

The 7th Nordic Conference for Rural Research
19– 21 May 2026, Joensuu, Finland

Changing Nordic rural realities



Book of Abstracts

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UNIVERSITY OF
EASTERN FINLAND

The 7th Nordic Conference for Rural Research

The Nordic Ruralities Conference is arranged biannually, and its location alternate among the Nordic countries. Since its launch in 2010, this conference has provided a valuable platform for interdisciplinary discussions. The conference brings together researchers from various disciplines, interested in the Nordic context as an empirical field. Nordic Ruralities is an excellent environment in which to share knowledge, exchange experiences, and explore pressing issues in Nordic rural areas.

Theme – Changing Nordic rural realities

We live in a time of a fast-changing geopolitical situation, where international alliances change or reconfigure, and where national priorities and politics change correspondingly. Simultaneously, natural resources are being re-interpreted as is their management, and we face both climate change and the biodiversity crisis. Within health, we are experiencing continuing growth in stress-, anxiety and lifestyle related illnesses. Our populations age, especially in rural areas, and many rural areas experience shrinkage in terms of population numbers. Much of the Nordic population live highly mobile lives, and increasingly multi-local, as technology and the past pandemic have made remote work more feasible and accepted. The changes are many, and they happen fast. They bring some issues and dilemmas to the forefront but may overshadow others. How do different institutions react? Who resist, and to what? How are different Nordic rural areas affected? How are issues of marginalization and of inequality, of accountability and reciprocity reconfigured by and reconfiguring the changes?

The National and Local Committee

The conference is organized by the Association for Rural Research and Development (MUA ry), in partnership with the University of Eastern Finland.

The members of the organizing team are:

Aapo Jumppanen, University researcher, Ruralia Institute, University of Helsinki / Chair, MUA ry

Mari Kattilakoski, University researcher, University of Eastern Finland / MUA ry

Henrik Hausen, Chair, Southwest Finland Village Association / MUA ry

Tuija Mononen, University researcher, University of Eastern Finland /MUA ry

The Scientific Committee

Tuija Mononen, University researcher, University of Eastern Finland

Rikke Brandt Broegaard, Senior researcher, Centre for Regional and Tourism Research, Denmark

Thoroddur Bjarnason, Professor of Sociology, University of Akureyri, Iceland.

Maja Farstad, Senior researcher, Institute for rural and regional research (Ruralis), Trondheim, Norway.

Arvid Stiernström, Researcher, Division of Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala, Sweden

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Programme

Tuesday 19th May 2026

8.00 - Registration, Metria-building, Yliopistonkatu 7, Joensuu. [Campus map, pdf >>>](#)

10.00 Welcoming session

Chair: **Aapo Jumppanen**, MUA ry – The Finnish Association for Rural Research and Development

Keynote 1: Professor **Ulla Higdem**, University of Inland Norway: Shrinking rural societies – How to plan for capacity and possible development in communities with expected population decline?

Commentator: Professor **Teemu Makkonen**, Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland

11.30-12.30 Lunch

12.30-14.30 Working groups

14.30-15.00 Coffee break

15.00-17.00 Working groups

Lunch restaurants near Metria:

Carelia, Yliopistonkatu 4, Campus map: building 7,

Futura, Yliopistonkatu 7, Campus map: 14,

Kampus Bistro, Opiskelijankatu 7,

Aura, Yliopistonkatu 2, Campus map: 6

Wednesday 20th May 2026

8.00 — Registration

8.30-10.30 Working groups

10.30-11.00 Coffee break

11.00-12.00 Chair: **Ella Mustakangas**, MUA ry

Keynote 2: Professor **Stefán Hrafn Jónsson**, University of Iceland: Health at the Core or at the Margins? Rethinking Public Health in Rural Iceland from a Multidisciplinary Perspective

Commentator: Associate Professor, University Lecturer **Johanna Vuorelma**, PI of the project Politics of Proximity in Finland in the 1990s and the 2000s, Tampere University, Finland

12.00-13.00 Lunch

13.00-15.00 Working groups

15.00-15.30 Coffee break

15.30-17.30 Working groups

19.00 Conference dinner, restaurant Kerubi, Siltakatu 1, Ilosaari, Joensuu

Thursday 21st May 2026

8.30-10.30 Working groups

10.30-11.00 Coffee break

11.00-12.00 Chair: **Tuija Mononen**, MUA ry, Nordic Ruralities Scientific Committee

Keynote 3: Professor **Jussi P. Laine**, University of Eastern Finland, Karelian Institute: Shifting Borders, Shifting Realities: Resilience in the New Nordic Security Landscape

Commentator: PhD, Docent in geography **Kaj Zimmerbauer**, University of Oulu, Finland

Concluding words and welcome to the next conference: Scientific Committee

12.30- Lunch

Keynotes and commentators



Dr. Scient **Ulla Higdem** is a full professor in planning at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, (INN), the Inland School of Business – Faculty of Economics and Social Science.

Higdem's research interests include new and changing forms of directing, steering (governance) and planning, innovative networks and policy innovation and processes for regional and local planning and development.

Her present research interests focus especially on innovative and realistic planning and policy development in non-metropolitan and rural areas. Until recently she has been heading the research group "Shrinking Societies", and she is affiliated with the Competence Centre of Public Innovation <https://www.inn.no/english/koi/>.

Besides researching and lecturing she is in dialogue with the field of practice, also being an action researcher and an active communicator of her research.

She led the project RURALPLAN (2025), *Innovative planning in shrinking societies*, <https://www.espon.eu/ruralplan>. Together with Aksel Hagen she edited the book *Innovative planning in the book Innovation in Public Planning, Calculate, Communicate and Innovate*, (2020 Palgrave Macmillan). In the book Hagen and Higdem explore the theoretical basis of innovative planning.

Commentator: **Teemu Makkonen**. Professor of Regional Studies and Economic Geography. Karelian Institute, Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies. Teemu's research interests include regional economic development and innovativeness, particularly in the context of cross-border regions. Recent and current projects: Smart shrinking in the North Karelian rural areas 2021-2023, Effects of subsidized collaboration on spatial innovation capacity (Cospin) 2020-2022, East railway: Traffic forecast and socio-economic impact 2025-2026, What is Smart Shrinking in Finland? 2021-2022, Renewal capacity of regional towns 2025, Total – Rural economic security and vitality 2024-2026.



Stefan Hrafn Jonsson is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Iceland. He holds a PhD in Sociology and Demography from Pennsylvania State University (2008).

His research focuses on public health, health inequalities, social determinants of wellbeing, demography, and higher education trajectories. SHJ has led and contributed to numerous large-scale quantitative and mixed-methods research projects based on survey and register data, in Iceland and through international collaboration. He has published in peer-reviewed journals and contributed to policy-relevant research for public authorities.

In addition to his research, SHJ has held several academic leadership roles at the University of Iceland, including Dean of the School of Social Sciences, and has been actively involved in the development of research infrastructure, graduate education, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Commentator: **Johanna Vuorelma**, Dr Johanna Vuorelma is University Lecturer in International Politics at Tampere University and Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Turku. Her research focuses on political language, the politics of proximity, and trust in international politics. She has previously worked at the Centre for European Studies at the University of Helsinki and at the Tampere Institute for Advanced Study. Vuorelma received her PhD from the University of Warwick in 2017 and her MA degree from University College London in 2008.

Vuorelma's recent academic publications include the books *Irony in International Politics* (Edinburgh University Press 2024) and *Narrative Traditions in International Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan 2022), as well as journal articles in *Cooperation and Conflict*, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka*, *European Journal of Communication* and *Politiikka*. Vuorelma is currently writing an academic monograph on national shame and pride in Finland from the Cold War to the NATO era. The book is scheduled to be published by Gaudeamus in 2027.

Vuorelma currently leads a research project funded by the Emil Aaltonen Foundation, examining the politics of proximity in Finland (2025–2029). Vuorelma's previous research projects, funded by the Kone Foundation, the Academy of Finland, and the Finnish Cultural Foundation, have addressed topics such as the use of irony in international politics, authority and trust in times of crisis, the relationship between militarism and democracy, and narratives in international politics.



Dr **Jussi P. Laine** is a professor of multidisciplinary border studies at the Karelian Institute of the University of Eastern Finland, holding the title of Docent of Human Geography at the University of Oulu, Finland. From 2013 to 2021 he led the Association for Borderlands Studies, the leading international scholarly association dedicated exclusively to the systematic interchange of ideas and information relating to international border areas. By background, Dr. Laine is a human geographer, yet in his approach to borders, he combines influences from international relations and geopolitics, political sociology, history, anthropology, and psychology. His research

explores the multiscalar production of borders and critically examines the relationship between state, territory, citizenship, and identity construction. His work extends to borderland resilience and comprehensive security, addressing the vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities of border regions in the face of geopolitical shifts, migration dynamics, and hybrid security threats. Most recently, Dr. Laine has published works on border mobility, migration, the ethics of borders, and ontological (in)security.

Commentator: **Kaj Zimmerbauer**, university lecturer, docent in geography, geography research unit, university of Oulu. His current research interests include supranational co-operation and the frictions between cohesion and competition it typically includes. He is also interested in branding of soft spaces through various 'framings'. Areas of expertise include: regional geography, regionalisms and regional identities, spatial planning, supranational regionalism, state/sub-state interplay, borders and boundedness in soft and hard spaces.

| Timetable for the groups | Presentations | Tue 19.5. | | Wed 20.5.2026 | | | Thu 21. |
|---|---------------|-------------|-------|---------------|-------|-------------|------------|
| | | 12.30-14.30 | 15-17 | 8.30-10.30 | 13-15 | 15.30-17.30 | 8.30-10.30 |
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| 4 Biodiversity in rural production landscapes | 7 | 4 | 3 | | | | |
| 5 Visions, methods and measurements of soc. sust.. | 6 | | | 4 | 2 | | |
| 6 Micro-level actions and consequences rel. to green | 10 | | | 4 | 3 | 3 | |
| 7 Gastronomy Tourism as a Driver of Rural Innovation | 3 | | | | | 3 | |
| 8 New perspectives on entrepreneurship in sparsely.. | 7 | | | 4 | 3 | | |
| 9 Nordic rural development policies and strategies.. | 5 | | | | | 3 | 2 |
| 10 Changing ruralities across a region: Actors, pol.. | 5 | | | | | 3 | 2 |
| 11 Rural Health Social Innovation in a Changing .. | 3 | | 3 | | | | |
| 12 The science-policy interface at the intersection.. | 4 | 4 | | | | | |
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THEME 1 – Cultures and people, places and identities

Group 1 Critical reflections on multilocal living, migration and community wellbeing

Coordinators:

Marco Eimermann, Umeå University (Se). Marco.eimermann@umu.se

Rikke Brandt Broegaard, Centre for Regional and Tourism Research (Dk).

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Kati Pitkänen, Finnish Environment Institute (Fi). Kati.pitkanen@syke.fi

Doris Carson, Umeå University (Se). Doris.carson@umu.se

Group description:

This WG is inspired by the 2024 Nordic Ruralities' WG Critical reflections on lifestyle migration and sustainable rural development. Our aim is to bring together scholars from across disciplines and countries interested in multilocal living, temporary mobilities or migration, and community wellbeing to advance our knowledge, to exchange experiences and to reflect on future studies.

We approach temporary mobilities and migration via multi-locality on various temporal and spatial scales. This includes tourists, visiting friends and relatives, seasonal workers, circular migrants working in agriculture or construction, refugees, grey nomads, digital nomads, second homeowners, lifestyle migrants, etc. These multi-locals perform agency while enjoying services, becoming involved in and shaping local communities as initiators, developers, members in rural associations, owners of rural resources, workers in local businesses and/or entrepreneurs.

This WG addresses how their multi-locality and local involvement unfold in uneven spatial and social patterns in times of multiple crises. On a global scale: climate change, energy supply, uncertain geopolitical and military operations, deteriorating health conditions, and financial challenges. In

society: the blurring between work and leisure, increased distance work (in some economic sectors) and changing needs to commute long distance for work. Locally: internal, place-specific factors such as demographic challenges, loss of services, housing issues, etc.

Thus, multilocal living and various forms of mobilities and migration unevenly affect and reshape various Nordic rural communities, often increasing inequality and socio-spatial divides (rural-urban, thriving vs. lagging rural areas, different degrees of privilege in migration, etc.).

Wednesday 8.30-10.30, 4 presentations

Voluntary Work in Small Communities – a Thriving or a Dying Practise?

Grethe Mattland Olsen, Volda university College, Department of social science, gmo@hivolda.no
Nathalie Homlong, Volda university College, Department of social science,
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Recent research from Statistics Norway (SSB) shows shifts in participation in voluntary work (called *dugnad*). Although the overall decline is modest, fewer individuals now carry a larger share of the voluntary effort, and people appear less willing to commit long term. This suggests increasing challenges in recruiting volunteers. *Dugnad* holds particular importance in small rural communities in Norway, where collective voluntary effort sustains local services, strengthens social cohesion, and reinforces a shared sense of responsibility.

This study examines conditions for voluntary engagement in a rural community on the west coast of Norway, based on a survey among local inhabitants. The aim is to understand the culture of volunteering, identify factors that hinder or promote participation, and assess whether national trends—such as pressure on the traditional *dugnad*—are reflected locally. The survey includes both individuals who contribute to voluntary work and those responsible for leading and organizing activities.

The study draws on theoretical perspectives from social capital (Putnam) and capacity building (Healey), which provide tools for analysing how trust, networks, norms, and local capacity for action shape voluntary engagement. It also explores participants' experiences: how they perceive their involvement, what they gain from contributing, and what may limit or encourage further participation.

Overall, the study offers a comprehensive picture of how structural conditions, local culture, social capital, and individual motivations interact. It highlights what is needed to strengthen and further develop the spirit of *dugnad* in a community facing societal change.

The remaining potential of residential rural areas in Finland: Scale, geography, and characteristics

Max Strandén, Lotta Aho, Jari Lauronen & Olli Lehtonen, olli.lehtonen@uef.fi, Department of Geographical and Historical Studies, University of Eastern Finland

Contemporary demographic and economic centralization in Finland has substantially constrained the developmental prospects of residential rural areas. These shifts reflect broader structural

transformations - including mechanization, automation, urbanization, and changes in governance - that have reconfigured rural economies and diminished the relative importance of primary production. Consequently, rural areas increasingly function as diverse residential environments whose viability depends on access to services, employment opportunities, and robust infrastructure.

Yet existing scholarship has not systematically examined how the characteristics of residential rurality align with the preconditions of an emerging place-independent society, nor how these capacities vary spatially across the country. Although previous studies highlight critical enablers - such as service accessibility, infrastructural capacity, and responsive housing markets - comprehensive, spatially explicit analyses remain limited. This project addresses these gaps by evaluating the ability of different rural areas to meet the residential preferences of heterogeneous population groups and by assessing how ongoing centralization reshapes these conditions.

Findings indicate that centralizing regional dynamics have weakened rural areas' ability to accommodate diverse residential demands, underscoring the need to foreground rural living conditions as a core component of rural policy. Without such prioritization, continued population decline and adaptive downscaling risk further undermining the long-term viability of rural habitation.

Place Attachment of second-home owners and residents as a Driver of Climate Action

Manu Rantanen, University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute, manu.rantanen@helsinki.fi,
Annamari Kiviahho, University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute, annamari.e.kiviahho@helsinki.fi

Although climate change is a global phenomenon, its impacts are felt differently across places, which requires place-specific local responses and actions. It has been argued that common senses of place could lead to innovative ways of recognising and solving global threats such as climate change. Likewise, place attachment can motivate people to act to tackle these challenges.

