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Challenges in preparation of regional rural policy programme for 2007–2013 – the case of Raahe sub-region, Finland

Abstract: This paper discusses the challenges that the next EU programming period has given to rural policy. In the case of Finland the most important level of implementing regional and rural policies so far has been provinces (NUTS 3) but in 2007–2013 both the EU Commission and our national rural policy highlight the role of sub-regions (NUTS 4).

The schedule of preparation of regional rural programmes has been very tight in Finland, which was due to both too late and inappropriate instructions from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and to some changes in the organizations, which were responsible for the preparation. Our case study area, Raahe sub-region, is especially interesting since there were two rural development actors with almost the same aims but with quite different backgrounds. The problems in the creation of cooperation between them were connected e.g. to inadequate social capital and to the operation areas. The empirical part of the paper describes what kind of challenges and tensions different actors faced when preparing a rural development programme on the sub-regional level.

Key words: Northern Finland, Raahe sub-region, regional rural policy, EU programming period, participatory process

Introduction

Several strategies and programmes are directing rural development more and more on the regional, national and EU level. For several years the implementation and even preparation of rural policies took place mostly on the national and municipality level in Finland. During the last decade or so, however, the role of the EU has been emphasized in the multi-level governance system. The EU Commission formulate the frames and focuses of the common rural policy in cooperation with the member countries and regions reconcile those regulations according their own local demands. Regional development strategies are the tools to integrate the local needs in the EU (OECD 2001).
EU programming period 2007–2013 will make a lot of changes to the common rural policy. In the proposal of the Commission for the rural development (COM(2004) 490 final) the aim was to simplify the programme policy and structural funding. A new aim was that the preferred implementation method of rural policy should be through the local development strategies targeting sub-regional entities, either developed in close collaboration between national, regional and local authorities or designed and implemented through a bottom up approach using the LEADER approach.

A new dimension to some extent in the formulation of future regional and rural policies both in the EU and in Finland is the demand to emphasize the role of social capital (e.g. Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992; Putnam 2000) in the programming work. This is closely connected to the rise of ideas like networking, participatory planning, trust and involvement also in rural policy (Edwards, Woods 2004; Lee et al. 2005). The role of experts like professional planners and other officials is still essential in the planning processes but now also uninitiated or non-professional actors are encouraged and given opportunities to tell their opinions. One of the read thread of our paper is to emphasize the role of social capital and trust in the planning process in order to increase cooperation between professional and administrative authorities and more or less unofficial and voluntary actors.

The aim of the present paper is to describe what kind of challenges and tensions different actors face when preparing rural development programmes, especially on the sub-regional level. This paper will not present the contents of the programmes, but only the preparation process. After this introduction we shortly introduce the present features of rural policy hierarchies and systems in the EU and Finland and their interaction. Then we describe our case study area in Northern Finland and the process of preparing the programme on the basis of opinions from the actors. The next part of the work concentrates on the challenges, which local actors in our case study area have met during the preparation process. Finally we present some concluding remarks.

**Rural policy hierarchies**

EU membership has increased and diversified the means available for rural development in Finland as in all the member countries. Through the different EU and national measures (e.g. Structural Funds, LEADER+ Community Initiative, National Rural Programme for Local Initiative (POMO), Rural Policy Committee) a number of projects, organizations and new enterprises have started in rural areas. The aim of the structural programmes of the EU is to reduce regional differences in development. Also in the future the welfare of especially remote and sparsely populated rural areas like those found in Eastern and Northern Finland will depend on the national regional policy, which aims to secure public welfare services, support local (municipal) economies and ensure support systems for agriculture. National policies are matched with EU Struc-
tural Fund policy. However, due to the enlargement of the EU, among other things, the funding from structural policy to the countryside will not be at the same level in the next programming period.

The programming process on the regional level faces fragmentation of policies and changes in many aspects. EU and national policies have scattered development programmes to small entities and at the same time made it difficult to maintain the strategic focus in regions (Virkkala, Lähteenmäki 2000, p. 6). Sectoral management has also increased during the current programming period (Katajamäki et al. 2001, p. 24).

