

# COMMUNITY EXCHANGE AND DEVELOPING PROCESSES: A CASE FROM NORTHERN SWEDEN

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## Abstract

With the rapid changing face of agriculture over the past years, traditional rural livelihoods and farming methods are constantly under pressure to change.

The structure of the rural community contributes to a mainly parochial way of life, with workload and pressures stifling new ways of thinking. The experience gained through making collective decisions concerning the communities development, networking, collective planning and action taking, owning your own project and taking care of the whole process from proposals, to applications, to financing, to administration, boosts self confidence and motivation to carry out the projects. One important factor in the development of new ideas is the necessity for integration, nationally and internationally, on different levels in society for exchanging theoretical and practical experiences and knowledge.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the developing process of a local group in a small rural community, from a bottom up perspective, in order to visualise this process for ourselves and for others. It includes success factors and problems and it thereby creates an opportunity for discussion and exchange of experiences, culminating with an acknowledged development strategy for integration at all levels.

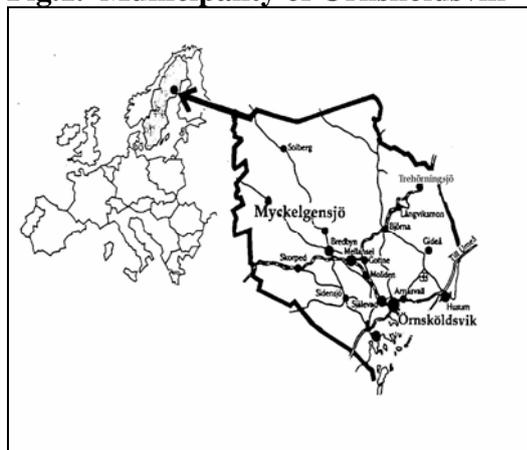
## Introduction

“There are some 3700 local development groups in rural areas throughout Sweden. These groups consist of people who have joined together to develop their communities. Their activities are within the sphere of the social economy since they do not work for personal gain but for the common good of everyone in the community. Significant for a local development group is that it takes collective responsibility for the development of the entire community. This may involve saving the store or creating new employment as well as working with a local vaudeville show or starting a co-operative for housing the elderly. Most local development groups are organised as voluntary associations. This means that they are legal bodies entitled to enter into agreements, own property, obtain loans, and act as employer and as a party before authorities and courts of law. They also have their statutes, which are their “laws” and control the purpose and organisation of the association. Associations are based on democratic principles; one member-one vote” (Herlitz, 1998).

## Background

Myckelgensjö is an old agricultural village dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is beautifully situated on Lake Myckelgensjön in Anundsjö parish, which was a self governing small municipality until the early 1970-s, when ten small municipalities were united in what today is the municipality of Örnsköldsvik. The village is 75 km away from Örnsköldsvik town, were the local authorities are based.

**Fig.1. Municipality of Örnsköldsvik**



The municipality is situated 600 km north of Stockholm in the County of Västernorrland, on the east coast of Sweden (Fig.1) and has a total surface of 67.750 km<sup>2</sup> and a total of 55.702 inhabitants. The town itself has a total of 9.092 inhabitants. The area offers an exciting variety of landscapes with a high coast, archipelago, extensive forests, farming land, valleys with lakes, rivers and many small villages. The four largest densely build populated areas have between 1.221 and 1.756 inhabitants. (Statistics from local authorities, June 2001.)

The summer season is short. Day temperatures can reach up to 25 degrees Celsius and during a period in June/July it stays light 24 hours.

Already in August, night temperatures can go down below freezing point. From November to April there is a long winter period with very low temperatures in January/February (down to minus 25 degrees Celsius) and heavy snow. In the hinterland temperatures can reach minus 40-45 degrees Celsius.

There is a long tradition of forestry, farming, fishing and hunting in this part of Sweden and forestry has been the major local industry since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, employing many people. As a result of automation and industrialisation, these numbers decreased drastically from the 1950-s to the 1990-s (Fig.2).

