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This is the published version of a paper presented at *11th European IFSA (International Farming Systems Association) Symposium, Berlin 1-4 April 2014*.

Citation for the original published paper:

Rytkönen, P. (2014)

Constructing the new rurality: Challenges and opportunities of a recent shift in Swedish rural policies.

In: Thomas Aenis, Andrea Knierim, Maja-Catrin Riecher, Rebecka Ridder, Heike Schobert and Holger Fischer (ed.), *Farming systems facing global challenges: Capacities and strategies* (pp. 1195-1205). Vienna: Boku University, Austria and International Farming Systems Association

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-25152>

Constructing the new rurality– challenges and opportunities of a recent shift in Swedish rural policies

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Abstract: This article highlights the outcomes of the implementation of the New Culinary Country program implemented in to facilitate and speed up the emergence of the new rurality in Sweden. Based on results from focus groups and one group interview conducted in eight landscapes/counties during 2013 and a state initiated evaluation of the NCCP, the study answers the following questions: What has been achieved by the policy change so far? Which are the main challenges and opportunities of and for the NCCP? The results show that the NCCP has led to a higher degree of regional coordination of actions and resources at regional level. Cooperation and coordination in turn have proved to be the main factors behind the most successful experiences.

Keywords: territorial development, new rurality, rural development policies, Sweden

Introduction

The new rurality stands for a process in which rural and agricultural agents reinvent themselves by supplying not only products to fulfill nutritional demands, but also recreation and leisure opportunities in beautiful landscapes, secure future environmental sustainability, provide post-industrial job opportunities, promote growth, counteract depopulation of rural spaces, promote gender equality and offer regions and nations a sense of history and tradition. The main expressions of the new rurality in Europe are diversification of farm activities, increased share of part-time agriculture, the valorization and patrimonisation of previously marginalized areas through the use of quality schemes that link agro-food products to their origin, the articulation of localized agri-food systems, short food chains and/or community supported agriculture and an up-swing for rural tourism (Losch 2004, Rytönen 2013, Bonow et. al 2011).

In Sweden, almost a century of a state led quest for increased productivity led to a far reaching homogenization of farm size and continuous efforts to increase productivity. This led to the eradication of on-farm elaboration of agro-food products and small scale food elaboration. Agricultural activities were subjected to the industrial sector's objectives and the abandonment of small farms was an important goal to secure sufficient labor force for the flourishing industries. Also legislation and regulations concerning food production were adjusted to cope only with large scale production. In a historical perspective, the policies that created a landscape of highly efficient family farms and a highly centralized food industry made perfect sense. Sweden is a small country, with a relatively small population and in order to successfully industrialize at the same time that food security and food safety was to be achieved, the productivist paradigm offered the best solution.

Since Sweden became a member of the European Union, former ideas have become obsolete and abandoned. Today a shift away from only promoting continuous productivity gains has been set in motion and a wider concept of rural and even regional development has become an important component of agricultural policies.

The policy shift is the result of many interacting factors. Changing world market conditions with a rapid process of centralization and consolidation in the agro-food industry, the internal dynamics of the common European market, changing consumer concerns and preferences, but also changing farmers strategies to cope with shrinking farm income and/or lack of possibility to consolidate and increase the scale of operations are some of the causes behind the policy shift.

In some ways, the new policy reinforces a process that was set in motion a long time ago, but that has become stronger and stronger. The reemergence of farm dairies, the establishment of a wine sector, the intensification of farm tourism, the constant increase of farm stores are just some of the many expressions of the new Swedish rurality (Rytkönen 2013, Rytkönen et al 2013). But in spite of the increased importance of this new process and new policies, the topic has been widely neglected by previous studies. The contribution of the current article is to highlight the emergence of the new Swedish rurality by illustrating the impact of recent policy changes and the challenges and opportunities that these create. Since the focus of the article is on ongoing processes, the emphasis of the article is will be put on the most important policy program implemented during recent years, the New Culinary Country Program (here after NCCP). Some of the questions to be answered are: What has been achieved by the policy change so far? Which are the main challenges and opportunities of and for the NCCP?

