

**XIX Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology, 2001**  
**Society, Nature, Technology. The Contribution of Rural Sociology**  
Dijon, France, 3 - 7 September 2001

**Working Group 4-1**

**Rural policy evaluation: assessing the roles of sociology and qualitative methods**

## **How to be rural in information age:**

### **Case of Rural Community Network in Finnish Periphery**

Jukka Oksa

Karelian Institute, University of Joensuu

PO Box 111, FIN 80101 Joensuu, Finland

jukka.oksa@joensuu.fi

#### **Abstract**

My paper discusses the social relevance of the new rural information society initiatives in Finland. The concept of local community net in Finland is deviating from the mainstream of information technology projects. It is relying on social innovations, new forms of co-operation, and it is mobilising unused human and social capital in a remote rural area. The main stream of information society policies and projects seems to emphasise the importance of processes usually regarded as urban. Urban is depicted as plurality of cultures and critical mass accelerating creative interaction of highly educated talents.

In this comparison remote and rural areas seem to be destined to impossible struggle to shorten the cultural gap to the advanced centre. However, there are experiments where the excluded places define their future in terms of the information age. The most well-known of these initiative is the Learning Upper Karelia project, which was seeking to prevent social exclusion, support social innovations, and improve services and living conditions. Upper Karelia is a remote rural area of three municipalities and about 20,000 people living in three service centres and numerous scattered small villages. The area has suffered from unemployment, declining incomes in agriculture and forestry, out-migration of young people, cuts in public services and infrastructure. During two years the Learning Upper Karelia project was able to create a local community network where about 25 percent of the population was registered as users. The paper is based on materials and observations of the village studies of the area and an evaluation study of the local network.

#### **1. Introduction**

My presentation consists of three parts: Firstly, a case study of a rural information society project is presented. The case of Upper Karelia has been regarded very successful and which has become a model of several other pilot projects in different parts of Finland. Secondly, there are the conclusions about the factors that made this project a success story. This part is based on an evaluation study of the project<sup>1</sup>. Thirdly, there is discussion about the possible connection of the success story of this case with things that we call rural. This part is tentative search for concepts that could help to understand the rurality of the information age.

---

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgment: The description of the Learning Upper Karelia project is based on the joint work with my colleague Jarno Turunen (Karelian Institute, University of Joensuu), see Oksa & Turunen 2000a and 2000b.

## 2. The Learning Upper Karelia Experiment

North Karelia, as well as Eastern and Northern Finland in general, has been a periphery for a long time. It has been relying on forestry and small-scale family agriculture. During the period of Welfare State, it was able to fight against the centralisation tendencies with the help of state regional policies, which supported rural manufacturing and public services (training, healthcare, social benefits), accessible also to people in remote areas. The cutting of public spending and the membership in the European Union has changed perspectives of remote areas profoundly. The earlier state policies are being replaced by structural fund projects of the EU.

The Region of North Karelia in Finland has been active in various information society programmes. Last year, according to the regional databank of projects, there were over 100 information technology related development ventures in this area of about 170 000 inhabitants. The Regional Council has formulated an information society strategy document of its own, and development of the Information Society is one of the main priorities of the regional development plan. As Finland is trying to become a model for an information society with social values, so the region of North Karelia wants to become a regional laboratory for information society development that serves also the social needs and local development, even in rural areas. The region has a long history of such information society projects. Two of the first rural telecottages in Finland were founded there in 1986 (in Polvijärvi and Kontiolahti). In early 1990's several other projects tried to find ways to use information technology for the needs of local people, for example, there were project to help rural social workers, some other experimented in getting public email terminals in rural post offices. There were also early tests of local networks, where local associations and citizens' groups and local administration were to develop forms of open communication. (See Oksa 1994, 1995.)

The newest concept developed in North Karelia is a community information network that is part of a collective local learning process. My observations are based on the evaluation study of the Learning Upper Karelia project, which has become a model for similar ventures in other parts of Finland. (See Oksa and Turunen 2000.)



