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Rural Resilience and Voluntary Work in the North of Sweden

An Ambiguous Relationship

ABSTRACT Rural areas in the north of Sweden are characterized by depopulation, unemployment and undermined social services. Due to the demands of economic growth and development, major cities in southern Sweden have been prioritized at the expense of the countryside. However, there have been many reactions to the dismantling of the welfare society in rural areas. People are also trying to counter and compensate for the impoverishment of the countryside through voluntary work. The overarching aim of this paper is to explore meanings of voluntary work in Sweden's northern county of Västerbotten. More specifically, the aim is to investigate how different comprehensions of rural voluntary work are related to rural identities and to a resilient rural society. A central argument in the paper is that the relation between rural volunteer work and rural resilience is ambiguous. On one hand, volunteer work can contribute to rural resilience, since volunteering is a necessary course of action for people in the countryside to secure a necessary level of social services. On the other hand, rural volunteer work often has a traditional character, not always representing the capital of knowledge needed to maintain a sustainable rural lifestyle in the long run.

KEYWORDS rural resilience, volunteer work, rural identity, non-profit organizations, rurality

Introduction

Many rural areas in the north of Sweden are characterized by depopulation, aging populations, unemployment and withdrawn welfare services. Rural resources are also increasingly exploited by, for example, mining companies and wind power companies. While such tendencies sometimes make rural populations regard themselves to be victims of unwanted ideals of economic growth (Nilsson & Lundgren 2019), their effects are also explicitly reacted to and protested against, for example, the uprising against the closing of the emergency room in Dorotea (Lundgren & Nilsson 2018; Berglund-Lake 2020),

the protests against the mining establishment in Kallak (Sjöstedt Landén 2017; Cocq 2014), the occupation of the hospital in Sollefteå (Enlund 2018; Enlund 2020; Nordin 2020), the protests against exploitation of land (Sehlin MacNeil 2017), and various other rural protests on social media against cutbacks, environmental damages and urban norms (Lundgren & Johansson 2017). Whereas such protests often have a specific target, they also make significant examples of an ongoing "politics of the rural" (Woods 2006), politicizing the very meaning of the "rural."

But not all criticised situations are met with explicit protests. On the everyday basis, people are also meeting the challenges of rural areas through more or less organized volunteer practices aimed at resisting perceived problems and creating a liveable space. This type of volunteering has sometimes been regarded as more important in rural than in urban areas, and many rural communities have high rates of volunteering (e.g., Davies, Lockstone-Binney & Holmes 2018). Not least, it has been noted that the lack of local services leads rural inhabitants to depend on each other and to develop high levels of trust, personal acquaintance and solidarity (Svendsen & Svendsen 2016). Also within policy, the reliance on volunteer practices is greater in rural areas than in urban ones (Rönnblom 2014); there is an emphasis in public reports on the significance of rural populations' "commitment" and "capacity for cooperation" as the basis for a sustainable development in rural areas (SOU 2017:1; SOU 2016:13).

In this sense, rural volunteering has been described as central to rural survival, or for rural resilience, to use an increasingly used expression (Shrestha & Cihlar 2004; Skerratt 2013); volunteering has been described as crucial for the ability of rural areas to handle challenges represented by, for example, cutbacks, withdrawals of social services and digital divides between urban and rural areas (e.g., Cras 2017; Enlund 2020). In this paper, I explore the meaning-making around volunteering for rural resilience in the northern part of Sweden, and I argue that there is an ambiguous relationship between volunteer work and resilience; at the same time as volunteer work is deemed important if not required for the survival of rural communities, it lays the foundation for a rural identity and rural practices that, at least indirectly, can counteract resilience in the long run.

Based on interviews with persons engaged in volunteering, the overarching aim of the paper is to explore meanings of local volunteering in the Swedish northern county of Västerbotten. More specifically, the aim is to describe and analyse how different comprehensions of rural volunteering are related to rural identities and to a resilient rural society.

Methods

This study is based on qualitative interviews with 25 persons, 13 women and 12 men, aged between 40 and 75, and living in the county of Västerbotten. 17 of the interviewees live in small villages with up to a few hundred inhabitants, 8 live in communities with between 1,500 and 1,800 inhabitants. 15 of the interviewees were approached because they had experiences of engaging locally in volunteer practices, and 10 because they were politically active at the municipal level. The idea behind the sample was to produce knowledge about volunteer work and resilience from a broad perspective, including both first hand experiences of volunteering and the kind of overall perspective that politicians can be expected to have.

By interviewing people who were engaged in local volunteering, ranging from formally organized to more informal volunteering, I was able to produce knowledge about the meaning-making around rural volunteering as part of everyday life. Interviewees in

this category were approached through local non-profit organizations, mostly village associations. Although village associations may not constitute the bulk of the Swedish landscape of volunteer organizations, which is commonly described to consist of sports and leisure organizations, they often have the advantage of functioning as central organizers of many different types of rural volunteer initiatives, sometimes also including sports and leisure activities. By interviewing politicians, I could counter the risk that the volunteer workers' perspective on the importance of volunteering dominated the interviews. Established politicians living in, and representing, small communities usually have a good overview of collective activities in these communities.