Methods and sources

This article is based on seven focus groups conducted during 2013 in the counties of Jämtland, Skåne, Södermanland, Uppland, Västerbotten, Västernorrland and Östergötland and one group interview conducted in, VästraGötaland. The selected cases are representative in terms of geography and socio-economic development. The stakeholders invited to the focusgroups/group interview were representatives for producers organisations, local authorities (country board administration, municipalities), leaders of important projects, NGO's, producers, regional representatives of the national farmers' association, tourism organisations, local universities and other knowledge centers. The counties were selected with the aim of getting a representative sample of Sweden. The data collection was done within the frame of an applied research project that aimed to deliver an embedded answer on how to move forward in the process of territorialisation of rural development in Sweden, more specific how to build gastronomic regions. The project was initiated by the Minister of Rural Affairs, but conducted by the National Farmers' Association LRF) in cooperation with Restaurangakademien (a leading gastronomy school) and Södertörn University. Gastronomic regions have been denominated as the unit to organize rural development from a territorial perspective. Prior to the project the Swedish Government and other stakeholders had studied other relevant European experiences, for example the Austrian Genussland Österreich. But the question of what a gastronomic region can be in a Swedish context and how could these be organized and delimited, still needed to be answered. The main questions of the project were: What is a gastronomic region in a Swedish context? How can gastronomic regions be delimited? And How does the process to develop gastronomic regions look like? The main results of the project have been reserved for the main project report, however the focus groups/interview offered an in-depth insight on the impact of the NCCP at regional level and also of the expressions of the new rurality in different parts of the country – these results are presented below.

Institutional change – from productivism to rural development

Institutions are often defined as the rules, regulation and practices that govern human behavior. Depending on the context, institutions can grasp a wide variety of formal and informal expressions. In rural contexts, institutions entail not only the rules, regulations or policies that entail agricultural production. They also include rules, regulations and practices on housing, infrastructure, public services and many other features that have special “rural” connotations (Goodwin 1998). In this particular case, the choice of subject is a policy package design to create a change in productive activities and although the following story also has profound effects on the entire rural context, the following lines will be delimited to the purpose of the study.

The productivist agro-food policies in Sweden were formulated in agreement between the Social Democratic Party and the Agrarian Party through the “cow deal” agreement reached in 1932²³⁰ and the 1947 agricultural bill that instated a standardized agricultural unit and aimed to speed up productivity gains in family farms of between 10-20 hectares. The agro-food policy package included subsidies, negotiated prices and transfer of knowledge. Agreements were made at the national level between the state and the farmers and everything was channeled out to farmers through the county board administrations and national public agencies. The effect of this policy was a strengthening of family agriculture and a focus on productivity gains.

The agro-food model became obsolete during the 1980’s due to rising costs and was abolished through the deregulation bill adopted in 1990. But the Swedish EU membership in 1995 retroceded the process as the CAP became the new political agenda. It was first in 2003, when decoupling of farm support forced a change that a totally new course was set to fulfill the focus shift from agricultural production to rural development (Government document 2003/04:137 and SOU 2006:101).

In 2007 the government adopted a new agro-food development program and in 2008, the Sweden the New Culinary Country program (hereafter NCCP) was launched with finance from the Rural Development program through modulation, e.g. transfer of funds from traditional agricultural policy instruments to environment improving measures and rural development. The shift is described by a new focus on “place based firms” (farms and other rural firms) as a strategic resource for growth (SOU 2006:101). The five overall goals of policy are the creation 20 thousand new jobs by 2020, intensification of economic growth in rural areas and villages, reduce bureaucracy for firms, increased quality of life in rural areas and villages, increase quality of food in all stages of the food chain (Jordbruksdepartementet 2008). To achieve the goals, initially five focus areas were selected and after the first evaluation of the program an additional area was added. The focus areas are primary production, food tourism, public food, restaurants, elaborated food (industry and handicraft) and trade (Regeringen 2013). The basic idea of the NCCP) is to boost and improve profitability of food production, elaboration in all possible areas in order to improve profitability in primary production. It is important to point out that policies that support large scale agriculture still exist, therefore the NCCP is an effort to broaden the scope of policies.