Figure 1: Location of Upper Karelia

The area called Upper Karelia is a remote rural area located in the eastern forest periphery of Finland. It consists of three municipalities (Nurmes, Valtimo, and Juuka) with a total population of about 20,000 people, living in three centres and numerous small villages. The area has suffered

from unemployment, declining incomes in agriculture and forestry, out-migration of young people, cuts in public services and infrastructure. During the two years of its implementation the Learning Upper Karelia project was able to create a local community network where about 25 percent of the population was registered as users.

The project is based on high awareness of its specific context: distant location, geographically large area with several centres and scattered small settlements, good communication infrastructure (underutilised high speed lines to the local polytechnic training school). The main financing for the project came from the Sitra Foundation, the Finnish National Fund for Research and Development. Three local municipalities, the district labour office, and the North Karelia Regional Council also contributed to the funding.

During 2000-2001 the network of Upper Karelia is being extended to the three neighbouring rural municipalities (Lieksa, Ilomantsi, Tuupovaara). Also during the year 2001 the SITRA foundation is starting a programme, in which eight regions in Finland start to implement the concept of learning districts, using the experiences of North Karelia as their guidelines.

### *Project history*

Learning Upper Karelia is a rural and local information society project seeking to achieve social objectives: preventing social exclusion, supporting social innovations, improving services and living conditions. The main tool used in attaining these objectives was the construction of a community information network.

The idea for the project was born in a local working group created to seek new uses for the buildings of an agricultural school that was to be closed. A proposal to start new types of training activity in the agricultural school premises failed, but the discussions of the group also produced a second idea for a local information society project. Luckily, at the same time, the Regional Council of North Karelia was drawing up regional information society strategy (part of EU Regional Information Society Initiatives, RISI), and it supported the idea. At the national level, the Finnish National Fund for Research and Development (Sitra Foundation) was at that time implementing its information society strategy and placing more emphasis on the social aspects of technology and it adopted the Upper Karelia initiative as one of its ventures in the area of local information society.

The operations of the project started in April 1998 and lasted for two years. In the first stage 21 local unemployed persons were selected for a special six-month training course, financed jointly by the project and the district employment office. During this course the unemployed were trained to become the trainers and support persons of the community network. The teachers and the premises for the training course were provided by the local project implementor, the Nurmes Vocational Training Centre.

Training of users started in May and the first of the more than 30 computer kiosks allowing free access to the general public started in August. In the beginning the kiosks were mostly used for surfing the internet, and participation in the community net started slowly. The most active message zone was the flea market. Public sector actors (municipalities, employment office, EU projects) started producing information in the community net. Some information about local enterprises and civic organisations was also included. Home visits were initiated to install the First Class client programme and to train new users. Support hours were organised in the kiosks to help users.

After six months of training 15 participants in the first training course were employed in the project for 6 months. A group of them founded an enterprise, Karelian Netfellows Ltd, which started selling training and support services. The idea to create an enterprise came from the Sitra Foundation. The enterprise has continuously employed 6 - 8 persons. A second training course for local unemployed persons began with 17 students in April 1999.

Both training in groups and personal training at homes continued at a steady pace. The number of registered users has constantly increased, reaching 3100 in April 1999, after twelve months of operation. During the *first year of operation*, the number of possible simultaneous telephone connections was too low, and caused some problems in connections. This problem was alleviated when the project bought a new modem of its own in early 1999. Communication costs at some of kiosks brought about unpleasant surprises, but they were relieved through negotiations and renewed contracts with the telephone operator. Faster connections were organised for kiosks with heavy traffic.

Special attention was paid to young people as users. In each municipality one fourth-grade class was selected and given a special status in the project, a special youth zone was established in the net, and there is even a message zone where no adults are allowed.

During the *second year* the use of the community network increased steadily. New target classes in schools were selected. Some schools started to build internal message zones of their own. Municipalities made more information available, including the agendas and minutes of all three municipal councils. An electronic register of local enterprises was constructed. Some space was sold for commercial advertisements. Eight persons from the second training course were employed for six months. Planning for the future after the conclusion of the project began. An evaluation study was commissioned from the Karelian Institute of the University of Joensuu (Oksa & Turunen 2000a).

