

Why people migrated to the countryside in Finland in the 1990s?

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Abstract

This paper aims at describing why people migrated to the countryside in Finland in the 1990s and how their in-migration processes succeeded. It contains a summary of the results from my doctoral thesis (Pehkonen, 2004). Motives relating to home and residential environment triggered migration to the countryside: building/buying a one-family house and relation to nature as well as changes in economic situation: unemployment and over indebtedness. Voluntary migration to the countryside, living in a one-family house, economic security and good relations with neighbours guaranteed that the migrants were satisfied with the village where they lived. Positive reputation of migrants, easy interaction and participation in village life contributed to gaining a positive position in the village community.

Keywords: village, rural in-migration.

Introduction

The migration movement has revived in Finland rapidly since the mid 1990s. During the whole decade, altogether 2.1 million changes of domicile were registered. Five growth centres, which benefit the most from migration profit, have developed in Finland: Helsinki, Tampere, Turku, Oulu and Jyväskylä. The educated people have been the most eager ones to migrate to growth centres, in which case other areas have become empty of population, also of know-how. (Okko et al., 1998: 33–41). No clear reason can be found for the rapid growth of the number of migrants. However, economic development of the society is an important factor as an explanation for the variations in the migration movement. In other words, during the periods of rapid economic growth the

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number of migrants has increased and during economic recessions the growth of the amount of migrants has slackened or even reduced. (Ståmböl et al.,1997).

Besides, the change in the structure of the labour market has increased migration. Jobs in agriculture and forestry and also in the public sector have decreased at the same time as jobs in information professions have increased. The migration movement as a whole is one of the biggest causes for regional differences, but on the other hand migration movement is caused by many regional structural factors. Indeed, internal migration forms an extensive political issue both in departure and arrival areas. Selective migration affects nowadays more and more the welfare differences between regions and polarization.

Social sciences have started from the idea that the reason why people migrate is the rational aim to improve their living standards and to increase their well-being. The matter is approached through social aspects, such as employment, living or education. The basic idea of the theories is that migration movement is explained by studying people's needs and their fulfilment. According to studies with the main stress on social sciences, the motives for migration vary depending on the life situation and income level of the family (Korkiasaari1983; Söderling 1980, 1983; Waris et al. 1952). The more wealthy families appreciate the status of the area and the quality of physical environment. Families with children pay more attention to the quality of the environment than migrants without children. Among the motives for migrating, the need for room is more common than defects in the residential environment, obtainableness factors or qualitative features of the dwelling (Summa1982). The willingness to migrate of those renting a flat is two-three-fold compared with those living in their own flat (Abu-Lughod, 1966; Kytö, 1998).

Haliseva-Soila (1993) studied potential migrants to the countryside and according to the study, 44 per cent of townspeople thought that living in the country could be possible. Interesting in the study was especially that townspeople did not regard contacts with neighbours or village com-

munity as an important appeal factor to the countryside but rather the opportunity for own peace. Also the study of Pekkanen et al. (1997) confirms the view that the need for individuality, not for communality draws people to the countryside. The study also shows that rural environment and the vicinity of the town are combined in the countryside near a town. People have started to measure distances more and more clearly by the time and geographical distances have lost their meaning due to the development of driving. This is important when the competitiveness of the countryside as residential environment is examined. Return to one's roots, return to the native place or to the area considered native place draw inhabitants to sparsely populated areas. According to Swedish research workers (Svensson 1991; Löfström & Löwander 1991), migration to scattered settlement areas in the early 1990s was mostly remigration. Buttimer (1978) has called such migrants insiders when emotional factors related to regional identity are the most common reasons for migration. The concept of regional identity is related to a person's identity in the same way as homesickness and the desire to settle down. In that case, we can talk about the moorings of living, which include for example matters relating to a phase of life, culture and region (Moon, 1995: 504-524).

Though growth centres attracted people in Finland in the 1990s, there were, however, people who migrated so to speak against the current - to the countryside. A way to study what happened in Finland in the 1990s is to examine the migration movement: why people migrated to the country and how their in-migration processes succeeded. This paper aims at describing why people migrated to the countryside in Finland in the 1990s and how their in-migration processes succeeded.

Methods

The target group of the study comprises ten Finnish villages. Near each of the five towns, Rovaniemi, Vaasa, Turku, Mikkeli and Kajaani, two villages were chosen of which one is situated 25 km, and the other 50 km from the town. Thus, the distances of the villages from the town (25 or 50 km)

form the analysis framework. The villages around the towns have been chosen at random: only the distance to the town has been a criterion. The towns are situated in different parts of Finland and besides none of them is a strong growth centre.