Up to now, the cost of the policy sums up to over one billion crowns (Löfstrand 2013). The national board of agriculture (Jordbruksverket), awarded funds to 66 large national projects and 424 regional projects between 2007 and 2012, the number of projects has increased per year and the topics vary from chefs meeting farmers, school food improvement, improved energy efficiency, tourism, et cetera (Jordbruksverket 2013, Kontigo 2013). More than 50 percent of the national funds was granted to seven quite large agents. The largest of them all, SIK, The Swedish Institute for Food and Biotechnology was granted a total of 37,3 percent of all the funds (Kontigo 2013).

²³⁰ The *Cow Deal* was an agreement between Social democrats and the Agrarian Party that secured financial support to agriculture in return for collectivization of dairies and voluntarily agreed termination of dairies. As such the *Cow Deal* was the corner stone of agro-food policies until the early 1990’s.

What has the change in policy achieved so far?

Critical voices have been raised against the NCCP because the number of farms and employments in the agro-food sector has decreased over time. Since 2006 employment opportunities within agriculture have decreased with 20 percent, which is the same as 15 thousand full time employments (Löfstrand 2013). Farm income especially in milk farms, meat farms, pig farms and crop farms is strained (LRF Konsult 2012, 2013). In addition, primary producers have felt that the government's main emphasis has been on restaurants and they have felt excluded.

Evaluation of the NCCP

An evaluation ordered by the government made by the consultancy Kontigo AB shows that many of the goals are difficult to evaluate, especially the overall goals of new jobs and growth in rural areas are poorly specified and since the market conditions for important products, such as milk, beef and pork have been quite difficult and conditions for crop farmers vary from year to year it is difficult to assess if the negative impact from the market has been counteracted by the NCCP or if the program has performed poorly. This is however not discussed by the report. Other goals, such as more small scale food firms winning public procurement contracts, increased interest amongst young people are easier to assess, although it is difficult to implement them because they require changes of behavior and in complex processes. The most positive goal achievement can be found in food exports, but increased exports are not as fast as they need to be in order to meet the goal of doubling food exports by 2010 (Kontigo 2013). The table below presents a summary of the results of a recent evaluation of the NCCP ordered by the government.

Table 1: Overview if impact of the NCCP according to the evaluator

Focus area/goal	Goal achievement	Comment
General goals		
New work opportunities and increased economic growth in rural areas and villages	Unclear development – goal not yet achieved	Different minor goals point to different directions. The realism of the goals can be discussed due to world market conditions
Public food		
More SME participating and winning contracts in public procurement	Positive development	Although there is an increase the goal itself has not been quantified. *
Increased quality of public food	Unclear development	Difficult to measure, goal needs to be precise
Primary production		
The share of farmers comfortable with her/his choice of work increases	Unclear development	Difficult to measure – available data suggests that status is unchanged
Increased production and increased profitability	Positive development	Development varies between indicators, but better performance than the economy in general**
More young people applying to agricultural educational programs	Unclear development	A small increase but much less than the general increase in applications to higher education
Processed food		
Decrease bureaucracy	Unclear development	Some positive and some negative results
Increased production and profitability	Positive development	Higher profitability than the rest of the economy
More food companies (20% to 2020)	Positive development	
Double food exports	Unclear development	Positive development but at a very slow rate
More SME contribute to export growth	Unclear development	Small increase but the goal is not quantified
Access to well-educated personnel that masters the know-how	Unclear development	Unclear goal, doubtful relevance***
Food tourism		
Increased number of guest nights in rural areas by 20 % to 2020	Unclear development	Difficult to achieve. Evaluator considers the goal irrelevant****
Increased number of farms that offer lodging, farm store, farm restaurant, etc	Unclear development	Development is so far negative. Evaluator questions the goal****
Restaurants		
Increased profitability	Positive development	Evaluator considers the goal as relevant but claims that the NCCP has no influence
More restaurants with high standard. More restaurants with stars in Guide Michelin	Unclear development	Goal points at different directions and lacks clear regional anchorage

Source: Kontigo 2013, Sverige – det nya matlandet. En studie av måluppfyllelse och effekter av hittills genomförda insatser.

