



“For the good of the village”: Volunteer initiatives and rural resilience

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ABSTRACT

As a consequence of cutbacks in the welfare sector, rural populations have reacted to their situation by taking over and operating activities that are threatened by closures, such as schools, grocery stores and health centres, for themselves. Such initiatives are often referred to as examples of rural resilience. Drawing on interviews, this paper explores participants' narratives about rural initiatives aiming to retain and develop local welfare and community services. It pays specific heed to how notions of resilience reside within the narratives – the ideological convictions and challenges they entail, and the practices they make (im)possible. The study shows that participants' narratives about resilient villages and initiatives indirectly support the neoliberal rural policy focus on regional responsibility to create growth. It argues that, in order to understand the appeal of the neoliberal positions and practices that resilience thinking proved to entail, it is important to recognise the intersections of space and identity, and to explore the local spatial experiences and imageries in relation to which resilience practices appear desirable and necessary, as well as the specific rural identities that resilience discourse supports.

1. Introduction

I'd say that the commitment makes the village survive, [it] creates attractiveness. I'd also say that it increases the value of our properties here in the village quite significantly. [...] Volunteer initiatives are a precondition for a village to develop and keep growing. I'd say so. They're a precondition. (Interview 6)

If we end our commitment, reduce it, then [the village] will be finished, that's the end of the village. That's how it is. [...] I see no alternative but to engage as much as one can. (Interview 3)

Rural communities in the sparsely populated areas of northern Sweden have suffered from the challenges of recent decades, including retrenchment policies and demographic processes such as out-migration and population ageing. This has resulted in depopulation and losses of welfare and community services, as well as closures of important employers, leading to reduced income opportunities. Alongside more explicit protests and struggles for liveable conditions, taking local responsibility through volunteering often surfaces as a necessity. Such volunteering takes many forms, from informal everyday practices to practices included in the work of established associations. In some areas, villages have reacted to their situation by taking over and operating activities that are threatened by closure, such as schools, grocery stores

and health centres, for themselves. Such initiatives are often referred to as examples of rural resilience (e.g., [McManus et al., 2012](#)).

In order to further our understanding of the sense-making around such initiatives – how practices and identities are explained and legitimised – this paper focuses on participants' narratives about rural volunteer initiatives aimed at keeping and developing welfare and community services. What practices were narrated as necessary in order to resist societal tendencies that were perceived as threatening village life? What notions of space and identity were evoked and celebrated in the narratives? The aim is to explore the constructions of rural resilience that reside within such narratives, and to discuss the ideological convictions and challenges they entail, and the practices and identities they make (im)possible. The focus on emic meaning-making is important because it sheds light on how rural populations make sense of their own situation and their practical involvement in making local space liveable.

The paper contributes with valuable insights into what enables certain understandings of rural resilience to take hold of local discourse. Unpacking some of the complexities of local responses to change, the paper acknowledges narratives about volunteer initiatives as being inherently bound up in the ongoing struggles to make sense of what rural life means ([Woods, 2003](#)).

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2. Rural volunteering and resilience

Studies of volunteering have a long history of recognising the significance of space and place, which is visible in titles referring to “geographies of voluntarism” (e.g., [Fyfe and Milligan, 2003](#); [Milligan, 2007](#)) and “landscapes of voluntarism” (e.g., [Milligan and Conradson, 2006](#)). This has particularly been the case in studies of areas that struggle with the challenges of ageing populations and suffer from cutbacks in welfare services (e.g., [Skinner, 2014](#); [Skinner and Joseph, 2011](#)), and where threats to services are seen as direct attacks on the sustainability of local communities ([Kearns and Joseph, 1997](#)). Despite results suggesting that strong welfare states do not lead to reductions in volunteer engagement ([Henriksen et al., 2019](#)), there is reason to acknowledge a relationship between perceived changes in welfare provision and volunteering. For example, [Banister and Norton \(1988\)](#) saw that several initiatives were set up in the UK in rural Norfolk and Suffolk after services were withdrawn. Such relationships between austerity politics and volunteering initiatives have been ascribed to the neoliberalising processes that, since the 1990s, have transferred responsibility for the welfare of rural communities from the state to the communities themselves, urging them to create their own growth ([Hudson, 2012](#); [Welsh, 2014](#); [Bracke, 2016](#); [Enlund, 2020](#)), with the positively charged aim of creating more sustainable and resilient communities and decreasing their dependence on the state (cf. [Humbert-Cheshire, 2000](#)).

In Sweden, the final report of the Parliamentary Rural Committee (*Landsbygdskommittén*) ([SOU, 2017:1](#)) explains that people’s “commitment” and “capacity for cooperation” are the basis for sustainable development in rural areas (see also [SOU, 2016:13](#)). Such normative characteristics are central to general notions of voluntary practices ([Trägårdh, 2010](#)), but also to rural self-descriptions and identities ([Beel et al., 2017](#)). While there has been a rapid spread of the usage of the term “resilience” in most policymaking ([Humbert and Joseph 2019](#)), it has been pointed out that the Swedish voluntary sector is mentioned far more often in policies for rural areas than in other policies ([ITPS, 2005](#); [Rönblom, 2014](#); [Müller, 2017](#)). This suggests that the state is appealing to, and relying upon, the voluntary sector to do some of its work in geographical areas that are not prioritised.

