

# Unwrapping rural capabilities

Many people, including politicians, researchers, and experts at all levels, acknowledge that developing rural areas is challenging. This appears to be the case in the Nordic countries just as it is in other parts of Europe and worldwide, both in advanced and developing countries. The challenges might be slightly different according to the particular society, but they are present nonetheless. In addition to the so-called 'normal challenges', rural communities and areas face the challenges represented by global environmental and economic crises. The limits to growth are perhaps currently more in evidence than ever before, as is the vulnerability of political, social, cultural, socio-economic and ecological systems. It is the responsibility of rural research to understand, organize and produce knowledge for responding to these challenges and it is the duty of rural policy to design and implement policies that lead to the development of rural areas and society at large.

When discussing rural development, it is useful to remind ourselves of the etymology of the word 'develop'. In the Finnish language we have two different forms of the verb 'to develop', an intransitive and a transitive form. Kehittää is the transitive verb meaning to gradually change or shape something or to make something more complete, as well as to grow or give a birth to something. Kehittyä is the intransitive verb, which does not take an object referring to a self-governing process. The etymological roots of these two words are the same and equate with the English verb to develop. The English word 'develop' first appeared during Shakespeare's lifetime, 400 years ago as 'disvelop', which meant 'to reveal' something. The de in develop means to 'take away' from velopment. Velopment meant 'wrapping up' or 'rolling up' something. So, if something is enveloped by rolling up, it is developed by unrolling and revealing it. A metaphorical meaning often used contained in unwrapping is that of the folded petals of rosebuds that unfold as the rose flower develops. It suggests that the structure is already there at least in some germinal state and it develops step by step during the course of the unfolding. Although this process is basically self-governing, it is, however, dependent on external conditions. So, what is also worth noting is that 'develop' does not necessarily bring about something new, but rather reveals and makes use of hidden resources and capacities.

During recent decades the main focus of rural research and policy has been redirected from exogenous towards endogenous development, highlighting hidden capacities. Governance has been introduced as a means of exploring and reaching these objectives. Yet, as we know, it has been challenging to put endogenous development into practice. It requires sensitivity in identifying local resources and special skills needed to set up structures to support local governance. Governance has not always led to the results that were expected or at least not in the expected time span. At this point it is useful to return to the etymology of the word 'development', to try to learn more about the rural resources present, to be sensitive to their features and realize that 'unwrapping' is partly a self-governing process that requires time, space and suitable conditions, as when rose buds break and develop into flowers.

It is a great honour for Finnish researchers to host the XXIII European Congress of Rural Sociology in Vaasa. To celebrate this event, we decided to publish a Special Issue of *Maaseudun uusi aika*,

the Finnish journal of rural research and policy, in English and present it to the participants of the Congress. The journal, the name of which is literally ‘ a new era for rural areas’, is funded by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and published by the Finnish association for rural research and persons working in rural development organizations and administration. The association aims to promote rural research and development work in Finland and interaction among all those involved. The journal is multidisciplinary in scope, comprising peer reviewed articles, analyses, discussions on selected topics, and interviews (see [www.mua.fi](http://www.mua.fi) for further information).

The call for articles for this Special Issue covered all themes on rural issues and was open to all Finnish researchers. Governance is of major concern to Finnish researchers as most of the articles included in this issue focus on governance in various contexts. They describe the roles and interactions of various actors and institutions in multi-level governance and identify governance gaps and scalar problems in rural and environmental policy. In addition, two of the articles explore how the Finnish food system and farmers face and respond to the challenges brought by the changing political and socio-cultural environment. Finnish rural research, and policy design and its implications at local level are introduced to the European research community through three brief analyses. Finally, we can read about what is now topical in the field of rural research and policy according to Professor Philip Lowe, a leading European researcher in rural issues. The contents of this issue are available online at [www.mua.fi](http://www.mua.fi).

I am extremely grateful for all the contributors to this issue, to the authors for their flexibility and co-operation during the editing process as well as to the sixteen anonymous referees from throughout Europe who kindly assisted in a very tight review process, and to Professor Lowe for the interesting interview.

I hope that this Special Issue of *Maaseudun uusi aika* provides an overview of the challenges in Finnish rural policy and the strategies and responses, some of which might be applied in other countries and other contexts where more or less similar challenges are being faced.

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