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Quality of Life and Urban-Rural Interaction

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The Question of Quality

This issue of Nordregio News approaches the quality of life discussion from an urban-rural perspective. In doing so, we address the essential question of choice and preference for place of residence; i.e. peoples' individual experiences of quality of life in urban-rural environments. A core question is how and to what extent individual perspectives on quality of life are applied to regional planning and development?

The debate on quality of life has probably been one of the most common topics during human history. Societal issues – like our neighbourhood – strongly affect our personal quality of life. A longstanding question within the topic is if quality of life should be perceived from an individual point of view, or if quality of life should be seen from the society's point of view. The question of subjective and objective viewpoint is still crucial not only in social planning but also in the planning of urban-rural environments.

Nordic social policy has traditionally focused on material resources as a means to achieve wellbeing. One part of this has been regional development policies where, for instance, politicians have been able to shape settlement patterns based on the level of public services that are provided in different areas of the country. In practice this means e.g. tackling the question if people should live in cities or in countryside?

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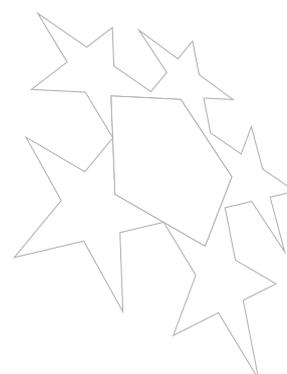
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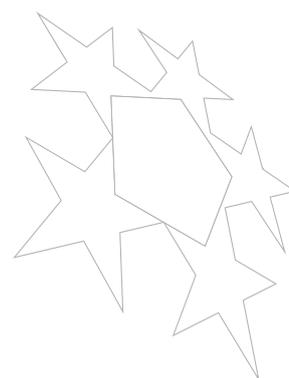
The state previously had a strong, guiding role in the implementation of welfare politics. Recently however, the role of individuals has superseded the welfare state and more emphasis is now placed on individual responsibilities and rights. In the case of Finland for example, regional development has shifted away from big national programs that were geared toward the strong political and shared will to keep the whole country liveable. These have been replaced by smaller, more localized projects where individual choice is put in focus, even if this means that people prefer to live in bigger cities.

Many individuals at some stage find themselves questioning the advantages and disadvantages of settling in urban or rural areas. The differences between the two mean that individual perceptions on quality of life are at the centre of any comparison between urban and rural living. Essential factors such as the capacity to make choices, health, economy and employment concerns all influence both sides of the comparison. We may say that urban and rural areas are generally alike in terms of human interaction but differ extensively when quality of life is the issue. Therefore, improving quality of life is not solely a question of equity, but also more and more a crucial aspect of strategies aiming at attracting people and investments.

We have to put quality of life into a broader perspective within the framework of urban-rural interaction. Addressing quality of life in urban-rural interaction is appropriate as it connects to the overall attractiveness of a region and touches upon the individual preferences of the people living in the region. Enabling higher quality of life is the main component in the development of attractive and competitive cities and regions in Europe. Successful environments have to allow people to develop and apply a broad range of talents in their own and also professional lives.

Thus far, the efforts undertaken and the methods used in respect of the management of quality of life in the framework of urban-rural interaction have been rather limited. The challenge for planners and policy makers is to link micro-level interactions to macro-level processes. It is important to reflect individual preferences regarding quality of life related issues in a daily perspective and generate (new) locally adapted solutions and methods of policy-making within the context of urban-rural interaction.

In the first article **Residential Preferences and Quality of Life** Petri Kahila and Stefanie Lange-Scherbenske discuss the question of residential preferences and quality of life. They give an overview of how people reflect on quality of life when choosing their place



of residence. The article is based on outcomes of a case study which was implemented in the Turku Urban Region as a part of the **NEW BRIDGES** project.

Efficiency of public administration and vitality of rural areas is repeatedly related to the discussion on provision of public services. Self-governing in rural areas is also an important question, often linked to the decentralization-centralization processes. Jørgen Møller considers these questions from a Danish perspective in his article **Big Changes in the Local Welfare System**. He underlines the need for reconsidering the traditional village and paying attention to diversity.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of Nordregio News!