However, while sharing the same places, the place attachment of second-home owners and local dwellers may differ from each other. Moreover, these two groups are treated differently by local governance structures and therefore lack common participatory structures. There is a strong need to identify new ways for local dwellers and second-home owners to collaborate and develop local solutions for adapting to climate change.

In this presentation, we introduce new ways in which multi-local residents and residents can be engaged in addressing local sustainability challenges related to climate change. The project 'Actor-based sustainability solutions for multi-local living' is an ongoing development and research project in the South Savo region.

The theoretical background is based on concepts such as sense of place and place attachment. Empirically, we apply an action research approach in which researchers and participants work together to find new ways to understand and solve local sustainability challenges, highlighting the dynamic relationship between researchers, second-home owners and other participants. All parties involved are subjects of the activity, and all play an important role in producing knowledge and results.

Material arrangements of multilocal living: How the metabolism of housing is shaped by practices across two homes

Hannele Toivonen, Hannele.Toivonen@lut.fi, Jenny Rinkinen & Johanna Hohenthal, LUT University

The current ways of living are in many ways dependent on large-scale centralized infrastructures, such as power and water grids, and continuous resource flows. Previous research has illustrated how centralized infrastructural systems have coevolved with everyday practices at home, such as heating and cooking, and have produced expectations of power being always 'on'. While this is significant, housing related consumption is not limited to a single place nor uniform material arrangements. Many live multi-locally between two or more homes with different kinds of material arrangements.

In this research, we bring to the fore the diversity of material arrangements shaping household practices and related resource consumption. We study how the housing related resource consumption results from practices that extend to two homes with different infrastructural arrangements. The study is based on research interviews with 24 summer cottage owners and users in Finland. Drawing on the theories of social practices and urban metabolism, we use the metaphor metabolism of housing to illustrate how the housing related resource consumption is an outcome of practices which 1) shift from first homes to second homes along the practitioner and change or remain similar depending on the material arrangements at the cottage. 2) Remain at the first home, 3) extend to multiple sites simultaneously.

The study contributes to the research on multi-local living, practice theoretical research on consumption in secondary spaces, and the role of different material arrangements in practice.

Wednesday 13-15, 3 presentations

The Internationalization of Tourism Labour Markets in Rural Arctic Sweden

Marco Eimermann, Umeå University, Sweden, marco.eimermann@umu.se

Facing the challenges of globalisation, the tourism sector in Arctic Sweden is at a crucial crossroads. The traditionally locally anchored workforce is no longer sufficient, and now the focus is shifting globally to solutions. Can international labour be the key to success for Arctic rural tourism industries? This presentation informs about ongoing studies in a Kamprad Family Foundation-funded project, which delves into the consequences of recruiting international labour as a solution to local staff shortages (as a side effect of the ongoing green transition). The presentation gives special attention to multi-locally living seasonal staff. The approach is inductive as empirical findings will be linked with tentative considerations of tourism entrepreneurs' and seasonal staff's various forms of embeddedness and social involvement with local stakeholders (such as sports clubs). This is then linked to regenerative tourism and potential encounters between mobile seasonal workers and locally operating civil society. Based on initial exploratory qualitative inquiries at one lodge in Norrbotten (Sweden), the presentation concludes with thoughts about the interconnectedness of places through mobile tourism workers. It also indicates topics for upcoming research in the project, mainly regarding tourism seasonal workers' potential contributions to local community wellbeing in destination places.

Rural Multi-Locality and Care Poverty: Intersections of Mobility, Aging, and Unequal Care Provision

Mari Kattilakoski, University of Eastern Finland, mari.kattilakoski@uef.fi,
Kati Pitkänen, Finnish Environment Institute, kati.pitkanen@syke.fi

In the rural context, multi-local living has been examined particularly as a phenomenon related to leisure time and changes in work. Other drivers that reinforce multi-locality, such as the needs and provision of care, have received less attention. Care researchers have criticized that the Nordic welfare states are increasingly unable to fulfil the promise of providing care equally to anyone who needs it. Especially rural elderly are at risk for care poverty. In this presentation, we examine how care poverty is interlinked with rural multi-locality.

The research is based on a multi-method case study in the rural areas of North Karelia in the Eastern Finland. With the aging of the rural population, the proportion of the population in need of care has increased and will continue to grow in the future. At the same time, transformations of the public service system have led to problems in the accessibility of social and health care services in rural areas. The care responsibilities are increasingly shifted to the third sector and family members, who often live far away. The aging population and their relatives face the challenges of multi-locality in many ways as they organize their lives in different places, through both physical and remote presence, and in the diverse interaction of giving and receiving care.

Living elsewhere, owning forest: Exploring absentee forest owners' multi-locality patterns and rural agency

Pasi Saukkonen, University of Eastern Finland, pasi.saukkonen@uef.fi,
Kati Pitkänen, Finnish Environment Institute, kati.pitkanen@syke.fi,
Mari Kattilakoski, University of Eastern Finland, mari.kattilakoski@uef.fi

The Nordic countries have a long tradition of family forestry, and the majority of forests in Finland, Sweden, and Norway remain in private ownership. Today, however, this tradition is undergoing significant transformation as family forestry increasingly shifts toward absentee forest ownership, where owners no longer reside on or make a living from their land. Earlier research has often portrayed absentee owners as passive, suggesting they place limited value on forest-related benefits and therefore present challenges for forest policy. In this study, we question this characterization by approaching absentee owners not only as forest proprietors but also as multi-local stakeholders embedded in rural regions.

Our analysis draws on a survey conducted in December 2026 among absentee forest owners in North Karelia, Eastern Finland (N = 605). Currently, more than 30% of private forest owners in the region live elsewhere. In this presentation, we introduce the first findings of the survey, focusing on absentee owners' motivations for forest ownership, their connections to the region, and their patterns of presence, absence, and rural agency. Our research team would like to present an abstract related to multi-site. We think it would best fit in Working Group 1.aim is to deepen understanding of absentee owners' roles in rural sustainability and to explore how their activities and attachments intersect with broader forms of rural multi-locality.

Group 2 Nordic Rural Youth in Change?

Coordinators:

Ville Pöysä, University of Eastern Finland, ville.poysa@uef.fi;

Päivi Armila, University of Eastern Finland, paivi.armila@uef.fi;

Kaisa Vehkalahti, University of Jyväskylä, kaisa.r.vehkalahti@jyu.fi;

Martta Rätty, University of Eastern Finland, martta.raty@uef.fi

Group description:

Rural and sparsely populated regions across the Nordic countries are undergoing significant transformations in the 2020s. Yet, many long-standing structural trends – such as demographic decline, ageing, and centralisation of services – remain deeply embedded. These developments continue to pose challenges to local welfare systems, as well as to rural youth. For example educational opportunities are increasingly urban-centred and both employment and leisure opportunities diminish in rural contexts. Despite these constraints, young people continue to live and build their lives in these areas, navigating and negotiating their socio-material conditions.

This working group examines the everyday experiences, coping strategies, and life-course aspirations of youth residing in sparsely populated regions, with the aim of reaching an updated understanding about what it means to grow up in these circumstances and specific opportunity structures.

Rural youth research has gained increasing scholarly attention in youth studies over the past decade, giving rise to a distinct field of inquiry. Despite the breadth of existing studies, contemporary global phenomena and uncertainty continue to generate new kinds of questions and need for research.

Tuesday 12.30-14.30, 3 presentations

Young adults' multi-scalar sense of home in rural Northern Karelia

Katariina Kotila, Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland, katariina.kotila@uef.fi

I present the preliminary results from my ongoing research on how young adults negotiate and (re)make their sense of home in rural places. My research draws from the critical geographies of home, especially the interest in home-making as multi-scalar, and the research of affects and emotions, as I aim to understand emotions entangled with the sense of home.

I have collected and created study materials together with the participants using two methods: photo diaries of everyday life in rural homes, and thematic on-site interviews. The participants, fifteen Finnish young adults, have each moved to rural Northern Karelia within the past seven years. Some of them live in remote rural areas, and some in villages or small towns. I analyse the photo diaries and interview transcripts using qualitative content analysis in order to understand how the rural environments the participants live in become a part of their affective, embodied, multi-scalar everyday experiences of the sense of home.

Young People's Experiences of Meaningful Farmwork Life

Ida Säfstrom, Stockholm University, Sweden, ida.safstrom@humangeo.su.se

Tomorrow's food supply depends on young people wanting and choosing to work in the agricultural sector, both as employees and as farm owners. Research has shown worrying trends indicating that the sector, both in Sweden and in other parts of the European Union, faces challenges related to generational renewal, poor profitability, low wages and difficulties of recruiting labour. There are, however, young people who actively choose to take employment on farms, to run farms, or to do both. In my PhD research, I critically assess how farmwork becomes meaningful to young people working in the region of Dalarna, Sweden. How do they experience and navigate a sector that is often portrayed as being fraught with challenges?

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and stories about and shared by individuals at the level of cowsheds and crop fields, and with an analytical focus on embodied and emotional experiences of daily practices in agrarian spaces, I show how young people engaged in farming, value the sense of being active co-creators of local landscapes and communities. In encounters with people and non-human actors in this study, farmwork emerges as more than food production and more than a job: the young people allow their work to be a matter of relationships building, attachment and emotional bonds with local communities involving both humans, animals and landscapes.

Sustainable Rural Futures: A Qualitative longitudinal study of rural young people in the 21st century

Ville Pöysä, University of Eastern Finland, ville.poysa@uef.fi,
Martta Rätty, University of Eastern Finland, martta.raty@uef.fi,
Päivi Armila, University of Eastern Finland, paivi.armila@uef.fi,
Kaisa Vehkalahti, University of Jyväskylä, kaisa.r.vehkalahti@jyu.fi

Although the current challenges facing rural young people are palpable, there remains a substantial knowledge gap in existing research: a lack of understanding of the perspectives and experiences of rural youth. When rural young people have been studied, the focus has primarily been on out-migration. The "mobility imperative" – the push or urge to migrate, particularly for education and employment opportunities – has been shown to shape rural youth across Europe and the Global North. However, previous longitudinal shows that out-migration is only the tip of the iceberg; rural young lives can be rich, fulfilling, and worth exploring in their own right. While recognising that mobility is necessary for many at some point in their lives, excessive emphasis on out-migration has overlooked other dimensions of rural life and the more nuanced processes of belonging – or not belonging – over time.

The presentation is based on the SURF project, launched in autumn 2025, which explores changes that have taken place in rural Finland in the 2000s from the perspectives of young people and social sustainability. The project examines how recent historical changes have affected the life chances of young people growing up in diverse rural regions in Finland. Drawing on a unique qualitative longitudinal study of two generations of rural youth (born 2000 and 2010) and their families, the project identifies key elements of socially sustainable rural youth.

Tuesday 15-17, 3 presentations

The distinct need of relative ethics in longitudinal qualitative research among youth in small rural communities

Päivi Armila, University of Eastern Finland,
Sinikka Aapola-Kari, The Alli Paasikivi Foundation, paivi.armila@uef.fi

Our presentation concentrates on features of special ethics in qualitative longitudinal research, when conducted with young people living in small rural communities. In this case, the researchers' ethical responsibilities are even tripled, because of 1) the interventional and long-lasting nature of the research, 2) the young age of the informants, and 3) the small communities where they live.

The longevity scrutinized means that research phases are long, repeated and tangled with each other, and the ethical demands and problems, as well, are continuously repeated and tangled. When the researcher becomes familiar with the research participants over the years, it is difficult to remain a neutral and non-intervening outsider in their lives – which, however, is often presented as the ideal role of the researcher. Additionally, when the research focuses on youth, the sensitivity - both concrete, psychological and mental dynamics - of emerging adulthood with its multiple life choices must be considered. When the research is conducted in small and often isolated rural communities especially, questions concerning anonymity and the researchers' overall relationship to the research site become difficult and are pronounced as well. Hence, longitudinal research sensitivities must not be scrutinized only in terms of normative research ethics, but strongly in terms of relational ethics that are based on encounters and deep familiarity within research relationships.

Rural schools as a specific question in educational research?

Leppähaara Susanna, Jokila Suvi & Jauhiainen Annukka, Department of Education University of Turku,
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For decades rural areas have experienced significant transformation with various intersecting changes including demographic and agricultural changes alongside centralisation policies of welfare services. These changes have significantly affected rural schools and schooling. The aim of this paper is to understand how rural schools are approached in the scientific literature and what these studies can tell us about rural schools as part of the Nordic welfare context?

Taking previous research on rural schools as a point of departure, this presentation draws on a systematic literature review of Nordic scientific articles from 1996 to 2024. The data were analysed using inductive content analysis. Our analysis shows that (1) the small scale attached with rural schools shapes the teaching arrangements and teachers' profession, (2) rural schools are approached as part of their wider community, and (3) rural schools are politically difficult question where education and spatial policy intersect. These findings raise important questions about how place-based perspectives should inform teaching practices, educational policy, and decision-making in rural contexts.

Rural grammar schools as dynamic village communities in the history of the Finnish elementary education

Päivi Armila, University of Eastern Finland, paivi.armila@uef.fi

My presentation is based on a history written about rural village schools (kansakoulut in Finnish) in a small and remote municipality of Eastern Finland. The timeline of the scrutiny extends from the latest years of the 19th century to the year 1973 that was the last year before the great educational reform and a start of comprehensive education (peruskoulu in Finnish). During that timeline, there have been even 50 small village schools in this municipality – now all these schools are only part of the local history and memories. However, schools and their working actors have had a huge and influential role for village dynamics and development of this certain historical period: teachers, cleaners, janitors, and cooks – who often had their apartments in school buildings or near them – are remembered as local influencers who did not count their working hours. Beside on village development, they had also a huge impact on many individual life courses, acting as significant others who educated not only pupils but also singers, dancers, sportsmen, and so on, as their free time aspirations and for empathy – or ideology. School boards (johtokunnat in Finnish), then, acted as strong local rulers when controlling their schools and, for example, using selective power when hiring staff for schools often among people from their own villages.

My presentation gets its contents from both massive local archives and people's memories that have been told to become data for this history. In this kind of data, of course, significant and positive influence of village school actors is present more intensively than the negative one.

Group 3 Open group theme 1: Cultures and people, places and identities

Coordinator

Markku Mattila, markku.mattila@migrationinstitute.fi, Migration Institute of Finland

Group description

This group is open for papers that does not fit any of the accepted working groups, but still relate to theme 1. The organizers will then create suitable sessions corresponding to the paper's contribution.

Wednesday 15.30-17.30, 4 presentations

Finnish farm women's well-being in the age of the global crises

Ada Trogen, ada.trogen@helsinki.fi, University of Helsinki Ruralia institute

Agriculture is currently undergoing multiple structural transitions, including climate change, the green transition, and geopolitical instability. As agriculture constitutes a fundamental component of societal infrastructure, it must remain functional under diverse and uncertain conditions. Enabling necessary transformations and strengthening the resilience of agricultural systems therefore requires

attention to the well-being of farmers. In this context, resilience in agriculture is intricately linked to the well-being of those who sustain the sector.

Well-being can be interpreted in several ways, but in this research, well-being is interpreted through the capabilities approach developed by Sen and Nussbaum. According to this perspective, individual well-being emerges from the interaction between personal capabilities, societal opportunities, and the freedom to choose how to utilize these capabilities.

The aim of this study is to explore how farm women's well-being is constructed, challenged, and enabled within the context of Finnish agriculture. Previous research suggests that women often play a key role in maintaining resilience at the farm level, and female farmers have been found to demonstrate a relatively strong orientation toward sustainable changes in farming practices. At the same time, women's agency in agriculture may differ from that of men, highlighting the importance of understanding the specific conditions shaping their well-being.

