

Vanessa Halhead

The Rural Movements in Europe

Summary

In this presentation, Vanessa will take an overview of the development of the national rural movements across Europe since the 1970s. The talk will look at the ways in which the form and activities of the rural movements has been interpreted in different countries, and the main influences on this. It will also look at the work that is on-going to network the national movements at a European level, to build on their mutual learning and to raise the voice of rural communities at the level of the EU. The presentation will look at the following aspects:

History and development

The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) we now refer to as the 'national rural movements' came into being from the 1970's onward. During this period such organisations have been established in at least 23 European countries. They developed in response to the pressures and threats on rural communities, experienced in all countries at different times. The development paths of these rural movements have been different and, until recently, not all were aware of each other. However, the work they aim to do is remarkably similar. Sweden and Finland have been particularly influential, in part through the PREPARE Project, in the establishment of rural movements in the accession countries of Central and Eastern Europe. But in other parts of Europe, there was a simultaneous, but disconnected, development of similar organisations.

Objectives

The objectives of the rural movements have responded to the particular national contexts. However, they share in common the desire to improve the situation for rural areas and their people. Their main work areas are strengthening the links between communities and the organisations that work with them, mobilising rural communities, promoting local learning and development activity and raising the collective voice of the rural areas in relation to local and national government policy.

Structure

The structures of the rural movements differ between countries, as does the degree of local control. Working at national, or regional (in the case of federal states or autonomous regions) levels, the movements have developed organisational structures which reflect the administrative structures and culture of their respective countries. In many countries this has led to the development of structures at national, regional, district and village levels. These enable the appropriate level of activity and links to government at each level. The most developed of the movements are true 'village movements', controlled from the grassroots villages, and enabling the local voice to be reflected and heard.

Activities

The activities undertaken by the rural movements are many and varied. They include promoting and supporting a multiplicity of local development initiatives, through mobilising, training and practical action; and providing publicity, advocacy and lobbying to increase public and government support to rural areas.

European networking

Since the national rural movements became aware of each other in 2005, there has been significant work to develop mechanisms for linking them with each other and with other relevant European networks. This has resulted in the formation of 2 new European level organisations: The European Rural Community Association (ERCA), which is the formal network for the national and regional rural movements, and the European Rural Alliance (ERA), which aims to link European level rural networks to strengthen co-operation and to influence policy at an EU level.

Impact

United small villages influencing government policy is just one outcome of the rural movements in Europe. They also support, train, and network thousands of rural communities. This is a quiet revolution, taking place in rural communities across Europe. The village movements are mobilising rural communities to address their own futures, to work together to help each other and to influence policy at local, regional and national levels. They represent an organised approach to providing a voice for rural areas, their people and the organisations working for rural development.

Personal profile

Vanessa Halhead is the Secretary of the Board of ERCA. Vanessa Halhead has worked in the field of rural and community development and research for 25 years, in Scotland and Europe, and has been involved with several European rural networks, over a period of 20 years. In 2004, she undertook research to investigate and map the rural movements in Europe, resulting, in 2005, in the publication of "The Rural Movements of Europe". As a direct outcome of this work, she was closely involved in establishing the European Rural Alliance ERA, and European Rural Community Association ERCA, and is a board member of both organisations.

Staffan Bond

The Power of Rural Communities – Swedish Example

In Sweden today there are almost 5 000 village action groups forming the Swedish village movement. They are spread all over rural Sweden, some also in the cities. Most of the Swedish villages are involved.

The village movement was the result of a campaign for rural Europe in the late 80-ies where Sweden took active part. The Swedish campaign was run by the government and about 100 NGO:s in collaboration.

The most important part of the campaign was local mobilization of village people, but also influencing public opinion and the policies. 1 000 village action groups were registered as a result of the campaign, some existing local associations taking on board new tasks, most newly established.

The background was depopulation of villages especially in sparsely populated regions. Village people in the peripheries of the big municipalities being established in the 70-ies also felt lack of influence. Some good examples of villages, who had acted not waiting for help from outside, inspired others to follow.

For 20 years now the movement has “matured” and is seen as a natural part of Swedish society forming the first level of society under the municipal level. From often opposing municipal policies the village action groups and municipality now mostly work hand in hand – but of course there is friction

The groups organize in various ways. They are the local hub, making democratic decisions, coordinating actions and representing the village. From the very beginning women were active in the process. The young ones were often missing – and so they are today too, one of our biggest challenges.

The village groups stands for participative village democracy complementing the formal representative party policies in the municipality. In the beginning some politicians, both locally and on higher levels of society, felt threatened by this new phenomena. Some still do, but a diminishing number.