*Important connotation is that public procurement market is dominated by two large wholesale companies, Menigo and Martin&Servera. Since SMEs have started to increasingly win procurement contracts, these two giants have made a routine of suing the municipalities and county councils. During the last three years 24 percent of all Swedish municipalities have been sued. The wholesalers look for formal errors in the procurement process if they lose, thereby they can delay the shift of supplier with up to a year and also get economic compensation for the errors. While the

large whole salers have experts in procurement, the detailed knowledge amongst the people that are supposed to take care of the process much less prepared (SVT 2014).

** Increased production and profitability in remaining farms occurs at the same time that many farms are excluded from the market especially in dairy, beef and pork production (LRF Konsult 2012, 2013)

*** The evaluator questions the relevance of skills in order to achieve the goals of the NCCP. However, the evaluators reasoning can be questioned because know-how is needed to improve quality and to offer something interesting for consumers.

**** There is reason to question the evaluators judgement. In Bonow et al (2013) concrete proof of the value of farm inns, farm stores, and food tourism is clearly stated-

As can be seen above, many of the goals can be difficult to measure. However, the evaluator clearly shows lack of understanding about rural affairs, therefore parts of the report can be questioned. But in spite of its shortcomings, this report led to the start of a redefinition of the goals of the NCCP in order to make them easier to assess. If this government stays in power after the elections in September 2014 at least some parts of the NCCP are likely to achieve positive results.

Impact of the NCCP at regional level

The results of the focus groups show that the main critique is that the shift in policy has led to a vast increased number of projects in which the local stakeholders, and especially primary producers and food artisans are expected to participate in. These projects are considered to take too much time from the producer's own productive and economic activities. In addition, most projects are granted for a period of one year and the entities applying for the projects are often local organizations and NGO's. Since these local stakeholders need to survive on a year to year basis, every year they need to apply for new projects, which they sometimes do at the expense of previous positive outcomes. Thus the funding system might be counterproductive since it does not stimulate to long term investments. Two counties have formulated strategies for their NCCP work, namely Skåne and Södermanland. In Skåne the strategy is divided into a food strategy and a recently developed beverage strategy. The formulation process has been an important tool to move the process forward, since producers have been involved during parts of the process. In Södermanland the situation is the different. The county board administration formulated a strategy and asked key stakeholders to retrospectively legitimize and adopt the strategy. This created a problematic situation because stakeholders believe that the provincial government competes with them rather than facilitate their work. In Västra Götaland the tourism sector has been the most important force behind the work with the NCCP. There is a large contrast between the coastal areas and the inland, since most efforts are concentrated on the exotic coast, by offering lobster safaris and other activities connected with fisheries.

Table 2: Summary of the main effect of the NCCP at regional level (result from the focus groups)