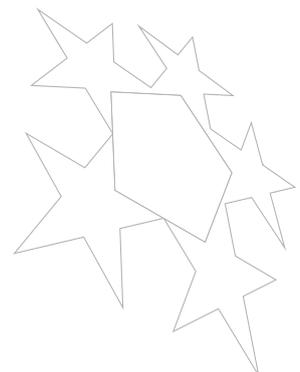


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Residential Preferences and Quality of Life

By Petri Kahila and Stefanie Lange Scherbenske

Residential preferences play a crucial role in quality of life. People's preferences when choosing their place of residence and conducting their daily activities are closely related to quality of life. A case study from the Turku Urban Region in Finland shows that individuals have individual perceptions of quality of life. Because people do not share social, environmental, or physical preferences, planners and developers must consider this as they plan new residential areas.

Improving quality of life has become a policy goal at the regional, national and EU levels. Good quality of life is important to people and is connected to the overall attractiveness of a city or region. Because there are individual perceptions of quality of life, individual preferences are increasingly important in regional development and planning. For instance, the rationales upon which inhabitants choose their place of residence have changed over time, and how they pursue their (daily) life activities has come to the attention of developers and planners. Furthermore, because people may, for example, work in a city centre and live in the surrounding region, they challenge administrative borders and eventually demand an integrated planning approach that addresses quality of life issues. However, quality of life is a broad concept that lacks a common definition, making it difficult to implement.

In 2009, the **NEW BRIDGES** project was initiated with the primary objective of operationalizing the concept of quality of life by including individual perceptions in spatial planning and regional development. The project offered an opportunity for policymakers to initiate new measures and processes to improve quality of life for people in the community. Eight local and regional planning authorities facilitated implementation processes in seven urban areas in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). The project was partly financed by the European Union (European Regional Development Fund) through the Baltic Sea Region Programme 2007–2012, the Finnish Ministry of Environment, and other partners (project website www.urbanrural.net).

Residential preferences in the quality of life concept

In the NEW BRIDGES project, Nordregio developed guidelines, coordinated case studies and facilitated transnational learning processes. The concept of quality of life was operationalized through three key



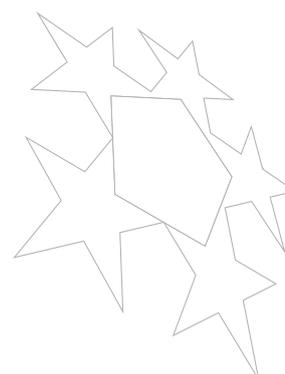
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elements: residential preferences, accessibility and mobility, and provision of services. Individuals are now both willing and able to commute longer distances to satisfy their residential preferences. More often than not, quality of life issues underlie decisions about where to live. Because individual residential preferences are one of the most important factors in regional development for better quality of life, we elaborate on these further.

By pursuing everyday activities, people challenge the current levels of services; they call for better accessibility and demand a wide variety of residential choices. We argue that residential choices are the result of several processes, and depend on households' economic, social and cultural resources.

In residential preferences, the influence of different lifestyles and stages of life have to be taken into account. People experience a variety of local circumstances (e.g., rural or urban environments) in different ways and value characteristics to varying extents. Furthermore, growing similarities between 'urban' and 'rural' areas offer unique and attractive combinations and opportunities to choose from and experience new kinds of lifestyles.

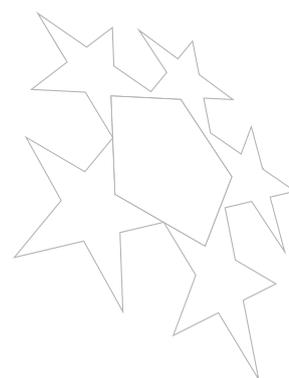
In decisions to move from one residential environment to another, changes in household or employment situation undoubtedly play an important role. In addition, stable preferences for particular residential environments influence the decision to move. Other key issues are the perceived opportunities and restrictions concerning a person's activities in a given environment/neighbourhood/city, and the emotional, social, and socio-economic opportunities and restrictions an environment offers. In practice, a new residential area needs something with which a person may identify, and should offer opportunities that the person desires.

