

Finland must be seen as a whole

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The division between rural areas and cities or towns is highly artificial in Finland, whose regional structure is based on small municipalities that, at a closer look, are difficult to specify as cities, towns or rural areas. Accordingly, it would be wise and fair for the citizens if Finland was developed as a country of small local communities, forgetting the idea of metropolises and centres of excellence, which is a poor match to our geographical reality.

One ideology above all others

A strong belief in the ideology of greatness has impressed itself on the minds of Finland's economic, political, scientific and communications elite. All services must be centralised in large units; small and inefficient companies must be eliminated through competitive bidding; small universities are dubious because they are not "top universities"; and small municipalities cannot succeed, only metropolises can. Discussion about the effects of solutions dictated by the ideology of greatness on citizens living in different parts of the country is dismissed. Any talk about local values and decentralised solutions is labelled as reactionary and anti-progressive.

Finland is being built on the basis of development ideas copied directly from elsewhere, assuming that our country is similar to those with a dense central network and large population, like the core of Central Europe or the metropolitan areas of North America. In reality, Finland is a country of small centres and large rural areas.

The predominant talk in regional development, the *hegemonic discourse*, reflects the conviction that competitiveness is generated through centres. Rural areas are subordinate to centres – areas that provide resources or are suitable for quick visits. The luminous innovation environments are assumed to be located in the largest city

regions. In order for Finland to be efficient and competitive, our regional structure must be denser, built around fewer and larger centres.

Supposedly, we can no longer afford traditional regional policy, which aimed to create equal opportunities for all parts of the country. The elite of regional developers now have the idea of strengthening the strongest areas and offering a minimal number of services for sparsely populated areas. The conviction is that Finland's global competitiveness can only be developed in one superior metropolitan area, and allocating any development resources outside it eats into Finland's global development potential. To comfort the areas that have fallen by the wayside, they are offered strategies of elegant regression.

The strategists of elegant regression are playing the Russian roulette with the national future of Finland; in their willingness to specify areas as regressive regions and "backwoods", they may be decisively limiting the cultural and financial preconditions of exactly the kinds of local communities that could be giving rise to a new Finnish success story. What gives people the right to think that competitiveness can only be created in metropolitan environments? What is the logic behind the idea that only one kind of environment can generate creative processes in individuals?

The elite have become alienated from the geography of citizens.

The Greek philosopher Plato pondered the essence of information long ago. In this context, he presented the Allegory of the Cave: A gathering of people have lived chained to the wall of a cave all of their lives. Their only connection to the outside world is the narrow mouth of the cave. The cave people have established their view of the external reality based on shadows cast on the wall by a faint light shining from the mouth. But have they been able to interpret the information they have received correctly?

The question faced by the cave people is linked with those wielding power in society, the decision-makers. The people referred to as the elite. The elite are inclined to establish their own views of reality and take these for the truth. For example, the leaders of the Soviet Union used to consider their country superior to all others. According to an old anecdote, Lenin, Stalin and Brezhnev were travelling by train. Unexpectedly, the track ended. They tried to find a solution to the problem, until

Brezhnev had an idea: “Comrades, let’s draw the curtains, rock our bodies and pretend the train is moving again.”

What the Finnish developer elite have said regarding our crucial questions also fits the Allegory of the Cave. Our elite are also living in a cave with their strategies, visions and innovation systems. Presentation graphics are stirring images that are interpreted to require condensing the regional structure, centralising basic services into large units and putting the reins on education by cutting down universities, universities of applied sciences, upper secondary schools and comprehensive schools. The goals include the efficient trimming of society and development of decision-making systems that are as sensitive as possible to the requirements of the economy.

As a geographer, I am worried about our developer elite’s way of perceiving the regional reality of Finland. The elite take the plane when they travel long-distance within the country, and shuttle in the Helsinki–Turku–Tampere triangle in a first-class railway carriage or private car. They have formed an image of a compact, densely populated country where all daily destinations can be reached easily. This is the cave in which the elite live, believing, probably sincerely, that this is reality for the whole of Finland.

Alienation from the daily transport realities of people living in rural areas in particular has caused the elite to forget one fundamental fact: Finland is a country with a large area, small and sparse population and little towns and local communities. The geography of the elite is completely different from that of most citizens.

The geography of the daily lives of citizens is disturbed when administrative units are stretched to suit the geographical requirements of the elite. No matter how much the city regions are puffed out, Finland will never become a metropolitan society. By contrast, what is emerging is a state that humiliates its citizens and turns its local communities into orphans, making daily life increasingly difficult, especially in rural areas. Mechanical population-based thinking and the spirit of centralisation are not the answers to the crucial questions of organising services in Finland, since they do not take account of the geography – particularly the distances in rural areas.

The good life and happiness of citizens require that the prioritisation of the smoothness of everyday life is recognised and ensured. Good day-to-day living, a

feeling of control and the predictability of life are great sources of innovation and happiness. The nation's best interests are not served if decision-making regarding the regional organisation of society is separated from the geography of citizens and progress is taken to mean making coercive reforms just for the sake of making reforms, steered from above, disregarding the principles of a good life and trampling on the prerequisites for happiness. It is time for the developer elite to come out of their cave and see what kind of a country we are actually living in.

