



3. THE ESTONIAN VILLAGE MOVEMENT KODUKANT

National context

History Estonia has had a long and turbulent history of occupation, from the 13th to the 20th centuries, including periods of occupation by Germanic, Russian and Swedish powers and a brief period of independence between the two World Wars. In August 1991, Estonia finally declared full independence from the Soviet Union, and one month later joined the UN. In May 2004, it became a member of the European Union.

Throughout its extraordinary history, the independent spirit of Estonia was kept alive. The Estonians credit much of this tenacity of national identity to the rural communities, who maintained the traditions, language and culture of the country.



The President of Estonia addressing the 2003 Estonian Rural Parliament

"When we told Moscow that we wanted to be independent, but this had no result, we wondered what we would do next. Then we saw the Berlin wall collapse and other states fought for their independence. When we had no more resources left to deal with Moscow, we sat and thought what to do. We called on our rural communities. Over 4,000 people gathered and we asked them what we should do. In the vote, 100 were against independence and 4,000 for it. Moscow was shocked and afraid that all republics of the Soviet Union would do the same. This was all because we have un-written laws which we follow every day in our villages."

President of Estonia, Arnold Rüütel 2003¹

Structure Estonia is a very small country by European standards. It has a total land area of 45,227 km² and a population of 1.36 million, with a density of 33 people per km². 40% of people live in the capital city, Tallinn. 33% of the population is classified as rural, i.e. people who live outside the towns of 2,500 or more population: this rural percentage has decreased significantly since independence.

Whilst still poor by EU standards, the Estonian economy is one of the fastest growing in Eastern Europe. GDP² is 5.3 billion Euro³. Unemployment is 10%. Since independence, the economy has been supported by foreign aid and investment.

Administration Estonia is a presidential republic. The administration is composed of State administration at national and regional (county) levels, and local self-government. The main elements are:

President	elected by Parliament
Parliament	101 Members
Government	Cabinet with 15 members, led by the Prime Minister; 12 Ministries
Regional Government	15 counties, each with State County Government and County Associations of Municipalities
Local Government	42 urban and 205 rural Municipalities

Regional Government Regional government is divided between the State-run County Governments, and the locally elected County Associations of Municipalities.

State County Government The County Governments are regional offices of Central Government, broadly based on the Scandinavian model. Their functions include oversight of delivery of Government policy at county level; oversight of Municipalities and service delivery; responsibilities for

¹ Excerpt from the speech delivered by the President to the Estonian Rural Parliament, August 2003.

² Worldbank 2002 figures.

³ At the time of writing 1 Euro = 15.6 Estonian Kroon (EEK).



larger services; and production of the County Plan. Each County Government is led by the County Governor, who is appointed by the Government but must be ratified by the County Association of Municipalities.

County Associations of Municipalities Each county has an Association of Municipalities, whose function is to assist co-ordination between Municipalities; to represent them in policy development and negotiations with County and National Government; and to develop joint working with the County Government. The Associations have their own staff and budget.

At the present time, a further re-organisation of the county level is again under debate, as the current model of County Government is not considered to be working well. The lack of political economic power at county level is a real problem, and many people feel that the Associations of Municipalities should be given more power, as they were up to 1994.

*"The Association of Municipalities has no power; and the County Government can make plans, but has no resources to implement them, and is therefore weak."*⁴

*"We do not have a systematic approach to regional policy and there is no effective regional planning. We want to reform local government to be strong partners in State Government. We need to improve public services and co-ordinate better. We need to increase democracy and make division of functions more clear."*⁵

Local government The Municipality is the most local level of government, often based on the former parish boundaries. There are 247 Municipalities in total. 205 of them are rural, and tend to serve small populations - an average of 1,000 people, but only 50 in the smallest - but they are important for local democracy in rural areas, and there is strong local pressure to retain the current scale of the Municipalities.

Municipalities have the task of local service delivery, including primary schools, health services, infrastructure, transport, community facilities, social welfare etc. They also have strategic planning responsibilities and produce Municipal Plans, linked to the County Plans, within a framework set by Government: this includes a full land use plan and a development and service plan. They employ many staff, including teachers, and are therefore very important to the local economy.

Municipalities gain their funds from 56% of income tax collected within the Municipality, land tax collected at the discretion of the Municipality and some other taxes, for example resource taxes. Funds are also raised from the sale of land or property; project funding; and loans. State funding is allocated in respect of the particular needs of each Municipality and the amount of public funding per head for Municipalities is governed by legislation.

The Municipalities are hard pressed to deliver all of the services they are responsible for, with limited staff and budget. During the Soviet period, although the Municipalities existed, most of the functions of today's Municipalities were served in rural areas by State and collective farms: in effect, they looked after all the needs of their communities. Now, these farms have largely been closed, but they leave behind a strong tradition of local action, within the framework of State control. The Municipalities need and usually appreciate the assistance of the village associations and of *Kodukant*, described later in this chapter.

The Municipalities are represented at county level through the County Associations of Municipalities and at national level through three national associations: the Association of Rural Municipalities, Association of Urban Municipalities and the National Union of Associations of Municipalities.

⁴ County Governor of Saaremaa.

⁵ Ministry of the Interior, speech to Estonian Rural Parliament, August 2003.



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The situation in Rural Areas

*"Starting from the 19th century the heart of Estonian culture and economy has been the village. It started to flourish when Estonians mastered their State and land again. People started to develop their environment, Estonian nationalism and patriotism progressed, and our independence was secured. Like in a real heart, our most precious principles and values were fixed there."*⁶

Estonia has traditionally been a very rural country. The village has been the heart of the people, with a long historical tradition. The land is rich, and supported the bulk of the population until the late 20th century. Estonia was one of the major food producers for the Soviet Union and known for its efficient farming and high production levels.

Change since independence This strong rural tradition was hit hard by independence. The State and collective farms have largely closed; and the whole farming industry has been affected by the loss of the large Soviet market, competition with EU producers, EU regulations, lack of capital and the land reform process. Much of the farmland has been returned to the former owners from the first independence period, 1919-1939. Many of the resulting units are too small to be economically viable. The Estonian markets in agricultural inputs and produce are becoming dominated by foreign companies. The four different organisations who represent Estonian farmers are not powerful enough to protect them.



As a result, there has been a 75% reduction in agricultural jobs; very large areas of farm land are disused; and many farm units are now used at most for hobby farming. In Viljandi County, for example, there are only 100 active farms left, out of 12,000 agricultural holdings. The loss of the State and collective farms has also had a major social impact, in that they previously took care of the social and built infrastructure and the welfare of the population.

Meanwhile, the urban economy has been growing rapidly. The result is growing disparities in wealth between urban and rural areas, and a flight of population from the villages into the towns. The rural population became depressed and felt powerless to address their problems. This was the situation into which Kodukant entered.

*"The changes have happened too fast for many people. People are losing their sense of purpose. There is a lack of employment in the rural areas, especially for men. This is a big issue for the community. It has affected the men particularly badly and many are suffering from alcoholism and depression. Estonia now has the highest suicide rate in Europe. We are all wondering what the impact of the EU will be."*⁷

Forestry is an integral part of farming in Estonia. 60% of forests are now privately owned, mostly by farmers, and 40% are State owned. All farms have a significant proportion of their land under trees. Farmers tend to use this natural resource to compensate for loss of agricultural income, to see them over hard times, and to provide raw materials for construction, fuel and forest foods. Forests are used for hunting by local people and by foreigners. Timber tends to be sold as a raw material to sawmills, which are largely foreign owned. Much of this tree-felling is asset stripping without planning: only 25% of trees felled have felling licenses. Wild berries are sold for making preserves, yoghurt etc., again mostly to foreign companies. The forests are also of important cultural significance, as they have sheltered independence fighters throughout the Soviet period.

Land reform⁸ Land ownership is a fundamental issue for all rural areas. During the Soviet period, all land was deemed to belong to the State. In 1991, the process of returning the land to the former

⁶ President of Estonia, Arnold Rüütel, 2003.

⁷ County Governor of Saaremaa - pers. com.

⁸ Information from the County Governor of Saaremaa / Saarde municipality / the Ministry of Agriculture.



owners began. The land reform process is judged not to have been very successful from the point of view of efficient land use. It has resulted in many small-holdings, not viable as economic farm units. Moreover, many of the new owners live in the urban areas and do not wish to use the land. There are also many foreign, absentee and speculative owners. The owners do now have security of tenure and the ability to raise capital for investment, but the trauma of moving from a State to a private system of land use is only beginning.

Business development⁹ The development of the private sector is one of the main challenges of this newly independent country. Everyone, from farmers to shopkeepers, has to learn this new culture. The growth of businesses and of an entrepreneurial culture requires the development of new skills, attitudes and confidence. Many rural communities are interested in starting businesses, but there is a lack of skills, capital and confidence. There has been a massive influx of companies from Western Europe, opening up new opportunities and know-how, but also dominating the private sector.

Support for new enterprises is provided by a network of 15 County Development Centres, linked to the Estonian Regional Development Agency. The Centres provide business support to small and medium-sized enterprises, with start-up programmes, research, training, advice, trade fairs etc. Rural enterprises face difficulty in getting start-up loans: this has been a particular problem for farms before the land tenure reforms were completed. Government loan schemes tend to give precedence to industry and services, rather than to rural enterprise activities. However, EU programmes provide support for farms and rural enterprises; and many rural women are getting help to enter business through the ILO programme 'Jobs for Women'.

Civil organisations¹⁰ Estonia has 19,013 registered NGOs, employing about 16,000 people (4-5% of the workforce). There are also many unincorporated groups, mostly in rural areas. There is a national umbrella organisation for NGOs - The Network of Estonian Non-profit Organisations. The development of civil society in Estonia, as in the other ex-Soviet States, has received substantial investment from western aid organisations.

The NGO sector is very diverse and has a long history, especially in rural areas. The activities of NGOs in rural areas tend to focus around heritage and social issues. There are now about 400 small village NGOs - Village Associations - which have been set up to develop their own communities, and have a broad focus. These begin as informal groups, but tend to evolve rapidly into formal organisations, in order to undertake fundraising and development projects. They are described more fully later in this chapter.

Rural Policy

There is no comprehensive rural policy in Estonia, and agriculture still dominates the rural policy and funding agenda. Rural and regional development is influenced most directly by the policies of the Ministries of Agriculture and Internal Affairs, the County Governments and the rural Municipalities. The Rural Development Department of the Ministry of Agriculture deals with issues relating to entrepreneurship, infrastructure and land, forestry and training. The Ministry of Internal Affairs has overall co-ordination of local government and regional development. The policies of the other sectoral Ministries also affect the rural areas.

In recent years, there has been a focus on preparation for EU accession and the development of regional and agricultural policy, including agri-environment and rural development measures. The Ministry of Agriculture has implemented rural development through different EU programmes. Up to 2004, EU funding came through the SAPARD programme, with a budget of 250 million EEK

⁹ Information from the Development Centre of Viljandi County.

¹⁰ Information from the Network of Estonian Non-Profit Organisations - NENO.



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(16 million Euro) per year. This included the Village Development Measure, with a budget of 36 million EEK (1.66 million Euro), aimed at improving the quality of life in the villages. Diversification of rural employment and rural infrastructure were also funded by SAPARD.

From the moment of entry to the EU, Estonia began to benefit from:

- The Structural Funds Single Programme Document for Objective 1, which covers the whole of Estonia: within this, Measure 6 and LEADER are targeted at rural communities.
- The CAP Rural Development Plan, including Less Favoured Areas, agri-environment and other measures.

These EU programmes have substantially increased the resources and focus for rural development, though still with a strong bias towards agriculture. There is very little national money for broad rural development.

There are 7 specifically targeted regional development programmes, administered by the Regional Development Agency and the County Governments. These include (for example) a programme for the islands; a project for agricultural restructuring in four counties in east Estonia; and another project targeted at a small number of failing Municipalities in east Estonia. Of most relevance to the villages is the Programme for Local Initiatives, which was started in 1996, as a direct result of lobbying by *Kodukant*. It is funded by the Government, run by the Estonian Regional Development Agency, and administered by the County Governments. Its purpose is to strengthen local initiative and co-operation, and increase the role of local people. The total fund is worth 450,000 Euro, and the average project 400 Euro. This is an easily accessible and well-used source of funds for rural communities.

In addition to the funds mentioned, the other main funding sources for rural communities are:

- Cultural and social funds - from the taxes levied on gambling, drink and tobacco. The funds are used to help young, elderly and disabled people, and are allocated by the Ministries of Social Welfare, Education and Culture.
- Municipalities: they have very few assets for promoting local development, but can use their modest budgets to assist local projects.
- Private sources, including the national lottery; sponsorship from banks, enterprises and individuals; foundations supported by Estonians living abroad; and local entrepreneurs who may provide co-financing for village projects
- Foreign investment and aid: various aid programmes are open to Estonia, mostly from Finland, Sweden and the USA.

The Ministry of Agriculture is trying to help rural development and to assist *Kodukant's* activities. They have achieved an agreement at Government level that they will develop rural life, and in 2001 set up a Rural Development Board to advise the Minister of Agriculture. This includes representatives of the Ministries of Finance, Economy, Environment, Internal affairs and several social partners. *Kodukant* is a member of this Board, which gives them access to the Minister. The Minister would like all EU regulations to be discussed with the social partners on the Board as a consultation mechanism.¹¹

"The 'whole country must live' is the right policy. If there are organisations that can support, this work they should be supported. The situation would be much worse if there were no organisations to unite individuals and work with one voice. If Government only decides what to do, they will have a lot of money available but no users - and inappropriate policies. It is very important to work together with representatives of different interests."¹²

¹¹ Information from the Ministry of Agriculture.

