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Distributed Rural Proofing – An Essential Tool for the Future of Rural Development?

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Abstract

Current rural proofing models are criticised for the inability to perceive detailed and varying local circumstances and the inability to pay attention to dynamics, to changing circumstances and the potential for change. The concept of rural proofing is discussed in this article, along with examples of proofing models in different countries. The deficiencies of the models are addressed using the concepts spatial justice and social innovation, which in combination allow for perceiving essential factors connected to geography and the varying capability of places. Two case studies are used for demonstrating the importance of these factors when judging centralising reforms. Together, the theoretical discussion and the case studies inform the construction of a new model for rural proofing, more relevant to rural development.

Key words

neo-endogenous rural development, rural proofing, social innovation, spatial justice

Introduction

Two decades ago, neo-endogenous rural development (NED) set out hopes for disadvantaged areas to enable development by mobilising their strengths and by building links to extra-local actors and resources. Funding opportunities have been essential in this model, and here, as Ray (2001, p. 4) pointed out early on, the criterion of *need* has not been alone, as it has been regularly accompanied by the criterion of *ability* for self-driven improvement. Later, Social Innovation (SI) has emerged as a new addition to the rural development literature, with a similar departure as NED, but portraying rural development networks as even more fluid, consisting of shifting actors and relations that go beyond fixed local and rural areas (Bock 2016).

Disregarding the benefit of these models, the trust in self-driven improvement and fluid networks put the weakest areas at risk of falling even further behind. Therefore,

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scholars have emphasized that SI should not only be interpreted as local civic action, but also be 'a call for change at a higher level of development politics' (Bock 2016, p. 567). The current rural development models accordingly seem to be in need of a more sophisticated structure for addressing uneven development. This is a delicate task, since these kinds of development efforts obviously need to function in a bottom-up manner, and efforts to even out differences correspondingly easily end up in a hierarchical structure, which in itself jeopardies the benefits of the neo-endogenous approach. With this in mind, the article will attempt to develop a model for such a structure by departing from the model *rural proofing*, which up to now has largely worked in a top-down manner.

Rural proofing may be defined as a 'commitment for the Government to undertake systematic procedures to ensure that all of its policies, programmes and initiatives, both nationally and regionally, take account of rural circumstances and needs' (Atterton 2008, p. 3). The model has primarily been developed in England, which now has two decades of experience using it. Other countries have followed, and the European Commission has set out rural proofing as a priority for rural development, through its Cork 2.0 declaration in 2016, and its communication 'The future of food and farming' in 2017 (European Commission 2017). Sherry and Shortall note that 'rural proofing has now become a priority across Europe' (2019, p. 336), but at the same time, the authors criticise current models, arguing that the methodological setup has led to flawed and misdirected policies. Their main argument is that the model assumes a rural/urban binary, which directs efforts to 'treat disparity rather than accommodate diversity', and that diversity would require a process where policy approaches may vary between different types of rural areas (Sherry and Shortall 2019, p. 343). Consequently, the task for this article is to investigate the requirements of a rural proofing model able to comprehend the diversity of rural areas and thereby pay regard to factors significant to NED.

What are the requirements of such a model? First, *geography* seems to matter (Massey 1992). *Place* does not in itself determine outcomes, but while factors such as education has beneficial impacts more or less everywhere, there are differences in how strong this impact is between different places (Brown and Cromartie 2004). The rural/urban spectrum is relevant here, but similar differences are visible also between different kinds of rural areas and different kinds of urban areas. The difference between the urban and the rural has been blurred (Andersson *et al.*): there are better and worse off rural areas similar to better and worse off urban areas.

Second, *democracy, participation and empowerment* of local communities is also relevant (Nikkhah and Redzuan 2009). This is because

> '(economic) uneven development ... goes hand in hand with political asymmetries and democratic deficits which manifest themselves in urban and regional policy networks favouring "the main centres of growth and affluence" and marginalising the region(s)' (Görmar *et al.* 2019).

The argument put forward in this article is that the concepts *spatial justice* and *social innovation* make a good fit for a rural proofing model that pays attention to factors related to geography and participation/empowerment, and consequently, also NED.

In order to construct such a model, the article turns to the concepts *spatial justice* and *social innovation* in section three. In section four, the bottom-up model will then be assessed by investigating case studies in the region of Ostrobothnia, Finland. Section five discusses the results and draws the contours for a new kind of proofing. The article ends with some final reflections regarding the role of proofing mechanism in rural and societal development.

The discrepancy of NED and Rural Proofing

As Bosworth *et al.* (2016, p. 428) explain, "local control remains at the heart of neo-endogenous development but the need to embrace 'extra-local' factors is also emphasised". Local control is needed, since the use of *territorial capital* should be in accordance with local culture, history and local needs and wants (Labianca *et al.* 2020). Two aspects of extra-local factors are interesting here. First, endogenous development efforts are said to be most effective when using heterogeneous networks, since they "facilitate ongoing dialogues that can provide 'power to' local communities ... while also maintaining a framework wherein that power has meaning beyond the local area" (Bosworth *et al.* 2016, p. 443). Second, NED implies a "new role for the state as co-ordinator, manager or enabler rather than as provider or director" (Shucksmith 2010, p. 4). This also relates to the difficulties of weak areas to mobilise. Here, public bodies may "identify, build and communicate local assets in ways that can underpin local development" (Bosworth *et al.* 2016, p. 430).

