and decision-makers. However, none of the three tactics identified in our study are sufficient to ensure the viability of rural communities in the context of municipal mergers.

Because of population decline and public-sector funding crises, rural communities all over Europe face the same challenges in maintaining their vitality (Elshof et al., 2014; Hospers and Reverda, 2015). Globalization and urbanization create pressure to centralize services and industries in cities. In addition to losing inhabitants and services to cities, rural communities have trouble getting their voices heard in political discourse. Rural interests have been marginalized in policymaking (Holdo, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to strengthen political agency so as to build the resilience of rural communities.

Community resilience typically means communities' capacity to adapt to external crisis and change. Communities' adaptive capacities have been

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scrutinized in the context of natural disasters such as earthquakes (Demiroz and Haase, 2019; Imperiale and Vanclay, 2016; Saunders and Becker, 2015), environmental (or climate) change (Kelly et al., 2015), sustainability (Berkes and Ross, 2016; Jarzebski et al., 2016), policy (Shaw, 2012; MacKinnon and Derickson, 2012) and rural studies (Wilson, 2010; Freshwater, 2015; McManus et al., 2012; Skerratt, 2013). Coping with the loss of inhabitants, jobs and services, as well as a general effort to adapt to changing circumstances and keep towns and villages alive, can be understood as community resilience (McManus et al., 2012).

Community resilience as a concept originates from ecology and social-ecological systems theory (Holling, 1973), as well as from developmental psychology and mental health (Paton and Johnston, 2001; Berkes and Ross, 2013). It is doubtful how well these formulations apply to social systems and the social sciences: social systems are emergent properties whose complexity cannot be reduced to ecological or psychological principles (Davidson, 2010; Berkes and Ross, 2013). Works highlighting the concept of (social) capital (Magis, 2010; Aldrich and Meyer, 2015; Roberts and Townsend, 2016; Pfefferbaum, et al., 2015; Vårheim, 2017) use a more sociological approach. Power-related and agency-oriented approaches have also been gaining interest (Davidson, 2010). We argue that a social systems-based approach to community resilience will benefit from insights from field theory, such as the ideas of power, struggle and social skill (Fligstein, 1997 2001; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). We are interested in political community development rather than ecological (e.g. Holling, 1973), psychological (e.g. Bonanno, 2004), social (e.g. Magis, 2010) or economic (e.g. Doeksen and Symes, 2015) perspectives. Local political capacities to build resilience have been somewhat neglected; we seek to fill this gap by focusing on the political dimension of community resilience processes—i.e. local efforts to politically influence local development.

Our study deals with community resilience in the context of municipality mergers in Finland. Municipalities in Finland are responsible for organizing local public health, social, educational and cultural services and can decide independently how to produce services for their citizens (Kröger, 2011). Small rural municipalities face financial difficulties in fulfilling their responsibilities for functional and equal basic services. This means increased demand for new solutions, such as municipality mergers to produce local services and organize administration at lower cost. The number of municipalities decreased from 460 to 311 between 1990 and 2017 (Association of Finnish municipalities 2020).

However, long distances make mergers challenging, particularly in rural areas. When economic necessities drive municipal service production towards bigger units, the increasing distances threaten the accessibility of

services in peripheral communities. In consequence, the most peripheral communities in Finland may be located dozens or even hundreds of kilometres away from the nearest school or health care unit. Sometimes municipality mergers are reached through signing formal merger agreements which protect rural service units and municipal jobs during a five year transition period.

Another significant change a municipality merger causes in a peripheral community is the loss of autonomy in decision making or in influencing local development. Municipalities are local development actors. In merger situations the old municipalities may form sub-municipal community boards (*kunnanosavaltuusto*) to deliberate local development issues. Often community boards have also a modest public budget to spend. In other cases, previously autonomous peripheral communities organize local development or village associations (NGOs) that seek ways to promote community viability—that is ensuring the sufficient health, social, and education services, livelihoods, infrastructure and recreation to make living in the locality possible for community members.