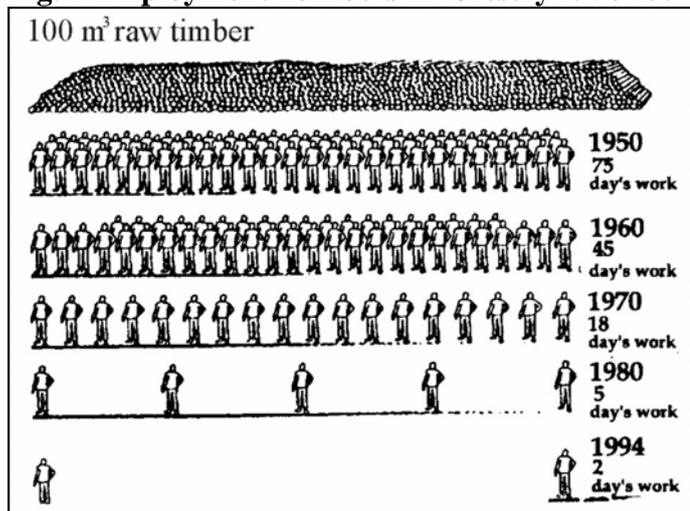
Since the 1960-s a considerable exodus of the local population towards the cities, with mainly young people moving away, has taken place.

Between 1989 and 1999 the total number of people employed in forestry, farming and fishery in the municipality of Örnsköldsvik, has decreased from 1.215 to 652 (statistics local authorities). Today the most important employers are manufacturers and the public sector.

There are approx. 200 interest associations and clubs, which traditionally involve a substantial part of the population in activities such as sports and leisure, and study associations organising evening study circles in languages, navigation, IT, EU-knowledge, history of arts, music, theatre, handicrafts etc. and religious and political activities.

“In the Nordic countries the study circle is a traditional form of non-formal adult learning with a "learning to learn" perspective.

**Fig. 2 Employment numbers in forestry 1950-1994**



The method had two overall aims; personal development and democratic training. Since the method was first introduced it has been of great importance for the standard of general education, not least in the Swedish farming community. During the year 1994/95 over 340,000 study circles were arranged in Sweden, with approximately 1.5 million participants.

The common form of study circle is a small group of people, normally five to twelve, who meet and carry out planned studies or cultural activities under the facilitation of a trained leader or of someone in the group. The studies take place for an extended period of time - normally three to four months. The entire group decides the goal for the group studies, which literature to read, which field trips to make and the pace at which they will work. A good study circle is based on the synergy of participant and facilitator experience and knowledge supplemented by written materials” (Ljung, M, D Gibbon and A Richert. 2000).

### Short history

The village Myckelgensjö was mentioned for the first time in the tax roll issued by King Gustav Vasa in 1535. The unique Gammelgården in Myckelgensjö, one of the best preserved old farms from the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Sweden, from which 28 buildings, each with a different function, are still standing on their original grounds. It is owned by the County Museum of Västernorrland and open to the public during 7 weeks in June/July.

**Fig.3. Village development between 1950-2001**

Myckelgensjö	1950	2001
<b>Households</b>	69	41
<b>Inhabitants</b>	300	101
Groceries	3	1
Petrol station	1	1
School	1	1
Café	3	-
Post office	1	-
Taxi agency	1	-
District tel. exchange	1	-
Garage	1	-
Forwarding agency	1	-
Cinema	1	-
Midwife	1	-
Hairdresser	1	-
Buss communications	6/day	2/day

Until the early 1950-s the main income for most families was based on forestry combined with small-scaled farming. Large forestry companies employed the men while women took care of the household and the farm. The village was more or less self sufficient (Fig.3). From mid 1950-s the forest industry became more mechanised, foresters were given notice and depopulation started. Small-scaled family farms closed down one by one as the farmers became pensioners and no younger family members were left in the village to take over. Land and forest owners farming on a large scale, which were not dependent on "outside" employers, were not affected to the same extent.

In the early 1980-s there were still 7 small scale farms (i.e. 4 and 12 cows, 6-12 hectares) and 2 medium size dairy farms (i.e. 25 and 40 cows, 25-35 hectares). One farmer produced potatoes.

Since 1999 there is only one farmer in the village maintaining an open landscape. In the early 1990-s this young family farmer had to choose between closing down and expanding. They decided to take a loan and build a completely new barn, installing a modern milking system. They increased the herd from 30 to 70 dairy cows. Today they have approx. 100 cows plus reproduction. They achieve this by leasing most of the farming land in the village (142 hectares). He invested in new modern machines and in October 2001 a milking robot was installed. Some extra income comes from a small sawmill and from doing labour work for other farmers in neighbour villages, such as harvesting and bailing silage. The farmer has 2 employees.

### Village association and development work

A local sports club with as main activity football was established in 1936 and has always had an important social function. It engages people in their free time and the football ground is a place for meeting, including people from other villages.

