



Living the rural in a shrinking economy:

Household adaptions to economic and demographic decline in an
Ostrobothnian village

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on adaptive strategies among households and individual in Lappfjärd, a village in Kristinestad municipality, Southern Ostrobothnia. The village, located approximately 100 km south of the regional centre of Ostrobothnia, is facing both economic and demographic decline. As in society in general, the farms are becoming bigger and more specialized, while the people in the farming business are diminishing in number. Some people leave, some people stay and work while others stay but choose to commute to work.

Almost everyone leaves the village at some point - often in order to get an education - but only some come back to stay permanently. People return because of their roots, their family, their farms, and because of the strong community spirit in the village. Some of these people choose to commute relatively long distances, in order to live where their roots are, but at the same time have a fairly paid job and a broader network. Many people have found creative solutions e.g. by working part-time at the family company in the village, while having another apartment in a larger city.

My analysis deals with the commuting middle class: how do they deal with the contradictions between seeking higher living standards as commuters and living the rural life in a relatively far away village? Do these people live in a relative prosperity compared to the other inhabitants in the village? As a general feature in of late modern countries, a "neo-rural middle class" can be found near larger cities, moving out of the cities in order to live "the rural idyll" with more space and more comfortable housing. In Lappfjärd there are some who come from the capital-region or from abroad, who have chosen to move to Lappfjärd almost at random, just with the desire to find a calm place with beautiful nature. This pattern is however not so common and most people living in the village are either born there or married to someone who was born there. The starting-point for these neo-rural people in proximity to the cities is different from the experience of the commuting middle

class in a more peripheral village such as Lappfjärd, but these two groups might still have something in common.

2. The material

The research in Lappfjärd is part of a bigger project called *The Multifunctional Countryside*, at the department for rural studies at Åbo Akademi in Vaasa. The purpose of the Lappfjärd-project is to get a clearer picture of how people live in a village in Ostrobothnia today, and get to know how different groups of people look at the present, future and development of the village. We hope to gain several propositions insights on how the village could be developed, how life could be made better for the people living there, and how the village could be made more attractive for potential new inhabitants.

The paper is mainly based on interviews with individuals and families in Lappfjärd in 2008, but also partially on my own observations in the village. I made three trips to Lappfjärd during the autumn and winter of 2008, and stayed overnight in a cottage in the village. The interviews were carried out with one or two people from each household. The questions were structured around themes such as the family, housing, mobility, work, the village, its development and future. The interviews are supposed to be a more anthropological contribution, to complement already existing statistics.

The Lappfjärd-project is not yet completed, and people from each of the defined “categories” have not yet been interviewed. Most people interviewed up to this point can be seen as middle class people, which is why this paper focuses on them. It is also not yet possible to make a more wide ranging comparison between the middle class and other classes, such as the working class. The “commuting middle class” is therefore analyzed here without any greater reference to any of the other classes.

The first problem was in deciding who would be included in the middle class since the distinction between different social classes is far from clear nowadays and there is no clear definition on who is middle class and who is not. It is difficult to know whether to classify only according to education, career and work related factors or to include others such as people's lifestyles and hobbies. The "middle class" in this paper consists of people with a higher level of education, with jobs more or less corresponding to this level of education, living either alone or with other family members.

3. The neo-rural middle class

Over the course of recent decades young people, and particularly young women have been moving from the countryside into the cities, leading to low birth rates and a decreasing aging population in the countryside. At the same time a reverse phenomenon can be seen in the countryside near bigger cities: counter urbanization. The population in some parts of the countryside increases due to city dwellers moving out into the countryside (Tillberg Mattson 2004). Traditional theories in migration research, seeing work as the most important cause behind migration, can not explain this counter urbanization. As a consequence, research has become more and more concentrated on reasons related to life quality. According to Tillberg Mattson (2004) there is research suggesting that immaterial needs are becoming increasingly important in wealthy countries starting to reach a material saturation. When it comes to housing, such needs may include a beautiful environment, a rich cultural life and the possibility to enjoy their hobbies. The countryside is also usually seen as a good environment for children.