Together, these aspects describe the type of proofing mechanisms needed in NED. While the state is needed to coordinate, enable and build assets, it must also provide sufficient room to maneuver for localities and local and extra-local networks. This section will now continue by scrutinizing in what way current rural proofing models enable or disable these roles of the state.

Current rural proofing models

Essentially, rural proofing is an impact assessment of government policies on rural areas. England has been a forerunner, establishing *rural mainstreaming* and the rural proofing model in the year 2000 (Shortall and Alston 2016). Outside the EU, Canada may be noted as a country adopting a similar mechanism early on, creating a rural secretariat in 1996 and a 'Rural lens' model in 1998 (Fairbairn 1998). In most countries, a specific government body holds the competence and responsibility for rural proofing, while the actual proofing activities are conducted by the department where the policy is developed (Tillväxtanalys 2016). Often, rural proofing is conducted using a tick box pro forma in order to simplify the process. In England, for instance, two tick boxes are used, one prior and during policy development, and the other during implementation. In Northern Ireland, tick boxes are however regarded as constraining and repetitive, and therefore, Rural Issues Statements are written instead, describing the rural proofing procedure, for instance how rural impacts are measured and how stakeholders are involved (DARD 2015).

In Finland, where the empirical case for this article is situated, rural proofing is under the responsibility of the government appointed Rural Policy Council, but as in many other countries, the concerned department conducts the actual rural proofing. Proofing is encouraged but voluntary, a compromise for getting the procedure accepted by an already burdened public administration. As a result, it has been used sparingly. The Rural Policy Council has, with the English example as a model, compiled a checklist for other departments to use consisting of six factors: entrepreneurship and employment, competence and innovations, services and housing, accessibility and infrastructure, attractiveness, social cohesion and democracy. Often, the proofing process is conducted by assembling elected politicians, civil servants and representatives of different stakeholder organisations which are given the task to judge, based on available data and personal experience, what factors have negative effects on rural areas (Tillväxtanalys 2016).

Despite a two-decade history, there is very little academic research on rural proofing. The English model has been scrutinised in a number of policy reviews, often highly critical, for instance pointing out that proofing is conducted too late in the process, that the influence of proofing is weak, that it is too sparingly used, that local communities are not heard and that there is a lack of data on actual local circumstances (OECD 2011; DEFRA 2015; House of Lords 2018). The Swedish government agency Tillväxtverket (Tillväxtanalys 2016) published a report investigating rural proofing mechanisms in England, Canada, Finland and Norway. The report saw some benefits, since rural issues have been highlighted in some cases, but especially the tick box procedure is criticised since it was often regarded as ‘unwarranted’ by officials, and tick boxes limit the ability to perceive the variety of ruralities and needs.

A few comprehensive academic analyses have been published regarding the models in England and Northern Ireland, especially Atterton (2008), Shortall and Alston (2016) and Sherry and Shortall (2019). Atterton criticises the validity of the auditing procedure, since rural communities are hardly consulted at all. There is a lack of understanding when rural proofing is needed and there is evidence of a “spatial blindness amongst policy makers in central government” (Atterton 2008, p. 9).

Sherry and Shortall (2019) conduct an analysis of the theoretical underpinnings to the Northern Ireland rural proofing model and find reasons to strongly criticise it. Rural proofing is a flawed process, according to the authors, displaying deficiencies regarding for instance ownership and governance, influence on politics and reluctant attitudes among responsible individuals. The authors derive the deficiencies from an assumption of a rural/urban binary, which results in “rural being equated with neediness” (Sherry and Shortall 2019, p. 342) and an inability “to reflect on the historical and inevitable future changes in rural areas” (Sherry and Shortall 2019, p. 343). In order to be able to answer to the demands of rural diversity, the authors argue that policy approaches must recognise that “rural policy issues will vary for different rural areas” (Sherry and Shortall 2019, p. 343).

Shortall and Alston (2016) investigates the possibilities for transferring the English model to the Australian context. In Australia, there are almost no rural-urban linkages and the political power of rural areas is very limited, at the same time as rural and urban areas are relatively similar in England, a country where urbanity is never far away. In this manner, the comparison reveals the inability of the English model to take account of rural differences and vast urban-rural divergence.

To conclude, the identified deficiencies of the current models, such as the lateness of the process and the inability to deal with power structures and comprehend diversity, are hardly consistent with the preferred role of the state to coordinate, enable, build assets and provide sufficient room to manoeuvre. Simply put, the deficiencies seem to rest on the inability of a top-down functioning system to continuously grasp and deal with place-specific characteristics. As Saraceno (2013) explains, top-down systems use one-size-fits-all methods in order to be effective, and the resulting rural/urban binary means that "there is no real explanation of inequalities and change" (Saraceno's 2013, p. 334). There is seldom room for different kinds of ruralities to present their specific characteristics, and often, 'rural need' is singular for a region or even a nation.