The club started organising small cultural events in the early 1980-s to liven up village life and to collect money for maintenance of the sports grounds. These arrangements became

known and attracted even visitors from town. This stimulated arrangement of several other and bigger events.

When in the mid 1980-s villagers expressed the need for village street lights, the people decided to establish a village association, because this type of development work was not in line with the purpose of the sports club. Since the establishment of the village association development work has successfully continued.

### **Collective planning**

What is to be done is collectively decided by the villagers. Arrangements and events are planned during an annual planning meeting open to all villagers. The meeting has no official agenda and starts by writing down all previous arrangements on the black board. Aims and results are discussed and villagers decide what they want to do the coming year. All proposals are written down, and no ideas or visions are rejected. For every activity that the group wants to realise, a responsible person voluntarily has to announce him/herself. If no one wants to take responsibility for a particular activity, it is crossed off the list. Everyone that has taken on an arrangement is responsible for creating a working group and fixes planning meetings. This way of working has proved to function well.

Before ideas come up at planning meetings they have often been openly discussed at the football grounds or in the local shop, as these are the only places in the village where people meet naturally and regularly.

### **Crisis: threat or opportunity**

After the nuclear catastrophe in Tjernobyli 1986, the middle/ northern part of Sweden was one of the areas most contaminated by radioactive materials (137-Cs). Crop and animal produce, traditional activities and income sources such as fishing and hunting were strongly affected. Recreation like berry and mushroom picking, fishing and hunting were no longer attractive. Rural communities were struck by a feeling of powerlessness and depression. There was insufficient and irresolute information to the public and the amount of 137-Cs permitted in foodstuff was set at a very high level. People did not know what they dared to eat of locally produced food, which further depressed the market and the spirits of the population.

The turning point for the people in Myckelgensjö came when they decided to turn these negative feelings into a positive action.

During an annual planning meeting, villagers were once again discussing the fact that fish were no longer edible. At the same time people were tired of complaining and wanted to do something positive. After some brainstorming an idea came up to clean up a swampy area and a small lake in the village and make it accessible for fishing, by planting out cultivated rainbow trout into the lake. The fish were to be fed with pellets to keep them free from 137-Cs. This made it possible for the public to carry on with a leisure activity which in Sweden traditionally always includes the pleasure of preparing and consuming the freshly caught fish. This idea of creating a put-and-take fishing lake was discussed and voted for, as it could even attract visitors to the village who might, besides paying for caught fish, want to buy products at the local shop, which was under threat of closure. The idea seemed practicable, a basic plan of action was written down, and a working group was elected.

This working group consisted of 3 villagers who were given the responsibility for getting permission from landowners, licenses, economical funding, recruiting of sponsors and voluntary workers. The group presented the idea to the local authorities. They advised the village association to establish a development company with the members as share holders in order to receive rural development funding available from the county administration

(glesbygdstöd: 50% of the total costs and a corresponding amount of volunteer working hours valued as 100 SEK per hour). Villagers carried out all the work.

In the summer of 1987 the fishing ground, complete with parking place, floating platforms one of which is accessible for disabled people in wheelchairs and a parking place was officially opened by a councillor from the local government. This opening ceremony was given publicity beforehand in the local newspaper and attracted many people from surrounding areas.

The fishing ground became a popular place for villagers, especially for elderly people. People from town started to visit the village to fish in the long summer evenings and started asking villagers for facilities such as toilets, caravan parking, and lodging.

A camping site had been on the blackboard during earlier planning meetings, but no one could give a good enough reason to build one. However as visitors asked, the discussion came up again. Through a labour market policy initiative for unemployed an interested villager was able over a period of 6 months, to investigate the possibilities. The local authorities were positive to the idea and helpful in finding funding (glesbygdstöd). A course in traditional building techniques for unemployed professional craftsmen (also that a labour market policy initiative) had made 4 timber cabins which they sold cheaply to the village association. Villagers did the groundwork and even put the lodges in place. In 1996 the camping site was ready for use with 3 lodges, space for 6 caravans, and a service building with showers, toilets, kitchen and washing facilities.

Through the participation in a regional project for developing fishing tourism, the opportunity came up to move and restore a traditional building, earlier used for storing sledges, to the camping site and change it into a facility for campers to barbecue, watch television etc. Even a sauna was build to better meet the tourists' requirements.

The villagers use these facilities regularly themselves for festivities and meetings.

