Kamp för bygden
En etnologisk studie av lokalt utvecklingsarbete

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Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektorsämbetet vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt försvar i Hörsal F, Humanisthuset, fredagen den 3 september, kl. 10:00.

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Struggle for Community
An Ethnological Study of Local Development Work in a Rural Context

Abstract
When collective action for community is defined as local development or as a struggle for survival different understandings are in focus. Politically, this kind of collective community action is defined as local development and understood in terms of growth and economics. An economic approach to community action is also emphasised in the EU-programmes that support local development groups and projects. On the other hand local groups describe their activities as a struggle for community and community survival.

Inspired by feministic research approaches and with an interest in human aspects and values this study investigates meanings of community action as experienced and expressed by rural inhabitants and activists. The study is based on fieldwork that was carried out in a small rural community in the northern inlands of Sweden: Trehörningsjö. Since the middle of the 1990s, the women in Trehörningsjö have driven collective action to uphold the community. With its point of departure in the community and expanding into the arenas of research and politics, the study takes on the form of a reflexive research process in which the researcher’s former knowledge and new understandings are made visible and discussed parallel with the interpretations made. The main focus of the study is the activist’s demand of voice, visibility and worth.

The first chapter presents the local community and provides a background to the study. The chapter includes an account of the reflexive approach that widened the field of research from a local to a translocal study of community action. In chapters two, three, four and five the struggle for community is reflected through fieldwork experiences in Trehörningsjö and other arenas beyond the village. Situated events and instances of collective action such as the fight for the local health care centre, are analysed as symbolic expressions of community values and rural importance. From chapter two and onwards, the study follows the footsteps of the leading female activist in and beyond the community itself; that is, the day-to-day work, meetings, conferences and other places where community action is acted out. The struggle for community is proven to focus on translocal rather than local action. In chapter six the fieldwork experiences - that tell about resistance and a struggle for community values and perspectives - are placed in the wider context of the rural development movement, local development research and governmental rural policy in Sweden. On all these arenas community action tend to be interpreted as local development in line with a growth perspective, rather than as community protests and struggles that expresses other meanings. Chapter seven takes the analyses and discussion further, and relates community struggle to concepts such as civil society and social economy. Anthony Giddens concept of life politics and Alberto Meluccis concept of collective action are used to deepen the analysis on how humane meanings and relation based aspects of community action are made invisible on the political “growth and development” agenda. Community struggle presents a possibility for rural inhabitants to (re)define and reclaim their community and themselves as important and valuable. However, to be able to understand what the concept of community struggle expresses, and demands, it needs to be acknowledged as a form of action that has the potential to challenge established bureaucratic and political definitions, which, in practice, proves to be difficult.

Keywords
Local/rural development work, community action, collective action, translocal action, women’s action, community activists, struggle, survival, situated events, relation based holistic perspective, symbolic expressions of community, social economy, life politics, voice, visibility and worth.

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