The study is based on semi-structured life-story interviews conducted with Finnish female farmers. The analysis is ongoing, and the presentation will discuss emerging insights into the role of women's well-being in supporting resilience and transformation in agriculture.

Workload and coping of female officers in Finnish forest sector

Marja Kallioniemi, marja.kallioniemi@luke.fi, Natural Resources Institute Finland, Helsinki, Finland, Hanna-Riitta Kymäläinen, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

The Finnish forest sector has been male-dominated. Only every fifth worker was female in 2023, and earlier research has indicated their poor well-being. In 2025, we interviewed ten female officers working in wood trade, timber harvesting, advisory work, and forestry. The respondents were located around Finland and represented different ages. The interview material (over 200 pages of transcribed discussion) was analyzed using case study, content analysis, and by utilizing three repertoires of gender (Kupiainen & Kovalainen, 2013) as a theoretical approach.

The respondents were mainly satisfied with their work community. Work tasks included challenges, and achievements reached were rewarding. The freedom concerning working time and tasks, forests as a work environment, and interesting human encounters were assessed positively.

All repertoires of gender were included in the interviews. Strength was indispensable in everyday situations and created during the first working years. The insignificance of gender was desired but left the respondents in confusion within a gendered work sector. Specialness received less space, yet the respondents asked, why does a female officer not have the opportunity to be herself.

Several interviewees had experienced burnout. Females must tolerate high workload, and disturbing speech and behaviour. The authority, skills and guidelines of female professionals may be questioned. Some customers announced they would contact only male forestry specialist.

The sample urges support, especially for young female officers, development of education, and improved practices at workplaces. The current masculine work culture should be renewed as fair and tolerant of diversity.

Rural Vitality through Community Based Marketing: Craft, Heritage and Local Identity

Andres Rõigas, andres.roigas@ut.ee, University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy/Estonian University of Life Sciences, Madis Rennu, University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy

The sustainability of rural regions is increasingly shaped by spatial and social processes that link place marketing, community based migration and the mobilisation of local resources. This presentation draws on research conducted in South Estonia that examines the formation of intentional communities and their contribution to rural development. The aim is to analyse how place marketing practices correspond with the value orientations and lifestyle choices of potential in migrants.

Findings show that broad and generalised marketing campaigns have had limited effectiveness, as they overlook the motivations of specific target groups and do not support the organic growth of communities. In contrast, targeted approaches that appeal to individuals who value craft skills, cultural heritage, environmental attachment and sustainable living have proven more successful in encouraging migration and fostering new community formation. In migrants with craft or building skills often find opportunities quickly, meeting local labour needs and contributing to community life through various practical and cultural activities.

The study also indicates that although local governments do not systematically manage the emergence of new communities, they generally view migration related changes positively and are open to cooperation with incoming groups. The presentation argues that rural place marketing is most effective when it builds on local resources and heritage, supports community based entrepreneurship and addresses clearly defined target groups whose values align with local spatial and cultural development trajectories.

Performing rurality in later life. Senior volunteering and rural place making in Southern Denmark.

Martin Lindhardt, The Faculty of Business and Social Sciences, Department of Political Science and Public Management, Danish Centre for Rural Research, lind@sam.sdu.dk

In recent decades scholars have been paying increasing attention both to the benefits of volunteering in later life and to the role of rural places in healthy aging. What is less researched is the way in which senior citizens actively engage with rural places through activities such as volunteering. Based on research in different rural locations in southern Denmark, this article explores how for rural seniors, different kinds of organizational volunteering can be important in creating and maintaining relationships with rural places by transforming locations into personalized, meaningful, and connected environments.

Drawing on relational-spatial theory, the article conceives of senior volunteering as an important place-making activity. I argue that some of the benefits that volunteering offers in terms of preserving identities and deepening place attachment are intrinsically related to sensations of continuously being able to shape and define rural places by endowing them with meaning and lived values. The

article shows how for rural seniors in southern Denmark, volunteering was strongly associated with living out, or performing, a certain rural quality of life.

Thursday 8.30-10.30, 4 presentations

Is Relocation a Viable Adaptation Strategy for Arctic Communities? Societal Costs and Rural Futures in Hazard-Prone Iceland

Matthias Kokorsch, matthias@uw.is & Jóhanna Gísladóttir, University Centre of the Westfjords, Iceland

Drawing on the relocation work package within the ARCHAIC project (Sustainable and Resilient Communities in Remote Settlements in the Arctic in the Age of Climate Change), the presentation examines how communities exposed to natural hazards can re-imagine futures beyond rebuilding in high-risk areas.

In the Nordic countries, relocation or managed retreat has so far rarely been discussed as a proactive adaptation strategy. It tends instead to be framed as a last-resort solution, initiated only when all other measures appear exhausted. This makes relocation a highly sensitive topic with clear political, legal, and rights-based dimensions, including questions of consent and procedural justice. Yet, given increasing hazard exposure and structural vulnerabilities in small, remote communities, relocation is an uncomfortable option that may nonetheless need to be addressed earlier in adaptation debates.

Empirically, the contribution presents results from the ongoing relocation process in Grindavík, Iceland, following the seismic crisis that began in 2023. The study provides a comprehensive calculation of the societal costs of relocation, including housing buyouts, compensation schemes, infrastructure investments, emergency response, and indirect social impacts. While grounded in a single case, the analysis argues that Grindavík represents a potential precedent for other Icelandic rural settlements facing escalating natural hazard risks.

Between War and Settlement: Identity and Reconfiguration in the Everyday Lives of Ukrainians in South Ostrobothnia

Markku Mattila, marmat@utu.fi & Toni Ahvenainen, Migration Institute of Finland, Mette Lund Kristensen, University of Southern Denmark, Maria Ivanova-Gongne, Åbo Akademi University, Finland, Maria Elo, University of Southern Denmark

This paper examines the settlement of Ukrainians under temporary protection in rural Finland, focusing on South Ostrobothnia, and asks how identity and future orientation are shaped in a context where the war continues and the horizon of the future remains uncertain. Theoretically, the paper draws on the concept of liminality and develops it in a layered direction: the in-between condition unfolds not as a linear transition but as simultaneous structural, social, cultural and psychological–existential dimensions. The empirical material consists of interview data collected in South Ostrobothnia, analysed through thematic analysis with particular attention to everyday practices,

forms of agency and the uncertainty generated by temporary protection and the return–settlement dilemma.

The findings indicate that Ukrainians' in-betweenness does not appear merely as a state of 'limbo', often described in refugee studies as stagnation, but also as a generative space. Structural uncertainty may foster skills development and educational orientation, while psychological liminality may give rise to shifts in values towards justice and practices of everyday citizenship. At the same time, the rhythms of rural life, experiences of safety and the texture of everyday routines may support processes of re-grounding, even as belonging and long-term planning remain fragile. The paper argues that liminality should be understood not only as an obstacle to integration but also as a space of reconfiguration embedded in place and everyday life – a perspective that challenges conventional, normatively framed integration debates.

“I realised that it’s not going to be a quick process, that it’s not going to be fast.”

Experiences of Belonging in the Narratives of Ukrainian migrants

Marja Enbuska, University of Jyväskylä, marja.l.enbuska@jyu.fi

In Finland, public attitudes toward Ukrainians fleeing the war have been welcoming from the very beginning. In rural areas, Ukrainian migrants were received with high expectations and were often perceived as a valuable resource for addressing local labor shortages. However, personal experiences of belonging are more complex than perspectives that primarily position migrants as a labor force. In this study, I bring together the concepts of belonging and social sustainability. My focus is on the experiences of belonging that five Ukrainian women constructed through the small narratives of their everyday lives.

In total, fifteen interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2025. The findings show that experiences of belonging shifted across different times and life situations. Everyday encounters and social relations, decisions between education and employment, the wellbeing of children, and uncertainties related to employment and the future all shaped the participants' sense of belonging. From the perspective of social sustainability, belonging does not emerge quickly. Moreover, the opportunities available—or the lack thereof—in rural areas shape the extent to which belonging can be built.

Limited availability of language education for migrants in rural regions: causes and consequences

Minna Suni, Sanna Mustonen & Oleksandra Poberezhets, University of Jyväskylä

This paper examines the policy-level causes and social consequences of limited access to language education for migrants residing in rural areas in Finland. The analysis draws on ethnographic data gathered in the multidisciplinary research project Language, engagement and belonging: Ukrainians accessing and transforming rural school and work communities (University of Jyväskylä, 2023–2027), complemented by policy documents and education statistics. The study is informed by Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of investment in second language learning and by perspectives on social sustainability in education.

The language education policies implemented in rural regions will be critically discussed. In basic education, key problems include the lack of tailored Finnish as a second language and literature instruction, as well as limited provision of migrants' mother tongue instruction, particularly in smaller municipalities. Among adult migrants, the challenges are intensified by the 2025 reform of the Integration Act, which assigns municipalities a central role in integration services while substantial cuts to integration funding, including integration training, are simultaneously introduced. Furthermore, the language education needs of employed migrants are largely overlooked, constraining both equitable access to instruction and opportunities for career development.

Our data demonstrates that the policies have far-reaching consequences: unequal learning opportunities, increased social exclusion, family relocation driven by schooling needs, the double displacement of migrant youth, and restricted employment trajectories for adult migrants. Nevertheless, individual agency and workplace initiatives partly mitigate these limitations: many migrants make determined use of available provision and digital self-study, and some private employers support workplace language learning to enhance employee retention and wellbeing. The findings highlight the need for socially sustainable language education policies and practices that account for the specific conditions of rural contexts.

Darvin, R. & Norton, B. (2015) Identity and a Model of Investment in Applied Linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 36-56. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000191>

THEME 2 – Sustainable use of natural resources and landscape management

4 Biodiversity in rural production landscapes

Coordinators

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Group description:

The rate of biodiversity decline is accelerating globally, including in the Nordics. The deteriorating trend is fuelled by extraction of natural resources to produce cheap commodities and bring about economic growth. Much of this decline takes place in rural areas, where natural resources and production systems hosting them, such as agricultural lands, forests, waterways and peatlands, are situated. Despite persistent efforts to address biodiversity decline via various biodiversity policies, it can be seen as the logical outcome of streamlining and enlarging production systems under the institutional logics of efficiency and extractivism, including externalisation of environmental and social costs and pressure to grow or perish.

The managers of natural resources, such as farmers and foresters, are central actors in reversing biodiversity decline. They also operate as a part of a larger economic and cultural context that conditions their actions. Concurrently, local rural communities are the first to experience first-hand the impacts of declining biodiversity through negative effects of biodiversity decline on various livelihoods dependent on high levels of biodiversity. Landscape management and the sustainable use of natural resources are thus fundamental to ensuring rural economies and rural wellbeing.

In this working group, we call for contributions that critically examine and explore the tensions related to biodiversity in rural production landscapes. What kind of development patterns of biodiversity in these landscapes can be detected? How do various institutional frameworks and logics as well as economic incentives shape land-use decisions? What kind of alternative logics or practices can support biodiversity in rural production landscapes, while sustaining rural livelihoods? What is the role of managers' individual agency, and to what extent they are operating by the rules set by other, more dominant and powerful actors? What could the future of land-use practices promoting biodiversity look like?

The working group welcomes empirical and theoretical work exploring various aspects of biodiversity in rural production landscapes. We especially endorse interdisciplinary works that integrate natural sciences with human and social sciences.

Tuesday 12.30-14.30, 4 presentations

The importance of social context for hay-meadow restoration in Norway

Sunniva Solnør, sunniva.solnor@ruralis.no, Rob Burton, Ruralis – Institute for rural and regional research

For over three decades European researchers and governments have recognised that agriculture is heading towards an “ecological crisis” and, consequently, have introduced a plethora of voluntary agri-environmental schemes (AESs). However, despite decades of operation, the problem of biodiversity loss has only worsened. Europe appears to have become locked into a research-policy system (dominated by ecologists and economists) that achieves little in terms of halting biodiversity loss – let alone reversing it.

In this presentation we argue that the problem stems from our failure to account for broader social systems. Based on a qualitative study of hay-meadow restoration in Norway, we identify four key issues that are limiting the long-term success of hay-meadow restoration, namely: (1) continued population centralisation, (2) changing social values (preferred family size, sense of duty, recreational expectations, gender expectations), (3) the loss of hay-meadow socialisation processes, and (4) the need to maintain historical structures.

We argue that restoration is problematic because society has changed so significantly that it makes returning to traditional management extremely difficult. From historical observations of meadows “swarming with people” (1956) to survey observations that “the people are just not there” societal changes have created significant labour problems that mechanisation alone cannot resolve. These are further worsened by increasingly irregular mowing dates resulting from climate change.

We conclude that expectations of biodiversity being restored by returning to historical management practices are unrealistic, and that continued change in society is likely to make them increasingly unrealistic in the future.

Institutional logics of protecting agrobiodiversity

Irene Kuhmonen, University of Jyväskylä, School of Business and Economics,
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The decline of agrobiodiversity remains a persistent global trend despite increasing policy and corporate commitments to halt biodiversity loss. This presentation examines the root causes of declining agrobiodiversity and identifies pathways for reversing the trend, drawing on empirical research on farmer perceptions, food value chain actors, and stakeholder visions, as well as theoretical analyses of the institutional foundations of biodiversity governance.

Food systems simultaneously drive biodiversity loss and host a substantial share of biodiversity. Particularly in the Global North agricultural intensification has diminished the ecological quality of farmland and surrounding habitats. Although agri-environmental policies have attempted to counter these impacts by reintroducing semi-natural elements into production landscapes, structural developments—larger farms, fewer farmers, declining grazing, and the loss of high-nature-value farmlands—continue to undermine these efforts.

Dominant narratives of promoting biodiversity in the food system context focus on reducing animal-based consumption. However, these narratives overlook the core driver of biodiversity decline: the specialization and intensification of agricultural production fuelled by continuously squeezed farm incomes. The inability of contemporary strategies to address these systemic drivers reflects the persistence of institutional logics emphasizing specialization, centralization, efficiency, and growth.

To effectively promote agrobiodiversity, food systems must transition toward more diversified production models. Key elements of such models include mixed cropping systems, regenerative and agroecological practices, increased self-sufficiency in production inputs, and reintegration of livestock within the agroecosystems. Such a shift requires reimagining the institutional foundations of food systems to support simultaneously ecosystem services, viability of farms, and recoupling, not decoupling, agriculture with nature.

Farmers' and advisors' views on on-farm biodiversity monitoring

Heli Lehtinen, heli.lehtinen@helsinki.fi, Tiia Malka, Toni Ryyänen & Traci Birge, University of Helsinki

Agricultural production affects biodiversity, and the European Union (EU) has an ambitious Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 as a part of the European Green Deal. Agroecology is considered by the EU as a promising approach for transitioning farming systems. Agroecology is a science-based and holistic approach based on thirteen principles of agroecology. Biodiversity is included as one of the agroecological principles.

We draw from the “13 principles” as a framework to examine farmers’ and advisors’ perceptions of biodiversity and on-farm biodiversity monitoring. The aim of the research is to analyse the extent to

which farmers already act in accordance with the principles of agroecology and to identify the barriers and enablers of on-farm biodiversity conservation.

A European partnership conducted 30 farmer-advisor focus groups of approximately four participants each in six European countries. Focus groups were organized according to farm production type. We used purposive sampling to select participants (N=113) with experience in biodiversity measures.

Preliminary data analysis includes summaries of thematic questions for each focus group and each country. The summaries show that participants found new biodiversity monitoring technologies generally interesting, but farmers' willingness to adopt them is limited by factors such as increased workload and complexity of the data.

Monitoring must clearly benefit farmers to generate farmers' interest. Farmers' views emphasize agroecosystem-level principles such as caring for soil health and the synergistic benefits provided by wildlife.