Ecology as a tool for running down the countryside

Life in the countryside has been made more difficult in the name of "harmonising" societal structures. People do not realise that the same zoning principles cannot be applied to spacious rural areas and dense cities. Finns should understand that sustainable housing is possible from the geographical starting points of each community.

Finland has, without any criticism, adopted the idea that only one type of community, as compact and urban as possible, can be "ecological". Lifestyle and a community's opportunities to produce its food, electricity and heat locally have been completely forgotten here. Ecology has become an ideological tool for parties that want to see the countryside shrink into the least possible part of Finnish society and want to promote the idea of a metropolitan state, which poorly fits the geographical realities.

A character test for Finnish society

According to studies, regional centralisation continues. The future looks particularly grim for rural areas in Eastern and Northern Finland: the number of jobs is decreasing, young people are moving away, the proportion of pensioners is increasing and the problems of public finance are getting worse.

It is time to draw some conclusions. How badly will we let the services and daily security of people living in sparsely populated rural areas deteriorate before something is done about this? Vast areas in Eastern and Northern Finland will require special measures. The centralisation of administration is gnawing at the foundation of the daily lives of the ageing population more and more severely. Unreliable, clumsy information technology solutions and flimsy multi-service points are not enough to

make up for the insecurity caused by running down the services and turning local communities into orphans.

Securing welfare services for the ageing population of sparsely populated rural areas is becoming one of the character tests for Finnish society. If we turn our backs on the residents of rural areas, stubbornly believe in the centralisation of services and leave the ageing population at the mercy of digitalisation, it is proof that one of the self-evident cornerstones of Finnish society – justice – no longer applies.

Dream of a new countryside

What we need is a vision of hope for the countryside, a shared dream. It is a vision of a new countryside twenty years from now, based on people, their skills and the competitiveness bred from them. I refer to this new countryside of the people as a mosaic of multiform functions.

The new countryside has large, specialised farms. Their production volumes are impressive. The large farms give rise to new kinds of employment through subcontracting. They also have more permanent employees than today's farms do. The increasingly modern farm entrepreneurship has created new kinds of rural professions that emphasise the application of information technology.

Persistent development measures have also given rise to small, work-oriented farms based on a multi-functional approach. They have found narrow niches in the market of greatness where they succeed thanks to their market know-how, product development, flexible production and small volumes.

Small companies form local and regional value chains based on co-operation. These are referred to as micro-clusters. While the companies are local, the markets are not only local but also national and international. Micro-clusters have been formed in fields like small-scale industry, care services and tourism. Value chains specialising in the production of bioenergy, which use raw materials such as wood, organic waste, geothermal heat, solar power, wind power and field energy crops, are also important. Micro-grids are a key part of energy production in the countryside, and the related know-how has become an important export sector. The markets for locally produced food have expanded.

The new countryside has an increasing number of people who divide their time between the countryside and the city. Most summer cottages have been converted into second homes also suitable for winter accommodation. Vacant countryside buildings have been renovated. They have been sold or rented out for housing. New timeshare chains based on flexible housing have also been established. Companies specialising in renovations, gardening, road ploughing and domestic aid have been created thanks to the demand from residents spending part of their time in the countryside.

Lifestyle professions in arts, science and handicrafts are blossoming in the villages of the new countryside. Rural communities are characterised by various remote work arrangements, which have significantly reduced the daily commuting traffic from the countryside to cities. Services organised with a multiform approach provide the citizens with care but also take care of the environment and local roads, for example. Wise market control has prevented monopolies of multinational care factories and ensured the fair treatment of non-governmental organisations and local companies in bidding competitions.

A wise information society policy has succeeded in abolishing the necessity of centralising everything in large units, and an increasing number of tasks are handled in advanced information environments based on broadband networks. Their exact nature cannot be described yet. In terms of a game of make-believe, we can consider what we knew about the Internet or smartphones in the mid-1990s.

Thanks to new, significantly more advanced information systems, learning no longer depends on time or place. Young people living in the countryside can study further and further in their home region. On the other hand, since work has become more flexible and less dependent on location, opportunities to live and work in the countryside have improved considerably.

The new countryside requires the strengthening of an extensive rural policy. It is carried out as a joint effort between citizens, state administration, non-governmental organisations, regions, municipalities, institutes of higher education and other specialist organisations and companies. The extensive rural policy aims to create a national set of tools that promotes the vitality of the countryside regardless of changes in the EU's funding trends. There is one decisive piece of insight behind the creation

of the extensive countryside policy: the countryside is no longer a battleground of conflicting interests but rather something that belongs to everyone, a key factor in Finnish well-being and competitiveness.

A chance for the geography of hope

In spite of the fervent admiration of centralisation and greatness, there is still hope. Local Finnish communities still have a strong belief and competence in doing things together. Dozens of events are organised in different parts of the countryside every summer. They are based on volunteer work, love for local heritage and belief in the future.

The Finnish geography of hope still has a chance. The self-sufficient country with strong local communities has not been lost yet. I am worried about one thing: where are the parties and politicians who have the courage to honestly work for preserving and developing the prerequisites for local values.