



Territorial Social Innovation in the Nordic Countries and Scotland



Village House Service Centres in Ilomantsi

This social enterprise has established Village House Service Centers in the most remote villages of the municipality of Ilomantsi, Finland, to bring services to the inhabitants in cooperation between the municipality, local people, local associations and businesses. The approach addresses the challenges stemming from outmigration and aging followed by the centralization of services.

Preconditions, Inspiration, Nurture

Village House Service Centers are local village houses used to provide different services on a regular basis in remote villages where none are otherwise available. The service centers address the challenges of outmigration and aging as well as the fact that services have been relocated to larger centers a considerable distance away. The initiator also wished to address the generally apathetic atmosphere in the remote villages following the relocation of all services and the severe outmigration. The service centers were considered a way to activate the villages.

Different services are available in the centers; for example, on a weekly or monthly basis (based on reservations made by the village inhabitants). In practice, the coordination of the centers' activities is carried out by volunteers who are active in village associations. The service providers are both small enterprises and municipal officials (such as community health nurses visiting from municipal health-care centers). The services and activities provided include health-care services, hairdresser, foot care, various educational courses, events, small trips and food services.

The development of the village house service center approach started when its initiator, Eija Liimatta, participated in a 1.5-year course for rural developers and developed the approach as her thesis work. As she received feedback stating that the approach could be used as a basis for a project application, she decided to apply for LEADER funding while working at the municipality of Ilomantsi.

The LEADER-funded project was conducted in 2013–2014 and aimed to achieve the following.

- Develop village house service centers and bring various services to the inhabitants of remote villages.
- Create new modes of working in cooperation between different actors.
- Increase security in the most remote villages.
- Prevent social exclusion and strengthen the local sense of community (Municipality of Ilomantsi, 2014).

This social innovation is strongly linked to an enthusiastic individual in municipal administration as a developer and initiator, while the implementation of the development project also required working together with village associations and inhabitants whose role

was central in ensuring that the provided services responded to citizens' needs. The associations and inhabitants also run the service centers in practice by coordinating the service providers.

The development of the approach was based on analyses of the problems in the villages. The project was planned carefully and based on analyses partly because it was part of a thesis and partly because of the support from LEADER, which demanded a well-formulated approach. During the planning phase, both social and economic aspects of the project were considered because the aim was both to contribute to community spirit in villages and to ease the financial burden for the municipalities by increasing the well-being of the inhabitants. It is, however, clear that the social aspects of improving service provision and activating village life are more central than the economic considerations.

After the end of the LEADER project, the activities in the village houses have continued, and are now run entirely by the village associations. The model also received the Finnish Rural Policy Committee's Best Practice prize in 2014 in the category of cooperation.

Implementation

Resources

The idea of developing village houses as service centers in very remote villages was developed as part of course work on rural development. It seems clear that the knowledge and expertise the initiator gained from the education focusing on developing rural areas contributed to the design of the idea and was an important resource.

After the development of the idea as such during the course for rural developers, the idea was implemented in a LEADER-funded project. The overall funding for the project was 75,000€. Funding from the EU and the state was 47,250€, while the share of municipal funding was 7,500€ and the share of private funding was 5,700€. The private funding was entirely covered by six village associations, which raised funds by activities such as organizing events.

The funding made it possible to employ one half-time employee (the initiator of the idea), but the initiator notes that only having a half-time position allocated to the implementation of the project constituted a challenge.

Active village associations are a crucial resource for keeping up village service centers, because their volunteers take care of the everyday work. In the beginning, there were challenges in activating people and creating trust in the project because of some negative attitudes caused by—among other things—the general trend of disappearing services in the villages. However, as the local inhabitants were invited to plan the activities themselves, they became enthusiastic and the service centers became very popular.

Well-functioning facilities that are suitable for the service providers' needs are also crucial in establishing village houses as service centers. When the LEADER project was initiated, many village associations were asked if they were interested in participating, but many of them did not have village houses with running water or heating during winter and thus it was not possible to turn them into service centers. One of the two established village house service centers uses the premises of the village school, and is also able to use the school kitchen facilities. This has facilitated the activities and also made it possible to sell food to the villagers at inexpensive prices.

The Network / Cooperation

As noted, the approach was initiated by a single individual with a background and interest in rural issues.

In implementing the approach, village associations are—as noted—central, as is the involvement of enterprises and the municipal health-care centre to actually bring their services to the remote villages. There have not been any challenges in finding interested entrepreneurs who want to bring their services to the remote villages and they are able to use the space provided by the village houses free of charge.

During the LEADER project period, it was found important that the initiator, as a representative of the municipality, visited the village house service centres every week to plan and discuss with the village associations and inhabitants. Many inhabitants had negative attitudes toward authorities because of the extensive decrease in service provision in the villages. Because of that, building trust and belief in the potential of the service centres required frequent personal participation of a municipal employee in order to show that the municipality was interested in improving access to services in its most remote areas.

Cooperation between the village associations running their service centres and municipal actors is still ongoing in the form of one of the service centres being located in a village school as well as in the form of a contract with health-care centres to bring health-care services to the village houses.