What's in a name? Contested meanings (and implications) of agroforestry in a Nordic context

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Agroforestry is defined as farming practices that incorporate woody plants into crop and animal husbandry. The European Union (EU) considers agroforestry a means toward more sustainable agriculture and asked Member States to define agroforestry in their CAP plans. Finnish language lacks a single established term for agroforestry, and varied meanings are attributed to the terms.

Agroforestry as a term originally described smallholder multi-cropping with trees in the tropics. What is its relation to Finnish farming?

Using purposive sampling, we explored stakeholders' views of agroforestry through two events in Finland. First, we conducted five semi-structured farmer-advisor focus group interviews (n= 21) in 2023–2024 on the topic of farmland biodiversity, with agroforestry as one topic. Secondly, we presented the results of the focus groups at a workshop (n=7) held in 2025 and collected the participants' feedback and discussion about agroforestry in Finland.

The focus groups and subsequent workshops provided insights into how agroforestry is perceived and accepted amongst stakeholders with interest or experience in farmland biodiversity conservation. Participants in the focus groups emphasised the unique qualities of Finland, challenged some prevailing implementation concepts related to agroforestry, considered when it is appropriate, and suggested that some of Finland's farming or farming landscapes are already agroforestry. These participants largely rejected "trees in fields" except in limited cases. Participants in the workshop were more aligned with definitions in policy. We propose that careful consideration of the Nordic context, including landscape and historical perspectives, is needed when implementing agroforestry in policy.

Tuesday 15-17, 3 presentations

Dualism in structural forest governance and multivalued forest cultures in rural Finland

Emmi Salmivuori, University of Eastern Finland, emmi.salmivuori@uef.fi

In Finland, the biodiversity loss is affecting forests: forests have become monotonous, and many species living in the forest have become endangered. The decline of biodiversity with the progress of climate change has increased the vulnerability of forestry and is therefore a major risk for livelihoods based on forest use.

This development relates to our relationship with nature: according to Bruno Latour, dualism existing in the management of natural resources has been typical for “modern” Western culture. In Finnish structural forest governance, the perception of the forest is narrow, and a “forest” is typically either a commercial forest managed according to an established industry-oriented formula, or a protected forest excluded from management.

To find out consequences rising from this binary in different rural contexts, semi-structured interviews were collected from 27 economically oriented forest owners and forest-using rural entrepreneurs. The decision-making processes of forest owners related to the use of their forests and the different values and actors that influenced these processes were analysed.

Based on these interviews, forest owners' values and needs towards forests and their use are much more diverse and multidimensional than what straightforward structural forest governance would suggest. Ignoring the diversity of these values in the structures guiding forest use produces experiences of lack of realistic alternatives and sometimes distrust and defiance towards external structural control.

To ensure both forest-based livelihoods and biodiversity conservation in rural Finland, more diverse approach to forests and their use in structures of forest governance and management practices is needed.

Visualizing Variability: Conceptualizing Current and Future States of Biodiversity in Finnish Forest Environments

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Forests are an essential part of Finnish nature and rural landscapes. However, in a country with industrial roots in forestry, they are a natural resource heavily impacted by humans. Thus, future forest biodiversity is directly dependent on human actions and decisions. How people understand biodiversity affects efforts and willingness to promote and preserve it, balancing conservation and economic aspirations. This understanding is guided by perception, which is both a sensory and mental process impacted by culture and values that are connected to future visions.

Thus, a future where conflicting interests on forest environments are navigated to stop biodiversity decline calls for tools that allow people to view and perceive why biodiversity is vital for our existence and what kinds of elements, be they taxonomic, structural or functional, in human-impacted environments indicate higher biodiversity, i.e., more variability. In our quest to create such a tool, we began by interviewing experts on the current state of forest biodiversity in Finland, and what could be done to significantly improve it. Then, we employed forest-growth modelling simulation tools to identify forest locations for which current and future scenarios could be visualized. The result is Nature Time Machine, where the effects of human decisions on forest biodiversity can be observed in current and future realities. By presenting existing locations where higher biodiversity already occurs, the Nature Time Machine shows that such futures are possible, and helps people to understand and visualize biodiversity in human-impacted rural landscapes.

Environmental Citizenship and Performed Participation in Regional Planning

Anna Mustonen, Doctoral Researcher, University of Eastern Finland, anna.mustonen@uef.fi

Regional land-use planning enables landscape-level decision-making that considers the cumulative environmental impacts of rapidly increasing green transition projects and reconciles different land-use forms in rural landscapes. However, the regional land-use planning system is currently undergoing reforms that can risk comprehensive planning and opportunities for local participation.

This study examines how an environmental NGO enacts participation and environmental citizenship within regional land-use planning in relation to biodiversity conservation. Drawing on concepts of participation, performance/performativity, epistemic communities, and environmental citizenship, the study examines how participation is experienced and negotiated in the context of ENGO's biodiversity conservation advocacy. The dataset covers planning documents from three regional strategy periods in North Karelia, alongside statements by the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation's North Karelia district and official responses. Document analysis is combined with eight in-depth, semi-structured expert interviews.

Preliminary findings show that regional planning creates spaces of participation that enables discussion across conflicting goals, yet the actual influence on planning outcomes remains limited. A streamlined green transition that dismisses local voices and conservation intermediary actors undermines environmental justice. To avoid depoliticization and juridification in planning, and to recognize and value local environmental knowledge, regional planning and spaces of participation are essential for just sustainability transformations – ensuring impactful participation rather than performative practices.

Group 5 Visions, methods and measurements of social sustainability in the use of natural resources in the Nordics

Coordinators

Eirik Magnus Fuglestad, Ruralis, eirik.m.fuglestad@ruralis.no, Gunn-Turid Kvam, Ruralis, gunn.turid.kvam@ruralis.no, Brit Logstein, Ruralis, brit.logstein@ruralis.no, Egil Petter Stræte, Ruralis, egil.petter.strate@ruralis.no (contact)

Group description

Sustainable resource management has primarily been posed as an ecological challenge; however, it is essential to recognise that this is also a social challenge. This working group, therefore, asks how natural resources can be used and governed in a way that is also socially sustainable. We include, for example, food, feed, timber, and other bioresources, as well as recreation, minerals, and ecosystem services (e.g., carbon sinks, water storage, and soil preservation). Sustainability aligns with the Brundtland Commission's 1987 definition of development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Several attempts have been made to operationalise this, for example, by the UN, the Sustainability Assessment of Food and Agriculture systems (SAFA), and Raworth's Doughnut Economics. However, it remains an unresolved task to unify our understanding of social sustainability and how we assess and measure it. Topics such as consumption and economic growth are also relevant to the use and governance of natural resources, as well as social sustainability, in the rural areas of the Nordic countries. Is economic growth a condition or a threat to social sustainability? What can research tell us about this?

The social dimensions of production systems related to natural resources require a better understanding and adaptation to the Nordic context. Environmental sustainability has so far been emphasised in the development of indicators, models, certifications, and taxonomies, while the social dimension is less developed.

This working group aims to stimulate studies and discussions on social sustainability related to natural resources, as well as how this can be assessed and achieved.

Wednesday 8.30 - 10.30, 4 presentations

Landscape democracy as a tool for ensuring socially sustainable use of agricultural resources

Brit Logstein & Eirik Magnus Fuglestad, Ruralis – institute for rural and regional research, Norway

While climate change and environmental degradation have both local and global consequences, green transition processes are often based in local contexts where natural resources are placed, and these processes inevitably have social and distributional impacts on local communities. In this presentation we explore how strategies and plans, discussions and negotiations for a green transition include and account for the social sustainability of the agricultural sector in the municipality of Sortland in Norway. Through qualitative interviews we analyse how this is experienced by individuals representing the agricultural sector.

As a theoretical lens we use the three concepts of Landscape democracy: 1) protection of individual self-determination 2) the experience of co-determination and participation, and 3) objectivity and impartiality. A key finding is that regulations farmers think run counter their interests as farmers and which are not agreed on in collaboration with them, seem to reduce their willingness to comply or support. Farmers tended to experience their right to have one's interest taken into consideration in the

regional and at the national level to be weakened. Farmers explained this partly by the reduction in the number of active farmers in the municipality and by weakened capacity of the farmer's local organizations. The principles of landscape democracy are valuable in this regard to shed light on the processes that can be important for social anchoring of green transition practices related to agricultural recourses.

From Pastoral Landscapes to Modern Dairy Farms: Meanings and Practices of Grazing in Finland

Taija Kaarlenkaski, University of Eastern Finland, taija.kaarlenkaski@uef.fi

Animals may be seen as an integral part of the cultural imagery of the countryside. Especially grazing cows have been understood as an icon of the ideal pastoral landscape. In this presentation, I will discuss cultural images of grazing cows and how these images relate to the grazing practices of contemporary Finnish dairy farms. I will examine how the expansion and industrialisation of dairy farming have affected grazing practices and what kinds of consequences these changes have for rural landscapes. Furthermore, I will explore how contemporary farmers perceive pasturing and the current place of the cow.

The empirical materials consist, first, of a selection of TV commercials advertising dairy products from the 1960s to the early 2020s. These commercials were produced by Valio, the leading dairy company in Finland. Second, I analyse data from an online survey conducted among Finnish dairy producers (n = 142) and fourteen thematic interviews with dairy farmers. Both the survey and the interviews addressed the contemporary public debate on dairy production, questions of animal welfare, and outlooks on the future of the dairy sector. The materials are analysed using theory driven content analysis and discourse analysis. The theoretical perspective draws on multispecies studies, which emphasises the inseparability of humans from other forms of life and understands nonhuman beings as social actors rather than passive objects or resources. I will argue that despite the persistent ideal of grazing cows in the rural landscape, pasturing is not a self-evident practice for contemporary farmers and they have to consider the issue from many angles.

Lost to Climate: Addressing Unavoidable Non-Economic Losses to Climate-Induced Events for Communities in the Arctic – insights from the Icelandic case study

Matthias Kokorsch matthias@uw.is, Jóhanna Gísladóttir, University Centre of the Westfjords, Iceland

This presentation contributes to the workshop theme Resilience in Nordic Peripheries: inspiring examples and shared challenges by presenting the Icelandic case within the international Lost-To-Climate project on non-economic loss and damage (NELD) in the Arctic.

The focus is on the gradual loss of farmland and, in particular, livestock farming in rural and remote Iceland. Livestock farming has long been a key identity marker, livelihood base, and source of community cohesion, identity, and (unmeasurable or intangible) cultural heritage. As farms are abandoned and herds disappear, more is lost than economic output: social roles, belonging, place-

based knowledge, and intergenerational ties to land and animals are also at stake. Through the lens of NELD and scholarship on limits to climate change adaptation, the project examines how normative (values, social norms) and cognitive factors (e.g. risk perceptions, psychosocial factors) shape these losses and the options communities perceive as viable.

Climate change acts as an important, if not the, accelerator in this process. More frequent and intense weather extremes, shifting seasons, and greater production uncertainty make traditional farming practices increasingly difficult to sustain, especially in already marginal settings. Drawing on ongoing ethnographic research in rural Iceland, embedded in a wider network of Arctic case studies, the presentation discusses emerging insights into how residents understand NELD versus adaptation trade-offs – for example, between investing in protection, facilitating relocation, or accepting the loss of a place-based way of life.

The Icelandic case is one of eight interconnected case studies stretching across the Arctic from Alaska to Finland. The presentation will also outline the broader Lost-To-Climate project and highlight selected insights from other sites to illustrate shared challenges and different responses or adaptation strategies.

” All pigs should be let outside”: Negotiating the role of outdoor spaces in modern pig farming in Finland, c. 1900–1950s

Eeva Nikkilä eeva.nikkila@utu.fi, University of Turku

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Finnish pig farming was shaped by processes of modernization and commercialization. This included attempts to find the most cost-effective practices and spaces within which to raise pigs. Consequently, pigs' lives were shaped anew in multiple ways through changes in feeding, housing, and care. At the same time, these changes indicated shifting ideas about what pigs needed as a species and what modern production was supposed to look like in practice. New developments in pig farming included increased indoor production of pigs, which led many farmers and agricultural professionals to defend outdoor spaces as necessary to help pigs thrive, grow well, and stay in good health.

In this paper, I will focus on the negotiations about pigs' physical places in modern pig farming and explore in detail why outdoor spaces remained important for early modes of commercial pig production. I base my paper on qualitative and historical analysis of pig husbandry guidebooks and texts written by agricultural professionals. My theoretical framework draws upon the geographical concept of space to analyze indoor and outdoor spaces as 'geographic entities that set the stage for certain kinds of (non)human activities.' The results of this study indicate that keeping pigs outdoors was an important part of earlier modes of modern pig production and, as a practice, supported cost-effective pig farming and improved the welfare of pigs.

Wednesday 13.00 – 15.00, 2 presentations

Exploring the social sustainability of new biobased value chains for feed in Norway

Egil Petter Stræte, egil.petter.strate@ruralis.no & Gunn-Turid Kvam, Ruralis,
Javier Cantillo, Shraddha Mehta & Magnus Stoud Myhre, SINTEF Ocean,
Brit Logstein, Ruralis, SINTEF Ocean

The social dimension of sustainability in current and emerging Norwegian feed value chains has received limited research attention. Social sustainability is broadly defined and includes living conditions, equality, HSE, workers' rights, community impacts, food security, consumer concerns, transparency, and acceptance of production. Findings from the literature, sustainability reports, interviews, and group discussions show largely consistent thematic categories; however, concrete indicators are unevenly developed and are strongest for HSE and supply chain management.

Different actors emphasise different aspects. Established feed companies focus on labour conditions and safety in international supply chains, while other stakeholders highlight local value creation, employee well-being, openness, and minimising negative impacts on local communities. Newer feed companies report few social challenges to date. Across the sector, the social dimension receives less attention than the environmental and economic dimensions.

Early assessment of social acceptance, local participation, ownership structures, labour access, and preparedness is considered crucial for long-term sustainability. This paper examines which social aspects and indicators are most relevant for assessing new feed value chains.

Methodologically, we conducted a literature review, analysed sustainability reports from established feed actors, carried out interviews with actors in both established and emerging value chains, and organised group discussions to elicit perceptions of social impacts. The results identify several relevant categories and indicators for evaluating the social sustainability of new Norwegian feed value chains.

The AIMEX project: ESG data in study of public acceptance of mineral exploration

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Janne Juntunen & Emmi Vähä, Finnish Environment Institute

The AIMEX (Artificial Intelligence in Mineral Exploration) is a project lead by the Geological Survey of Finland (GTK) in collaboration with the University of Turku and the Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE) and financed by Business Finland. Beyond prospectivity, the project examines ESG issues of mineral exploration in four case study areas: Vihanti-Pyhäsalmi (VP) and Outokumpu-Hammastahti (OH) volcanic massive sulfide (VMS) belts, and Rompas-Rajapalot (RR) and Sokli. The former two are well-known local mineral exploration disputes (MEDs), while the latter ones are regional cases. AIMEX studies public acceptance of mineral exploration by using environmental and demographic data and implementing GIS-based spatial data integration for their unified analysis. The aim is to help companies avoid MEDs.

The VP VMS belt occurs from Raahel (Ostrobothnia) to South Savo Province of the Päijänne and Saimaa lake areas, while the OH VMS belt occurs in the Saimaa lake area, North Karelia. The VP VMS belt can be divided into two domains: Ostrobothnia with only a record of two MEDs, and the lake area with many. The latter characterizes the 'not in my leisure area' phenomenon represented by opposition of second homeowners and tourist entrepreneurs towards mining and mineral exploration, forming one of the sensitive contexts prone to MEDs (e.g., Heinävesi). Other cases are related to groundwater and protected areas (e.g., Vekseli and Rautalampi). MEDs increased therein due to energy transition. Integrated geospatial mapping of related environmental and social datasets highlights these issues and further identify potential conflict areas in the VP study area.