¹² Ministry of Agriculture official - pers. com.



The Estonian Village Movement - KODUKANT

History The Estonian village movement, *Kodukant* ('Home Place') was the first village movement to be established in Eastern Europe. The idea of the movement started in late 1991, when supporters of rural life in Estonia made contact with the already established national village movement in Sweden, *Hela Sverige Ska Leva!* - "All Sweden Shall Live". The motivation was to improve the conditions in the countryside, in the context of the heavy suffering caused by the transition from a State planned system to the market economy.



In 1992-93, following preparatory work and lobbying, the process to start a rural movement began, with support from the Swedish village movement. Two counties, Viljandi and Rapla, were selected as pilots, supported by partner counties Dalarna and Jönköping in Sweden. In both countries, the county administrations were responsible for the projects. The pilot projects were financed by the Swedish International Aid Foundation, and supported by the Estonian Ministry of Agriculture, together with the Agricultural University of Uppsala in Sweden. As required by the Swedish funders, a co-ordination group from different Ministries was formed.

The success of the pilot projects soon became known, and several more County Associations were registered. Today *Kodukant* is represented in all 15 counties. More than 4,000 individuals are directly involved in the movement, and many thousands are indirectly involved. The national movement of *Kodukant* became legally registered as a non-governmental organisation in 1997.

Mission The mission of *Kodukant* is to support the survival, revival and harmonious development of Estonian rural life and villages, including support to the rural economy, national culture, and the bringing together of village associations. The vision is the balanced development of rural regions, municipalities and villages.

Structure *Kodukant* is an association of non-government associations, structured at 3 levels, which match the three levels of public administration:

- 1 National Association, made up of the County Associations and other NGOs,
- 15 independent County Associations, one in each Estonian county,
- over 400 Village Associations.

The three levels are linked in a logical 'cascade' of membership and of action:

- The role of the National Association is to set the overall direction, develop the national strategy, provide networking and communications, support the county branches through training and other development work, undertake advocacy to Government and other bodies, and to develop trans-national links.
- The County Associations are all members of the National Association. Their role is to develop county strategies, provide the link to the villages, stimulate the formation of village associations, provide training and support for the village associations, and work with the regional authorities.
- The Village Associations are members of the County Associations. Their role is to develop village plans, unite all village activities and groups, undertake local development work, and work with the Municipalities.

The National Association

Objectives The objectives of the national association focus on:

- **Technical advice** - Consultation in the areas of rural development, rural youth, small enterprise project design and maintenance, woman and gender development.
- **Networking and communication** - Information for member organizations and provision of links for them to services, partnerships, funding etc.
- **Capacity building** - Training for organisations and individuals in writing grant applications,



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strategic planning, leadership, enterprise development and community building; plus exchange visits to share best practice.

- **Advocacy** - Serving as a mediator between local villages and Government by education, advocacy and influencing decision-making at the local and national level.
- **Support of local initiatives** - Promotion and support of village days, information days, village development plans and village leaders.
- **Co-operation** - Finding and establishing partners between villages, counties, countries and sectors.

Membership *Kodukant* is a representative organisation with direct membership. Membership is open to anyone who supports its aims. At national level, membership is only open to organisations and community groups, but at county level it is also open to individuals. The boards, at national and county levels respectively, vet all applications. There are no prohibited categories as such, but *Kodukant* aims to be neutral of any political party.

The **General Council** has 25 members, who represent the 15 county boards and other key organisations, which themselves embrace 2,700 member groups. The Council meets at least once per year, and is responsible for developing and implementing the legal statutes of the organisation; setting the overall strategic direction, under the guidance of the membership and Rural Parliament; approving the annual report and financial statements; and electing the Board.

The **President** is elected by General Council for 3 years, to represent *Kodukant* at national and international levels. This post was created in 2002, before which the tasks of President and Chairperson were combined.

The **Board** of 7 members, including the **Chairperson**, is elected by the General Council. The Board meets once a month, and is responsible for implementing the decisions of the General Council; developing the action programme for the organisation; and the day-to-day management of the organisation, including the appointment and management of staff.

The **National Managing Director** is appointed by the Board and is responsible for implementing the decisions of the Board. Her functions include fund-raising; implementation and monitoring of projects; management and support to 15 County Co-ordinators and project staff; financial and office administration; administrative support to the Board, General Council and membership; and co-ordinating the development of the national and county *Kodukant* strategies.

The **Revision Committee**, with 3 members, elected for 3 years, is responsible for monitoring of finances and activities and ensuring that these meet the decisions of the General Council and Board.

The County Associations

There are 15 County Associations, one for each county. The first two associations, Viljandi and Rapla, established as pilots at the start of the movement, were registered in 1995. The last of the Associations were set up in 2002. Each association is a legally independent body, but they all work within the umbrella of *Kodukant*. Each county association is a full member of *Kodukant*, with a seat on the General Council and representatives on the main Board. They are free to establish their own structures and activities, however they work closely together to ensure a common pattern of activity across the country. Their members are village associations, local NGOs and individuals. This membership elects the Board of the association, which takes responsibility for the organisation.

Each county association currently has staffing of at least 1 part-time person. Their ability to employ staff depends largely on their ability to raise project funding, with all staff being employed through different projects. One national project (Estonian Villages) enabled the part-time employment of county staff, with funding raised by *Kodukant* centrally. Most associations also charge a small membership fee.



Each county association has a 5-year strategy, linked to the overall national *Kodukant* Strategy. All strategies at national and county level are published together in one document. The current strategies run from 2003-8. The strategies were developed with support and training from *Kodukant* centrally.

Most of the action of *Kodukant* takes place in the county associations. Their main work is to support village groups through information and training events and study visits. Two information days are held each year, which enable village leaders to gain access to a wide range of information on rural policy, organisations, funding sources, local activities etc. One village day is held each year, to connect villages and other organisations and to provide a market place for their work.

The county associations run a wide range of local activities and projects. These typically include promotion of village associations; training for village leaders; information and dissemination events, newsletters, website, publications, exhibitions; county village days; networking activities between villages and regions; and projects focused on environment, tourism, food or other themes.

The Village Associations

The aim of *Kodukant* is to encourage broad-based, legally constituted village organisations, which can stimulate and co-ordinate activities in their locality. Traditionally, villages were not organised, apart from specific interest groups. *Kodukant* engages in mobilising local communities, encouraging them to become more organised. This takes place through the county staff and Board members visiting communities, attending village meetings and talking with village activists. About 400 villages have so far taken up the challenge of establishing their own registered village association, though there are many more informal associations.

Kodukant has promoted a bottom-up approach to the creation and work of these village associations or societies. Their view is that village societies are set up by the free will of each village; related to the area that they choose; and owned and managed by the village people. The societies are normally organised as legal companies, able to trade and hold funds, and have an elected committee and a village leader. They produce village plans through a process of consultation with the village people. They network with each other, at local, regional and national levels.

The process of village development is illustrated by one village association: *"The village has 65 people, and started to become active in 1998. One member of the village visited the county offices of Kodukant to ask for support. A village meeting was set up and the villagers were asked to invite as many people as possible. 20 people attended the meeting, at which the Kodukant county manager spoke about the activities of Kodukant in the county. The meeting decided to start a village group. A village leader was elected and eventually we formed a legal NGO. We have since developed a village development plan, through Kodukant's E-villages project, and applied for funding under the Local Initiatives Fund, which requires communities to be organised in order to apply. This was a carrot to set up a village association."*



Members of Soometsa Village Association

Funding

It is difficult to assess the true cost of running *Kodukant*. Much of the work is done voluntarily, and without any mechanism for costing this fully. The organisation has no core funding from Government, though this is currently the focus of discussions with the Government. The main funding currently comes from projects financed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Social Affairs, Estonian Local Initiatives Programme, European Union and the Baltic American Partnership Fund. *Kodukant* has also received support from various foreign aid organisations and co-operation programmes.



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Activities

Kodukant undertakes a wide range of activities at national, regional and local levels. These include:

- Strategic activities to develop, set, promote and implement policy.
- A wide range of projects including information, training, partnership and local development.
- Stimulating village action and the development of village and County Associations.
- Mediation and advocacy between local communities and national and local government.
- International co-operation to share and promote rural development.

These five types of activity are described below.

Strategic activities Strategic planning is a key part of the movement, and is well-developed. This provides a clear direction for the movement, based on priorities agreed at village, regional and national levels. It also enables other organisations and the Government to understand the priorities of the rural villages. The villages undertake their own planning processes, and are instructed by *Kodukant* regional staff in the planning methods. The county associations produce their own strategies for 5-year periods. These nest within the national *Kodukant* Strategy.

The strategic process consist of a number of elements:

- **The Rural Parliament** This is a biennial national event, which brings village members together with representatives from local and international organisations, authorities and decision-makers. It plays an important role in setting overall strategic direction and making links with the membership and Government.
- **The *Kodukant* Statement** The Statement identifies key issues in rural development for the coming 2 years. It is produced at the Rural Parliament and presented to the government and local authorities. It guides the work of the national and county Boards, who are required to take account of the Statement in preparing their own plans and projects. The Statement is based on information gathered from the contacts with the county branches, membership and local people.
- **The *Kodukant* Strategy** The Strategy is developed over the period of 1 year, through meetings at county level and in the villages. It addresses the goals and objectives of the organisation at national and county levels for a 5-year period. It identifies the actions that *Kodukant* can take to address issues at village and State levels, and within the organisation.
- **The Annual Action Plan** The Action Plan is developed and targeted at national and county leaders and discussed with county members. It guides the practical implementation of the Strategy.
- **The Publicity Strategy** This provides guidance on all aspects of communications, both within the organisation and with external interests at local, national and international levels.

Projects *Kodukant* undertakes a multitude of projects, at national and regional levels. At regional level, these are mostly developed locally and vary from region to region, though within the priorities established nationally and through the regional strategies. Current and recent national projects include:

- **Estonian Programme for Local Initiatives** A national fund for rural initiatives, financed by the Government, for which *Kodukant* was the initiator. During the first year (1996), 1.1 million EEK (68,000 Euro) was given to rural projects in Estonia. The annual budget has now grown to 6 million EEK (375, 000 Euro).
- **Travelling Workshop** In 1999 *Kodukant* received representatives from EU and candidate countries, in seminars in 10 Estonian villages. This was part of a Travelling Workshop to Estonia and Sweden organised by *Kodukant*, the Swedish Village Movement, Forum Synergies and ECOVAST. This event had a beneficial impact on the use of the SAPARD programme in Estonia, and proved to be the starting-point of the PREPARE partnership programme (described in chapter 1 and in Appendix 2).
- **Estonian Villages Project 2003-4** This ambitious project has played a key role in the recent development of the movement. The focus of the project was to build the capacity of the villages and prepare them to join the EU. All *Kodukant* regional co-ordinators were trained to support village leaders in village planning and fund raising, and a handbook and video was



produced. As a result, over 200 village development plans were prepared to assist villages in raising funding from EU and national sources. A public relations and development strategy for *Kodukant* was produced, and better PR for villages promoted, to change attitudes to rural areas among urban people. The project also funded staff in each of the 15 county associations. Its total budget was 3.7 million EEK (225,000 Euro), funded through the EU Phare Programme and local match funding.

- **Village Leaders Capacity Assessment** To assess the strengths and weaknesses of village leaders, in order to target training and resources; and to create a directory of village leaders. Funded by the Social Ministry and Ministry of International Affairs - 140,000 EEK (8,500 Euro).
- **EU Coffee Talks** Two meetings in each county to discuss Estonian integration in EU. Funded by EU - 110,000 EEK (6,700 Euro).
- **Access to Assets** Training and consultations in organisational development for local rural NGO's, to help them to be sustainable and professional. Funded by EU - 313,000 EEK (19,000 Euro).
- **Estonia - The Natural Way** Training for individuals involved in rural tourism, in cooperation with the Estonian Eco-tourism Association.
- **Local Healthy Foods** Activities to stimulate local food production and consumption. Funded by the Ministry of Agriculture - 140,000 EEK (8,500 Euro).
- **AITUMA** Supporting women to start small enterprises and to establish a regional marketing network.

Stimulating the Associations A significant effort has been put into promoting and supporting the development of the county and village associations. This is undertaken through a range of programmes for training, information, networking and direct support, some of which are listed above. This work has been successful in raising the capacity of local people to tackle their own development process and to work effectively with the authorities.



Kodukant village workshop

Mediation and advocacy¹³ Since its foundation, *Kodukant* has always sought to act as a partner to the public sector in the development of rural Estonia. As a result of contacts made with Government, *Kodukant* has become a mediator between villages and the Government through education, advocacy and lobbying.

Kodukant has a well-developed system for enabling issues to be raised from within the membership of the movement, to be debated at the Rural Parliament every two years. Twenty delegates from each county association are selected. Their task is to prepare proposals and questions and to put these to the working groups of the Rural Parliament, which work out the declaration to be sent to the Government, Ministries and Municipalities: the '*Kodukant* Statement'. This forms the basis for working with the authorities at different levels, in order to promote rural issues and policy.

Kodukant makes a point of talking, on a regular basis, to every Ministry and inviting them to events, to inform them about its work. They have tried to establish a key contact in each Ministry, but have not yet succeeded in all Ministries. The Ministry of Agriculture is very supportive of *Kodukant*'s work, but connections with other key Ministries have proved more difficult to develop. *Kodukant* is represented on the Rural Development Board set up to advise the Minister of Agriculture¹⁴, and on various committees at national, regional and local levels. They take part in the round-table meetings with the President of Estonia, which make proposals for strengthening of civil society.

