

## **Reflections on Finnish rural policy**

**Juha Kuisma 14.6. -22 Kantri Cycle-guests, Teisko**

I have lived in the countryside for 59 years, followed politics for about 52 years, pondered the peasant economy for about 40 years, been involved in rural policy and village activities for about 30 years. I have written on peasant culture, eco-history and environmental policy. So, I am old enough to speak about rural policy. Yet my English is young and sloppy.

First, some comparative data as a starting point. For the 13th century, Finland was a unit consisting of tribal provinces who traded towards the southern shores of the Baltic Sea, Sweden and the upper Volga River. The most significant means of earning money was working abroad: to serve as a mercenary in the small principalities of Germany. After that, Sweden conquered the territory of Finland for 600 years. This common history ensured that, despite the strange Finnish language, the region became more united and Finland became a Nordic country. The quest of expansive Russia for the shores of the seas resulted in us becoming a Grand Duchy under Russian rule for 112 years. Our position corresponded to the then Poland. We have been independent for almost 105 years. If anything can be said about this broad-based rural policy, the statement is: rural policy over a thousand years is a defence policy. And vice versa.

Some numbers to give more background. The most significant difference in the social history of Finland and Sweden is that in Sweden there has been approximately 430 ironworks and ironworks manors in Sweden, but about 15 in Finland. This explains the different political power relations between the countries. The difference in relation to Germany is that the population density in Germany is about 18 times higher than in Finland. The German countryside is able to maintain specialized farms and a commuting population. Mid-European rural policy fits poorly in Finland.. The fundamental difference between Finland and the rest of Europe is that there is 4 ha of forest per person here, while in Sweden the corresponding figure is 2.7 ha, in Austria 0.5 ha, in France 0.23 ha in other Western European countries even lower. Statistically, 92% of Finland's land area is rural.

We are a large rural park in the westernmost part of the Eurasian coniferous forest zone, which is habitable thanks to the Gulf Stream. Without the Gulf Stream, we would be like Yakutia in Siberia. Another point of the sea needs to be mentioned. As a coastal state of the Baltic Sea, we are part of Europe, part of its development and its values. The sea does not separate, it connects. Even if you may think otherwise by looking on the map, we are actually an island in Europe. It takes two days on sea to get to Finland. Finlands geographical position is somewhere between Shetland and Iceland.

+++

The independence of Finland in 1917 and the Winter War of 1939-1940 are associated with an agrarian - not so much rural - myth of an independent peasant as the guardian of the nation. That was the case until the 1980s. Attempts to develop the countryside were only agronomically justified , i.e. made through agriculture. The countryside and agriculture were identified. Rural industrialization, on the other hand, was implemented through regional policy. It was not until the European Rural Year 1988 gave the first excuse and opportunity to build a conscious rural policy within ministries. It led to the POMO period (Local Self-Government Rural Program), which began in 1991. During that period the development program - similar to the EU's Leader program - was practiced in the national framework even before Finland became a member of the EU. It was a free rehearsal.

At some point during this first national program, the structure of the Leader programs was taken into the consideration. A fascinating possibility was open: what if Leader groups could be organized through a nationwide village movement. However, the development of the village movement was too slow and too weak. Its level of organization in provinces was not strong enough. In this way, Leader groups with their tripartite membership were trampled from scratch, with the unofficial support of local state authorities. This solution proved to be a success too, but the village movement remained somewhat half raised.

+++

I am one of those Finns who think there is a license for aphorism: "Dwelling is the most important livelihood in the countryside." Aphorism is difficult for purebred agrarians. It is easy to be misunderstood. The aphorism says: the social reality of rural areas and the range of opportunities for development, are maintained by the people who live in the countryside without being farmers. They find country so attractive so strongly, that they decided to live in the countryside, even if rational considerations speak in favor of moving to the city. It is about life handling, coping, hobbies, experiencing nature, perceptions of health, etc. Today, 90% of rural population consists of these "other rural residents" and only 10% of the working population in rural areas are related to agriculture. Rural development therefore means that there must be possible to live in the countryside and to build new houses there - without the zoning or the state intervention of limited rationality. Every ministry has its own limited rationality and taken together: more limited rationality.

The pandemic in 2020-2021 and the war started by Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022 turned migratory flows in Finland from large cities to nearby rural areas and even deeper into the countryside. The development of information technology enables us to work in a hybrid way, which in turn is a vital condition for living in the countryside. It may be that Finnish summer cottage culture (530,000 summer cottages and accommodation for 3 million persons) is proving to be a decisive force in this turnaround. Such a development, in turn, requires a nationwide and rural optical fiber network. Unfortunately, commercial pressure groups have slowed down the construction of the fiber network to such an extent that Finland is statistically at the Moldovan level in that matter. That's a sad fact. The most important rural policy grip is therefore to build a comprehensive optical fiber network. That optical fiber network capacity is also needed from the point of view of resource management: it is also a string in economic policy. And it has a lot to do with defence policy.

+ + +

The traditional rural culture of fields, forests and lakes is environmentally characterized by the principle of sustainable use, as a first rule. The nature capital should not be destroyed. For over 100 years, Finnish forestry science has developed variations on the sustainable use of forests. Climate change and the emphasis on biodiversity have brought new parameters into this thinking. It would be important for all rural people to consciously and deliberately embrace the principle of biodiversity; the principle of beautiful land; the principle of abundance of beings. It would also be important for the countryside not to be blamed for climate change or biodiversity loss. All involved should be able to invoke the psychological factors that lead a person make the right choices for nature. People should be rewarded for small things, not punished. Personally, I am fascinated by the idea of a “regional ecological community”. It does not interfere with property rights, but in the spirit of the ideas of Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom, the diversity of the residential area is managed according to the knowledge of the local residents and by the decisions they make together.

+ + +

Finally, a brief reflection on the circular economy. I have found that many who are enthusiastic about the circular economy do not know the meaning of entropy. Circulation is assumed to be eternal, like perpetual motion. Every round in cycle needs energy, - preferably non-fossil energy. In reality, the cycle/loop is just one of the three major functions of the ecosystem. The others are photosynthesis, ie the binding of solar energy to green structures, and the decomposition, ie the release of nutrients for the use of organisms by micro organisms, Decomposition happens mainly in living land, soil and ground. The system that sustains life on Earth will become the framework for rural development ideas. The sun is central to dwelling order. In carbon sequestration, the soil becomes a large carbon stock - it must be developed as fund. All in all, we are talking about the bioeconomy, the biotic economy. More ecological thinking would be needed here. We, as humans, live from the renewables, and, as members of biotic world system.