Similar suggestions have been made in studies that have delved into the specific processes of taking local responsibility for organising essential local services (see [Bygdell, 2014](#); [Stenbacka, 2015](#)). In his work on Swedish rural citizenship, [Cras \(2017\)](#) argues that rural civil society takes on responsibilities that in urban areas are mostly provided by commercial companies or municipalities, and that this also constitutes a norm and an expectation in rural policy. A similar increased emphasis on civil society is detected in [Enlund’s \(2020\)](#) study of the collective action taken to sustain access to local healthcare through worker and citizen cooperatives. Such suggestions are in line with understandings of increased volunteering as an “institutional fix” ([Macmillan and Townsend, 2006](#)), complementing the state and the market in the provision of welfare.

Against this background, studies of rural volunteering have also increasingly acknowledged volunteering as a *space of resistance* against structural changes, not least in the health and care systems ([Skinner and Power, 2016](#)), where local autonomy is (complexly) defended against perceived “threats to local services, employment and vulnerable populations” ([Skinner et al., 2016: 68](#); [Lundgren, 2020](#)). Hence, it is often shown that local volunteering is understood as fundamental to the shaping of sustainable communities ([Joseph and Skinner, 2012](#)), and defined as central to what is more and more often referred to as *rural resilience*. Borrowing from the field of ecology (e.g., [Holling, 1973](#)), rural resilience has been defined as rural communities’ ways of handling shocks or disturbances, from which it is then possible to bounce either back (*equilibrium resilience*) or forward (*evolutionary resilience*) ([Scott, 2013](#)).

However, in opposition to the associations of the (still) dominant

ecological framework, a need for more nuanced definitions has been voiced. In such a pursuit, [Skerratt \(2013: 45\)](#) argues that it is necessary to problematise the “increasingly-ubiquitous concept” of resilience so that it may better acknowledge the agency of rural populations and the “context of constant change” that constitute rural communities. This approach suggests the importance of a dynamic definition of geographical space and spatiality that, as has been pointed out by [Massey \(2004\)](#), refutes notions of space as static locations, and instead acknowledges it as a set of dynamic processes defined by social relations, deriving their uniqueness in an ongoing way from the complex relations within and between them. This definition enables analyses that acknowledge notions of space and spatial identities to be open to contestation and change ([Massey 1994](#)) and, as we will argue, recognise how they may be evoked as resources in meaning-making practices.

Working from a similar view of rural communities as inherently dynamic and ever-changing, [Magis \(2010: 402\)](#) suggests a definition of community resilience to be the “existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise”. In line with evolutionary resilience approaches ([Scott, 2013](#)), this conception allows “shocks” and “disturbances” to also include long-term restructuring processes ([Pike et al., 2010](#); [Wilson, 2012](#)).

Resilience thinking has met with criticism, however. Primarily, the discourse of resilience has been identified as, and criticised for, being closely connected to neoliberal discourse through “responsibilising” vulnerable rural communities into accepting cutbacks and withdrawals of services, and encouraging them to take their own responsibility for such services ([Caldwell, 2015](#); [Wilson, 2010](#); [Joseph, 2013](#)). It has also been suggested that resilience thinking tends to stand in the way of taking structural inequalities seriously ([Harrison, 2013](#)). While some take this criticism as a point of departure, others maintain that the connections to neoliberalism should be a “question to be explored rather than a presumption from which analysis begins” ([Anderson, 2015: 60](#)).

It is in this sense that we engage with the concept of resilience, asking what local volunteer initiatives for rural resilience *do* – what ideological thinking and what practices, identities and notions of geographical space are evoked in narrating such initiatives? This implies a definition of resilience as a “complex and evolving processes of articulation and identification”, relying on ideas of “self-organisation, adaptation, transformation and survival in the face of adversity or crisis” ([Humbert and Joseph, 2019: 215](#)). Hence, and in order to avoid a view of resilience thinking as a solely top-down biopolitical process, great significance is ascribed to local cultural activities, and to the sensemaking around those activities (cf. [Beel et al., 2017](#)) – to the way in which they result from, and constitute, specific forms of resilience thinking, and the way in which they imply and produce identifications.

3. Methodology

The study draws on interviews with twelve people, eight men and four women, with an average age of 55 years. They all lived in the hinterlands of northern Sweden, in small rural inland communities with populations of between 100 and 800. Just like most rural communities in the vast area of northern Sweden, they had all experienced depopulation over the previous several decades, although during the last few years one village had also experienced a small degree of in-migration by people with no previous connection to the village, a fact that was told with a great deal of pride. The communities were home to various local businesses, such as carpenters, construction consultancies, hauliers and campaigners. The smallest community was dominated by farming. At the time of the interviews, the communities also had schools and grocery stores in the nearby vicinity. The communities all self-reported a high degree of involvement in their respective communities’ development and future; for example, through volunteer engagement in sports associations, hunting teams and local cultural associations. What became

clear during the interviews, however, was that volunteer initiatives were not always confined to individual villages, but comprised people from the wider geographical area who engaged in initiatives that did not directly concern their own village.