*"Kodukant has achieved this position over time, and with difficulty. It took time to earn the respect and understanding of Government. The Government didn't know or understand what Kodukant was doing. The Government initially thought that Kodukant was just about social work and cultural activities: it now understands that it is about much more than this."*¹⁵

¹³ Information from interviews with the Ministry of Agriculture and *Kodukant* leadership.

¹⁴ Ministry of Agriculture.

¹⁵ President of *Kodukant*, pers. com.



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Working with Local Government *Kodukant* encourages involvement and participation between villages and Municipalities. Each county association works with the public authorities, Municipalities and NGOs in its area to engender support for the work of the villages. This activity varies between counties, but some have developed very effective systems for involving local communities through direct contact (discussions, village days, training, study tours etc). The response is variable, but many Municipalities have come to understand the benefits of more organised villages, and are including the village plans into their own planning processes. *Kodukant* nationally trains and prepares the County Associations for this role.

It was noted that the Municipalities are not able to do the work that is undertaken through *Kodukant*, as they are fully occupied with delivering their statutory functions. They are not always as closely connected to the villages, nor as aware of the problems at village level, and can't do so much at local level as can the village associations. Municipalities are also more representative than participative in approach. For these reasons they have come to value the work of *Kodukant* as complementary to their own.

*"Many Municipalities once thought they were doing everything and that there was no need for any other organisation. They treated the movement badly and the local people involved in it. But this is no longer the case: the Municipalities have come to learn how useful the movement is to them."*¹⁶

International co-operation *Kodukant* is very active internationally. Having started through links with Sweden and Finland, its members appreciate the value of such co-operation. It is now engaged in supporting other new EU member states to develop their own rural movements. It is a partner in the PREPARE Programme, and a member of the Nordic network, Hela Norden Ska Leva. These networks enable it to engage in lobbying at EU level. *Kodukant* also has several EU-funded projects and many trans-national partners.

Achievements

Kodukant was voted 'Estonian NGO of the Year' in 2000, being recognised as *"an organisation which is focused on improving living conditions, seeks to create a sense of social conscience, approaches existing problems in a new way, and targets a sizeable segment of society."*

Its achievements have been considerable in the 12 years since the work started, and the 7 years since the organisation was fully established. During this time, it has:

- highlighted the importance of the rural areas
- developed a strong presence within the country and with the Government
- established 15 county associations
- helped to establish and train numerous village associations
- involved over 4,000 individuals directly in the movement
- given confidence and empowerment to many rural people
- established itself internationally
- taught other countries how to establish rural movements
- undertaken a wide range of projects, some trans-national
- delivered rural development in a very cost-effective way
- run the organisation with no core funding for 7 years
- maintained the energy and enthusiasm of hundreds of volunteers
- promoted the successful Estonian Programme for Local Initiatives
- launched the Estonian Villages Project.

Recognition of these achievements is shown by the following comments from village people and from local and national government officials:

"The work is interesting and fulfilling. The villages feel part of something bigger, and get stimulation from their work. It gives local people a role in their community, and makes them feel useful and valued. It gives them a goal to work for. It helps to make the most of people and places."

¹⁶ President of *Kodukant*, pers com.



"Kodukant enables the additional use of social capital by mobilising so much voluntary action in the communities. This is much needed by Government. The added value of more active local communities is also being felt at Municipality level. People in the villages are starting to think and be more active."

"Kodukant has helped the Government to communicate more directly with rural people, and to gain a better impression of the needs of rural people. The work of Kodukant in highlighting rural issues has helped the Government to see rural development more holistically, and not just as relating to agriculture. This has lead to more opportunities and options being opened up."

"Villages have been trained to make village development plans. These are used by the Municipal and County Governments in preparing their own development plans. They also enable villages to apply for funding in a more structured and agreed way. Feedback from the villages means that village issues are being brought to the notice of the authorities and the whole country is starting to work together."

"The identification, development and training of 'village leaders' has helped to prepare people for public office, and many of these leaders are now standing for and being elected to the Municipalities."

Challenges

However, the work has not been without problems and frustrations. The following is a summary of some key issues raised:

- **Government relations** There was an initial lack of interest and understanding from Government. This has improved over time, but significant parts of the Government still do not relate closely to *Kodukant*. It has not been easy to achieve effective lobbying. There is a widely held view that *Kodukant* needs to be more professional and stronger in its lobbying role.
- **Municipalities** were initially hostile to the village movement, and regarded it as un-necessary and in competition with their own work. This has now improved.
- **Media** There has been negative reporting of the village movement by the media. Village development is not seen as newsworthy, and the press are always looking for the negative angles and conflict stories. *Kodukant* has had to learn how to work effectively with the media, and now has a Publicity Strategy to guide this work.
- **Connection to the villages** Some people in the villages commented that the structure of *Kodukant* is still too far from the people. Operating at county level, with very few paid staff, it is hard for the staff to make good contact with all villages.
- **Funding** It has proved very difficult to obtain funding for the core work of the movement, forcing it to rely on project funds. Difficulties in finding money for staff salaries and uncertainty in general financing have forced the movement to be very resourceful, but have also resulted in an over-reliance on volunteer labour.
- **Volunteer time** The work demands a significant commitment of voluntary time at all levels. The national and county boards have to implement much of the work programme, without pay or expenses, in the absence of sufficient paid staff. Individual board members spoke of spending all their free time and half of their income on expenses for *Kodukant*. There is too much work for the most active people in the organisation, resulting in fatigue. There may be a limit as to how long people will be prepared to continue this level of input.

Commentary

Origins of the movement The history of the occupation and final independence of Estonia provides an understanding of how such a successful rural movement could be organised in such a short time. Rural communities play a critical role in this story. The President of Estonia, who was a key figure in the independence process, has credited the rural communities with preserving the culture, language and identity of Estonia through centuries of occupation. He attributed much of the energy behind the bid for independence to the rural people.



3. THE ESTONIAN VILLAGE MOVEMENT, KODUKANT

Paradoxically, following independence, it was the rural areas that suffered the most, while the urban areas grew stronger. The agricultural reforms led to an immediate and massive downturn in agriculture, and the loss of most of the jobs that rural villages had relied upon. Under the Soviet system, Estonian rural areas had been relatively well off, supplying much of the food for the Soviet Union. Suddenly they faced a bleak future, with little clear sign that the Government was doing much to help. This crisis is not the only reason that the movement began, but it explains the commitment and sense of urgency that has driven it forward.

*"Communism taught people that they are not able to do anything, landowners did the same, so people have not developed confidence. Once we were village fools - now we are active people."*¹⁷

Character of the movement *Kodukant* is of the rural communities. It embodies the spirit and values of the rural villages, and is driven by a passion to retain rural life and traditions. It comes 'from the heart' as well as from the mind, and the heart of the village shines through all that the movement does and stands for. The Estonians were famous for their 'singing revolution' when people joined hands and sang for independence, all the way from Tallinn to Riga. By the same tradition, *Kodukant* celebrates the rural culture in a way that touches the hearts of those who meet it.

The strongest impression of *Kodukant* is that it represents and promotes the spirit of rural village life. It is a voice and market place for rural people, and a uniting force for the many dispersed rural communities. The movement is 'bottom up', owned by the rural people and a source of great pride to them. It is run with great energy and enthusiasm, by many hundreds of rural people. It is also clearly respected by national and local government. *Kodukant* is also an emerging leader in the expanding village movements in Central and Eastern Europe. It has close relationships with the established movements in the Nordic countries, and is active in the rural lobby at EU level through the PREPARE partnership.

Kodukant is a lesson in how a common need and passion can build strength and empowerment, in the face of great hardship. It shows how working together can improve the image, confidence and lives of rural people, in a very short time, despite opposition and lack of resources, and in a country undergoing enormous change. The leaders and workers in the movement deserve great credit for this huge achievement and inspiration.

The power of a name Each culture uses language to convey subtleties of meaning. In Estonia it became clear that the choice of names holds great significance, and expresses the spirit which the movement wished to convey. The name *Kodukant* means 'home place'. This signifies that the movement is very strongly 'bottom-up' and represents rural people in their 'home place', not in any artificial administrative unit. It also conveys the deep sense of place that is such a powerful feature of the villages.

*"You have to be able to use your language so that people can understand. When the mind is getting tired, you have to use your heart."*¹⁸

*"The home place is important to people - we need to know where we came from and our history, to know where we are going."*¹⁹

Maapaev is the name given by *Kodukant* to the biennial Estonian Rural Parliament. The same name was given to the national gathering in 1919, which claimed the first Estonian independence. Maapaev means 'Country Day'. But the word *maa* has a wider significance in the Estonian language. It means earth, soil, land and country. *Maa* is the name of the Estonian counties, for example *Viljandimaa*. *Maailm* means world. The ancient name for the Estonian people was *Inemene Maal* - Earth People: this was chosen as the logo for the 2003 Rural Parliament of *Kodukant*.

¹⁷ President of *Kodukant*, Kaja Kaur, 2003 Rural Parliament.

¹⁸ Mikk Sarv - First President of *Kodukant*.

¹⁹ Village Leader of Jani Village.



The Estonian Government was concerned about the use of the word *Maapaev*, when it was first chosen for the Rural Parliament, 5 years after the second Estonian independence started in 1991. This concern about the motives of the village movement has long since been dispelled, but revealed the sensitivity that surrounds the birth of any social movement, especially when a country is struggling to define its own recent independent status.

The Rural Parliament is, in effect, a large gathering and celebration of rural life and the village movement. It is a showcase for the work of the many small rural communities, a way of networking these communities and an opportunity for the Government bodies to speak directly with them. The purpose of the Rural Parliament is to give rural people direction, to identify tasks and solutions for addressing the tasks, and to give a message to the Government. There has been a rural parliament every other year since 1996, each larger in attendance than the last, and with a different focus.²¹ The 2003 gathering focused on 'rural people and communities'.

"The Rural Parliament is a really festive event. It shows that the tree in our garden has grown quite big already." ²¹

The village The village is a very important, traditional social unit in Estonia. Historically, it was also a unit of administration, though this is no longer the case. The village has power in the social consciousness of Estonians, because it was the core social unit in a very rural society, and also the refuge for people and for their cultural values through periods of occupation. The bonds that bind people to place cannot be underestimated. These traditional 'tribal territories' often go back into ancient history, and have been strengthened over time through the addition of parish boundaries etc. *"Every community has its own purpose and priorities. The village is a tribe, with unwritten village rules and laws."* ²²

"Starting already from the 19th century the heart of Estonian culture and economy has been a village. It started to flourish again when Estonians mastered their State and land. People started to develop their environment, Estonian nationalism and patriotism progressed and our independence was secured. Like in a real heart, our most precious principles and values were fixed there. But by now this heart has suffered a lot from bad times experienced during the past years. But when the heart is not sound, the body cannot function. We all know the song which says that Estonia lives as long as its villages live. We have sung this song untold times - sometimes with all our heart and protesting, sometimes thoughtfully to ourselves, but always knowing for sure that the song tells the truth. By now I am convinced of it more than ever." ²³

Two powerful symbols of this 'village heart' are the 'village fireplace' and the 'village swing'. The first communal act of the emerging village associations is always to create a village green, or recreation ground, to house the village swing and the fireplace for the annual midsummer village bonfire. These represent the main meeting place and heart of the community, and much creative energy goes into constructing them.



The Estonian village swing

Governments tend to create artificial administrative units, which ignore the power of traditional territories like the villages of Estonia. This does not always create successful allegiances or smooth running systems: given an opportunity, the traditional territories will re-exert themselves. This is the underlying energy that *Kodukant* has tapped into, and partly explains why the village associations are so successful. This is evidenced by a comment from one of the village leaders:

"The Soviet period broke the tribal traditions and territories - and formed units which we did not

²⁰ Reports of the Rural Parliaments are available through the *Kodukant* website: www.Kodukant.ee.

²¹ Rural Parliament speaker.

²² Village leader Lääne-Virumaa County.

²³ Excerpt from the speech delivered by the President of Estonia, Arnold Rüütel, to the Estonian Rural Parliament, August 2003.



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relate to. *The idea of the Village Association builds on the human tendency to support the local 'tribe' and to feel allegiance to something that they themselves own and have created. People have had enough of centralisation - we don't want to go back to it. We don't need to do everything at the centre through big organisations - we can do it in the villages.*" ²⁴

The village associations The village associations do not 'belong' to *Kodukant*, they are independent entities. However, they are the roots and focus of the movement, and many are formal members of *Kodukant*. The village associations are a formalisation of the village as a unit. The model is based on that promoted by the Finnish Village Movement: it is intended to unite the diverse local interest groups into a cohesive force, able to plan and manage the development of the village in its entirety, and to act as a partner for the local authorities.



Members of Ruhve Village Association

"Without our old opportunities for meeting around the village pump, we have to organise such opportunities. The village is deciding what they want and the village organisation is deciding what is feasible. In this way, the whole village is working together for the area." ²⁵

The importance of preserving the villages, as the foundation of rural life, is at the heart of *Kodukant*. The forces for change and erosion of this local level are great, as jobs and services become more centralised. *Kodukant* promotes the message that the villages will only survive if they get organised and address their own futures. This message is accepted by many Municipalities, who have the responsibility for local development:

"The Municipality wants to support those who are investing in the villages. The village is the foundation of the system. The village centre is very important. It is not good enough for people to have to drive to the next town. The village should have an information centre, meeting places, internet access, library, school." ²⁶

The villages are trained and networked by *Kodukant* to undertake a development process, from producing a village plan to fund-raising, lobbying the authorities and implementing projects. The message is to use all available human and other resources to ensure the future of the village.