The centralization of political power and services has affected the strategies offered to rural areas to secure their vitality. Finnish rural policy promotes local communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) increasing their role in developing rural areas. In the European and Finnish official rural policy discourse, local stakeholder such as village associations are seen as actors which can take those responsibilities that municipalities are not capable of carrying out anymore. For example European Union LEADER funding and village action movement are seen as important instruments which encourage communities to become more active in developing local living conditions and securing the welfare of the citizens. (Nousiainen, 2015; Nousiainen and Pylkkänen, 2013).

In small rural communities, municipality mergers cause changes in decision-making systems and the availability of services, but do not remove local communities as actors. The same communities exist after the mergers, but they have to adjust to changed circumstances. We are interested in the strategies rural communities adopt to cope with these circumstances: how do rural communities react to the changes and challenges they face? This is related to ways of adjusting to new circumstances and taking advantage of available opportunities to preserve and develop communities' vitality. Therefore, we refer to the theory of community resilience (Berkes and Ross, 2013; Coulthard and Britton, 2015; Roberts and Townsend, 2016).

We present the results of a research project (2012–2014) investigating the impacts of centralization on four municipality mergers in Finnish rural localities: Konginkangas and Leivonmäki in central Finland, and Uukuniemi and Värtsilä in eastern Finland (Kumpulainen, 2014). We focus on how rural

communities build political resilience after losing independence as municipalities, describing conditions where rural communities strive to maintain their viability and development. We focus on the political dimensions of resilience by identifying different local tactics that rural communities adopt.

Community resilience as political agency

The concept of resilience was first applied in the 1970s to explain ecological systems' adaptivity to adversity (Norris *et al.*, 2008). According to Holling and Gunderson (2002, p. 28), this refers to 'the magnitude of disturbance that can be absorbed before the system changes its structure by changing the variables and processes that control behavior'. This raises the question whether social systems can be treated in the same way as ecological systems. An increasing number of recent studies emphasize the need for holistic views in community resilience research (Berkes and Ross, 2013; McManus *et al.*, 2012; Norris *et al.*, 2008; Wilson, 2010). The social theorization of systems also highlights how disturbance, crisis, stress and decline interrupt systems' functioning and reproduction. The difference from ecological systems is that 'only humans anticipate change and use social, political, and cultural means to influence resilience' (Folke *et al.*, 2010, cited in Berkes and Ross, 2013, p. 16).

Community resilience theory focuses on social systems, highlighting the transformative stage that occurs after shocks (see Skerratt, 2013; Shaw, 2012). Freshwater (2015) identifies four vulnerabilities that communities face: natural events, policy changes, economic shocks and general insecurity. Becoming resilient as a community means gaining control not over the conditions people face, but over how they respond to change (Magis, 2010). Recent research aims to explain communities' adaptation, recovery and development after disturbance, stress or decline in different contexts. The emphasis has increasingly shifted to agency rather than systems: how individuals and groups actively influence their community's development (Roberts and Townsend, 2016; Steiner and Markantoni, 2013; Magis, 2010). Skerratt (2013; see also Freshwater, 2015) refers to 'proactive human agency', which means that local residents identify and use available local resources to develop their community. Revell and Dinnie (2018) talk about 'transformative' resilience: when planetary limits have been met, alternative ways to develop more sustainable communities are required. An important aspect of transformative resilience is that communities need a strong sense of control over decisions that affect them.

In this view, local actors and resources are important for building local adaptive capacity and resilience. According to Magis (2010), community resources consist of natural, human, cultural, social, financial and political

capital. Following [Wilson \(2010\)](#), rural communities' resilience is also based on multifunctionality, meaning a balance between forms of community capital ([Roberts and Townsend, 2016](#)). Active actors and strategic action are important too ([Magis, 2010](#)). Community resilience as a strategy can mean local people's adaptive means of maintaining and promoting well-being after a decline in local livelihoods ([Coulthard and Britton, 2015](#)). In rural areas, for example, the smallest schools and health units have closed down, and various joint organizations produce these services in cooperation between municipalities. In these circumstances, actors need to interactively organize and develop stable practices to guarantee their area's vitality. Community resilience thus highlights networks, knowledge, skills, learning processes, communication, values, beliefs, economic development and the role these factors jointly play in adaptive capacity (e.g. [Berkes and Ross, 2013](#)).

