



Needs for rural research in the northern Finland context

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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Rural research
Rural development
Rural actors
Northern Finland

The aim of this paper is to discuss the needs and demands which rural research faces at the interface between research and development. The case study area is northern Finland, which constitutes the most remote and sparsely populated areas of the European Union. This paper is based on the tradition of rural research since the 1980s in connection with the development of programme-based rural and regional policy. Rural researchers are desired actors in rural and regional development projects and programmes both at the national and regional level, but their challenge is to fulfil both academic standards of their background research organization and the often very practical needs of local and regional rural development actors. According to the opinions of rural actors in northern Finland, the definition of rural research is somewhat unclear and multidisciplinary of rural research seems to give a free hand to carry out many kinds of research under the title. The needs and demand for rural research(ers) are quite practical and are mostly connected to the creation of new job opportunities outside primary production and development of villages via proposals given by researchers. The major result of this study is that rural research is highly appreciated both in programmes and among actors on the “field”, although the real role given to research remains unclear in most cases.

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1. Introduction

The community of rural researchers has increased substantially, especially in the last 20 years or so in several countries. At the same time the amount of research subjects has widened. From the start, rural research has been multidisciplinary which has created new networks of researchers and given chances for new openings on the interfaces between different disciplines. Together with theoretic and conceptual basic research, applied rural studies concentrating on practical rural problems has also advanced in close interaction with rural development organizations at different regional levels.

As is well known defining “rural areas” is difficult, despite the many attempts. At the general level most definitions are based on a three-level division into remote, core and close-to-centre rural areas, with different terms. This division is adequate for comparisons of rural areas within single countries or between similar countries, but many members of the European Union, for example, differ so much in their population and settlement structures, land areas and internal distances that this type of analysis runs into huge problems (e.g. Muilu and Rusanen, 2004, pp. 1499–1500). This is

also the case for the generalization of results of rural research for different rural conditions.

Rural research is thus very pluralistic both in its study themes and target areas. The aim of the present article is to describe rural research from the viewpoint of “users” of rural research, i.e. through the needs and demands of actors of rural development in sparsely populated rural areas. The case study area is northern Finland, which is defined here as the three northernmost provinces (NUTS 3 regions) of Finland. This area constitutes also the northernmost part of the EU. Instead of a conceptual and theoretic analysis, the focus is on the attitudes and opinions towards rural research at grass-roots level, where the aim is to implement the research results into practical policies and measures for development. The focal starting point is, therefore, the relationship and problems between rural research and development.

The paper begins with a description of the background, definitions and concepts of rural research, followed by an analysis of traditions of Nordic and Finnish rural research. The case study area of northern Finland is then briefly presented. The area is mostly very sparsely populated and so it may be hypothesized that the exceptionally challenging local conditions result in very concrete expectations for rural research carried out in the region. This is analyzed empirically on the basis of regional rural development programmes and questionnaires sent to the municipalities and regional development organizations. Finally, some concluding

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remarks are made on the relationship between rural research and development.

2. Multi-dimensional rural research

2.1. Development of rural geography since the 1970s

The subject and content of rural research have been examined in several studies and papers, since as Cloke (1985, p. 1) stated in the first issue of this journal, rural areas have been targets of research for several centuries. In this paper no extensive review on the development of this research field is made, but some viewpoints are presented mostly from the perspective of human geography.

Agriculture remained the most important field of rural research until the 1950s, after which the diminishing importance of primary industries for economy and employment in western societies directed the attention of researchers towards social and cultural changes in the countryside. This becomes clear from the early definition of rural geography by Clout (1972, p. 1): "...rural geography may be defined as the study of recent social, economic, land-use, and spatial changes that have taken place in less-densely populated areas which are commonly recognized by virtue of their visual components as the 'countryside'".

The change in rural areas was of course only one dimension in the development of regional structures. At the other end of regional continuum the rapid growth of cities sparked increased interest in urban research. Rural research was not left out, however, for within human geography, for example, this research field started to expand substantially from the 1980s. Traditional subjects like primary industries, settlement structure and land-use were still important issues, but new topics made their appearance, such as traffic infrastructure, unemployment, services, evaluation of planning and development policies of rural areas and processes of exercise of power and policymaking.

