

Research Strategy 2006

Knowledge concerning rural development



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Preface

In the autumn of 2002, Formas (the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning), KSLA (the Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture and Forestry), Nordregio (the Nordic Centre for Spatial Development) and the Institute for Future Studies held a conference on “Sparsely populated regions in the global economy: State of the art in research and development”, where international and Swedish researchers discussed research needs and strategies for building up Swedish research concerning rural and sparsely populated areas. In 2004, Formas was instructed by the Government to formulate by no later than 30 November 2006, in consultation with funding agencies, clients and contractors and the Committee for a Strategy for Sustainable Rural Development (Jo 2004:05), a national strategy for research on rural development, which is presented in this report.

Formas and the Rural Development Committee have collaborated closely in this work. Together with KSLA, we arranged a research conference in early 2006 on the theme “Research for sustainable rural development”. The discussions centred on issues such as “Rural enterprise and entrepreneurship”, “Democracy, responsibility and a holistic view”, “Nature, culture and environment” and “Commercial and public services”. The discussions revealed that rural development differs widely between different rural areas. Near-urban rural areas show positive development, and it is questionable whether support is needed there in a special rural policy. The situation is completely different in more remote rural areas. There, national policy must attempt to compensate for inadequacies in accessibility and services. The researchers also concluded that rural development is also important for people in urban areas.

The conference discussions also centred on the importance of the local economy. Acquiring knowledge and data to measure and assess local development in other terms than just economical is important. Local economic development does not necessarily have to lead to development in other areas, but local capital acquisition was held to be of central importance. The researchers also discussed natural resource management. Today’s rural areas comprise a complex living environment which regional planners and town planning architects are not quite sure how to handle. It appears as if they are leaving this to the forestry and agricultural sector.



Sture Blomgren, Acting Director General,
Swedish Research Council Formas.

Another important area was clearly highlighted: Entrepreneurship as an important strategy in rural development. Many of these issues are addressed in the research strategy for sustainable rural development presented here.

In the spring of 2006, Formas and the Rural Development Committee commissioned researchers Erik Westholm and Cecilia Waldenström to devise an outline for the strategy, for which we are very grateful. The outline has also been presented and discussed at meetings with funding agencies and clients during the year. But the final proposal was formulated by the secretariat of Formas and approved by Formas's research council at a meeting on 16 November 2006.

Sture Blomgren
Acting Director General
Swedish Research Council Formas

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Summary

In its appropriations letter for 2005, Formas (the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning) was instructed to formulate by no later than 30 November 2006, in consultation with funding agencies, clients and contractors and the Committee for a Strategy for Sustainable Rural Development (Jo 2004:05), a national strategy for research on rural development.

Rural research is seen to be a thin and fragmented field of research that has not yet quite found its proper forms. The necessary continuity for building up an internationally strong research field is lacking. The strategy for strengthening Swedish rural research that is now being presented by Formas is an attempt to create a platform for a more long-range capacity buildup for research on cultural, social, economic and ecological conditions in rural areas.

The goal is that Swedish researchers should take a more active part in this internationally important research field with greater participation in conferences, research projects and journal publication.

Proposals

1. Thematic strategic initiative

The initiative should consist of a number of projects spanning a number of disciplines, which will probably require the collaboration of several different institutions.

The initiative:

- should include both disciplinary and cross-disciplinary projects
- should include projects of a basic research character as well as more action- and development-oriented projects
- should guarantee a methodical diversity in the research
- should have an international, and preferably a Nordic, association
- should contribute towards competence buildup, for example through postgraduate studies and the participation of post-graduates in undergraduate education
- should include PhD students and preparatory graduate schools in order to create a future generation of researchers with networks and research in the area

A strategic initiative could focus on one of the themes: *The Physical Environment*, *Local Development* and *The New Rurality*.

2. The EU's structural funds

There are good opportunities for researchers to participate within the framework of the EU's structural funds. These opportunities should be taken advantage of in a more systematic manner than previously.

3. Infrastructural measures for building up the research field

Special measures are needed in order to build up and consolidate rural development as a research field in Sweden, assimilate the research that already exists and support relations with the surrounding society:

A national network

Formas sees a need for a network for exchange and collaboration between researchers. The idea is to establish a network that is based on the projects in the strategic initiative, but is also open to other researchers. Accordingly, participation in the network should be one of the tasks within each programme. Important tasks are, for example, conferences, state-of-the-art reports on various areas, and working actively to promote internationalisation of the area. Research results must be communicated both within the research community and to the surrounding society. Such a network could, for example, collaborate with the networks that are created by the EU's rural programmes.

An annual conference

An annual conference on rural research with a focus on Nordic and European conditions should be arranged. This will be a platform for the networking and exchange between researchers which we believe is needed to strengthen the field over time.

4. Internationalisation

Funds are needed to strengthen the international exchange. An example is the funding of postdoc positions in order to give young postdocs from other countries an opportunity to conduct research in Sweden, and so that postdocs from Sweden can work abroad. Enabling foreign researchers to work in Swedish research environments is also important for fostering an exchange with leading international research environments. Such opportunities already exist within the framework of Formas's ordinary grant competitions.

5. Project support

It is important to fund both broad, interdisciplinary programmes and individual scientists working more or less on their own. Project support to rural research can address questions that arise during the course of the strategic initiative as well as initiatives by individual researchers. This is handled within the framework of Formas's big annual call for proposals.





Knowledge concerning rural development

Several attempts have been made to strengthen Swedish rural research during the past ten-year period. This has been done by means of, for instance, state-of-the-art conferences and research reviews. The Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture and Forestry (KSLA) and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) have been the forces behind these efforts, and numerous other institutes and university departments have also been engaged. The fact that so many institutions have been active shows that rural conditions and development are of relevance to the entire spectrum of the natural sciences.

If there is a common denominator for these research syntheses and conferences, it is that rural research is seen to be a thin and fragmented field of research that has not yet quite found its proper forms. The necessary continuity for building up an internationally strong research field is lacking. The strategy for strengthening Swedish rural research that is now being presented by Formas is an attempt to create a platform for a more long-range capacity buildup for research on cultural, social, economic and ecological conditions in rural areas.

