

GEOGRAPHICAL ACTION RESEARCH IN FINNISH RURAL VILLAGES

Reviving Villages through Activations Local Residents

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On the nature of this kind of research

Research aiming at activating people was introduced to Finnish geography some years ago and the idea has found some quite eager supporters. In addition to a great number of rather limited local case studies, geographers completed two national studies in a row. These projects were widely acknowledged in mass media.

In both projects the interest focussed on thinly populated rural areas. The purposes were not merely scientific; influencing the object was also consciously aimed at. The intention was to create permanent positive changes in social and economical conditions which prevail in the countryside. The initiative of the local residents and the activity of the authorities was combined with the efforts of the researchers. Wide collaboration was essential in order to guarantee permanent results.

Structural changes in the Finnish society have been extremely radical. They have caused the most severe problems in the metropolitan area on the one hand and in the thinly populated rural areas on the other hand. To continue the research, originally begun in the countryside, the geographers have to some extent widened their work to cities. Nevertheless, analyzing the problems of the suburbs in the metropolitan area has mostly been done by sociologists in the real life studies of theirs.

In the following chapters the main features of the Village Research 1976-project (Kylätutkimus 76) will be described, including methods, aims and results. Kylätutkimus 1976 was the first geographical action oriented research in our country and a new social experiment, too. Thanks to the experience geographers had accumulated they also had a central role in a slightly newer project "School as a center of the village". The project focussing on the importance of the school will be described in some detail later on after Kylätutkimus 1976. In both projects, the most active period was 1977—1981. The writer of this article took part as researcher in both projects mentioned above. Therefore, both the problems that arose and the results that were achieved have become familiar to me.

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Purpose and aims

Kylätutkimus 1976 represents applied science and the practical value of the results has been very important. Action has overshadowed theory in the project. The practical value of the project is accurately reflected in the following list, in which the most important aims of the project are presented.

1. To create a new atmosphere generating faith in better future in rural areas and supporting the feelings of identity, solidarity and social integration.

2. To activate villagers to work consciously to achieve their own purposes, to make them the subjects and the determinators of their own fate and to enhance their selfconfidence.

3. To revive old and find new methods for solving rural problems and for easing life in the countryside.

4. To secure the availability of every-day facilities such as grocery, elementary school, post office and buss connections to the regional functional center (church village).

5. To develop mobile services in order to attain sufficient service level (e.g. mobile shop and travelling library).

6. To achieve better medical care, social services for the old and to support daynurseries.

7. To contribute to economic development by moderating local economy to overcome the most severe drawbacks.

8. Inform planners and local authorities about concrete difficulties in living in sparsely populated areas.

9. To demand changes in legislature, allowing e.g. construction activity according more simple areal plans and construction orders in rural areas.

In the project the village has been regarded as a socially functioning unit characterized by solidarity. A community, in which common activities unite local residents. The project did not the village merely as a functional center with a sphere of influence of its own. Nor was the village confined only to a statistical unit. It was thought, that the village should be regarded as a living organism.

Background of study

Some thirty years ago life was rich in the countryside and the majority of the Finnish population lived there. In the 60's and early 70's Finland underwent one of the sharpest and swiftest changes in Europe when thinking about economical and social life.

Migration from periphery to urban areas was very heavy, especially to the southern parts of the country and to Sweden, too. Therefore, the percentage of population employed in agriculture and forestry decreased immensely from the high 32% of 1960 to the low 12% of 1975. Rural infrastructure thinned and accessibility of services worsened.

Deep apathy prevailed in the countryside, residents in sparsely populated areas were without hope for the future. A new populist political party was formed, giving some hope but being only a temporary phenomenon and unable to solve essential problems. Economic, social and areal planning was initiated in the late 60's, but it

was inadequate to overcome rural difficulties. Problems deriving from the expansion of the urban areas took all the time and energy of the planners.

In the beginning of the century, when the agrarian phase still prevailed, collaboration between villagers was a natural condition of economic welfare. It was reflected in co-operative movement, it gave birth to various associations and working for the neighbours was an essential part of it. Collaboration was in those days a vital part of every-day life. Not only working hours, but also leisure was shared. Weddings, anniversaries and so forth brought the whole village together. Social movements such as temperance societies, religious activities and working class movement gathered great numbers of members and supported solidarity among them. It was not until in the early 60's that the traditional way of life broke down in the countryside. Family became more important than community.

