Art in Rural Development Policy

by Anne-Mette Hjalager, Professor, University of South Denmark

Does art have a special role to play in rural areas and villages? The GRASSLANDS project provides a moving account of art having indeed actively contributed to change in the four villages of Selde, Junget, Thorum and Åsted in Salling. This article sets art in a rural development policy framework. It examines how an understanding of art’s role emulates three major shifts in the perception of how best to encourage development in rural areas.

Rural areas have almost always been afforded much sympathy from both the government and the national parliament, from local politicians in county councils and regional assemblies, and not least from a broad share of the population. However, this sympathy is not always easily translatable in to visible, tangible undertakings and for this reason, emotions often run high in any discussion of these regions. In addition, rural areas in reality face strong centralising forces through urbanisation and disadvantageous demographical shifts. It is understandable that rural populations, in particular those furthest from cities, believe that the public and private service sectors are diminishing; bus routes are abolished and it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a level of optimism.

But there are also developments in the opposite direction. Beacons of shining ideas and powerful implementations. Where the local population succeeds in running a shop as a cooperative, successfully protests school closures and supports transformational building projects, to give some examples. This is, however, in no way a uniform development across the country. We cannot generalise by saying that the movement is reciprocal. This development occurs where and when people seriously want it, and do not easily admit defeat.

**Three rural paradigms**

Regional development policies have existed in various guises since the first regional development law from 1958. But the understanding of rural areas needs and development suitability has expanded quite dramatically since. Over time, a movement has taken place, away from a subsidy-and transfer economic paradigm, with its heyday in the 1960’s and well up into the 1980’s. This was gradually replaced by a paradigm whereby locally identified potential- and resources came to the fore as driving forces. This has been the fulcrum for rural development policy since the 1980’s and in many ways it still is. From the mid-noughties, the development of rural areas has been perceived through a relational economic perspective, an interplay between different geographies, and here we can trace the outlines of an expanding new rural development paradigm. So within this main movement that spreads over three epochs, there will, at any given point in time, be elements of all three paradigms in the actual rural development policies, though with different emphasis on each.

In the following I will outline these paradigms in more detail. The possible and actual roles of art in these three rural development paradigms will also be explored.

**The subsidy-and transfer economic paradigm**

An underlying observation of the subsidy- and transfer economy is that rural areas decelerate compared to other regions. They are the victims of unfavourable structural developments. They must therefore be assisted, in the name of equality and a regional balance of living conditions, so that they remain aligned.

In this paradigm there is a sharp focus on supporting industry and agriculture, on the premise that creating valuable, innovative and export-orientated jobs will have a spin-off effect on other areas of local life and development. The tools for this are direct investment in agriculture, industry and in some cases “intransient” service industries. The relocation of State bodies (and jobs) is another tool from the subsidy- and transfer economy toolbox that has been revived in recent years. Furthermore the paradigm encompasses the expansion of transport infrastructure so that it no longer feels as difficult to run a business in the country, as in the cities.

The subsidy-and transfer paradigm is based on the assumption that as long as there are jobs then there will be a requisite tax revenue to enable the expansion of local areas with educational, cultural and other service facilities. Perhaps this development can be given a little extra push, through state support, for a theatre, a museum or a sportsground. The extended logic is that for the business community to thrive, then there must be favourable living conditions for the attractive employees and their families.

Art is placed on a low rung in the subsidy-and transfer economy. Art is the “icing on the cake” – not unimportant as such, because in a welfare society there must also be a geographical balance in the realm of the arts. The cultural ingredient in rural policy consists of supporting the creation of institutions such as exhibition space and museums. Recognised tasteful art, Giacometti’s sculpture in Holstebro for example, fall into this category. Such investments encourage rural areas and small towns to receive a dose of culture in the most well-established forms and quality.

**The activation of localised potential- and resources paradigm**

Free taxpayers money is nice, but it rhymes with disempowerment, bureaucracy and disdain for Copenhagen. The reaction to the subsidy- and transfer economy paradigm reveals itself as a smouldering demand for greater respect for the rural areas own resources and potential. Rural populations covet the surrounding areas confidence in them; that they both can and will resolve things themselves. They want recognition that their way of doing things also has merit. Under this paradigm it is no longer a case of what can be “planted from above” as to what can grow from below.

