

Recognizing the farmer: Local food systems can provide improved social conditions for farmers

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Abstract

Farming activity has a considerable impact on rural development. An interview study conducted during the autumn 2001 indicates that Swedish farmers perceive their way of life as unsatisfactory in terms of working hours, financial position, but also in terms of social conditions:

- Farmers sense that they have too little influence on decisions that affect their farm business.
- Farmers perceive an impoverished social situation with few contacts with other farmers and also with the consumers of their produce.

These deficiencies contribute to make farmers retire from farming and/or leave the countryside.

The aim of this paper is to discuss 1) recognition as an important source of well-being and motivation for farmers, but also to 2) stress that increased collaboration among farmers and among farmers and consumers enhances the farmers' ability to be recognized by others.

In 2003 another interview study was conducted to penetrate the issue of recognition; loneliness, feedback and appreciation, further. The findings conclude:

1. The public image of farming activity is a negative one. It tells the farmer that the general public of Sweden doesn't appreciate him and what he produces. This is not necessarily the accurate interpretation of the public opinion, but that is what the farmer sees.
2. Collaboration that involves farmers and consumers, such as local food systems provide better contacts between them and gives the farmer an opportunity to give a positive image of his work. It also gives the consumer an opportunity to show his appreciation.

Every human being needs to be recognized an individual, as an equal member of society and as a member of particular group/with particular skills. This is the core foundation of existence. The farmer's experience of loneliness makes him non-recognized on the first level (which represent *love* and *care*). On the second level he can perceive that he is deprived of his *equal rights* as a member of the Swedish society, when he is given worse conditions than other people. Finally on the third level he may lack the proper appreciation and respect for agricultural production and the farm way of life (this level represents loyalty and solidarity).

My preliminary conclusion is that agriculture needs different measures of collaboration to solve the problem with the sense of dis-respect and non-recognition at different levels. Collaboration is needed between farmers as well as between farmers and consumers and other stakeholders. There is a need for further research on the actual effects on perceived recognition and other social conditions in collaboration projects.

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1. Background

1.1 Rural development and farming

Farming activity has a considerable impact on rural development. Without healthy and happy farmers rural development will be difficult. The social dimension is central to keep farmers farming and at good health, and to accomplish a sustainable development for agriculture. For rural development it is important to link consumers to producers and to develop/withhold a local economy. The aim of my research project is to create a deeper understanding of how to achieve a social situation that is perceived to be sustainable by the farmer.

1.2 The social condition at farms

My first case study was conducted in autumn 2001. In-depth interviews with 30 farmers in three marginal areas of Sweden were carried out with questions that covered the main conditions for farming in these areas. One area was in Småland in the south of Sweden and two areas were in Lappland in the north. Ten farmers were chosen in each of the three areas. Strategic sample was applied with purpose to get different perspectives of being a farmer. With the help of local farmers' federation members, farmers from different age, sex and production aims were selected.

The result of the interviews shows that Swedish farmers perceive their way of life as unsatisfactory in terms of working hours, financial position, but also in terms of social conditions (Nordström Källström, 2002a; 2002b). Some conclusions concerning the social conditions are:

- Farmers perceive an impoverished social situation with few contacts with other farmers and also with the consumers of their produce. Decreasing interaction with other farmers derives from long working hours, many farmers living alone on the farm (without a family) and farms constantly shutting down leaving only a few large farms left on the countryside. Few contacts with consumers derive from the dominance of large-scale retailers and by some means from an ongoing specialisation on farm level.
- Farmers sense that they have too little influence on decisions that affect their farm business. Farmers sense that they are in an exposed position towards authorities and consumers. They feel controlled and under suspicion from authorities that handle regulations and subsidies. As well as powerless and undesired by the consumers that, through media, complain about farmers not caring for their livestock or polluting the environment. Farmers today perceive a great distance to policymakers and to consumers.