City dwellers in Finland are often interested in the countryside and many of them own a cottage on the countryside. Besides, most urban Finns have roots in the countryside because of Finland's long history as an agricultural society. However, urban people interpret the rural landscape in a different way from country dwellers. For urban people the image of the countryside is often romanticized and connected to childhood memories. They seek a

peaceful environment to spend their free time in, the chance to become “one” with nature and to lead a freer and more healthy lifestyle, whereas for country dwellers the environment of the countryside is both their home and workplace, and they tend to embrace a more tamed landscape rather than nature in its wild, romantic form. (Silvasti 2003).

The people who started the counter urbanization movement were middle class people with anti-urban ideals. They see the countryside as a place where it is possible to lead an authentic life without the stress of the cities. Regardless of the aim to live real country life, the neo-rural middle class usually maintains a strong connection to the city and to the modern network society, through their work for instance. They are not only members of the local society, but also a more extended society (Andersson 2007). An underlying factor to this is that the income of the middle class has risen above a level that permits more spending on hobbies and lifestyle (Brandt & Eklund 2007).

This is the case for areas of countryside near larger urban centers. The situation in Lappfjärd, a village in the more peripheral countryside, is however different, or even reversed. The number of people, particularly of young people, is decreasing since so many of them move to Vaasa or to other large cities.

4. Lappfjärd and its middle class

Lappfjärd is a village of approximately 1,830 inhabitants (www.lappfjard.fi). The number of Swedish-speaking people is larger than that of the Finnish-speaking population. Lappfjärd used to be an independent rural municipality, but was merged with Kristinestad and three other rural municipalities in 1973. Potato cultivation and processing has played a big part in the village since the 70s, and this also provides work for transport companies, of which there are several in Lappfjärd. The farms are however getting larger and less people are involved in the cultivation. Some former farmers have for example started packing potatoes instead of cultivating them or have become entrepreneurs in other sectors, but

many have decided to quit and find a job elsewhere. In addition to the general structural changes in agriculture, an industrial crisis resulting from the economic recession of the 90s can be seen as a reason for economic decline in the village.

There are few jobs for highly educated people in the municipality. According to information from the municipality, the women of Kristinestad give birth to more children than women in Finland in general, but the women are too few to make a significant difference on the demographics. The rate of mortality in the village is still higher than the birth rate. Everybody recognizes that the biggest problem for the village is that people move away because there are too few jobs. The local government points out another problem; a shortage of new houses:

You could say that there is a little shortage of houses in Kristinestad. Both for the newcomers and for those already living here, because the production of new houses is very low, and there is always the category wanting to move into a new house.

In the interviews, work, more specifically work for both the men and the women of the families, is often mentioned as the main reason to stay or to leave the village. There are however 500 commuters living in Kristinestad. Most of them work in the neighboring municipalities, but about 100 commute all the way to Vaasa.

5. The community spirit

As is usually the case in the more peripheral countryside regions, most of the inhabitants are born in the village where they live and with which they have strong connections through family or farms. That, and a strong community spirit, gives a sense of belonging. A man living on his home farm in Lappfjärd, but working elsewhere, explains why he still lives in the village:

And it is not only the farm that keeps me here. It is that you feel like a Lappfjärd-inhabitant, and as long as you can manage here, and have a job not

too far away. The solidarity. That you feel like a Lappfjärd-inhabitant [...] and as we discussed earlier it is much because of the organizations.

This sense of belong is thus something that keeps the commuters in Lappfjärd, and for them the sense of belonging is connected to leisure time spent in the village. The people living in the village are relatively active during their free time. There are several different social organizations in the village, such as different choruses, a youth organization and a “village movement organization” for arranging events and dealing with problems in the village. The importance of lifestyle and leisure is acknowledged by an employee at the municipality:

-What keeps the commuting people here then?