Comprehensive rural policy programmes have been prepared in Finland since 1991 in order to put together all rural development needs from different organizations. The present programme *Viable Countryside – our joint responsibility* is for 2005–2008 (Maaseutupoliitikan yhteistyöryhmä 2004a).

On the sub-regional level the role of rural policy has been unclear or even invisible so far. Most policy measures have been written in sub-regional policy programmes which aim to deal with the whole regional entities, i.e. both cities and rural areas and the latter have not risen to be an important development target. Also the majority of municipalities in Finland lack rural strategies and rural villages are not developed as an essential part of a municipality (Mustakangas et al. 2004). However, the Regional Centre Development Programme (RCDP) of our case study area Raahen sub-region does highlight the rural area development to be one of the important development sectors which is rare among the 34 RCDP’s in Finland (Raahen Seudun Aluekeskusohjelma 2004–2006). This is one of the main reasons that Raahen sub-region was selected as the study area for this research.

**Sub-regions as regional units in Finland**

In 1994 Finland was divided into 88 sub-regions based on the law of regional development. Sub-region refers to the NUT 4 level in the systems of regional units in the EU. The aim was to promote the regional and local power and initiative (Niemi-Iilahti et al. 2002). Since then the number of sub-regions and also their regional division has been under change to some extent, which demonstrates the somewhat unclear formulation of sub-regions (Pyy 2002). According to Katajamäki et al. (2001, p. 27) sub-regional entities have been the weakest level of implementation of rural policy (see also e.g. Pyy 2002). The reasons for this weakness are multiple, but one of the most important is probably the lack of involvement in cooperation on the sub-regional level. In Finland the most important local government unit is the municipality (NUTS 5), which has self-autonomy and the right of collection of local taxes in its region. Distribution of work is often unclear between municipalities, sub-regions and Local Action Groups (LAG) (Katajamäki et al. 2001, p. 60).

In Finland there are ongoing plans to reduce the number of over four hundred municipalities closer to the number of sub-regions. An even more radical sug-
gestion from the Ministry of the Interior has been to cut down the number of municipalities to only about twenty so called regional municipalities. The major reason behind these proposals and the present project of the Finnish government to restructure municipalities and services is the fact that the current municipal division is too numerous and fragmented in order to arrange services for their citizens as enacted in the law. The ageing of the population in Finland is fastest in Europe and this constant development will deepen spatial inequality, especially when remote rural areas are concerned.

In this process sub-centres will have a more important role, and on the contrary, there will be new peripheral areas inside sub-regions (Mustakangas et al. 2004, p. 161-172). Sub-regional entity could offer the proper areal size for development needs and help the proper allocation and management of regional funds. This leads to conclude that the sub-regions that have clear thematic objects, vision and strategy for their operation are strong in the future. Those areas have effortless areal division, shared values, business structure and culture and strong will and involvement to develop the area together with different actors. One successful example has been the model of the LEADER LAG (Local Action Group) on the sub-regional level (Lönnroth 1998). Our case study sub-region aims to be in the front line in this confirmation of sub-regions in regional administration.

The study area – Raade sub-region

Raade sub-region is located in the province of Northern Ostrobothnia in Northern Finland (Figure 1). The centre of the province of Northern Ostrobothnia is Oulu with almost 130,000 inhabitants which makes it the sixth biggest city in Finland (a total of 5.2 million inhabitants) and the only bigger centre in Northern Finland. Oulu sub-region has been one of the fastest growing regions in Nordic countries which affects positively to the province of Northern Ostrobothnia and the whole Northern Finland.

However, the situation is not that good in other parts of the province. Raade sub-region, which is located only 80 km south of Oulu, has suffered moderate depopulation since the 1990’s and the trend seems likely to continue in the near future (Statistics Finland 2006; Maaseutupoliitikka yhteistyöryhmä 2004b). Also the unemployment rate in the region is higher than in Finland and the province of Northern Ostrobothnia. Raade sub-region consist of five municipalities with a total of about 35,500 inhabitants. The only city is Raade with 23,000 inhabitants where the administrative office of the sub-region is also located. The municipalities of Pyhäjoki, Vihanti and Ruukki are classified to rural heartland areas and Siikajoki is a sparsely populated rural area (Figure 1) (Maaseutupoliitikka yhteistyöryhmä 2004a).