Interviewees were located through contacts in villages that were known through the media to have formed organisations to save local services, regardless of whether this was done through efforts to convince politicians to change their decisions on closures, or through taking over and running the services themselves. We then used snowball sampling (Denscombe, 2016); our first contacts referred us to other people who had also been involved. This meant that we primarily talked to people who were personally invested in the initiatives. The interviewees had experiences of various initiatives, such as the building of a local retirement home, efforts to convince politicians to save local schools when they were threatened with closure, initiatives to welcome and create social contexts for refugees after the closure of refugee accommodation, and the starting of a healthcare cooperative following the closure of the primary care centre.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via telephone or computer (Skype or Zoom), and varied in length between 90 min and 3 h. They were semi-structured in character and based on a thematic list of questions that included both overarching open questions and more specific follow-up questions to capture details. As the interviewees talked about various different projects and their own personal experiences, some questions were created during the interviews in order to follow up on specific themes, and so were not asked in all of the interviews. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interviewees' narratives were viewed as practices through which their situated experiences of volunteer engagement were given meaning. The concept of "discourse" – defined as a specific and shared way of comprehending a phenomenon – was used to capture the patterns of those narrative efforts. Drawing on a poststructural approach to the study of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), discourses are seen as radically contingent and produced in and through articulatory practices that are always ongoing, where phenomena such as rural volunteering acquire meaning through becoming combined with pre-existing discursive elements such that they come to construct a more or less novel arrangement of meaning (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Studying articulations is hence a way of capturing the meaning-making process.

Hence, discourses are seen as constitutive of reality, such that a discourse of "rurality" has concrete effects for how rural areas may be comprehended. This also has consequences for identity. What are referred to as "subject positions" are constituted through the articulatory processes of discourse and form the positions that are made available for people within a specific discourse. Within a rural context defined by a discourse of "rural life", subject positions such as "farmer" or "land-owner" would be more available to identify with than they would be in an urban context defined by a discourse of "urban life". This example suggests the importance of geographical space and spatiality. In the analyses, we begin with Massey's (2004) dynamic definition, which refutes a notion of space as a series of static locations, and sees it rather as a set of dynamic processes defined by social relations, deriving their uniqueness in an ongoing way from the complex relations within and between them. This definition enables analyses that acknowledge notions of space as open to contestation and change (Massey 1994), and that recognise how they may be evoked as resources in meaning-making practices.

Our initial object of study was the discourse about "rural volunteering", and the analytical approach comprised the following interrelated steps: Firstly, transcripts were read through to gain an overview and a sense of what was considered important; recurring words, expressions and notions were noticed and organised (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This meant identifying and analysing recurring articulations of rural volunteering alongside other systems of articulations within the data. What constituted a pattern or theme could consist of explicit expressions, but also latent meanings (cf. Vaismoradi et al., 2013). For

example, a theme highlighting the significance of entrepreneurs could consist of expressions such as "entrepreneurs are important", but might also include an interviewee's talk about the necessity of "having connections in the local business community" and of being "action-oriented and daring to invest", i.e., characteristics that could be defined as "entrepreneurial".

During this first reading, we noticed that explanatory and legitimising expressions emphasising that things were done "for the good of the village" (or similar expressions) recurred across the interviews, and we became curious about what these expressions entailed: what was implied and what was at stake when rural populations narrated volunteer initiatives as being "for the good of the village"?

In the second step, the analysis focused on how such expressions helped to structure a discourse about rural volunteering in the sense that the articulations encouraged and legitimised certain perspectives, practices and positions, while discouraging others. The encouraged perspectives, practices and positions were narrated as necessary in order to resist societal tendencies that they perceived as threatening to village life, and so could be seen as acquiring meaning from within a discourse of "rural resilience".

In the third step, we explored how the narratives constituted specific forms of resilience thinking, and also offered specific kinds of identifications. This meant that we searched actively for instances of articulation where the interviewees' narratives about their volunteer experiences, and what they did for the good of their respective villages, related to the types of aspects that previous research has identified as belonging to discourses of "rural resilience".

4. Results: For the good of the village

The significance attributed to volunteer engagement was often concluded by assurances that it was carried out "for the good of the village". All the interviewees referred to their engagement in terms of necessity; according to them, a certain amount of volunteering was necessary for rural life to be possible in the current situation of cutbacks in welfare services. They could all refer to specific moments when it had dawned on them that "something had to be done". The following four themes were foregrounded as specifically significant and important in the interviewees' descriptions of their volunteer engagement: i) the rural condition, ii) village needs, iii) entrepreneurialism and iv) the approach that "the end justifies the means". These themes were partially interrelated, but are separated here for the sake of clarity.

