

Sotkamo Story: From Land Owning Family Farms to Sport Tourism

The long-term economic change in Sotkamo can be connected with the rise of Vuokatti area into a sport tourism attraction. This change is here described in such a way that its connections to Restrım themes of international comparisons are highlighted.

Traditional livelihood in forestry and milk farming

Connected to Scottish, Irish & Norwegian themes

Forests have been the traditional source of livelihoods in Sotkamo, as well as in other parts of Kainuu Region. During the 1900s family farms and land owning farming families living in villages became the backbone of the local society. Compared to other municipalities the size of farms in Sotkamo was larger and production was more modernised. There were also small-farmers working as a labour force in forestry logging. However, compared to other parts of Kainuu Regions, which had the image of hunger land, forest workers and small farmers giving political support for backwoods leftists, Sotkamo was a place of robust farmers, who supported the patriotic centre forces and believed in local autonomy and self reliance.

The strength of farming families was able to make Sotkamo a regional centre of milk-processing, which lead also later to the founding of bio-tech laboratory aimed to help in product development of milk production. The Sotkamo dairy owners (farmers) participated in the 1990s an attempt to create a new milk product brand "Aito-Maito" ("The Genuine Milk") into the toughly competitive Finnish milk product markets. The attempt did fail and the Sotkamo dairy went into the ownership of the major milk product chain, which is now closing down the dairy plant, and biotech laboratory is looking for new partners in the snowpolis networks.

The tradition of trusting one's own strength and ability can be seen in the spirit of Sotkamo municipality, in local ideas of entrepreneurship and also in traditions of local village actions.

Vuokatti becomes a centre of sports and tourism

Connected to Scottish, Irish & Norwegian themes

Vuokatti's fame as an impressive landscape has long historical roots. It has been described in works of many national writers and painters. The rise of Vuokatti's visibility and positive image has been a joint result of many simultaneous factors: Vuokatti Sport College as an international training centre of skiing, Katinkulta Spa Hotel, and finally Sotkamo Jymy baseball championships. One of the additional factors has been the emerging co-operation connecting the efforts of various enterprises, the Sport College, voluntary organisations, and the municipality. The local travel business has gone through several failures, bankrupts and reorganisations. Now Vuokatti is able to attract both winter and summer tourists, and its rate of occupancy is comparably high. Especially in the field of tourism marketing there have been different solutions that have been replaced with new ones.

One of the new constellations in Vuokatti is the co-operation between tourism enterprises and the Sport College. Sport College is owned by the Finnish Skiing Association, which has channelled into

Vuokatti public support, international contacts, publicity brought by big events. In earlier years the Sport College lived a separate life of its own, but recently it has become a participant in many local development efforts. It has been active in many innovative projects (for example, plastic jumping hill, high altitude cottage, ski tube) which have been used also in marketing of its services. Many international events have brought about media publicity. In addition, the enlarging of the new Sotkamo Sport Gymnasium (Upper Secondary School with special programme in sports) has brought new activities into the Sport Collage facilities. College has developed its own training programme, specialising in its strength in Nordic winter sports, and lately also in Finnish baseball.

The growth of tourism has created possibilities for small tourism enterprises and their networks. Many of these have started as a part of farming, but after years they have grown into enterprises of accommodation, catering and programme services. Change from agriculture to tourism may have taken as long as twenty years, before tourism is the main source of income. Difficulties have been many and surprising. In case of one entrepreneur it took seven years to get a permit to put up signs of his enterprise on the roadside. Now there are many specialised tourist enterprises. Hotel Suvikas is a small quality hotel and restaurant, attracting friends of cross-country skiing from Western Europe. Organic Farm Heikkilä tells its story how a civil servant went back to his parents' farm to start a new way of life on a scenic hilltop, offering food and accommodation by the ski and hiking route. Hiidentorppa is combining village shop, meeting hall, park of domestic animals, and catering and accommodation.