Beginning of research

There were traces of voluntary activity, the old time "talkoo"-spirit (unofficial mutual collaboration), still to be found in some villages; sophisticated agricultural machines were usually common property and happenings were open to all the inhabitants. The residents were all acquaintances unlike in the modern society and they had an informal organization of their own for co-operation. Self-initiative work was the way of improving living conditions. This is the basis of the model for the village movement created by the geographical project Village Research 1976.

The father of this project is *Lauri Hautamäki*. He started his work in Helsinki and continued it with *Sauli Rouhinen* in Tampere. One principal aim of the project has been to make popular the self initiative function model in the countryside. Another task has been to test the model under present circumstances in a number of Finnish villages representing different parts of Finland and varying in size (300–500 inhabitants). Practical research activity began in 1977 in ten municipalities (see figure) as intensive co-operation of ten researchers (mostly younger lecturers) representing five regional universities. Many students assisted in interviewing.

Performing project

In every village studied, the residents were invited to an open meeting, where a village committee was elected to represent villagers. Its task was to plan proper actions aiming at positive development of the village and to create information channels to the local authorities and, furthermore, to react against unpleasant decisions made at higher administrative levels.

A thorough interview, involving practically all the villagers, was carried out in order to get an idea of local resources and to find a basis for the activities needed for solving every-day problems. A survey-type interview is too crude a way to get a contact to people. But then, the project took a long time and the researchers have afterwards had time and opportunities to get acquainted with the villagers and their way of thinking.

After the survey, it was already possible to apply the information that had accumulated. The researchers could give their first recommendations concerning activities in the village, thus helping people in their self-made administration.

The villagers and the researchers constructed together plans aiming at developing the village. The purpose of the project was to create a model according which the plans were recommended to be made. This recommended version included both long run aims and a short run specified and more practical programme for realizing the aims. The latter one was also a timetable for coordinating different activities and financing. Hence, the nature of the plan was highly functional and therefore it was a simple task to combine it with the official long run and yearly plans of the municipality. The development plans of the villages were primarily an instruction to the village committee's decisions. Coordination of different needs focussed on land was only a minor part of the plan.

One of the most important resources in developing the villages was the refound old-time "talkoo"-spirit, on which the collaboration among villagers is based. The village committee organized for example fixing up old meetingplaces, building sports grounds, piers for boats and other projects, which aimed at meeting the actual needs of the villagers. Very often the municipality gave money for building equipment and thus rised the motivation of the villagers.

A very important part of the work of the committee was to make proposals and improvement suggestions to the local authorities – concerning e.g. schools – and also to the higher levels of administration. In the latter case roads were often discussed. Because the committee did not have money of its own, it was essential that consensus prevailed with the municipality, but then, it was usually easily achieved. There is also a great number of official initiatives which can only be brought to higher authority through the municipality. Deciding about land reservation and building plans is a monopoly of the municipalities. Co-operation with the municipality was needed when successful campaigns were carried out to find new young families to the villages. This caused a sudden need for building land.

Village movement represents a kind of grass-root democracy which encouraged initiativeness in local communities and which was supported and investigated by the researchers. Researchers, planners, ordinary people and politicians from local and higher levels took part in numerous meetings, the themes of which varied. Village self-help, development problems and proposals for overcoming obstacles caused by higher level administration and economy were discussed. The researchers distributed actively information about village activity and established a team meant for long lasting exchange of experiences and results of the investigations. The results of the project have been published in about ten reports and numerous short papers in 1978–1981, all in Finnish because they have also practical, not only scientific applications.

Practical results

A whole number of voluntary local unofficial administrative organizations has developed spontaneously in Finnish village communities since 1978. This village committee movement imitates the practice of co-operation and self-help found in villages before the radical changes in the structure of the whole society took place.

The development and expansion of the movement has been rapid, because the investigated villages functioned as innovation centers of local self activating and initiativeness. In Finland there are about 3000 villages with about 300–400 inhabitants. Roughly 2000 of them has an active committee today. The innovation has

diffused over the whole country in a very short period. The idea of the village action had a real social need.

The self-activating model has been best adopted in the most sparsely populated areas in northern and eastern Finland, where the economic drawbacks have been most serious. An example illustrates the facts: the Regional Planning Council in Lapland has in collaboration with geographers made a development plan for one village in every municipality. In many other municipalities plans for developing villages are prepared, too.

Information about the village movement has spread through newspapers, radio, television, many conferences and the activity of local organizations. Village action has been included as a special topic in the programmes of adult education. Professor Hautamäki has written a guide book which helps the villagers to organize themselves and find channels to upper administrative levels in order to promote important proposals.