In that case it's the free time. That we have people and free time activities here. You have to keep in mind that the free time is a part of the politics.

Something else he mentions is that people notice that it is much more convenient to live in the home village if they have children. They have their own parents there to help with the children and there is good childcare in both languages (Finnish and Swedish) in the municipality.

The community spirit in Lappfjärd is often said to be strong. Sometimes it is described as being almost too strong. As one young girl who has moved away because of her studies describes it:

The Lappfjärd-inhabitants, they are like 'yei, I live in Lappfjärd' [...] that Lappfjärd is really the place to be, that... I am in a way relieved to get away from that a bit. I do think that Lappfjärd is...my, yes my home village, but...I think it is stupid that they have to see Lappfjärd as a village separate from everything else, that it is not whole Kristinestad but just that village. That I see as a bit strange sometimes [...]

Not everyone is involved in the local social organizations. Those who are seem to be people who spend mainly their free time in the village, and mostly Swedish-speaking. For example some farmers and entrepreneurs claim that they don't have time to participate, and they don't have the same experience of the strong community spirit.

You see them on the Lappfjärd-day, the inhabitants, and then in the supermarket [but not otherwise].

In addition to the roots and sense of belonging, the middle class in Lappfjärd also expresses values that can be compared to the values of the neo-rural middle class, such as a desire for silence, space and a good environment for children, in opposition to the noisy and stressful life in cities:

Somehow the lifestyle is more relaxed here, and the houses are not so close to each other. What one misses here sometimes are street lights, since it is so dark here.

Now that I got involved in the politics I'm going to do my best to make the youth like it here. It is no joy and happiness to live in the big cities.

Sometimes I've suggested, mostly as a joke that people from Helsinki could come here to work on the hay-fields and they could pay, say, 100 euro a day for it. It's mostly a joke, but if you live in the stressful city...every day, I think that if they would get to the countryside it would be incredibly good therapy for them [...] here we have space and fresh air.

A completely different category, corresponding more to the picture of the neo-rural middleclass, consists of “lifestyle people” moving to the municipality of Kristinestad just because of the attractive environment and relatively cheap housing alternatives:

Yes, articles in newspapers note that there are these kinds of people too. Simply because this [living in Kristinestad] feels good. And there are people I know personally who have come here on vacation and just felt that ‘we’re moving here’, and then the truck with their stuff comes a month later.

The municipality of Kristinestad, where Lappfjärd is situated, already offers traditional middle class hobbies such as sailing, fishing and hunting, while horse riding is also becoming more and more popular. There is some small scale nature tourism and the landscape is considered beautiful, so there is the potential to attract even more middle class people from outside the municipality.

6. Your home village or your career – or both?

-*Do you think it is worth commuting 100 km to work?*

Because I like my job, yes. And then, if you have a job with a better income, it is clear. There is work here too. I could get some kind of a job here too, but you have certain requirements.

Commuting is a result of people deciding to stay in the village, but striving for a career and not settling for any job available there. Most jobs for people with a higher level of education are in bigger cities, and as a consequence we have a commuting middle class in villages such as Lappfjärd. Among the young people living in the village or planning to return, working from Lappfjärd, even if the job is relatively far away, is something that can be dealt with. For example, one young man, whose place of work is in a municipality nearby, works from home some of time through the internet or phone, and regards this as a possibility for other people in the village too. A young girl studying in Vaasa at the moment is considering moving back, if not to the village, then at least to the municipality of Kristinestad. Commuting is not an impossible alternative for her either, and also she mentions the potential for using technology to work from home:

-*And you think it would be worth it commuting from there [the village]?*

Yes. It is...you can do a lot of things through the internet and telephone, so you might not have to go every day...drive [to work]. So if it were like that it wouldn't be such a big deal. My dad has worked like that for...almost 10 years maybe...so, driven [to work]. He has his office in Vaasa, but he drives around to a lot of other places too."