The characteristics of desirable residential areas in urban areas are usually identified by broad descriptions such as quiet, green, safe or spacious. These are mostly questions of interpretation and socio-cultural traditions in a particular region, whether these areas are considered urban or rural. Expressed preferences for specific residential areas have an important influence on decisions regarding choice of new places of residence.

Residential preferences in the Turku Urban Region

The Turku Urban Region was one of the seven case studies in the NEW BRIDGES project. The Turku Urban Region case study was conducted by the City of Turku and the Regional Council of Southwest Finland. The Turku Urban Region is a formalized co-operation network between 14 municipalities and the City of Turku.

The focus of the case study was municipal co-operation in relation to residential preference and a survey (Vasanen, Antti 2010) conducted in the Turku Urban Region. The survey was sent to 3000 residents and asked: "What kinds of characteristics do residents prefer in



the Turku Urban Region?” One third of the recipients responded and the results of the survey were used to initiate new measures to improve quality of life in the Turku Urban Region.

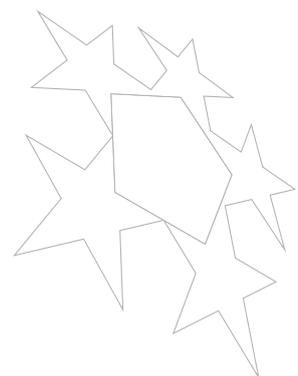
According to the survey, inhabitants generally value closeness to nature and access to public services and shops. People who can meet the expenses of moving to the better and more expensive areas are attracted by proximity to rural environments in the municipalities around the City of Turku. However, municipalities implement individual policies to attract new residents, resulting in the neighbouring municipalities of the City of Turku attracting people with greater economic resources.

The survey also showed that residential choices are clearly a combination of various factors, in which can be included household characteristics and structure, age, education level, place of employment and familiarity with the new place of residence or the socio-economic situation. Quality of life in a residential environment is therefore an individual decision, but for planners and developers it is more strongly related to a group of people. Not all individuals share social, environmental and physical preferences for conditions. This is the main challenge for planners and developers to consider as they plan new residential areas.

Issues related to quality of life in planning and development of residential areas in the Turku Urban Region are normally considered in municipal strategies for recreation, safety and access to services. However, the regional aspects of the whole Turku Urban Region have not been fully considered. Neighbouring municipalities mostly have their own starting points in planning residential areas, which has to some extent led to a scattered residential structure. There is an obvious need for overarching cross-border planning of residential areas between these municipalities. This is important to achieve the sustainable development of residential infrastructures in the whole Turku Urban Region. Issues related to the provision of local services and effective public transport are particularly crucial for inter-municipal co-operation and planning.

Conclusion and outlook

In the urban–rural context, crucial issues for residential preferences are the provision of services and recreation, which are closely connected to mobility and accessibility. The results of the survey in the Turku Urban Region confirmed that there is a logical relationship between the level of urbanity/rurality and residential development. The emergence of intermediate areas between the city and its rural vicinities generates uniform housing patterns and thereby reduces variety of residential options on the borders of urban and rural areas. As an illustration of this point, the Turku Urban Region survey revealed the need for increased inter-municipal co-operation in planning residential areas.



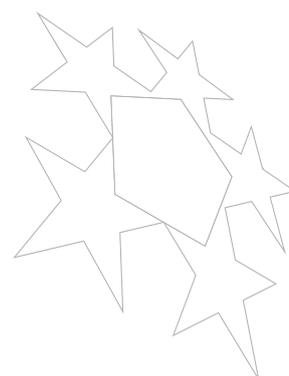
Quality of life is generally an individual perception. Therefore, the NEW BRIDGES project pursued an involvement approach addressing individual interests and those of various groups. The working group meetings organized in the Turku Urban Region were helpful in providing information about the local perspectives on residents' issues related to quality of life. The local stakeholder meetings provided municipal authorities and stakeholders with opportunities to discuss and to obtain information about residential planning issues. Specifically, the main issues discussed in the meetings were the planning of new residential areas and accessibility, as well as the provision and usage of services across municipal borders.