6 Micro-level actions and consequences related to green transitions in rural areas

Coordinator

Maja Farstad, Ruralis, maja.farstad@ruralis.no

Group description

The context for this working group is the multitude of envisaged transitions into more comprehensive climate- and environment-friendly solutions (i.e., green transitions), involving both rural areas in general and the agricultural sector particularly. A main example in this regard is the worldwide efforts to mitigate climate change, which interfere with all societal levels, including local societies and industries. There is often broad consensus on the need for green and sustainable transitions – whether it concerns climate change or other considerable nature-related challenges – and brave goals are agreed upon and set. Despite that such goals are usually followed by a range of suggested measures and certain policies, the changes needed have proved hard to realise in practice.

In many cases, desired changes depend upon the steps taken (or not taken) and decisions made by micro-level actors, such as farmers or consumers/citizens. Thus, how to stimulate the establishment and diffusion of certain sustainability-promoting actions is a major challenge. Further, the promotion of green transitions may also bring about various consequences with both positive and negative local-level impacts.

In this working group, we invite papers that study both (conditions for) micro-level actions and micro-level consequences related to the green transitions in rural areas, and how relevant policies and desired actions work in the real world. Studies focusing on climate mitigation, the prevention of biodiversity loss, or overcoming other environmental problems are all of interest. Examples of relevant target groups are consumers/citizens, households/families, farmers, and other rural entrepreneurs. The papers may focus on enablers and barriers – drivers and non-drivers relevant to the implementation of favourable changes. Structures, processes, access to knowledge, networks, and motivations are examples of potential key issues in this regard, and the efforts of creating desired changes may be initiated by authorities or other institutions, and at different levels (national/regional/local).

Wednesday 8.30-10.30, 4 presentations

Transitioning towards sustainable weed management in farming from the perspectives of Finnish agri-food sector stakeholders

Tiia Malka, tiia.malka@helsinki.fi, Eliisa Malin & Toni Ryyänen, Ruralia Institute, University of Helsinki

Although herbicide use effectively controls weed growth and ensures crop growth, they pose detrimental environmental and health risks. The European Union seeks to halve pesticide use by 2030. Our research focuses on advancing this goal from the perspective of agri-food sector stakeholders. The data consist of a co-creation workshop materials we collected from nine Finnish agri-food sector stakeholders in late 2025. Our data includes discussions of the current state, barriers to reducing, and potential solutions for reducing herbicide use in Finland. We apply a multi-level perspective to consider how the transition to sustainable weed management can be advanced at the landscape, regime, niche, and the added farm levels. The multi-level perspective is often used to examine sustainability transitions in socio-technical systems. We examined the data with qualitative thematic analysis. Our preliminary results show that the identified social, economic, and environmental barriers and solutions are distributed across different levels, and societal factors at the regime level must change to advance the transition towards sustainable weed management. Our study highlights the weed management challenge: the persistent friction between profitable food production meeting the social, economic, and environmental expectations of more sustainable agriculture. Our study contributes to prior research by illustrating how the food system stakeholders consider practical constraints, institutional expectations, and ecological uncertainties in reducing herbicides, and how these exist on different system levels influencing sustainability transition. The participants called for better understanding and use of farmers' situated experiences when designing policies and innovations to support less herbicide-dependent food production systems.

Biodiversity As a Rural Resource (Lumoava-Project)

M. Savolahti, Mikko.Savolahti@syke.fi, H. Savolahti & K. Pitkänen, Finnish Environment Institute (Syke)

Biodiversity loss can be reversed with local actions. Two major contributors to biodiversity loss in Finland have been changes in farmland use and forest management.

Some important aspects of biodiversity are not commonly understood. There are efficient ways for citizens to improve local biodiversity, but many don't know what measures are available and how to carry them out.

The main objectives of the project were to i) make concrete changes in the local landscape that improve biodiversity ii) educate citizens about biodiversity and measures to improve it and iii) study how participants perceive biodiversity, what contributes to their perception and how it can be changed.

We worked with 40 villages or municipalities on a small-scale biodiversity project of their choice (e.g. establishing a meadow). The participants in villages filled a questionnaire about their nature-related hobbies and views on biodiversity before the project. After the project, we asked the contact person in each village how they think it was received in the community.

Results: At the start of project year 3/3, 30 biodiversity-improving physical actions have been implemented. We had also arranged 11 webinars on biodiversity-related topics and 3 workshops for municipalities. Questionnaires showed that people's background and hobbies affected their views on biodiversity, as well as their willingness to contribute to its improvement. The more a person had nature-related hobbies, the more they had done or wanted to do biodiversity projects, and the more they felt they can affect local biodiversity.

Enabling nature restoration in Finnish rural areas: Perspectives of farmers and other stakeholders on rewetting organic agricultural soils

Anna-Kaisa Hakkarainen & Antti Miettinen, National Climate Unit located within the Economic Development Centre of Lapland, firstname.lastname@elinvoimakeskus.fi

Terhi Latvala, Olli Voutilainen & Hilikka Vihinen, Natural Resources Institute Finland, firstname.lastname@luke.fi

The EU Nature Restoration Regulation requires that a specific share of organic agricultural soils be rewetted and either restored as wetlands or converted to paludiculture. While peatland rewetting significantly benefits biodiversity and the climate, it can also impose substantial costs on landowners and local communities. Implementation is further complicated by the uneven spatial distribution of organic soils across rural Finland.

Meeting the Regulation's targets for 2030, 2040, and 2050 depends on measures taken by micro-level actors, such as farmers and other stakeholders (landowners, entrepreneurs, regional authorities, NGOs etc.). Therefore, it is crucial to gather stakeholder views on restoration measures before implementation.

In late 2025, the National Climate Unit, together with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Finnish Rural Network Unit, held four discussions in peatland dominated regions to collect local insights and codevelop acceptable implementation strategies for the National Restoration Plan. Simultaneously, the Natural Resources Institute Finland organised four Rural Proofing workshops to assess how nature restoration could affect rural residents and the local economy.

Rural communities generally support rewetting marginal organic soils, but successful rewetting depends on local actors taking the lead, coordination at the catchment scale, and fair compensation for those affected. Reallocation of pieces of land can provide an opportunity to update local land-use which may renew the structures of the rural economy. In areas where the state owns land, farmers may accept the conversion of poorly productive arable parcels into wetlands if the state offers more productive land to affected stakeholders in return.

Daily politics of active food citizenship in home gardening and Community-supported Agriculture

Riikka Aro, riikka.aro@jyu.fi, University of Jyväskylä

Citizens active agency and widening roles in developing resilient and sustainable (agri)food systems are promoted in strategies as food citizenship (e.g. EC, 2020; MMM 2017: 17) emphasizing also food

self-provisioning as part of food security and security of supply. Food citizenship is citizens' food-related agency, involvement, understanding, knowledge and know-how (e.g. Hassanein, 2003; Welsh & McRae, 1998) and practices essentially beyond consumption such as participating in local food initiatives or becoming a (co)producer.

Gardening as small-scale food practices may be viewed as challenging the control and power of dominant input-, business and growth-oriented practices within industrial and corporate food production, as supporting diverse ecologies and as encompassing diverse economies potentially creating new directions for future (Aro, forthcoming). Pointing to politics of everyday life, the agency, practices and experiences of gardeners are here viewed as to contain acting otherwise as potentially everyday subversive acts (e.g. Pungas, 2023).

I focus on active food citizenship in home gardens and Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) that recognize the need for agri-food system transition. Utilizing ethnographic research materials (interviews, fieldnotes, photos) I ask what kinds of food citizenship the current system allows and supports within these contexts and reflect on what countercultural paths the (regime) transition enables.

The findings indicate that these small-scale food growing practices embrace diversity of actors, practical knowledge intensity, more-than-human relations and holistic understanding of food in context. Within these grassroot practices current circumstances are critiqued and desirable alternatives futures visioned and enacted upon.

Wednesday 13-15, 3 presentations

Green transition investments in Finland: how to link global value chains to regional economy in sustainable, just and inclusive way?

Tanja Kähkönen & Teresa Haukkala, University of Oulu, Kerttu Saalasti Institute, Sustainable Energy Business (SEB) Research Group, tanja.k.kahkonen@oulu.fi

Finland is a major destination for green transition investments in Europe with more than 1250 green transition investment projects being at different preparation stages in Finland with a total value of over 300 billion euros (Confederation of Finnish Industries 2026). Particularly renewable energy investments in energy transition can facilitate major changes in regional business environment with new jobs being created, possibilities for new businesses arising and regional economy being revitalised. Little is known about how value created by the global green energy investments can be rooted and value added can be retained in the regions. Qualitative thematic interviews have been conducted with global investors, local entrepreneurs and other local actors, and energy cluster actors in winter and spring 2026 to explore how green transition investments link to global value chains, how these linkages affect regional economy, and how value added is created from these investments through using Northern Ostrobothnia in Finland as the case study region. In our presentation, we will discuss the major observations from these interviews for facilitating participation of local entrepreneurs in value chains, anchoring green transition investments in the region and supporting regional economy. and present a tentative growth and development model for attracting green

transition investments in the region in an economically and socially sustainable, just and inclusive way.

Regional economic impact of energy transitions driven by renewable potential and ownership

Outi Hakala, outi.hakala@helsinki.fi & Susanna Kujala, University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute

Energy transitions toward more sustainable energy systems influence regional economies, with effects varying according to the implementation strategy. The technical potential for renewable energy production sets limits on deployment, while the ownership of production units determines how economic benefits are distributed. However, the wider regional economic impact of harnessing renewable energy production potential also considering opportunities for community energy remains insufficiently examined. This gap may leave community energy initiatives with inadequate attention in energy transition planning. The present study provides insights into such regional impact.

The regional economic analysis, applying a general equilibrium model and mainly official statistics, focused on two sub-regions in South Ostrobothnia, Finland. According to the results, the utilization of renewable energy potential would promote the region's economy and employment under all ownership models. The impact varies with the extent of potential utilization, the type of energy production, and the location of energy operators' owners. Relative to the potential magnitude, labour-intensive rural bioenergy potentials with local ownership have a stronger and more diverse effect than wind and solar energy units owned by actors outside the region. The results suggest that community energy solutions are needed to offset regional employment losses resulting from the phase-out of energy peat production.

The study is part of the EU co-funded project Carbon neutral, fair, and sustainable energy communities in South Ostrobothnia.

Building collaborative biogas ecosystems: strategies for rural circularity and business potential

Santeri Halonen, Santeri.Halonen@oulu.fi, Microentrepreneurship Centre of Excellence MicroENTRE, Kerttu Saalasti Institute, University of Oulu

The rural biogas ecosystems do not emerge organically, despite shared benefits. This study examines how new coordination structures could open the full potential of decentralized energy and nutrient cycling and business opportunities. Empirical this study draws from 12 focus group interviews.

Wednesday 15.30-17.30, 3 presentations

A Topic modelling-based literature review on the regional twin transition

Anni Tuomaala, anni.tuomaala@helsinki.fi, & Toni Rynänen, University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute, Max Strandén & Olli Lehtonen, University of Eastern Finland

The number of policy documents and academic research on the twin transition has been steadily increasing. However, combining green and digital transitions at the regional level remains abstract. To better understand the current state of twin transition research, a scoping literature review was conducted. Using the PRISMA protocol, 171 peer-reviewed articles were identified for analysis. This dataset was first quantitatively topic-modelled and then refined using qualitative content analysis. The preliminary models describe six, nine and 15 twin transition topics. The results show that the twin transition studies related to the food system and agriculture, as well as Chinese companies' green innovations and recovery from major crises (e.g., COVID-19 & Russian invasion to Ukraine), are rather robust across the different models. Other topics, particularly those concerning regional and urban development or industry and manufacturing-related twin transition, tend to fragment into more specific subtopics. This study contributes to regional studies by providing a structured analysis of twin transition topics and offering a clearer conceptual map of how green and digital transformations intersect across existing research.

Repairing soils to stay afloat: local meanings of carbon farming practices

Anni Piironen, Doctoral researcher, University of Oulu, Finland

In the last decade, agricultural soils have been increasingly studied and governed as promising sites of carbon sequestration. Farmers have been urged to commit to so-called carbon farming in the hopes that this could turn their fields into carbon sinks, as well as contribute to better yields, improve biodiversity, and boost their incomes through the sale of soil-based carbon credits. Meanwhile, critical social science research has questioned the carbon-centric governance of agricultural lands, arguing that it threatens to increase the standardisation of agricultural practices, reduce farmer autonomy, and prioritise carbon at the expense of other important issues.

In this paper, I wish to add empirical nuance to these critiques by reflecting on observations from my ongoing doctoral research, which examines how different farmers in Finland engage in practices linked to carbon farming. Through interviews and participant observation, I examine how farmers themselves understand practices such as cover cropping, manure use, and reduced tilling, and how these sit within the histories and values of particular farms. I suggest that in many cases, farmers hope to increase soil carbon as part of their efforts to respond to the troubling local legacies of modern agricultural practices and to ensure the long-term viability of their farm in an ecologically and economically precarious situation. By following the on-the-ground reality of farming, I draw attention to the mundane work that is involved in managing carbon cycles, and the compromises that farmers strike between ecological, economic, and personal needs.

Farmer perspectives on carbon credit trading systems as a financial tool in Norwegian agriculture

Maja Farstad, Renate M.B. Hårstad & Isabelle Hugøy, Ruralis – Institute for Rural and Regional Research, Norway.

There is a growing need to implement soil management practices that simultaneously strengthen soil health, improve soil productivity and enhance carbon sequestration as a cornerstone of a more

sustainable primary production system. However, promising soil improving practices are financially burdensome for farmers under the current regulatory, market, and business conditions in Norway.

To overcome economic barriers preventing such measures from being implemented, this paper explores whether carbon credit trading systems could be a feasible solution to this problem. The paper empirically explores farmer perspectives on a carbon credit trading system aimed at soil-improving measures on Norwegian farms. The analysis is based on individual, semi-structured interviews with farmers as potential participants in such a system. Our findings demonstrate widely different farmer perspectives on most aspects related to this topic, which alludes both to the challenge and need for developing a sustainable business model that successfully accounts for the diversity in farmers' needs.

THEME 3 – Rural economy and entrepreneurship

Group 7 Gastronomy Tourism as a Driver of Rural Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Coordinators

Inna Kopoteva, inna.kopoteva@helsinki.fi, Hanna-Maija Väisänen, hanna-maija.vaisanen@helsinki.fi, Helsingin yliopisto, Ruralia Institute

Group description

Gastronomy tourism is increasingly recognized as a driver of rural entrepreneurship and local development. In Nordic rural areas, food production and culinary traditions are deeply embedded in landscapes, cultural heritage, and natural resources. When transformed into tourism experiences, these elements not only create new economic opportunities but also strengthen local identity and community resilience.

Gastronomy tourism in rural context connects primary production, processing, hospitality, and cultural activities. It creates possibilities for diverse forms of entrepreneurship—from farms and small-scale producers opening their doors to visitors, to chefs and restaurants highlighting local ingredients, to food events, markets, and culinary routes that reinforce place-based brands. These entrepreneurial initiatives often extend beyond the individual enterprise, fostering collaboration between actors and sectors. In this way, gastronomy tourism can act as a catalyst for wider rural development, contributing to employment, innovation, and cultural vitality.