The village groups take on board many different tasks. They make village plans, arrange cultural events, stimulate business development, run shops and schools, build broadband, take care of environment etc. They take responsibility for more and more complex and costly tasks as the state and municipality withdraw their resources. More than 100 000 people are directly involved, influencing indirectly about 3½ million Swedes, a third of the Swedish population. They contribute each year with more than 100 million euro in developing their villages.

Characteristic for the village movement is networking on all levels of society – in the village, in the municipality, in regions, nationally, in the Nordic countries, in Europe. Villages exchange experiences, gain power and influence opinion and policies. The nation-wide “Rural Parliament” is an important event expressing the power of villages being a meeting point for villagers and politicians.

There are strong forces against local development in rural areas –market, policies (including EU- overall policies) and people’s preferences (city values). Rural areas are however becoming more important as global demand for natural resources increases and shortage becomes a fact – like peak oil. Small scale smart technology opens possibilities. So do changes in people’s preferences, like being close to nature, having space and at the same time the small scale, safe food with local identity etc. And not least important; engagement and capacity in the villages.

The local rural community has an important role to play in building our sustainable society. So act, don't wait for others, unite, take the initiative in planning, use resources including money, network with others, collaborate with your municipality and Leader, put pressure on exploiters, welcome newcomers and outsiders money, influence on all levels to improve policies!

Staffan Bond is the Chief Manager of Swedish Village Action Movement and member of the Board of ERCA.

Prof. Bert Broekhuis

Village Development Planning in the Netherlands; History, examples and analysis.

Developing village plans with the villagers is already a long history in the Netherlands. Most plans concern the community development supported by professional organizations. In many cases the main objective was the establishment of a social cultural centre.

The positions of the actors about decisions in the plan-processes were mostly clear.

Responsibilities were fixed at local government, the municipality. The support has been delivered by a regional or provincial professional community development organization, endowed by local, provincial and national governments. By questionnaires, inquiries and hearings, talks with so-called key-persons in the local society, opinions were collected. Via desk-researchers village-plans have been produced and officially presented to local authorities in the presence of a delegation of representatives of the village society.

Modern times with well-educated, well-informed and assertive people also in the country-side request another approach.

Since the late sixties and the early seventies different methods have been developed and tried out.

Nowadays village plans are developed for a large part by the villagers themselves with some help by the municipality and the provision of necessary tools by a professional. In most cases the village council or group starts the initiative for a village plan.

The content differs from plan to plan. Sometimes it concerns an overall development-plan for the village and the surrounding area divided in several steps. Mostly a more specific object is in the picture for example play grounds for children, footpaths and cycle-tracks.

In this way the shape of an unique plan, or better: a strategic process will be created.

In early times a country wide network of government-subsidized professional organization were active in the Netherlands. Now a few commercial oriented organizations for community development give (paid) support with some money from the EU, some national funds and private support by enterprises focused on development of the country side.

Village organizations and movements are now organized in the 12 Provincial Associations with one or more coordinators and advisors. The representatives of these associations constitute the board of the 32 years young National Association for Small Towns and Villages. Here the interests of local initiatives and developments are discussed with policy-makers like municipality- and provincial councillors, and parliamentarians. Together they form a vital networking organization.

In more than fifty per cent of the villages a village council or committee is active. In some rare cases the village council has been based on political parties after elections.

The differences between regions about the position of the village council versus the municipality are remarkable; for example the West part ("Holland") and the North and East parts of the Dutch country side.

A recent evaluation of the provincial arrangements of Integrated Village Development Plans gives a good perspective on the co-creation and co-realization as factors in policy-processes. For real accepted and supported village plan a broad participation of village people is a fundamental condition. The village plan has to be not only a positive view on the future; it has also a function as a symbol of pride and identity based on individual and collective drives of the village people.

Bert Broekhuis is president of ERCA and Board member of the Dudge Village Movement "Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen"

Sirje Vinni

Experiences of regional Networking of Villages, of Cooperation with LEADER and NGOs

Kodukant is an association of non-governmental organisations, structured at 3 levels:

- National Association with the voluntary Board (7 members)
- 15 independent County Associations, one in each Estonian county
- Village Associations (about 5000 individuals)

Kodukant is the first village movement in Eastern Europe. Decades of occupation had left Estonian villages and rural people devastated. The motivation to start a civil association was to improve the living conditions in the countryside. Village people started organizing community reunions, discussions on rural development and learning how to make their own decisions.

We were clever enough to involve the decisionmakers of different levels in our building-up process from the very beginning (Estonian Ministry of Agriculture, Uppsala University, County governments from Sweden and Estonia).

