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## THE VOLUNTARY WORK BASED VILLAGE ACTIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY FINLAND

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The article considers the voluntary based village activism in contemporary Finland. The author sees the roots of nowadays village activism in the traditional voluntary work: cultivation of common fields called for cooperation, and decision making on common issues required organisation of village meetings to make a collective decision. As a large social movement the village activism started in 1970s in the course of protest actions driven by the diminishing rural population and abandonment of arable lands. A large-scale establishment of village committees was also determined by the reduction of importance of traditional rural productive cooperation and by the changing role of countryside in the era of industrialisation. Nowadays Finland has a well-developed system of village associations, and its structure consists of three levels: village level, regional level and national level. At the local level, there are more than 4200 villages. In 2013, about 3100 villages had a registered village association and about 930 villages had a non-registered village association. Approximately 200 villages in Finland still do not perform any village activities of the considered type. As a rule, village activism generates in response to the specific needs of the village and aims to guarantee its residents' well-being. At the regional level, there are 19 regional village associations. The most important tasks for the regional rural organisations are to ensure the villages' interests and to work as a cooperative body for the rural development at the regional level. The top of the system under consideration is the Village Association of Finland. It is an umbrella organisation for the state, regional and local rural actors. The current development of rural movement in Finland could be evaluated in the framework of several theoretical conceptions: social capital and networking, entrepreneurial culture, and institutionalisation.

**Key words:** Finland; rural development; voluntary activism; village association; village movement; village activism; social action; rural settlements

Finland has a large proportion of rural areas that compose approximately 95% of the total area of the country; one third of population (1,6 million) live in rural areas. The Finnish countryside has experienced dramatic changes as many other countries in the last decades: ageing of population and outflow of younger generations have reduced the scope of the business activities of many rural municipalities, quite often work commuting is the only possibility for getting an income. The loss of population led to the radical reduction of services in rural areas: municipal transport connections between regional centre and villages reduced strongly; to get many municipal social services rural dwellers have to visit urban centres. The state and regional services are under changes too, and the most tragic change for the village is closing of rural schools, which are often centres of rural live and all activities. The main reason for such tendency is difficult economic situation and attempts of municipal authorities to reduce the expenses. Many small departments of different services were merged into bigger entities; railway stations, police stations, tax offices, post offices were closed in villages and small towns. The same tendency can be found in the private sector too: the number of rural shops, repair shops, etc. has reduced strongly in rural areas. Thus, village communities have to adapt to the new situation even if in some villages there is a growth of population.

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Villages are different and differently cope with the situation. Villages have long histories, the population dynamic differs as well as the economic development, so there are significant differences in villages' goals depending on how the villagers define their common will. There is a variety of ways to create a village administration and determine a way to implement organisational activities. For many villages the development effort become more and more difficult because of demographic, economic, and political situation. On the other hand, the changing funding conditions open new opportunities for villages but require learning new management skills for implementing projects at different levels.

In this paper, I focus on village activism, voluntary based rural development in Finland. The first section presents a short overview of the history of Finnish village activism; the second part — the structure and goals of the Finnish village movement and village associations; the third part — analysis of two cases (local and regional) to see the current activities and tendencies in the work of village associations in Finland.

The village activism has a long tradition in Finland. The history of activism and its trajectories can be written through different perspectives: the most common is probably the perception of village activism as a form of traditional rural voluntary work, see for example, work of Torsti Hyyryläinen [6]; village activism roots can be found in the history of village administrative structures — this approach is supported by Anttila [2], Holmila [5], Katajamäki [7]. For this article the first interpretation of rural activism serves the best.

So, the roots of village activism can be seen in the traditional voluntary work. According to Hyyryläinen [6], Finnish village actions or village movement in its modern form of village committees appeared in the mid-1970s. A large-scale establishment of village committees was determined by the reduction of importance of traditional rural productive cooperation and by the changing role of countryside in the era of industrialisation. This led to the reduction of livelihood opportunities in rural areas and to the deterioration of services, as well as to the demographically negative tendencies. In the 1960s the rural birth rate declined strongly, outmigration from rural to urban areas increased considerably, the number of pupils in rural schools declined and the demand for services was contracted [6].