These deficiencies contribute to a perceived unsatisfactory quality of life and make farmers retire from farming and/or leave the countryside. The following question must be: How do we manage this situation and contribute to better social conditions for farmers? In my research I want to study how we can facilitate or improve the conditions for farmers in this respect.

1.3 The role of local food systems

Farming in the countryside can some times be seen as equal to unsatisfactory social conditions. Local food systems and other forms of collaboration could be favourable for keeping financial resources in the region and thus enabling rural development. Collaborative processes could also be important for the rural social conditions. Food systems could be a way to link farming with non-farming sectors, connecting people to people and improve social conditions.

2. Aim

In the conclusions from my first case study¹ and from other studies made in Sweden recent years², recognition seems to be important. A lot of Swedish farmers have too little contact with others; colleagues, friends and consumers. This deprives the farmer of feed-back and appreciation for his work. It is also shown that the farmer often feels more like a burden than a resource for his country and society.

I want to discuss recognition as an important source of well-being and motivation for farmers. What would happen if we introduced recognition in local food systems or other collaboration projects? Can local food systems or other forms of collaboration reinforce the feeling of recognition for farmers? My hypothesis is that increased collaboration among farmers and among farmers and consumers enhances the farmers ability to be recognized by others; consumers, colleagues and society at large.

3. The relation between collaboration and recognition

Here I develop how I perceive recognition and the role it plays for farmers' social conditions. Collaboration between farms and between farmers and consumers are possible ways to broaden networks and enable feedback in the system.

3.1 Recognition

The following discussion builds on theory of the importance of recognition developed by Axel Honneth and also by Charles Taylor. I describe the three dimensions of recognition, how recognition affects identity and the effects of non-recognition.

Identity derives from recognition

Person's or a group's identity is closely connected to the amount of recognition he or they receives from other people or groups (Taylor, 1999). A person's identity can be defined as a person's perception of who he or she is and what characteristics he or she has as a human being. Our identity is partially created by the recognition or the absence of recognition. The absence of recognition could be a form of oppression and could cause great damage. People get forced into a false, distorted and narrow way of life.

Recognition effects people's identity by leading to a disparaging image of people and groups. The image of inferiority gets internalised within the group or individual identity: "*Due recognition is not only a courtesy we owe people, it is a vital human need*", Taylor states (1999)³.

¹ Nordström Källström, H. (2002a). Att vara lantbrukare eller inte: En studie av förutsättningar för livskraftigt lantbruk i tre nedläggningsdrabbade områden i Sverige. Jönköping: SJV.

² Conducted, for example, by Djurfeldt, G. (1998). Familjejordbrukets sociologi. Porträtt av den svenske bonden före EU-inträdet. *Sociologisk forskning*. and Bergsten, M. (1999). Bonden i bladet. In *Svenskt bondeliv. Livsform och yrke.*, (ed. A. Salomonsson). Lund: Studentlitteratur.

³ Taylors discussion on recognition and identity is a development of George Herbert Meads description of how we create our identity partly by communication with generalised and important "others" (Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society - from the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.). The socially derived identity is by definition depending on the social environment of a person or a group. Recognition is therefor very important to our lives.

A person (farmer) has a personal identity but also several social identities. We are, for example, both parents and have a professional identity. One person may, in different contexts, be a member of a local community, a farmer, a hunter, a car-owner, a member of farmers' federation and a man. All these identities have a social origin, some being more accepted than others.

Three dimensions

Recognition can be found in three independent modes (Honneth, 2000)⁴. To develop a personal identity, or a positive relation to oneself, you need multidimensional recognition from others. People need to be able to refer to oneself from the perspective of an approving and encouraging "other". The three different levels of recognition are (figure 1):

1. The individual is recognized as a person whose needs and desires are of unique value to another person. This mode of recognition is often referred to as "love" or "care" and imply a conditional care for the well-being of the other for his or her sake. Love and care build a person's self-confidence.
2. The individual is recognized as a person who is ascribed the same moral accountability as every other human being. This kind of recognition has the character of universal equal treatment and is often referred to as "moral respect". It implies the moral duty to recognize the accountability of all others. The experience of moral respect builds a person's self-respect.
3. The individual is recognized as a person whose capabilities are of constitutive value to a concrete community. This kind of recognition has the character of a particular esteem and is often referred to as "solidarity" or "loyalty". It implies the conditional care for the well-being of the other for the sake of our common goals. The experience of solidarity or loyalty builds a person's self-esteem.