Leadership is an important concept. Every village elects a 'village leader', whose role seems critical to the village development process. *Kodukant* works to support village leaders through training and networking. The development and training of 'village leaders' has also helped to prepare people for public office, and many of these leaders are now standing for and being elected to the Municipalities. *"If we have local leadership and direction, then the work can be controlled more effectively, rather than doing everything through big organisations."* ²⁷

"The village leader is important for lobbying the authorities and negotiating for better services." ²⁸

The evolution of the capacity and activities of the villages follows a similar path to the Finnish experience, though not yet so well advanced. The typical pattern of development starts with restoring and enhancing the basic fabric and environment of the village, and providing for the cultural and recreational needs of local people. Undertaking a village plan is usually a second stage. This leads to working with more strategic policies for different sectors of the community - young, old, incomers etc. Eventually, at a third stage, the village has the confidence to work with economic development and service delivery.

²⁴ Village leader.

²⁵ President of *Kodukant*.

²⁶ Municipality leader.

²⁷ Village leader - Jani Village.

²⁸ Municipality in Lääne-Virumaa.



The villages equally progress through stages of developing partnership with the local authorities. Initially, there may be resistance from the Municipalities and local politicians to the idea of villages getting organised. This resistance tends to dissipate as the authorities realise the importance of the village in helping them to deliver their demanding work. The Municipalities have limited resources to carry out their basic functions, so the villages can help with many tasks. Through the Estonian Villages project, villages have been trained to make village development plans. These are now of use to the Municipalities and County Governments in preparing their own development plans. They also enable villages to apply for funding in a more structured and agreed way. In one village, a further step in becoming part of the democratic process has been taken: the village has formed their own 'political' party in order to put forward candidates for the municipal elections.

"The added value of more active local communities is being felt at Municipality level. People in the villages are starting to think and be more active, local leaders are being identified and local village plans are being developed." ²⁹

The voluntary effort that goes into the work of the Village Associations is an indicator of the power of the village as a development unit and as a focus of energy and allegiance. By mobilising so much voluntary action in the communities, *Kodukant* strengthens social capital and provides more effective partners for the Government. It is helping to link local action to regional and national priorities. This role of *Kodukant* in building capacity and social capital was noted by many people, as illustrated by the following comments:

"Kodukant is very good at village level. They are good at community involvement, and encouraging communities to look within for solutions before looking outside. They are good at linking community experience to help solve problems." ³⁰

"Kodukant has been essential to the development of our villages: without it we would not have had the confidence, information or organisation to proceed effectively. Kodukant has provided workshops, training and opportunities to network with other village groups. They have given training in writing funding applications and developing village plans. Kodukant has also proved to be a good contact with the Municipality and other organisations needed for undertaking village development projects. The village would not otherwise have had these contacts." ³¹

The county associations *Kodukant* has now successfully mobilised 15 county associations - one in each of the Estonian administrative counties. The inspiration for the county associations came from the partnership with Sweden in 1992-3. This model was very consciously adopted to reflect the principle that *Kodukant* is a bottom-up organisation, and does not attempt to rule from the top. The main *Kodukant* Board is composed of representatives from all the county associations, and the county Boards include many representatives of village associations. The strategic planning process originates from the bottom up, from village to county to national levels: in this way, the issues that *Kodukant* pursues at national level truly reflect the local situation. Each county sends a delegation to the Rural Parliament. Most of the activists at national level are drawn from the county associations.

The county associations are quite dynamic in their work. They have built extensive partnerships between the various county and local NGOs and public bodies. The public bodies are conscious of the usefulness of this linking mechanism, which can help in their task of working with local communities. *Kodukant* is seen to add value to their work.

Concerns were expressed, however, about the capacity of the county associations to cover all of the villages effectively, with so few staff and resources. This comes back to the ever-present issue of financial resources. Much creativity is needed to develop sufficient project-based funding to maintain the activity at county level.

²⁹ Parnu County Association of Municipalities.

³⁰ Network of Estonian Non-Profit Organisations - NENO.

³¹ Soometsa Villages - Parnumaa.



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The national association The management of *Kodukant* reflects its fundamental philosophy - namely that it is bottom-up, decentralised and driven by the village people. Throughout the organisation, at local regional and national levels, it is 'village people' who are the key players. Through the membership structure, village activists and local NGOs can become Board members at regional level and can then be elected to the national Board.

"Kodukant is an a-typical example of a national NGO, in that it is very 'grassroots'." ³²

There is no 'head office'. Instead, a dispersed network of volunteer Board members and paid co-ordinators runs the organisation through various forms of communications technology, and occasional meetings. At present, *Kodukant* has only one national manager, who works out of the office of the county association in Pärnu. The level of commitment and energy invested by the staff and Board members is outstanding.

"Kodukant is all about getting involved. Although the work requires a significant commitment of voluntary time, most people enjoy it and want to continue. The villages feel part of something bigger and get stimulation for their work. It gives local people something to do, a role in their community, and makes people feel useful and valued. It gives local people a goal to work for. It helps to make the most of people and places." ³³

However the organisation knows that, to keep pace with its rapid rate of growth, it will have to seek funds to employ more people. The Board members receive no pay or expenses for their work: their energy is impressive, but fatigue and personal financial stress are issues to be addressed. Moreover, some people who are trained by *Kodukant* then leave to go into business where they can make more money.

Kodukant, like most of the other rural movements, has experienced great difficulty in attracting public funding for their organisation. To date, *Kodukant* has not had Government money for core funding, despite lobbying for that support.

"When we meet Ministers, they think we are doing good work but they won't fund us." ³⁴

The Ministry of Agriculture stated that they wish to find funding to support *Kodukant*, as a partner, to enable them to participate. If this support is not secured, the organisation will have to fund extra staff through project funding, as they have for all of the current staff.

The issue of public funding should not be so difficult as it appears to be. *Kodukant* has achieved extensive output from the funding it has received so far, with substantial leverage and voluntary input. The Ministry of Agriculture recognises that *Kodukant* is very good at using finance. However, it was said that decisions on which organisations the Government supports is largely a question of good lobbying of MPs: this was also the Finnish experience.

Relationship with Government Advocacy to Government, on behalf of the rural communities, is seen by *Kodukant* as one of its key roles. It aims to work in partnership with the Government to help to develop rural policy. It pursues this aim through strategic planning, events, liaison with Ministries, and participation in policy-related committees. Despite this, the general view was that *Kodukant* is still not fully effective in working with policy and in lobby-work. This view came from the Ministries, local authorities and some members of the movement.

Kodukant's view is that the Government is too remote from the people, and does not have enough capacity, to work effectively in the rural areas. It does not have a good understanding of rural interests. Rural policy in Estonia is still weak, dominated by agriculture, and lacking integration across the rural sectors. For this reason, the Government needs *Kodukant* as a disseminator and a link to rural communities. *Kodukant* is one of the few organisations with the breadth and grassroots credibility to play this role.

³² Network of Estonian Non-Profit Organisations - NENO.

³³ President of *Kodukant* - pers. com.

³⁴ *Kodukant* National Manager.



*"The relationship between the State and the local level is that the State is like a giraffe, looking down from a great height - it does not see the details at local level. So the State needs the villages. It is important to recognise and work with the village identity from the inside."*³⁵

Kodukant has helped the Government to communicate more directly with rural people, and to gain a better impression of the needs of rural people. Its work in highlighting rural issues has helped the Government to see rural development more holistically, rather than relating only to agriculture. As a result, more opportunities are being opened up.

*"The Government is beginning to benefit from having more capable and organised villages."*³⁶

However, Kodukant is not satisfied with its relations with the Ministries. The development of good working links and trust has been a slow process. Rural issues span the competencies of several Ministries, notably the Ministries of Agriculture, Internal Affairs, Finance and Social Affairs. Good working relations have been built with the Ministry of Agriculture, however, relations with other Ministries have proved more frustrating: this matches the experience of other national movements.

The Ministry of Agriculture pointed out that Kodukant needs to increase its capacity and effectiveness in bringing its knowledge and influence to bear in the policy arena.

"Kodukant is an umbrella body uniting all rural interests, with the potential to help to unite policy issues before policy is developed."

It was suggested that Kodukant needs to work with other organisations to gain solidarity on issues and to lobby. They also need to work more closely with the Parliament itself, as this is where the final decisions are taken. A Rural Development Board has recently been established, and it was seen as a good time to work with them.

Relationships with local authorities The work of Kodukant at regional level is strongly focused on building effective partnership with regional authorities, NGOs and Municipalities, and on developing links between these organisations and the villages. Each County Association undertakes this in its own way and is at a different stage in development, so overall conclusions cannot be made. The following points were raised in discussions:

- The Ministry of Agriculture commented that some of the most negative reactions to Kodukant had been from Municipalities. This may be fuelled by the fear that Kodukant and the Village Associations could threaten the power of local politicians.
- Kodukant observed that the quality of relationship with Municipalities depended greatly on what each side was expecting, e.g. partnership or simply the meeting of demands; and upon the character of the municipal leader.
- There have been some conflicts with County Governments. This has usually been for a specific reason, and has been resolved in all cases.
- However, the positive comments far outweighed the negative in all regions. This example from Saaremaa was typical:

*"The goals of Kodukant are good. Their work is very useful, especially the village plans and projects. Kodukant is well represented in many institutions, and is helping local people to have a voice in decision-making. It is working well with the Municipalities and with the regional programmes. The County Government had tried to do some of this work previously, but we find the presence of Kodukant very helpful as it had proved to be difficult to cope with the number of local groups."*³⁷

Other regional organisations were also working well with Kodukant, for example:

- The Development Centre of Viljandi considered Kodukant to be "very good partners", with whom

³⁵ Kodukant village workshop report.

³⁶ President of Kodukant - pers com.

³⁷ The County Governor of Saaremaa - Pers. Com.



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they were working in training, promotion and information on business development. *Kodukant* were seen as a future delivery mechanism for training.

- Viljandi County Farmers Union said that both organisations were fighting for the same goals for rural areas. The Union was working for agricultural production and the village movement was delivering social support.

"The two organisations support and help each other and there is no competition between us."

- Pärnu County Association of Municipalities noted that:

"Feedback from the villages through Kodukant means that the whole county is starting to work together. Kodukant are bringing village issues to the attention of the authorities."

- A village leader commented:

"I have learned that when I believe in something I just have to start it and other people will follow and want to know how to go on. We all need courage, and step-by-step we get braver. To become brave you have to believe in yourself - to do something for others. Then the spark has a flame. When we get together and organise, we become brave enough to talk to the authorities. When we become brave enough to talk to the authorities, they start to respect us."

International co-operation It is clear that *Kodukant* is already very much part of Europe. International co-operation has always been important for the movement, probably because it was through such co-operation that *Kodukant* was born. Links to Finland and Sweden were vital in the development of *Kodukant*, and these are still its closest partners. However, since *Kodukant* has established itself so successfully, it is also embarking on the work of supporting the development of similar movements in other parts of Eastern Europe.

*"The first initiatives in the Estonian villages were modelled on the Swedish village movement. Now Europe has become curious to see how, in a comparatively short time, we have managed to create a fixed structure, effective network and developing partnership with the Government. Reflections on our Rural Parliaments have started the same kind of activities in Hungary and Slovakia. We hope we can also 'infect' our southern neighbours with the ideas of village movement. To help them, Kodukant are working with the PREPARE network and Latvian Ministry of Agriculture to start 'moving' their villages. Lithuanians and Poles have also been seriously scouting and investigating tricks of the village movement because they have considered the Estonian model as a good example."*³⁸

Critical to this work is their involvement in the PREPARE Programme and Network. This has been a vehicle for mobilising the new movements, and for raising funds. Through the PREPARE Network, *Kodukant* is also able to engage directly in lobbying and advocacy with the EU. PREPARE has spread the principles of working through partnership at all levels and with all players. This lesson is evident in the whole approach of *Kodukant*.

Entry into the EU presents new opportunities for *Kodukant*. The Ministry of Agriculture has commented that the EU focus on rural development will make a difference to attitudes of Ministries. *Kodukant* is already experienced in how to work with EU funds, and will benefit from this experience in the future. Its strong international partnerships will provide a foundation for using EU funding to good effect.

³⁸ Kaja Kaur, President of Kodukant - speech to the Rural Parliament 2003.

4.THE VILLAGE ACTION ASSOCIATION OF FINLAND, *SUOMEN KYLATOIMINTA RY, SYTY*



National Context

The nation Finland became an independent country in 1917, after a long history of occupation. It suffered during World War II, when the relations between Germany and Russia determined events in Finland, including the loss of Karelia to Russia. In 1995, Finland joined the EU, setting it on a new development path.

The land area of Finland is 338,100 km², 1,100 km from north to south. The population is currently 5.2 million, a density of 17 per km², the lowest among the four countries covered in these chapters. In northern Finland, the population is particularly sparse, with an average of 2 people per km².

Finland has a strong economy, ranking 30th in the world by GDP (110 billion Euro)¹. Unemployment is currently 9% and inflation 0.5%. The average monthly wage is 2,250 Euro. Employment is dominated by services (33%) and industry (20%), with agriculture and forestry now only 5%. Exports are led by hi-tech equipment (28%) and pulp and paper (21%).