In the sub-region there are two key rural development organizations. The first and older of them is the LEADER action group Nouseva Rannikkoseutu (Rising Coastal District), which was established with a different name in 1995 when
Finland joined the EU. The Finnish nickname for it is NORSU, which will be used later in this paper. The other is the voluntary-based ORAS (it means in English “sprout of grass family” but is not an abbreviation from a longer Finnish name) network, which was established by the Raahe District Development Centre in 2003.

Despite the shared target to work for rural areas, the cooperation of these two actors has not been without problems. One matter that causes problems is that while NORSU is under the control of the Ministry of Agriculture and it has official status and its own development finance budget through LEADER+ programme, ORAS belongs to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior and it has no own development finance. Their geographical areas of operation are also different since besides the Raahe sub-region five other municipalities from two other sub-regions also belong to NORSU. ORAS operates only in the Raahe sub-region. These administrative and organizational differences have caused a lack of cooperation, which has been harmful for the programming work. Some basic elements of their differences are concluded in Figure 2.
The preparation process of the rural programme for the new EU-programming period

The process on the EU and national level

The preparation process for the EU programming period 2007–2013 started in Finland as in other EU countries in spring 2005 (Figure 3). The principle of the European multilevel governance is that first the EU commission and member states formulate the frames for politics and focuses, which are then adapted to regional levels on the basis of local needs and demands (OECD 2001).

The EU formulated the focus of the EU’s rural development policy for 2007–2013 according to three main areas or axis (European Communities 2004). They are competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector (axis 1), environment/land use management, agriculture and forestry – the main land users (axis 2) and wider rural development – e.g. placing agriculture and forestry in their rural context (axis 3). A fourth axis based on experience with the LEADER+ programme introduces possibilities for locally based bottom-up approaches to rural development. The third axis includes improvement of the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging diversification is particularly interesting in this research. The key actions will be raising economic activity and employment rates in the wider rural economy (COM(2005) 304 final).

In 5th July 2005 the Commission gave a proposal on Community strategic guidelines for rural development (COM(2005) 304 final). It aimed to bring rural development policy into line with the Community’s priorities and the Council Regulation on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund.
for Rural Development (EAFRD). The process continued so that the Community’s strategic guidelines were given in autumn 2005. Then Member States finalised their national rural strategy plans till the beginning of 2006. After agreement on the main orientations, the detailed programming took place in the first half of 2006 and during the second half of 2006 the final approval of the project would be done. The actual budget frame for the programming period has been open during the process since the member states and the Commission have not found a common consensus on the matter (till the end of May 2006). This has caused concerns in Finland that the final decision on the budget for 2007–2013 might be done at worst only during Finland’s EU chairmanship period in the second half of 2006 (Helsingin Sanomat 22.6.2005; Maaseudun Tulevaisuus 22.6.2005).

Another challenge is that while working out their national strategies, member states should have ensured that synergies between and within the axis are maximised and potential contradictions avoided. The Member States should also
ensure complementarity and coherence between actions to be financed by the ERDF, Cohesion Fund, ESF, EFF and EAFRD on a given territory and in a given field of activity. And finally, both the regional and sub-regional rural programmes should be in line with the national strategy (COM(2005) 304 final).

The programme process in the province of Northern Ostrobothnia

As mentioned above, the national rural development programmes for the programming period of 2007–2013 were formulated on the basis of both regional rural programmes and EU guidelines and so the process was bidirectional (see Figure 3). In Finland the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry decided that regional Employment and Economic Development Centres (EEDC) must take the responsibility in carrying out the regional rural programmes together with other regional (provincial) cooperative actors. There are a total of 19 provinces in Finland. In the province of Northern Ostrobothnia the practical process was entrusted to a project administered by the Forestry Centre and financed by the EEDC of the province (Figure 4).