Instead of comprehending needs in terms of disparity, Saraceno advocates for a diversity perspective, where each area is expected to be unique in terms of social, economic and institutional factors, and where development paths consequently are unique and differ over time. This understanding aligns with NED, but not with the current rural proofing models. The models (1) have difficulties of comprehending differences between localities, in other words, differences related to geography, and (2) are often momentary judgements and therefore unable to comprehend dynamics, movements for change and development opportunities. Is it possible to envision a continuous process of proofing which pay regard to such factors and where the administration is not overburdened? In the next section, the concepts of spatial justice and social innovations will be introduced as essential elements of a rural proofing model better aligned with the prerequisites of NED.

A rural proofing model relevant for rural development

The argument put forward in this article is that spatial justice may address deficiencies in rural proofing models related to *geography*, while social innovation highlights factors related to *dynamics*. This section will first give an overview of the two concepts, and then engage in a discussion of their compatibility with NED and rural proofing.

Spatial justice

Spatial justice finds its origins in studies of disadvantaged urban areas. Davies (1968), as well as Henri Lefebvre with his *right to the city* concept, were central theorists early on. While the concept is named using the term 'space', its interpretation and especially its later use is more closely aligned to the perception of geography as 'place'.

Spatial justice may be understood as an extension of social justice, where space joins the social and temporal elements (Soja 2010). Soja argues that both scholars and social institutions have generally paid attention to social and temporal aspects, but neglected spatial factors. Similarly, Roberts and Green (2013) argue that 'geographical blindness' has been evident in both the academic discussion of social justice as well as in public administration. Geography exercises influence over social circumstances, and such circumstances are ignored if the spatial aspect goes unnoticed regarding the concept of justice. For instance, Soja explains how 'the friction of distance' results in 'distance-minimizing behaviour' and that human activities as a consequence 'tend to cluster' (Soja 2010, p. 72).

Soja (2010, p. 18) argues that the spatial dimension of human life is a social product, that human 'lived space' is constructed 'mentally and materially' and 'intertwines with our socialised lived times to create our biographies and geo-histories'. In other words, geography is not static; it may be influenced in the same manner as we influence our history. Consider for instance the effect the construction of a bridge has on its surroundings.

Dikeç (2001, p. 1797) describes how areas become advantaged or disadvantaged due to interventions in the geography, for instance through building infrastructure and housing in certain places, or making public services inaccessible to some communities. Dikeç (2001, p. 1798) argues that such spatial disadvantages not only result in challenges in everyday life, they also hamper the possibility of the population to take part in societal development. As a result, spatial injustices are often reproduced through generations. The participation and inclusion of the population in societal and community development may accordingly be regarded as an element that furthers spatial justice, since it enables the restructuring of geographies in accordance with local circumstances, at the same time as it empowers people (Nikkhah and Redzuan 2009).

Dikeç (2001) similarly maintains that justice builds not only on a right to participate, but an *enabling* right. In other words, oppression and disadvantageous circumstances are sources of injustice also since they often impede people from having influence on societal development. Sen (2009, p. 326), in his seminal book *The Idea of Justice*, similarly argues that "there is an intimate connection between justice and democracy". To reach justice, all places must accordingly have the capacity to form political alternatives to the prevailing societal development. Görmar *et al.* agree, stating that "More spatial justice would be achieved if the people affected by peripheralisation processes gained control over the development of their region(s)" (2019, p. 6).

Ever since John Rawls (1971) introduced the concept *distributional justice*, the distribution of resources have been considered as relevant to the spatial understanding of justice. Young (1990), on the other hand, concluded that injustice 'should be defined primarily in terms of the concepts of oppression and domination, rather than distribution'. Still, Farrington and Farrington maintain that 'participation, or the lack of it, is likely to be affected by the distribution of benefits and burdens' and that 'accessibility, or lack of it, can affect this distribution' (2005, p. 5). Access is argued to be dependent on subjective needs rather than mere distribution, and subjective needs are in turn dependent on income levels, demographic structure, industrial structure, culture and values etc. Additionally, a temporal dimension is evident, since needs alter with for instance changing demography and technology development. There are universal ideas of justice linked to concepts such as freedom, equality and democracy, but Harvey (1996) claims that the perception of justice varies over time and from place to place. Jones *et al.* (2019, p. 110) similarly describe recent work on spatial justice as moving away from a universal understanding of justice towards more plural understandings, in other words, “a more choice-oriented understanding of what is fair”. This is an argument for the ability of places to define and act on their needs.

We may therefore conclude, first, that the very notion of justice is produced locally through participation, and second, that spatial justice demands that participation is enabled. Spatial justice is not only about distribution and accessibility, although there is certainly an interdependence between accessibility and how people are enabled. A central factor seems to be how different kinds of structures facilitate or hinder the ability of communities to participate, act on their needs and mobilise for the development of the area. This should involve also the ability to scale up joint efforts, something which should be affected by both geographical and cultural distances. In summary, relevant factors for spatial justice are:

- Ability to participate and gain local control (financial and judicial conditions, power structures)
- Geographic and cultural distances
- Infrastructure and services
- Demography
- Industrial structure
- Culture and values

Social innovation

According to Bock, what most definitions of social innovation (SI) have in common is

> ‘the basic idea of social innovation as a motor of change rooted in social collaboration and social learning, the response to unmet social needs as a desirable outcome, and society as the arena in which change should take place’ (Bock 2016, p. 555).

