SHERPA
Rural Science-Society-Policy Interfaces

EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES

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MAP POSITION NOTE

MAP NORRBOTTEN

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Table of Content

1. Current situation from background research and evidence

The MAP Norrbotten is geographically centred around the northernmost region in Sweden. It is a large and varied region, spanning over 97 000 km2, with a coastline, vast forests, and mountainous areas. Norrbotten is one of 21 regions in Sweden and have about 250 000 permanent inhabitants. The region borders to both Norway and Finland, which indicate additional inhabitants that commute for work and tourism as temporary inhabitants throughout the year (Regionfakta Norrbottens län, 2022).

In the regional development strategy for Norrbotten (2019) it is mentioned that the last ten years have been revolutionary for the region. The booming green and industrial investments in data storage, mining, energy and battery production have changed the region and enhanced the situation where some municipalities are growing while others are shrinking. As mentioned in the previous *MAP Position paper Digitalisation in rural areas* (2022), the new circumstances combined with old preconditions of large distances and great nature provide an opportunity to use digitalisation to create a more attractive region and attractive rural areas.

The Position paper (2022) also highlights how the use of digitalisation to increase rural attractiveness require both more science-policy-society cooperation, and more consultation and dialogue between public actors and local rural actors such as rural village associations. The question of how to implement digitalisation in an inclusive way is therefore closely interlinked with the new topic for this SHERPA cycle, governance. There are several participatory digitalisation projects ongoing in Norrbotten and researchers working within these emphasize how digitalisation and the digital transformation touches much broader topics such as inclusion, democracy and ethics (Runardotter et al., 2022). In an essay some of these researchers describe the process of inclusive digital transformation as similar to the functions of a jazz ensemble:

"... where the cooperation (playing together) needs, and is promoted by, someone who leads and challenges the ensemble to dare to experiment, and who, with the help of negotiation and education creates the conditions for the production of music. Together the ensemble learns, creates a common understanding, or meaning, for what is to be played" (Runardotter et al., 2022).

With this comparison they mean that also the process of inclusive digital transformation should encourage creativity and include common learning practices and creation of meaning for all involved actors. One emphasis is that public actors such as regions or municipalities need to lead the cooperation and create a forum for open dialogue where companies, local actors and individuals can meet. Other research projects on inclusive digitalisation are projects such as *Smart Sustainable Villages*[1], *DIGIBY, Viesso duobbdága/Living rural areas*[2], *RörLa*[3] and *Predictive Movement.*

There are also other governance processes ongoing in the region. *Leader Polaris group* is working with local development in Jokkmokk, Gällivare och Överkalix. In 2019 the Region finalised the Strategy for Smart Specialisation after a long governance process including several actors from different sectors in the region. The municipalities are engaged in a collaboration to establish local service hubs (see more on this, page 6).

But there are also governance processes that can be improved. In a pre-study carried out by Wsp (2020) about the coordination of the regional initiative *Develop Norrbotten*, it is concluded that it is also necessary to strengthen governance and cooperation between different public actors. This is emphasized in several steering documents and in interviews with the region, municipalities, Tillväxtverket, Swedish Lapland Visitors Board, Trafikverket och Länsstyrelsen. How governance in Norrbotten can be improved and strengthened, in particularly within the frame of digitalisation, is the focus of this Position Note from MAP Norrbotten.

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[1] Smarta hållbara byar
[2] Levande landskap, Ájtte – Svenskt Fjäll- och Samemuseum » Viesso duobbdága/Levande landskap (ajtte.com)
[3] Mobile rural areas, RörLa - Rörliga Landsbygder - Luleå tekniska universitet, LTU

2. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform

2.1. Identified strengths and needs

Several key strengths of Norrbotten are identified by the MAP in relation to governance. The main aspect is that there, in several places in rural Norrbotten, are a strong engagement from people to fight for the existence of their locality. People are organising themselves in cooperatives and economic associations to voice their opinion on governance at local and municipal level. This creates local, regional and national governance which can have effect on policy. It is also mentioned that digital services and tools can be an instrument to enhance the cooperation in and between rural areas. The large engagement in rural areas should however be nuanced by the fact that all municipalities are different, and some are more vocal and resilient than others, and commitment also varies over time. In addition, other strengths are mentioned as connected to rural areas in comparison to urban areas are the sense of community, the security, the nature and that contacts and relationships usually are deeper and more frequent.