The aim of the regional rural programme 2007–2013 in the province of Northern Ostrobothnia is to collect the information on the rural development, rural areas’ possibilities and needs of the rural people of the region. The aim was also to analyze different strategic plans and programmes (a total of twenty or so!) with some rural dimensions and their relevance to the provincial rural programme. The regional rural programme covers 40 municipalities and seven sub-regions of the province of Northern Ostrobothnia (Pohjois-Pohjanmaan alueellisen maaseutoutiuhjelman 2007–2013 osallistumis – ja arviointisuunnitelma).

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<td>Opening seminar and establishment of 10 expert groups, arrangement of sub-regional seminars together with EAGGF project and LAGs’ for all interest groups</td>
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<td>Regional seminar for managers of rural projects, project plan had to be sent to Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry by 15th June</td>
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<td>Questionnaire to groups who had not yet participated the process, group of experts estimated the programme process so far and formulated the focuses</td>
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<td>A preliminary proposal of programme delivered to expert groups, comments received and evaluated, approval of programme in the provincial council</td>
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Figure 4. The preparation process of the regional rural programme in the province of Northern Ostrobothnia Finland in 2005
The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry was quite satisfied with the process plan of Northern Ostrobothnia. The processes differed highly between different regions of Finland, since all together 15 regional process plans were sent to ministry by the deadline. The plan for the participatory process in Northern Ostrobothnia was highly appreciated by the ministry who even stated that it is one of the best in Finland.

Programming work in Raase sub-region: challenges and tensions

The next lower regional level for rural programming work was sub-regions or the areas of LAG’s, as mentioned above. How did the sub-regional programme preparation actually take place in the Raase sub-region? As already described there were problems in the beginning and actually there was only 4 months left when the process finally started out full tilt: in practice the preparatory work for the sub-regional/LAG rural programme was still on starting line in mid September 2005 and the programme was to be sent to the ministry in mid December.

The major reason for this was that there was a lack of will and trusts between NORSU (LAG) and ORAS to do the programme together. There were even stages when it seemed that there would be two competing programme proposals from the region sent to the ministry even though all the actors agreed that this would be extremely stupid. Distrustfulness was especially true from NORSU’s side but when the new manager of NORSU started in August 2005 “from a clean table” it started to happen. The citations in this chapter are from the conversations in the meetings of the joint work group of NORSU and ORAS during August and September in 2005.

The biggest challenge in August 2005 was that the schedule was lagging behind because of the problems in the start of cooperation. This caused pressure on the actors: how to make a good programme and with participatory planning criteria in mind? A real participatory process requires listening to several actors (e.g. village people, entrepreneurs), which means a lot of meetings and personal contacts – and takes a lot of time. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry highlighted that not only the programme itself but also the preparation process is important in regional and LAG programmes, since one aim was to create social capital between the different rural actors. Programmes should also be formulated without limitation only to the aspects that were proposed in the strategic guidelines for rural development, but also courageous local initiatives were spurred. However, regions found this to be a difficult task. The opinions below were tape-recorded in the preparatory meetings in autumn 2005.

Last time [the programming period 2000–2006] we used one and half years to make a programme! And now we have only four months time left. (Opinion of a representative of NORSU)
Regional programme papers prepared only by a small group of people are not that competitive in the Ministry [of Agriculture] where they are compared with other programmes. All the programmes from different parts of the country are competing with each other even if this is “officially” denied. (Rural programme coordinator of the province)

One challenge was how to fit the process of the sub-regional programme to the regional (provincial) rural programme, since they both had to be sent by 15th December 2005. Since the both papers were in progress at the same time by different coordinators, how to reconcile the writing process which was a requirement? There were also some other big administrative processes going on at the same time in the Raahä sub-region, for example the unification of Siikajoki and Ruukki municipalities and Ruukki and Vihanti parishes (The newsletter of Raahä sub-region August 2005; Raahä Seetu 15.8.2005). The parish is one of the important actors when wellbeing and welfare services especially in rural areas are concerned (Mustakangas et al. 2004). Both these unification processes involved local politicians and partly the same actors that took part to the rural programming work.