In practice, the division between people engaged in volunteer activities and people engaged in politics was difficult to maintain, as many politicians were also engaged in volunteering. The main reason for including both categories was not, however, primarily to map differences between them, but to get a broader overview, which meant that such difficulties were deemed less important.

The interviews were conducted both via computer (Skype), telephone and face-to-face. They were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Two interviews were conducted in pairs, while the rest were individual. There are conflicting experiences of telephone interviewing. Telephone interviews have been criticized on the grounds that information in the form of gestures and body language is lost, that they are often shorter and less rewarding (see Mealer & Jones Rn 2014), and that people are hampered by not seeing who they are talking to (cf. Novick 2008). The opposite has also been emphasized, for example that it can be liberating not having to meet the interviewer face-to-face, that security and anonymity increase for the participants, and that social stress decreases (Mealer & Jones Rn 2014). In my experience, people are generally so accustomed to mobile phones and computers that such devices do not constitute an obstacle in the interview situation. All interviewees seemed to talk freely, and took initiatives during the interviews to give examples from personal experiences.

The interviews were semi-structured and based on a questionnaire with both open and specific questions, but the interviewees were also encouraged to introduce their own subjects and questions. The interviews varied somewhat in scope, and the interviews with politicians were usually a bit shorter than the others. But they nevertheless ended up being quite rich, probably because politicians are used to talking to strangers and declaring as well as defending their opinions (cf. Harvey 2011).

In the initial analysis, I turned to conventional qualitative content analysis. I read all the interview transcripts repeatedly and inductively identified central concepts and ideas. These were then organized in general themes or categories (cf. Hsieh & Shannon 2005; Neuendorf 2002). For example, the concepts of "informal volunteer work" and "formal volunteer work" were deployed as a first principle of categorization (cf. Wilson & Musick 1997). However, it was soon clear that most interviewees were engaged in both formal and informal volunteering and it became difficult, if not impossible, to make clear distinctions between the experiences made in one or the other capacity. In a second step, focus was on the meanings that the interviewees attributed to volunteering, and questions such as "what does volunteer work mean for you?" "what are the driving forces behind your volunteering?" and "what does volunteer work mean for rural communities?" were asked. Here, the concrete meanings of volunteering were of interest, but also how volunteering was being related to notions of rural conditions, to local narratives and to rural identities. Finally, and in line with constructivist realism that acknowledges how constructions are real in their effects and telling of the reality in which people live,

feel, act and identify, I explored the relation between, on the one hand, different forms of rural volunteer work—and the narratives and identities they are related to—and on the other hand, rural resilience. How can rural volunteer work and rural identities be understood in terms of rural resilience? The quotes have been edited for greater readability.

Central Perspectives and Concepts

The paper is influenced by constructivist realism (Cupchik 2001). This means that the stories told within the interviews are viewed as social and cultural constructions, created in specific social and cultural contexts. Apart from the context of the interview and the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Roulston 2010), the interview material is also seen as influenced by, and influencing, discourses that structure how notions about cultural phenomena such as volunteering are comprehended (Schmidt 2010; Wijkström 2012).

This means that interview stories are neither arbitrary nor exist independently of contextual circumstances, such as geographical location or other material circumstances. On the contrary, they are viewed as efforts to comprehend the interviewees' lived experiences and their encounters with a material reality, and are hence of importance for self-images and meaning-making around volunteer experiences. Thus, despite their constructed character, the point of departure is that interview stories tell us something "real" about the meanings of volunteering in a specific place at a specific time. In practice, constructivist realism meant that it became less important for me to check if the stories told within the interviews were "correct" and if they were consistent with other types of data. Of more importance was how significance was ascribed to the volunteer practises, thereby constituting them in ways that would be telling of the interviewees' concrete experiences of state withdrawal and cutbacks in service, which in turn would shed light on the ways in which they comprehended their volunteer practices as connected to broader contexts. The analysis also comprised efforts to scrutinize whether and how the interview stories were affected by the interview as such.