A shift to a quality of life-based approach in spatial planning and development policy may offer a balance between individual preferences and policy efforts. This is attractive to policymakers concerned with sustainable development and smart growth, and to residents increasingly concerned about issues such as public safety, air quality and peaceful neighbourhoods.

In the Turku Urban Region, the NEW BRIDGES project demonstrated that co-operation between various actors is an important method to structure conventional residential planning and make it more far-sighted and collective. There was also a recognizable positive aspect to enhanced inter-municipal co-operation in residential planning issues. An integrative approach to quality of life can aid the sustainable planning of residential areas that pays attention to mobility and accessibility, residential preferences and provision of services.

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Big Changes in the Local Welfare System

By Jørgen Møller

The Danish welfare model is being challenged by rural development. Visionary, long-range municipal planning could be the solution to balance resources and needs in a well-planned geographical area.

In recent years, rural Denmark has been undergoing a sweeping and very noticeable process of adjustment. Development in municipal service provision plays a particular important role to play in both the popular and the political debate and in relation to everyday living conditions. The debate about the future of rural Denmark is also very much a debate about the kind of welfare model we choose in self-governing, municipal Denmark. The centralised, specialised model based on economies of scale, or the decentralised model based on proximity. In the developments and debate relating to these matters, strategic and visionary planning is back in the municipal arena as the only tool capable of handling the many different challenges facing the municipalities.

Background

Over the last few years, a number of different yet concurrent development trends have transformed the debate on the development of the local, municipal welfare system. The debate on the development and future of rural areas and villages also an important part of this discussion.

The first significant structural change was the major municipal reform in 2006, when the number of municipalities was reduced from 274 to 98. One of the arguments was that this would bring about economies of scale and enhanced professionalism in dealing with tasks through a degree of centralisation in the municipal service sector.

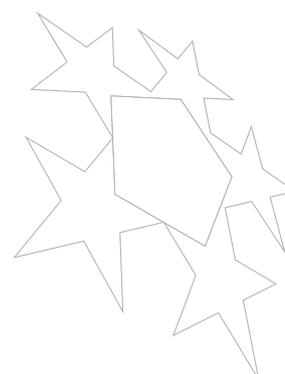
The financial crisis that struck Denmark in 2008 has meant that public finances are managed according to a neo-liberal paradigm of control with a focus on balancing public budgets. This has also resulted in Denmark's municipalities being controlled quite strictly through annual financial agreements between the state and local governments. These agreements place tight restrictions on the taxes individual municipalities can raise and their level of expenditure. This has entailed significant reductions in the municipal welfare services, where the closure of schools and libraries in small village communities have provoked intense popular outrage and debate.



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Since 1978 Jørgen has been working with public planning, public participation, planning systems and planning practices. From the year 2000 until now he has mostly been working with different angles of development and planning in small towns, villages, hamlets and rural districts. Jørgen has published a lot of articles, especially on the subject of villages, and he is also a well known public debater in media in Denmark.

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Politicisation of municipal development

The development of Danish user- and participation democracy, where parents sit on school boards, nursery school councils, etc., has been a platform for a whole raft of local protest movements against institutional closures; as a result, each municipal proposal, for example regarding routine modification of the school structure, has been met with well-organised resistance from resourceful parents and villagers.

At the same time, Danish rural development policy, with its strong emphasis on local living conditions and a bottom-up perspective, has led people living in rural areas to expect their voice to be heard in matters of local development. Exploited by resourceful, well-organised villagers, working together with different user- groups from schools, kindergartens and so on, it has become a platform for local protest movements against the closure of schools and other municipal institutions.