4.1. The rural condition

Engaging in practices "for the good of the village" was frequently retold as part of local and rural traditions, and seemed key to rural self-descriptions and identities (cf. Beel et al., 2017). Interviewees frequently talked about commitment and active engagement in and for the local village as being a rural tradition – almost a natural part of rural living:

I think there's a tradition, there is a *tradition*. [...] I believe that there's a *spirit* as well to help each other [...] And then it's probably so, I think, there's a *culture*, there is a natural commitment, it's there in the "village walls". (Interview 6).

The volunteer initiatives were further described as bonding villagers together: "You get to know one another when you're doing stuff like that, you know. I think that's good" (Interview 8). Sometimes, the propensity to volunteer was described as a characteristic of an individual village, which distinguished that village from others. However, similar descriptions were quite common. Personal experiences of volunteer engagement were repeatedly articulated by the recounting of past initiatives when their still-active local associations had been established to get water, electricity, broadband, street lights and/or petrol stations. Hence, most interviewees described a local rural culture with historical origins that urged people to take responsibility for

securing their existence. This culture was highlighted as a very significant backdrop and an explanation for people's present-day commitment to engaging in volunteering, and as an explanation for why their specific villages had managed to survive despite the difficulties that came with withdrawn services. It was also used to describe rural identities as specifically prone to fending for themselves and standing on their own two feet.

Articulating one's own and co-villagers' volunteering as something that they did "for the good of the village" teased out assurances that this was nothing new, but inherent in rural life. It encouraged narrations of volunteering as typical of rural contexts and identities, thus emphasising and confirming rural specificity. It included the construction of a rural "we" who did the volunteering, and a specific rural space where that volunteering took place. Tracing the desire to engage "for the good of the village" back through time made it possible to position the village as a space of active and responsible villagers, with long traditions of altruistic and indispensable volunteering.

Framing volunteering "for the good of the village" as part of local tradition also indicates and historicises a specific relationship to the welfare state. The interviewees frequently brought up perceived deficiencies in regional policy. Historicising the need for local volunteering hence implied a politicisation of rural living via the reinforcement of two things: that rural villages were being neglected by the state, from which no help was to be expected (and that this had been true for a long time), and that the village's future was therefore in the hands of the villagers themselves.

4.2. Village needs

Narratives about working "for the good of the village" included clarifications of what constitute the core needs of a village. Some services were mentioned in almost all the interviews: a local school, a local store, local healthcare and sometimes a local petrol station. Dystopian imageries about decreasing populations and the subsequent withdrawal of core services were told as important drivers behind their involvement in their villages' respective struggles to retain the store, school, healthcare centre or petrol station:

You've seen what happens in other villages when the school disappears [or] the local store disappears. [...] Then these little things that make things easier will disappear. Then the villages eventually erode [...] You have that in the back of your mind, [and therefore] we wanted a store here! (Interview 3)

Although the initiatives were also described in terms of what they gave back to the volunteering individuals in terms of much-appreciated social interaction and a sense of belonging (cf. Clary and Snyder, 1999; McManus et al., 2012), the described aims more often centred around securing, strengthening and developing the local community given the harsh conditions faced by rural areas. This meant that measures had to be taken to see to it that key services were secured. In one village this included welcoming refugees:

They said it was important that we agreed to receive asylum seekers because that could save the school. Because it was not decided whether the school would be closed, but what the municipality said was that fewer and fewer children are born in [the community] so we don't know how long we can keep the school. But if there are asylum-seeking families, yes, well then there will be children at the school. (Interview 11)

The studied initiatives were thus certainly not only reactive but also proactive (Brown and Kulig, 1996/97). Apart from being an act of empathy and solidarity, welcoming refugees was also comprehended as a strategy to increase the population in order to save the local school (cf. Hudson and Sandberg, 2021). This led to the founding of a local association to help and support refugees. This initiative came to an abrupt end, however, when the Swedish Migration Agency decided that the

refugee accommodation was to be closed down. This aroused a great deal of frustration about the village's relation to the state (cf. Hansen, 2018):

Unfortunately, I have to say that I've lost confidence in our authorities and politicians. If civil society in our country had not acted [when refugees arrived in 2015], then I fear that it would've looked much worse than it does. (Interview 12)

Schools, stores and healthcare centres were also seen as immensely important as meeting places. A local store not only made everyday grocery shopping easier, it worked as a communication centre where people met and exchanged information. The same was true of the local healthcare centre, which also provided a general sense of security. The school was more than just a place for education, but represented the future and hope for the village (cf. Forsberg, 2010). It was clear that the school, store and healthcare centre also constituted important key symbols (cf. Ortner, 1973) that exceeded their functions; the villages invested in them emotionally and associated them with important values (Haartsen and Gierling, 2021). Hope was articulated with these specific institutions – and was maintained as long as the institutions were retained. Threats of having to close the last remaining stores, schools or healthcare centres became symbolic of the ongoing closing of the whole village. Keeping them symbolised that the village was still "viable", which was given meaning in relation to a need to which the interviewees repeatedly gave voice: to have more people stay in the village and to attract in-migrants (cf. Lundgren, 2017; Nedomysl, 2008; Nilsson and Lundgren, 2021; Nilsson, 2021). There was a tendency, while explicitly lamenting those villages which had lost a school or healthcare centre, to also express relief and a sense of pride when describing one's own success. Engagement "for the good of the village" could sometimes be evaluated almost in terms of a competition between regions, where the best village wins.