During the two years of operation the number of users of the local community network reached 5000. The project received a lot of favourable publicity in the local and national press and in television. The project officially concluded at the end of March 2000, but the community network continues to operate as a part of a new project, Oppiva Vaara- Karjala (Learning Karelia Hills), which is extending the network to three additional neighbouring municipalities. Furthermore, the project is starting to "export" its expertise to other local community networks in Finland and elsewhere. A new enterprise, Glocal Ltd, has been founded for this purpose.

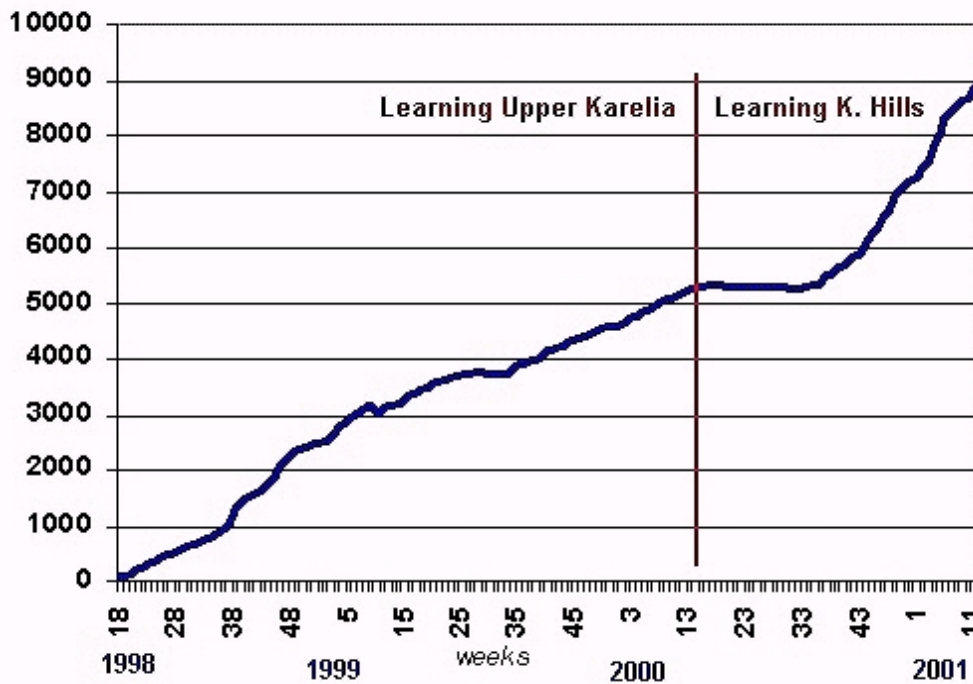


Figure 2 : Weekly numbers of registered users of the community network

### *Limits to success*

Although the project can be called a success story, there are some less successful parts. Some of the original objectives were not achieved, such as networking of municipalities, schools, and enterprises. Nor were plans realised to initiate joint electronic marketing and create teleworking jobs.

The comparably high rate of penetration (25%) would not be possible without the very efficient mobilisation of school-aged boys and girls. Although some active users can be found in all age groups, the percentage of those over 40 years of age is low, and consists mainly of the more educated middle class, who use computers at work.

One may conclude that the community net has broken through to local life, but there are still large groups of working age people and pensioners who not reached by the net. Although there is a group of community activists keeping discussion alive in the net, their number is small. The role of entrepreneurs is also modest and they have started to join late. The municipalities have had reservations. They have mainly contributed by putting their decisions in the net and by constructing municipal pages in the Internet. The smallest of the three municipalities, Valtimo, used the expertise of the project to build a net of its own. It also bought support services from the enterprise founded in the project.