A discussion is needed about Spatial justice and Fair development in rural areas. Services cannot be the same in rural areas because of several reasons, however the level of services need to be addressed. It is important to be aware of the fact that the critical mass is smaller in rural areas why private market solutions do not always work. A place-based approach is needed where the outcome is just, regardless if the person lives in an urban or rural area. In rural areas citizens need to organise themselves to find solutions to problems which are solved by public or private actors in urban areas. The question that is important to discuss is how much the public sector should step in to make this difference "just".

Rural questions need to have a more central position in administrations at all levels. Revisit the discussion about whether to treat rural issues as separate entities or if they should be integrated within discussions of other sectors. The MAP does not have a simple answer to this question, but they want to lift the discussion of a more holistic perspective on rural issues and rural governance. Issues that specifically affect rural areas should have more focus on national and regional level. Rural areas and especially the north are often not a priority in national discussions e.g. there is no minister from the north of Sweden.

A need to have one coordinating actor responsible and present in the region. The MAP emphasises that there is a need to have one actor that is responsible for rural issues in the region. When you want to talk about rural issues in general you do not know where to turn. This is also connected to the previous mentioned need of a holistic perspective and an actor that have an overarching and coordinating role. To take on this role in an inclusive and effective manner is very resource demanding why the actor needs to have sufficient resources, both in terms of economy, time and knowledge to do it properly. In addition, several other actors working with rural issues in other sectors have disappeared from the region. Headquarters and offices have moved further south and to larger cities and positions such as "rural officers"[4] are no longer employed at the regional administrations.

More focus on intersectionality and equality in governance processes. It is mentioned that several different groups need to be included governance processes in Norrbotten. The local development work taking place in rural Norrbotten is mostly done by women. It is mentioned that the "equality requirements"[5] for LEADER are changing and becoming more ambiguous. Before there were requirements of a gender divide of 60/40 while now the requirements should only exist and be regarded. The advantage of this is that it makes it possible to work for broader inclusion that matches the different groups in the population. This can create better inclusion of different indigenous groups, non-binary people, people of different ages, nationalities and ethnicities.

Increase the use of digital services and work with digital inclusion. Digital services can be a way of facilitating governance in Norrbotten. Norrbotten is a large region and travel between places takes a long

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[4] landsbygdsarbetare
[5] jämställdhetskraven

time. Digital services, both in terms of communication services, distance care solutions or E-commerce can make everyday life easier and make it possible to live in rural areas. As emphasized in the previous report, there are still issues with the use of digital services. First and foremost, the expansion of broadband in the region is not sufficient, but also other private market solutions are not working because of limited critical mass, such as E-commerce. There is also a need to work more with digital inclusion so all groups can use services and not be left outside this development.

2.2. Existing interventions and actions

Table 1 – Examples of actions taken by local actors

Research projects Digiby and SMALL

Digiby, digital service in villages, started in 2019 with the aim to increase knowledge about methods and applicability of digitalisation opportunities for service development in rural areas. The project ends in March 2023 and in January 2023 the project SMALL, smart viable rural areas, started, which is is a scale up project of Digiby funded by national and EU funding. SMALL will continue this work and expand into villages in the county of Västerbotten and test new combinations and collaborations for more a more desirable living in villages.

Both Digiby and SMALL will create conditions for establishing digitalisation of traditional service hubs, where digital solutions for coordination and communication are offered with the aim of increasing accessibility to service. Digiby has created 18 Rural Living Labs in Norrbotten and used existing technology and the services that has been adapted to the conditions in the villages.

The project has: Increased coordination of service types within public and commercial services; Supported the development of service solutions and support for maintaining service functions in vulnerable areas; and Invested in new technical, innovative solutions for an improved coordination of service, ex digital venue, digital parcel boxes, digital support for municipal bookmobiles and digital locks.

Leader in Norrbotten

Through Leader, actors who have ideas about local development can put them forward, get involved and seek funding for development projects. In Norrbotten there are four geographical Leader areas that cover all 14 municipalities. In 2022, new strategies/control documents were established for each area, where the strategies are based on the needs and conditions of the local level. Decisions about which development projects are to be prioritized are made by a local LAG board (LAG=Local Action Group) with representatives from the non-profit, private and public sectors. The goal is to create attractive areas with competitive businesses, all based on the idea that local development is carried out most effectively by those who live and work in an area. Each Leader area is part of a large network of development actors at national level, and through the LAG boards channels are created to the municipal level in all sectors.

PTS (the Swedish Post and Telecom Authority) existing model for broadband support is not adapted to areas with a low degree of deployment.