SIs are not necessarily novel, but they are always novel in the local context. In the SI literature, the act of participation and collective action in itself is viewed as producing new and intensified networks, in turn producing social capital, which in the end will lead to tangible outcomes. Neumeier (2017) therefore sees SI as ‘asset building’ for the future. This may be exemplified by two rural cases presented by Rantamäki and Kattilakoski (2019, p. 339), where co-operative action in village communities “led them to find the identity they had once lost” and “doing this in a way that contributes to the development of new social relationships and collaborations crossing the different sectoral and organisational boundaries and thus strengthening the sense of community”.

One element of SI is accordingly a process of social inclusion, grounded in the needs and opportunities of local communities. Since these needs and opportunities are defined locally, of people living and experiencing the local circumstances, it may be assumed that they are the outcomes precisely of the social, temporal and spatial dimensions described above. The SI literature may thereby point out factors of importance for such processes.

Neumeier (2017) highlights general success factors of SI. First, the size of the region matters: the smaller the region, the higher the potential to trigger a participation process. Actors of a small region generally have a higher socio-emotional bonding to the region itself, resulting in a stronger commitment. Second, the experience of common actions and collaboration is relevant: SI processes are easier to initiate in rural areas where potential actors have already gained experience in participation processes. It is difficult to promote local development in places with no history of collective action, since such places have less social resources such as trust and social capital. Neumeier (2017, pp. 37–41) compiles three main categories of factors that promote SI:

Factors important for the success of the overall innovation process

Degree of advantage of innovation Consistency with existing experiences/needs/values Trialability and ease of use/simplicity of innovation Foreseeability of results of new form of action

Determining factors influencing the 'room to manoeuvre' for the social innovation actor network

Means of funding Public support (consulting etc.) Organisational structure (cautious organisational cultures of administrations, fragmented capacities and skills etc.) Basic judicial conditions (does legislation allow novel kinds of solutions?)

Factors influencing the actual participation process

Social capital Willingness to participate Competence of participating actors

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The synthesis of spatial justice and social innovation as the basis for a new rural proofing model

As discussed above, the NED literature emphasizes (1) local control, (2) collaboration through heterogeneous local and extra-local networks, and (3) the state in a role as co-ordinator, manager or enabler. We also concluded that the current proofing models have difficulties in recognising (1) local specifics and differences in geographical circumstances, and (2) dynamics, movements for change and development opportunities. These are deficiencies likely to impede the attributes of NED. The argument put forward here is that the combination of spatial justice and SI both align with the requirements of NED and respond to the deficiencies of the proofing models.

What spatial justice and SI have in common is that they emphasise local empowerment and accommodate diverse local circumstances, although in different ways. Spatial justice describes the specific needs set by geography, how the needs change over time and their context dependency, for instance regarding power structures, geographic, cultural and temporal distances and local and extra-local cohesion. SI, on the other hand, describes mechanisms able to answer to the needs set by geography. These especially include the initiation of processes, building on social needs, and improving and/or creating local and extra-local networks for change.

In short, spatial justice describes the needs while SI describes the measures to address the needs. Whereas the SI literature has stated quite clearly the fundamental role of local communities when SIs are formed, it has been less clear about the manner in which public actors are able to intervene, while simultaneously observing the delicate factors involved in local mobilisation. Strategies similar to the LEADER approach have been praised, which Neumeier (2017) see as a middle way, a down-up strategy in between a bottom-up and a top-down one. Accordingly, Butkeviciene (2009) concludes that external actors are able to promote social innovations by facilitating local institutional capacity, by providing for instance education and forming local action groups. However, in order to address unequal development, a rural proofing process seems to require a more detailed description of the role of the state, and here, a rural proofing model based on the understandings of NED, spatial justice and SI seems to have a role to play.

Case studies

Two rural Ostrobothnian communities are studied here, Sideby and Bergö. As shown in Table 1, they share many characteristics, but there is a difference especially in the development of the population, where Bergö is doing a lot better than Sideby.

However, they form an interesting comparison especially due to their similarities. Both cases were independent municipalities up until the early 1970s, when they merged with their neighbours. They are both rural, peripheral and coastal, with histories of fishery and agriculture. A difference is that Bergö is an island, connected to the mainland through a ferry, while Sideby is peripheral in the sense that it is located on the southern tip of the region of Ostrobothnia (see Figure 1).

Table 1: *Demographic and socioeconomic structure in the case studies in comparison with Finland as a whole*

	Sideby	Bergö	Finland in total
Population 2017	604	469	5513130
Change of population 2013–2017	−10,3%	−0,2%	+1,1%
Age structure 2017			
Average	54 years	50 years	41 years
<14	8%	14%	16%
15–64	56%	54%	63%
65>	36%	32%	20%
Workplaces 2016			
Primary	23%	11%	3%
Secondary	39%	11%	22%
Tertiary	38%	78%	75%
Local workplaces as share of number of employed	67%	21%	N/A
Self-employed	31%	10%	13%

Source: Statistics Finland.