One aspect about the background and big trends... I prefer that we should in the first stage look also at the mess going on in the municipal sector [the unification processes]. What are the signs that we have to take into consideration from it into rural development and programme work? That is an extremely interesting question. (Opinion of a representative of ORAS)

It seems that on the sub-regional level the instructions from the upper level (ministry, province) were essential even though many actors had participated in the same kind of preparing process even twice before. This is due to the fact that the guidelines seem to be changing constantly which confuses and frustrates the participants. Most of the actors also feel high responsibility to formulate the sub-regional programme properly since it has many significant consequences for the development of their home areas. Moreover, common instructions are required because most of the different rural regions in Finland are struggling with more or less the same procedures.

Last time when we were sitting around this table three months ago, many questions were still without answers... What are the aspects that LAG will be working on in future, what are the themes... We were waiting that we could start really, but we did not have tools and abilities. And what we just heard from other LAGs they have not really started yet either. We have not had a base from where to start. (Chairman of NORSU in August 2005)

Regardless of the programmes, methods and funding, this [the programme work] is a very serious question we are dealing with. It is a question how our countryside could be kept alive... Should we direct the discussion in working group to handle the themes how to create new jobs. Is it too risky to do so? (Opinion of a representative of ORAS)
One of the critical problems is the different geographical area of ORAS and NORSU. They both belong to the same regional support area of the EU, but the problem is that NORSU operates within a wider area than just the Raahre sub-region like ORAS. The municipalities of the NORSU area belong to three different sub-regions. Only Raahre sub-region belongs to the area as a whole, Oulu and Siikalatva sub-regions only partly. This is due to both historical administrative divisions and to the fragmented regional structure of the region south of the fast growing city of Oulu. Rural municipalities have not yet found natural cooperation partners among each other.

*That, what worries me most is that some of the municipalities could be neglected... to some extent the ORAS area is the active one in Raahre sub-region. But what about the other five municipalities in the NORSU area? (Opinion of a representative of NORSU)*

There were also rumours that the Raahre sub-region would be divided with two LAG operational areas, but no official decisions were made on this. After negotiations with neighbour municipalities it was decided that the area of NORSU will stay the same, but the process was not easy: the LAG’s were actually competing with each other in order to expand their areas and so to increase their strength.

*It has caused bad blood when we heard from other LAGs that the Raahre sub-region would be divided into two. I know it has caused wondering among actors that what the heck is going on. (Opinion of a representative of ORAS)*

Both NORSU and ORAS tried to pay especial attention to their actors during the process. Both considered it important that every group of people could express their opinions. The challenge was how to keep the people motivated because many of the active representatives also participated in some other programme procedures. How to avoid overlapping?

Both on the EU and national level there has been many efforts and pronouncements aiming to simplify and unify the programmes but the reality seems still to be far from the good intentions. Aims, implementation and financial potential of regional development should be collected into the common regional development programme of the province but in spite of this there are a lot of sectoral programmes in the province of Northern Ostrobothnia, for example. This threatens the involvement in participation and may also cause too short-term developments (Kahila 2003, p. 106).

A total of around 30 local actors were asked about the weaknesses and strengths of the current programming period (2000–2006) in a pre-workshop held in 26th May 2005 in the NORSU region. It turned out that the main weaknesses were the project bureaucracy, insufficient funding, especially when trying to find the self-financing required, and the efficacy of projects. Also the lack of cooperation and incoherent regional divisions were seen as problems from the NORSU’s client’s point of view (Figure 5). However, many good things during
Figure 5. The weaknesses of the current programming period in the NORSU-region (based on the opinions expressed in the NORSU LAG working group in Liminka 26.5.2005)

the programming period were also found (Figure 6). It looks that the “real” local actors on the grass roots level do not necessarily face the problems in cooperation to same extent as the actors of NORSU and ORAS when sitting in planning meetings.