Furthermore, engaging in the retaining of local stores, schools and healthcare centres was generally described as relatively unproblematic and non-controversial (but see Lundgren and Sjöstedt, 2020), and was unquestioningly equated with engagement "for the good of the village" and opposing processes that made local rural life difficult. The fact that education and healthcare specifically constitute policy areas that are generally seen as very important in Sweden (e.g., Håkansson, 2020) gave power and impetus to engaging with them. Furthermore, since responsibility for schools and healthcare centres is held by public bodies such as the municipalities and regions, the interviewees often emphasised that their engagement was a necessity because politicians and decision-makers had failed to do what needed to be done (cf. Lundgren, 2020).

4.3. Entrepreneurialism

You have to create that service yourself, sort of. [...] We can do it ourselves here. So, that's my philosophy. I think we can! We can damn well fix it ourselves. (Interview 6)

Also central to the narratives about local volunteer initiatives, and closely related to the traditional rural identities referred to above, was the position of the entrepreneur and the significance of entrepreneurship in a broad sense. This included the ability to create and run businesses but, more than that, it included the abilities to fix things on one's own, be flexible, creative and innovative, seize opportunities, take initiatives and be generally resourceful (cf. Mokaya et al., 2012). In line with this, entrepreneurship was related to a mindset, an identity or way of life that included decisiveness as well as flexibility:

It's about seeing opportunities and solutions. Because there are people in [the village] who are not self-employed at all, but have paid work somewhere and work there. But they can still be *entrepreneurs*. They sit on the board of the local community association, they're driven by "yes, now let's do this! [...] I'm ready to do this and

that!” So, it’s this *driving force*. It’s important to include that as well. You don’t have to be the owner of your own business to be an entrepreneur. (Interview 4)

This form of entrepreneurship and general attitude was given a historical dimension and was articulated with village identities through descriptions of it as a “local spirit” that was inherited and was seen as contagious in a positive sense. Entrepreneurship was closely related to volunteering, in that the spirit of entrepreneurship was said to make it easier for people to engage:

We have alert retirees who’ve fixed the electric lighting trail and think that’s interesting. Similarly, in the summer, we have an enthusiastic retiree who cuts our fine football field for only the cost of fuel. That part is also in line with the tradition of entrepreneurship. And that includes not being afraid of working non-profit. (Interview 4)

In practice, volunteer initiatives were carried out as collaborations between different actors, and the ability to engage the “right” person for each task was emphasised. Central actors were local board members and business owners, as well as people who were just engaged temporarily due to their specific skills. While entrepreneurialism was described as a general spirit, the fact remained that only some individuals were described as entrepreneurs – people who were perceived to be informal leaders of the initiatives. These entrepreneurs were often described as specifically good at establishing relationships with positions of power. This was important because the web of actors also included representatives of the municipality, people whose trust it was important to have, since most of the initiatives included gaining municipal approval. New formations of actors were continuously being created to undertake various chores, including working groups, foundations, economic associations and limited liability companies. Divisions between work and leisure, weekdays and holidays were explicitly described as unimportant, as were boundaries between profit and non-profit organisations and enterprises:

I hope people see me only as a committed fellow human being. Some people see me as an entrepreneur, and I am. I’m also chairman [of the village association], but for me all this is only an expression of my commitment. (Interview 5)

Even when practices and initiatives were not explicitly described as entrepreneurial, they were frequently articulated as effects of long-standing local enterprising approaches and of a local or rural spirit of “getting things done”. These approaches and spirits were retold as the *reasons* why the villages had been successful in retaining some services. Again, emphasis was put on distinguishing individual villages from other, less successful, villages, and one interviewee proudly stated that: “We’re the village that’s managed to develop and survive, and where community service remains” (Interview 4). It was implied that villages that did not have this drive were the ones that lost services, and, ultimately, their population. Structural explanations and injustices were thus downplayed because survival was constructed as a race that was possible for those with the right assets to win, and where assets were defined less in terms of proximity to larger cities or natural resources, and more in terms of having the right attitude. The stories about the entrepreneurial attitude and what it had accomplished “for the good of the village” then comprised the telling of success stories – stories that were believed to attract the media, as well as visitors from other municipalities, who came to learn about the concept of success.

4.4. “The end justifies the means”

“For the good of the village” is also an expression that seemed to legitimise incidents where the villagers’ engagement included the bending of rules. Since rural village life was comprehended in terms of severe and negatively charged phenomena and processes such as

cutbacks, out-migration and demographic ageing, doing *something* was generally regarded as better than doing *nothing*, regardless of whether this meant ending up in opposition to the authorities:

It’s obvious that we’re an entrepreneurial village where you just go for it. If we have an idea, we just go for it, and then “you should’ve had an environmental permit to do that” [...]. I mean, sometimes you’ve deliberately done things in the village that may provoke others, but that’s been done because you think it’s for the good of the village. Then we go for it and it’s like, if there’s no one in the village against it, and we’ve gained momentum, then it’s full speed ahead. (Interview 3)

Hence, doing things “for the good of the village” justified policies being ignored, such as seeking permits for activities, or regulations being circumvented. It sometimes even included a somewhat creative relation to the truth, and some interviewees described how they had successfully applied for and received grants to which they were not really entitled. The sense of urgency that surrounded many interviewees’ talk about their villages constituted an important legitimising context for these unauthorised practices but, in addition, identification with the position of rural entrepreneur seemed to be an important driver, as we can see in the above quotation.