If we focus on political community resilience as the adoption of active agency to defend or develop communities' vitality, the ideas of strategic action and power become central; the latter is particularly neglected in community resilience theory. Here we refer to the concepts of social skill, power struggle and the game point of view, adopted from [Fligstein and McAdam's \(2012\)](#) field theory. Generally, fields differ from systems in that they are open, game-type arenas of struggle, and cannot be understood purely in terms of function.

Strategic action is defined widely as 'an attempt of actors to create and maintain social worlds', which is also 'about control in a given context' ([Fligstein, 1997](#), p. 398; [Fligstein and McAdam, 2012](#), p. 17). [Fligstein and McAdam \(2012, pp. 46\)](#) highlight the role of social skill as 'the ability to induce cooperation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities'. More specific definitions refer to actors' 'cognitive capacity for reading people and environments, framing lines of action, and mobilizing people in the service of broader conception of the world and themselves' ([Fligstein and McAdam 2012, pp. 17](#)). Social skills are central to strategic action, as in the cases of building allies, seeking cooperation and convincing opponents.

Such negotiations in relation to municipal mergers take place in the context of policy changes to decision-making and management structures. Community resilience as an adaptive process ([Magis, 2010](#)) means not only adjusting to new circumstances, but also actively influencing local development and politics. Skilled actors are able to perceive and interpret the field from other actors' perspectives, and to construct appealing shared meanings, interests and identities for the advantage of their own group or coalition ([Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 46](#)). They can build diverse tactics related to conventional (political party voting and activities, political

discussions and meetings) or unconventional politics (social media influencing, protests, various types of civic engagement such as implementing development projects).

Another advantage that can be taken from field theory is the idea of power struggles and the understanding that these processes are ‘about who gets what’ (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012 p. 3). System and resilience theories tend to gloss over these issues. Fields are generally arenas of struggle over advantage and desires to be in power, gain power or resist power, indicating conflicting interests in which actors’ resources, skills and strategies are central (e.g. Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). It is important to include these factors in the theorization of political community resilience. For instance, municipal mergers occur in relation to a wider neoliberal politics characterized by public service cuts, privatization, new public management, individualization etc.

Moreover, the development of rural areas is overshadowed by a general social and political climate that emphasizes centralization. It follows that local actors lose their previous decision-making power and services, and this links political resilience—otherwise understood merely as adaptive capacity—to power struggles and conflicts. The idea of political community resilience must take into account how local actors navigate systems characterized by imbalanced power relations so as to maintain their own political agency and gain experience of political influence and meaningfulness in changed circumstances, including by promoting their own interests and desires to foster their community’s vitality.

Data and method

In Finland, rural local affairs are largely organized through the municipality system, and province-level or village-level administrative structures are not significant (Ylikangas, 1991 pp. 97–98). Finland is (at the moment) divided into nineteen provinces whose main tasks are regional development and planning which emphasizes the independent role of municipalities as governmental agents. The village-level the village associations (NGOs) do not have any official role in the municipality structure, even though there is a strong will in the national rural policy to integrate village planning to the municipality planning processes (Kumpulainen, 2012).

The data for our study were collected from municipality mergers in four small rural communities in Finland (Table 1). The communities were selected according to specific criteria:

- They were not located near provincial centres or regions with population growth. They can be defined as peripheral communities.

Table 1 Studied communities

| Community | Province | Distance from the provincial centre | Inhabitants (estimated) | Municipality merger |
|--------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Konginkangas | Central Finland | 65 km (from Jyväskylä) | 1500 | 1993 (with Äänekoski) |
| Leivonmäki | Central Finland | 51 km (from Jyväskylä) | 1100 | 2008 (with Joutsa) |
| Uukuniemi | South Karelia | 145 km (from Lappeenranta) | 500 | 2003 (with Parikkala) |
| Värtsilä | North Karelia | 74 km (from Joensuu) | 600 | 2005 (with Tohmajärvi) |

- The mergers were not too recent (under five years) which means that the integration process is still in progress.
- All the communities were active, and there was a strong local identity (active NGOs, activities and happenings). We wanted to find rural communities which have strong community resilience.
- All the communities in the study are merged to different municipalities to obtain the most diverse data possible.