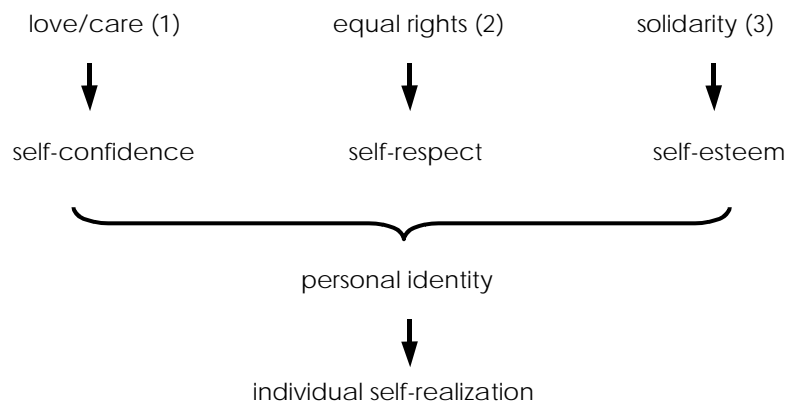


Figure 1. The three levels of recognition and their effect on the individual by Heidegren (2002)

The three dimensions of recognition present us with moral obligations and duties. We have a moral obligation to emotionally care for others in the perspective of the first level of recognition. We have the moral obligation to treat others equally in the perspective of the second level of recognition. And finally, we have the moral obligation to show solidarity, interest and commitment to others' work and activities in the light of the third level of recognition.

The non-recognition

What happens when persons and groups lack recognition on one or more levels? There are a number of examples of violations on the three different levels of recognition.

⁴ With a reference to the thought of Hegel, that there are three patterns of recognition. To Hegel, a persons self-consciousness depends on the experience of social recognition.

- a) On the first level the lack of love and care deprives us from the feeling of security that derives from the ability of physical well-being. A person can lose trust in the value of his own needs from others point of view. Extreme cases of violation of the first level of recognition are for example rape and assault. It is not the amount of physical pain that is the issue, but the perception of being exposed to the will control of another human being.
- b) There are several acts of moral violations where a person's moral accountability is disdained. A person's perception of self-respect can be damaged through not having the experience that people recognize the value of his or her judgement. Fraud or betrayal could be such violations, but also deprivation of one's human rights such as social welfare and democracy; to be able to influence decisions that are crucial to your future.
- c) Moral violations of the third level of recognition could be when one or several persons, through humiliation or dis-respect, discover that their skills and efforts get no recognition. This damages the feeling of being socially valuable within an actual community. Examples of such violations are forms of cultural degradation and could be everything from not exchanging greetings when meeting to extreme cases of stigmatisation.

Social dis-respect can be seen as the mental correspondence to physical illness. Symptoms of social dis-respect could be negative emotional reactions such as shame, indignation and anger. In the moral aspect of recognition lies the expectation of a particular response. It is the disappointment in the absent recognition in relation to these expectations that causes damage to the identity of a person or a group (Heidegren, 2002).

3.2 Collaboration

Due to, among other things, the deteriorating social situation on farms, Ljung (2001) concludes that there is an urgent need to develop venues and meeting places for collaborative learning; where farmers are able to collaborate with their colleagues, rural citizens as well as other stakeholders within the whole agri-food system. Ljung aims to use collaborative learning as a model to manage environmental problems in Swedish agriculture. In my research I want to study these methods further to investigate how they can contribute to an improved social situation as well as managing the environment. Most studies of collaboration is done for the purpose of solving a problem, like an agri-environmental issue or to get better financial conditions, but I argue that the effect that collaboration might have on social conditions, such as network building, positive feed-back and better relations to colleagues are equally important.