	Formalized alliance	Emphasis of development	Perceived influence of the NCCP	Agro-food market impact	Other relevant impact	Main challenges	Success factors
Jämtland	An NCCP coordinating group has been formed. Key stakeholders have moved in together. No common strategy, but coordination.	Artisan food with great influence of French examples..	Positive, it has underlined an ongoing process	Decreasing number of farms.	Decreasing number of students in agricultural school	Too few farms Regulations only adjusted for large scale operations	Long term investments and cooperation. Strong commitment of CBA* + local stakeholders.
Skåne	Livsmedelsakademien (LA) umbrella organization since 1994. Smaka på Skåne, a subdivision of LA leads the NCCP work Food strategy and beverage strategy were developed with strong stakeholder involvement.	Industry, large scale production, but small scale production is boosting.	Positive for artisan food production and boosting activities. Skåne has many large scale farmers and these do not feel involved.	Difficult market conditions for dairy, beef and pork farms. But best conditions in Sweden.	Positive inputs of local universities.		Strong organization. Commitment of the CBA*. Good consumer response from local cities
Södermanland	No NCCP group has been formed. A strong producer organization, many strong individual agents, a strong CBA A food strategy has been developed but without stakeholder involvement.	A strong and growing food artisan sector. A strong primary production.	Pushed interest amongst stakeholders forward.	Due to vicinity to Stockholm market impact is not felt.	Farmland transformed into golf courses and riding clubs. Farmland being urbanized. No cooperation with local universities.	The CBA competes with the stakeholders Too easy to sell, does not stimulate to quality	Vicinity to Stockholm
Uppland	Strong producer organization with support from some municipalities, but interest in common activities is weak. Coordination and important activities is done by a few volunteers.	Festivals and large activities	Positive concerning financial support. Still difficult to get more organized support from authorities	Due to vicinity to Stockholm market impact is not felt. Easier to succeed with diversification	Farmland transformed into golf courses and riding clubs. Farmland being urbanized No inputs from local universities	Too easy to sell, does not stimulate to quality.	Vicinity to Stockholm and Uppsala. Easier access to national TV
Västerbotten	NCCP group with relevant stakeholders. The CBA* is a facilitating entity.	No clear direction yet	Quite positive. Regional coordination is possible.	Negative impact from world market. Number of	Positive engagement from local university.	Revert the decrease in number of farms.	Arctic nature and Lapland act as positive brands. International

			Financial support at regional level.	farms critically low	Most important local brand, Västerbotten cheese is unwilling to cooperate		known.
Väster-norland	NCCP group is currently being formed. CBA a facilitating entity. Stakeholders not yet coordinated.	Activities still incipient. Food artisans are quite active.	Quite positive. Support from regional funds has been acquired within the NCCP to develop Smakstart Väster-norland.	Sharply decreasing number of farms.	Has not yet found harmony between all stakeholders, still some conflict of interest.	Revert the decrease in	Personally engaged governor. Available regional resources. Världsarvet (World Heritage) good brand and symbol to work with.
Västra Göta-land	One strong tourism board and one strong organization for food artisans. Organizations have a close cooperation.	Tourism is the main driving force. Coastal areas and fisheries dominate.	Positive, but it only reinforces a positive development	Varied. Some positive and some negative.	Financially strong stakeholders. Sharp contrast between coastal areas and inland-		Well-coordinated work. Beautiful nature that can be used to profile food.
Östergötland	Key stakeholders under the same roof. Creates synergies.	Large scale production dominates	Positive influence. Increased diversification. Cultural activities.	Stressful situation especially for pork farms.		Some conflict of interest between some stakeholders	Good knowhow on market

* CBA = Country board administration

As can be seen above, the general perception of the NCCP is that it has contributed in several ways to promote rural development. In several places regional NCCP groups to coordinate actions have been initiated. These groups contribute with the territorial coordination of resources, they facilitate synergies and enable the diffusion of knowledge. In Skåne for example, Smaka på Skåne (taste of Skåne) has regular meetings with a panel of retail stores. The panel members help to solve logistical problems so that local food can reach the stores. In several of the counties speed-dating between stores and producers, and between chefs and producers are organized. This helps creating new sales opportunities, but also offering the producers feedback on their quality. Food festivals and/or the food logistics of other large activities are promoted. For example in Östergötland, there is a lot of emphasis on promoting local food on large sport tournaments, in Västerbotten the NCCP group is coordinating all food events and food logistics in the celebration of the National Cultural Capital that will be going on in Umeå (one of the main cities) throughout the year.