## Users of the Community Network and the Population of the Upper Karelia by Age

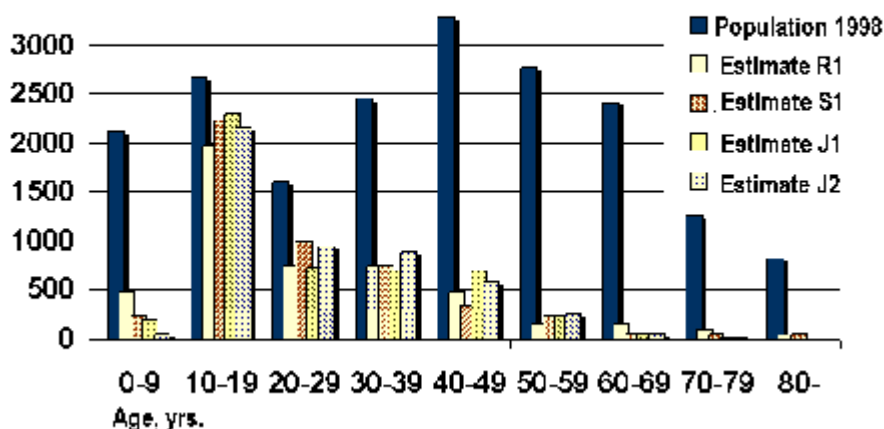


Figure 3

### 3. Evaluation of the factors behind the success

If compared with the mainstream of information society development, the concept of the Learning Upper Karelia is based on different starting points. It does not share the idea of big growth centre, it does not rely on the highly trained specialists, neither does it call for technological improvements. Its profile rather consists of social innovations, new forms of co-operation and mobilising of unused local human and social capital.

The essential feature behind the successful results in the Upper Karelia, was the fact that the project was immersed in local life. This was the basis for the successful user training and the content of the community net. In geographically widening the project and transferring its experiences to other locations, this connection to local life cannot be transferred as such. The lessons of this project, however, can be valuable in pointing out how the local connection can be achieved.

The core factor behind the success is the skilful connecting of locality and general development trends of the society. Locality has not been understood as isolation or a fortress, but rather it has been an arena for working together to meet new challenges. The local resources for this task were recognised and mobilised. The implementation was rooted in the local community: the key implementor and the project leaders were local, the lay-trainers who themselves were trained in the project had earlier been local unemployed and they were highly sensitive to the starting level and needs of the local people.

The use of the community network was not expensive. When connecting by phone and modem, a person paid only the local telephone charges. No service provider's fee was required. Anyone could use the net and its equipment cost-free at the 32 kiosks that were made available in public spaces, such as libraries, youth centres, club houses of unemployed persons, local banks and shops. The training and support of users made up a well-integrated system. Training and support was free and easily accessible. Training and advice was available at village meetings, local computer classes, kiosk access points, and at home.

The decision to use First Class software as the client programme had far-reaching ramifications. This selection has been questioned by many, especially by computer professionals and teachers, who have been using other software. Defending their decision has enforced the identity of the project as an alternative way of building information society. First Class client software is easy to learn and use. It gives the user combined access to electronic mail, open public message zones, local on-line chat, and it also enables the launching of an internet browser. As a by-product it creates a common basic desktop (portal), which can be used for general community messages and for commercial purposes, too.

In addition to being embedded into local life in many ways, the project succeeded in gaining sufficient outside support. The resources have allowed for innovative experimentation. In addition to the financial support from the Sitra Foundation, the district labour office and the North Karelia Regional Council, their expertise has been indispensable.

The third important factor was the way of local implementation of the project, its special working style, which emphasises teamwork and learning by doing: “If they can’t solve a problem, they work and study for the answer. One person doesn’t know everything but a group can brainstorm anything” (project homepage). This working style supported enthusiasm, commitment and innovation. The key actors have a strong orientation to the future and are able to rapidly grasp new possibilities, keeping the project is in a continuous process of reconstructing future perspectives, which gives larger meaning and deeper motivation to the practical work in the project.