The mobility in and out of the village is big, largely because the jobs and services are elsewhere. However there is one case of person commuting to Lappfjärd from Vaasa. This is a man who lives in Vaasa but spends two or three days a week in the village, because of his involvement in the family company situated in Lappfjärd. In another family where the husband works in the family company in Lappfjärd and the wife in Vaasa, the solution was to have a house in Lappfjärd and an apartment in Vaasa and to move between these two homes. The mobility and flexibility of the people in the village is greater than one might

think, the solutions for living and working in different places can be quite creative. Not everyone takes the easy way out and moves to where the jobs are.

For some people, commuting is more involuntary. A farmer, whose wife had to start commuting every day when Kristinestad-hospital was closed down and her job moved to Vasa, believes that things will be tougher now, especially with no one taking over the farm. The commuter bus leaves 5 am and comes back around 5 pm. The family is tied up in Lappfjärd by the farm, but the wife needs to keep her job.

-Have you ever thought about living anywhere else?

No, we haven't done that. Not at all. The times are a bit hard now since she [his wife] started working in Vaasa, but me, I still have 10 years left until I get retired, so we have to think it over a bit.

After all commuting long distances is usually a more or less temporary solution, and not something you do your whole working life. There are many factors determining whether someone decides to start commuting or not. These include the family situation (if there are small children for example), the housing situation and the economical situation. The commuting itself is naturally not something that people aim to do. It is the combination of a satisfying job and living environment that leads to commuting.

Because the hospital has closed, many commute daily to Vaasa, or maybe they stay there a couple of nights and then come home. Some have an apartment there. It is not exactly a lot of fun, especially if you have...it depends naturally on what kind of family you have, if you have small children it is tricky. For us it works well since our daughter can take care of herself, but of course it isn't something you aim to do.

According to one inhabitant people often choose the village instead of a well paid job when they get tired of commuting.

[...] people drive even longer ways every day from here [...] there are even people going all the way to Vaasa, and some go to Pori, but the driving is quite

heavy, and at some point, if the economy permits, people choose to earn a little less and live here [switch to a job with a lower salary near the village].

It is however difficult to know how many choose if possible to switch to another job closer to the village and how many choose to move where the job is. Especially for those people with a high level of education, their job is important, and the contradiction between making a career and living the rural lifestyle in their home village can be big. On the other hand this can also be a profitable combination. Though without having examined any statistics, my general impression is that the commuting middle class lives in relative prosperity. They combine a well paid job and cheaper housing than in bigger cities. Besides, almost all of the interviewed persons in Lappfjärd live either on the family farm or have bought or inherited the land from relatives, which makes acquiring a house much cheaper.

Another characteristic tendency of the commuters is that they are often some kind of “[community leaders](#) leaders within the community”. In a similar way as the neo-rural people, the commuters in Lappfjärd combine living on the countryside with an extended network, consisting of contacts with larger cities and people all around Finland as well as abroad. Because of this, the commuters bring knowledge and expertise from the outside world to the village. This can also be seen in the municipality politics. Several inhabitants of Lappfjärd expressed their discontentment in the “old foxes” who have ruled local politics for a long time, and support a younger candidate with a broader point of view instead. It could be said that a regime change is on its way in municipal politics. The older men are more and more being edged aside by younger people, often from the commuting middle class and also often by women.