Although the village actions emerged only in the 1970s, the self-identification of villagers as responsible citizens by non-governmental organisations was mentioned already in the XVIII century. In 1860—1870's the first voluntary organisations were the fire brigades, which were based on the principles of equality and self-management. The gentry and the peasantry worked side by side in such brigades [6. P. 31—33]. The principles of association and the growth of individual citizens' awareness were transferred to other local organisations to use. In rural areas, the most contributing organisations were farmers associations, sport clubs, temperance organisations, work-class organisations as well as youth clubs. Through these associations the local cooperation and contribution to the political principles and common ideals became significant. In 1979 there were 424 village committees; in 1982 already 1700 [6. P. 28, 50—51]. The development of village activism depended on the general increasing interest to the rural development from the state and research institutes in the 1970s. Many new parties for the rural development emerged in Finnish countryside at that time. In the 1990s the new stage of village activism started when the European Union introduced new funding opportunities

for municipalities to secure rural services. More and more village committees were registered as associations or cooperatives so that they would be able to take the financial responsibility and seek funding for development projects. The number of unregistered village committees continued to decrease. Thus, Finland has more than 4200 villages, and in 2013 about 3100 villages had a registered village association and about 930 village had a non-registered village association.

There are three levels in the structure of village movement in Finland: at the national level there is the Village Association of Finland, an regional level — 19 regional associations, at the local level — more than 3000 registered and 900 non-registered village association. The Village Association of Finland (in Finnish: Suomen Kylätoiminta ry, or SYTY) is an umbrella organisation for the state, regional and local actors of rural development (in 2013 more than 130 member organisations). The membership in the Village Association of Finland is open only for organisations not for individuals. This Association includes not only rural sector actors, but many others too, for example, at the national level they are Pension Association, Rural Education Association, Forestry Development Centre Tapio, Finnish Local Heritage Association, Finnish Local and Regional Authorities Association, Finnish Hunters' Association, Finnish Youth Association, Finnish Taxi Association, etc. At the regional level, there are 56 Local Action Groups (LEADER groups), 19 regional rural associations and other organisations, such as Regional Council of South Karelia, South Ostrobothnia Federation of Municipalities, Regional Council of Kainuu, Regional Council of Lapland, etc. At the village level, a rural association can be a member of the Association though regional organisations or can directly join the national level organisations. Basically the national level organisations are a kind of forums for the sub-regional, regional and local association; village associations tend to belong to the regional level. At the webpage of the Association there is a full list of its members: through its three levels' membership the Association unites 4000 villages and their 3 million permanent and 1.7 million temporal inhabitants.

The Village Association of Finland was established in 1997 when the European Union activities and the LEADER approach for rural development just started to work in Finland. At the same time eight regional village associations were established in Finnish regions — nowadays there are 19 of them. The party politically independent Association works in cooperation with the key rural developers like Finnish Parliament, different ministries, research institutes and the rural sector's other organisations. It also has strong links with ERA (European Research Area Coordination Programmes) and ERCA (European Rural Community Alliance); through the LEADER Program the Association established relationship with ELARD (European LEADER Association for Rural Development). The Village Association of Finland has an elected board of ten people, the chairman and ten vice-members to substitute each member of the board if necessary. The board is elected at the annual general meeting with "the one third principle" in the election procedure: one third of members represent the national level organisations, mainly non-governmental; one third — regional organisations; the last one third — other rural development organisations with the priority of Local Action Groups. Besides, one member has to represent the Swedish speaking minority. Each member of the board is elected for two years.