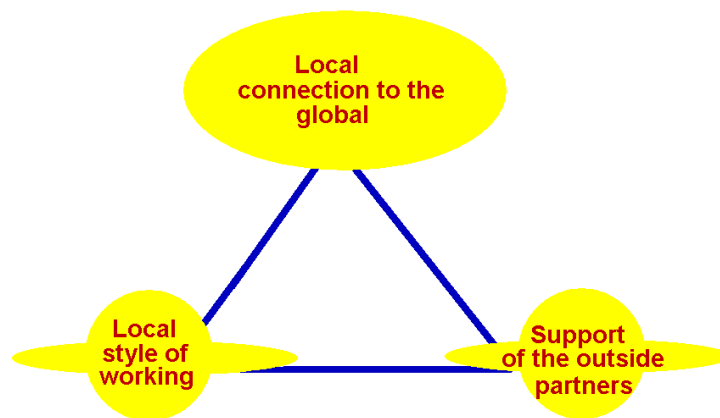


Figure 4: Factors of success in Upper Karelia

#### 4. General conclusion about information society projects

Relying on the experience of Upper Karelia and also other rural information technology projects, following conclusions can be drawn and taken into account when planning and evaluating information society projects.

*Learning (information technology) improves self-esteem*

The barriers that one has to overcome to be able to use information networks can be classified into three main categories: 1) the access to the network, which can be provided with some policy measures, that provide computers, physical infrastructure etc; 2) the skills and knowledge needed in using networks, which can be provided with adequate training; and 3) the motivation, which is often the hardest barrier of all (Viherä 1999). The experience, however is that people of all ages learn how to use information network, if they find it useful and if they want to learn it.

In the cases where these barriers have been overcome, both the self-image of people and the public image of localities, have changed dramatically. I just mention two examples of heroic learners from case studies of my own. In early 1990's in a project of telematics in social work, a group of middle-aged social workers with no earlier office or language skills learned to use email programmes with English user interface, and they had to type the commands in English, too. One of them told me that prompts and commands were like "smoke signals of some Indian tribe", but these ladies learned them because using the email decreased their need of daily driving, saving time (and money). In Upper Karelia, there is a similar experience. About two years ago a group of unemployed persons started a training course in information technology. Later they have become star trainers of the new community network. The knowledge of the local people, their needs, and their starting level, has made these trainers irreplaceable. These "heroes of learning" have become public figures telling their story in journals and television, and to groups of visitors, politicians and researchers. The image of Upper Karelia, in the media, has changed. Earlier declining place without any future has become arena of exiting developments, a centre for a new, locally based networking culture.

#### *Information technology projects needs non-technological (e.g. social) objectives*

If we define the objectives of projects only in terms of technological improvement, we get systems used only by technical experts serving the economic elite. We may get faster computers, wider and faster channels, expert knowledge systems, efficient social control, may be producing fast profits for a small elite, and entertainment for the middle-classes. However, we may at the same time lose some valuable possibilities, such as personal development, improved communities, and civilising network contents. Manuel Castells (1998) draws a gloomy picture of the information age, if the sense of social purpose and social responsibility is lost: Our economy, society and culture are built on interests, values, institutions and systems of representation, that, by and large, limit collective creativity, *confiscate the harvest of information technology* and deviate our energy into self-destructive confrontation.

#### *Information society project is a learning process*

The good results of the Learning Upper Karelia can be explained by a successful combination of three kinds of factors: 1) the skilful linking of local resources and local needs to information society development, 2) the adequate outside support in financing and expertise, and 3) the enthusiastic, committed and innovative style of local implementation. It was collective learning by doing.

The recent OECD report (1998) on the best local development practices concludes that good practices are contextually embedded, because that is what the local development is about, the action suitable for local special conditions: "The main lesson that can be learned from existing knowledge on transfer processes is that policy-makers should not attempt simply to transplant policy from one area to another in a passive and one-directional manner."

*One project is not enough.*



In some Finnish rural areas a local information technology coalition (or a bloc, if we want to refer to its hegemonic role) has brought together different kinds of groups: rural developers, new rural inhabitants with high education, and rural entrepreneurs. The objective of such a coalition is to create new activities and objectives, which connect the local development to general waves of development. It draws a new vision about the future of the place. At the same time it changes the forms of interaction between urban and rural societies. It is acting against social exclusion of rural and peripheral locations. The development bloc often creates trouble for the old local leadership and it may disturb the political balance of power. In a sense, it aims for the local hegemony: it talks about the future and claims to represent the interests of the local people; it defines a strategy or a programme that unites several groups in joint action.