As Pacione (1984, p. 1) pointed out "Contemporary rural geography is a multifaceted phenomenon...has strong linkages with related fields of interest in economics, sociology, politics and planning.... But it is important to appreciate that rural-based investigations are not simply regional applications of some wider perspective; the rural environment poses new conceptual and methodological questions, and presents unique problems for investigation." Gilg (1985, p. 173) presents another view: "In conclusion therefore, the future for rural geography should be an applied one, where it integrates its own research, relates this to the real behavioural world and to policy formulation, and thus attempts to produce a rural environment that is not only physically attractive but also a lively and prosperous place to live". With respect to the present article it is interesting to notice that already in the middle of 1980s the relationship of rural geography to the sweep of rural development and policy was being discussed.

The cultural turn in human sciences became visible also in rural research in the late 1980s (e.g. Holloway and Kneafsey, 2004, p. 15, 79; Woods, 2005, p. 24). Cloke (1997) stated that the cultural turn led to the rise of rural research in the form of an analysis of how the countryside is constructed and how it is understood. He listed four research subjects which reflect the cultural turn of the middle 1990s: (i) nature-society relations, (ii) discourses of rural experience and imagination, (iii) symbolic texts of rural cultures in different media, and (iv) movements. Cloke (1997, p. 373), however, impugned the ability of cultural studies to produce practical research information, since many political decision-makers tend to doubt that the results of qualitative research can be implemented. He was also worried about how research on rural representation dwelt mostly in arts and literature, at the cost of texts from everyday life.

After the second half of 1990s, several articles were published in which the thematic multiformity of present rural geography emerge. One thematic issue with the title "The New Rural Geography" was published in *Economic Geography* in 1996 (Roberts, 1996). In *Progress in Human Geography* many articles have highlighted research themes of the field. Little (2001, 2002), for example, emphasized the role of new rural governance, rural gender identity and the performance of masculinity in rural research. Roche (2002, 2003, 2005) and McCarthy (2005, 2006, 2008) have in their review articles analyzed recent trends, like post-productivist rural spaces, agro-industrial development, alternative rural economies inside rural geography, globalization of the countryside and also to some extent in neighboring disciplines.

The Handbook of Rural Studies (Cloke et al., 2006) is likely to be the most extensive textbook so far on multidisciplinary rural research, taking into account both theoretic traditions and research subjects. Michael Woods' book titled "Rural" is to be published in 2010 by Routledge (Woods, forthcoming). In addition to the human aspects of rural research, "non-human" rural studies are discussed briefly in Chapter 2.3.

To conclude, rural development and rural research have always had a close, practical relation. This is not surprising since it has always been characteristic of rural researchers to act on the "field", obtaining ideas from rural people and finding real research problems from where they originate. The challenging triangle of rural research, development and policies and decision-making was expressed already by Cloke and Park (1980, p. 57): "A more dynamic strategy of rural research, involving greater cooperation between academic geographers and practicing planners, and focusing upon problems of rural deprivation, is advocated in this paper."

2.2. Rural research in the Nordic countries

The relationship between rural research and development has a solid foundation also in the Nordic countries. Social sciences, which in this paper include rural research, have played a central role in the development of the Nordic or Scandinavian (the latter expression excludes Finland) welfare model and modernization process. In recent years, themes like the changing nature of rural concept and cultural turn have also gained ground.

In Finland, Norway and Sweden there are many sparsely populated areas which are sensitive to changes in population structure. At the same time rural areas have maintained their position as desirable residential environments, although not without criticism. In the "Rurality" theme issue of *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift* (Norwegian Journal of Geography) Haugen and Lysgård (2006, p. 174) say that "The rural way of living has been and still is more or less regarded as the hegemonic norm for 'quality of life' in Norwegian society, and this has had a severe impact on both regional/rural politics and research". They sum up that the Norwegian tradition of regional and rural research which developed from the 1960s onwards has focused on studying peoples' reasons for choosing a place to live, rural development research and rural change studies. The explicit difference between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian rural research has been that the latter has had a strong link with the emergence of the Scandinavian welfare model. However, Anglo-Saxon tradition has had a remarkable effect on the theoretical development of Nordic rural research (Haugen and Lysgård, 2006, p. 176).

Madsen and Adriansen (2006, pp. 465–466) say that in Denmark the cultural turn did not attain as central a position as in British rural research. As one of the reasons for this the authors present that agriculture still dominates research of the countryside and landscape in Denmark, because of which 'rural is not considered

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