After careful survey from the internet and documents, we decided to select four rural communities which meet the criteria best for this study.

As [Figure 1](#) illustrates the merged communities are large areas with long distances.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews (e.g. [Wengraf, 2001](#)) which lasted one to three hours. We interviewed four active long-time members in each of the four communities in 2013 (sixteen in total). First, we contacted the chairperson of the village association and discussed with them who could be potential informants in our study. Since the aim was to identify different tactics of development, we chose only active community members who were experienced in organizing local activities and promoting the common good. Ten informants had also acted as municipal councillors. All of them were over forty year old and twelve of them were men and only four women. All of the interviewed lived in the community but we did not collect more detailed information, for example how long they had lived there. The interviews were carried out in informants' homes, or in public spaces such as village halls. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We have translated the data from Finnish to English.

The interview included questions about general community development and the experiences and effects of the merger. First, we asked about the history of the community, the present situation and ideas or visions for the future development. Secondly, we asked how the municipality merger was decided, carried out and what had happened after the change. We were especially interested in how the communities have built their relationship with the new municipality after the mergers. Thirdly, we discussed how



Figure 1 Villages (Dark) and in parentheses their Municipalities (Light): (1) Konginkangas (Äänekoski), (2) Leivonmäki (Joutsa), (3) Uukunniemi (Parikkala), (4) Värtsilä (Tohmajärvi)

local people have experienced and reacted to the changes they have faced in their community. Lastly we were also interested in the local community activities, local identity and place attachment, and how the informants see they have affected the development of the community or vice versa. However, the interview strategy was open-ended, and interviewees could introduce topics they felt were worth discussing.

In this article, we concentrate on analysing how the informants talked about the ways they had tried to influence local development and to maintain their communities as vibrant places to live after the mergers. In the data there was also a lot of information about the merger processes, but because our main task is to study the resilience process after the change and not the governing structures, we have excluded that part of the data from our analysis. We conducted content analysis (Sandana, 2011, p. 10), seeking first-hand accounts in the data of how community members had acted to maintain the viability of their area. These constituted experiences, emotions or stories about the possibilities and difficulties of rural development action in merged municipalities in Finland. Even though these accounts present informants' subjective views, they nevertheless also strongly influence the possibilities of development. After all, as the Thomas theorem puts it, 'if men [*sic*] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas, 1928, p. 572). As qualitative researchers, we seek to describe situations that are real in this sense. We see development as a human affair, and correspondingly we seek to produce concrete, practical, context-dependent knowledge to increase our understanding of the processes of political resilience in peripheral communities.

Results: building political community resilience through diverse tactics

The informants described various activities through which they had tried to influence local development after a municipal merger. The activities were diverse and sometimes contradictory; therefore, we do not try to identify any single pathway or strategy of resilience. Instead, we seek to respect the diversity of tactics the communities adopted, which might be applicable by other rural communities in similar situations.

Cooperation

Cooperation is related to 'building a political coalition' in which actors aspire to provide resources to their members (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 15). In this tactic, diverse cooperation activities were used to secure local interests in the new, larger municipality. The communities had lost their share of power, since their opportunities for influence via municipal decision-making processes had decreased. Many interviewees felt they had lost the instruments necessary to influence and organize local community affairs, and that the new municipality did not look out for small communities' interests. When choosing cooperation as a tactic, local actors aimed to find alliances and seize opportunities as they arose (see Fligstein and

McAdam, 2012, p. 51). Generally, the cooperation tactic consisted of formal decision-making processes, and informal cooperation with the municipal administration or democratically elected decision-makers.