One of the most prominent reasons why the restructuring debate in the municipalities generally ends in a stalemate, where positive dialogue is difficult to achieve, is that the closure of schools and institutions take place under a paradigm of savings, where savings in the municipal budget have to be found quickly. The discussion thus quickly descends to a narrow focus on sector planning and financial planning, instead of the comprehensive local social planning that is needed, with an emphasis on sector considerations, the municipal finances and future urban patterns of the municipalities and rural areas.

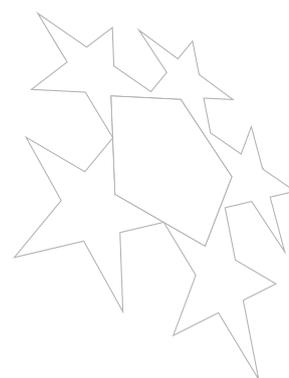
Denmark's villages

The spotlight then turns to the rural areas and villages. Twenty per cent of Denmark live in the villages and surrounding rural areas, and villages are important hubs for the aspect of the municipal sector that serves the rural areas. All soft, citizen-centred services such as schools, nurseries, kindergartens, senior citizen centres, libraries as well as cultural and sports facilities are predominantly located in the larger and largest villages with populations ranging from approximately 350 to approximately 1000. There are roughly 600 of such villages and this is where the battle for the future of welfare services is being fought. In the 5000 or so smaller villages, all municipal and private services have long since been shut down, as a general rule.

All change!

A basic tenet for understanding the situation of Danish rural areas and villages today is an awareness that the economic functions, the associated physical structures and the way of life are in a constant state of flux. What is new is that the pace of change has increased dramatically in recent years.

Most villages were economically and culturally self-sufficient local communities well into the 1950s, and in the years between 1970 and



2012 there have been dramatic trends of change, mainly because the 6,000-year old symbiotic connection between agriculture and village has been definitively broken. The foundation for the future for most rural and village development in Denmark is now settlement, migration and commuting.

Today, all villages in Denmark can be regarded as highly mobile commuter communities, where the majority of economically active people earn their living in the towns and cities. This means the village is now primarily a place where people reside. Villages have transformed from production communities into residential and reproduction communities they are today. As most of the life-blood of commerce and functions are no longer operational, it is clear that villages are developing in different directions. Distinct differences are emerging between villages that embody quality and momentum, and those places that are losing value and substance. Some are ‘winner villages’ and others are – or are becoming – ‘loser villages’.

The future of village Denmark in the pipeline

In Danish society and in planning circles, we lack a number of fundamental discussions about how to plan for the dual aspects of phasing out and development.

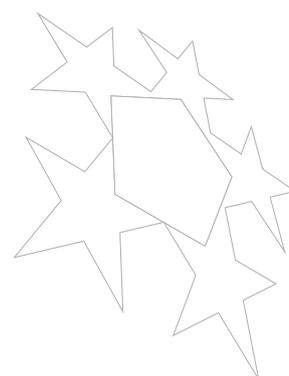
The challenges

- How do we develop and adapt the substance and physical location of the welfare system in the context of an urban pattern?
- What should we do with the “surplus villages”, and what should they be used for in the future? Should exit strategies be prepared for these small communities so that, over a period of time and with dignity, municipalities and residents can initiate the necessary processes for adapting the number and size of villages, or should we just shut our eyes and hope for the best?
- What should happen to all the villages and rural districts with scant or no resources and a declining population?

The tools

Planning and phasing out, exit strategies and demolition of villages is not very familiar territory among Danish planners and politicians, but a few important aspects could tentatively be mentioned here.

The ordinary planning system can be used as a process template. In connection with the overhaul of municipal planning in 2013 or 2017, it would be a good idea to initiate the necessary dialogue about a holistic view of municipal service and its future location in large, sustainable village hubs.



In my opinion, it is necessary to bring to bear visionary, long-term and strategic thinking, by combining the three familiar types of planning: budgeting, sector planning and physical planning. As part of that process, it will be necessary in many municipalities to centralise municipal services and give greater priority to some villages at the expense of others, which will then lose their services. This is important to be able to maintain a futureproof level of service in the municipality as such.