The empirical quantitative research data comprise the in-migrants, who migrated to the villages in question between 1 January 1990 and 22 June 2000 (n=533, response rate 39 per cent n=205: quantitative material). There were 74 questions in the questionnaire, four of which were open answers (n=159). The qualitative data are based on interviews (25) and open answers of the questionnaire. Of the interviewees 16 were women and 9 men. Age distribution was from 27 to 75 years. The contact information of the interviewees was obtained by contacting the so-called key informants, such as village committees and societies as well as municipal offices.

The data were collected using a questionnaire that was sent to in-migrants complemented with half-structured interviews with both in-migrants and native inhabitants of the village as well as observations, literature and statistics material. For the sake of the reliability of the research results, it is better (if it is possible) to use different approaches in the study at the same time. The use of triangulation aims at increasing reliability.

Before posting the questionnaires the village committees were informed about the up-coming study and a notice was sent to the local papers of the area. A questionnaire was sent to every in-migrant aged 18 and over. Address information were obtained from the population information system of the local register office. Background information of the people to be studied and issues related to numbers were examined with quantitative data. The main stress of quantitative data is on descriptive use, so the study is not based on statistical tests or theoretical generalizations.

Results

The questionnaire used in this study explored the reasons why people moved to the countryside by making use of four categories of reasons: *work, housing, family relationships,* and

other. This paper addressed the three most common causes of rural in-migration: *home suitable for the current life situation*, *financial reasons*, and *relationship with nature*.

Home suitable for the current life situation

For pensioners and families with children, the countryside offered a home that fitted their needs in that particular phase of their life. This finding is compatible with a previous study (Seppälä, 1999: 68-72) suggesting that there are two phases in life that induce people to migrate: when they start a family, and when they are approaching retirement.

In the interviews, families with children reported that they wanted a larger home than they could have afforded in a city. As a result, the standard of housing and value for money became important criteria. Both adults and children found chores both meaningful and relaxing as well as a pleasant pastime. Physical work, such as planting and building, can also be seen as a sign of attachment to a place. As far as children were concerned, the countryside was believed to offer a better environment than the city. Also, the respondents thought that, in the country, it was easier and more natural to teach children how to work. *“When you hand a rake or hoe, they don’t go on and on about how depressing it is not having anything to do or complain about trivial things”*, a 45-year-old mother wrote in her reply. This comment reflects the beneficial effect of work and underlines the notion that idleness increases boredom. Conceivably, the family-centred thinking at the time when the decision to move is made represents a wish that family life would be happier and more harmonious in a single-family home in a rural environment than elsewhere. Another thing that emerged in the interviews was that the acquisition of a family pet (e.g. a dog, cat, horse) will give the children and young people something to do while at the same time teaching them care and responsibility.

The pensioners included in the sample moved either back to their childhood home, to a holiday home fitted out for year-round use, or bought a home of their own at an affordable price compared with city dwellings. The childhood

home or converted holiday home had served as a second home for the respondents even when they had still been working. When you are retired, the rural environment offers ample opportunity for free-time activities. Although the number of people living permanently in the countryside has declined, that of free-time dwellers increased from 1990 to 2000 (Leppänen 2002.). At the end of 1999, there were 444,000 holiday homes in Finland, half of which could be inhabited throughout the year.

Financial considerations

Close to a third of all returnees (31%) were in a financially insecure position. Although those moving to the rural communities cited the clean environment and a wish to live in the country as the main motives for in-migration, they used the "Other comments" section at the end of the questionnaire to tell about their business failures, illnesses, loss of employment, or over-indebtedness.

Even though berry-picking and fishing were described in the questionnaires as healthy hobbies and pleasant pastimes, they also play a role in improving the income level. It is hard to talk about financial problems with "losing face". Understandably, a major turning point in life makes people rethink their values at which point an active person starts seeking and implementing new solutions. A move to the country has served as a rational choice and possible as the only means of survival.