## **5. What is rural in the success story of Upper Karelia?**

When looking at the success factors we cannot point to success factors that are rural in the conventional sense of rural resources, such as natural resources, features of agriculture and forestry, newly found values of natural environment, or traditional community or local heritage and way of life. We have people who are utilising the rural natural and cultural resources, and who are attached to their home place, and are motivated to maintain and improve the living conditions there. If we look it from the viewpoint of conventional rural resources, the perspective of the area is defensive struggle against overpowering tendencies of declining incomes and jobs in agriculture and forestry, and bitter struggle to maintain the public services needed in training and social and health services.

In this light, it may be asked, how is such a project possible in such conditions. Such innovations should be found in more urban and certainly in more central places. Manuel Castells thoughts about the uneven development in information age, may help to understand the general possibility of such breakthroughs in improbable locations.

*Manuel Castells: Network vs. self*

Manuel Castells has analysed the logic of Information Age as uneven development (1996, 1997, 1998). According to Castells new informational economy is a new stage of capitalism, whose productivity is based on knowledge and information. The *spirit of informationalism* is to be found in network enterprises, not in the values and behaviour of the individual entrepreneur. This process has both positive and negative consequences. The positive one is the growing number of high skilled workers, which means cutting down barriers of social upward mobility. The negative side of this development is that rich are capable of shutting out the concerns of the poor in their own country, as they aim to please their fellows in the elite in other country. A new Fourth World is being formed, that of the excluded and impoverished territories and populations, including parts of otherwise wealthy regions.

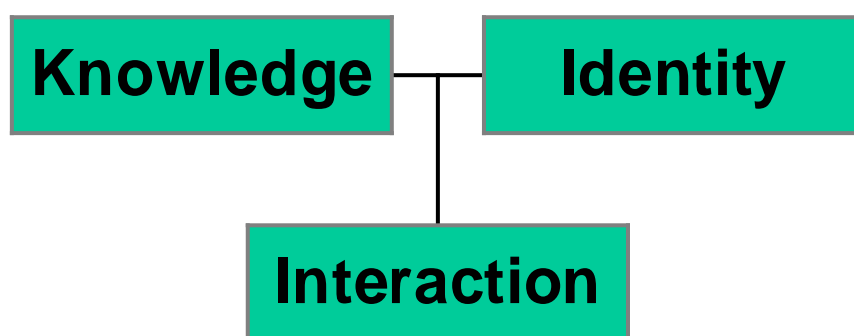
Castells idea supports the experience and conclusion that we have made in North Karelia, that information society has exclusive mechanisms of its own. Those peripheral regions, which have become peripheries during the industrial growth, are now facing new kinds of threat of becoming peripheries of the information age. Against these new threats of exclusion new measures are needed, that focus on overcoming the new dimension of peripherality, that is the issue of connection to the networks of economy, policy-making, training, research etc.

Castells brings into action also mentality or cultural factor, which explains the new forms of resistance with help of identity policies. According to him network mentality strips both firms and individuals of any secure sense of identity. There is a decline of career employment. Nothing can be

done if one has not become a node in a network. Once the job is done, new jobs force into new network configurations. Both human and corporate lives are defined by the project. Against all this erosion of continuity stands *the "self"*. People assert their identity by putting emphasis on the particularities of place, ethnicity, nation, gender or religion. Whereas informational capitalists treat the network as an instrument, the new social movements rely on the network for their sense of solidarity and, hence, they may become gatekeepers of the network's democratic potential. Crisis of democracy, decline of state power and corruption of national (media-visualised) politics gives *new opening for more locally organised social movements* which know how to use media.

### *Knowledge and identity as resources*

The Learning Upper Karelia has built its result by training and learning. The good results are very much connected with improved identity and image. In the upcoming field of study of social capital there was an interesting article by Ian Falk and Sue Kilpatrick (2000), that defined social capital in terms of knowledge, identity and interaction. The collective learning process in Upper Karelia could be seen in terms of constructing and using knowledge and identity as resources.