The LEADER project tried to involve inhabitants across village borders, and the service centres were also frequented by inhabitants from other villages and municipalities. Traditional negative attitudes toward the neighbouring villages, however, prevent cooperation between villages. The initiator of the social innovation finds this to be unfortunate and notes that as the villages are further decreasing in size, they will be forced to cooperate. The final report of the LEADER project notes that a 'bridge-builder' would be needed to bring the villages together and coordinate their activities.

Enablers and Barriers

The existence of active village associations is an important prerequisite for establishing service centres that follow this model. An expected future challenge related to the service centres is the aging of the population and outmigration. Since the implementation of the idea relies on village associations that are mainly run by elderly individuals in the village and those who are still working usually lack the time, there is a risk that there will no longer be active organizers in some years.

To address this situation, the initiator states that there is a need to develop models and approaches that are flexible and can be adapted to new preconditions. Improved

cooperation between village associations and inhabitants in different villages will also be needed.

Funding received from the LEADER Programme was an important enabler; for example because it provided the possibility to employ a person in the municipal administration to coordinate the approach and develop it.

There were no institutional or legislative barriers to the establishment of the service centres. In order to use the school premises as a service centre and to ensure health-care services, contracts were concluded with the relevant departments of the municipal authorities.

Negative attitudes and opposition constituted a larger barrier than actual institutional barriers. Close contact with the villagers, however, has helped to overcome these barriers to some extent. When it became clear that the service centre idea would work, the service centres also started to attract villagers who otherwise were not active in village life. In particular, different kinds of events, trips and courses activated villagers.

Interaction with Municipalities and Other Levels of Governance

As noted, the approach was developed and its implementation was initiated by the municipality of Ilomantsi. There was no clear cooperation with other levels of governance in developing the idea or implementing it, but funding from the EU in the form of the LEADER funding allocated to develop the idea was crucial.

Social Innovation Effects

Outcomes, Impact and 'Scaling'

The village house service centres have been more successful than expected. They have attracted visitors (including also those who usually do not participate in village activities) and activated village life (i.e., they have contributed to building social capital and improving the sense of community).

One of the outcomes during the LEADER project period was also that three new companies were established in the villages to provide services (two provide massages and one provides IT courses). It is unclear whether more new companies have been established after the end of the project period.

By bringing the municipal authorities to work in practice with the villagers and village associations during the LEADER project, it can be presumed that there was some positive effect on the villagers' trust in authorities, which had been weakened by decades of experiencing feelings of being neglected by the local authorities and decision-makers.

The service centres also clearly improved the access to services in the inhabitants' villages and the surrounding ones. Although the services are not provided every day, the service centres are a major improvement compared to the earlier situation where no services were available at any time.

It can also be considered a success that the service centres have continued their existence after the end of the LEADER project and no major changes have happened in their mode of operation or the services provided. In one of the two service centres, the level of activity intensified after the project and activities now take place almost every day.

The number of visitors and participants and the amount and type of services and events provided was followed up as part of the LEADER project, and the village associations have continued doing this monitoring after the end of the project. There have not been other impact evaluations.

There has been an interest in scaling up the approach but several challenges have appeared. Although there has been considerable interest and project applications have been prepared to try the model out in other villages, the model has not yet been tested in other places. The initiator has arranged negotiations on developing a project together with the Local Action Group (LEADER), the Regional Council, municipalities and other actors in order to test the approach in other municipalities, but the outcome was that the funding needed (of approx. 1,5 million €) would require almost all of the LEADER funding available for the area, and is therefore impossible. It was also found that while the project would be too large

for LEADER, there are no other suitable funding sources as the actors find that, for example, the EU's European Regional Development Fund focuses more on innovation and actions that are not compatible with the extreme territorial conditions of the remote villages. However, the Local Action Group is still aiming to develop a project to scale up this approach, possibly with a focus on employment.

Lessons Learned

The village house service centre model is an example of a social innovation addressing extremely remote locations with virtually no services available and with a history of intensive outmigration and an aging population. It can provide useful lessons on how to deal with these kinds of contexts and how improvements in service provision that would seem minor in other contexts may have major effects in the most remote areas.

One of the main challenges at the beginning of the implementation was the attitude and earlier negative experiences of the villagers. In remote conditions, inhabitants may have felt neglected by authorities for decades as services have been relocated, and it was not easy to convince them to believe in new ideas as they may have felt disappointed by authorities before. In the LEADER project, including villagers and village associations from the start was central in order to avoid feelings of being steered top-down and also to ensure the provision of the right services. Having the local authority openly discussing with the villagers probably contributed to gradual changes in attitudes, while the fact that the service centres actually functioned in the end and continued to deliver services and arrange activities has attracted more and more villagers to participate.

The birth of this social innovation relied largely on one local person working in the local administration who had a strong will to try to improve the situation in the remote villages from which all services had disappeared. However, its implementation depended on cooperation between the municipality, the village associations and small local entrepreneurs. Developing the new cooperation and networks was crucial to the success of the approach, but here too, the role of the municipal employee as a coordinator was important during the first steps.

It also seems that by activating the village associations and increasing the activities in the villages, the approach was able to build social capital and new networks between villagers; many of the organized activities are social and also attract inhabitants who were not previously involved in village activities.