Central to the paper is the concept of "volunteering." It refers to activities that are voluntary, mainly unpaid, and performed with the aim of producing something meaningful for others (cf. Agarwal & Buzzanell 2015; von Essen 2008). The studied volunteer practices represent important local initiatives based on the "recognition of oneself as part of the social fabric, oriented toward influencing the way society works" (Jacobsson & Korolczuk [eds.] 2017: 3). A dividing line can be drawn between formal and informal volunteering (Wilson & Musick 1997). While the former refers to activities within an association or organization, the latter signifies less formally organized activities with the aim of helping and supporting relatives, neighbours and friends, for example, grocery shopping, gardening, cleaning and caretaking (cf. von Essen, Jegermalm, & Svedberg 2015: 61), thus including what is sometimes referred to in terms of "informal helping" (Henriksen, Strømsnes & Svedberg [eds.] 2019). However, the boundaries between different forms of volunteer practices are fluid and hence difficult to establish (Lilja & Åberg 2012), and the purpose is here primarily to point at how volunteer practices were comprehended as important aspects of rural living. In fact, the interviewees did not always recognize their own practises as "volunteering" at all, but rather as just something that they did and that was part of living in a small community. How a practice was comprehended was strongly dependent on the discursive realm within which it was articulated.

Being "resilient" as a community was an implicit goal within many interviews. "Resilience" usually refers to the ability to handle change, to cope and to recover, as well as to

develop after a hardship of some kind (Magis 2010). Originally deriving from the study of ecological systems (Holling 1973) and developed to fit also socio-ecological systems (Adger 2000; Adger 2003), the concept points at the ability of groups or communities to adapt and endure (Adger 2003; Stenbacka 2015; Keck & Sakdapolrak 2013), with the aim to maintain or renew a society or a system. While the translation of the concept of resilience from the context of ecology to complex social and cultural contexts was met with criticism (e.g., Walker *et al*. 2004), there have been plenty of efforts to adapt the concept. Scott (2013) has identified two main perspectives in the research on resilience. Equilibrium resilience represents a system's ability to "bounce back" or return to normal after a stressful event, for example, an environmental hazard, while evolutionary resilience stands for the capability to rather "bounce forward" by developing alternative trajectories. Applied to studies of rural areas, the importance of resilience is especially connected to the challenges faced within contexts characterized by more or less rapid transformation—social, political or environmental (Scott 2013). This is reflected in Magis' (2010) definition of community resilience, which refers to: "... the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise" (Magis 2010: 401).

There are various phenomena that are said to contribute to resilience. History and tradition (people's habit of acting), equality (Magis & Shinn 2009), optimism, collective and strategic action (Magis 2010), and local and charismatic leadership (Herbert-Cheshire 2000; Sorensen & Epps 2005) are some examples. Further aspects of importance, not least for rural resilience, are the introduction of new technologies, for example, broadband (Stenbacka 2015), social media, local medical training and cultural heritage (Beel *et al*. 2017). Rural resilience is furthermore linked to local engagement and volunteer work (Stewart *et al*. 1996/1997; cf. The Scottish Government 2009). Both formal and informal involvement in community life are said to be of importance, together with social networks, local identity and place belonging (McManus *et al*. 2012; King & MacGregor 2000). According to McManus *et al*. (2012: 22), place belonging "form[s] the basis for action." Thus, rural resilience is often related to local circumstances and people's engagement in volunteer work.

In this study, I am interested in the meanings that are attributed to volunteer work by members of rural communities that are facing significant changes. The changes can be instant, for example the sudden closure of a local business or care centre, but they can also be long-term restructuring processes, including social, political and economic transformations during time-periods characterized by urbanisation processes and neoliberal reforms (Pike *et al*. 2010). In what way can people's voluntary efforts to counter shut-downs, urbanization and deteriorating community services through volunteer work be understood in terms of rural resilience?

Results

The material seemed at first glance to have a rather uniform character. Both the volunteer workers and the politicians expressed similar views on volunteer work. However, it soon became apparent that the material was characterized by contradictions. The interviewees described engaged inhabitants and a great deal of positive activity in rural communities, while at the same time referring to the negative development of society, as evidenced by a severe decline in collective engagement. They emphasized that people in rural areas are known for being helpful and bighearted, but they also pointed out that

people are becoming more and more selfish. But there was also a difference between how the politicians and the volunteer workers talked about volunteering as such. All interviewees referred to a general situation with cutbacks in service. But while the politicians paid strong attention to specific structural factors, such as changed economic conditions for rural municipalities, the volunteer workers rather focused on changes in people's everyday lives, for example, how the impact of television had made people less inclined to volunteer. It did not seem to matter greatly if they were engaged in formal or more informal types of volunteering. In the following, I will describe the material and its inconsistencies, and then discuss how it can be understood in relation to rural identities and rural resilience.

The Evasive Character of Volunteer Work. Informal Volunteer Work

"Voluntary work" occasionally had an evasive character in the interview narratives. For example, in response to direct questions, the interviewees could state that they had no idea if people were engaged in volunteering or not in their community, or they could claim that people generally manage on their own without the help of others, that is, "you take care of your own" (Int. 4, volunteer). However, in the next sentence they could emphasize that people in small communities are used to helping each other without being paid. This was partly a conceptual confusion: the interviewees did not associate informal helping with informal volunteering; instead, it was regarded as a "natural" part of rural living. Thus, informal volunteering was common, for example, helping a neighbour or a relative, but it was not conceptualized as "volunteering," and hence not recognized as such. However, when the interviewees were asked about organized activities or formal volunteering (cf. Wilson & Musick 1997; von Essen, Jegermalm, & Svedberg 2015) within the framework of local associations, it became more obvious that people in the rural communities were highly and actively engaged in voluntary work.