The village association owns the camping site and until 2000 it was run voluntarily. A villager now runs it on lease.

### **Factors for success**

- One important factor in this positive process development, is the fact that the villagers in 1995, (i.e. the year before the Tjernobyl catastrophe) very successfully had organised a big agricultural outdoor event, which attracted about 1500 spectators to the village. This event had received much attention from the local newspapers, because the whole profit of the show was donated to a national association for disabled sports. The teamwork resulting in this success and the attention received during and after the event, created a feeling of pride, affiliation, affinity and self-confidence amongst villagers, preparing them to look for opportunities and how to succeed when faced with a crises.
- A common vision. All activities and arrangements have always been preceded by brainstorming sessions, workshops and meetings in order to create a picture with common goals and visions, leading towards a plan of action and responsibilities (who, what, where, when) for individuals participating in the meetings. Meetings are open to every villager of every age and invitations are always sent out to every household and even to neighbouring villages. To those who have moved out, a newsletter is sent every year, in which all planned meetings, activities and events are mentioned.
- Many different skills and talents are available amongst the villagers; leadership, practical skills and networking skills.
- Over the years the village association has developed a large network and positive relations with local authorities.

- Participation in a conference on innovative rural development in Holland in 1998 initiated international contacts. Through exchanging experiences on national and international level, organising study visits including discussions with practitioners, project managers, volunteers, participating in national and international conferences, talking with academics, politicians etc, village leaders have gained better insight into the effects of a changing society, sustainable development and better awareness and understanding of learning processes.

### **Problems**

- One of the biggest problems is a “lack” of time. People need to take off from work to be able to participate in courses, important meetings with authorities or organisations and conferences. Many telephone calls and other small but important errands have to be done during working hours as civil servants and other professionals are only available during office hours. This creates negative feelings for voluntary workers having to use their employers’ time for volunteer work purposes.
- Economic resources are minimal.
- Lack of interest and respect for the villagers’ ideas from authorities. Decisions are made over their heads.
- Lack of back up systems. Difficulties in getting access to professional networks, results in missing out on important information, courses, seminars etc which makes it hard for us (village leaders) to stay informed (= powerless)
- The last few years it has become more difficult to develop "freely", with all the EU regulations, set goals, indicators and authorities designing “top-down” managed projects, which do not motivate and engage people participating at village level.

### **Practical experience**

The population in this area has despite limited formal education, highly competent practical survival skills. We have learned that practical group activities are positive and effective methods for community development; while working practically people talk easily about village issues, problems and how to possibly solve them. Also new ideas are created and discussed. The village’s (group’s) collective knowledge, skills, experience, talents, motivation, engagement and willingness to take responsibility in and for a process of change, has to be considered as a trustworthy basis for decision making and as positive resources for public economy.

### **Projects**

Myckelgensjö participated in a three-year EU project (1997-2000) with four other villages based on small-scaled tourism and rural development. This project (Five Villages, described below) was presented during the conference “Rural Innovation in Europe”, 16-17<sup>th</sup> April 1998 in Wageningen.

In May 2001 a mentor project together with the Swedish Agricultural University and Myckelgensjö started, which also involves the village school.

This project was initiated by the village association and has received funding from the county’s Rural Group.

The village association is since November 2001 participating in the Equal project “Rural renewal”, which is carried out by the Swedish Agricultural University, the Rural Parliament in Sweden and the Regional board for agriculture and rural development in Norbotten.

## **Project Five Villages – holiday resorts in a living countryside**

The villages of Myckelgensjö, Trehörningsjö, Åmsele, Örträsk and Fredrika, situated in two different counties Västernorrland and Västerbotten in the north east of Sweden, face typical rural problems of unemployment, depopulation and declining services. They also share a common history and cultural and natural heritage.

### **The action**

In an attempt to curtail the rural exodus, five villages in the north east of Sweden came together in 1995 to develop a project based on co-operation in developing the tourism potential of their area. Through co-operation and learning from each other, the project aimed to improve the areas tourism offer in order to attract more visitors, thereby creating employment opportunities and recreational activities for the local people.