The distribution of the state's funds for broadband development through PTS has not worked to provide rural areas with broadband, neither in Norrbotten nor in other rural counties. Therefore, the seven northernmost counties have, through their broadband coordinators, pushed for a change through letters and lobbying towards PTS and the ministry stating that areas with special challenges and low deployment rates therefore need to be defined for a functional model, whose support is effective in Sweden's rural and sparsely populated areas. Without such a definition, earmarked funds will not reach their intended goal. A first step should be to at least break down the national broadband targets by municipality level, and preferably lower. The definition should also focus on areas outside urban areas where broadband is missing according to the 2025 target, and where a certain distance to existing connection points is identified. When regions can prioritize construction based on societal needs and special challenges, and not as today forced to strategic bidding, a real opportunity arises to actually lift the areas that have special

needs. or the aforementioned reasons, the seven northernmost regions urge the Government Office not to follow the recommendations of the Swedish Post and Telecom Authority (PTS). The seven northernmost regions call on the Government Office to provide the agency with a clarified directive that clarifies the purpose of the earmarked funds, which requires a clear definition of the areas to be reached by the funds. The regions offer to participate more concretely in the task at hand to contribute constructively to finding the right model for the distribution of these earmarked funds.

Local service hubs in Region Norrbotten

In Norrbotten, several local services hubs have been established by municipalities to provide services that are adapted to local needs, strengths, technical possibilities, and community resources. These services hubs are designed to serve as local points of contact for residents in rural areas and provide a range of services that are traditionally only available in central areas.

The services provided by these hubs vary depending on the specific needs of the community, but they often include services related to healthcare, social services, education, employment, and cultural activities. For example, a local services hub may provide access to a doctor, nurse, or physiotherapist, as well as counselling and support services for mental health and substance abuse. They may also offer educational services such as language courses, vocational training, and adult education classes. In addition, the hubs may host cultural events and provide opportunities for residents to participate in recreational activities.

The goal of these local services hubs is to reduce the need for residents in rural areas to travel long distances to central areas to access essential services. This can be a significant challenge in rural areas, where access to transportation can be limited and travel times can be long. By providing services locally, these hubs aim to improve the quality of life for residents in rural areas and reduce the burden of travel and time spent away from home.

The services provided by these hubs are often tailored to the specific needs and resources of the community. For example, in areas with a high proportion of elderly residents, the hub may provide services that cater to the needs of older adults, such as healthcare and support services. In areas with a strong cultural heritage, the hub may provide opportunities for residents to learn about and celebrate local traditions and customs.

Overall, the establishment of local services hubs in Norrbotten is an innovative approach to addressing the challenges of providing essential services in rural areas. By tailoring services to local needs and resources, these hubs are helping to improve the quality of life for residents in rural areas and promote the sustainable development of rural communities.

2.3. Recommendations from the MAP

2.3.1. Recommendations for future rural policies

The EU and national level should investigate ways to diversify the financing alternatives for support to local development to receive the maximum output: Support for local development from EU and national level should allow for alternative financing options that are placed based rather than only project based to improve continuity in local development work. Alternative financing options could be "fondsamverkan" to avoid that fonds are paid out in siloes, to organise support in missions, or allocate funds to a specific areas to work with local development. There is also an opportunity in following how national authorities work with the process of "trail development" within the tourism sector. Today you get priority in the tendering process from funds from The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth if you cooperate in a consortium, and particularly with regional actors. To use this model also within other sectors can be a way to increase governance and cooperations in the region.

Restore the holistic perspective on rural areas: Some of the policy implications of thinking that rural development involves all sectors including business, education, and healthcare leads in some cases to a lack of priority of thinking about possibilities for the smaller villages in Norrbotten. Collaboration between different sectors is critical for promoting the integration of rural areas/questions into all sectors. By bringing together stakeholders from different sectors such as business development, health care and education it is possible to develop integrated policies and programs that consider the unique needs and circumstances of rural areas in Norrbotten. Policies and programs that are tailored to the specific needs could involve developing targeted incentives and support programs for rural businesses, investing in rural infrastructure, and ensuring that rural communities have access to essential services such as healthcare and education.

Spatial justice as a priority on the national agenda: It is recommended that the discussion about spatial justice and fair development between urban and rural areas should be given higher priority on the national agenda. This can be achieved through various means, such as initiating policy dialogues, organizing conferences and workshops, and involving stakeholders from both urban and rural areas in the discussion. It is important to emphasize the need for a holistic approach to spatial justice, which considers not only the distribution of resources but also the processes that lead to unequal spatial outcomes. Additionally, there should be a focus on identifying and addressing the structural and institutional factors that perpetuate spatial injustices. By prioritizing the discussion about spatial justice and fair development, policymakers can work towards creating more equitable and sustainable urban-rural relationships in Sweden.