An Engaged Local Population. Organized or Formal Volunteer Work

Some of the interviewees represented and held formal positions in village and interest associations, and they often described the origin of these associations. Several of them had been founded with the purpose of meeting some common needs in the community. One association was formed for practical and infrastructural reasons in order to install broadband in the village, and it had since then developed into something bigger with more responsibilities. Another association emerged as a successor to an older village organization. However, many associations appeared to be relatively late, founded during the post-war period—some of them in the 1990s or 2000s.

What activities, then, characterized the rural associations according to the interviewees? There was a wide variety of activities. The interviewees described different feasts, such as fermented Baltic herring parties and moose hunting parties—the latter in relation to the hunting season. They talked about course activities, craft fairs and craft cafés. Furthermore, they referred to maintenance work, snow clearing, cleaning of beaches and renovation of common premises:

> We have a large association building that was voluntarily built, in -46 [1946] I think it was, that we have renovated. It is like a community hall. It is very big, and we have everything from small meetings to big dances with three to four hundred people. We have a bakery,

> we have a sauna, you name it, we have almost everything there. And because the premises are so big, we can use them for many different activities. Play ping pong and gym and other things. It also has a good kitchen. (Int. 2, volunteer)

Here the interviewee stated "we have almost everything there" and created a picture of a very dynamic association with many different activities. It was also said that people in general were actively engaged in or supported non-governmental organizations:

> [...] there are *many* members. There are many who support, it is probably almost everyone among these 257 [households]. Or, yes, there are actually more! There are more members than accommodations! It's a bit interesting. And then you see guests and those who support and think it is fun to have an association. But the active are probably around 70. (Int. 8, volunteer)

It was also pointed out that older men (pensioners) are so eager to help that they almost compete with each other for driving the tractor and shovelling snow. It was further said that there are so many activities during the summer months that there are not enough visitors, and that different associations have to compete against each other. Although there were also voices claiming that the will to volunteer had gone down (cf. Lundgren 2020), it was clear that for the ones who were formally engaged, it was of great importance to be able to describe the many different and periodical activities based on voluntary work undertaken in their communities.

Voluntary Work and Its Multiple Meanings

What, then, are the village associations and their activities considered to mean for the local community? According to all of the interviewees, a central driving force for voluntary work was that it felt important and meaningful (cf. von Essen 2008), not least on a concrete everyday level. The interviewees also emphasized that voluntary work was important for the village community in general, and that the associations could be described as the glue that holds the village together. Volunteering was regarded to be significant in both practical and social terms:

> I think it's really important. The alternative, then, is to take the car to activities. And that takes time. And energy. When you come home from work, then it's not so easy to get around. If it's in the village, it's easier, and it will be, after all, it's a community and it's important to get to know each other! Which I think wouldn't be as easy if we didn't have this forum to meet. (Int. 8, volunteer)

The interviewees also said that volunteering is very important for rural areas overall, not least for the welfare sector, in order to maintain important social services. Furthermore, it was believed that volunteer work is central to "preserving what already exists, because it's so damn much work done already" (Int. 6, volunteer).

The associations were also attributed a certain financial significance. By renting out premises to tourists, moose hunters and other open-air people, the associations could at least cover their operating costs and maintain the village-based business. However, the non-profit associations were given even greater importance. Some of them were, or had been, essential from an infrastructural perspective in modernization processes of the countryside, for example, for maintaining or improving the standard of roads, maintaining commons, arranging common wells or—as mentioned above—installing broadband.

Identity, Loyalty and Helpfulness

Stories of voluntary activities and committed villagers comprised descriptions of concrete and everyday local events, but they also mediated notions about people in rural areas in general, about their characteristics and living conditions. Especially the politicians often raised their eyes from the local plane and concludingly described people's experiences of living in sparsely populated areas, and the social and material changes that they must deal with. They talked about all the challenges that residents in smaller villages face in the absence of a basic community service, and they said that people in the countryside had to cope much more on their own compared to people in cities. Here, the stories were characterized by moralistic and, indirectly, also urban-critical ideas; urban areas were considered to be prioritized at the expense of rural areas. Thus, descriptions of volunteering became a platform for recreating a positive rural identity with Norrland's rural areas as a point of departure, and where expressions of a need for "rural loyalty" were central (cf. Bye 2009).