Data and methods

The case studies are firstly investigated using statistics from Statistics Finland regarding data on population development, industrial structure, commuting and so on. This is supplemented with data from municipal homepages regarding service, administrative and political structures.

Interviews were directed to local inhabitants and government officials. The context of the case studies was the planning of a major centralising administrative reform in Finland in 2018. The reform highlighted issues related to placement of services and the necessity of local services and allowed the respondents to reflect on local needs and the impact of centralisation of services. Informants were identified in the case study areas using the snow-ball technique, with the aim of finding respondents representing a range of ages, genders and life situations. 19 interviews were conducted with inhabitants, 4 with municipal officials and 5 with regional officials. The

Figure 1: *Map of southern and central Ostrobothnia and the two case studies Bergö and Sideby*

questions to inhabitants concerned the present situation and fears for the future regarding availability of services, as well as questions regarding local identity, civic activity, everyday mobility etc. The interviews with government officials provide insights into the service structure arrangement and concerns about influence and capability. Questions concerned the present situation, concerns for the future regarding service availability and influence as well as cooperation and development possibilities.

The interviews were analysed using a thematic content analysis (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). The transcribed interviews were read through and arranged into themes, partly deductively based on the descriptions of SI and spatial justice above, partly inductively, to receive a picture of how respondents generally describe for instance geographical belongings and the importance of different kinds of services. Based on this categorisation, conclusions were drawn on how respondents generally describe issues such as local cohesion, connections to other localities, availability of services and fears for the future. To evaluate mobility patterns, the interviews were combined with statistical data on commuting.

Case 1: Sideby

The municipality of Sideby is located at the southern tip of the Swedish speaking settlement in Ostrobothnia. After the war, with rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and emigration to Sweden, the population halved to below 2000 before merging with the municipality Kristinestad in the 1970s. Today, three villages, Sideby, Skaftung and Ömossa, are living in decline. The peripheral position stands out as the main reason for this condition, as the municipal centre is 40 km away from Sideby and the regional centre in Vasa is 130 km away. Sideby has few local services left: only a small grocery shop and a health clinic are present. Current reform suggestions have included moving health services from Kristinestad to Närpes, 70 km away, or even to Vasa. Substantial commuting is directed towards Kristinestad and the other towns of southern Ostrobothnia, but as much as 67 per cent of the workforce work in Sideby. The share of entrepreneurs is as high as 31 per cent, and these figures indicate that job opportunities have been essential for people deciding to settle or stay in the area.

The interviews with locals indicate that Sideby is an area that has largely lost its vitality. One interviewee declared that "nothing really happens here", while another respondent argued that "we don´t really have any cohesion or fellowship here any longer, after the schools and the grocery store closed down". Regarding services, one interviewee describes an unfortunate situation: "we had grocery stores and a school, but we have lost everything ... you adapt and get used to it, and in the end you don't even understand to demand services anymore".

As most public services have moved north, most civil associations have declined and many of them ceased to exist. There is some activity in the old municipal centre in Sideby, where a village association has been setup, but in the other villages, only hunting associations are mentioned as particularly active. The interviews indicate that all villagers are familiar with each other and have cultural connections between them, but in everyday life, the mobility of Skaftung and Ömossa is directed to the north, away from the old municipal centre (see Figure 2). Of course, with only about

200 people in the separate villages, a lack of cooperation leaves very few people to be engaged. The solidarity with the Swedish speaking Ostrobothnia is visible in statements where interviewees explain that “Vasa feels closer than Pori, although Vasa is 120 km away and Pori only 70 km”. Pori is situated to the south in a monolingual Finnish-speaking region.

Case 2: Bergö

Bergö is an island connected to the mainland by a ferry, 60 km from the regional centre of Vasa and 30 km from the municipal centre in Malax, which considering the ferry journey adds up to relatively cumbersome commuting (see Figure 3). Still, the share of workplaces on the island related to the number of islanders having a job is only 21 per cent and 10 per cent are self-employed. Since there is no shortage of places of residence on the other side of the ferry, this suggests that Bergö as a place of residence is attractive and people are ready to cope with time consuming commuting.

The peripheral position is also visible in concerns for the future regarding the accessibility of services. Because of ‘the peripheral position’, the islanders fear losing the local health clinic, since ‘it can take over an hour for an ambulance to get here’. The