Even though there are still plenty of problems, one has a more optimistic view when evaluating the future of rural areas than ten years ago. Villages are reviving and raising their status as pleasant environments. Conditions in the countryside have changed. Geographers have had a substantial contribution in changing process. Reciprocally the work in the villages necessarily left marks in Finnish geography. The relation between the researchers and their object is changing and the researchers are becoming more responsible for their objects and studies.

Another village research project

“School as a center of a village” project (Kokke-research) was set going a couple of years after the Village Research 1976. The latter project was a more limited and more specified one. The initiative for the research came from the school authorities. Geographers were very well represented in the project on account of the experience which they had gathered in the Village Research 1976. The Kokke project naturally emphasized pedagogical aspects. Nevertheless, it followed the steps of the earlier project, too; it aimed at encouraging local residents to be more initiative and to organize themselves.

Parallel projects with Kokke were set going at the same time in Tromsø (Norway) and Umeå (Sweden). In Finland the corresponding center of the project was Joensuu in eastern Finland. Experiences from different Scandinavian countries were exchanged in annual meetings. Typical of the Finnish project was, that it focussed on organizing village activities and on diffusing the innovation of village self help.

The Kokke-project had its greatest influence in peripheral parts of the country. There were three areas in which the problems concerning schools were most pointed and to which the idea of village self help had not earlier been introduced. These three research areas were North Karelia in the eastern part of Finland, the south western archipelago and the remotest part of Lapland. The respective research centers were Joensuu, Turku and Rovaniemi.