Localised potential- and resources are, by their very nature, entirely unique to each area. In this way rural development policy, by necessity, becomes fractured. In some regions there can be a focus on natural resources that can form the basis for new forms of food production. Certain local areas have skilfully combined this, offering a framework for food-related festivals and events that strengthen the broader tourism potential. In other places the importance of cultural heritage is prioritised as a framework for identity and innovative business and social activities. Realdania’s programs, among others, have aimed at contributing to an increased pride and awareness of built culture, and to encourage local investment in informed and restrained reuse of buildings. Others have designated themselves renewable energy villages. Rural residents have increasingly realised that local communities and enthusiasts are the key drivers.

This rural development policy’s tool box is different from the subsidy-and transfer model. The stimulation of the localised potential- and resources is encouraged through development-orientated grants aimed at awareness and expertise, and support of networks and collaborations. An all-inclusive village renewal aims not only at creating a revitalised sense of value, but equally a local autonomy and capacity for action. There is a gradual acceptance that development policy is multifaceted and is not merely concerned with jobs and economic growth in the traditional sense, but also with meaning, identity and unanimity. Therefore, rural development policies under this paradigm are, by necessity, more flexible and pragmatic.

Art takes on a new role under this paradigm. Local artists and artisans are seen as interpreters of the local areas soul and history through their art, and in that sense they can help to reinforce a sense of authenticity on several fronts. They are also a part of the business community and their economic success is something that the villages worry about. Promoting the conditions for artists as a business can be achieved by, among other things, increased visibility in shopping areas, and involving them in projects where there professional capabilities can be utilised. Some villages seek to create “clusters” of artists and artisans by providing studios, artist residencies and exhibition spaces; by promoting festivals around various artistic themes and by promoting artists’ work and productions through the local tourist office and resettlement marketing materials.

**The relational economic paradigm**

Building on localised potential- and resources has proven to be a successful approach in many local areas, stimulating both the strengthening of identity and unity. But again there are adverse reactions that create a breeding ground for a new paradigm. The problem with focussing on localised potential- and resources is that the local community risks closing in on itself. The same energetic people always have to pick up the slack, and this in other respects commendable practice, can result in their resources of expertise possibly ending up going nowhere or worse, drying up complete with a resulting drop in momentum.

One observation from local areas is that it is often new residents, or other outsiders, who reignite the enthusiasm and spark. They bring expertise and networks with them, on how external resources can be harnessed with local ones, and can make the recognised localised resources’ productive in new ways. A new micro-business may have a local supply network, and these can be connected directly and indirectly to urban consumers, as a number of food initiatives have shown. Villages that have a close interaction with other areas, be they larger towns, other villages or even foreign local communities experience greater inspiration, are more often (positively) challenged and can marshal a greater critical mass to launch projects and activities.

Support for the relational economy is about stimulating collaboration across sectors and geography. This has, in fact, been a prerequisite for many EU-supported programs for years, and this practice has become increasingly refined over time. Now the discussion centres on co-design and co-innovation, which signals that local residents and companies in rural areas are no longer passive recipients or bystanders. On the contrary, they are creating and revitalising their own village, and in a way, other villages who, to a more or less subtle extent participate for shorter or longer spells in a creative network. The issues for the relational economy are not well-defined in advance, and perhaps one lands, by way of the consciously experimental processes, in a completely different place than expected.

If we are to understand art in the relational economy then we must emphasise arts special ability to connect the villages, with each other, and with a larger world. It introduces something new, adding new layers to the life and existential conditions of the village, but also take something with it, that is reused and reinterpreted in another place, at another time. The subsidy- and transfer paradigm understood it thus; first one must have a solid and sound economic base, then art can be introduced into the equation. In the relational economic paradigm, it is almost the reverse. Here, the artistic projects’ mission and idea is supported first, presupposing that in its wake that the village will be a nicer and richer place for its residents and companies.

**GRASSLANDS and rural development** **policy**

In this book, Trine Rytter Andersen uses the concept of relational aesthetics to describe the activist and collaborative process that has taken place in connection with GRASSLANDS. Sofie Maj Thomsen writes about “artist participation”. In this way GRASSLANDS exemplifies some important points in the changing role of art in rural development policy. The chapters of the book, with their wealth of testimonials and observations illustrate that this is not necessarily an easy process.

This article has introduced three rural development policies paradigms that in an underlying way are at work in GRASSLANDS. Some prefer subsidies and others want to be left alone. Others mean that artistic expression should be authentic, growing from the bedrock, from the resources, and addressing this premise has been a fundamental concern for the artists in GRASSLANDS. Seen in the perspective of the general rural development policy paradigm shift, GRASSLANDS has, through its working method, contributed to the exciting and challenging relational rural development policy paradigm that raises constructive questions and opens new horizons far beyond the realm of art.