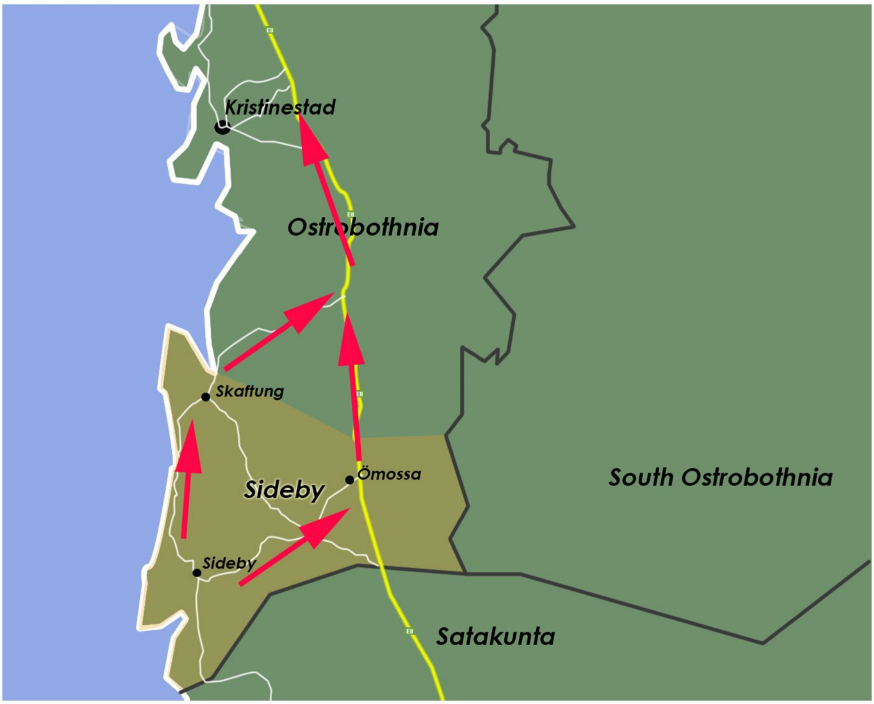

Figure 2: *Map of the historical municipality of Sideby, with the villages Sideby, Ömossa and Skaftung and the municipal centre Kristinestad to the north. Arrows indicate main commuting directions*

Figure 3: *Map of the case study Bergö and surroundings*

local grocery store is the other service mentioned, since the closest store outside the island would be at best 40 minutes away. Elders without cars are especially worried about losing these services, but also younger interviewees describe the loss of these services as 'unacceptable' and that the attractiveness of Bergö as a place of residence are dependent on them. Although the availability of services have declined over time, Bergö still maintains a grocery store, a bank, a primary school, a kindergarten, elderly care and a health clinic that is open once a week.

The interviews clearly indicate that Bergö is a vibrant local community. 'Cooperation' and 'unity' are words often mentioned, and one person explained that this is due to Bergö being 'small and an island'. The settlement is relatively dense, which means that 'you meet people all the time' and 'everybody says hello when they meet'. One respondent suggested that "Bergö probably has the largest number of associations per capita around here". The interviewees agree about the importance of the civic associations, which seem to be very active and play an important role for arranging different local services, such as a café, an outdoor gym and summer markets. One respondent mentions that the different associations, with the Island Council up front, have been able to 'gang up' when pursuing issues that have been important for the whole community. Municipal officials similarly describe the islanders as 'stubborn' and 'united for the cause'. One instance mentioned is the new elder care home established a few years ago, which is further described below.

Regarding connections with other communities, the neighbouring villages are most important. Malax and Vasa are familiar places as many services and workplaces are located there.

Bergö home for elders. In Bergö we find an example of a process which specifically addresses issues of access and social inclusion. The result is a social innovation, an elder care home set up as a joint stock company with all shares owned by the island council, with the municipality running the operation, built in conjunction with the school, sharing infrastructure and combining elder care, health care and teaching.

Bergö had pursued an elder care home for decades, since the elders were referred to homes on the mainland. There was little understanding for such needs by municipal politicians during a period when many services were cut down and centralised. The islanders did not give up, first establishing the island council in 2002 and a specific working group in 2008. At this time, the aim was still to convince the municipality to build a home on the island. The island council applied for funding from a government house financing fund, ARA, but was denied largely due to a lack of support from the municipality. A municipal official explains that there were already too many care places in the municipality at the time. Soon, certain events turned things around.

First, in 2010, a long time summer resident and newly retiree joined the island council, bringing experience and networks from his previous working life. This person soon ascertained that the municipality will not engage in building new facilities on the island and instead suggested that the islanders should build the facility themselves. With advice from acquaintances in the state government, this person was able to find a path for bringing the issue forward. Second, soon afterwards, two elder care home buildings in the municipality were found to be in bad conditions, which admitted a reshuffling of care places. Third, the school building in Bergö was similarly found to be in a bad condition and needed to be rebuilt. Up until then, there was no room in the municipal zoning plan for new service buildings on the island, but the rebuilding of the school thereby opened up for a joint solution.

These seemingly chance events may be related to place-specific characteristics. A strong local community is able to join strengths and thereby seek solutions for long periods of time, over two decades in this case. During long periods of time, structural factors will alter and opportunities for influencing restructuring efforts will appear. A second factor is that although Bergö is peripheral, the socially active community and the archipelago environment is appealing not only for native islanders, but also for outsiders. A place with an inflow of newcomers continuously receives new impulses, ideas, resources and engagement, and these may in fortunate instances be a good fit for the specific mission the community pursues. A third important factor is the smallness of the municipality and the resulting closeness between the islanders and the municipal officials. The interviewees clearly depict the close relationship between the municipality and the islanders as decisive. The interviewed islanders and municipal officials describe a close and sometimes even daily discussion when a feasible arrangement was sought. Interviewees were asked whether the solution would have been possible if the administration would have been regional rather than municipal, and here, both locals and municipal officials agree that this would not be the case, as one official explains:

> 'This is a typical example of a flexible and practical solution that arise from a circumstance where the municipality and the village have a lot of knowledge about each other. Will a regional administration be able to maintain such closeness and receptiveness to flexible solutions? It would be very demanding for a region to maintain such competence for every village. I doubt we will see a lot of these kinds of projects in the future [when the administration of health care is centralised]'.