Helpfulness and solidarity were common themes in narratives characterized by rural loyalty. The interviewees pointed out that it is impossible to manage in rural areas unless people help each other. Quite often the stories developed into benevolent depictions of the characteristics of people in the Nordic countryside:

> If you have a snow blower standing in your yard, and you have an old neighbour, it's natural that you'll help the neighbour with snow clearing while you're at it. [...] I think that's very common, that you try to help as much as possible. And I think it's quite natural for us, up here. [...] Everyone knows everyone in a different way in a small place, so ... You take care of each other, and keep a little watch on each other, in a different way. (Int. 22, politician)

Thus, the interviewee said that it is "quite natural for us, up here," that everyone knows everyone, and that everybody takes care of each other. Other interviewees provided other concrete examples. If you are out clearing snow, then it is obvious that you also will clear the neighbour's driveway, one of the interviewees emphasized (Int. 16, politician). Someone pointed out that helpfulness is a "must," there are no alternatives, "you have to help each other with snow clearing, ditching, haymaking and so on" (Int. 18, politician). Furthermore, it was said that people are socially interdependent, and through various forms of voluntary activities, feelings of community and belonging were maintained.

The interviews also comprised notions of younger people's responsibility for older people; older people have, according to the interviewees, the right to expect help in different forms, considering everything they have done for the society:

> You can't expect to be paid for everything. As people get older, you have to do something. You have to take care of the elderly, if society is to function. It's older people that have built society. I think you should help out without anyone having to beg for it. (Int. 2, volunteer)

The stories emanate from both concrete life experiences and more general moral conceptions. It is, according to the interviewees, for practical, social and moral reasons that people help each other and take a collective responsibility for different tasks. However, these stories also resulted in the creation of a "we" in relation to a more or less diffuse "they." This was specifically clear in recurring formulations such as it is '"natural for us, up here" and that "you take care of each other, and keep an eye on each other, in another way." Words and phrases like "us, up here" and "in another way" suggest that helpfulness

is something that is special for people in the rural north. Helpfulness seemed also to extend beyond village boundaries:

> We had problems with the snowmobile in our association; we have a snowmobile to maintain snowmobile trails. It was broken [...]. Then we called a guy in the neighbouring village. He fixes many things and such. And we said, "you won't get paid." No, but comes here with the snowmobile anyway: "I'll help you," he said. He was not paid for it, but it was obvious that he would help a neighbouring village. It's just something you do. (Int. 9, volunteer)

"It is just something you do," said the interviewee, an expression that can be regarded as an aspect of the production of a common identity. The interviewees positioned themselves against some kind of "other," indirectly represented by people living in cities and in the south of Sweden. Thus, employed in a discourse on rural identity or specificity, helpfulness and volunteer work become central characteristics that connect the present with notions of the past. It is a construction of a collective identity that connotes "idyllic rurality" (Horton 2008; Baylina & Berg 2010; Nilsson & Lundgren 2015), a symbolic construct according to which people in rural areas have a high quality of life and are living in harmony with each other and the nature, and in which egalitarianism, solidarity and belonging are central (cf. Woods 2003). This identity represents an important resource and a social glue in smaller communities, but it can paradoxically have some unexpected consequences in terms of rural resilience. I will return to this later.

Lost Engagement, Lost Helpfulness

Volunteer commitment sometimes had an evasive character, and the interviewees did not naturally associate their local activities with "volunteer work," which could give the impression of a "lack" of non-profit engagement in the rural communities where they lived. This impression was reinforced by explicit stories about the decline of non-profit activities in the countryside. These stories functioned as counternarratives (cf. Delgado 1989; Delgado 1995) to the narratives about helpfulness. The interviewees emphasized that there is only a small number of people who are involved in associations of different kinds. They said that many youth associations lack leaders because of a decreasing interest among parents, which has resulted in many associations and clubs closing down. This tendency for declining engagement was, according to all interviewees—volunteer workers as well as politicians—characteristic of rural areas in general.

This notion of a fading commitment was sometimes explained with references to local circumstances, for example, the experience of an increasingly unequal involvement among inhabitants. It was said that some people work intensively and take a great deal of responsibility, while others engage more sporadically, a few only after persuasion from other villagers, and quite a great number do not participate at all. Some people seem to obstruct, said one interviewee, and also pointed out that, while those who are active "work for the benefit of the whole village," many residents seem ungrateful (Int. 10, volunteer). The criticism of villagers who did not engage in volunteering had a moral undertone based on notions of reciprocity as central to rural life (cf. Stephens, Breheny & Mansvelt 2015).

A failing commitment was furthermore explained with references to changing conditions for rural communities in general. This was especially evident among the politicians, who pointed out that a reduced commitment can be explained by structural factors, such as aggravating (political and economic) circumstances. The politicians empha-

sized that the finances in rural municipalities are catastrophic, because the government transfers more and more costly tasks from the state to the municipalities. This means that they no longer have the same resources as before to compensate those who, for example, are willing to engage as sports leaders for children and young people, which has led to a reduced commitment. There were also those who blamed the state for recent developments, and argued that it was feelings of having been let down that caused the reluctance to engage: "Since they have taken all the people away from here in the past, few want to volunteer" (Int. 20, politician). According to this interviewee, people have lost hope for the future of the countryside. "Why get involved when it will lead to nothing?" the same person asked, rhetorically.