What do these collaborative processes look like? In Sweden we have traditionally worked with systems for food production for the local market and collaboration on agricultural machinery. These processes have been practised and studied and are working well to accomplish its objectives, such as increased locally consumed agricultural products or lower costs for agricultural machines on farm level. But these processes also have a social and a political impact. Collaborative processes can contribute to new networks in the countryside as well as new contacts with farmers and consumers. Further, collaboration is also a way to achieve participation in decision-making and it can serve as feedback and new input to policy makers and authorities. It is a part of social learning among actors.

The actual results of collaboration between farms has recently been studied in three master theses (Blad, 2003; Samuelsson, 2003; Skargren, 2003). The studies show that farmers chose to work together partly because of economic advantages, but also because of the loneliness and isolation they perceive. Statements such as wanting to share important decisions with other people or wanting to have a working

companion are frequent in the three studies. Working and learning together is a social activity and has social implications for farmers and the rural community.

4. From the farmers' point of view

To investigate farmers' experience of recognition and feedback interviews were conducted in the middle-part of Sweden.

4.1 Interviews

In this paper I use results from an interview study with nine farmers conducted during winter and spring of 2003. The farmers were from two different areas in the east-centre of Sweden. One was in Västmanland where four male organic farmers participated in the study. The other area was in Södermanland where four male farmers and one couple participated. In the group from Södermanland there were no organic growers. Västerfärnebo in Västmanland is an old genuine farm region with high cultural and natural values and Sörfjärden in Södermanland is situated at a bay of the lake Mälaren and is a place of high interest for nature conservation.

Semi-structured in depth interviews were conducted with the farmers. The purpose with the interviews was to study how environmental work on farm level contributed to motivate the farmer and also how farmers perceived the feed-back and appreciation that they experienced regarding to their work. There were mainly men among the interviewees and they were all involved in rural development or nature conservation projects. The study is ongoing and will finally be published in a report (Ljung and Sonnvik, In production)⁵.

When analysing the interviews I placed statements into themes, that was developed during the analysing process and that were connected to the notion of recognition. The general results from the interviews were obtained by empirical saturation. I give an account of the general result of the interviews below each theme and I exemplify with perspectives from one or several farmers that illustrates the general opinion.

4.2 Results

While processing the outcome of the interviews, themes emerged to divide the testimonies in. Obvious themes of interest to this discussion was; the picture of farmers in the media, their relation with consumers, perceived response from politicians, the experience of loneliness, received appreciation and feed-back on production.

Farmers in media

A majority of the interviewed farmers believe that Swedish people in general, and also the government and other authorities, have and show little understanding for agriculture. According to the interviewees, farmers are seen as villains responsible for pesticide residues in rivers and nitrogen leakage. This is also shown in other interview studies.⁶

⁵ Special thanks to Per Sonnvik, who conducted the interviews and shared his data with me.

⁶ For example by **Djurfeldt, G.** (1998). *Familjejordbrukets sociologi. Porträtt av den svenske bonden före EU-inträdet. Sociologisk forskning.*

Most of the farmers are sceptical to the knowledge journalists have of farm business and also of the media coverage of agriculture at large. The farmers think that media treats them unfairly. The general picture in newspapers and magazines is that farmers pollute the environment, make farm animals suffer and earn money on subsidies (Bergsten, 1999).

This is a picture that has been spread for quite some time. During the 80's there was a debate on agricultural subsidies in Sweden and a lot of farmers, already by then, felt that they were a burden to society. One farmer in the study said "I used to joke about that you quit your farm business because you have placed a radio in the barn".