The goal is that Swedish researchers should take a more active part in this internationally important research field with greater participation in conferences, research projects and journal publication. This is a goal that lies well in line with Sweden's research policy, formulated for example in "Research for a better life" (Gov. Bill 2004/05:80). At the same time it is important that Swedish rural research produces a knowledge base for decision-makers and other actors in Sweden.

The concept of "rural"

The actual concept of "rural" is a rough lumping-together of a wide variety of environments and activities. A research strategy must be able to handle the wealth and diversity inherent in the concept, and there is no consistent operational definition of the concept of "rural" in Sweden. Rural is an empirical category where general social, economic and ecological processes have their specific outcomes.

Rural is defined in research in the way that is best suited to the research topic in question. Sometimes it is important to include urban areas up to a given size; sometimes it is of greater interest to be able to distinguish truly peripheral sparsely populated areas. Modern statistics, which are based on individuals and households, make it possible to vary boundaries and criteria.

Geographic information systems (GIS) permit a more flexible relationship to the spatial dimension. Both in real life and in research, the trend is towards a more flexible conception of space, and in research it is necessary to be able to vary scale and perspective. A common definition of the concept “rural” would limit the field of inquiry.

Rural studies as a scientific field

What reasons are there then for regarding rural conditions as a special field of study? Aren't we just maintaining an outdated dichotomy between city and country? There is good evidence for the contention that country and city are becoming increasingly similar in social and economic terms. The daily exchange of information that takes place via the media, migration and daily mobility are weaving city and country together. More and more people will divide their time between urban and rural environments. Changes in labour markets, human mobility, multiple dwelling, cultural influences, services, gender roles, health issues, education and the R&D system etc. are not specifically rural phenomena but should be studied in their general context within the social sciences. But if the countryside is a different environment in crucial ways it is reasonable to distinguish it and study the specific outcome of general processes as well. In that case, rural research is analogous with the contributions of urban research towards understanding the metropolitan regions.

Formas believes that there exists such a *rural distinctness* in the sense of a special set of conditions that make it meaningful to treat the countryside as a specific category in research, policy and planning. One such condition is the physical environment, which is typified by the cultivated landscape, the infrastructure and the institutions and social relations that are associated with the way this landscape is used. The other is the sparseness of the population, which creates special conditions for nearly all human activity.

Let us begin with the *physical landscape*, in other words the cultivated landscape, with the built environment and the natural resources typical of it. What we call “rural” is the result of how human activity is organised in this landscape. The land-based industries (agriculture, forestry, reindeer herding and fisheries) are enterprises that also have a mission to manage and conserve natural resources. The production of food and fibres takes place in an environment that is also a habitat for some two million Swedes. Global and long-term environmental assets must be managed, and resource management is linked with local and short-term needs. The number of people earning a livelihood in the traditional land-based industries has been declining for many decades. But natural resources in a broad sense continue to form the basis for all social and economic activity in rural areas.

The other component of “rural distinctness” is the *sparse population*. Sparsely populated must be understood as a relative concept. The sparse population is important because greater distances and poorer accessibility affect virtually all human activity: social relations, enterprise, demographics, etc. It is of fundamental importance that the local population base for various activities is small and that the costs of organising different functions in society are greater in a sparsely populated region. A sparse population and scattered production resources make it difficult to provide commercial and public services. The sparse population also leads to poorer access to infrastructure due to the fact that high fixed investment costs have to be divided among fewer households. However, a sparse population can also be an asset; for example in the tourist industry or in the siting of space research and automobile testing facilities. The growth of digital technology is also altering the situation in sparsely populated regions in a fundamental manner. Certain accessibility problems may disappear or take on another dimension as more and more human interactions become less dependent on geographic distances. We can perhaps speak of the elimination of remoteness as a siting disadvantage.

The need to identify and support rural research is also related to the fact that the social and economic structures in rural areas are often perceived as problems in spatial planning. The ongoing process of urbanisation is leading to a gradual strengthening of the urban perspective. Knowledge of people’s living conditions in urban environments tends to become normative, while rural areas are a kind of backwater whose opportunities and resources are not utilised. There are strong reasons for instead regarding the countryside as *a life-sustaining environment* in more than one sense. The need for productive and sustainable rural areas will probably grow, but the time scale is uncertain.

Another aspect of rural studies as a research field is its international standing. In most EU countries this is an important research field, and there are special sub-programmes for rural research within the EU’s framework programme etc. There are also good opportunities for research within the framework of the EU’s structural funds (Objectives 1–3, Leader+ and Interreg). Sweden has conspicuously low participation in these contexts and therefore few researchers publishing internationally in the field. There may be several reasons for this. In part, it is a reflection of the fact that rural areas and rural policy are accorded greater weight in many other countries. Many signs indicate that rural policy will be an important policy area in the EU for at least the next ten to fifteen years. There is therefore reason to believe in continued positive knowledge development when it comes to social, economic and ecological change in rural areas in Europe. Sweden should participate in this change for several reasons. Without such knowledge development, Sweden cannot participate in formulating EU policy and adapting it

to conditions in rural areas in Sweden. Rural research also contributes to a general understanding of society as a whole.

Finally, as far as reasons for rural research are concerned, the countryside is of deep psychological significance to many people. It forms an important part of our identity regardless of whether research makes any contributions or not. This is another reason for researchers to devote their attention to it.

Formas concludes that good reasons exist to strengthen Swedish rural studies. In this work it is important that rural studies be dealt with as a part of the general development of scientific theory and be addressed at universities and research institutes. One problem is that such studies have often fallen by the wayside and that researchers who work specifically with rural studies have lived like isolated islands in their disciplines. A rural research strategy must therefore be able to both tie in with existing disciplines and create links between different disciplines and between researchers who work with the specific conditions in rural areas. We need to address this later when we arrive at proposals for how rural research can best be promoted.