However, financial difficulties are not necessarily a sign of failure: there may be a number of underlying factors that are beyond the people's control. The Finnish society underwent a major structural change in the 1990s when the study was carried out; for example, court orders for debt rescheduling increased. By the time southern Finland had lived through the worst years, the recession had only just started to make itself felt in northern Finland. Regional differences were considerable. For this reason, it is advisable not to take all the recorded motives for rural in-migration at face value, although they should be treated with due respect. Things simply seemed and felt different at different times, possibly

changing from day to day. This should not be taken to mean that respondents would consciously distort the truthfulness of their answers. However, there are studies that suggest the existence of a “wall of happiness” (Roos, 1987) that causes people to embellish their life and choices. If not, they would be blaming themselves and the choices they have made.

Relationship with nature

Closeness with nature and countryside as the living environment were highlighted in the responses as valuable and significant issues in the selection of the dwelling place. Being close to nature does not always mean frequent outdoor activities; for some people, it is enough to know that it is possible. Particularly those holding responsible positions requiring advanced inter-personal skills valued nature as a way of relaxing. The tranquillity of nature served as a counterweight to the busy working life. Nature was associated with rest and relaxation. Additionally, the different seasons and their variations were felt to be more tangible and profound in the country than in the city. It is true that it is easy and even acceptable to value the clean environment, so that value-based motives used to explain the move may overshadow the concrete background factors to migration.

Forests and lakes have a unique meaning to Finns. Throughout the country’s history forests and lakes have offered protection and been a source of tranquillity and relaxation. The integrity and peacefulness of nature, or harmony, give a sense of security and continuity at a time when life and the world appear to be fragmenting. Spending time at a holiday also represents a temporary return to nature. After all, this kind of relaxation consists of just being there without stress, sauna-bathing, fishing, chopping wood, rowing, etc. Even though people are willing to accept a more primitive way of life at the summer place than normally, these “second homes” are increasingly being fitted out to an equally high standard as city homes.

Conclusions

The motives for rural in-migration comprise a wide range of interests, and therefore it is impossible to identify one single explanation. Every move is preceded by a period of deliberation and consideration that may vary a great deal in duration from one family member to another. This study does not answer the question how long this period has been. When the decision to move to the country is finally made, the objective is to arrive at an optimum solution with regard to the current life situation.

The families with children wanted to live primarily in single-family homes, so that the selection of the locality depended on the availability of a suitable plot and related costs. The parents wanted to offer the children a natural environment where pets also fit in. With pensioners, the project to find a suitable home often led to a return to the childhood home, retiring to a holiday home, or buying a house of their own.

Those moving into the country for financial reasons were in a class of their own. They migrated in order to minimize their financial burden due to bankruptcies, over-indebtedness or guarantor liabilities, because living in the country is cheaper than in town. Although berry-picking and fishing can be regarded as hobbies and an expression of interest in nature, they also serve as sources of additional income. Financial poverty does not mean spiritual poverty even if the financial problems may be paralyzing.

A close relationship with nature is important for people of almost all ages. Nature offers protection and relaxation. Living in a natural environment was perceived as a good way of recovering from fast-paced working life. For children, the environment was felt to offer the opportunity to "do real work", such as gardening and construction. Conceivably, the parents may have wanted to pass on to their children the same kind of experiences they had had themselves.

The starting point of the positive migration process of the person migrating to the village was the voluntariness of migration. An important motive for migration was the benefit of the family, in which case the members of the

of the family, in which case the members of the family anticipated that they would benefit from the migration in their own way. Parents or one of the parents defined the benefit of the family. Migration to the country usually meant spacious living and building a one-family house. One-family houses still have their image value in the Finnish society. Economic security of the family guaranteed that everyday life did not become unreasonably complicated and hard. Even though migration would have been voluntary and hoped-for, it did not exclude the migrant's critical examination and valuation of the residential environment. This happened when the so-called fascination of the new disappeared and the greyness of life was shaping in the new environment. Matters relating to living, environment and customs are questioned. The more unrealistic the expectations had been, the sharper the critical phase is. It was easier for the migrant to begin to feel at home in the village community, if he was willing to understand the operational culture, customs and values of the village. Natural first contacts with neighbours are positive key experiences to incomers. Social relations were necessary for the migrants as makers of social reality and channels for experiences of being involved. Social relations further getting practical and mental help. Important was the notion and confidence in getting help if necessary.

Correspondingly, if the in-migrant was for some reason forced to make the decision on migrating to the country, the starting point of getting anchored in the village was poor. In this data, forced migration came out in the clearest way as a result of financial embarrassment. Financial difficulties and lack of work caused a shortage of well-being and made exclusion development from the society and the community possible.

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