Phrases like “for the good of the village” elicited stories about a seemingly united village “we”. However, in doing so, it simultaneously tended to gloss over local conflicts of interest when not all villagers were in agreement about what exactly constituted the “good” of the village, or what means were permissible to reach one’s goals. In a few interviews, such disagreements were mentioned. One interviewee described a villager who was indeed credited for accomplishing a lot, but who was “known for trampling over everybody” and stirring up emotions. Despite this, and in retrospect, the interviewee continued by confirming that a majority of the villagers “think this man did the right thing, because he acted in the best interests of the village” (Interview 3).

Understanding practices as necessary “for the good of the village” also tended to undermine those villagers who did not agree with the suggested solutions. The positively charged articulation between the entrepreneur and the notion that the end justifies the means managed to create antagonistic relations with criticising villagers, who risked being comprehended as recalcitrant, reluctant, backwards and traditionalist nay-sayers (cf. Lundgren and Nilsson, 2018; Lundgren and Sjöstedt, 2020).

The emphasis on getting things done produced rural identities in opposition to the state, and contributed to the idea that rules and regulations constituted proof of the state’s inadequate understanding of rural conditions. Furthermore, the production of entrepreneurial and energetic rural subjects also meant countering the strong stereotypes about rural Norrland as unmodern and passive in comparison to the urban centres and populations in Sweden (cf. Eriksson, 2010), which gave them a further positive charge.

5. Discussion: Understanding resilience thinking

Volunteer initiatives were primarily narrated as success stories; they were described as successful interventions by rural populations to retain their local welfare and community services. In that sense, the initiatives were constituted as examples of actions both *for* and *of* rural resilience, defined as the ability to live in an environment despite the constant changes and uncertainties (Magis, 2010; Pike et al., 2010) that have long affected inland rural communities in the north of Sweden. As the “increasingly-ubiquitous concept” (Skerratt, 2013: 45) of resilience is not neutral, but attracts people with its powerful and ideologically charged ideas about the desired possibilities for rural survival (cf. Roberts et al., 2017), there is reason to explore what the narratives about these initiatives brought with them in terms of naturalised thinking. Drawing on Anderson’s (2015) suggestion not to take any ideological embeddedness of the concept for granted, we focused on the

sensemaking around the initiatives (cf. Beel et al., 2017) and on which thinking, practices and identities were thereby privileged: What was implied and at stake when rural populations narrated volunteer initiatives as being performed “for the good of the village”? Three aspects surfaced as particularly important: notions of urgency, the constitution of antagonistic relations between rural areas and urban centres of power, and the desire to represent rural areas as resilient. They all seemed to steer the narrated themes – about the rural condition, village needs, entrepreneurialism and necessary means – towards a neoliberal interpretation.

5.1. Urgency and neoliberal rebooting

In the interviews, the initiatives were packaged as urgent actions being carried out to save services that also functioned as important symbols for the possibility of a future. The initiatives were carried out “for the good of the village” and comprehended as the answers to a horrific vision (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) of the impending death of rural communities due to their ageing and decreasing populations (cf. Lundgren and Johansson, 2017; Nilsson and Lundgren, 2018; Hudson and Sandberg, 2021). It was against this backdrop of perceived urgency that certain types of thinking and acting became legitimised and prioritised.

The interviewees reported a local ability to step up when municipalities and regions failed them, and they took a great deal of pride in their efforts to save important services. The telling of success stories was in line with, and strengthened by, policy expectations, whose emphasis on volunteer initiatives has been described in terms of a neoliberal striving to shift the focus away from the public sphere, while responsabilising individuals and groups (Hudson, 2012; Ronnblom, 2014; ITPS, 2005; see also Harrison, 2013; Harvey, 1989, 2006). The focus on local success further revealed a sense of competition between villages in the region, and a perceived (but unwelcome) need to compete for “scarce markets and funding” (Lockie et al., 2006: 34; Eriksson, 2020). This placed the initiatives not only within a discourse of urgency, but also within a prevailing discourse of growth (Holdo, 2020). The narratives about local resilience must therefore be seen as part of place-marketing strategies. But, rather than emerging in the form of organised campaigns (e.g., Nedomysl and Amcoff, 2011), they represented an internalised need to promote one’s home village (cf. Lundgren, 2017). More than just representing pride in one’s village, people were aware of the urgent need for in-migration; that if the population were to decrease, central services might be at risk. Such an awareness has been identified in studies of Swedish municipalities’ place-marketing (Heldt Cassel, 2008; Eimermann, 2015), as well as in media representations of refugee reception (Hudson and Sandström, 2021). The responsibility thus taken by villagers to promote their own villages, and to package their volunteer accomplishments as promotable, had wider implications due to their support for the ongoing shifting of responsibility from regions and municipalities to the local population, as well as by maintaining the policy-sanctioned logic of regional competition.