Figure 6. The strengths of the current programming period in the NORSU-region (based on the opinions expressed in the NORSU LAG working group in Liminka 26.5.2005)

Several meetings, discussions and observations confirmed the general opinion that one of the main challenges what it comes to the developing of rural areas of our study area will be the deepening of cooperation between local action group NORSU and the rural know-how network ORAS. The next stage in our study will be to find out the real reasons for poor cooperation in past and, in particular, what could be learnt for the future.
Conclusions

In this paper we have described the regulations, conditions and challenges that rural areas face when preparing for the EU programming period 2007–2013. Some preliminary concluding remarks may be made.

First, the new regulation on rural development in the EU calls for more regional flexibility. According to the EU Council proposal for regulation on support for rural development, wider rural development should be implemented through local development strategies targeting sub-regional entities (NUTS 4). In the future the implementation and even preparation of rural policies will take place more and more on regional and local levels, i.e. closer to the actors on the grass-roots level. This demands that actors must seriously take into account cooperation between sub-regional actors in order to create social capital and trust between the partners.

Secondly, the funding of structural policy in old member countries will not be on the same level during programming period 2007–2013 and so even more strategic approach is required when the focuses of regional development are defined and decided (see Virkkala 2000; COM(2005) 192 final). It is quite obvious that there is need to concentrate on fewer development issues also in sub-regional development and the adherence to these strategic solutions is essential. Finance must be allocated to fewer and more focused objects.

Thirdly, the opinions and lessons from the programming period 2000–2006 should be considered very carefully. The weaknesses concerning bureaucracy, delayed funding, project results, cooperation and the problem with regional division are the most acute ones. Rural development actions should seek to contribute to the growth and jobs agenda of the renewed Lisbon Strategy, to sustainable land management and to the quality of life in rural areas (COM(2005) 192 final). This must also to be taken into consideration when preparing regional and sub-regional programs.

Fourthly, the participatory programming process must be equal for every actor in the region. This is not an easy task, however, since in practice there are always actors that are more active than the others. Another question is how equal is the process really on the sub-regional level (e.g. Edwards and Woods 2004; Mustakangas et al. 2004). Inside even small sub-regions there are areas that are located in the periphery either physically or mentally in the preparation process and decision-making. It is important that the needs of these areas are also taken into account. Also observing the needs and possibilities for participation of the special groups of people like the young, women, entrepreneurs and elderly are crucial. The challenge in our case study area was how to secure the real participation of different groups within such a short preparation schedule. The utmost challenge of the participatory process is how to create a common will for rural development on the basis of very different opinions and how to
write a programme that sums up this will to real development aims for the next programming period.

Finally, it has been interesting to note during our study, that while regional (rural) policy based on EU programmes emphasizes modern participatory process and partnership, it still at the same time seems to rely on “old-fashioned” bureaucratic multiregional level models which are familiar from classical planning methods. Regional policy seems to operate between the old and the new way of preparation and implementation work where “the old” means hierarchical borders between actors and officials (e.g. ministries and provincial agencies) and “the new” is represented by the real will and involvement of regional and local actors to cooperate without hierarchies in order to find better future for their regions.

The programme work especially on the sub-regional and local level emphasizes communication and process but it may also have some risks. For example, if there is too much trust into the system or process itself it may leave the real innovations and entity of the programme in the background. The requirement for ongoing participation and communication may also mean that the original and essential targets and responsibilities may be forgotten: too much time is used in chatting. The process needs coordinative power (see Sotarauta 1996).

To conclude, the regions and sub-regions are facing many challenges in their preparation work and only the results of the programming period 2007–2013 will tell how they succeeded. There are a lot of questions and perspectives to be taken into account. The cooperation and networks between different actors from the local to the international level are crucial if all the possibilities are to be exploited. Our case study area is a big enough platform for cooperation but it may be too small to operate alone: regional and rural policies do not operate in a vacuum.

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