At the same time, gastronomy-based entrepreneurship faces challenges linked to changing Nordic rural realities: demographic decline, climate change, shifting consumer demands, and pressures for sustainable production. The increasing mobility of populations and the rise of multi-local living also reshape the customer base and opportunities for rural entrepreneurs. In addition, questions arise concerning the role of support structures, NGOs, and third-sector actors in enabling such

entrepreneurship, and how policies and business support systems respond to these evolving conditions.

Wednesday 15.30-17.30, 3 presentations

Push and Pull Motivations of Finnish and French Gastronomy Tourists in the Saimaa Region

Hanna-Maija Väisänen, Inna Kopoteva, Marjo Särkkä, marjo.sarkka@helsinki.fi, Ruralia Institute, University of Helsinki, Mikkeli, Finland

Push–pull motivational theory can be used to study both the tourist’s internal motivational factors and the attractive factors related to the destination. The framework was applied to explore Finnish and French gastronomy tourists’ push and pull motivations for traveling to Saimaa. The survey was carried out through an online consumer panel of Finnish (n = 1019) and French (n = 1006) consumers interested in gastronomy tourism in the Saimaa region. Principal component analyses (PCA) were performed to reduce the push and pull variables into new principal components. Statistical differences in Finnish and French push–pull factors were tested with a t test.

According to the results, the push factors of Finns and French differ in some respects. Finns emphasize diverse, high quality local flavours and are motivated by learning, skill development, and breaking away from everyday routines. In contrast, French place more weight on cultural discovery through food and include relaxation and fun as a distinct motivational dimension. While both groups value sustainability and togetherness, the French frame unique experiences as part of broader personal development, whereas Finns view them more as an escape. For both nationalities, the pull components include basic destination factors (such as safety, a pleasant climate, and friendly local people), sustainability and destination’s food culture offering and expertise. The study provides insights of the push and pull factors and offers several practical implications for developing gastronomy tourism in the Saimaa region.

Reimagining the Finnish Hotel Breakfast: Reducing Nature Footprint While Strengthening Local Food Culture and Rural Entrepreneurship.

Aino Tarkkio & Johanna Teräsjärvi, johter@utu.fi, Nutrition and Food Research Center, University of Turku

Hotel breakfasts play a central role in the tourism experience, yet their environmental impacts remain unexamined. As part of the *Luonnon monimuotoisuus lautasella* (LuLa) project, this study investigates how the typical Finnish hotel breakfast can be redesigned to reduce its biodiversity footprint while enhancing local food culture and strengthening rural entrepreneurship in Southwest Finland and the Turku Archipelago.

In summer and autumn 2025, a survey was conducted across regional hotels in Southwestern Finland to identify guests’ most appreciated breakfast components and to explore their willingness to accept menu adjustments that support biodiversity. Based on the collected data, the composition of a typical Finnish hotel breakfast was defined, and its biodiversity footprint was calculated in collaboration with

LUT University. The analysis highlighted which items contributed most to biodiversity loss and identified locally produced, biodiversity-supporting alternatives.

The results suggest that the biodiversity footprint of the typical Southwest Finland hotel breakfast, is driven mainly by red meat products, tropical oils used in margarine, tropical fruits, and coffee. The findings further suggest that relatively small adjustments could reduce the breakfast's biodiversity footprint by nearly half. Particularly effective measures include replacing red meat with poultry, substituting tropical oils with locally produced alternatives, and favouring domestic berries, fruits, and other locally sourced ingredients over imported options. Replacing coffee with tea also appears to lower the overall impact.

This study contributes to understanding how sustainable gastronomy within tourism can act as a catalyst for rural innovation, local collaboration, and biodiversity-positive transitions.

Creating Value from Local Food: Gastronomy Tourism and Rural Entrepreneurship

Inna Kopoteva, Ruralia Institute, University of Helsinki, Mikkeli, Finland

Gastronomy tourism is increasingly recognised as a driver of rural entrepreneurship and regional development, particularly in areas where food production, cultural heritage, and natural landscapes are closely interconnected. Understanding how local food resources are transformed into tourism experiences and entrepreneurial opportunities is therefore an important question in contemporary rural studies.

This paper explores how gastronomy tourism activities contribute to the creation of value from local food resources in rural areas. The analysis is based on several gastronomy tourism activities organised within the D.O. Saimaa initiative, which promotes collaboration between local producers, restaurants, and tourism actors. The study compares the experiences of different visitor groups—including international food bloggers and participants in a local food tour targeting domestic tourists, second-home owners, and local residents – who participated in similar programme elements such as producer visits, cooking workshops, tastings, and storytelling encounters.

The findings show that gastronomy tourism experiences combining participation, storytelling, and interaction with producers create strong emotional engagement and enhance visitors' understanding of local food culture and production practices. These encounters allow rural entrepreneurs to communicate the meaning and value of local ingredients, production methods, and cultural heritage. At the same time, the comparative analysis reveals that different visitor groups perceive and value these experiences in different ways, highlighting the importance of designing gastronomy tourism products that respond to diverse expectations.

The results suggest that gastronomy tourism can play an important role in rural development by revalorising local food resources, strengthening collaboration among small rural enterprises, and supporting regional place branding. Experiences that allow visitors to engage directly with producers and food preparation processes help transform local food from a product into a meaningful tourism experience, creating value for both visitors and rural entrepreneurs.

Group 8 New perspectives on entrepreneurship in sparsely populated areas: Diversification, the prospects of green transformations, and community resilience

Coordinators

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Group description

This Working Group brings together researchers examining the diversification of nature-based livelihoods and entrepreneurship in sparsely populated northern areas.

Within regional development efforts, entrepreneurship has become a key strategy for revitalizing places and communities. In sparsely populated northern areas, policymakers are increasingly promoting large-scale investments in renewable energy, green industrial production, and the extraction of mineral and biomass resources to generate employment and stimulate entrepreneurial activity. Moreover, the strategic security role of the Arctic, marked by a growing military presence and expected defense-driven infrastructure investments, together with the region's rising appeal as an international tourism destination, presents additional opportunities for economic diversification and new development pathways.

This Working Group focuses on the interpath relations between these emerging industries and established nature-based livelihoods, such as agriculture, forestry, reindeer husbandry, tourism, or fisheries, vis-à-vis community development. While rural entrepreneurship is conventionally framed in economic terms, equating new growth trajectories with community well-being, our aim is to unearth more nuanced perspectives. In particular, we seek to discuss

- How, why, and where can new green resource extraction and industry, as well as more volume-oriented forms of tourism, be integrated with and diversify entrepreneurship in established nature-based livelihoods?*
- What new forms of community-oriented or social entrepreneurship and business models are emerging? Conventional conceptions of entrepreneurship build on Schumpeterian ideas of individuals who disrupt the market via creative destruction. Yet are there countering tendencies in sparsely populated northern areas, abandoning individualism in favor of collective organization and mobilization? Relatedly, are there entrepreneurial efforts to advance community self-sufficiency and resilience by establishing intra-regional supply networks?*
- What kind of institutional support structures facilitate diversification of rural entrepreneurship? Which entrepreneurs in sparsely populated areas benefit from European Union Just Transition Funds and regional development funding? Who and which areas are left behind considering differences between urban hotspots and small rural places? How do funding agencies shape*

the interpath relations between different industries and sectors and set regional path trajectories by prioritising certain businesses over others?

- *What kind of intergenerational aspects need to be considered when thinking about the future of (multi-)entrepreneurship in sparsely populated areas? What is the situation for young nature-based entrepreneurs? What are their visions for the future of agriculture, reindeer husbandry, handicrafts, tourism, ecosystem services, and forestry? What kind of skills are needed to establish links between the different sectors?*

Wednesday 8.30-10.30, 4 presentations

Revaluing primary production in Northern sparsely populated areas for human security: on polycrisis, local agency and institutional path dependence

Mia Landauer, REBOUND project, Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP),

Dorothee Bohn, Umeå University, Department of Geography, REBOUND project, Arctic Centre, University of Lapland

Recent geopolitical conflicts, together with the impacts of climate change and economic crises, are generating new and complex challenges for nation-states with regard to human security. The concept of human security extends traditional national security frameworks by incorporating threats to livelihoods, health, the environment, and social stability. In this context, Finland has begun to re-emphasise the role of domestic primary production, not only as a driver of sustainable local development but also as a strategy to reduce dependence on vulnerable global supply chains within broader food security and crisis preparedness policies.

In northern Finland, nature-based livelihoods such as reindeer husbandry and farming play a crucial role in sustaining settlements and communities in sparsely populated areas. Moreover, the preservation of territorial and environmental knowledge embedded in these livelihoods constitutes an important element of the Nordic 'total defence' model, which relies on cooperation between military and civilian sectors to strengthen societal resilience to hybrid threats. At the same time, farmers and reindeer herders face increasing structural pressures, including global market competition, rising production input costs, reliance on subsidies, and perceived lack of political support. These challenges threaten the economic viability and intergenerational continuity of primary production.

This study examines how farmers and reindeer herders in northern Finland navigate the tensions between institutional path dependencies and emerging policy ambitions to revalue domestic primary production as part of human security. Empirically, we draw on semi-structured interviews with policymakers, farmers, and reindeer herders, complemented by a questionnaire survey, policy document analysis, and focus group observations. The study contributes to broader debates on resilience by examining how the interplay between local agency and institutional constraints shapes adaptation pathways in a polycrisis context.

Spatial economic sensitivity and peripheral resilience in disruptive times

Maija Halonen, maija.halonen@uef.fi & Moritz Albrecht, Department of Geographical and Historical Studies, University of Eastern Finland

Globally our societies are experiencing multiple crises and disruptions which (re)shape global economic spaces and the interrelations of economic places. To survive disruptions, resilience is key for industries in different regions. Geographically informed economic resilience studies predominantly focus on typification and dualisms. Contrary, little attention is paid to the socio-spatial sensitivity of economic actors and on their knowledge of (trans)local socio-material conditions that foster resilience. Employing interviews of peripheral forest industries in Finland as a backdrop, the presentation unfolds how long-standing sense of economic and adjunct socio-material assemblages of peripheral industries permit a better understanding on the functionality of socio-economic processes and preparedness for fluctuation. Such spatial sensitivity allows to maintain solid economic performance from positions at the margins of economic and political spaces. Interconnected with the sense of economic spaces, spatial sensitivity in its material, social and consequently relational forms enable survival despite sudden shocks and years of turmoil. The understanding of the continuous nature and potentiality of crises appearance linked with such spatial sensitivity have strengthened the resilient navigation of peripheral forest industries.

Urban-rural differences in the performance of the private sector enterprises in Finland

Simo Rautiainen, simo.rautiainen@uef.fi, University of Eastern Finland, Karelian Institute

This study examines the performance of private-sector enterprises in Finland at the municipal level. We analyse regional variation in performance and identify the factors explaining it. As GDP data are not available at the municipal level, we construct a proxy variable for private-sector profits for 2014–2023 based on corporate tax data. Private-sector performance across municipalities is analysed using descriptive statistics and panel regression models. Explanatory variables include the age and educational structure of the population, the number and sectoral distribution of jobs, and the role of major employers. Regional differences are examined using a generalised and slightly modified urban–rural classification.

The results reveal a high and increasing concentration of private-sector economic activity during 2014–2023. Private-sector profits are strongly concentrated in Helsinki and other growth centres, with the ten leading municipalities accounting for 60% of total profits in mainland Finland. When profits are measured relative to the working-age population, annual variation is substantial, but significant differences emerge between municipal classes: performance is strongest in the capital region and sub-regional centres, and weakest in peri-urban municipalities and rural municipalities close to urban areas. At the municipal level, performance is strongly associated with job self-sufficiency and the employment share of the largest firm. This underscores the importance of local labour market attractiveness, employment clusters, and large firms in generating private-sector income.

Municipalities as Enablers of Regenerative Tourism: From Projects to Enduring Practices

Virpi Pakarinen, University of Eastern Finland, virpak@student.uef.fi

Tourism plays a significant role in strengthening municipal vitality, particularly in rural municipalities. EU- and state-funded tourism-related project activities constitute a key instrument for the development of sparsely populated areas. This article examines tourism-related project work as a process of co-development between public administration and local actors, viewed through the lens of regenerative tourism. Based on a tourism-related case study and the analysis of project report material spanning the years 2004–2023, the study identifies five interlinked factors that can support long-term tourism development in municipalities.

The analysis suggests that the impacts of projects are shaped in particular by strategic planning, development-oriented attitudes, collaboration and coordination, forms of participation, and local foundational resources. Together, these factors also shape municipalities' capacity to use tourism projects as arenas for experimentation and learning, supporting the diversification of local livelihoods and the strengthening of community resilience.

The findings deepen the understanding of community-based and regeneration-oriented tourism development and provide practical insights for municipal and regional vitality work. The study highlights that the effectiveness of tourism projects is primarily linked to the strengthening of foundational resources rather than to individual project measures, and it clarifies the role of projects as part of municipalities' strategic development processes. In this sense, tourism projects function as institutional support structures that enable experimentation and continuity while contributing to long-term municipal vitality in sparsely populated areas.

Wednesday 13-15, 3 presentations

Crossing Boundaries, Building Futures – Cross Border Cooperation Toolkit for Nordic Smes

Ada Trogen, ada.trogen@helsinki.fi & Urszula Ala-Karvia, University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute

Nordic countries share a well-recognized political vision for cross-border cooperation. They aim to work together to become the world's most sustainable, integrated and competitive region by 2030, guided by the Nordic Council of Ministers' "Our Vision 2030" plan.

For this aim in mind, we have created Cross Border Cooperation Toolkit for Nordic SMEs in project GENGREEN. The toolkit supports especially female entrepreneurs willing to establish synergies and collaboration with new business partners in Sweden, Finland and Norway by providing them necessary information of the available business opportunities, regional networks etc. The toolkit works as an easy-to-use manual where entrepreneurs can search for the information they need.

The Toolkit underlines that effective collaboration does not appear from nowhere; it requires effort but at the same time it can bring economic and social benefits and contributes to regional and social cohesion by creating a "Nordic entity". Thus, it facilitates the generation of trust and mutual understanding among entrepreneurs and their communities.

In our presentation we will present the main content and aims of the toolkit with real case study examples from entrepreneurs who have engaged in cross border collaborations in the Nordics and are related to GENGREEN project.

The toolkit is created in Interreg Aurora funded project GENGREEN – Closing the small-business and gender gap through education for green sustainable and competitive growth (2024-2026) that is providing support, networking opportunities and trainings for sustainable, female entrepreneurs operating across the northern regions of Finland, Sweden and Norway.

Beyond Resource Extraction: Mapping Emerging Tourism Labour Market and Labour Mobilities in the Industrial Peripheries of Arctic Sweden

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Tourism entrepreneurship is widely promoted in regional policymaking as a driver of workforce diversification in the rural industrial peripheries. Creating mobile and flexible employment, tourism provides accessible entry points to jobs for populations underrepresented in sparsely populated environments, including youth, women or international migrants. In doing so, it helps address depopulation, marginalization and economic decline, particularly when traditional staple industries are experiencing a crisis.

Yet little is known about the capacity of tourism to generate and sustain distinct labour market structures when the extractive industries are strongly present and unemployment is nearly eliminated. Therefore, this study aims to account for challenges faced by small- and medium sized tourist enterprises in the industrialized peripheries in northern Sweden, focusing on labour shortages and workforce mobilities. Drawing on a labour regime perspective, we analyse how national regulations, regional and local policies, tourist firms and resource extraction are interlinked through their capacity to produce and reproduce labour. We combine statistical analysis with GIS-based visualization of the geocoded data from Swedish population and company registers to map tourist employment hotspots in Norrbotten and examine how they coexist and evolve alongside extractive industries. The findings reveal the size of tourism-associated labour market, identify the distinguishing characteristics of tourism workforce in terms of gender, age and country of origin, and trace employees' spatial, temporal and institutional mobilities to assess the extent to which tourist entrepreneurs support seasonal and mobile employees in transitioning to permanent positions and residence in the rural areas.