Rural research today

One way to classify rural research is on the basis of the intended use of the knowledge acquired. Roughly speaking we can say that one kind of research is aimed at understanding and describing change in rural areas as a part of the general acquisition of scientific knowledge. Another kind is research that is more oriented towards action and intervention and makes greater demands on relevance to actors in the private and public sectors. The aim has often been to improve rural conditions or the effectiveness of various interventions. These two kinds of research can exist within one and the same subject sphere, and there are researchers who have worked with both kinds. Another method-related basis for classification is the time horizon of the studies, in other words whether they are longitudinal, based on time series and historical analyses, on discussions of future scenarios, or have a shorter time perspective.

The research that is aimed at understanding conditions in rural areas rather than creating or changing them has mainly developed as an empirical field within the social sciences. These studies are coloured by theories and methods within the different disciplines. Some of this research investigates real local conditions, focusing on individuals/households, villages or districts. Numerous such studies have been conducted by anthropologists, ethnologists, geographers, historians, etc. Another branch of this research is more macro-oriented, quantitative and sometimes model-building. Municipalities, labour markets and regions are some concepts associated with a higher geographical scale level. Here there is an unclear borderline between rural research and its cousin regional research, and here there are also bridges to urban research.

Much of this research falls into the category of what is often called “curiosity research”, in other words it springs from a striving for a deeper understanding rather than a direct need on the part of rural actors. It is primarily within this sphere that critical social research can develop. And there is nothing to prevent this research from also having social relevance and being perceived as beneficial by practitioners.

The more action-oriented approach can be traced back to the need for knowledge in the primary industries, where the obvious purpose of research and education is to help the industries to develop. Action-oriented research often has close relations to industry and to other societal actors who are committed to rural issues and welfare. Within the social sciences, this research has often been of a participatory nature in terms of method, focused on case studies and more or less interventionist. In recent years, action-oriented research has obtained a broader and distincter platform due to the fact that government agencies are satisfying their knowledge needs by commissioning research with high demands on relevance. As a result it has come to include natural resource and ecosystem issues as well as research on, for example, outdoor recreation or entrepreneurship.

Some of the more practically oriented rural research is conducted in evaluations of rural policy initiatives. Research institutes and agencies, such as ITPS (the Swedish Institute for Growth Policy Studies), Nutek (the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth) and SLI (The Swedish Institute for Food and Agricultural Economics), usually base their work on quantitative, statistical methods and economic analyses. Other evaluations tend to combine case studies with goal-oriented evaluations of the outcome in terms of specific indicators, which means they have limited general applicability.



Central issues – a thematic classification

In the following section, rural research is classified into different themes. Formas has tried to identify the “big” issues and central research areas. The different themes should not be considered in isolation; they are intimately interrelated and can be regarded as different ways of viewing the same reality. The presentation is an attempt to sketch the research field without delving into individual projects, environments, persons, etc. There has also been an ambition to avoid labels and not to mention particulars of any kind. There is, of course, a problem with this; it is not a research review and it is not a research programme. Formas’s purpose is to describe the area well enough to be able to justify a commitment to rural research and propose strategic approaches.

1. The physical environment: natural resources and landscapes in production and management

One of the distinguishing features of the countryside is the physical environment characterised by the cultivated landscape with its natural resources, institutions and social relations. Natural resources in a broad sense are the immovable production factors of rural areas that range from the potential represented by biological diversity via the production of wood products, foods and fibres with all their potential for further processing, and on to the values of the natural environment for dwelling, tourism, leisure and so forth.

Today’s use of natural resources mainly rests with companies associated with agriculture, forestry, fishing, horticulture and reindeer herding. This foundation has developed over a very long time in terms of its physical form and has shaped the institutional framework: norms, traditions, organisational forms, activities etc. How these economic activities develop has ramifications for local enterprise and local community life in a broad sense. It also has consequences for the landscape, the attractiveness of places and the use of natural resources for other purposes. The multifunctionality of agriculture is linked to the ability of the land-based industries to exploit and manage the natural resources in the long-term perspective.

Internationally, research on the development of the agricultural sector and food production is vigorous. But in Sweden, research concerned with the agroindustrial complex and the forestry and food industries’ relations with the rural population and demands on production forms, supply of goods, and sometimes even the design of the landscape is poorly developed.



Other research areas have to do with consumer and producer movements and new relations between producers and consumers, how regional and local identities are increasingly being used as brands, and certification systems. This is being studied against the background of economic and political conditions as well as values and ethics. Such research is largely lacking in Sweden, but could contribute to an understanding of the societal and global contexts in which the industries operate. It could also clarify the local and regional importance of the land-based industries and thereby increase interest in them on the part of actors at a municipal and regional level.

New actors operate natural resource-related enterprises such as golf courses, ski hills and tourism based on premises that are different than before. This can sometimes lead to conflicts between different interests and to difficulties in relation to regulatory frameworks and institutional divisions. Conflicts and antagonisms can increase when the population increases, outdoor recreation intensifies and new ways of relating to the land develop. But conflicts can also increase in sparsely populated regions where local resources are becoming an even more important source of livelihood. Experiments with new types of resource management are one way to deal with questions of sustainability that require new kinds of collaboration between local actors and between actors at different societal levels. Like other governance-based initiatives, they highlight questions of legitimacy and control, of new professional roles and of individual and collective learning. They also highlight the question of the relationship between local management and local development.

New business enterprises can offer different opportunities for men and women that can both fortify and modify “gender contracts” and patterns of business succession. Research that describes and interprets the changes in these industries is needed, as is research that develops and evaluates methods and means to support rural development and deal with conflicts. There is plenty of foreign research in this area. Landscape analysis is one way to approach these issues. Differences in views of the landscape and how it is used have been addressed in various studies, and the use of GIS and GPS in landscape analysis is a growing research area. Concrete processes in the landscape are associated with causes in the form of individual decisions, politics, regulatory frameworks, markets, management models, etc.

If we lift our gaze beyond Sweden and Europe and into the future we sense that a whole new agenda will characterise rural Sweden. The global population increase and the growth of populous states will increase pressure on natural resources in Sweden as well. It is likely that the current boom in demand for gas, oil and minerals will be followed by a similar increase in demand for biological materials. As a result, all kinds of relations will be subjected to re-evaluation. What kind of institutional transformation can be expected? Will there be a displacement

or development of traditional rural economic activities? Who will own, who will decide, who will get jobs?