It all started actually 10 years before the official registration date of the organisation. Rapla and Viljandi Counties, who both had twin counties in Sweden, were the pilots of „moving villages”. A great help was the Swedish Village Movement „All Sweden shall live!” and Swedish fund for foreign aid SIDA.

Soon the idea spread all over Estonia and was taken to the government and parliament. We succeeded in making the government see that our own, national financial village development program was badly needed and in 1996 it was started to support local village projects.

At the outset the energy was concentrated on creating a network which now is our „trade mark”. Our members at regional level are Independent associations who are connected through the „umbrella” of the movement. They unite village societies. This structure enables to operate effectively across the country, and also be connected to the decision-making process at each formal administrative level.

We started with a project which helped to establish regional centres in every county. For that reason we trained coordinators (managers of regional organisations) who got the task of counselling the village societies, helping to start new societies and delivering information from the villages to the *Kodukant* Board (manager) and vice versa. Our members at regional level are usually contacted via *Kodukant* manager, but in course of different projects, our staff might also need to get in touch with them. In every county there are also people who deal with young people or village elders. They keep in touch with corresponding *Kodukant* staff members.

For training our members and also village societies *Kodukant* Training Centre was established in 2003. It is an independent adult educational institution with a number of lecturers and several training programmes useful for rural areas.

Our members cooperate with other organisations and institutions at regional level (different consultation offices, county governments, associations of local authorities, other regional civil society organisations, LEADER LAG-s etc). Regional level usually takes care of the village societies, „breeding” them to be suitable for LAG membership.

This sort of structure has justified itself so far. Because the „head” (*Kodukant* Board and staff) and the „feet” (village societies) both need something in between to „digest” their experience and knowledge.

Sirje Vinni is Board Member of ERCA and Board Member of Estonian Village Movement.

Village action in Finland on the national level

The present type of village action got started in Finland in the mid-1970s, first as a peripheral protest movement, driven by the diminishing rural population and abandonment of arable lands. The rural people also felt that the general mood in the society was against the countryside. The movement as such was not a political one, but at the same time the rural areas launched a political counterattack, which also speeded up the spread of village action. Another significant factor was the extension of action research to the villages by numerous researchers. Village committees were set up to follow the activities of villages: over a ten-year period more than 2000 village committees were established in Finland. The movement spread from the east and north towards the west and south. The villages found support in the municipalities and their organisations, but a great deal of emphasis was also given to independent development work by the villages themselves.

The village action movement got started in villages, but already in 1982 an unofficial national advisory board on village affairs was set up to support the local action. The members of the advisory board represented almost all national organisations involved in work on the rural areas, including the Finnish Municipal Association. This association steered the village action on the national level up until 1997 when the Finnish Village Action Association was established, meaning that village action became independent as it detached itself from the "protectors" or "controllers", which had been perceived as an impediment to the work. At this point almost 10 national rural organisations left the Village Action Association, but during the next couple of years all of them, except for one, returned to the association. The Finnish Village Action Association had 37 founding member organisations, but the association has since expanded to 125 members. All the local action groups, among others, are members of the Village Action Association. The organisation process started from villages, found support and further impetus on the national level, and then established its proper place on the regional level. Now all of the 19 regions in Finland have a Village Action Association of their own.

Finnish village action has both expanded and gained in internal strength. When the Village Action Association was set up in 1997 the number of village associations or other organisations engaged in the development of villages was just about 400, but today it is about 2900. The last regional associations were established in 2000. Now the national village action is founded on the principle of tripartition, that is, it is comprised of the regional, sub-regional or municipal village associations, secondly, there are the local action groups, and the third party consists of the 19 national rural organisations. The aspects of village action that are often praised include its rapid organisation and efficient and abundant utilisation of the EU funds. In spite of this, village action has not as yet achieved a true political breakthrough. Some of the old rural organisations seem to be jealous and sometimes even the growing municipalities may consider themselves more appropriate as the lowest, local-level actors. Even the good results achieved have not removed the doubts regarding villages as operative units and the know-how of the village people.

This is why an extensive national training campaign entitled Stronger Villages (Voimistuvat kylät) was launched in autumn 2010. The aim of the campaign is to construct the relationship between municipalities and the villages in them on the basis of constant interaction, as well as to consolidate the village actors' faith in the future. Besides the Finnish Village Action Association the campaign involves numerous other national organisations, the Rural Policy Committee obviously among them.

This Committee is a governmental instrument and among other things responsible for the planning of the Finnish national rural policy. Since 2008 SYTY is a member of the Committee and three workers of SYTY take part in working groups of the Committee.

Professor Dr. Eero Uusital is Secretary of the Rural Policy Committee and Chairman of the Village Action Association of Finland (SYTY)