How to do this

The question of how and where the municipalities should build future-proof municipal service structures in large service villages with a population of between 1,000 and 1,500 and the supplementary pattern of smaller, diverse villages and settlements outside these village hubs is the key question in planning.

A number of researchers (Hjalager & Halkier, 2012, Højgaard, 2011, Møller, 2011) have put forward the view that Danish society does not have the necessary resources to maintain the existence of all of today's villages. However, up until now, politicians at all levels have failed to realise that, as a supplement to developing growth villages, there is a need for exit strategies for the small, run-down villages. In such villages the goal of the proposed phasing out over the long term is to achieve better-functioning rural districts, with a village structure that corresponds to the challenges of the future. It might be possible to save municipal funds on various operational and infrastructure tasks that would be eliminated with the disbandment of villages.

A (small) number of municipalities have recently approached what is a very difficult task in terms of municipal policy, namely prioritising the future level of services in a geographical context. For example, in connection with the municipal plan and the municipality's rural policy, Næstved municipality has divided the municipal area into a hub structure that provides the level of service residents can expect at a given location in the municipality, such as distance to schools. This offers an open reconciliation of municipal service provision and what the population can expect. (Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs, 2012)

However, a number of legal and financial aspects require clarification before villages can be disbanded. The scope of compulsory purchase orders needs to be tested. It will be necessary to investigate whether existing – or, in fact, slightly older – legislation on urban renewal could provide inspiration for sustainable, economic system structure. Finally, substantial financially resilient funds will need to be built up for purchasing, demolition and relocation. Mortgage institutions and banks must be included in the structure of deals for

acquiring real property with a view to physical restructuring, and various relocation schemes will need to be established. As was the case in earlier situations, like under regional policy and the fight against unemployment. (Møller, J. 2012, Mølgaard, J. 1980).

It could also be envisaged that funding from short-sighted agricultural subsidies could be diverted to clearance and village disbandment funds, and that selected, condemnable villages could be demolished. In some locations, new villages could be built for holiday- and leisure purposes and second homes (or other -purposes) villages, on the site of the old villages.

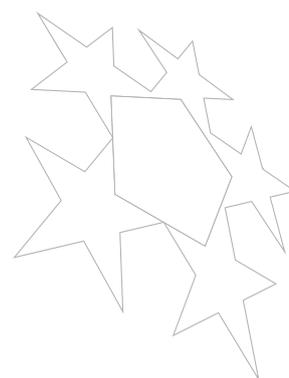
The result

Those villages going forward, without receiving municipal services, should be given special attention from the municipality in terms of future development. Villages need to be thought out again, and the result could be greater diversity with re-purposed villages as the sustaining principle for the future of small villages.

Of course, conditions in the 5600 villages, small and large, will not be the same. Differences and diversity should be respected, supported and encouraged, and accordingly there should be variety in our system of villages.

The municipalities can develop their small villages into re-purposed villages in dialogue with the residents. The extent of the overall village system could be quite considerable. To illustrate the possibilities, (Møller, 2011) at one end of the spectrum there could be entrepreneurs' or equestrian villages, where "anything is possible", and at the other end of the spectrum there could be sanctuary-like, tightly-regulated cultural heritage villages with half-timbered houses, thatched roofs and hollyhock, with the appearance of the village controlled via local planning preservation orders. In most cases, it will not be possible to embody such diverse development principles in any one village, but if everyone's cards are put on the table, a lot of misunderstandings and local battles could be avoided.

Over time, villages diversify, and together they constitute a strong and varied network, where people can choose to settle in planned and prioritised re-purposed villages, and live there according to their own desires and opportunities. In doing so, the dynamism can be promoted and/or recreated. Last but not least, going forward, the municipalities must not allow urban sprawl and haphazard residential development in the rural districts in the hope that this will reverse the decline that has affected many rural areas. That would only lead to more municipalities experiencing even greater difficulties in providing services to the people who live in the open countryside and small villages.



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