Regional village associations were created in the period from 1989 to 2000 in each region, and the last — in Eastern Uusimaa and Southwest Finland, thus this village activities for the first time embraced the whole country with the exception of the Åland Islands. Regional associations are independent NGOs operating in alliance with the Association at the national level. Each regional association is an organisation in its own right and not a branch of the Association. It is not a hierarchical structure, rather a forum for cooperation between villages and those concerned with their development. The most important tasks for the regional level rural organisations is to work as a co-operative body in the interests of rural development at the regional level. Regional associations promote and support the activities of the villages by providing training, advice and a variety of events. Members of regional associations are villagers, village and other associations, municipalities, and other partners.

All regional associations are different, there is no typical model: each of them has its own charter, structure, composition, and priorities. They are different because territories they work at have different histories, number of villages and rural population, local and regional organisations participating in rural development. Regional associations were established through the village associations (three members are enough for that). Usually board of regional organisations has from 6 to 10 members, the chairman and 6—10 vice-members to substitute each member of the board; some regional organisations have a secretary; every regional organisation has a so-called rural agent (in Finnish: kyläasiamies). Membership in regional organisations can be different, but all members must be a registered body. The main members of regional organisations are village associations; municipalities, other rural development or local organisations also can be a member of a regional association, and individuals as well (usually of non-registered village associations).

There are about 4200 villages in Finland, and majority of them have registered or non-registered village associations. Table 1 shows that the number of registered associations grows while the number of non-registered associations declines primarily due to the reduction of the funding opportunities through national programmes, the LEADER and the European Union. In many programs only registered bodies can participate, and there is not many grantors to support projects of non-registered organisation though some municipal, regional and national program provide small grants for non-registered associations and working groups. For example, the Arts Promotion Centre of Finland (Taite) in the framework of “Good Village”-project distributed grants for the art activities in rural areas.

Table 1

**Village associations in Finland, 2007–2013**

№	Types of associations	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2013
1.	Registered village associations	2 730	2 800	2 900	2 810	2 989	3100
2.	Non-registered village associations	1 170	1 100	1 000	1 033	981	930
3.	The total value of the project funding for the development of villages (including private money and voluntary work), million EUR	17	13	25	38	45	n/a

Often village activism is defined as a traditional voluntary or social organisation, however, village associations possess specific functions that makes their work more challenging. A village association is not a stakeholder but rather a geographical agent; it is more an idea than organisation; it is a residential community and locality-bounded identity. Thus, the majority of village activities are localised and implemented in response to the specific needs of a village and aims to support its residents' well-being. Organisational forms of village activism can be different, there are no rules what it should be — only good examples. For instance, the Village Action is voluntary; people are involved in its activities freely as in all other non-profit organisations. This leads to the fact that its resources are scarce but optimally used. In different activities of Finnish village associations a huge number of volunteers participates, and this is one of the basic principles of the system together with democracy for any undemocratic village association is by definition sentenced to death.

Finnish village associations are characterised by independence and cooperation; their soul and strength depends on the autonomy of actions not only formally but also in practice. No one can speak on behalf of the villages except the villagers themselves, aims and interests of the village are crucial though village associations often have strong links. Independence does not lead to isolation, on the contrary — to cooperation with other villages, local authorities, even with the EU, to strengthen the village. Unfortunately, due to the ageing of rural population the village activism is ageing too: about 40% of volunteers are older than 60 years; 20% are 50—60-year old.

In 2013 in Finland there were 68 rural agents (in Finnish: kyläasiamies) whose role was to act as messengers between villages and decision-makers. Rural agents are working on sub-regional (33 rural agents), regional (19) and in some cases municipal level (16). The system of rural agents emerged in 2002, when each regional association got at least a part-time employee through the national network project “Equal” of the Village Association of Finland. Next year the idea was supported by the state, and since 2003 regional rural agents were partly paid by the state subsidies. In 2016 the state subsidies for rural associations were reduced, which influenced on the number of paid working hours of rural agents. However, there are funding opportunities through different projects.