The Role of Place in Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystems – Case Studies of Three Rural Social Enterprises

Judith Alms, University of Greifswald, Germany, judith.alms@uni-greifswald.de

This study develops a practice-based understanding of social entrepreneurship ecosystems, focusing on the role of place in shaping these systems. Drawing on three case studies of rural social enterprises in the Baltic Sea region—located in Finland, Latvia, and Germany—the research explores

how social entrepreneurship ecosystems emerge through interconnected practices rather than predefined spatial or institutional boundaries.

While entrepreneurial ecosystem research is well established, it has predominantly focused on urban contexts and high-growth ventures, often overlooking rural areas and the unique dynamics of social entrepreneurship. This urban bias has led to a perception of rural ecosystems as underdeveloped or non-existent. By focusing on rural social enterprises, this study offers a new perspective on ecosystem theory.

Applying a practice-theoretical lens, enterprise biographies are developed to uncover how social entrepreneurship ecosystems evolve through linked practices in place. This approach allows for an analysis of ecosystems without imposing predefined spatial or structural constraints. The findings reveal that such ecosystems develop into scale-spanning systems, while the entrepreneurs remain deeply rooted in place. The results contribute to a rethinking of rural areas as dynamic, practice-driven innovation environments, challenging the notion that rural regions lack entrepreneurial vitality

THEME 4 – Policies and politics of the rural

Group 9 Nordic rural development policies and strategies in times of military securitization

Coordinators

*Aapo Jumppanen, University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute, aapo.jumppanen@helsinki.fi,
Laura Junka-Aikio University of Lapland, laura.junka-aikio@ulapland.fi*

Group description:

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 dramatically changed Nordic conceptions of their security environment. The change paved way for Sweden and Finland's decisions to join Nato, and for a rapid and comprehensive securitization and militarization of Nordic societies more broadly. Defiant, even warlike rhetoric among politicians and citizens alike have become common, military spending is on the rise. Likewise, also many civilian sectors and functions of the society are seen and valued more and more through military and security lenses, as is the case, for instance, in the context of discourses on total defense, resilience and comprehensive security.

In the rural areas, this paradigm change presents both new challenges and possible opportunities. Many aspects of the welfare state and regional development are threatened by budget cuts in the name of austerity measures and the need to step up the defense budget. The border closure and sanctions against Russia have radically challenged livelihoods, economic opportunities, mobility, and potential for cross-cultural and social exchange especially in eastward border regions. At the same time, the discourses of security and defense are also mobilized to support and justify regional development, for instance in terms of energy and transport infrastructure projects, mining of critical raw materials and domestic and local food production. Indeed, today even village development can

be marketed and rebranded as an aspect of security and resilience. Likewise, the potential arrival of international troops is associated with prospects of economic prosperity and revitalization of rural regions.

In this working group we explore the ways in which the new wave of military securitization of the society is affecting the rural regions and communities of the Nordic countries, and their future prospects. What are the short and long-term social, cultural, economic and political implications of a situation in which Nordic ruralities are developed increasingly in service of military interests? How is the paradigm change reflected on the level of contemporary rural policies and regional government? To what extent and how do rural actors take this paradigm change into account in their own rhetoric, discourses of justification and future strategies? What are the benefits and risks involved in the military securitization of regional and rural wellbeing and development? What can be lost and what gained if military security is turned into a central imaginary through which the meaning and value of rural development is justified for the state and for the broader society?

We welcome a broad range of empirical and theory-driven contributions which may explore the thematic from a variety of angles and perspectives. How does military securitization affect the lives of various subjects and actors in the rural regions, ranging from farmers, entrepreneurs, rural developers and civil servants and soldiers to immigrants, ethnic minorities or the Sámi people, or depending on age, gender and class? How are rural livelihoods, ways of life, identities and cultures challenged and reshaped? How does military securitization affect flows of people, goods and economic activity between regions? What about militarization's impact on state space and on the spatial and territorial organization of the rural regions? What kind of geographies of militarization are forming as a result, and how is this all reflected in the future prospects and development of the rural regions? And finally: is military securitization making us feel more, or less, secure?

Wednesday 15.30-17.30, 3 presentations

Counter-peripheralization through militarization: discussing the emerging regional policy paradigm

Kaj Zimmerbauer, kaj.zimmerbauer@oulu.fi, Satu Kivelä, Geography research unit. University of Oulu

Peripheral regions in the northernmost Europe have recently become more integrated into the political interests of nation states and their central authorities. This has resulted from two separate, yet partially overlapping societal transformations: firstly, a rapid change in geopolitical landscape and secondly, an emphasis on green transition. While the former is connected to the Russian invasion in Ukraine and the resulting NATO-membership processes of Finland and Sweden, the latter stems from more long-term strategies against climate change. Although stemming from different 'domains', the initiatives related to latter are being increasingly 'reframed' by discourses related to preparedness and self-sufficiency, however. Thus, while many processes focal for regional development in the northernmost Europe may not be actually changed, they have become justified in new ways, embracing the vocabulary of militarization. This has contributed to more general militarization of regional policy and development.

The notion above, supported by our fieldwork in northern Finland, suggests the idea of peripherality is transforming, and we are witnessing a development that can be conceptualized as counter-peripheralization. This has two aspects: first, the greater emphasis on the importance of resources - largely related to preparedness and self-sufficiency but also to green transition - decreases negative connotations related to resource peripheries earlier, and second, periphery is becoming less peripheral due to emphasis on both civil and military related east-west connections across the nation states in the North.

Maintaining everyday security in rural Finland: Community action under new geopolitical pressures

Maarit Sireni, maarit.sireni@uef.fi & Mari Kattilakoski, University of Eastern Finland, Karelian Institute

This presentation examines everyday security in sparsely populated rural areas and the role of community-based village security initiatives in strengthening it. Drawing on interview and observational data from Eastern Finland, the study shows that everyday security in rural contexts is largely built on local communities, especially in areas where public services have receded and emergency response times are long. Key elements of village level security work include fostering community cohesion, neighbourly assistance and community based preparedness practices — all of which help alleviate feelings of insecurity and support the continuity of everyday safety.

The presentation also situates everyday security within the broader security environment. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has heightened concerns among rural residents regarding proximity to the border, preparedness for crises, and the potential for disruptions. This altered geopolitical context introduces new tensions and raises questions about the role of local communities as part of the national security framework. According to the findings, village level planning and community-based preparedness can ease fear and strengthen resilience, even though they do not replace formal authorities' responsibilities.

The presentation emphasizes that promoting everyday security in rural areas requires both support for local community initiatives and stronger integration with municipal and regional safety efforts. It also highlights the need to recognize the potential of village-based action as part of a broader, society wide approach to preparedness and security.

From Resource Deserts to Rural Resilience – What Do We Know About Services and Crisis Preparedness in Peripheral Areas?

Louise Skoog & Veronica Strandh, Umeå university

As governments across Europe intensify efforts to strengthen crisis preparedness and civil defence, questions of how preparedness conditions vary between central and peripheral areas have gained renewed relevance. Yet research on crisis preparedness in the Global North remains dominated by urban assumptions, with limited attention to rural and peripheral contexts.

This paper presents a scoping review of international literature examining how access to essential services is linked to local crisis preparedness in peripheral areas. The review systematically analyses

how existing research conceptualises the role of service provision, the types of resources emphasised, and the responsibilities attributed to public, private, and civic actors. Particular attention is paid to geographical focus and to how rural and peripheral communities are framed in terms of vulnerability and resilience.

The analysis shows that while rural areas are often acknowledged as vulnerable due to distance and limited service access, few studies explicitly examine how everyday service provision conditions preparedness and resilience in Nordic and similar welfare-state peripheries. The review identifies significant blind spots regarding public responsibility, local capacity, and the role of commercial and civic services in preparedness strategies. By synthesising insights across crisis research and rural development literature, the paper contributes to a more geographically sensitive understanding of crisis preparedness and outlines priorities for future research and policy.

Thursday 8.30-10.30, 2 presentations

Militarization of rural space and mindset?

Aapo Jumppanen, University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute

This presentation examines the militarization of rural regions and people in Finland from 2022 to 2026. The analysis draws on research literature and empirical data, consisting of articles from Finnish news media.

The concept of militarization is understood as “a set of attitudes and social practices that regard war and the preparation for war as normal and desirable social activities” (Mann 1987).

In this paper, rural space is conceptualized through the national urban-rural regional classification while also being recognized as a negotiable social construct. The militarization of the rural mindset refers to the ways in which military matters, militaristic thinking, and worldviews gain prominence in rural consciousness.

The central claim of this paper is that the militarization of rural space and mindset can be both direct and largely physical, often led by military initiatives, or indirect, frequently mental, and largely initiated by civilians from the public, private, and third sectors.

Direct militarization of rural space includes, for example, the expansion of military bases, the erection of border walls, the deployment of new troops, and the organization of military exercises, as well as improvements in military logistics through the construction of new roads and railroads.

Indirect militarization encompasses a wider range of activities, including rewetting peatlands to create natural barriers, geopolitical renaming of municipalities and areas, developing village preparedness plans, emphasizing the importance of leisure activities such as hunting for maintaining military skills, and leveraging rural heritage work and culture to prepare for potential crises.

Indigenous Land Defense in Sápmi: negotiating subaltern security dilemmas, conflicts, and cooperation.

Laura Junka-Aikio, University of Lapland

Amid the ongoing shift to multipolarity, the Nordic region has been swiftly militarized as a NATO frontier zone facing Russia and the Arctic region, and as a site of growing US military presence. The change is particularly tangible in Sápmi, where allied efforts to strengthen military capabilities and security of supply translate into concrete pressure on land use and the environment, for instance in the form of bases, infrastructures, and large international military exercises. For Sámi communities, whose identities, livelihoods and future depends on the continued sustainability of traditional livelihood and healthy ecosystems, the resulting "geographies of militarization" (Woodward 2004) present a wicked dilemma.

Although military land use is advanced in the name of national security and defense of the land from foreign invasion, it simultaneously produces new threats to Sámi access to the land, to the viability of Sámi livelihoods and culture, and hence, to their future as Sámi. In this presentation, I examine various issues and challenges that this contradiction, or what I suggest may best described as a subaltern security dilemma, presents to Sámi societies and communities, and explore what kind of solutions have been or could be suggested to negotiate and address them. The presentation builds on my existing research on the impact of militarization in Sápmi, as well as on ongoing Sápmi policy discussions on this topic across the national borders.

Group 10 Changing ruralities across a region: Actors, policies, innovations

Organisers

Judith Alms, Dr. Vassilis Kitsos & Lisann Schmidt, University of Greifswald, Germany

Group description

This session explores the interplay between social and institutional change in rural areas and subsequent changes in the understanding of rurality. We are interested in researching this process in several layers, including policy design, adaptation and application on the ground. We associate this change with broader regional transformations in the extended area of the Baltic Sea Region.

The 'rural' is here broadly understood, and its transformation is viewed from within. Instead of considering it as receptor of changes happening elsewhere, we suggest an approach in which the study of recent and current rural policies reveals shifting understandings of rurality. This shift, to our understanding, unfolds together with an increasingly contested understanding of regional development across regional and national authorities and supranational bodies.

We are interested in topics such as:

- *Local actors and translocal challenges: How do locally embedded actors and organisations envision "rural development" and what are their action trajectories towards it? How do they*

respond to the “global challenges” of our times, especially when it comes to local service provision? We are interested in cases of overcoming challenges and barriers, adaptation mechanisms and international synergies.

- *Innovation and the mobility of policy in rural contexts: What do innovation breakthroughs in the social and policy sphere as in, for example, fiscal policy, welfare or spatial planning mean for rurality and how do they transform its features? We are interested in accounts of the impact of change in such policy landscapes across local, regional and cross-border settings.*

The session aims to offer a nuanced perspective on multi-scalar rural transformations and welcomes both conceptual and empirical contributions.

Wednesday 15.30-17.30, 3 presentations

Redefining Public Transport as Shared Mobility

Johanna Lindberg, johanna.lindberg@ltu.se, Department of Computer Science, Electrical and Space Engineering, Luleå University of Technology,

Wiebke Reim, Department of Social Sciences, Technology and Arts, Luleå University of Technology,

Glenn Berggård, Department of Civil, Environmental and Natural Resources Engineering, Luleå University of Technology

The public transport bus routes in rural areas mainly connect larger settlements. More remote villages are not included, excluding residents from access to bus trips. Private cars are present in most households, yet occupancy rates are often low. Travel often takes place without the knowledge of others, excluding the potential to serve other persons' trip needs. This interpretive case study builds on the four-year RörLa project, comprising two pilot initiatives and a structured innovation process conducted in collaboration with local and regional bus operators and transport authorities in Norrbotten. The case illustrates how private mobility can shift from being perceived as competition to functioning as a complementary element within public transport.

By redefining public transport as “shared mobility” rather than “bus service”, cars can be seen as collective transport. This was done by first identifying local needs and developing an innovative business model to create incentives for actors to participate and use the solution. The focus is on how bus ticket prices can be redistributed to cover parts of the cost of ridesharing. The business model visualizes the redistribution of responsibilities, costs, and benefits between users, the ride-sharing platform provider, and public transport operators. Based on this model, car-based ridesharing was technically embedded into official ticketing infrastructure, whereby the car becomes institutionally recognized as public transport. Thereafter policy was re-written. Our study adopts a critical realist perspective to explain the transformation of private transport resources into coordinated public mobility infrastructure through digital, organizational, and economic mechanisms.

When Bottom-Up Meets Top-Down: A Study of the National Strategy for the Survival of Local Stores in Small Rural Communities in Norway

Finn Ove Båtevik, finn.ove.batevik@hivolda.no & Lars Julius Halvorsen, Volda University College

A useful approach to studying local communities is to analyse key actors, the dynamics of their interactions, and the values that underpin these relationships. Such interactions involve both internal community processes and linkages to external stakeholders. This perspective is also relevant for understanding efforts to secure the survival of grocery stores in small rural communities.

Previous research has primarily emphasized rural stores' role in providing goods, services, and important social meeting places, underscoring the involvement of local store owners and residents. This paper shifts attention towards external actors, their values, and their modes of engagement with local communities and store owners. In Norway, such actors operate within the national Merkur programme. Although the programme is widely regarded as successful, it warrants closer examination to understand how its strategies support local stores and local development processes. Central to this inquiry is the question of on what grounds, and in what ways, the community perspective is safeguarded within the programme.

The paper conceptualizes rural development as a dynamic interplay between bottom up and top-down forces and argues that strategies grounded in this interaction have been particularly valuable in the case of the Merkur programme. Empirically, the study draws on findings from multiple investigations of the programme, complemented by analysis of documents tracing its evolution over the past 30 years.

Securing Rural Public Services through Inter-Municipal Cooperation: Innovative Approaches from the Baltic Sea Region

Lisann Schmidt, University of Greifswald, Germany, lisann.schmidt@uni-greifswald.de

Rural areas face significant challenges in providing services of general interest (SGI), driven by demographic decline and the progressive ageing of local populations alongside wider economic and geopolitical pressures. Sparse settlement structures and long distances further increase strain on municipal capacities. Against this backdrop, inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) has emerged as a key instrument to reorganise rural service delivery beyond administrative boundaries.