The environmental issue is of the same magnitude. Countless studies all over the world show that human impact is threatening many ecosystems. In Sweden, the evaluation of the work with national environmental objectives shows that five of the environmental objectives cannot be achieved without new policy instruments. At what level should these instruments be designed? Will higher energy prices, the drive to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and climate change create new priorities? What interests will arise surrounding the land if biofuels are to eventually replace parts of today's dependence on oil and if the potential for food production decreases on a global level?

Several of the national environmental objectives specifically concern the rural environment. The relationships between ecosystem and environmental issues on the one hand and issues of production, enterprise and rural development on the other are complex, to say the least. Different scientific perspectives and models intersect, leading both to interdisciplinary approaches and to conflicts in interpretations of the different dimensions of sustainability. A trend towards the integration of the social and natural sciences in rural research can in itself be regarded as progress.

2. Demographic challenges

A demographic approach to rural research is warranted since the size and age distribution of the population are closely related to a number of social and economic factors. Demographics are also important because the variables are fairly stable. Even though migration to and from a given place can vary widely, the basic demographic patterns are more predictable than most other variables.

The population trend is one of the big future issues facing rural Sweden. After decades of out-migration of young people, particularly young women, many rural areas are entering a new phase of "advanced ageing". The proportion of the population that is of working age is declining, at the same time as relatively few children are being born because there are few women of childbearing age. These imbalances are now so great that not even changes in the migration patterns would suffice to reverse the trend. This trend does not apply to all rural areas. In fairly large rural areas, mainly around the big cities and along the coasts, there is a net in-migration of young people, bringing about a rejuvenation of the economy and a larger population base for services.

Many of the rural areas with a declining and ageing population will experience economic stagnation and decline. The available workforce is declining at the same time as the need for personnel in healthcare and elderly care is increasing. The risk is that a shortage of labour will be combined with skewed labour markets.



A projection of today's migration pattern and birth and death rates shows that there will be big changes, and not just in the distant periphery.

The population crisis that large parts of the country are facing will be addressed by political decisions at different levels, by adjustments on the part of households and individuals, by decisions on markets for services and goods, etc. The crisis could lead to new migration patterns, new types of job commuting, etc. Data are for the most part lacking to permit conclusions as to how companies, public organisations, households and individuals will respond to these changes. The research questions have to do with not only the population trend, but also what the effects will be at different levels in society. The changing age structure of the population is changing the premises for local enterprise, for the valuation of different dwelling environments, for the availability of commercial and public services, etc. In peripheral rural areas in particular, this is increasing the need for institutional changes such as new forms of cooperation between private, public and volunteer actors, and new solutions for accessibility to services.

One consequence of the outlined trend is that greater transfers may be needed between different geographic areas in the country in order to even out living standards. An international research exchange on the subject of stagnating economies would be fruitful.

One question that concerns demographics is the importance of holiday home occupancy. Even though it is widespread, holiday home occupancy is not visible in the population statistics and is therefore not addressed in public policy and planning and seldom in research. The efforts that have been made to measure holiday home occupancy show that it greatly increases the population in certain rural areas during certain parts of the year. This naturally affects all kinds of social and economic factors. More pensioners and a greater demand for peace and quiet are factors that may lead to an increase in holiday home occupancy in rural areas.

The outcome is of course different in rural areas where in-migration is able to offset out-migration and ageing of the population. A social and cultural transformation is occurring in these areas as traditional rural industries recede and the advantages of rural living become an asset in large interlinked labour market regions. There is a great deal of experience to draw on here from more densely populated countries where rural areas are undergoing economic rejuvenation as they are populated by a growing well-to-do middle class. Certain rural areas in Europe seem to be enjoying an actual economic upswing due to the in-migration of affluent pensioners who have left the big cities to live out their lives in the country. There is a growing need for regional planning to handle conflicts between different interests.

In summary, population issues represent a powerful force whose consequences have not been adequately researched. There is a great need for knowledge concerning how migration patterns for different groups in society are developing: cultural differences, gender differences, ethnic differences, etc. What variations in development will characterise rural Sweden in the future and how will this compare to the trend in the rest of Europe?

3. Economic development

Current research on local economics and local economic development is based on a variety of perspectives and hypotheses. Small enterprise and entrepreneurship research in particular has tackled the local/regional dimension in general and the non-urban dimension in particular. Here considerable theory development is taking place in international cooperation, and here results are being published to a greater extent than in other fields of Swedish rural research. This research represents an alternative track to the one that has dominated in regional economic research in recent years and has focused on regional enlargement, advantages of scale etc., thereby marginalising rural areas and their potential for independent economic development. It thereby ties in with the specific potential of rural areas as we defined them in the introduction.

Another field of economic research that is well developed and is concerned to a greater degree with sparsely populated regions is that which investigates the social economy. All in all, the economic research shows that successful rural companies are able to create many relationships in an increasingly network-based economy. New technology developed over the past ten years has given companies new means of communicating with markets and suppliers regardless of distance. In tourism and the experience industry in particular, the Internet is playing a crucial role in reaching new customers.

Globalisation entails considerable challenges for rural companies due to competition from low-wage countries, a growth of free trade and increasing non-local ownership. But it also offers new opportunities for those rural companies that are able to combine local roots with the new networks and flows made possible by globalisation. There appear to be great local and regional differences here. Recent studies provide examples of rural companies that successfully capitalise on a formerly natural resource-based local economy or on the place as such. Globalisation can create niches that can become very large.

So even though there is vigorous Swedish research on social economics, small enterprises and entrepreneurship, knowledge concerning rural companies and labour markets is inadequate. The research that is being done today on rural enterprise is largely concerned with companies associated with natural resources, food production or tourism. Here it is possible to forge links with international research. One area has to do with the transformation



of the land-based industries (agriculture, forestry, fisheries and reindeer herding). The concept “production” is being re-evaluated, and with the support of the EU rural development programme new types of production are emerging, for example landscape-related services. A transition has also been under way for many decades from land-based industries to other business activities in the form of part-time farming in combination with other side-lines and perhaps to the “new”, diversified rural economy which the EU has emphasised in recent years. These are long-range processes where traditional agriculture and forestry comprises one leg in a gradual development of new economic activities.