The sense of urgency also drove an appreciation of the position and mindset of the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs, or people who were described as entrepreneurial, were celebrated actors, even heroes, in these local narratives (cf. Pilotta, 2013), and entrepreneurial action was constructed as an “intrinsically good and creative quality” (Berglund and Johansson, 2007: 91). Driven by notions of economics and production, decisiveness and power to act, these positions were partially defined by their important connections and networks that were engaged in order to contribute to the volunteer initiatives. This made initiatives difficult to delimit because they often branched out into for-profit enterprises. They stepped up to the reported sense of urgency through a mindset that “made things happen” when state, regions and municipalities failed them, making promises that were presented as the “only way forward”, and that were easy to believe because they quickly manifested in concrete projects.

What was promoted as an answer to the urgency was a form of thinking and acting that resonated with the emerging neoliberal order of recent decades (cf. Bracke, 2016; Welsh, 2014). The results resonate well with the arguments of McKeown and Glenn (2018), who stated that economic adversity and uncertainty often enable neoliberal policies to be “rebooted”, and that aspirations to change were seldom debated but were quickly redefined in terms of progress (cf. Foucault, 1980) – including when the goal was to retain threatened services. In this sense, the recurring reference to a rural situation of urgency motivated the engagement with resilience thinking, and also proved to be invested in what has been called the motto of neoliberalism: “There is no alternative” (Neocleous, 2013: 4). The studied practices of taking local responsibility appeared more feasible than, for example, political struggles over unjust conditions. The results also constitute an example of the insights of Massey (2004), who claims that processes that are generally conceptualised as “global” not only become palpable on the local scale, but are also in some sense produced on this scale. Capitalism, to take one example, is not only threatening rural communities from the outside, Massey argues, but is also “carried into places by bodies” (2004: 8).

However, an important result of this study is that these neoliberal features were not only reluctant responses to urgent demands. Repeating them also seemed to fulfil important desires relating to identity: the neoliberal features were supported and stabilised through simultaneous articulations with rural specificity. The narratives that drew on rural traditions and identities situated these forward-looking initiatives as a continuation of rural tradition. The emphasis on the neoliberal catchword “flexibility” (Bourdieu, 1998; Harvey, 2005) – which generally refers to increasing requirements on the workforce to adapt to change – was highlighted as a traditional rural characteristic that emerged through descriptions of limited local employment opportunities and the subsequent commuting, seasonal work and multitasking. The tendency to interpret rural resilience along the lines of neoliberal characteristics was thus supported by long-established, positively charged and – for rural areas – central self-images and subject positions, such as being independent and down to earth (Hansen, 1998; Vallström, 2014). The highlighting of such rural self-images and subject positions gained further momentum from their power to counter the critical and negatively charged stereotypes of rural Norrlandic populations as passive and dependent on subsidies (cf. Eriksson, 2010). This desire to celebrate and re-represent otherwise mocked identities as being resilient and active (Skerratt, 2013; Lundgren and Liliequist, 2020) has been described as typical of rural initiatives (e.g., Ducros, 2018), and seemed to work as an important driver behind the narratives studied here. The emphasis on entrepreneurialism managed to balance these negative rural stereotypes against self-identities that were rooted in a rural place-based tradition but were more positively charged. Hence, the interviewees’ recurring talk about the significance of the rural context and tradition supported the interpretation that past identities and cultural practices on the local scale may work as pathways for resilience (Magis and Shinn, 2009; Wilson, 2010, 2012), even when the treading of those pathways comprises support for otherwise often criticised neoliberal policy.

5.2. Antagonistic rural/urban power relations

“Making things happen” “for the good of the village” further entailed an antagonistic relation to a perceived establishment consisting of politicians and representatives of the regions and municipalities. This relation resonated with feelings of having been let down by rural and regional policy, and spurred rural identifications. These identifications sometimes flirted with rural populism, in that they united rural populations together as underdogs in opposition to a perceived urban establishment (cf. Nilsson and Lundgren, 2019). This in turn seemed to make tolerance towards local misdemeanours higher, since they were interpreted as a means justified by its noble end; wrongdoings were seen as righteous acts that balanced the perceived immoralities and wrongdoings that rural areas had experienced in the past (cf. Frykman and

Hansen, 2009) and were still experiencing today.

The notion of the spatial evoked in such narratives exemplifies Massey's (1994: 2) oft-quoted description of space as "social relations 'stretched out'". In this dynamic definition, space extends beyond the present (towards historical relations and identities, as well as towards future im/possibilities of inhabiting rural space) and, simultaneously, beyond the geographical coordinates of the interviewees' respective villages (towards other villages facing similar challenges, as well as towards the urban establishments upon which they felt dependent). The notion of space in the interviewees' narratives raises questions concerning geographies of responsibility (Massey, 2004). There was an underlying agreement that urban instances of power were responsible for the situation in rural areas, and that there was a moral obligation on the part of urban seats of power to "give something back" as an act of responsible reciprocity towards the areas and populations upon which they depend. Urban seats of power were, however, perceived as having failed to take that responsibility, and this failure was countered with the legitimisation of subsequent bending of the rules.