Meeting consumers

A farmer talks about when he sold organic milk in the local shop in the 90's and met a lot of customers. He felt really encouraged by their positive comments and that they bought his milk. Several of the interviewees would like to meet their customers on a regular basis.

When the specialized farmers of today, who meet fewer and fewer of the consumers of their goods, see the negative picture of farming that media spreads they start to believe that it is the view of the public and the consumers. Farmers who meet consumers in local shops or at the market get more positive feedback and increase the feeling of *recognition*.

Some farmers complain about not having enough contacts with consumers. "You never meet the consumers or other stakeholders in the food chain that can give you any feedback or appreciation", one farmer declares. "Farming is not enough an outward activity".

Politics of agriculture

"Swedish politicians, don't view agriculture as a resource", says one farmer during the interview. Some of the farmers perceive that Sweden got a worse deal than other countries in Europe when Sweden joined the European Union. This reflects a belief that the Swedish politicians opinion of agriculture is that it is more of a nuisance than a resource.

Loneliness

Today farmers work alone a lot. A way to overcome the problem of loneliness is to work together, but in some areas of Sweden this is difficult because of the physical distance. Collaboration has both economic and social implications, you can share machinery and help during periods of heavy workload and you have company and someone to talk to.

Several farmers in the study refer to farming as something you do alone. By such statements they relate to the past when you did much of the farm work together with members of the family or other farmers. Some farmers declare that they, for weeks sometimes, do not speak to another person during work hours.

The number of farm businesses continues to decline in Sweden. One farmer suggests that they are doing this to themselves; farmers buying new farms to create bigger units. It is not a favourable change in the long run because of the loneliness it creates.

Appreciation

All of the interviewed farmers express the need for appreciation and feedback for their work. It makes the work more fun, easier and works like a driving force. "Every person wants to be appreciated for what they do", says one farmer. "As a Swedish farmer you want to be appreciated for producing good food for the Swedish citizens. If you get positive feedback from the consumers for what you produce, it gives you self-confidence", says another farmer.

“Consumers’ will to pay for their produce is another way to show appreciation. If you get less paid and get a lot of critique for the work that you do, you most certainly consider to change line of production or quit farming”, one farmer tells us.

Public opinion and the self-confidence of agriculture

Farmers’ perception of public opinion is to a high degree reflecting the picture distributed by the media. Farmers believe that the general public has little knowledge of farm life and farm business. Some claim that it is necessary to start educating young people on the conditions for agriculture, to, in the long-term, build knowledge in society.

“More out-wards activities will give the opportunity to improve the public image of agriculture and indirectly strengthen the self-confidence of the farming community as a whole”, some farmers argue. One farmer states that untidy farms give farming bad reputation. He says that we have to keep the farms neat and organized to give farming higher status. People tend to look down on farmers, assuming them to be dirty and dull, he continues.

Farmers try to adjust their activities according to the public opinion. One farmer states that the increase of organic growers in Sweden is partly due to the common picture of a polluting farmer. Farmers want to get appreciation from the consumers not complaints.

5. Discussion

The interviews show that the experience of recognition is important to motivate the work. Honneth (2000) also suggests that it is crucial to survival. Some farmers lack recognition on all three levels. Loneliness is one level; other levels are equal rights and respect for agricultural production and their way of life. He may be very lonely and lack recognition from family or friends (love/care), it is possible that he feels unjustly treated in relation to his equal rights as a member of society (moral respect) and he may not get appreciation for his work/the products from consumers/society (solidarity/loyalty). There are three levels of recognition and if unsatisfactory they have to be improved in three ways; on each particular level. To be recognized as an individual, as an equal member of society and as a member of a particular group/with particular skills is a foundation of our existence. The themes from the interview results are illustrated below to clarify the impact on the farmer (figure 2).