Cooperation requires social and communication skills. The interviewees pointed out that effective representation on the larger municipal board was dependent on council members' personal skills:

Even from Uukuniemi there have been strong representatives on the municipal board who have been able to make an impact. At least one [conservative] Coalition Party member has been skilful and most of all able to build trust. One easily gets labelled a troublemaker if one only advances the interests of one's own village. Collaboration is what makes the difference. (Interview 11)

The new situation made it more challenging to act politically in defence of peripheral communities. Even though it was generally recognized that the new political structure offered weaker possibilities, individual actors could still find positive roles; but this called for more strategic negotiations with other communities' representatives. Rather than the sheer number of council members, it was representatives' individual traits that played the central role in how well this tactic worked.

Another example of formal cooperation was that some Finnish municipalities had established community boards to increase small communities' ability to influence local matters. One community, Värtsilä, had such a board for five years after the merger, established to retain some power at the local level. However, informants did not consider that the board had been effective (Interviews 15, 16). Since the most important decisions are made on the municipal board, the community board and its €15,000 budget remained symbolic rather than a real instrument of self-government. According to the interviewees, community boards were unable to overcome power discrepancies and hierarchies between large new municipalities and local rural communities.

In addition to formal decision-making processes, there were descriptions of informal cooperation with new municipalities that the interviewees considered successful. For example, officials and decision-makers had been invited to visit communities, which proved an effective way to build dialogue with new municipalities. Leivonmäki's technical service arranged 'village walks' where locals and officials jointly observed neighbourhood development needs (Interview 1). Similar collaboration tactics were also described in Konginkangas (Interviews 6, 7). According to a village activist (Interview 7), the village association had made an infrastructure development plan in collaboration with the town of Äänekoski and the government's regional Centre for Economic Development, Transport

and the Environment: building cycleways, reconditioning a municipally owned beach and decking, conserving the environment and repairing buildings. Another joint plan was the building of a broadband network, which would be important to local residents and entrepreneurs (Interview 7). One reason for Äänekoski's positive attitude towards the cooperation was the village association's activeness, which enabled the municipality to benefit from European Union rural development funding scheme LEADER (Interview 7).

Good personal relationships with individual officers were mentioned as an efficient way to promote communities' interests. Individual-level activeness and negotiation skills may constitute a prerequisite for the success of unofficial cooperation tactics (Interview 1). Another apparent prerequisite was the new municipalities' goodwill towards the communities—the willingness of individual officials and decision-makers to recognize them. This was the case in Leivonmäki, where a local council member had been elected chair of the new municipality board, and therefore the community was well connected to the administration (Interview 1).

However, there were sometimes deficiencies in the cooperation tactics, and the cooperation was rejected. Communities agreed that cooperation should not be deployed to save endangered municipal services. The commonly trumpeted idea of organizing welfare services through voluntary work in local communities was often considered unacceptable.

Our elderly care association was contacted by the municipality, and they suggested a merger with three other elders' support associations operating in the area. I refused even to negotiate, since we are the only one with no debt. It's not our role to take care of the municipality's rental homes, we mind our own homes. This is an example of how the municipality tries to shift its responsibilities onto other actors. I think it is outrageous. (Interview 10)

Here, the cooperation proposal was rejected. The interviewee felt the municipality had tried to shift its responsibilities onto the active community. He remarked that 'voluntary work will continue only as long as it is fun; when it starts to feel like work, it will end' (Interview 15). Peripheral communities pay similar taxes to others to fund health and education services, and the idea that they should also volunteer on top of that was understandably seen as unjust (e.g. Interview 15). The data suggest that even smoothly functioning collaborations did not prevent municipalities from favouring the centre over the periphery (Interview 7). Therefore, health and educational services—a vital aspect of welfare for rural communities—were largely out of reach of the cooperation tactic.

Conflict

Interestingly, conflict was another defence strategy that interviewees described. The conflict tactic invoked explicit hierarchies, domination and the unprivileged positions of local rural actors whose negotiation power had diminished (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Although local actors recognize the dominant logic of new municipalities, ‘they can usually articulate an alternative vision’ (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 13). The conflict tactic meant not seeking cooperation with the new municipality, but finding formal or informal ways of pressuring decision-makers to secure the community’s interests.