One difficulty faced by rural enterprise is the limited range of choices that follows from population sparsity. Due to distance and population sparsity, companies in rural areas are seldom able to benefit from advantages of scale, clustering or nearness to differentiated labour markets. Small labour markets have low mobility and dynamism. There are simply fewer relationships to choose from, and in a similar manner there may be a scarcity of exchange relationships within, for example, the public sector and commercial services. There is much empirical support for the contention that it is easier to achieve high productivity the denser the environment is. But many rural companies exist in an environment that seems to be able to compensate for these disadvantages. Social relations, culture and corporate climate are examples of conditions that can vary widely between different districts and regions and that have proved to be of importance for the vitality of the companies. Seasonal work in tourism and natural resource-based industries and combinations of enterprises and employments are examples of how local rural labour markets can entail both vulnerability and robustness for the individual. There is also a tradition of a multiplicity of livelihoods in rural areas, as well as historic ties to the primary industries. More detailed knowledge of these labour markets is lacking, however. The importance of the informal economy in rural areas has also not been adequately studied.

There is great potential for developing these research fields. The relationships between economic growth and local social relations, local economic development and sustainable business are not clearly understood. What characterises sustainable business and entrepreneurship in rural areas? How can it be supported? What interests are being met and what groups are being given priority? Neither corporate development nor industrial development are gender-neutral activities, for example. Women and men differ in terms of business activities, networking and work situations. A lack of knowledge and awareness can lead to a strengthening of such differences.

4. Local development

One of the central themes of rural research is the function and development of the local community. This is a theme that appears in many forms and under different designations in different disciplines: place, community, local development, rural development, etc. The common denominator in these

different ways of looking at the local aspect is that it has to do with relations between people who are striving to achieve something (together) within a limited territory. It is largely a question of the institutions of civil society: norms, organisation, resources, etc. All of this naturally has strong links with other themes, not least as previously mentioned with everything to do with the economy.

Questions concerning relations to places, place policy and the importance of places seem to be growing in an increasingly mobile society and as the attractiveness of places is upgraded as a development factor. At the municipal level, block-straddling constellations and “site ideological” parties have become more common. At the local level, community associations and development groups have emerged in recent decades. The demographic changes that we have indicated also require an understanding of what is happening at the individual place. New solutions for services that are based on collaboration between the municipality and local groups are already emerging in sparsely populated regions. Such solutions are based on local involvement and need to be adapted to the needs and resources of the individual place. Many different locally adapted institutional solutions will be needed in the future.

Today there are local groups who become engaged in issues relating to community services, safety, industrial development and housing, as well as cultural activities. Successful groups often have good relations with actors outside the region and extensive networks. Some studies have been done of such groups and their importance, but this is a research area that needs to be developed. Questions of legitimacy, of who in the local community participates and who does not participate in various groupings, and what interests are represented by local groups are important in such research. When responsibility is delegated to local and sub-municipal levels, environmental issues and conflicts of interest at these levels also have to be dealt with. How is this done?

We have already mentioned the landscape and natural resources as an important topic in rural research. One aspect of this ties in clearly with the discussion of the local community. The landscape is in part a common resource that includes right of public access, customs, easements etc. that link people together in the landscape. Land use outside urban areas is largely determined by informal agreements between people. There are often different claims on one and the same piece of land. The sometimes hidden web of relations plays a large role in how the natural resources can be utilised. Rural policy today largely takes the form of support to individual companies, but these questions also concern larger systems. What possibilities are seen by local actors such as entrepreneurs, landowners, residents and part-time residents? What conflicts of interest occur? How does this affect the local community and the social and cultural nature of the place? What is the impact on rural and agricultural policy in the local community?



One sociological research area examines how the local community is affected by impulses from the surrounding world. Commuting possibilities, access to the Internet and in-migration of people from other countries or other parts of Sweden can lead to population increase and new economic opportunities, but also to fragmentation, marginalisation and weaker links within the community. More and new kinds of resources become available to the community as the personal and professional networks available to the local population become more extensive and people with different skills and capital move in. At the same time, people's "living spheres" become more and more compartmentalised both socially and spatially. As a result of increased consumption of media and more long-distance migration, people's lives are formed by outside influences.

This is perhaps most clear in villages and districts with heavy out-commuting. Even though the population may have increased, many of the residents often have most of their relationships somewhere else. These are slow and subtle processes that can fundamentally alter the meaning of "local". How does this affect the rural economy? What are the consequences for social cohesion and shared norms? Questions concerning marginalisation, criminality and political exclusion are important in the international research on rural development. Several Swedish studies of local rural communities provide a picture of how districts and small towns have changed, but there has been no synthesis of them. Swedish participation in international research on how the meaning of "local" can change when it is impacted by outside influences is urgent.

5. Rural policy

Rural areas have long been the object of various political ambitions. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, the Swedish state tried to preserve the dispersed pattern of settlement and to protect and develop all parts of the country and developed instruments for this in the form of municipal tax redistribution, regional policy supports, support to commercial services, etc. At the same time the state tried to promote the transformation of various industries and structures, even though it led to a weakening of rural areas. The concentration and specialisation of agriculture was partly driven by the need to free labour for the growing industries in the cities.

After Sweden's accession to the EU, the different branches of agricultural policy have been woven into the EU's structural policy. Agricultural policy still dominates the budget with many consequences for the structure of the agricultural sector, the landscape, people's livelihoods, biological diversity, etc. It is formulated to a great extent in an international policy sphere where the EU provides the regulatory framework but where there is a clear global agenda in the form of the increasing impact of global markets and global policy through the WTO. The agricultural policy is increasingly swinging towards a rural



policy, which has contributed to renewed interest in local development. Project culture, development thinking, partnership, cross-border approaches, technical and institutional renewal are some phenomena which are often described as endogenous processes even though there is also a clear political/ideological superstructure and concrete development programmes that are launched at the national or EU level.