Is the population of Bergö more enabled?

The case of Bergö exemplifies the benefits of a small and geographically concentrated community, as well as the flexibility that closeness to local government brings. Whether the reason is the attractive environment or the vibrant community, Bergö demonstrates that a peripheral community may be attractive as a place of residence without offering accessible work places. Possibilities of influencing municipal investments on the island have been difficult in some regards, but the active local community has achieved a larger representation in municipal bodies than the population size gives expectation of. Not the least has the strong local community been a fertile ground for local mobilisation, as the construction of the elderly care facility demonstrates. Bergö is an attractive place of residence and attracts outsiders who bring with them resources in the form of knowledge and networks.

Sideby suffers from the lack of several of these qualities. The area was a flourishing place in the mid-20th century, but has been greatly disadvantaged of its peripheral position through the development of modernity. Sideby is located on the coastline, with a similar archipelago environment as Bergö, which suggests that social circumstances are more probable to explain the difference in attractiveness between the cases.

Here, commuting is directed away from the old municipal centre, which results in a lack of a natural community centre. Local cohesion between the villages is weak, partly as a consequence of geographical dispersion, partly due to a lack of joint structures. The municipal merger in the 1970s was apparently implemented without securing such structures, with the result that the three villages became three separate entities, by themselves unable to maintain political influence and capability to mobilise. Today, the area has a lower representation in municipal bodies than the population size presumes. The dispersed population, the lack of joint structures, and weak influence seems to be impeding the emergence of social innovations.

To conclude, the cases reveal that factors related to geography have a significant impact on local development. Geographic and cultural distances, density of settlement, mobility patterns, social cohesion and vitality have an influence on the local ability to mobilize (participate), on local competence, on social capital, and on access to external knowledge, resources and power structures. Spatial justice and SI together may thereby guide efforts of the government to support NED in accordance with the needs of the diversity of places. Some places, such as Bergö, mainly need room to maneuver and consulting for arranging the specific activity of interest. Others, such as Sideby, are in need of initiatives of external actors, for instance in the form of analyzing the need of competences and resources and even of external actors running the development efforts.

May such factors become visible in a rural proofing process? And is the existing politico-bureaucratic system fit for accommodating them? With the aim of determining the premises for such factors, we will in the following section briefly look at the regional reform process launched in Finland in 2015.

The regional reform 2015–2019

The political stakes were high to pull off an administrative reform when the Sipilä government assumed its position in 2015. The restructuring aim was massive: 60 per cent of municipal budgets were to be transferred to new regional structures. The government rushed to carry through their version of administrative solutions during the four-year government period, and the approach was therefore very much of a top-down kind. Gradually, impact assessments were launched. For instance, rural proofing was executed only through a research project studying impacts in two regions. In short, the bottom-up and rural perspective received limited attention in the reform process on the national level. However, since the reform was rushed, regional reform processes started without detailed instructions, giving them some leeway at least initially.

In Ostrobothnia, a number of working groups gathering municipal and regional officials were assembled to prepare the reform. Interviews with regional and municipal officials reveal two kinds of divergences between the two perspectives. First, regional officials saw a risk of a future forced merger with the neighbouring regions if expenses were not under control, something which could motivate centralisation of services. Simultaneously, municipal officials saw a risk of the destruction of 'a system that works', since the small scale of the municipal structure has "allowed us to be flexible … we handle things across sectors … there is good cooperation between the health care centre, elder care … school health care and general health care". The fear was that these kinds of solutions "will be broken to pieces' since 'a larger organization … organize everything in sectors". Regional officials are on the other hand, quite expectedly, primarily concerned with the future of 'their' sector. One regional official raised concerns about the concentration of rural issues to a special working group. This group, as it turned out, focused on the agri-food sector, while other working groups expected that rural issues were dealt with in the rural working group.

Second, municipal officials raise concerns about the loss of local knowledge and of influence:

> 'We will have very little say. The Vasa region will be very strong … they will be in majority in the political bodies … and regarding civil servants, all rural municipalities now hold executive positions … they will disappear … we will lose control'.

Regional officials instead saw opportunities for more decentralised or mobile specialised services in a larger organisation and thereby even closer relationships with the local. The officials thereby saw no concerns for a lack of local knowledge in a small region such as Ostrobothnia.