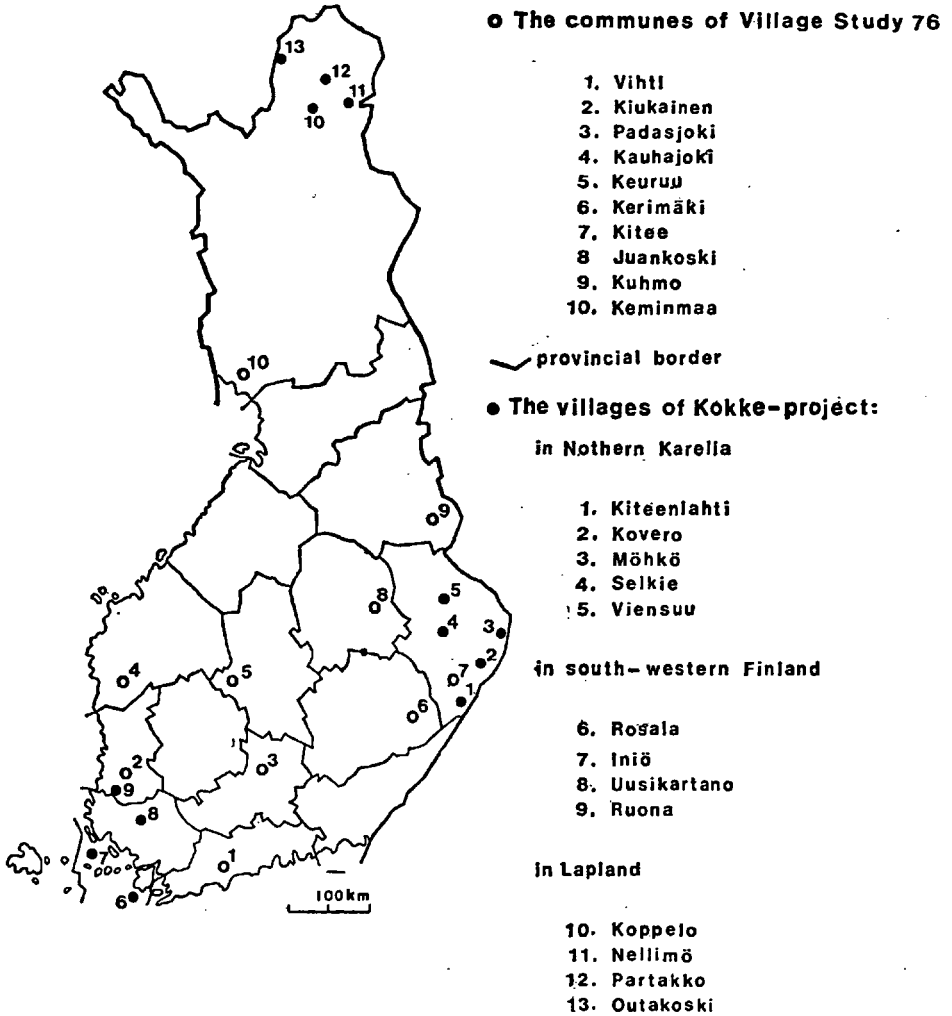


Fig. 1. Views of school oriented village movement

The Krokke-project aimed at slowing down the collapse of elementary schools in sparsely populated areas. The trend seemed still to be clear: deserted schools followed deserted dwellings. The migration from the countryside caused by the concentration of jobs absorbed especially the young, thus biasing the structure of population. The percentage of the retired got up and that of children got down very rapidly. After the suppression of the school other facilities usually vanished, too. The living conditions of the remaining residents worsened.

The Kokke-project encouraged people to be more enterprising and initiative particularly in order to turn the vicious circle described above. An active, vital and liveable village is able to fulfil the expectations of the residents and may find new residents as well, for example by offering extremely cheap building sites. The autonomous administrative organizations in the municipalities were very favourably inclined towards the development of the villages. Their support has been of essential importance when thinking of fruitful operation of the independent village organizations. Nowadays, progress in the more peripheral parts of the municipality is supported, too.

Schoolbuildings have always been important meetingplaces in the countryside. In the evening they have given shelter to hobbies and culture. It is also commonly known, that teachers have always been effective organizers of local activities. Hence, the suppression of the school is in many ways and on all occasions fatal to the village. If one wants to keep the village alive it is necessary to maintain the school. Therefore, the Kokke-project tried to find ways of changing the school into a multipurpose center of the village. It was tested how new services and jobs, such as barber shops, cafes, day nurseries, handicraft industry and meals for the elderly, could be combined with the school. Finally, the project tried to turn the professional profile of teachers into a more diversified one.

Both the local administration of the state and that of the municipalities is highly differentiated and sectorial. For example, education, health care, and social services form organizations of their own. Municipalities and villages are governed pragmatically in slices. Hence, it is difficult for the villagers to advance initiatives on higher administrative levels according to their own holistic, local oriented views and needs. This is why the Kokke-project aimed at moderating the severe limits between different sectors by focussing planning and administration on villages and other sub-regions.

In addition to pedagogical experiments such as using educational material based on local features, the Kokke-project tried in every possible way to bring the school near the villagers and make it an essential part of the local community. The better interaction and the new functional variety were utilized in education, too. Interaction inside the community was encouraged by gathering activities for people of different age and social status in the same place.

New forms of action oriented research

Action oriented village research was a successful social experiment, made particularly by geographers. The experiment contributed to the revival of the countryside through voluntary work organized by the villagers themselves. The practical tasks are now performed, but for example *Sauli Rouhinen* has continued the research in a more theoretically weighed study. He has been working on an action oriented theoretical framework concerning the process of change and its conditions in local communities. Earlier while the busy field work still lasted, there was only time for very paractical considerations.

Today, the idea of village self-help has been realized and the action oriented research is searching for new goals in the countryside. After the activation of local communities, reviving rural economy became the main task. Universities and muni-

cialities work together to encourage small-scale enterprises. The fundamental idea is to accomplish a more diversified structure of rural industries. Only a solid local economy can maintain the basic population, every-day facilities and infrastructure (roads, electricity and water-supply) also in the countryside. The earlier village research project already contributed to these targets, but by different means.

The decline in the number of farms must be moderated in order to secure rural population. The task is difficult on account of severe problems caused by oversupply in agriculture. Therefore, new lines of production are looked for—for example fishing, bee-keeping and cultivation of fruit and vegetables. Another way out is to combine entirely new functions with agriculture, such as garages, tourism, boat building and contracts on forestry machines. There are still lots of possibilities to be tested.

Geographers also take part in a very practical project carried out presently, in which education organized by universities and lower level course centers has a central role. When the village project combined planning and action with research, the new project aims at combining research with education in order to create new jobs. Models for this have come from various sources.

The projects are based on sociological studies concerning second jobs in the countryside and on geographical village research. Experiences from employment courses for training independent craftsmen arranged in certain municipalities have also been of great value. Development work is expanding to new declining areas in the countryside and it is supported by simultaneous research.

It seems, that when first set going, the action oriented research has come to stay in geography. The social weight of the researcher may be underlined, but at the same time, the role becomes more and more complicated and contradictory. It is better, though, for the researcher to find disagreeable answers to important questions than to enjoy of sympathy thanks to ones insignificance and social neutrality.

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