Swedish rural policy finds itself in a period of uncertainty. There has been a slow transition from a dominant “Let all of Sweden live” policy to a conviction that Sweden must focus on growth and growth regions. Policy initiatives to promote competitiveness, innovation etc. are based on the assumption that labour markets in metropolitan regions are more dynamic, and economies of scale have a broad influence. At the same time, agricultural policy persists in its established forms such as rural support, support to commercial services, etc. The EU’s rural policy, with its structural programmes and the EU Rural Development Programme dominated by support for the transformation of agriculture, has constituted a cornerstone that has brought billions of kronor of subsidies to rural Sweden.

In recent years, territorial strategies have been developed for rural development, above on the initiative of the EU. The European cohesion policy underlies this, along with a new emphasis on the distinctness of rural areas. As already mentioned, social relations, local culture and corporate climate vary widely between districts and regions. Culture and norms are formed over time, and each district and region has its history. In a territorially oriented policy, the individual region’s or district’s characteristic assets, its problems and its potential are seen as points of departure, and an attempt is made to both support general processes that contribute to better conditions for development and to liberate and develop local resources, preferably by building further on what is perceived as being characteristic of the area. This means emphasising social processes and relations that can create synergies and strengthen economic growth in the territory. Cross-sectoral partnerships, networks and joint projects are recommended as policy instruments. Territorial initiatives are ideally based on the assumption that local factors can be linked up to regional, national and global levels. How will sectoral initiatives that increase regional imbalances and territorial initiatives be handled within the framework of the development policy? To what extent and how do partnerships and networks contribute to synergies and learning? It is important to underscore the important role of the municipalities in managing and developing the community based on a territorial approach with local resources and on directly elected political mandates.

Rural research that is focused on policy must be able to tackle the big issues relating to the long-term utilisation of the landscape in a global perspective. It must establish relations to research on climate change, on the future utilisation of food and fibres, on the international hierarchy of power when it comes to production

methods and production resources, etc. One of the most important tasks of the research will be to generate knowledge that can contribute to extending the perspective of decision-makers at various levels.

At the same time, rural research focused on policy must tackle practical questions in the borderland to evaluation. An independent critical review of all the funds that go to rural industries and the rural population must be established. It is vital that this review be linked to the extensive international research that exists around the EU programmes. What effect is obtained from the big investments that are made, not least within the Rural Development Programme? In the upcoming programme, Swedish rural development policy will, via the Leader programme, move towards a more territorially oriented policy for rural development. How are EU decisions translated at the national, regional and local levels into concrete action in the landscape? What interests are represented and what are the driving forces? Studies of the long-term effects of political initiatives are unusual in Sweden, as are multidisciplinary studies of such effects. Swedish participation in international comparative research is of great importance here.

When it comes to rural areas, such research is particularly relevant in the light of hopes for management that brings together different sectors and levels of society. There is an ideological trend from the strong state intervention in the local community of the 1970s to the early 21st century's attempts to return decision-making to the community via local management in partnerships and networks. Is this a retreat by the state or simply a new form of state control? What dependencies and vulnerabilities are being built up in the time-limited projects? The policy studies must also contain a clear democracy aspect. How does citizen influence move between different groups and political levels?



6. The new rurality

The time dimension is present in all the themes we have described. The questions have to do with the situation at a given point in time, changes over a given period, time series and historical analyses or discussions of future scenarios. But the subheading in the theme is always trying to figure out what the future will be like and how it can be influenced.

The thematic overview seems to suggest a shift of perspective on rural areas. A fruitful perspective seems to be to view the countryside as a complement to the city. In this perspective, the countryside is not primarily an environment for those who live there, but rather an environment that contains a number of functions that are needed in society in general. The urban-rural relationship is changing. City and country are growing closer together in many ways, but that does not mean they are becoming the same, but rather complementary in new ways. The “new rurality” finally emerges as an independent theme where we

can gather together examples of the emerging roles of rural areas in a national and international perspective.

Production in the land-based industries is perhaps the most obvious of these roles, including the traditional production of food, fibres, energy, wood products and paper, which is now being extended to include biological diversity, tourism, health and landscape. Agriculture and forestry are undergoing rapid rationalisation, which is reducing the number of active farmers and resulting in large changes in the physical landscape. These processes are proceeding at very different paces in different parts of the country. In the south it is taking the form of a continued structural transformation in the same direction as in recent decades, while further north the traditional industries are tending to disappear or be transformed and take on new roles. This is a formative change that raises questions concerning the future use of the landscape.

The new land use pattern that is emerging is based on natural resources in a broader sense. Interest in the countryside as a dwelling environment has been growing for a long time, and there is a migration of people from urban to rural areas. There are several trends here: Middle-class people who move from the big cities to exclusive rural environments within commuting distance; low-income households who are looking for cheaper housing; newly retired people who are living in their holiday homes for a longer part of the year; etc. These trends are also international, and Swedish rural areas are in increasing demand as an environment for recreation, health, dwelling, tourism, etc. Opportunities are opening up here that are specifically Nordic where the complementary characteristics, sparse population and close access to Nature of rural areas comprise the driving force. Clear examples of the attractiveness of these qualities can be found in the growth of ski tourism and the emergence of airparks and ice tourism, but also in the steady increase in the number of Dutchmen and Germans who live all or parts of the year in rural areas of Sweden.

Other aspects of the new rurality are new forms of transport and changes in mobility. In just one generation, both physical and virtual mobility have increased enormously. Computers, mobile phones and falling prices of long journeys have lifted people out of their local contexts and multiplied their long-distance relations. This is enabling them to live a divided life in both rural and urban settings. It is also transforming relations between people in the local community. As yet this is an unexplored field where many myths prevail. Everyday contacts are still the most important ones, and paradoxically many people seem to be even more homebound.

The IT trend can mean a great deal in making the country a complement to the city. On the one hand it is leading to a re-centralisation of services that have been distributed in the



community. We see this for example within various state agencies such as labour exchanges, social insurance offices, post offices and police stations, which are being closed in small towns.

On the other hand, digital technology is increasing accessibility to information and services in rural areas. A long period of geographic concentration is in the process of being complemented or replaced by a period when the availability of public and private services, information, culture etc. is being decoupled from the location of the individual. Public services may become available to citizens from virtually anywhere. What long-term consequences will this have for the local community?