Administration Finnish administration is composed of State administration at national, provincial and regional levels, and of regional and local self-government (local authorities). The main elements are:

President	elected every 6 years
Parliament	200 seats - elected every 4 years
National Government	13 Ministries
Provincial Government	6 Provinces with responsibility for some State functions
Regional Government	19 Regions (Counties) with both State and local authorities
Sub-regions	77 Sub-Regions
	58 Local Action Groups (LAGs)
Local Government	444 Municipalities

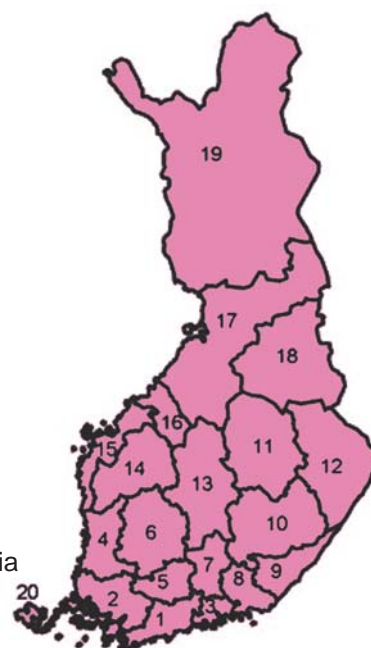
Of most relevance to an understanding of the Village Action Association of Finland (SYTY) are the regional, sub-regional and local levels of government.

Regions Counties have been the basic geographical and administrative units of Finland since 1634. Restructuring in 1997 established the current 19 Regional Councils, each covering one county. Many other organisations operate at regional level, including State regional authorities, universities, farmers' organisations, trade unions and (as will be described) Regional Village Associations.

There is a lack of clarity in the relationship and the role of the regional authorities, which has led some to identify the regional level as the most problematic in the Finnish system. The regional level is very important in relation to the policy for development, but it is a point of tension between State and local authorities. There is a big disparity between the State regional authorities and the Regional Councils. The State regional

Finnish Regions

1. Uusimaa
2. South-West Finland
3. Itä-Uusimaa
4. Satakunta
5. Häme
6. Tampere Region
7. Päijät-Häme
8. Kymenlaakso
9. South Karelia
10. Southern Savo
11. Northern Savo
12. North Karelia
13. Central Finland
14. South Ostrobothnia
15. Ostrobothnia
16. Central Ostrobothnia
17. Northern Ostrobothnia
18. Kainuu
19. Lapland
20. Åland



¹ Worldbank 2002 figures.



4. THE VILLAGE ACTION ASSOCIATION OF FINLAND, SYTY

authorities have funds, but few planning powers: the Regional Councils have planning powers, but limited funds for implementation. The structure at regional level is being reviewed by Government, and efforts are being made to improve the integration of national and regional policy.

State regional authorities The State regional authorities are directly funded by Government, and carry out tasks assigned to them. They are involved in designing EU programmes and administering partnerships. The most important of these authorities are:

- Employment and Economic Development Centres, jointly sponsored by the Ministries of Labour and of Agriculture: these Centres promote business and regional development, and function as specialists and channels for EU funds,
- 13 Regional Environment Centres,
- The district offices of the Finnish Road Administration.

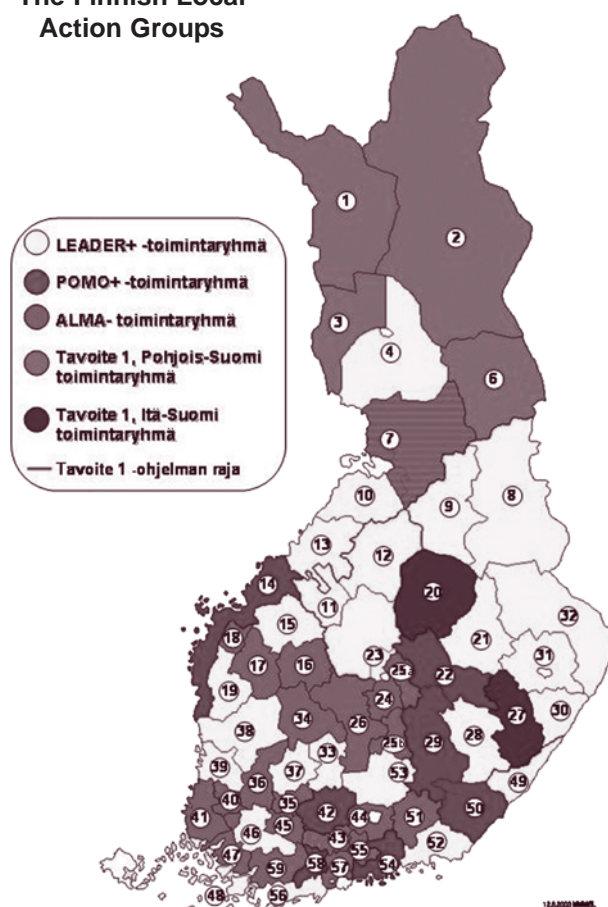
Regional Councils The 19 Regional Councils are coalitions of the Municipalities in each region, with members appointed by the Municipalities. They function as regional development authorities, handling the planning and implementation of regional policy, and the international contacts for their region. They co-ordinate decision-making on Structural Funds, and distribute the EU Objective 1 and 2 regional funds. They have their own staff, paid for by the Municipalities. They also use funds from the National Regional Development Programme. They have many powers and policy duties, but very limited funding, so they rely on other organisations within the region to implement regional policy.

Sub-regions There are 77 sub-regions, defined on the basis of co-operation between Municipalities. The sub-region is only a semi-official unit, but it has increasing importance as the context for co-operation between Municipalities, for example in the field of promoting business development.

Local Action Groups (LAGs) are also established at a broadly sub-regional level, though at differing geographical scales. The whole of rural Finland is covered by a network of 58 LAGs, linked together at national level by the LAG Network Unit of Finland, which is managed by the Village Action Association of Finland (SYTY). The LAGs are funded from four different sources, three of which are part-funded by the European Union - LEADER (25 groups), ALMA (Rural Development Programme) and Objective 1 groups (26 groups) - and one, POMO (7 groups), is funded only by the national Government. This pattern of national coverage of LAGs is a remarkable feature of rural development in Finland (*see map*).

There are some differences between the types of LAGs, but their function and structure is similar. On average, each LAG serves an area of 42,000 population, with a range of 10,000 to 90,000. All LAG groups must be composed of 1/3 Municipalities, 1/3 local associations or enterprises, and 1/3 local inhabitants who have no link to associations. State agencies are not involved in LAGs. The LAGs are a relatively new structure, formed in response to the European Union, and have added to the complexity of the regional level. However, they are now established as a central pillar of rural policy, which may mean that the sub-region will become an official level in future.

The Finnish Local Action Groups





Local Government There are 444 directly elected Municipalities. They are strong, autonomous and long-established bodies, with significant powers and funding. They also elect the Regional Councils. The largest Municipality is Helsinki with 0.5 million people, the smallest has under 200 people. Some people feel that the average size of the Municipalities should be increased, with perhaps only between 200 and 300 Municipalities in future. Others resist the idea of amalgamating them, and fear the loss of local identity. Municipalities often co-operate, and specialist tasks can be distributed between them.

Municipalities play a central role in society by organising most of the welfare services, delivering primary education, healthcare, technical services, infrastructure, housing, social services, cultural and sports and promotion of local economic development. They are also responsible for planning and development control, within the legal planning framework set by the Government. Each Regional Council ensures that Municipality plans are produced in line with legal requirements and with the regional plan.

Funding for Municipalities comes through taxation, Government funds, and grants from Regional Councils, public bodies and EU programmes. Their main source of funding is a flat rate income tax. The Municipalities take an average 2/3 share of income taxes, while 1/3 goes to the State. Municipalities have access to other forms of taxation, e.g. land tax, but these are relatively minor contributors. They can also take out loans and apply to the State for additional funds. The financial situation of the municipalities is, however, increasingly difficult, as public funding has declined since entry into the EU. The role of municipalities is still strong in the Finnish administrative system, but their capacity to deliver is weakening.

The situation in Rural Areas

Rural areas cover 98.5% of the total national territory, the largest proportion of any EU member state. One third (1.6 million) of Finland's 5 million people live in rural areas. This does not include the many small towns scattered across the countryside, which would double this figure.

Most Finns attach great importance to rural areas, and want to see them maintained as living areas, in a viable condition. However, since the 1960's, the rural areas have suffered a continual decline in employment and population. The main reasons for this are the increasing trends towards urbanisation and centralisation of employment, coupled with agricultural decline. Finnish farms, lying so far north in a harsh climate, cannot compete with farms in other EU countries. Many farm units are very small, because of land reform after independence in 1917. The number of active farms fell from 225,000 in 1980 to about 70,000 today, and the number is still falling. Over the same period, the proportion of the national workforce employed in farming has dropped from 10.8% to 5.4%: it currently stands at 140,000 workers.

Forestry is an integral part of Finnish farms, with forest land accounting for an average of 43% of each farm, and 62% of forests being owned by private individuals. The Finnish timber industry has been called the 'green gold' of Finland, fuelling a substantial part of its economic development and exports. However, this too is changing: in 1930, 90% of Finland's net export was timber, in 2003 it was only 40%. Home-grown timber is now so expensive that the industry is increasingly moving to cheaper imports from Russia, Brazil etc.

The central problem of the countryside is how to attract new people and new skills. Diversification of rural employment is a key issue, emphasised by the agricultural unions. Farmers are increasingly diversifying into tourism, food processing, machinery hire, transportation, health care services etc. Teleworking is important for rural areas, and the installation of broadband is a key issue, requiring Government support for the remoter areas.



*Traditional boat building,
Fiskers Community*



Rural Policy

The development of rural policy in Finland was described as a 'conscious choice'², the policy relates to the 'will to change things'. The justification for having a distinct rural policy is based on:

- the special needs of sparsely populated areas,
- the national benefit from better utilisation of the production factors of rural areas,
- the national cost of migration, and the need to balance centralising forces,
- the need to broaden the sectoral view of rural development,
- the implementation of equal rights for rural people, as per the Finnish constitution,
- the potential of rural areas to address sustainable development,
- the importance of rural areas for environment, culture and recreation.

Finland has developed a clear strand of rural policy, which is recognised as an example of good practice in the EU. Indeed, the concept of integrated rural policy may be more fully applied in Finland than in any other EU country. Rural policy is developed by the Regional and Rural Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, through the Rural Policy Committee and Theme Groups. The policy is contained in the Rural Policy Programme³, which is developed for 4-year periods. The first Rural Policy Programme was operational from 1991 and the third covered the period 2001-2004. The fourth programme was published at the end of 2004⁴.

Rural policy committee Finnish rural policy is developed through the Rural Policy Committee. This Committee is appointed by the Government, and works under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry: but it comprises 21 members representing 9 Ministries, regional administration and expert organisations, including trade unions and universities. The Rural Policy Committee, through the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, has an annual budget of 3.3 million Euro for undertaking research and development projects. This funds between 70 and 80 projects per year, with 1/3 to research and 2/3 to development. SYTY has a strong link with the Rural Policy Committee, in that the Secretary General of the Committee is also the Chairman of SYTY, and some members of the Board of SYTY work in the Secretariat of the Committee.

Theme groups In support of the work of the Rural Policy Committee, 300 people from across the rural sectors work in a total of 15 Theme Groups. These groups survey issues in their sector, draw up a development plan and are responsible for its implementation. The themes covered by the groups include women, welfare, nature, peripheral areas, culture, rural-urban interaction, second homes, youth, food, forestry, tourism and training. The groups are seen as the most important part of the process of developing policy. They enable development of diverse rural policy, with cross-sectoral learning and negotiation with many actors. Many people from SYTY are involved in the groups.

The rural network of MPs The Rural Policy Committee is very effective in developing integrated rural policy: but there are still big problems in linking this to the programmes of the 13 Ministries. Only two Ministries have a real involvement - the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and the Ministry of the Interior. It has also proved to be very difficult to involve politicians from the different parties in rural policy. In order to tackle these issues, a Rural Network of Members of Parliament was established in 2003. The Secretary General of the Rural Policy Committee acts as Secretary of this network. Out of 200 MPs, 78 have signed up to the network from across the parties. This gives a direct line to Ministers. The network meets 2 to 3 times per year, and receives information on-line. The Rural Policy Committee uses the Network to inform and influence MPs across the parties. The aim is that in any new Government there will be a group of Ministers who will take a stand on rural issues, and who understand that 'rural' mean more than just agriculture.

The process of rural policy focuses on rural development across the different administrative sectors

² Eero Uusitalo, Secretary general of the Rural Policy Committee (pers. com).

³ 'Countryside for the People - rural policy based on will' - Rural Policy Programme 2001-2004.

⁴ 'Viable Countryside - our joint responsibility' - Rural Policy Programme 2005-2008.



at local, regional and national levels, and draws together public and civil interests. The horizontal, cross-cutting arrangements of the Rural Policy Committee are useful in identifying issues across the powerful Ministries, though this is still a difficult area. The Government has realised that so many issues are cross-cutting that they will need to work more across the sectors.

Focus Rural policy is organised around two core, cross-cutting strands:

- **Broad rural policy** This targets all the policies and actions of Government which can impact on the rural areas. It aims to influence the different policy sectors (employment, welfare, environment, industry, agriculture, taxation, communications, community planning and housing etc) in order to *"reinforce the preconditions for maintaining the viability of the rural areas and to cause as little damage to these as possible."*⁵
- **Narrow rural policy** This focuses on the measures and tools which are specifically targeted at rural development, both EU and national. It aims to strengthen the delivery programmes of rural development. It takes the EU principles of integration, horizontal co-operation, partnership and subsidiarity and advocates rural policies based on the special characteristics of the regions, co-operation across sectoral boundaries and extensive partnership and participation.