Rural policies' investment in neoliberal ideologies of growth have generally been described as problematic for Swedish rural areas (Ronnblom, 2014; ITPS, 2005; Müller, 2017). The evocation of a rural/urban power dynamic could certainly lead to criticism of such investments, arguing that the requirements to produce local growth are unfair on rural areas. Such criticisms certainly exist (Nilsson and Lundgren, 2015). However, in the narratives studied here, the rural instead became articulated through the figure of the entrepreneur and capitalist logics of accomplishing change at any price (Boltanski, 2011), thus partly supporting and rebooting problematic policies. Also contributing to this was the tendency to explain involvement in entrepreneurship as being for the "collective good", which, as Bakas (2017: 72) points out, represents a departure from classical entrepreneurship theory that "posits [that] all economically active individuals operate as rational, profit-driven selves".

5.3. Troublesome resilience

The concept of rural resilience was born out of a conundrum: it requires resilient rural areas to prove their resilient abilities, and, simultaneously, to turn away from any associations with vulnerability and dependence. Bracke (2016) has noted that to repeatedly describe a group as resilient (or strong, enterprising, sustainable, enduring) is to repeat a simultaneously positively and morally charged fantasy of self-sufficiency and control (see also Harrison, 2013). However, this is a fantasy that is generally only repeated about groups who somehow lack self-sufficiency and control, who are exposed to structural questionings and threats, and for whom there is no intended help in sight. The conundrum of rural resilience thus resembles the way in which neoliberal subjectivity has been described as a compulsory process of turning away from associations with vulnerability (Layton, 2008).

In the material studied here, the stories entailed a focus on positive aspects, rather than on disagreement, insecurity and defeat; thus, they did not enable narratives about the vulnerability that underlies most protests (Butler et al., 2016; Forsberg, 2010). Criticism of *how* struggles to retain central services were executed were seldom raised. As has been pointed out elsewhere (Forsberg, 2010; Lundgren and Sjöstedt, 2020), this can lead to central values such as equality and democratic processes being downplayed – especially when measured against the existence of a local school, store or healthcare centre. The notion of working "for the good of the village" was also closely articulated with notions of the necessity to form a united front in the struggle for rural survival. In such struggles, local dynamics and power relations have proven to be exclusionary, and initiatives' participatory nature to be both a resilience trait and a vulnerability to the community (Ashmore et al., 2017; see also Nousiainen and Pykkänen, 2013). Hence, while the descriptions of resilient rural communities certainly offer important representations of rural agency, they also have two problematic effects. Firstly, they stand

in the way of understandings of rural areas and their increased demands as inherently complex and heterogeneous. Secondly, although respondents were acutely aware of injustices at a structural level, their rhetoric simultaneously tended to downplay broader understandings of the structural conditions that make the position of rural areas vulnerable (Harrison, 2013; Tidholm, 2017) and that make descriptions of resilience desirable in the first place.

Interestingly, the landscape of rural volunteer initiatives was interwoven with the state, municipalities and regions, on whom the villagers depended to get the approvals they needed. This meant that, although those instances of power were sometimes antagonistically positioned as enemies of the rural – the constitutive outside of the local identity – working "for the good of the village" still included safeguarding those relations. This meant that people who had experience of managing such relations were prioritised, and resilience processes and practices became dependent upon specific individuals whose capital in terms of charisma, position and networks – but also in terms of their position within strong (neoliberal) discourses – gave them interpretive precedence and latitude.

6. Conclusion

Narratives about successful volunteer initiatives in this study described the volunteer spirit of Swedish rural areas as both inherently rural and as exceptionally modern. The initiatives were discursively produced as the solutions to a situation of acute urgency that tended to prioritise unity and concrete action before discussion and bureaucratic hassles, that drew upon antagonistic constructions of the relations between rural areas and urban instances of power, and simultaneously served the purpose of countering stereotypes of rural populations as passive. Hence, and in line with much resilience thinking, the narratives about resilient villages and initiatives indirectly supported the focus of neoliberal rural policy on regional responsibility to create growth.

Drawing on Pike et al. (2010), and Wilson's (2012) conceptions of resilience to include long-term restructuring processes into the notion of "disturbances", we argue for the need to delve into the intersections of space and identity. To understand the appeal of the neoliberal positions and practices that resilience thinking proved to entail, it is important to explore the contexts in which such thinking is evoked, and the identifications that it makes possible. Simply highlighting how resilience discourse is permeated with neoliberal catchphrases such as individualism, competition and flexibility, or criticising how it legitimises a weakened state influence, does not suffice. It is also crucial to explore the local spatial experiences and imageries in relation to which resilience practices appear desirable and necessary, as well as the specific rural identities that resilience discourse enables people to restore.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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