Place based branding, using the name of the county or landscape is an important expression of the process of territorialization and all focus groups concluded the positive influence of the NCCP on that process. One of the measures adopted by the government at the beginning of this program was the appointment of NCCP ambassadors in each Swedish landscape. In some cases the geographical limits of landscapes coincide with those of counties and some do not. Nevertheless, these appointed ambassadors have played a crucial role in the promotion of the NCCP in their regions. They have become symbols of their landscape. Moreover, a number of umbrella brands, using the name of the landscape/county have been established to promote regional food.

Brands (or trademarks) can be divided with reference to their status. A relevant such in this case the budget brands, which are used to turn to broad audiences and premium brands used when companies want to reach an audience that is willing to pay a higher price for the product, in exchange of experiences and qualities that together provide a sense of class, prosperous and distinctive from the mass market (Parment 2006). In this case the umbrella brands are used to mediate a feeling of belonging to the local consumer and add a sense of premium to bulk products and more exclusive foodstuffs. According to a representative for the artisan food brand Smakriket at the whole sale company Martin&Servera (the country's most important artisan food brand), these regional brands work well on the brand's home (regional) market.

An important conclusion of the focus groups is that working with terroir and territorializing, e. g. using territorial attributes in food production and marketing activities is increasing rapidly. The counties who have advanced the most in that direction share some important features: 1) The CBA is engaged and facilitates the coordination of activities and long term planning; 2) There is a functioning NCCP group or other entity with long term commitment that coordinates actions; 3) Leading individuals in the group have a clear territorial thinking.

An important merit of the NCCP is that the government formulated a strategy that was easy for many stakeholders to embrace and that has helped elevating the importance and place of food in public debate. Especially larger projects have left important platforms from which long term positive outcomes can be seen. The NCCP has also stimulated the emergence of regional coordination groups in order to cope with activities that have been generated by the NCCP.

But although the strategy of the NCCP is clear, a further territorialization requires a new shared vision and support along the way.

One conclusion is that the decline in number of farms presents severe problems to -not only the future articulation of gastronomic regions – but also for the entire future of the NCCP. The argument of stakeholders is quite clear: Without food, no gastronomic regions! The decline can be illustrated through the dairy sector. According to statistics, the number of dairy farms in Jämtland decreased from 372 in December 2001 to 151 in December 2012, in Västerbotten the number of farms was 529 in 2001 and 258 in 2012, in Västernorrland it was 344 in 2001 and 132 in 2012, in Skåne it was 1043 in 2001 and 426 in 2012, in Östergötland it was 590 in 2001 and 309 in 2012 and finally in Västra Götaland it was 1981 in 2001 and 865 in 2012. (Svensk Mjöl 2013). There is, however, an important difference between the north and the south of the country because in the South there are other economic alternatives and the number of large cities is larger, while in the northern part and especially in the inland of Sweden, primary production is essential for the local economy.

Another important conclusion is that bureaucracy is still seen as a large problem when people want to start food production. Producers need to keep contact with a large number of authorities, rules are difficult to interpret and implementation is quite varied. This is confirmed by Bonow et al (2013), who concluded that local food and health regulations for fisheries in the four municipalities that form the delimited area for the PDO Kalix Ljörom varies between individual inspec-

tors. While some of the fisheries were forced to refrain from using the preparation facilities for other purposes during the 11 months when there is no vendance harvest, while other municipalities gave permission for other uses (Bonow et al 2013).

Concluding remarks

The NCCP has contributed with a number of positive outcomes, such as increased coordination of resources and activities which generates positive synergies. In general the NCCP is considered to have strengthened a process that was already on its way, but some counties have come a long way while others are just starting. Some of the most important challenges is the fast rate at which the number of farmers is decreasing, especially in the northern part of the country.

Finally, what is the real outcome of the NCCP so far. According to the evaluation made on behalf of the government many of the goals are imprecise and might to be met by 2020. But the level of activities, initiatives, innovative branding strategies, and all of the activities conducted at regional level partly contradict the results of Kontigo. An important problem is still that the impact of the NCCP is difficult to measure under current market conditions.

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