Leadership One thing that is unique to the Finnish situation is the close connections fostered by the role of one man in rural policy. Eero Uusitalo, Secretary General of the Rural Policy Committee, is also the Secretary of the Rural Network of MPs, and Chairman of the Village Action Association (SYTY). He has been referred to as the 'father of rural development' in Finland, and is acclaimed for making rural policy into an issue in the country. This critical link has undoubtedly accelerated the pace at which rural policy, and the position of the Village Action Association, have moved forward.

The Ministries There is interest in and growing commitment to rural policy. However, there is no rural Ministry per se, and all policies have to be implemented by different Ministries or bodies. Rural policy is well rooted in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and in the Ministry of the Interior, but its impact in other Ministries is still weak. Even in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, only 20 people work in the rural unit out of a total staff of 460.

The regions The effect of the EU Structural Fund programmes is that existing strategies must be co-ordinated at regional level. However, the rural dimension is not well catered for in the regional structures. The regional level is complex, with no one body with any real power and money. As yet, there is no clear vision for the future regional structure in Finland. Some believe in a Finland of regions, with a dispersed policy. Others believe that a concentrated system is essential, in order to be competitive. Whilst rural policy emphasises the importance of recognising regional diversity, there is an increasing emphasis on the role of sub-regions, through the LAGs.

Regional planning is implemented through regional councils, in consultation with Municipalities and key social partners, within the framework of priorities defined by Ministers. It was noted, by regional village associations, that it is still very hard to influence regional policy: local organisations must be very assertive in lobbying, rather than relying on being consulted. The Finnish system is said not to be traditionally consultative, and officials are not trained to involve local level actors.

EU programmes Finland is very aware of the growing importance of the EU in determining policy, finance and economic development. The role of EU Programmes in implementing rural policy is emphasised in the 'narrow' rural policy, and careful thought has been given as to how this can be done in a way that adds maximum value locally. The most important aspect is the 'mainstreaming' of LEADER across the whole country, through the mechanism of local action groups (LAGs) and the use of various funding streams. The LEADER approach is now a permanent part of the Finnish delivery system. It is estimated that LAGs will have channelled a total sum of 340 million Euro to the development of their areas by the end of the current programme period in 2006, money which would not previously have been available for rural development.

⁵ 'Rural Policy in Finland 2000-2006' - Eero Uusitalo (2002).



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Much of Finland is currently covered by Objective 1, but there are doubts as to whether this will continue beyond 2006. A compromise is being sought, to retain Objective 1 for the north of Finland (and also northern Sweden), with the rest of the country covered by LEADER and POMO. The Rural Development Programme covers 8% of the whole rural programme, this is higher than in other countries due to the structure of Finland, with its relatively high proportion of rural area and low population density. After 2006 it is recognised that there will be a reduction in EU funds. This is addressed in the 4th Rural Policy Programme in terms of the national structure, which gives wider responsibilities to the LAGs.

Conclusions The rural policy system in Finland is ahead of many other countries, and has many achievements to record. The actions targeted in Rural Policy Programmes have largely been achieved. The rural policy approach has strengthened the role of local actors, and improved the direct lines of communication between the local and national levels. The horizontal linkages at each level are much stronger. Public awareness of rural issues is greater and the political parties have all revised their rural policy programmes, listing many of the ideas from the Rural Policy Programme. The outstanding issue lies in bridging the sectoral divides.



The Village Action Association of Finland - Suomen Kylatoiminta Ry (SYTY)

History⁶

Finland is often quoted as the first of the village movements, though in reality, the Danish movement started at the same time, in 1976, though in a different way. The Finnish village movement is much older than the present organisation, SYTY, and has been through several stages in its development.

The origins of the village action movement in Finland stem from the severe period of rural-to-urban migration in the 1960-70s. By the mid 1970s, there were signs of a movement for rural revival, and a number of village committees formed spontaneously during this period. The energy crisis of 1973 also shook faith in the Finnish development model and was a catalyst for the village movement⁷.

The village committees In 1976, Professor Lauri Hautamäki of the University of Helsinki launched the project 'Village Action 1976'. This was led by the universities, in partnership with the Federation of Municipalities, the regional authorities and associations. Professor Hautamäki advocated the need for special tools for the development of rural areas, and promoted a new type of rural organisation - the 'village committee' - in order to co-ordinate the increasingly scarce human resources of villages. This argument convinced the villagers. Most villages had many different issue groups, with many of the same people involved in them, but there was no overview. The purpose of the village committee was to provide co-ordination and to focus on the development of the village as a whole.

*"The village committees are an expression of small-scale collective action over individualism."*⁸

Professor Hautamäki travelled the whole of Finland, making speeches in every region and in many villages. In response, the number of village committees started to grow. Many started informally around key issues, such as preserving the village school or post office, and were initially pressure groups. Their successes promoted other villages to follow, and by 1990, there were 3,000 village committees. By December 2003, there were 3,935. The slower growth in the 1900s is probably a function of saturation, as there are only about 5,000 villages in Finland and many committees cover more than one village. These committees involve about 40,000 people directly and many more indirectly.

⁶ Information for this section provided in interviews with: Eero Uusitalo, Chairman of SYTY, Torsti Hyrylainen, University of Helsinki and Iiris Jurvansuu, board member and former General Manager of SYTY.

⁷ Torsti Hyrylainen, University of Helsinki (pers. com.).

⁸ Creating Common Unity - Friends of the UN 50th Anniversary awards.



Professor Hautamäki had advised that village committees should become legally constituted in order to use public funds and to undertake development work, and that village and municipal planning should be integrated. There followed a move to persuade the village committees to establish themselves as legal entities - 'village associations'. There are now 2,200 legally registered village associations, and the number is rapidly increasing.

The first national organisation In 1981, Professor Hautamäki formed the first national organisation - the 'National Organisation for Village Action'. This was not a bottom-up organisation, however: it was an 'association of associations' - effectively a rural forum. The members were not village committees, but large NGOs with a rural focus, such as the Associations of Finnish Agricultural Producers, Finnish Municipalities and Finnish Local Journalists. Individuals and village committees could not be members, and no politicians or political parties were involved. This model was adopted to gain the support of the large, powerful NGOs; but it was much criticised by the village committees, and there was conflict about whether to form an independent organisation or not.

A new impetus was provided by the Council of Europe's Countryside Campaign of 1987-88. This provoked a campaign under the slogan 'All Finland Shall Live', parallel to that in Sweden. Then in 1989 came a difficult period for Finland, with the start of economic depression and the collapse of the Soviet Union, by which Finland lost its Soviet market. In the same year, Professor Hautamäki published a book on the village action, saying that this marked the end of his research into village action. At this point, the second key figure in the movement's history took over, and is still a vital force in the movement. Eero Uusitalo, a rural sociologist, and the first in the movement to be active at a political level, had started his work on rural development in the late 1980s and was previously active in the Finnish Association of Municipalities. This marked a new direction in the development of the movement.



*Eero Uusitalo,
President of SYTY*

Regional village associations In 1989 the first of the regional level village associations was formed in Lapland - 'The Village Forum of Lapland'. Lapland already had many village associations, and wanted a regional association to help to overcome their isolation. The next regional association was set up in 1991. However, regional associations could only form where there were enough village associations and no other similar regional organisation. Nine were formed before the present national association, SYTY, was set up in 1997. A further ten were set up after SYTY was formed, as a result of further promotion. There are now regional associations in all 19 administrative regions of Finland.

The formation of regional associations was in part a result of local activists realising that the EU works with regions. In 1994 the Government passed legislation for programme-based regional development, in anticipation of entry to the EU. This made it clear that expenditure would be linked to regional planning. It was felt that the village movement must be organised at regional level to work with this, and to avoid the villages being in a weak position. This was seen as more important than the national level.

The Village Action Association of Finland (SYTY) In 1997 SYTY was formed as a national NGO. Membership was open to associations at regional and village level. This organisation replaced the 'National Organisation for Village Action'. Its formation was also motivated by Finland's entry to the EU. Its founders realised that it would be difficult to stimulate sufficient activity at local and regional levels without a strong body at national level. The movement wished to be able to work effectively with the new tools provided by the EU Programmes, and to benefit from these.

*"The national association was formed in order to integrate sectoral interests, at local and national levels, to strengthen the involvement of village people and to bring their interest groups together. If we wanted to get support for these village groups we needed a body that was fighting for this at national level."*⁹

⁹ Eero Uusitalo - Chairman of the Village Action Association of Finland - pers. com.



4. THE VILLAGE ACTION ASSOCIATION OF FINLAND, SYTY

Structure¹⁰

The village movement in Finland is structured at 3 levels, namely:

- 1 national village association (SYTY)
- 19 regional village associations
- 2,200 registered village associations

The National Village Action Association (SYTY)

"The Village Action Association of Finland is the villagers' voluntary co-operation organisation which aims to develop the villagers' living standards. The objective of Village Action is to develop the village as a functional community in which living and residing is pleasant."

"The Village Action Association of Finland works towards developing the Finnish countryside and strengthening the vitality and possibilities of influence of villages and resident communities. This helps to create opportunities of employment and livelihood for village residents."

The aim of SYTY is to ensure that village people have employment and a satisfactory livelihood; an enjoyable environment; humane and social well-being; adequate services within a short distance; opportunities for leisure activities for both year-round and temporary inhabitants or holiday-makers; and a concrete opportunity to influence their own future and the future of the surrounding areas. SYTY believes that the initiative in pursuing this aim should come from the village people themselves.

"We are not willing to regard economic values as more important than the quality of life. We don't believe in development through centralised structures for decision-making and services. Instead we believe that people should control their own lives. We are particularly happy if our movement can be an encouraging example for rural people in both the industrialised and developing countries to demonstrate that vibrant rural life is not inconsistent with development." SYTY 1995

*"Village action is local, self-initiated development work carried out by village residents to strengthen the liveability, comfort and village identity in their own home region. Village action gathers residents together regardless of profession, age, gender, political view, leisure activities or whether one is a permanent resident, newcomer or leisure resident. Village action represents local democracy and local initiative at its best."*¹¹

Role The national association is the forum for co-operation between all organisations which promote village action, including village and city district associations, through which the following functions are performed:

- advocacy for neighbourhood democracy in Finland,
- promotion of the voluntary and locally-driven activities of the villages,
- establishment of national development projects for villages,
- deepening the interaction between the rural and city populations,
- encouraging positive attitudes and actions towards village development among citizens and decision-makers,
- network services to the 58 Local Action Groups,
- education, advice, information on village action and examples of beneficial ways of working, through its newsletter and web-site,
- Support for international co-operation among village people.

Membership SYTY was founded in 1997 with 37 members. It now has 134 members, including:

- 20 national level organisations which pursue local development activities,
- 19 Regional Village Associations,
- 58 Local Action Groups (LAGs),

¹⁰ Information from papers and personal communication with the SYTY staff and board members.

¹¹ 'All the Power of a Small Village' - the National Village Action Programme 2003-7.



- local village and citizens associations,
- sponsoring organisations (Post Office and 2 trade companies).

Through its constituent members, SYTY reaches 4,000 villages and their 3 million permanent and 1.7 million part-time inhabitants.

When SYTY was founded, the constitution allowed for local, regional and national associations to be members, but not individuals. This is still the case. However, since the regional associations were created, village associations tend to belong to the regional associations, and SYTY is now more of a forum for the regional and national associations working with rural issues.

Board SYTY has an elected board of 10 people, plus the Chairman. There are also 10 vice-members, one to substitute for each board member as necessary. All are invited to attend each meeting. The Board is elected at the annual general meeting, according to the following principles:

- One third to represent national organisations (mostly NGOs)
- One third to represent regional village associations
- One third to represent other rural development organisations (with a priority for LAGs)

One member must represent the Swedish-speaking minority. Each member is elected for 2 years, with one half standing down each year.

Staff 11 people currently work for the central organisation SYTY, mostly full-time. This includes the General Manager and a range of project-based staff. In addition, each of the 19 Regional Village Associations has an office and paid employee.

Funding The annual turnover of SYTY in 2003 was 770,000 Euro, including projects. The funding came as follows:

- 20,000 Euro from membership fees - there are 3 levels of membership fees,
- 120,000 Euro from the Government - 2003 was the first year that SYTY received core funding from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry: this was the result of a long campaign for public funding, and they hope to increase this in the future,
- 620,000 Euro from project funding - most of the funding comes from different projects, and most of the staff are engaged through project funding, including EU funds.

National financial support to NGOs is diminishing overall. SYTY has had a long hard fight to get core funding in 2003. The support finally came through a special Parliamentary initiative. The level of funding is not seen as enough, and there is pressure on the Government to increase this. However, there is concern that future Government money will be subject to conditions.

SYTY is currently working on a study to identify ways of making the organisation more self-financing and sustainable. One issue under consideration is the possibility of establishing a foundation for the support of rural development.

The Regional Village Associations

There are 19 Regional Village Associations, one in each of the Finnish administrative regions. These are independent NGOs, operating in association with SYTY at national level. Each regional association is an organisation in its own right: it is not a branch of SYTY. This is not a hierarchical structure: it is an organised forum for co-operation between villages and those concerned with their development.

The idea of the regional associations is that they can work with the regional authorities, EU programmes and other organisations working on rural development at regional level. SYTY has promoted regional associations, because it has limited central capacity to work for the local areas across the country, and needs flexibility and responsiveness at regional level. It is the role of the regional associations to do this work, whilst SYTY concentrates on the national functions, networking and co-operation.



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There is no typical regional association. Each has its own constitution and structure, reflecting the distinctive history, village culture and organisations that exist in that region. A regional association is set up on the initiative of the village associations, and they form the main membership. Topic-based associations can also be members; and individuals can represent villages that have no registered associations. In some places, the members include municipalities or other rural development associations.