Our data revealed one striking reason for disappointment with the democratic system: the meaninglessness of the integration agreements made before the municipality mergers. Informants from all four communities felt that promises given before the mergers had subsequently been forgotten—especially in relation to health and education services. Such violations were possible because the municipalities that had been parties to the integration agreements no longer existed after the mergers; the agreements thus ceased to be legally binding. As an informant from Värtsilä reported, locals faced no sanctions for violating the agreements (Interview 15). After the fact, it proved impossible to make official appeals regarding the implementation of the mergers.

Reports of such experiences signalled a loss of trust, which likely inspired more militant ways to defend communities’ interests. The conflict tactic, described by one informant as organizing ‘loud campaigns’ (Interview 5), was especially deployed in situations where municipalities did not recognize communities’ concerns, or where community members felt that positive communication with the municipality was unworkable. The tactic was used in struggles concerning single issues, such as legal complaints and continuous appeals to decision-makers (Interview 9). These can be seen as formal conflict tactics where locals exploited all administrative and democratic means of opposition. However, this tactic was considered inefficient, and was more of a method for ‘delaying battle’ (Interview 1). Tiring out the opposition was also used as an individual-level tactic: an informant from Leivonmäki reported that when she had a concern about community matters, she ‘kept on calling the officials until they gave up’ (Interview 4).

A Värtsilä community activist presented an example of informal squatting conflict tactics to gain premises for the village development association. According to his story, Tohmajärvi municipality had evicted the Värtsilä development association from its office in order to sell the municipal hall. As no buyer was immediately found, the association moved into the old

municipal manager's office without permission, and later expanded to a neighbouring room. The municipal officials gave 'a silent blessing' to this apparently lawless annexation by not actively opposing it. As time passed and still no buyer was found, the municipal council was persuaded to yield the building to community use as a village hall for a moderate €400 monthly rent—despite opposition from other communities within the municipality (Interview 14.) Negotiation may thus not be the most efficient strategy for dealing with an indifferent administration.

Another example of the conflict tactic was 'the school episode', a plan to close down a nursery school, described by all four of the Uukuniemi informants. Therefore, the episode apparently had at least symbolic importance for the community's identity. The new Parikkala municipality had decided to close down a school in Uukuniemi to gain a dubious €30,000 annual saving, even though the integration agreement had promised its continuation for at least five years (Interviews 12, 13). In response, parents threatened to use their legal right to place their children in the school of the neighbouring municipality of Kesälahti, which was closer than the new municipal centre (Interviews 10, 11, 12). The local school was closed down and the parents moved their children to Kesälahti, whereupon Parikkala municipality lost the government funds that were paid in respect of those pupils. The reason this tactic could not save the school was that its credibility was questioned: the local municipal manager considered it 'nonsense that will be forgotten in two weeks' (Interview 12). Even though the tactic failed, it was mentioned as an instance of a strong feeling of commonality among the interviewees (Interviews 10, 12).

'The school episode' also reveals two aspects of the conflict tactic. Firstly, it may give locals an effective means to pressure the centralizing economic rationale if they actively pursue it. In this case, the idea was born out of the activeness of one pupil's father (Interview 11). Secondly, the effectiveness and credibility of such pressure requires strong organization in the community, which in this case was lacking.

The often weak position of smaller communities in merged municipalities emphasizes the need for informal action as a method to put pressure on officers and decision-makers. The simple ability to use some type of conflict tactic, if properly organized, might put rural communities in a better position to negotiate with local government. And even though a conflict tactic may fail, it can have an important symbolic function in the community. In our study, the conflict tactic was used not only to influence the new municipality, but also to demonstrate the strength of the local community and their refusal to submit to prevailing policy and development. As was noted in our data, nothing unites a community more efficiently than a common enemy (Interview 2).

One criticism of the conflict tactic is that accounts of its effectiveness are few in our data. One school had been saved through the locals' active resistance in Leivonmäki, but the depiction of this case remained vague (Interview 2). In addition, some incremental improvements were achieved, but the overall state of the communities continued to worsen. In addition to poor organization, their weak position compared with bigger communities may explain this. A sad picture was painted by a Värtsilä interviewee, who stated that 'our fights have been fought' because of the many defeats and disappointments suffered in the past (Interview 17). The community simply no longer had the strength to resist.