This paper examines IMC as an institutional response to securing SGI in rural areas of the Baltic Sea Region, focusing on Denmark, Finland and Lithuania. It compares distinct IMC arrangements embedded in different governance contexts to analyse how institutional frameworks shape cooperative structures, redefine municipal responsibilities and influence service accessibility and long-term viability.

The study applies a qualitative multi-level design combining expert and municipal interviews with policy analysis. Findings are comparatively synthesised and discussed in multi-level policy workshops to validate interpretations and connect empirical insights with practice.

The analysis reveals distinct institutional configurations. The Danish case illustrates a strategically institutionalised cooperation model linking rural service provision to long-term regional development

objectives. In Finland, a municipally backed development company operates as an organisational hub aligning project-oriented initiatives with broader ambitions of regional vitality. The Lithuanian case reflects an experimental functional area arrangement seeking to overcome administrative fragmentation.

Across cases, implementation depends on context-specific institutional conditions. IMC facilitates resource pooling and coordinated organisational solutions that enhance accessibility and regional positioning, yet its effectiveness remains contingent upon institutional embeddedness and local actor constellations.

Thursday 8.30-10.30, 2 presentations

Experiencing citizenship and local democracy amid the centralisation of public services in peripheral Finland in the 2020s

Mattias Lehtinen, Tampere university, mattias.lehtinen@tuni.fi,
Johanna Vuorelma, Tampere university, johanna.vuorelma@tuni.fi

This presentation examines how citizenship and local democracy are experienced amid the centralisation of public services in peripheral Finland in the 2020s. Drawing on focus group interviews with citizens (n=23) and elite interviews with local decision-makers (n=14) conducted in peripheral Finnish municipalities, the study analyses how citizenship and local democracy are lived in contexts marked by welfare state restructuring and the partial centralization of governance.

The study contributes to debates on welfare state retrenchment, left-behind places, and lived citizenship by demonstrating how the centralisation of public services affects not only access to welfare but also perceptions of citizenship and the legitimacy of democratic governance.

Methodologically, the study employs frame analysis to identify different interpretative frames among peripheral citizens and decision-makers. In citizens' frames, local politicians are perceived as irrational and powerless, the welfare state as retreating, and citizens themselves as democratically neglected. In decision-makers' frames, citizens are perceived as overly intrusive and emotionally driven, the state as commanding, and decision-makers themselves as constrained and depoliticised actors.

Interviewing the chatbots: AI perspectives on human agency in regional development

Thoroddur Bjarnason, University of Iceland, thoroddur@hi.is

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in regional development raises important questions about agency and moral responsibility. The ability of large language models (LLMs) to draw on vast amounts of professional knowledge and mimic human interactions promises to support professional judgement, reduce routine administrative work, and enhance consistency and safety, yet threatens to undermine human judgment, shift accountability and reorient practice toward organisational priorities of efficiency, standardisation, and risk management.

Drawing on symbolic interactionism and actor-network theory, this paper approaches AI systems as social actants comparable to the projected social selves of humans in interaction. This does not imply that AI systems are “sentient” actors capable of internal experiences, but rather that such systems generate accounts that can offer fresh insights into the promises and threats of artificial expertise in regional development. Using a standardised interview-style protocol, responses were elicited from five widely used AI systems; ChatGPT (OpenAI), Claude (Anthropic), Gemini (Google), Copilot (Microsoft), and Grok (xAI). Each system was prompted multiple times using identical questions, and the resulting texts were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal both striking similarities and systematic differences in how AI systems frame professional autonomy, responsibility, efficiency, ethics, and governance, alongside notable silences and displacements of responsibility. By approaching AI as a discursive actor rather than a cognitive subject, the paper offers a playful but serious methodological provocation for studying the role of AI in contemporary regional development.

Group 11 Rural Health Social Innovation in a Changing Nordic Welfare State

Coordinators

Annette Aagaard Thuesen, aat@sam.sdu.dk & Kasper Friis Bavnbæk, kaf@sdu.dk, Danish Centre for Rural Research, Department of Political Science and Public Management, university of Southern Denmark.

Group description

This working group explores the evolving role of local communities in rural health development within the context of welfare state health reforms in Nordic countries. We are interested in exploring how local actors navigate and respond to shifting expectations in health provision. The Danish welfare state, like its Nordic counterparts, is undergoing reform processes characterized by both centralization and decentralization. These reforms increasingly position volunteers, local associations and their localities as contributors to addressing societal challenges such as health inequality. We propose to discuss how these “slow and invisible – but steady” reforms open new spaces for community involvement, while also raising critical questions about the boundaries of responsibility and legitimacy in health-related initiatives. The theoretical framework could relate to the concepts of on the one side social innovation emphasizing new collaborative relationships, resource mobilization, and context-sensitive solutions in rural health and on the other side moral capital offering a critical lens on the norms, expectations, and obligations shaping community engagement in traditional public welfare domains.

Format: We invite short presentations followed by discussion. Contributions may include empirical studies, theoretical reflections, or policy analyses related to rural health, welfare reform, and community engagement.

Tuesday 15-17, 3 presentations

Local Councils and Citizens' Associations as Health Actors? Evidence from a National Survey in Denmark

Annette Aagaard Thuesen, aat@sam.sdu.dk and Kasper Friis Bavnæk, kaf@sdu.dk, Danish Centre for Rural Research, Department of Political Science and Public Management, Pernille Tanggaard Andersen, ptandersen@health.sdu.dk, Department of Public Health. All from University of Southern Denmark.

Denmark's 2024 health reform seeks to reduce social and geographic health inequalities by strengthening local health service closer to citizens and communities. How civil society organizations - especially local councils and citizens' associations - are and could become mobilized in this shift, remains underexplored.

We conducted a national survey of all local-community associations to explore these issues. "Health, wellbeing and physical activity" ranked 12th among typical association topics, though many activities indirectly support health (e.g., outdoor amenities, walking/cycling infrastructure). Only 14.8% reported municipal invitations to co-deliver health initiatives, with higher engagement among local councils than citizens' associations. Associations saw potential in health activities for community building (29.9% high/very high) and disease prevention (36.2%).

Factor analysis of 15 health-related contributions yielded three components: social focus, health-service support, and physical activity/facilities. Social-focus activities were more common in rural parishes near municipal centers, while health-service support (e.g., transport to care) dominated in remote areas. Associations prioritized safe walking/cycling infrastructure and microgrants as engagement levers. Free-text responses emphasized vibrant meeting places but noted capacity limits and concerns about role boundaries. Based on the empirical results analyzed against theory of social innovation and moral capital, we propose a boundary framework to guide fair, sustainable partnerships.

Varieties of Coproduction for Digital Inclusion in Health and Welfare Services: Insights from Pilot Projects in Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal

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Snijder, Allette & Annema, Janneke, Healthy Ageing Network Northern Netherlands,

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Vilaça, Teresa & Carvalho, Graça S. (4) University of Minho, Portugal

Health and social services have become increasingly digitalized in recent years, either by being supplemented with digital solutions or by shifting to digitally mediated access. This development offers new opportunities, particularly in rural areas, where for example video consultations can help bridge distances to increasingly centralized health and welfare infrastructures. At the same time, digital solutions can be difficult for some people to use, and a significant proportion of those at risk of digital exclusion live in rural areas. This creates a need for measures that strengthen digital inclusion.

In this paper, we focus on coproduction initiatives between providers of digitalized services in health and welfare and voluntary organisations that seek to improve digital inclusion in rural areas. Pilot projects were implemented in four European countries—Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal. Owing to major organizational and cultural differences in welfare state regimes, regional and local service delivery, and volunteering traditions, these pilot initiatives took very different forms.

We present an analysis of the resulting varieties of coproduction models, ranging from the more public-sector-driven Danish initiatives to the bottom-up, community-driven Dutch ones, alongside the diverse approaches observed in France and Portugal.

Conceptualisations of marginalisation of men in health inequality. A scoping review of the Scandinavian context

Kasper Friis Bavnæk, kaf@sdu.dk & Annette Aagaard Thuesen, aat@sam.sdu.dk, Danish Centre for Rural Research, Department of Political Science and Public Management, University of Southern Denmark

Living on the margins of society, geographically, socio-economically or socially, represent a major concern to social inequality and social challenges in health and access to health services. As the changing health reforms, in Nordic welfare states, with universal accessible health service, often position individuals and communities as contributors to addressing health inequality, the challenges of marginalisation and how to address it remain. Designing a scoping review of Scandinavian literature, we examine the theory used and the conceptualisation of marginalisation in specifically men's health inequality in Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

We find that most studies focusing on male health inequality employ a conceptualisation of marginalisation related to either socio-economic status (SES), social exclusion, or identity. These mostly correlate with method, with quantitative studies using SES, identity related conceptualisations used in qualitative studies, and social exclusion conceptualisations used in both quantitative and qualitative. The review highlights intersectional theory as an example to bridge the methodological differences, as it enables a more detailed and nuanced consideration to health inequality. Furthermore, it is found that what in some studies are considered health outcomes, such as mental illness or alcohol/drugs consumption/use, are instead used as marginalisation factors in others.

Group 12 The science-policy interface at the intersection of exogenous and endogenous territorial development

Coordinators

Arvid Stiernström & Thomas Norrby, Swedish University of Agricultural Science, Department of Urban and Rural Development; Contact information: arvid.stiernstrom@slu.se

Group description

In many European countries, rural policy is under scrutiny. Applying concepts such as rural proofing or spatial justice in the design of sectoral policies is stressing the need to include rural and regional actors in the development, implementation and evaluation of new policies. This in order to better grasp how sectoral policies will affect rural and regional development – the economy, the people and the natural resources?

We meet a myriad of examples of how rural communities and actors take responsibility for development from below and express a will to increase local participation in development. But relying on endogenous capabilities without examining the structural limitations and enablers keeps locals running in a perpetual treadmill, it simply does not bring about rural development.

How can national initiatives and policies best be designed to enable just and fair development in our entire territories? How can local and/or regional assessment of national policies and cumulative negative consequences be assessed and scrutinized and how can this be taken care of by national policy formulating bodies? Can we re-think policy formulation from a territorial perspective and create a more sensible policy formulation process? Can academia have a role in mediating such policy development?

In this workshop we engage with policy and knowledge production at the nexus of academia, municipal, regional and national governments, and local practitioners of rural development (civil society as well as private business actors). We welcome contributions from scholars and practitioners who work together on rural policy development and/or evaluation that addresses the challenges of multilevel governance.

Tuesday 12.30-14.30, 4 presentations

Relationship between rural research and rural policy in the light of political steering documents – a Finnish perspective

Ella Mustakangas, Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke), Mari Kattilakoski, University of Eastern Finland (UEF), Karelian Institute

One key issue in rural research concerns the relationship between the field of research and the surrounding society. Many of the themes in rural research are politically topical, and socio-political debates are reflected in research in this field. Rural research, as a social science, has been characterized by its close connection to rural development and policy.

In our presentation, we analyse the relationship between rural research and policy in the Finnish context from two different perspectives. On the one hand, we examine the roles assigned to rural research and researchers in Finnish rural policy. On the other hand, we analyse how rural research has been promoted in rural policy.

Our presentation is based on a qualitative document analysis of national rural policy programs (7 in total), three rural policy reports, two special programs of the Government, and one national action program. The analysis provides an overview of the interaction between rural research and policy and the changes that have taken place in this interaction. The study raises questions about the significance of the relationship between rural research and policy and the changes that have taken place in this relationship for both research and policy in the field.

Local science advice? Prospects and problems of research-informed policymaking in small rural towns

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Policymaking informed by research-based evidence is trendy. Systems of science advice in its support are being established at the EU level as well as the national level in various countries. It is much less common at the sub-national level of cities, and even less in rural towns. While the need for such policymaking is particularly pressing in the current conditions of deep and hard-to-manage uncertainties, it is faced with multiple obstacles. On the “supply” side, most urban research is biased towards big cities, thus leaving rural towns with little scientific interest; limited generalizability of the results of research to pertain to unique cases; no university in the vicinity. On the “demand” side, in rural towns there is often a shortage of resources needed for the production, identification and effective use of relevant policy-apt information; e.g. limitations in local policy capacity, including science literacy and other epistemic capacities. All this may lead to an institutionalised reliance on low-quality consultancy services.

In remedying the situation, it is essential to develop an epistemic culture recognizing a need for high-quality research-based information; and to construe mechanisms whereby relevant research becomes mobilised and utilised. To ensure the recognition of local specificities and the legitimacy of this approach, these mechanisms should involve participatory processes, including “citizen science” experiments.

By the time of the conference, I am supposed to have delivered a lecture on these issues to the city council and admin staff of Savonlinna, a small city in Eastern Finland with the bulk of its territory consisting of rural areas. I hope to draw on this experience in my talk.

The place strikes back: Visionary planning, local translations and materialization realities of urbanism in small town planning

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The revitalization of downtown areas through visionary planning is a key feature in contemporary urban planning. More recently, downtown renewal projects have become a strategy by small, rural towns to tackle their variegated challenges (e.g. shrinkage/decline). In most instances these revitalization projects are initiated through detailed visions functioning as singled-out components of urbanization within the overall local planning process to initiate an improvement of the townscape and to raise its attractiveness. Considering small-towns as translocal assemblages of ‘undefined becoming’ and taking departure from critical planning studies’ criticism on the placelessness of urban visions the study focuses on the processes that unfold between visionary urban planning approaches and the socio-spatial capacities in (declining) small towns.

Approached through two case studies of small towns in Finland (Kitee & Eura), the paper unravels the complexities and frictions that accompany the implementation of downtown revitalisation and assess

how urban ideals and detailed vision frameworks are translated in small towns with numerous rural characteristics. The paper studies the various sociospatial processes that reproduce shifting trajectories and implementations during the three key phases of development: visionary phase, local (institutional) translation phase, and (attempted) materialization phase. Results show a skewed picture rendering most parts of the visions and their urban ideals as misaligned with the socio-materialities of local becoming. Providing some impetus for development the visions largely remain an externally introduced urban planner's utopia rather than a collectively agreed on development trajectory that would be required for an inclusive and place sensitive planning in small-towns.

From Poetry to Placemaking in Dalabyggð, Iceland: The Yule Lads as a catalyst for community-led development

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This paper examines how creative entrepreneurship rooted in poetry and heritage can foster regenerative rural development, drawing on a case study from Dalabyggð, West Iceland. Inspired by the folklore of the 13 Yule Lads – popularised by the poet Jóhannes úr Kötlum, whose familial legacy informs this research – the project “Yule Lads are from Dalir” demonstrates how embedded cultural narratives can function as place-based development strategies that mobilise memory, identity and rural distinctiveness.

Through qualitative fieldwork, the study analyses how the family-led dairy farm Erpsstaðir evolves from an agricultural enterprise into a cultural hub that interlaces food production, storytelling, crafts and community collaboration. The initiative exemplifies emergent placemaking: bottom up processes through which residents activate local identity, landscape and heritage to strengthen regional cohesion and stimulate tourism. It also reflects regenerative principles by positioning cultural actors as stewards who cultivate local resources and social capacities through collaborative practices. A typology of social entrepreneurs – social bricoleurs, social constructionists and social engineers – is applied to reveal how different forms of entrepreneurial agency shape the initiative, including the enabling role of Iceland's Brothættar byggðir (Fragile Settlements) programme, a national policy framework supporting vulnerable rural communities through participatory development processes.

The paper argues that integrating entrepreneurship with folklore based placemaking can generate relational, spatial and economic value in peripheral regions. The Dalir case highlights how family embedded creative actors contribute to community anchored futures, demonstrating the potential of cultural heritage to support adaptive, sustainable development. The study offers insights transferable to other non-urban contexts where demographic fragility, identity challenges and limited institutional capacity require hybrid forms of cultural, social and entrepreneurial innovation.

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