Table 2: *Factors relevant to rural proofing in accordance with NED, spatial justice and SI*

Neo-Endogenous Development	Local control	Extra-local networks	Government coordination (Rural Proofing)
Spatial Justice	• Power structures • Mobility pattern • Industrial, social and cultural history • Social activity • Demography • Judicial conditions	• Extra-local cohesion • Competence of individuals • Distances (geographical, cultural, social)	• Placement of public services • Local decision-making structures • Cooperation platforms
Social Innovation	• Project funding • Local competence • Local cohesion • Density of settlement • Willingness to participate	• Project funding • Organizational structure • Competence of individuals • 'Closeness' to administrative bodies	• Identification and analyzation of local needs • Development funding • Guidance to relevant sources of knowledge • Provision of innovation ideas • Project initiation

In conclusion, the reform process calls attention to the challenges of discerning NED related factors in administrative reforms. On the national level, proofing processes are easily neglected when political stakes are high. On the regional and national levels, reform processes are mainly operated sector-by-sector, which renders spatial perspectives as secondary. Regional competition and the relationship towards the national government steer attention away from the local. In short, local dynamics and needs easily become lost in administrative reforms in the prevailing political-bureaucratic system.

Discussion and conclusions: distributed rural proofing

The joining of three different strands of research in this article gives the opportunity to respond to several issues raised in previous research. First, combining spatial justice with rural proofing contributes to the implementation of the concept of spatial justice in rural areas called for by Jones *et al.* (2019). Second, the dependency on market forces implied in both the NED and SI literature have raised concerns for territories with weak resource bases (Bock 2016; Bosworth *et al.* 2016). Here, a rural proofing mechanism using the understandings of NED and SI may inform governments on measures that recognises such special needs. Third, the article answers to the call for a new kind of rural policy raised by Sherry and Shortall (2019). By combining the understandings of spatial justice and SI, we are able to advance the understanding of 'rural need' and the dynamics of rural places, and thereby achieve a better understanding of the diversity of places. In the end, these understandings may help to determine more appropriate policies.

The impact of geographically related factors on the potential for rural development are obvious. The case studies show how factors often neglected by public administrations, such as settlement densities, cultural connections and histories of community action, are central to the ability of places to mobilize for development (see Table 2). For instance, a more dense settlement pattern handed Bergö the advantage: a stronger local community is attractive for people to move to; it enables joint action and gives the community a stronger political position. In areas with a more dispersed settlement, as in Sideby, mobilisation is more difficult.

In this fashion, the understandings of spatial justice and SI may together instruct government coordination in rural development, in other words, bottom-up rural proofing. As the study of the administrative reform in Ostrobothnia demonstrated, this would entail quite a different perspective to the manner in which the politico-bureaucratic system handles itself. Compartmentalisation of sectors and incongruent perspectives of the local level and levels above it are central obstacles here. This is in line with how Bock interprets the role of SI 'as an innovation of and for society', and a 'call for change at a higher level of development politics' (Bock 2016, p. 555), and how Jessop emphasises "solidarity-based learning through sharing and cooperation", which "requires a wide range of institutional supports that can connect these initiatives, share good practice, and provide broader orientations" (Jessop *et al.* 2013, p. 119). Rural proofing should accordingly not be regarded as a task for national, regional or local governments separately, or solely the public sector. Rather, the model needs to incorporate all perspectives simultaneously, while at the same time inviting educational institutions, firms and the voluntary sector. Is such a proofing mechanism possible?

A distributed rural proofing model

The first problem a bottom-up rural proofing model faces is the incapacity of public administration to accommodate the kind of laborious processes required. The proofing needs to be more distributed. *Distributed networks* in computer science refers to a network of computers where the nodes are autonomous but share resources to accomplish common objectives. With a growing number of nodes, the network becomes exceedingly powerful. Could rural proofing become distributed and make use of the power of networks? What would such a model look like?

Distributed rural proofing would consist of two corresponding parts. The first would be the network of local units. A local actor, for instance the local authority, would be assigned the duty to activate local communities by inviting local actors to discuss local needs and ideas of local solutions to answer these needs. Most importantly, these processes are the initiation of a development process and a channel of communication through which the local community and the local authority continuously reconcile development needs and plans and try to find solutions and cooperation models. In this manner, the process becomes a continuous mapping of local circumstances where the responsibility is distributed to include the local communities. Moreover, a distributed network implies links between local nodes, which enables knowledge to be exchanged between them and the expansion of solutions to include several local communities.

The second part would consist of impact assessments carried out by authorities on the regional, national or even supranational level. With the distributed network in place, the government organisation would be able to retrieve the necessary information from the network. Identified obstacles on the local level may become the basis for altering judicial circumstances or for directing development funding. In order to be able to transfer information between local units and from the local units to authorities on higher levels, a system for documenting and coding information locally is needed.

Final reflections

Regarding rural development, the place-based model advocated here is not new. The argument put forward is instead the need of linking such processes to proofing mechanisms, since geographical disparities only seem to grow and the prevailing politico-bureaucratic system seems to be unable to recognise and act on them. Accordingly, we do not only need a system for developing rural areas, we need a system that is able to act for change seamlessly between government levels and, based on notions of justice, implement varying degrees of actions in accordance to specific local needs. Essentially, this is a new way to act for public administration, and the implementation will be difficult. Still, this is not only a rural issue – we see many urban areas in decline all over the world. Therefore, *rural* proofing might be a misguided title for the model, since *geographical* proofing would include all kinds of areas, while also avoiding an unnecessary stigmatisation of the rural as places of neediness.

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Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

Data availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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