7. Conclusions

Lappfjärd is a much more “closed” community than the areas near bigger cities. Most inhabitants have strong connections to the village in the shape of family ties and farms, or

an identity connected to the organizations and activities in Lappfjärd. Lappfjärd is not just “any little countryside village” for them - it is their village, the place where they come from, and where they are deeply rooted, even though the networks of especially the commuting middle class reach all around Finland and abroad. There is however also a small group of people moving in from other parts of the country, for example the capital region, even though they have not had anything whatsoever to do with the village before, and so correspond more to the description of the neo-rural middle class. There are two types of middleclass in Lappfjärd: one with a strong connection to the village, trough family, friends and farms, and the other purely lifestyle class for whom the actual place is not that important as long as the environment is pleasant and they have the possibility to practice their hobbies. The “lifestyle class” still consists of only a few people, whereas the group with strong roots is the dominant one. These two groups of people still have some things in common, such as a house in the countryside, a job in the city and the same kind of values: a less stressful environment to live in, open space, peace and quiet, as well as a healthy, safe environment for their kids to grow up in.

The distinguishing factor for the first category is the importance of roots and community spirit. The strong community spirit in Lappfjärd can be both a pro and con in the development of the village. On one hand it makes people stay and return to the village, because they have good memories of the activities and social organizations and feel at home in the village, but it can also make it harder for strangers to adapt to the community, and impose restrictions on the open mindedness towards cooperation with others from outside the village. It is possible that Lappfjärd could attract more “lifestyle people” prepared to commute or work from home in exchange to living in a nice environment, by offering more new houses, a better infrastructure when it comes to bike roads, better communications to Helsinki for instance, and of course more work for well educated, or at least more possibilities for them to work from home, such as improvements in telecommunications infrastructure. Work is of course very important in attracting people to the region, but one should not forget the importance of other factors such as values and hobbies. In the countryside around Lappfjärd it is possible to practice typical middle class hobbies such as sailing and hunting, and even riding is on the up. The numerous social

organizations arrange different types of activities for people of all ages. In addition, the landscape is considered beautiful and unique, and there already is some small scale tourism in the village.

In many cases the decision whether to stay or to go seems to imply a choice between the home village and a better paid job corresponding to a higher level of education. For certain people it is possible to choose both, often by commuting to work, but also for example by working from home, or by having two residences – one in the village and another where the job is. Commuting longer distance is however mostly seen as a temporary solution, or as a certain phase in one's working life. Sometimes commuting is not even possible, at least not for both parents in a family with small children. What I here call the commuting middle class is for that reason not a consistent group. People can move in and out of this category as their work and living conditions change. They can become commuters when for example they decide to move back to their home farm but maintain their old job, find a better paid job in the city but decide not to move out from the village or get married to someone from the village. Some are practically forced to start commuting as was the case for many of the employees when the hospital moved from Kristinestad to Vaasa.

Also, people move in and out of the village at different stages of their lives, and it is not always that easy to define who is one of those who will stay, and who is one of those who will go. Some of those who find a job elsewhere after their studies and who swear they will never come back, do return anyway after a few years, and some of those who have been living in the village their entire life move elsewhere during their retirement days, to live nearer their children and grandchildren. The degree of mobility and activity in the village is sometimes larger than one might think. A young woman who has moved into the village from a bigger city claims that when one just drives by, Lappfjärd seems like yet another dead village, but when one gets to know the village better one finds a lot of active and effective people.

When it comes to the question about relative prosperity, it could be said that, particularly in regard to those families in Lappfjärd where both members have a well paid job elsewhere

and are able to commute because of their family situation, that they are more well off than others in the village, especially given that it is cheaper to live in Lappfjärd than in a bigger city, or the countryside near bigger cities. The commuters have also in a way become the experts of the village, in possession of knowledge from the outside world.

In conclusion, the commuters deal with the contradictions between living in the home village and seeking a higher living standard with a great deal of flexibility. There are not yet many using technology to allow them to work from home, but especially among young people this is seen as an alternative. There seem to be no insurmountable contradictions between the small community in the village where the commuting middle class spends its free time, and the extended networks gained mostly through work. There are some very active and adaptive people in Lappfjärd, who are committed to their home village and to keeping the village alive. And yet unfortunately these people are still too few, and they are still outnumbered by those who decide to leave.

...and you can write that in your report, that all young people, and even the older people, have to come home and make something happen!

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