Many rural agents believe that policymakers should dare to rely on the expertise of villagers on everyday life and general issues more, and the interaction between the city management (municipal and regional government) and the villages should be more active. In many cases villagers have the best expertise in local affairs of their own village and know better what is good for the village. So rural agents work as a linkage between authorities and rural inhabitants. In order to communicate with the authorities, rural agents have to know very well every possible situation in their region; they participate actively in rural local development. The villages develop not on the basis of top-down instructions but on the basis of interaction with local and non-local actors to meet local needs and support community's well being and positive mood. Rural agent bring a positive spirit into villages, invent and provide tools to meet villages' needs; advise, guide and organise trainings according to the needs of villages, thus, carefully listen to the voice of villages. Another task for rural agents is to help villages to make a plan or update

an old one, to make a financial plan, to write applications, to help with organisation of events, to register a new village associations, etc. Besides, rural agents participate in many village events in their region. So, if to speak about different roles a rural agent plays they are: an enthusiast, creator, traveller, specialist, project manager, treasurer, networker, trainer, self-employed coach, communicator, interpreter, rock-star, etc.

Let us consider two cases: one is from the local level, the second is a regional level organisation. At the lower level, I will take Vitsiälä village association which celebrated this year the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and consists of a few small villages forming a part of a larger Mikkeli municipality, Etelä-Savo region. On this example one can see that the process of integration of municipalities did not influence the local activities: small villages were not lost within the bigger urban area due to the active rural population. At the regional level, I will consider a Pohjois-Savon kylät ry — North Savo villages association.



Logo of the Vitsiälän village association

Vitsiälä village society (non-registered association) was founded in 1980 and includes several villages: Heimari, Löytö, Sattila, Vihkko and Vitsiälä. At that time residents of these villages decided to join forces and set up a Vitsiälä village society. At the village meeting in February 1980, the first Chairman and nine members of the board were elected; besides, a list of improvement and development proposals was made. In 1987 one village was elected as the best village of the year in Ristiina municipality — Löytö village. The explanatory memorandum stated that the village society used its own merits and funds for its development. In 1991 Vitsiälä village society was registered as association. In 1992, Löytö-Vitsiälä-Sattila-Heimari village was elected as the best village of the Mikkeli municipality. At that time there were about 320 permanent inhabitants and about 65 summer residents. When making the selection the jury emphasized the recent developments of the villages and the effectiveness of planning activities. Over years the village association has been active in numerous projects; many proposals of the first meeting of the village society in 1980 were implemented. For example, improvement of the Saimaa lake shore by the villagers: or after closing the rural school village associations organised a children day care.

In 2009 Ristiina municipality donated to the village association about a hectare of land and a barrack located next to the former school. For the reconstruction of an old barrack into a village hall, the village association applied for and got funding from the Mainland Finland Rural Development Programme; supplementary money of private persons and local enterprises were collected; and with the help of volunteers the village hall was opened at the end of 2009. Before that the majority of village events took place in Löydön Kartano (a historical manor house built in 1890's in Ristiina, Mikkeli). The village hall provided the rural inhabitants a space for the community needs. In 2011 the village association celebrated its 20th anniversary in their own village hall Sampola. In the same year a village book about history of the villages and village association was

published. In the next years the village hall has been renovated: the ceiling was raised, a new storage space was constructed, an additional room was made — last works were completed in May 2015.

Except reconstruction and improvement works (village hall, lake shore and pier) village associations organise a lot of events for the local population. Last year these were: African cooking course, several art exhibitions, pop-up restaurants, market days, collection of local stories and photos for the village historical book, celebration of different events, for example, Independence day, Christmas, Easter, etc. Some of these events brought money in the village association budget, for instance, when villagers organised several pop-up restaurant days for rural inhabitants and their guests, make real restaurant food and took good price for it (about 25 Euros per lunch per person). So the entrepreneurship culture has developed in the recent years of association active life. The norms and values of the market economy have become a part of the local development work. Thus, in 2016 the village association was again selected the best village but on much wider territory — Etelä-Savo region.