### **Starting point**

In 1995, the village of Örträsk held a study circle on how to better capitalise on the village's assets to improve tourism. The group mainly women attending this study circle expressed a desire to exchange experiences and ideas with villages close by sharing a similar history and culture, and faced with similar problems of depopulation, etc. This gave the two course leaders the idea of developing a joint village project based on tourism as a foundation for village regeneration. The course leaders approached the community associations of two villages within the county (Åmsele and Frederika) where similar courses had been held. It was also decided to extend the project area to two further villages (Myckelgensjö and Trehörningsjö) in the adjacent county of Västernorrland, both of which had received significant press coverage for their active involvement in local issues. Trehörningsjö, for instance, had become well known for its campaign, albeit unsuccessful, to save the local health centre.

Following a presentation of the joint-village project concept in each of these villages, the idea was put to the ballot box and the results were overwhelmingly positive. Project teams in each village were then established, in conjunction with which the two course leaders set about preparing a project plan. A local consultation exercise identified the following common priorities:

- halt the population decline;
- increase the number of companies in the village;
- develop the tourist potential of the villages;
- strengthen co-operation between the five villages.

In addition to a common action plan, each village established an individual plan setting out goals and targets at village level. Several months were then spent preparing, submitting and resubmitting applications for financial support to the local authorities. This procedure proved complex, mainly because it involved two different counties and several different municipalities. All-round agreement was eventually reached by April 1997 after which the project officially got off the ground.

### **Implementation**

Each village either elected or appointed a project leader to steer the project forward. The project leaders received 4-days intensive training in project leading followed by a 12-day course in marketing. Employed on a part-time basis (50%), the project leaders' work broadly

consisted of liaising with the other villages and the public authorities and co-ordinating the various local working groups. The ad-hoc working groups were set up to oversee the implementation of a particular project and were made up of interested members of the communities.

The first activity to be undertaken under the project was an inventory of existing and potential tourist facilities (businesses, activities and accommodation) in each village. The findings of this exercise varied significantly from one village to another. For instance, one village was found to have a dynamic handicraft sector, organised in a co-operative, whereas, another was shown to have craftspeople pursuing their craft as a hobby and for whom the prospect of commercialising their work was quite alien. Accommodation availability varied also, with the larger villages naturally possessing a greater accommodation capacity, such as guesthouses, whereas the smaller villages tended to rely on guest cottages. On the basis of this survey a number of needs were identified to enhance the visitors' stay; these included the need for guide training and improved road sign posting.

Parallel to the compilation of this inventory, the project launched an information campaign. Various methods were used to raise awareness of the project, including the village newsletters and participation in a 4-day exhibition in town (Örnsköldsvik) on the theme of tourism, leisure and handicrafts. The purpose of this exhibition was to communicate to the villagers, and to outsiders, the scope of the project and their potential role. To reinforce this message, the village communities were invited to take part in study visits to two popular tourist destinations within the region. These visits enabled some 50 villagers to look and learn from established tourist resorts.

Further collective activities during the first year included training in marketing, tour guiding and handicrafts for interested members of the villages, and a bus tour of the five villages for members of the local press. Organised to generate publicity, this tour visited some of the villages' most interesting attractions, such as small museums and historic buildings. The positive feedback from this tour inspired the project leaders to develop a bus tour package for tourists on the theme of cultural heritage. To test the programme, the local inhabitants were invited on a dummy run. After more than a year of endeavouring to interest bus tour companies in the package, the end of the tunnel may be in sight as several companies have requested a demonstration tour. On the marketing side, the five villages held a stand at the international travel fair in Stockholm in both 1997 and 1998; a postcard presenting all villages has been published as well as a joint brochure.

At village level, a number of actions have been carried out as part of the local plan to create activities for local people but which fit into the global plan for enhancing tourism in the area as a whole. For instance, one village has built its own snowboarding track, another saw the erection of a bird-watching tower and the installation of disabled facilities in the fishing ground, whilst another has built a riding school and a campsite. An IT centre has also been built in each village, as well as the information network infrastructure needed for inter-village communication. In early 1999, the project was just approaching the end of its second year. Activities carried out during this year had been a continuation of the first year, i.e., study circles, training courses, restoration of buildings of cultural interest, the development of further thematic package tours. A public meeting, gathering the inhabitants of all five villages for the first time, on the theme of fishing, was held, to define the role that fishing can play in attracting visitors to the area. Furthermore, several villages made a determined effort to have a full calendar of weekend events, such as cheese and butter making demonstrations.

In November 1999 a weeklong study visit to Lancashire, England took place. Participants were villagers, farmers and civil servants and the purpose was to study rural tourism and farmers diversifying. This visit was due to a previous contact made in Wageningen, Holland, during the conference on rural innovation, organised by Carrefour the year before.