A recurring tendency in the interview stories in general was for interviewees to compare "yesterday" with "today," a comparison that usually resulted in the idea that everyday life has become tougher. That the pace is quicker, and people work more intensively than before and therefore cannot cope with voluntary work to the same extent as previously, was a commonly held view. Other explanations were that people of today want to be compensated financially for everything they do, and that they lack time for non-profit work because they have such high material standards that all their spare time is spent on gadgets:

> people in general have too much money and they have too many things. They have too many cabins, and so they have so damn much to do. It has become like that. Damn, there is not a man who doesn't have three, four snowmobiles and quad bikes, and everything must be used. (Int. 5, volunteer)

Other explanations for the declining engagement in volunteering was the impact of television, and that people in general have become less interested in taking responsibility for others in everyday life, for example, by helping a neighbour with grocery shopping. "I think that the Swedish people are becoming more and more lazy. It was not like this before. People used to take responsibility for all their associations" (Int. 20, politician). Another interviewee pointed out that not long ago people could spontaneously visit with their neighbour, they helped and took care of each other, and they did not have to lock their front doors. This is, however, not the case anymore:

> This I remember, if any farmer, for example, was ill during some period of haymaking or something, then almost all helped. Everyone who could help helped this man. That's how it used to be. That kind of helpfulness doesn't exist anymore. But of course, if I were sick and I couldn't do anything, change tires or something, as an example, then someone would come and help, of course. That's how it is in a village. After all, there's always someone you can call to get help. (Int. 1, volunteer)

"That kind of helpfulness doesn't exist anymore," the interviewee explained, but said in the next sentence that in a village there is always someone to help you out. This ambiguity—which also characterized the interview materials as a whole—is not unique. People's stories tend to be multifaceted and contradictory (Riessman 2003). There is, however, things to be learned from exploring the contradictions as related to the various contexts that were actualized in the interview narratives.

Different Stories, Various Contexts

Stories about identity and place have been described as simultaneously local and global (Massey 1998), because they are based on interaction and information that are not

(only) locally dependent but which exceed geographical boundaries. Such stories have sometimes been defined as glocal (see Thornton 2000). In the following, I am interested in how the interview stories were used in relation to different contexts, both local and global.

When the interviewees talked about a decline in helpfulness and a fading commitment, they took a wider social context as a point of departure, a context based on general notions of a changing social climate in general. Thus, it was not always people's own experiences or local community that constituted the material for their stories, but a notion of the development of society in general.

However, when the point of departure for the interview story was a concrete situation in the interviewee's own village, helpfulness and non-paid engagement stood out as self-evident: "Then someone will help out, of course," as one of the interviewees said. This form of local narrative has a glocal character, because it is not only a comment on local characteristics but represents a common counternarrative to the established stereotypes of rural Norrland as passive, needy and backward (cf. Eriksson 2010), and rural areas as primarily marked by lack and absence (cf. Wollin Elhouar 2014). The interviewees are accustomed to the effects of urban norms, cutbacks, decommissions and exploitations: "actually, it is an overexploitation of Norrland, in the sparse countryside, you have probably heard it before" (Int. 16, politician).

Glocal narratives are thus used by the interviewees as a defence of their place of residence against derogatory stereotypes; they emphasized that rural areas comprise qualities that are well worth preserving, for example, that people in the countryside are more considerate, empathetic and helpful than others. According to similar notions, people in rural areas are more authentic and loyal to their employers than people in large cities in the south of Sweden. The latter are regarded to work "just until they get another line on their resume, then they change jobs" (Int. 5, volunteer). Thus, the construction of rural specificity in the stories about rural volunteering, reacted against, but also reproduced geographic stereotypes. In that sense, the stories about rural volunteering were not only descriptions of facts and experiences, but were also invested in, and organized by, a spatializing logic of centre and periphery (cf. Sjöstedt Landén 2012). According to this logic, notions of Norrlandic rural volunteering seemed implicitly related to ideas about the urban. This is not unique for the county of Västerbotten; rather, it can be seen as an effect of the glocal rural-urban divide identified in many rural (and urban) areas. Against this background, stories of helpfulness and of extensive volunteering become comprehensible, and an important part in the construction of local identity.

Hence, there was a parallel existence of partly antagonistic discourses about rural volunteering, one about reduced voluntary commitment and one about active and highly engaged rural inhabitants. What this contradiction means in terms of rural resilience is the topic of the next section.