This year the association celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the status of the best village of the region, and publishing a new Village Book. However, the tasks of the village association have not changed over years and include the representation of collective interests and belonging to the municipality in the decision-making process, increasing of comfort and well-being of villages.

North-Savo Villages Association is a regional level organisation founded in 1993 to unite villages of North-Savo region, to promote cooperation between rural dwellers, to support their self-reliance. There are 18 rural municipalities and about 300 villages on the territory. As an ordinary member of the regional association a village



Logo of the North Savo  
Village association

association or even a person interested in North-Savo Villages Association's activities can be approved. A person or a legal entity that wishes to support the activities of the association can be accepted as supporting member. Nowadays the association includes 65 village associations, 16 individual members and one supporting member (a local pharmacy). The main activities of the association are communication and information distribution among villages and other stakeholders, organisation of meetings and seminars, introducing regional development projects, implementation of North-Savo village Program, contacts and networking with regional and national authorities and other organisations involved in the rural development.

The activities of the associations can be divided into several levels: at the village level the regional association usually does not organise events but can help (distribution of information about village events through its website, for instance). The activities of the associations are mainly focused on the regional level — there are seminars and workshops for village associations like tax workshop; cultural, sport and other activities like regional virtual hobby trial for North-Savo villages; distribution of information about the association annual plans, about villages with links to the villages' websites or facebook pages, links to municipalities websites. Majority of villages have own websites

or at list a group in the Facebook with a list of summer amateur theatres in which rural inhabitants can participate.

A very interesting part of the Association website is “Village activity tools” — some useful tips and links to help village activities be put together. It starts with an information how to register a new village association; there is an information about free of charge legal help and advices, which the Village Association of Finland gives its members; a questionnaire model for collecting general information about villages, village plan form as an instrument of village development, form of a rescue plan, important information for village halls, etc.

North-Savo Villages Association maintains a regional village registry at its website, in which the basic information about villages and contacts can be found (of about 300 villages). Through the electronic letter and members’ newsletter the Association reminds to notify about changes in the village life. The village register also collects information about village halls, youth clubs and other spaces, rooms, which the locals can use for common needs.

North-Savo Villages Association participates in the national events such as trainings, seminars and annual meetings organised by the Village Association of Finland. Usually the board of regional associations make a decision about participation in national events according to the availability of resources. One of the most important annual events is the “The village of the year” which starts at the regional level — North-Savo Villages Association as all other regional associations organised the selection of the best village of the region on the basis of information about activities during the year, participation in different projects, cooperation with different actors, fundraising initiatives, etc. At the next level the best regional villages participate in the national competition (in 2016 it was already the 32<sup>nd</sup> selection of the best village). The “The village of the year” generates ideal models and criteria, which represent an active village — planning, projects, village as a welfare producer, cultural heritage and the spirit of the village, management techniques within development projects and creation of rural products and services. In the long history of this contest the criteria has not changes in general, but some additional points were added to evaluate the village activism (cooperative spirit, open attitude in local operations; local activities became more commercialised, entrepreneurial culture become more visible).

Another important national event is “Open village” that started only in 2013 and in 2015—2016 spread across the country and engaged more than 400 villages. North-Savo Villages Association participated in this event in all three years with the dancing evening, flea markets, village walks, village tourism, family day, dinner at the village hall, the auction, sport activities, etc. — to attracts visitors to explore the village activities and business destinations. In 2017, a year of 100 years of Finland independence celebration more than 800 villages will participate on the “Open village”.

Thus, Finland has well structured system of voluntary rural organisations thanks to its historical economic and rural development. With the deterioration of economic and social situation in rural areas, the local population started to defend its own interests in 1970s, however, some roots of village activism can be found even in 1880s. The current development of rural movement in Finland should be considered in the framework of several theoretical concepts: social capital and networking, entrepreneurial culture,



and institutionalisation. The social capital concept helps to focus on the interpersonal and intergroup relations and their impacts on the collective activities [11. P. 285]. The main idea is that social capital improves well-being of communities and societies, for example, makes collective problem solving and interaction easier [10]. In the Finnish village movement one of the most important things is activities of local population that is ready to protect its interests, express its opinion on local development issues, rise a voice in order to be heard, consolidate resources, forces, and voices to solve local problems and improve situations. Besides, active villages are not isolated, they are usually closely linked with each other. Partnership and cooperation became indispensable part of everyday life of rural dwellers and their associations and gave an additional impulse to the rural development.