One actor should have the main responsibility for rural issues: Today there is no one actor that has the main responsible for rural issues, which means there is no actor that has the holistic view of rural issues in the region. Even though it is important to also have several actors that work on different levels and with different questions, there is also a need to have one actor that can coordinate the work and that can be a forum to where people can turn. This is also connected to the need for offices/headquarters of organizations that have left the region to be reinstalled since their presence is needed.

More coordinators should be employed on regional level to test already existing solutions: There is a need to test good existing solutions and not always come up with something new. It is important to see if there are ways to make small adjustments to make the solutions more place based or functional. This needs to take time to understand what works and why. Therefore, we need more coordinators to test and modify these solutions. A testing and modifying process requires time and resources. It cannot be done in a rush, as it is important to understand what works and why it works. This is where more coordinators come into play. By employing more coordinators on a regional level, it would be possible to dedicate more resources to testing and modifying solutions. These coordinators would have the necessary expertise and experience to work with local communities and stakeholders to understand their needs and make the necessary adjustments to existing solutions.

2.3.1. Recommendations for future research agendas

Benchmarking the realities of rural areas in Sweden: An investigation of changes over time

This aim with this research project is to establish a benchmark of the realities in rural areas in Sweden and investigate how these realities have changed over time. The project aims to contribute to a better understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities facing rural communities in Sweden and to inform evidence-based policymaking and programming. The collected data will be analysed using statistical and qualitative analysis methods Results may contribute to a better understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities facing rural communities in Sweden and to inform evidence-based policymaking and programming.

Compare long-term effects and impact of LEADER in different countries and regions

LEADER is a European Union (EU) initiative aimed at supporting rural development by providing funding and assistance to local partnerships. While LEADER has been in operation for over 25 years, there is still much to learn about its long-term impact and effectiveness in different countries and regions. Future research could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of LEADER in achieving its goals and objectives, identifying the factors that contribute to successful implementation, and understanding how LEADER can be adapted to different contexts and changing circumstances.

Inclusive research teams with representatives from academia, civil society and policy

How do we reach the group that is negatively affected and cannot participate in policy processes? One of the challenges of research projects is reaching out to groups that are not typically involved in policy processes or may be negatively affected by policy decisions. To address this, future research could focus on innovative approaches to engaging with marginalized communities, such as using social media, mobile technology, or community-based participatory research. Additionally, researchers could explore ways to build trust and establish relationships with these communities, which may involve working with community leaders, advocates, and other trusted intermediaries.

Research on governance processes for rural areas

Rural areas often face challenges in terms of governance processes and representation in national decision-making entities. Future research could explore different governance models and approaches that are specifically designed to meet the needs of rural communities, such as participatory budgeting, community-based decision-making, and network governance. Additionally, research could examine the role of digital technologies in improving governance in rural areas, such as through e-participation and e-governance platform.

Spatial justice as a theory in terms of the urban-rural dichotomy

Spatial justice is a concept that refers to the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and services across different geographic areas. In the context of the urban-rural dichotomy, spatial justice can help us understand how power and resources are distributed between urban and rural areas, and how this affects the well-being of people living in these areas. Future research could explore different dimensions of spatial justice in the context of the urban-rural divide, such as access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, and how policy interventions can be designed to promote spatial justice and reduce inequalities between urban and rural areas.

Conclusions

MAP Norrbotten has identified several strengths and needs regarding digitalisation and governance in rural areas. One key strength is the strong engagement of people in rural Norrbotten who are fighting for the existence of their communities. This is evidenced by the formation of cooperatives and economic associations, which allow residents to voice their opinions on local and municipal governance. However, there are also several needs that have been identified, particularly the need to restore resources and focus on rural issues at all levels of administration.

To address these needs, MAP Norrbotten recommends diversifying financial support for local and regional development from both EU and national levels. Additionally, there should be a greater focus on highlighting the discussion of rural issues and spatial justice between rural and urban areas and allocating more resources towards rural development to create a more holistic view and allow for testing and development of effective solutions. Regarding future research, MAP Norrbotten recommends focusing on the role of Leader, the concept of spatial justice and finding ways to engage participants who are not typically involved in discussions and placing greater emphasis on governance in rural areas.

Acknowledgements

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