The village associations

A questionnaire was recently sent to all the regional associations to update the picture of how many village associations exist in Finland. This confirmed that there are, in total, 3,935 associations, made up as follows:

- 2,188 registered associations, including 1543 registered village associations and 645 other registered local associations with village activities
- 1,747 non-registered village associations

The same study also confirmed that about 3 million Euro per year are spent through these associations. There is also an increasing tendency for village associations to form coalitions within and across Municipality borders, in order to work with the Municipality, or on wider issues.

Activities

The main activities of the national Village Action Association focus on:

- Strategic village planning and policy development,
- Advocacy and lobbying,
- Central projects and services,
- International co-operation.

These activities are described below.

"SYTY carries out village development as well as trans-provincial and trans-municipal co-operation and networking together with 19 regional village associations, 58 rural development societies (LAGs) and 3,900 village associations and committees from over 4,000 villages."

*"As a national organisation free of party-political ties, SYTY works in close co-operation with the parliament, ministries, departments and central organisations. International projects and other forms of co-operation are also on a rapid increase."*¹²

Strategic village planning Strategic village planning is the most basic tool advocated by the village action movement, since the time of Professor Hautemaki in 1980; and is arguably one of the most important things that has been put in place by the movement. It has enabled the villages to become part of the process of planning for the future, not only within the civil sector, but also increasingly by linking to the statutory planning and policy processes. Three levels of planning are now undertaken by the movement:

- Village Plans - in which village inhabitants draw together the village's needs, aims and measures: very often, these form part of the Municipality's plans.
- Regional Village Action Programmes - in which the priorities of the village plans and the specific regional issues are drawn together: these often link to the statutory Regional Plan.
- National Village Action Programme - in which the priorities of the regional plans and the specific national issues are drawn together: this has strong links to the national Rural Policy Programme.

Village Plans The longest established part, and the foundation of the strategic village planning process, is the Village Plan. SYTY estimates that there are at least 1,000 active village plans. Regional Village Associations have observed that the most successful villages are those with village plans. Without a plan, villages do not achieve such long-lasting results and tend to talk about possibilities but fail to implement them.

¹² The Village Action Association of Finland - promotional leaflet.



The process of preparing a village plan can take about 6 months. SYTY and the Regional Village Associations support the village planning process with training, materials and advice. Various methods are used, the most usual being a questionnaire survey among all households, conducted by the village association. A small group analyses the questionnaires and lists the main ideas raised. A village meeting is then held to identify the priorities, which feed into the draft plan. The planning process helps to take people from having a good idea to making it happen. It takes the thinking into the whole community, and gives a clear mandate to undertake priority projects. This also helps in gaining funding and support for the project from outside bodies.

Co-operation with municipalities is increased through the plans, and many municipalities incorporate the findings into their own statutory planning process. Municipalities have to give about a third of the funding to each approved local development project, but they have to prioritise limited resources. The plans help the villages and the municipalities to establish priorities, within the bounds of money available. Previously, the most active villages tended to gain all the resources, while other villages found it difficult to compete. The village planning process helps less active villages to get their share of development.



Häkkilä Village Hal, Toholampi

"This is the process by which local people take responsibility for development. This is a very big argument for village plans. It gives the village something to follow, even if the people change. It encourages people when they see what they are doing, on paper, in black and white. Their work becomes visible. If you set out with a plan, you have something clear and measurable against which you can assess your progress."

"Strategic planning is not something that comes naturally to villages. However, they have come to realise the great benefits it brings, and have been encouraged by seeing how it has produced results in other villages. The first plan is the most difficult. After that the village is more able to work with strategic planning, and updating is easier. Starting the process and being involved in it is the most important thing - not the initial results." ¹³

The regional village action programme The planning process at regional level is more recently established. 17 of the 19 regional associations now have a 'regional village action programme'. This has been very helpful in drawing the issues of the villages to the attention of authorities at regional level. The regional plans are used to lobby the authorities, to raise funding for projects and to help to build the National Village Action Programme.

The process used is similar to that of the village plans, but at a different level. A questionnaire survey of the villages identifies their most important development targets and what they need from the authorities. From this material, the regional board identifies the priorities to be handled at regional level. These are discussed in regional seminars, and the regional village action programme is then prepared. This programme states the priorities for village development that require support from the Regional Village Association and SYTY. Actions for other bodies are passed on to them.

SYTY provides support by obtaining funds from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry for developing and publishing the regional plans; organising seminars on plan preparation; organising a forum for creating joint inter-regional projects; organising a forum for internet co-operation, through a strategy theme group; and supporting pilot projects in new topics.

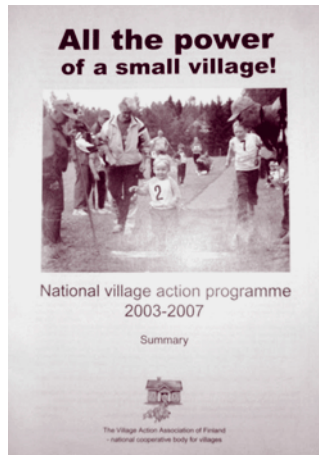
The national village action programme The National Programme is the over-arching, four-year policy document for the village movement. It provides a clear statement of the most important issues to be addressed across rural Finland, and provides a national link to the regional and village plans. It is also one of the foundation documents for the development of the government's Rural Policy

¹³ Iiris Juvansuu - Board member of SYTY and regional project leader - pers. com.



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Programme. The first was developed for 2000-4: of the 108 proposals listed 77 had, at the time of writing, been successfully completed and a further 19 were about to be completed.



SYTY's National Village Programme

The second National Village Action Programme was published in November 2003, for the period 2004-7, under the title *"Powerful as a small village"*. This lists the goals to 2007, the action proposals, evaluation of the previous programme and an overview of the state of village and regional activities. A separate strategy for international work is prepared.

SYTY does not have power to affect Government decisions directly, but through this plan is able to have much influence. The proposals are given to different actors to undertake, which proved very successful in the first programme. SYTY has different thematic working groups, which will work with the follow up to the plan. Each proposal in the plans is monitored twice a year to assess how well other organisations and Government are implementing it.

"This is a national programme, not a prescription for the villages. Village action is not a one-issue movement - there is work for many different causes and organisations."

*"Village action has organised into local, regional and national activity, and international co-operation is increasing. Each level has its own responsibilities and each is needed to promote village development. This is recognised in the programme, where there are responsibilities for each level. The village action programme is an essential part of rural and regional development. Therefore the most central proposals are also included in the Rural Policy Programme. It would also be beneficial if the regional proposals were included in regional plans and programmes. In this way, the self-initiative and responsibility of villages is tied to the definitions of policy and objectives for rural Finland."*¹⁴

Advocacy and lobbying The village movement seeks, at all levels, to influence policy through advocacy. It has developed, through its strategic planning, a clear process for forming policy positions, rooted in the views and issues of the villages of Finland. This is based on the 'upward cascade' process described above. The participatory nature of this process gives it great strength in advocacy and lobbying to the authorities. However, the responses vary greatly between the different bodies at local, regional and national levels. The National Village Action Programme clearly does influence the National Rural Policy Programme. But overall, Village Action cannot yet claim to make a strong impact on policy at national, regional or local levels.

At national level, SYTY is part of the integrated national rural policy network. It takes part in the Rural Policy Committee and Theme Groups. The Chairman of SYTY is also Secretary General of the Rural Policy Committee and Secretary of the Rural Network of Members of Parliament, described earlier.

At regional level, the regional village associations seek to influence the development of regional policy through the Regional Councils. They are also connected to the development of the strategic plans of the LAGs. However, the task at regional level is difficult, because the regional structure is complex and most regional village associations are very young.

At local level, the villages increasingly seek to influence the plans of the municipalities. Very big differences have been recorded between different regions and municipalities as to how they use the village associations. This often depends on the people involved. In the early stages, there was significant fear of the village movement on the part of politicians at all levels. Overall however, there is agreement that co-operation is getting better with time, and the importance of the village movement is now more widely recognised by authorities.

¹⁴ 'All the Power of a Small Village' - National Village Action Programme 2003-7.



Central projects and services The next few paragraphs describe some of the current central projects and services managed by SYTY.

Communications and networking SYTY has a communications strategy to enable everyone within the village movement, at village, regional and national levels to be networked and kept abreast of developments. This includes website, newsletter, events and annual village gathering.

The village economy project This work, funded under the EU Equal Programme, is currently the main funding source for the organisation, providing funding at national level and also for each of the regional co-ordinators. Its objectives are:

- To work out and test methods of social economy suited to the Finnish countryside,
- To develop new opportunities and employment in, for example, cultural, social and environmental services,
- To strengthen the economic life and structure within villages,
- To strengthen the local village associations,
- In the longer run, to develop a strategy of social economy suited to the nationwide villages programme, to the regional villages programmes and to the economic planning and development of villages.

The national LAG network unit SYTY acts as the National Network Unit for the 58 Finnish Local Action Groups (LAGs). It has undertaken this role since the start of the first LEADER Programme in Finland, which coincided with the start of SYTY. The Network Unit was chosen through a tendering process, from 8 applications. It provides support to 58 action groups, funded from 4 different sources, as previously described. Because of this complex structure, the Unit is funded by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, rather than by EU funds. Seven people are employed part-time in this Unit.

The Network Unit gathers and disseminates information about the LAGs, and provides training for LAG members. It acts as a co-operative link between LAGs and other rural action groups, such as village organisations, the Carrefour network, and the employment and economic development centres. It takes part in trans-national networking.

Neighbour assistance project SYTY, in co-operation with the churches, municipalities and associations, is implementing an extensive national community care and infrastructure project, to support the elderly living in their own homes.

Village infrastructure development project The infrastructure in this study includes information and communication technologies (ICT); maintenance of roads, cycle tracks and pavements; water supply and sewerage; and waste management. The aim of the study is:

- To look for models and good practices to strengthen the role of the villages as developers of infrastructure,
- To study the needs for development of infrastructure, and projects in progress in the field,
- To produce a catalogue and report on existing projects, research and technical development in this field,
- To strengthen the role of the national and the regional village action organisations in stimulating the actions of the villages,
- To lay the foundation for villages to take initiative in developing infrastructure.

'Village of the year' competition The National Organisation for Village Action started the Village of the Year Competition in 1985, and SYTY has continued the tradition. The purpose of the contest is to raise awareness of the life and development of the rural villages in Finland. Each year, village associations throughout Finland can apply for the award of 'Regional Village of the Year'. The applications are collected and judged by the Regional Village Associations, who award the regional title and can also pass on to SYTY their recommendation of candidates for the national award of 'Village of the Year'.



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At national level, the criteria used in choosing the best candidate relate to the level of activities in general; the planning of activities and systematic development work of the village; open information and good communication in the village and with the co-operative partners; and creative and innovative activities. The awarded villages mainly gain extensive publicity: no financial rewards are given. At local level, in the best cases, the winning villages gain more population, more jobs, more tourists etc. Winning the award always brings empowerment and self-confidence to the active villages.¹⁵

The village project The main objective of the 'Village Project', which is funded by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, is the development of the local and regional structures and their activity programmes. The first phase of the project started in 2001 and ended in October 2003. The 'Top 5' achievements since then have been:

1. Regional village associations have been created, covering all of the 19 regions in Finland.
2. The number of registered local village associations has increased from 400 in the beginning of 1990s to 2188 in 2003.
3. Regional village co-ordinators are employed, at least half-time, in every region.
4. 17 regions out of 19 have prepared their regional village action programmes and strategies, and the second national village action programme 2003-2007 has been published.
5. Work has started to deepen the activities and programmes and to make them more versatile e.g. the new feasibility studies on infrastructure and on domestic and care services.

International co-operation International co-operation has always been an important part of the agenda of SYTY, though it has varied in emphasis and action over the years. Links with the Swedish village movement have always been strong, and these have provided mutual support as the two movements evolved and matured. More recently, Finland has become an important source of support and guidance to the newly emerging rural movements in other parts of Europe, especially in the Baltic countries.

SYTY is producing a strategy for how to deal viably with international affairs. International co-operation is currently undertaken in 4 main ways:

- Participation in EU events and projects.
- Membership of the PREPARE Network.
- Nordic co-operation through the Nordic Network - *Hela Norden ska Leva*.
- Support to the development of rural movements in the accession countries.

EU events and projects Finland is very aware of the increasing importance of the EU in determining policy, financing and economic development. In the EU's next programme period (2007 to 2013), Finland does not expect to get much development funding at regional level. But the Government knows that it is more likely to attract EU funds if it is actively involved in international co-operation. Within this national effort, SYTY actively participates in EU events and in development of a European framework for rural policy. It uses EU funds for its activities, and in supporting local projects through the LAG Network and Regional Village Associations. It acts as an information centre for those who want to develop trans-national work, and works in this respect with the *Carrefour* network.

The PREPARE network is seen by SYTY as strategically very important, and one of the priority tasks for the future. SYTY is a full member of the Network and plans to assist through co-operation, partnerships and contacts.

Nordic co-operation This is a long tradition, and SYTY has had an important role in exchange of experience. It is an active member of the Nordic network of village movements, *Hela Norden ska Leva*, which includes movements in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Faroes and Estonia. Each country has its own distinctive movement, but Sweden and Finland are probably the most fully developed.

¹⁵ Tarja Helanen - SYTY staff member.