Activities of the local population promote the entrepreneurial culture, so the norms and values of market economy have become a part of local development work. Entrepreneurial culture is the core value of neoliberal society, in which the citizens are considered irresponsible and autonomous consumers and entrepreneurs, so that competitive spirit extends to all areas of life [3. P. 576—577; 4; 12. P. 66]. On the one hand, villagers and their associations are autonomous, their decision making processes are based on the needs of particular villages. On the other hand, they are a part of the wider world, they live in the competitive surroundings and need an entrepreneurial spirit to adapt to the changing environment, to improve situation in the villages, to improve their well-being.

The institutionalisation of village activism started from the some actions to protect interests of rural inhabitants, from the step-by-step increasing of village associations and generated a massive village movement and a strong three-level system of village associations in the country. The local institutionalisation of village activism, on the one hand, means increasing structures and mechanisms of cooperation among different agents of rural development and formation of their well-organised system (village associations become more effective and powerful). On the other hand, it means bureaucratisation of practices, formation of more official attitudes [8. P. 3]. Nevertheless, the village movement nowadays develops as a social and political institution. In the 1970s there were protest actions driven by the decline of rural population and abandonment of arable lands; the movement was not a political one, but the rural areas also launched a political counterattack, which widened the area of village action [13. P. 50—51]. Currently with the development of entrepreneurial culture the village movement could be seen also as an economic institution.

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## **СЕЛЬСКИЙ АКТИВИЗМ И ЕГО ДОБРОВОЛЬЧЕСКИЕ ИСТОКИ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ФИНЛЯНДИИ**

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Статья посвящена развитию добровольческого сельского движения в Финляндии. Корни сельского активизма можно увидеть в традиционной добровольческой работе — обработка общих полей требовала сотрудничества, совместного принятия решений, проведения сельских сходов. Начало сельского движения в Финляндии относится к 1970-м гг., когда прошли первые массовые сельские акции протеста вследствие массового оттока населения из сел в города и отказа от пахотных земель. Масштабному созданию сельских комитетов предшествовало снижение значимости традиционного сельского хозяйства и изменение роли села в эпоху индустриализации. В результате сегодня Финляндия имеет хорошо развитую систему сельских ассоциаций, функционирующую на трех уровнях: местный или сельский уровень, региональный уровень и государственный/национальный уровень. В настоящее время в Финляндии насчитывается более 4200 деревень, и в 2013 г. зарегистрированные сельские общественные организации существовали в 3100 из них, еще 930 деревень имели незарегистрированные сельские общественные организации. Сельский активизм повсеместно развивается в ответ на конкретные потребности деревни и направлен на улучшение социально-экономической ситуации и обеспечение благополучия ее жителей. На региональном уровне существует 19 региональных сельских ассоциаций, главная задача которых — помощь организациям низшего уровня и работа в качестве связующего звена организаций, заинтересованных в участии в сельском развитии на региональном уровне. Возглавляет систему финского сельского активизма Финская сельская организация — зонтичная для государственных, региональных и местных акторов, прилагающих усилия для развития сельских территорий. Для социологической оценки современного сельского движения автор предлагает использовать три концептуальные модели: социальный капитал и создание сетей взаимной поддержки, развитие и распространение культуры предпринимательства за рамки сугубо рыночной деятельности, разные формы и стратегии институционализации добровольческой деятельности.

**Ключевые слова:** Финляндия; сельское развитие; добровольческая активность; сельская ассоциация; сельское движение; сельский активизм; социальное действие; сельские поселения.