The conflict tactic did not solve problems related to the diminished negotiating power that was a consequence of communities' disadvantaged positions following municipal mergers and the new political order. Moreover, the unequal distribution of power meant that many interviewees felt they were at the mercy of decision-makers, even when the terms of the merger had been agreed beforehand in an integration agreement. They described the period after the merger as a shock phase, and even felt betrayed by the new municipality's false promises. The shock phase was followed by a phase of paralysis, a period of passivity after the integration. People observed and wondered what was going to happen next, and how the new municipality was going to organize community affairs. One informant from Värtsilä (Interview 16) regretted that they had been unable to get more involved and defend their rights at this stage of the process. This implies that the correct timing of conflict tactics demands skill and the capacity to read the future: a conflict tactic adopted too late will be ineffective.

Community-led development

In addition to conflict and cooperation, our data contain accounts of alternative ways to advance local development, which we call the community-led development tactic. Community-led development means local action whereby locals take an active role in developing their community by using various available development instruments that are not directly dependent on municipalities. The main rhetorical justification for the community-led development tactic was the idea that 'it's all up to our own activeness' (Interviews 1, 11, 16), meaning that ultimately development was not dependent on administrative structures but on the locals' willingness to work for their own success. The community-led development tactic relates to local actors' social skills insofar as the idea is to strengthen the villagers' collective identity and support group activity.

The first community-led development tactic in our data was voluntary activeness. In the four communities, it was seen as necessary to organize new

forms of collective action through NGOs following the municipal mergers. Two communities, Värtsilä and Konginkangas, had founded new village associations; in Leivonmäki and Uukuniemi, the existing local associations had adopted more substantial community development roles than previously. According to the informants, autonomous action and NGOs often provided easier ways to act in rural communities than official municipal decision-making bodies.

A popular way to advance local welfare through community-led development was by organizing local events. Nearly all our informants described community events such as village fairs (Interviews 1, 5, 12, 16), music festivals or concerts (Interviews 2, 11), sports events (Interviews 1, 2, 3) or summer theatres (Interviews 4, 16). For instance, village fairs attracted tourists to the locality and also had an important symbolic function. They brought villagers together to celebrate local identity and demonstrate the village's vitality to outsiders:

But this small group has been active and we have a very active chair [of the village association], and we get involved in many kinds of things, for example celebrate these village festivities. . . . The first time it attracted lots of people, and the second and third time quite well. Now it is the fourth time, we'll see. We have local performances and then we elect the Konginkangas Villager of the Year. (Interview 5)

Similarly to this interviewee, many informants seemed proud of their annual fairs, despite their somewhat improvised content.

Some more imaginative local events were also mentioned. An informant from Uukuniemi talked about a young adults' association that organized music and cultural events, such as a biannual, two-day rock festival set up 'through voluntary work and without any previous experience' (Interview 11). In Leivonmäki, the local sports club organized a floorball championship, which was obviously held in high regard in the community as it was mentioned in several interviews. This event had already been held fifteen times, and was described as having attracted several hundred players from all over Finland (Interviews 1, 3). Such local events may generate revenue for local tourism entrepreneurs, but they are more meaningful in their symbolic function of representing community spirit and vitality (Interview 1).

Another mode of community-led development was the maintenance of public facilities. A couple of informants talked about people who donated their own money and time to take care of local sports facilities on a voluntary basis. Even though these facilities—such as skating rinks, football fields or ski runs—were usually owned by the municipality, their maintenance was left to the communities. According to interviewees, village associations also had special expertise in activating voluntary work compared with

other actors, e.g. the parish. People became interested in environmental conservation work, such as raking a cemetery, when it was made into a 'happening', as one Uukuniemi informant told us (Interview 12).

Village newspapers or newsletters were also published through communities' independent efforts. In Värtsilä, an informant mentioned the online local newspaper *Värtsin lehti*, which was the result of a couple of active individuals. It had been established by a 'retired journalist from *Karjalainen*' (the North Karelia regional newspaper) and was continued by 'an active lady from the village' after he moved away. According to the informant, the village association became the publisher when they needed somebody to administer the paper (Interview 14).