**Figure 5: Elements of social capital, based on Falk & Kilpatrick 2000**

In case of Upper Karelia *knowledge resources* used and accumulated would be: Knowledge of networks inside and outside the area, knowledge of what skills and resources are available via the networks. They include also knowledge of rules of behaviour in the net, which knowledge was actually very actively created inside the net, as was knowledge of values and purposes of actors in the network. One must not forget knowledge of access points and skills needed in using them, which was the core content of the peer training system.

The central role of *identity* changes have been mentioned several times. Identity as resources used and built would include the following: improved self-confidence (by learning), creation of common objectives, visions, and purpose. Successful problem solving together created trust to others in the project. The public image of the community was improved. All this increased commitment to the project and the whole concept of learning district.

The special quality of interaction inside the project group and also externally with outside partners, is according to Falk & Kilpatrick essential to construction of social capital. "Social Capital is produced and used in social interaction" (op.cit. 101). Their almost programmatic statement,

“Social Capital can only originate in local interaction” (op.cit. p. 103), highlights the very core the success factors found in evaluation, as well as their comment on community. Not all local interactions create knowledge and identity resources, the quality of interactions matters, too. They propose that in this sense meaningful interactions take place in community. It is not a traditional community, nor a loose community of style or consumption. This kind of community is modern one (like communities of practice), it is "community-of-common-purpose". People may have multiple memberships in this kind of communities. The life of community seems to be defined by its purpose. (op.cit. 103). In case of Upper Karelia, one may say that the project became identical with a community-of-purpose.

*Upper Karelia's key: rural knowledge and identity resources?*

This frame of thoughts send us looking for strengths in following aspects of rural life:

1) Create new possibilities for interaction. 2) Locally started new initiatives of interactions between rural and urban people, and between new and old rural inhabitants. 3) Turning the experience of being in periphery into motive for action initiatives. 4) Turning local rural knowledge into network contents, needed and used by local people. This may widen the access to these existing resources. 5) Helping rural people to connect to regional, national and international networks to find partners and knowledge resources.

#### **References:**

Castells, Manuel (1996, 1997, 1998) Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Vol. 1. The Rise of the Network Society. Blackwell 1996. Vol. 2. The Power of Identity. Blackwell 1997. Vol. 3. End of Millenium. Blackwell 1998.

Falk, Ian & Sue Kilpatrick: "What is Social Capital? A Study of Interaction in Rural Community." Sociologia Ruralis Vol. 40, No 1, January 2000, 88 - 110.

OECD (1998) Best Practices in Local Development. The Local Economic and Employment Development Programme (LEED).

Oksa, Jukka: "Descendants in information age: telecottage experiments in Finland." In Leo Granberg and Jouko Nikula (eds): The Peasant State. The State and rural questions in 20th century Finland. University of Lapland publications in the social sciences B. 20. Rovaniemi 1995, pp. 149-164.

Oksa, Jukka: "Are Leaping Frogs Freezing? Rural Peripheries in Competition." Teoksessa Heikki Eskelinen and Folke Snickars (eds) Competitive peripheries? Springer 1995, 183-204.

Oksa, Jukka ja Jarno Turunen (2000a) Paikallinen kansalaisverkko - Oppivan Ylä-Karjalan arviointitutkimus. Joensuun yliopisto. Karjalan tutkimuslaitoksen monisteita University of Joensuu. Karelian Institute. Working Papers N:o 5/2000. 77 s. (Local Community. Net Evaluation Study of the Learning Upper Karelia Project, English summary homepage: <http://www.joensuu.fi/ktl/projsoc/upperkar.htm>).

Oksa, Jukka and Jarno Turunen (2000b) Local Community Net as New Model of Regional Policy: Case of the Learning Upper Karelia Project. A paper to be presented in MOST CCPPP workshop, Joensuu and Polvijärvi, Finland 15 - 19 November 2000.

Vihäriä, Marja-Liisa (1999) Ihminen tietoyhteiskunnassa - kansalaisten viestintävalmiudet kansalaisyhteiskunnan mahdollistajana. Turun kauppakorkeakoulun julkaisu A-1: 1999. (People and Information Society - The Citizens' Communication Skills and the Opening of New Prospects for the Civil Society.)