Digital technology is also contributing to learning and knowledge acquisition in rural areas. Today's distance instruction, learning centres and outreach college courses are part of a trend that is equalising the opportunities for learning between city and country. Some rural areas are also benefiting from an influx of knowledge and skills due to the in-migration of new groups of permanent or part-time residents. Different knowledge needs also arise in rural areas because the surroundings are different and there are other problems to be solved.

The new rurality also includes changes that we are vaguely aware of but that have not yet penetrated into our consciousness. Climate change and higher energy prices raise questions concerning how we can live and work in a community with a minimum of transport and travel. This is almost a non-issue today when increased daily travel is a regional policy objective. The scattered pattern of settlement in a sparsely populated landscape is not a probable future scenario and scarcely a satisfactory vision.

At the same time it arouses questions concerning the use of the landscape and natural resources. Conditions can change quickly for the land-based industries in a way we cannot predict today. The picture that dominates in the media, in the public awareness and in politics and planning is that rural Sweden has seen its best days and can now look forward to gradual stagnation due to the fact that its resources are no longer in demand. It is safe to say that this is little more than a parenthesis in history and that the crucial importance of biological resources will become increasingly obvious with increasing global population growth and climate change. Sparsity of population, which in the short-term economic perspective is primarily a problem, may soon come to be seen as a vital asset because it means relatively bountiful biological resources. How this ultimately affects human activities in the landscape is something we know relatively little about.



Strategic considerations

Formas's fundamental premise is that research should be of benefit to society. In order for research to be justified it must offer new perspectives and new knowledge and be able to communicate them to the surrounding society. To do this it must be possible to conduct research in environments that promote long-term theory development and knowledge acquisition with demands on generalisability, scientific validity and openness. Researchers must be able to pick their own topics. At the same time they must be able to meet the expectations that emerge in the surrounding society. The legitimacy and usefulness of the research is linked to its ability to interact with practitioners and decision-makers.

The two-fold task of social research is to gather facts on various social phenomena and to participate towards a gradually deeper understanding of how society changes. By testing and challenging prevailing attitudes, research has an "enlightening" function that changes the way we see things. Even though the results of social research may appear to be difficult to apply immediately, they may very well lead to changes in the long term. Concepts from the social sciences and humanities are introduced into the public discussion, often with a slight shift in meaning. An example relevant to rural research is the concept "social capital", which is controversial in the research world, but which has become widespread in the public debate in talking about the importance of trust in human relations. Other concepts are networks, innovations and perhaps even local management.

But universities can also make more direct contributions to development processes. They are increasingly expected to participate in development- and action-oriented activities in specific and delimited contexts. Research is seen as a means not only for strengthening national competitiveness, but also for regional and local development and growth. At the same time it is becoming increasingly clear that the challenges facing society today are complex and stem in part from many decades of major technical and scientific advances. The reliance of postwar society on science to pave the way for the steady forward march of progress by producing authoritative and general knowledge has largely faltered.

Due to the complexity of the issues facing society and demands for action in dealing with them, universities today must tackle problems that transcend the traditional disciplinary categories. They require cross- and multidisciplinary collaboration between

researchers as well as with non-academic actors. At the same time there is a risk that knowledge acquisition will be dominated by specific interests, and that narrow collaborations and consensus will take over. There is also a risk that the ability of research to challenge prevailing paradigms will be lost in action-oriented research that becomes too local, too instrumental and too focused on short-term problem solving.

Initiatives focusing on the relationships between research, development and education

The Government has expressed the opinion that there is a need for a national strategy for rural research. This is supported by the overviews that have been conducted of the area during the past ten years. Swedish rural research is a thin field with little international publication and limited participation in joint international research projects.

Some state-of-the-art conferences have also been held, for example under the auspices of the Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture and Forestry (KSLA), that have shown that Swedish rural research is limited in extent compared with the situation in many other European countries and that it has a weak international position.

Swedish rural research is conducted within different disciplines at universities and research institutes, and exchange between them is fairly limited. There is no setting or institution that acts as a node with a long-term responsibility for coordination and exchange between researchers. Nor is there any established forum where research results are presented, or any Swedish journal for this purpose. At the same time, researchers from many different disciplines and institutions have been active in those conferences that have been arranged. This shows that rural conditions and rural development are of relevance to the entire spectrum of the natural sciences.

Formas believes that a more systematic buildup of knowledge regarding cultural, social, economic and ecological conditions in rural areas could play an important role both in the sciences and in the future development of rural areas in Sweden. Natural resource management in a broad sense will emerge as a crucial issue.

Formas sees a need for:

- critical, theory-generating research on cultural, social and economic changes in rural areas
- development- and action-oriented research that supports, reviews and participates in development initiatives and innovations that can contribute to sustainable rural development
- multi- and cross-disciplinary research aimed at natural resource management and rural social development
- practical and empirically oriented research that can inform politicians and other actors of the variables involved and the consequences of different actions

- establishment of a network that creates venues for exchange and collaboration between researchers from different disciplines and research institutions

An initiative to promote Swedish rural research needs to:

- handle disciplinary research while forging links across the disciplinary boundaries and creating both interdisciplinary and inter-institutional research groups
- guarantee a high level of methodical diversity in the research, including both different disciplines and different projects within the same discipline
- be long-term and create continuity over a long period of time – otherwise it is not possible to build up a strong research field, which should be highly multi- and cross-disciplinary
- enable Swedish researchers to take a more active part in international conferences on rural research, research projects and journal publication. Swedish research needs to link up with EU research programmes and other international research. There is vigorous international research which we all have reason to take note of, and the EU's calls for proposals and forums, for example the European Society for Rural Sociology, can be seen as engines driving this research. They open up possibilities for funding and academic advancement.
- be associated with universities so that the research is linked to both undergraduate and graduate studies.

Today's situation is that rural research, like most other research areas, *has to seek funding via general calls for proposals*, where it is decided whether there are qualified researchers and topics with sufficient relevance. This has not given rise to vital rural research.