Achievements

The significant achievement of the Finnish village movement are best summed up in the statistics produced in the 2003-7 National Village Action Programme for the action of the villages in 2003:

- 3,900 village associations and committees,
- 2,200 registered village associations,
- 40,000 individuals involved (divided equally between men and women),
- 1.6 million volunteer hours per year,
- 16 million Euro worth of volunteer time,
- 3.2 million Euro independent funding per year,
- 31 million Euro public project funding a year,
- 8,000 development measures per year,
- 2,600 village halls/ community centres,
- 1,000 village plans in effect,
- over 2.5 million Finns assisted by village development work.

Among the main achievements of the movement as a whole are:

- Developing an extensive network of legal village associations,
- Establishing a regional village association in each of the 19 administrative regions,
- Developing a national village action programme, linked to regional and village plans,
- Developing social capital: encouraging villages into financial co-operation, establishing new methods of working and employment opportunities,
- Implementing a wide range of projects at national, regional and local levels,
- Strengthening the position of the village associations to the point that their plans influence rural policy,
- Improving co-operation between civil and public bodies for rural development,
- Working with other countries to develop rural movements,
- Contributing to the European network and lobby for rural development.

*"The national Village Action Association is now regarded as an established body and is accepted as a key player in the rural scene. It is seen a vehicle that works."*¹⁶

Perhaps most importantly, the whole issue of rural development in Finland, and the situation of the many villages, has been brought to national attention. The logic and simplicity of the structure of the village movement at each administrative level has enabled a clear system for linking civil society to public administration.

Finnish village action has been awarded 2 prestigious awards for its work to develop rural society:

- The 'Alternative Nobel Prize' - Right Livelihoods Award in 1992
- The UN Friendship Award in 1995.

Challenges

The village action movement has faced, or now faces, significant challenges, including:

- Negative responses at local, regional and national levels.
*"At the start many people said, why do we need another organisation? The villages didn't think they needed another village organisation, nor did they want a national organisation, as they thought it would dominate and take power away from the local level."*¹⁷
- Shortage of funding: not till 2003 did the movement manage to get some limited core funding from Government. Most of the funding, on which the organisation depends, comes from projects. This creates tensions between the demands of delivering projects and servicing the wider needs of the organisation. The movement has depended on a huge amount of voluntary labour.
- Constant changes in personnel, both staff and board members: this is due, at least in part, to the constant fluctuation and insecurity of the funding.

¹⁶ Iiris Jurvansuu - SYTY board member and regional project manager.

¹⁷ Iiris Jurvansuu - SYTY board member and regional project manager.



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- A loss of willing volunteers. The members of village associations are getting older and fewer. Young people are less willing to undertake 'Talkoot' voluntary work, the historic mainstay of village action. Some key activists have moved on to work for the LAGs since they were set up.
- Weakening, in some places, of the links between village associations and the village population.
- Failure to connect effectively with the policy planning processes of Municipalities and Regional Councils.
- Weakness in lobbying the government and political parties, at local, regional and national levels.
- Some personality clashes and contentious issues: this is a feature of all of the national movements.

Finally, there is some unease as to the over-reliance of the movement on the work of one man, the Chairman of SYTY, in driving rural development and linking SYTY with the Government. In part, the success of the movement is also his success, and there are concerns as to what will happen when he moves on.

Commentary

The Village Action Movement in Finland is now about 30 years old. It has progressed through different stages of orientation and activity, and has helped to foster similar movements in other countries. It is now facing a new range of issues, and there is debate as to how it will evolve into the future to meet the new challenges. This final section attempts to set out the issues surrounding the development of the movement. It reflects discourse and dialogue with key players from the movement, academic and public sectors, rather than any in-depth study of the literature. Indeed, much of the work of the village movement remains un-documented and un-researched.

Origins

*"It was a movement against centralised administration and power. It was a small revolution in thinking. The rural people found new ways to influence and have impacts."*¹⁸

The Village Action movement in Finland started from a rural crisis. This created the demand. Professor Hautamäki, and those who followed him, interpreted this demand into an organised movement.

The old countryside in Finland was very lively, with many associations. But after World War II, many people moved to the cities and to Sweden. In the north of Finland, not enough people were left to form associations. In the 1970s, there was a policy to put big industries into rural areas, but this only partially succeeded. Agriculture became more centralised and mechanical, and gave work to fewer people. A growing number of rural people were working in other sectors. The rural areas needed new opportunities to stem the threat of de-population. A new and more efficient way of gathering people together was needed.

The village action movement provided that new way. Professor Hautamäki was able to persuade the villagers to create village committees. It was a social innovation, at the right time.

The character and tradition of the villages of Finland played a major part in enabling this movement to flourish. Before the 1865 law that established the municipalities, the village had been the most important unit of local administration. The parish boundaries were used to define the municipal boundaries. These were relatively large areas, as the Finnish villages are so dispersed. But the villages remained at the heart of Finnish rural life.

Because of the geographical circumstances of the country, and its long history of occupation, villages had to be very self-reliant. Only since World War II did national independence and the welfare

¹⁸ Eero Uusitalo - pers. com.



state begin to relieve the pressures of survival. But the challenge of agricultural decline presented a serious threat to the rural communities. As Professor Hautamäki realised, the villages either had to get organised to face this challenge, or die. His advocacy was so persuasive that the thinking behind the movement was seeded.

*"At the start of the village movement, there were mostly meetings and some declarations to the authorities, stating what was needed. What was more important was that the people started to work together for their own villages. During the early years, Talkoot (volunteer labour) was the main driving force."*¹⁹

Character of the movement The village action movement is, by character and conviction, 'bottom-up'. It represents direct action by the villagers. The future of the villages is increasingly determined by that action because of the weakening of the public financial base; the increasing size of local authorities; increasing bureaucracy, sectoring of tasks and privatisation. These factors emphasise the need for neighbourhood democracy and the villagers' ability and wish to influence their immediate surroundings and the development of services.

The village action movement has been organised in such a way that something can be achieved. Doing is more important than talking. It represents all people, not just interest groups.

*"It is the nature of the village action movement that it comes from the bottom and evolves at a natural pace - regional and national associations are only set up if they are needed and wanted and to give expression to what is already happening. You cannot act in a society unless you are organised. The village movement is an invention that is very useful for local people. It is very flexible, nothing can be forced and it must be open to local needs. All villages are working according to their own needs."*²⁰

The village The village, or *Kylät*, is a very important unit in Finnish rural life. 'Village' has many meanings. It is primarily a mental unit, an historical rather than a legal or geographical unit. It began where people first settled, and spread out from this nucleus over the years. The village has traditionally met its own development needs through its own labour. This form of voluntary labour, *Talkoot*, is at the root of Finnish village action and the work of the village associations: it is a very organised system, based on reciprocity and trust, dating back to the early times.

The role of the village associations has traditionally been focussed on defending the interests of the village, fighting for the school, shop etc. and undertaking various social, environmental and recreational projects. This is termed the '*first generation*' of village action, laying the foundation for villages to move into a more professional mode. Whole villages are now increasingly involved in various aspects of service delivery and economic development, through the mechanism of village associations: this is referred to as the '*second generation*' of village action. An important characteristic is that most of this work is still undertaken through *Talkoot*, non-profit labour: thus it is a civil-society activity, rather than a business enterprise, part of the 'social economy'.

Social economy There is a growing debate about this form of social economy, and the extent to which it should become part of the monetary economy, with villages being paid for service delivery. Villages may be so accustomed to doing things for themselves, voluntarily, that they do not realise that they may be able to raise money for some of this work. Many municipalities fail to recognise the value of this form of social economy, and tend to take it for granted that the work is done for free. The view expressed by people working at village level is that the municipalities must learn how to work with the social economy. In some municipalities this is happening, but it is a slow process.

The Nordic welfare state model is quite centralised. The State takes care of people; and local people are needed to deliver this care, mostly through the municipalities, which are the 'local hands' of the State. As a result, the third sector (i.e. civil society) has played only a minor role in service delivery

¹⁹ Eero Uusitalo - pers. com.

²⁰ Torsti Hyyryläinen - University of Helsinki - pers. com.



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and employment (3-4% of all jobs in 2001). But the welfare state is expensive, and there is pressure to reduce the taxes which pay for it. Thus civil society has a rising role in delivery of the welfare system.

However, there is a critical distinction between the traditional concept of *Talkoot*, as a freely given effort to support your community, and the notion of voluntary labour as an in-kind contribution to project funding. In-kind labour is increasingly seen as part of the economy, as something that should be costed. This raises new issues of communal responsibility, regulation, health and safety.

When the LEADER+ programme was developed, the contribution of voluntary in-kind labour from communities was accepted as a legitimate contribution. This then had to be costed, and rates were set, currently 10 Euros per hour. This has brought voluntary labour into the economy in a measurable way. For many local people, however, the notion of charging an in-kind cost for their labour is still an uneasy concept. *Talkoot* works according to a different value system: people give their labour freely, and do not expect or want payment: they gain satisfaction from being involved, feeling valued and improving the local life.

But life in the villages is changing. Members of village associations are getting older and fewer. Many people have left the rural areas, and those who are left are busy. In a typical household, both partners may have to work and may have no spare time for voluntary work. People are increasingly accustomed to being paid for their work. So there is rising expectation in the villages that service delivery should be paid for.

"Eventually we have to move to a system of paying for local labour. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry believes the village should become an economic unit." ²¹

This is the main debate surrounding the development of the village movement. What is the most appropriate role of villages in the national process? Should villages be considered deliverers of economic development and services, or of mutual care and social and environmental action?

Village Action What is the added value from Village Action?

"Organised villages are more active, stronger and do much better. They are more open-minded and attract incomers. Disorganised villages do nothing, become unattractive to live in and people move away. Success is always greater in the villages with village associations: there are strong correlations. They are generators of social capital." ²²

"It used to be that people became active if there was a perceived threat. But people have now realised that they have to be more responsible and to tackle local development pro-actively. It took the EU to make people realise that they can do something. Through LEADER funding they had to be organised. Previously villages were more dependent on higher authorities, but now they have to do it for themselves." ²³

The role of SYTY The leaders of the Village Action Association realise that the villages have the key role in the movement, and that SYTY's role is simply to support them and to help them to deal with the political realities in the country and the European Union.

"SYTY is a young organisation but the village movement is older than SYTY. Many of the village associations were in place before SYTY and are leading their own lives - if SYTY went they would remain. It is the nature of the village movement that it is local. Unless you need a national body it is not created. However, the work undertaken by Prof. Hautamäki shows that mobilisation from the outside was necessary."

"In all the countries where rural movements have been established, people have seen a need for a rural voice, which was not already being expressed through existing organisations."

²¹ Risto Matti Niemi - Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry - pers. com.

²² Iiris Jurvansuu - SYTY Board Member.

²³ Eero Uusitalo - pers. com.



*"You cannot act in a society and meet the demands if you are not organised. That is why it helped local people that there was a national project helping the villages and regions to get organised. All the different regions and village associations are using the movement in different ways, arising out of the different needs in their own area. This is therefore a very flexible structure. Also it is not very powerful, it couldn't be otherwise, we couldn't force anything. It has to be open to the villages' own needs."*²⁴

The role of SYTY is *"to integrate sectoral interests, at local and national levels, to strengthen the involvement of village people and to bring their interest groups together. If we wanted to get support for these village groups we needed a body that was fighting for this at national level."*²⁵

The regional structure of SYTY enables it to give support at local level, and to relate its work to the diversity of rural areas.

*"SYTY finds no problem with diversity. We are proud of the diversity we have in our regions. We always work from the premise that we have to leave it open to the regions to develop. The regional structure is essential for this. SYTY could not operate without a regional structure."*²⁶

STY provides the link between the multiplicity of villages and the singleness of government policy and programmes.

*"In the Ministry we must have facts and ideas about how we can develop village matters, and we are taking the proposals from this programme into the rural policy. Rural policy requires the village movement. There are very tight connections between SYTY and rural policy."*²⁷

This link is enormously helped by the fact that the Chairman of SYTY, Eero Uusitalo, is also the Secretary General of the Rural Policy Committee, and Secretary of the Rural Network of Members of Parliament. He has been referred to as 'the father of rural development in Finland', and is an enthusiastic and respected leader, devoted to professionalising the field of rural development. This link to the Rural Policy Committee has given SYTY a lot of energy, ideas, knowledge and belief. There is immense gratitude, both in the movement and the administration, for the risk-taking and work of the Chairman, which has made all this possible. However there is also concern as to whether the movement could sustain this level of achievement without his critical role. The Chairman's view is that the movement is now mature enough to carry on without him.

What is the future for Village Action?

"When the organisation first began it was quite informal, but now it must speed up and become more efficient. Only a few politicians know about SYTY, we are not powerful, policy impact is important. We must strengthen the direct influences and channels for villages to influence decisions. The local democratic system is not enough. We must give more power for direct work and impacts. The village action groups are very strong actors in their own affairs, but they are only one actor in the big picture. Some village associations have been given their own tasks by the municipalities. We need this kind of group - which stands on three legs."

*"The village movement in Finland has expanded and advanced rapidly. It has taken place according to plan, though it does not always look like it. The necessity of leaning on different kind of project funding has reduced the style points of our activities. In the next phase, the area of priority will be establishing the finances and the activities and building up more cooperation with other rural non-governmental organisations."*²⁸

*"Village action will not be left alone - it can expect society to support it and work towards the same direction."*²⁹

²⁴ Iiris Jurvansuu - SYTY Board Member.

²⁵ Eero Uusitalo - pers. com.

²⁶ Iiris Jurvansuu - SYTY Board Member.

^{27, 28} Eero Uusitalo - pers. com.

²⁹ Eero Uusitalo - The National Village Action Programme 2003-7.