The small number of active people seems to be the greatest flaw in the community-led development tactic (Kumpulainen, 2017). When our informants described successful actions and achievements, they also mentioned that activeness often relied on individual activists; this limits the credibility of community-led development. In the 'new rural paradigm', community solidarity is seen as an important basis for organizing diminishing services in rural areas (Kumpulainen, 2016; Nousiainen and Pylkkänen, 2013). Our data seem to support the critical evaluation of this policy. The biggest challenge in increasing the role of voluntary organizations in rural community development is to get more people involved in community work. Communities' own initiative seems suitable for short-term or individual development efforts, but sustained action seems to exhaust the actors, even when supported by substantial European Union funds. Even though the informants regarded NGOs as effective instruments for promoting local development, the activeness and use of the community-led development tactic were not entirely voluntary, but were experienced as a necessity because of the lack of support from the new municipality.

Discussion and conclusion

We see the political dimension as an important part of community resilience. For example, MacKinnon and Derickson (2012) criticize the concept of resilience for overemphasizing the adaptive role of communities, and they call for approaches that highlight communities' active role in shaping their own destiny. The addition of the political dimension to community resilience discussions may be one way to focus attention on the deeper empowerment of rural communities. In addition, power struggles and discrepancies are a central part of political community resilience.

Our findings revealed disappointments and experiences of injustice, but also the creativity and various tactics our informants adopted to take care of their local communities. In the rural communities in our study, political

resilience was constructed from a combination of diverse tactics to act in the situation the municipal merger represented. These were cooperation and conflict with the municipality, or community-led development. None of the three tactics identified in our study were sufficient to defend the viability in rural communities in the context of municipal mergers. All had recognized shortcomings. Therefore, we conclude that resilience requires a readiness to adopt various modes of action, depending on the situation.

Cooperation with the new municipality, local activeness and the role of associations were crucial instruments in local community development. The cooperation tactic entailed formal decision-making processes, and informal cooperation, which aimed to build trust. This required social and communication skills in order to secure local interests, which was the main interest of local actors. The skillful actors can create dense, interpersonal networks, which help them in achieving their goals. Perhaps surprisingly, cooperation within the formal municipal decision-making process was the least effective way to promote local community development. The results emphasize the importance of civic participation, but they also reveal something about the inefficiency of the prevailing decision-making system, especially from small communities' point of view.

There was also a need for conflict tactics. Usually the conflict tactic was brought to bear after the cooperation tactic had failed. The rural communities found that officials and decision-makers in the new municipalities were not interested in the periphery and its problems. By putting pressure on officials, it was possible to politicize decisions that were based on questionable justifications or unfairly served the interests of the centre at the expense of the periphery. Officials and decision-makers in the new municipalities had more power than local actors. They had powerful positions to influence the structure and goals of the municipality; they were better able to drive their own interests, and construct their view of the world as legitimate (see [Fligstein and McAdam, 2012](#), p. 13). Local actors after municipality mergers, on the other hand, had less power than decision-makers in new municipalities, and did not occupy the same positions from which to negotiate the game in their own interests. However, rural communities seem to have a lot to learn about conflict tactics; accounts of conflict tactics were sporadic.

In the community-led development tactic local actors take an active role in developing their community and to a certain extent remain independent from the municipality. This tactic enables locals not to stay in contact or be dependent on the new municipality and they have decision-making power. In this tactic, it all comes to locals' willingness to work for their own success. Skillful local actors can promote the villagers' collective identity and encourage group activity. Activeness, however, was often based on individual activists. Even though the advantage of the community-led development

tactic is that it is well established and supported by national and European Union rural policies, it seems to exhaust the actors.

In community resilience research, the emphasis has been on communities' internal capital and resources (Magis, 2010; Roberts and Townsend, 2016). Resilience, however, is built not in a vacuum but in relation to surrounding actors, through external relations, networks and influence on policy (Skerratt, 2013). Political resilience means not only intracommunity decision-making, but the capacity to influence community affairs.

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