## **Innovative elements**

- *Mobilising the population and social cohesion:* Local participation and voluntary support underpin the development and execution of the project's activities. The working groups were responsible for the practical jobs to be done during each project. Moreover, the villages' communities were often invited to test out some of the pilot actions set up by the project.
- *The area's identity:* The villages use local heritage, cultural, natural and architectural assets for revitalising the area. This serves to promote the area to outsiders and, through the participatory approach adopted by the project, is raising awareness of the areas' amenities to the locals.

## **Results**

As a result of this project, the number of visitors increased in 4 out of the 5 villages from 1997 to 1998. Myckelgensjö and Trehörningsjö, for instance, recorded a 75% increase in overnight stays from 1997 to 1999. During the project period of three years in the five villages a total of 18 new enterprises and 18 new jobs have been created, which is significant for villages with a population of just 100 to 600 inhabitants. Myckelgensjö has still today a comprehensive co-operation with Trehörningsjö, through exchanging experiences, shared courses/education, communication and information concerning tourists and tourism.

## **Review, conclusions, quotations**

In this paper I have tried to describe the developing and learning process in a local development group. We have learned through practical experience that making our own decisions, teamwork and co operation, working towards a common goal, exchanging experiences and networking on different levels, can lead to successful results. Success in its turn leads to motivated people. Networking, nationally and internationally, has shown to be of great importance for our work. At the same time access to important networks only comes with success and networks need to be worked with to keep them amenable for later use, which takes time. Publicity, showing results and reporting to authorities and others what is being achieved is also of great importance. To quote Harvey Mackay, a noted American networking expert: "Be like the turtle. If he didn't stick his neck out, he wouldn't get anywhere at all!" (Mackay 2000). The rapidly changing world demands new ideas and skills for creating new sources of income and sustainable livelihoods. Without all previous experience and "small scaled" big successes the villagers would surely not have dared to take on the challenge of owning, managing, administrating and documenting their own EU-project (Five Villages). Through this project they have had the opportunity not only to improve their own living environment but also they learned to deal with complicated EU administrative routines. Some civil servants mean that we, at village level should not have to deal with the economic and administration sides of carrying out a project, as it is too complicated and time consuming. That may be so, but we feel that authorities are underestimating our capability and knowledge. They may also fear losing control. Instead of being given the opportunity to manage and carry out own projects, local development groups most of the time are target groups for "top down" managed projects of authorities and other large organisations. Villagers quotations:

- "Not any top down designed and managed project with the aim to create engagement and initiatives on village level will result in a structural change and have long term sustainable effects. Society can not afford to loose the engagement of the community."
- "We, at grass root level are treated as patients by authorities and institutions and have become the institutions' tool."

Many of the voluntary workers have over the years developed into well-informed and capable village/project leaders, in spite of the fact that they have no back up systems, too little time and very little money. The “right” methods may not always have been used (whatever “right” may be), and maybe small groups should learn to demand more of the organisations that could present their case on EU level. However, it is doing the practical work that is most rewarding. Village leaders are aware of what they are trying to do; they show engagement, results and create job opportunities. But in the end the only way to succeed on a long-term basis is via political support. Active leaders with the desire and ambition should be given resources in forms of for example a “time bank”. That would mean; at least 10 days off work with full pay, besides vacation, to use for conferences, meetings, courses (leadership, management), study visits etc. We would also like to see more conferences where there is a mixture of people with practical skills at village level, policy makers, politicians and academics in different fields. In this way, we think there is a much better chance for everyone involved to directly and actively participate in important discussions and in planning and decision making processes. Besides that, it is inspiring and illuminating to meet and talk to people from different levels face to face. People at the village level can contribute to the development process on all levels by offering and sharing their time, energy and practical skills. Our question is:

*In what way can institutions, organisations, authorities, educational institutions etc more directly contribute to and facilitate for a more effective and sustainable developing process at the village level?*

### **Quotations from the Business Development Department, Örnköldsvik**

- “ We can contribute by making people interested in their own local living environment, and thus motivating people more and more into taking part in the local development activities.”
- “ There are certain people that want to give lobbyists for certain groups in society (for example youth, pensioners etc), more influence and power in the decision making process on local government level. Whether this will have impact or not, depends on our politicians. I have no opinion on that; ...possibly that this could result in more insight for citizens, but at the same time there will be the risk that the decision making process will take a much longer time.”

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