A somewhat larger ambition is one or *more targeted calls for proposals*. This would enable the field to attract greater interest, but there is a great risk that it could end up being a one-off initiative that will not have the desirable long-range effect. Some form of more long-term support appears to be needed. It could be *environment support*, which means that already existing environments get a larger and more solid base for establishing positions and running projects. It could also be programme support, which is support for large research programmes containing several projects and collaboration between different environments. The most institutionalised form of competence buildup would be environment support in the form of establishment of some kind of centre, institute or institution with national responsibility.

International outlook

There is strong institutional establishment of this kind in the neighbouring Nordic countries. The Research Council of Norway has a long-term commitment to the *Norwegian Centre for Rural Research* (Norsk Senter for Bygdeforskning), an independent research foundation formed in 2001 that cooperates in its educational programmes with the Norwegian University of

Science and Technology, NTNU. The Norwegian Centre for Rural Research has existed in different organisational forms since 1982 and has played an important role as a hub for rural research. The foundation has some 40 employees and spans the R&D field with broad funding. The Norwegian Centre for Rural research has a clear mission to develop and maintain theoretical and methodological research competence. At the same time they execute development assignments for the public sector and rural organisations.

In Finland there is the *Ruralia Institute*, which is an independent institute associated with the University of Helsinki. The institute has about 100 employees and works with research, university education and development projects. The institute has an interdisciplinary character with professorships in both the social and natural sciences.

In Scotland, the *Arkleton Centre for Rural Development Research* at Aberdeen University has played a similar role for many years. In Wales there is the *Institute of Rural Studies* at the University of Aberystwyth.

All of these institutes have participated in EU-funded rural research, and their research results have led to the emergence of a nascent body of specifically rural research focusing on the specific conditions in Northern Europe.

In Canada, the *Canadian Rural Restructuring Foundation* (CFFR) has for several decades played a coordinating role for rural research in Canada and has arranged periodical conferences to foster communication with practitioners all over the country.

What unites these institutes is that they have a broad mandate aside from agriculture. There are also a variety of institutes and centres at universities in the rest of Europe, but they are more closely associated with agriculture. The UK occupies an intermediate position with well developed rural research across the entire field. But rural research in the UK is concerned largely with growth issues, which makes it very similar to urban research. It explores pressure on various kinds of resources, conflicts of interest, physical planning, rapid social change, etc.

It seems as if the Nordic situation – dominated by a sparse population, limited prospects for food production, a harsher climate, declining population etc. – gives rise to a search for knowledge of the type pursued at the institutes. They are research-based, but at the same time play an active role in the rural areas' own search for knowledge. They are in demand on a broad front and at different levels in their respective countries.

Proposals

Would a rural research institute in Sweden be able to meet the goals set up by Formas? There is undoubtedly a need for some kind of hub in Swedish rural research. Such a hub could, like

its Nordic colleagues, encompass research, postgraduate studies, links to undergraduate studies and relations with the surrounding society. Nevertheless, Formas believes that founding an institute is the wrong way to go, at least at the present time. The rural research that exists in Sweden is mainly conducted at universities, where it is fertilised by the different disciplines. There is a potential in this that is worth building further on. The risk is that establishing an institute or giving overall coordination responsibility to a specific institution will marginalise research in other environments. Rural research may come to be perceived as the exclusive reserve of the specific institution. The question is instead how the resources that exist today can be brought together into a strong research field.



This leads us to the following proposals:

1. Thematic strategic campaign

The initiative should consist of a number of projects spanning a number of disciplines, which will probably require the collaboration of several different institutions.

The initiative:

- should include both disciplinary and cross-disciplinary projects
- should include projects of a basic research character as well as more action- and development-oriented projects
- should guarantee a methodical diversity in the research
- should have an international, and preferably a Nordic, association
- should contribute towards competence buildup, for example through postgraduate studies and the participation of post-graduates in undergraduate education
- should include PhD students and preparatory graduate schools in order to create a future generation of researchers with networks and research in the area

A strategic initiative could focus on one of the themes: *The Physical Environment*, *Local Development* and *The New Rurality*.

2. The EU's structural funds

There are good opportunities for researchers to participate within the framework of the EU's structural funds. These opportunities should be taken advantage of in a more systematic manner than previously.

3. infrastructural measures for building up the research field

Special measures are needed in order to build up and consolidate rural development as a research field in Sweden, assimilate the research that already exists and support relations with the surrounding society:

A national network

Formas sees a need for a network for exchange and collaboration between researchers. The idea is to establish a network that is

based on the projects in the strategic initiative, but is also open to other researchers. Accordingly, participation in the network should be one of the tasks within each programme. Important tasks are, for example, conferences, state-of-the-art reports on various areas, and working actively to promote internationalisation of the area. Research results must be communicated both within the research community and to the surrounding society. Such a network could, for example, collaborate with the networks that are created by the EU's rural programmes.

An annual conference

An annual conference on rural research with a focus on Nordic and European conditions should be arranged. This will be a platform for the networking and exchange between researchers which we believe is needed to strengthen the field over time.

4. Internationalisation

Funds are needed to strengthen the international exchange. An example is the funding of postdoc positions in order to give young postdocs from other countries an opportunity to conduct research in Sweden, and so that postdocs from Sweden can work abroad. Enabling foreign researchers to work in Swedish research environments is also important for fostering an exchange with leading international research environments. Such opportunities already exist within the framework of Formas's ordinary grant competitions.

5. Project support

It is important to fund both broad, interdisciplinary programmes and individual scientists working more or less on their own. Project support to rural research can address questions that arise during the course of the strategic initiative as well as initiatives by individual researchers. This is handled within the framework of Formas's big annual call for proposals.

Formas, the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning, is a governmental research-funding agency. Formas encourages and supports scientifically significant research related to sustainable development.



Forskningsrådet för miljö, areella näringar och samhällsbyggande, Formas
*The Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and
Spatial Planning*

Box 1206, SE-111 82 Stockholm, Sweden. Visitors: Kungsbron 21
Phone: +46 (0)8 775 40 00, Fax: +46 (0)8 775 40 10
E-mail: info@formas.se, www.formas.se