Discussion

Based on the interviews, volunteering is crucial for people in smaller communities in northern Sweden. Non-profit work provides social benefits, maintains social networks (cf. Eckstein 2001) and social services, confirm identities (cf. Agarwal & Buzzanell 2015), enables altruistic efforts (cf. Mowen & Sujan 2005), and attracts visitors and in-migrants. These aspects can, of course, be said to be central for resilience in general (Stewart *et al*. 1996/1997), but volunteering as a collective action (Magis 2010) can be regarded as a specifically essential resource necessary for the survival of smaller rural communities. This is

especially important in relation to the overall transformations that have characterized the northern countryside since the mid-1900s, for example, urbanization, depopulation and deteriorating community services.

In the interviews, these transformations are (partly) comprehended as the effects of neoliberal reforms, increasingly transferring responsibility to the regions to produce their own growth (see also Hudson & Rönnblom 2007; ITPS 2005; Müller 2017). Rather than highlighting earlier structural transformations leading to out-migration from rural areas in search of work (Sörlin 1988), emphasis was placed on how de-regulations of the welfare society have meant that the government and the municipalities no longer take the same responsibility for rural community services as before. According to interviewees, much volunteer work has then become a replacement of the lost services (cf. Szebehely 2000). Partly in opposition to research problematizing any straightforward relations between welfare provision and civic engagement (Henriksen, Strømsnes & Svedberg [eds.] 2019), this comprehension of volunteer work as *compensation* politicizes volunteering and supports the suggestions that people's willingness to volunteer when needed has indirectly legitimized and partly camouflaged the retraction of governmental services from rural areas (Little 1997). Interestingly, the tendency to politicize volunteering in this vein was noticeable across all interviews, regardless of the type of volunteering discussed—whether it was formally organized or rather characterized as informal helping. There was a strong discourse that gave volunteer experiences a symbolic meaning, and provided support for the feeling of being unfairly treated by regional politics.

I will in the following—against the background of the contradictory narratives and experiences that characterized the interviews—discuss the ambiguous relationship between volunteer work and rural resilience. On the one hand, the interviewees emphasized that helpfulness and volunteer work were central aspects of rural areas, and on the other that the form of commitment that previously characterized their communities was lacking today. This division, and oscillation, between the two types of narratives permeated virtually all interviews. There was, however, a difference between the politicians and the rest of the interviewees. Although there was coherence around the view that rural areas were generally being unfairly treated by regional politics, the politicians were more likely to focus on changing economic and political conditions on a policy level when they explained why people's non-profit activities had declined, while the interviewees with personal volunteer experiences rather tended to emphasize how contemporary societal developments have made it more difficult on an individual level to find the time, energy and interest to engage in volunteering.

Beside this difference, notions of helpfulness and engaged villagers were prominent when the interviewees talked about local conditions rather than general tendencies in society. Thus, the locally based stories were to a great extent based on place belonging (cf. McManus *et al*. 2012), i.e. on feelings of belonging to a certain community and a certain context. But stories of helpfulness were also used as a defence of the countryside in Norrland and of the qualities that the interviewees attributed to rural environments as well as rural people (cf. Eriksson 2010). Compared to metropolitan residents, people were portrayed as authentic and reliable, and were said to take responsibility for their villages and the collective, in general, through a strong non-profit commitment. This commitment had, according to the interviews, a traditional character. People arranged, for example, handicraft cafés, parties with traditional Norrlandic dishes and events with the purpose of attracting in-migrants (and also out-migrants to move back "home"). And, as mentioned earlier, it was considered important to help each other with ditching, snow

clearing and shovelling, haymaking and lawn mowing, i.e. activities that have a partly traditional rural character.

There are, of course, many reasons for the traditional character of rural volunteer work. One is that it corresponds with local material needs and interests that have a lasting character, for example, that roads have to be cleared and maintained, and that people need help with different kinds of everyday activities. In that sense, volunteering practices had a central and upholding, as well as economic, function in the rural communities. For example, by renting out a common assembly room to guests, a village association can cover its costs. Volunteering is also socially important (cf. Eckstein 2001). It contributes to the creation of social cohesion and a community of interest, for example through common arrangements of various activities such as village holidays. It also happens that such activities attract visitors from nearby villages and communities, and thereby contribute to a temporary population increase, and a feeling that something "happens." However, in many cases, the effects of these volunteer activities were temporary, and, when not concerned with covering up for cutbacks in service, often of a traditional character. As such, they were associated with a positive rural identity based on, among other things, notions of a long-established solidarity in the countryside. While this was described as decisively important, not least because it worked to form a positively charged rural identity in opposition to negative stereotypes, it also implied a problem. The effects of more traditional identifications have been discussed. Studying the grassroot festival centered around volunteer residents' serving of soup as a peasant dish, Ducros (2018: 296) suggests that the festival constitutes a space for villagers to "revitalize the rural and showcase it as a place of creativity." However, Edwards and Woods (2006) have warned that the tendency of rural volunteering to engage in and confirm established rural values and identities, may also stand in the way of renewals.