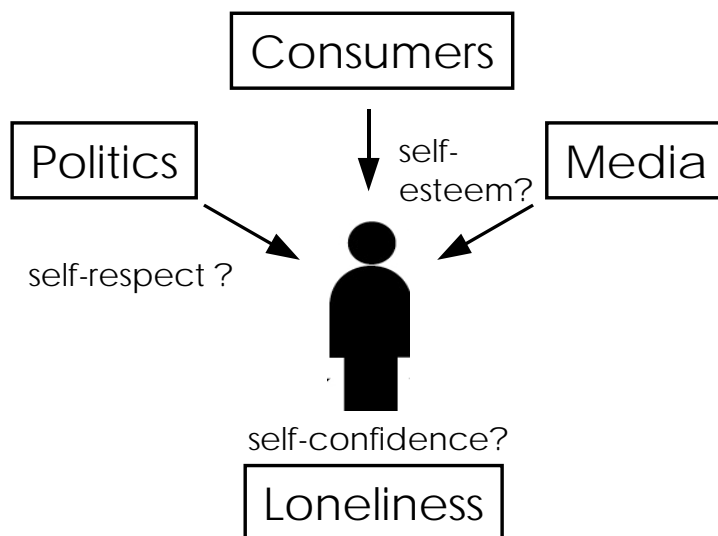


Figure 2. The impact on the farmer of non-recognition from different actors in society

Collaborative learning between farmers and between farmers and consumers and local food systems can provide conditions for increased contact between consumers and colleagues. It can reduce loneliness. In the process of collaboration it is also possible to influence political decisions and improve unfair treatment of farmers in comparison to other people. Even more important is the effect to the *feeling* of being treated unjust. It can also help the farmer to improve the image of farming and also discover the consumers' appreciation of his work. While collaborating the consumers learn about farming and farmers learn about consumers and they also learn about food production and consumption.

6. Conclusions

The results of this discussion can be drawn to two basic conclusions, which also can be bases for action:

1. The farmer perceives the public image of farming activity as negative. It tells the farmer that the general public of Sweden does not appreciate him and what he produces. This is not necessarily the accurate interpretation of the public opinion, but that is what the farmer sees.
2. Collaboration that involves farmers and consumers, such as local food systems provide better contacts between them and gives the farmer an opportunity to give a positive picture of his work. It also gives the consumer an opportunity to show his appreciation.

Collaborating is a learning process where the collaborating actors learn about each other, themselves, the actual issues (like local food production and consumption) and the procedure of collaboration. In this learning process people develop pictures of the other actors and that is the foundation for appropriate recognition. Farmers get recognized by consumers of their produce and the consumers get the satisfaction of recognizing the producers of their food.

The newspapers and television often show a negative picture of agriculture, which does not necessarily correspond to a public opinion. But the farmers see no other opinion because they lack contacts with consumers and citizens. There would be a lot to gain by establishing closer connections between consumers and farmers on the local level. In the notion of recognition lies also the duty to show appreciation, respect and care for others. This duty, if carried through, gives satisfaction to those showing it (consumers and society) as well as it renders recognition to the ones receiving it (the farmers).

Agriculture needs different processes of collaborative learning to manage problems with the sense of dis-respect and non-recognition at different levels. Collaboration is needed between farmers and between farmers and consumers. Collaboration between businesses can produce food on a smaller scale but still act on a larger scale (that is together) when it comes to buying supplies, delivering products and coping with times of heavy workload. Hence collaboration provides measures to strengthen the local economy and keep control of resources within the region in order to create a rural development. This is especially useful in regions not suitable for large-scale agriculture.

Extensionists should be made aware of their twofold roles; they have the task to pass knowledge on to the farmers, but they can also take responsibility to create arenas for collaboration. The extensionist can play a part by recognizing the farmers as a qualified professional with unique skills. It is also important to appreciate that social issues can be equally important to economy when it comes to decisions on farm level.

More research is needed on the effects of collaboration between farmers and between farmers and consumers (for instance local food systems). I intend to continue working in this field and in my next case study I will investigate one or more collaboration projects and its effect on social conditions such as recognition.

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