Here one can ask what the traditional character of volunteering means for rural resilience and a sustainable rural landscape in a longer perspective. Can volunteering, because it primarily supports an established rural identity, in some sense complicate or even aggravate rural development opportunities and the ability to meet new challenges? The problem can be that neither rural voluntary work nor traditional rural identities in an obvious way include a readiness to deal with the new conditions and requirements that rural communities directly or indirectly face. Examples of such conditions and demands are the cashless society, digitalization, higher taxes on gas-fuelled cars, young people's (changed) views on suitable leisure and cultural activities and consumption, and the interests of potential in-migrants—such as possibilities for a sustainable ecological lifestyle. One could argue that it is not on rural volunteers to solve the challenges of such changed conditions and demands. There is, however, reason to ask whether rural village associations would benefit from a greater openness also to other kinds of activities, for example, organic farming, sustainable development and sharing economies.

Volunteering cannot dramatically change the social conditions of contemporary rural areas in northern Sweden. Urbanization, depopulation, declining social services and impaired communications are tendencies that are difficult to counter in the long term through volunteer initiatives. Here, too, volunteer engagement seems to represent a kind of "artificial respiration;" it contributes to the survival of rural municipalities, but tends to primarily contribute to rural resilience in terms of equilibrium resilience. It is characterized by the ability of "bouncing back" rural communities to return to a former state, through the potential to compensate for lost community services. Although there are exceptions, much of the volunteering described in the interviews was characterized as

equilibrium resilience; it seemed to lack the capability of "bouncing forward" (cf. Scott 2013).

But has not volunteering been of great importance for the technological development in rural areas (cf. Brennan 2007)? Many village associations and community-led organizations have certainly been established with the aim of arranging, for example, street lighting, common wells and broadband (cf. Stenbacka 2015; Ashmore, Farrington & Skerratt 2017; Cras 2017), which have been central for local identity, for the possibility of people staying in rural communities and for rural resilience. However, such rural volunteer work has, at the same time, a lagging character, because it has mainly contributed to the creation of a technological infrastructure that since long has been self-evident in urban areas. Rural volunteering can thus indirectly reproduce a stereotypical picture of the countryside, especially in the light of a dominant urban norm, as traditional and old-fashioned (cf. Eriksson 2010).

Another problem with rural volunteering is that it may create the impression that rural communities manage on their own after all. The aforementioned loyalty, helpfulness and willingness to work for the common good mean that residents in rural areas arrange social services previously provided by the state, county council and municipality by themselves. Although there are protests against this arrangement and against cutbacks in general, as was the case with the recent Countryside uprising (Swedish *Landbygdsupproret*), it can be difficult to get support for such protests if volunteer work makes it possible, at least temporarily, to maintain a relative high standard of living in northern rural areas.

Conclusions

Rural volunteering refers to practices that are elusive and multi-layered. The words used to capture practices of volunteering seemed to point the interviewees in different directions, and to forget or not recognize certain practices as practices of volunteering. The focus in the interviews was on practices organized by associations, but as conversations proceeded, also less formalised practices were included and deemed important. In the interviews, rural volunteering was constructed as being simultaneously part of traditional rural identity and a necessity for rural survival, and was also simultaneously seen as a characteristic of prospering rural villages and a symbol of decline. The interviewees all testified to volunteering being immensely important—specifically against the background of their concrete experiences of state withdrawal and cutbacks in service—but it was clear that the stories about it were used to project partly different experiences.

Regardless of whether the volunteer practices that were described were about compensating for cutbacks in social service, attracting in-migrants to increase the local population or organizing a handicraft café, they were symbolized primarily in terms of equilibrium resilience (cf. Scott 2013) which, at least indirectly, may prevent changes. On the one hand, the stories about successful volunteer initiatives and their valuable effects may strengthen a logic of competition and individualism, where rural communities more than urban ones become dependent on whether their inhabitants are able and willing to contribute enough. On the other hand, there is also the risk that rural volunteering, and the stories making sense around it, contribute to give the impression of a countryside that is self-sufficient and that offers a relatively high quality of life despite the discontinuation of community services and despite the degradation of living conditions that people report. This suggests volunteer engagement may risk being perceived as an institutional fix (Macmillan & Townsend 2006), performing work that was previously

the responsibility of the public sector, thereby possibly legitimizing the withdrawal of the public sector from basic service provision in rural areas (Little 1997). This becomes particularly pressing as there seemed to be a void between the needs described in the interviews and the highly tradition-related volunteer initiatives that the interviewees talked so proudly about. There was an awareness about this situation that was sometimes reflected in expressions like: "In the end, we'll go down, I think we will. But it'll take some time, because we who live here are still pretty tough" (Int. 5, volunteer).

One might ask what the alternative for rural communities could be? Would an even more active political engagement, explicit rural protests and direct actions organized within the framework of non-profit organizations be a more effective way to counteract the challenges that many rural communities face and to secure their future? Or could a renewal of volunteer organizations in the direction of sustainable development be a way to create a long-term perspective on resilience in the northern countryside?

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