Strong role of Municipality - From Local Welfare State to Development Agent

Connected to Scottish, Swedish & Italian themes

When the Finnish Welfare State developed its system of public services, municipalities expanded taking responsibility of providing many of the public services (social care, compulsory education, and general health services). The state provided financial support. Many of these reforms created new jobs in rural administrative centres, especially for women. The "new gender contract" of the welfare state liberated women to participate in labour market by giving them a right for childcare, which simultaneously created many female jobs in social sector. In Finnish case one could say that also a new rural-urban contract was created as the idea of welfare state and the autonomy of rural communities were married together.

Recently the cuts in public spending have limited the real options of municipalities, which have been forced to cut some of their public services. In spite of this Sotkamo's public services have been regarded as being reasonably good.

The time of local welfare state increased the role of municipal administrative centre, which attracted jobs and enterprises and residents. Remote villages lost their youth to municipal centres, if not to bigger centres.

Within the welfare state a new municipal function of industrial planning emerged. Sotkamo hired its first industrial secretary in 1975. The municipality developed direct lobbying connections to the central administration. The municipality was active in starting also enterprises if they were regarded as of strategic importance (Electronic component company Valco, Talc Quarry, Tulikettu Hotel, Vuokatti Slopes enterprise, Tourism marketing). However, the municipality has learned to release its investments by selling the enterprises to private actors. Sotkamo has been recognised nationally for successful reconstruction of the role of municipality; it was nominated among the municipalities as having "the best image" in 1997, being the "best developer" in 1998, and being the "most creative" in 2000.

Settlement structure and land-use-planning

Connected to all comparative themes

The heritage of Sotkamo, like many rural locations in Finland, was the scattered settlement structure of villages of farming families owning fields and forests.

The welfare state instigated the growth of the Sotkamo administrative centre, where services and manufacturing were concentrated. Against these processes of concentrating new village action movement was created in the late 1970s. Today many of the villages are still active, fighting for their services, to improve their infrastructure and connections and trying to maintain their residents and identity. Many villages are developing rural tourism on village level, organising events and festivities for summer guests and tourists.

Since the 1980's there has been a growth of regional centres, attracting people and enterprises from a larger commuting area. People commuting to work, and looking for better services and products cross the old municipal borders. Some people move after better housing conditions to more rural environment. In Kainuu Region this development can be seen around Kajaani town. In Sotkamo this development has increased the connections between Vuokatti settlement and Kajaani city. A self-enforcing service economy axis of Kajaani and Vuokatti sport tourism has emerged. This coalition of Kajaani and Vuokatti has shadowed and bypassed the municipal centre of Sotkamo. One example of this is the current (autumn 2002) bankruptcy of the Hotel Tulikettu, which was founded with the strong support of the municipality 20 years ago. Now the municipality of Sotkamo has started to develop the transport corridor between the administrative centre and Vuokatti.

Land-use planning has become a problem for development in many minds. The demand for construction land around Vuokatti Hill and near Kajaani city has increased. Land-prices have gone up. This is reflected even in more remote villages of Sotkamo, where construction lot may cost twice as much as across the municipal border. Decisions about land-use plans in Vuokatti area have been difficult, because there are many private landowners, whose expectations have run wild. The municipality has the responsibility for land-use plans, and municipal officers may encounter contradicting demands. The process of land-use planning is criticised to be too slow and too complicated. In some cases, however, municipality has been able to anticipate the future needs for land, as in the case of Katinkulta, where municipality bought land that was later used as an area for golf course.

Local politics and decision-making

Connected to Swedish & Italian themes

In Finland there are many small municipalities with autonomous decision-making and taxation rights. However the autonomy of municipalities is very limited because of the many law-defined responsibilities and tight budgets. Some experts calculate that only 10% of the municipal budget are available for local decision-making.

In Sotkamo the industrial policy of the municipality has been brave and risk taking. In the history of Sotkamo tourism policies there are also undeniable failures and mistakes. In the 1990s the municipality decided to do radical cuts in its costs and number of employees, which has influenced the working atmosphere also later.

The political power has been in the hands of the Centre Party (earlier agrarian party) since the 1970s. Nowadays it has 20 seats of the 35 in the Municipal Council. It has filled also the chair posts

of both the Council and the Executive Board. The party has power to push things through, but for some decisions simple majority is not enough, so it needs also to maintain some relations of trust with other parties, especially the second largest, which is the Leftist Coalition. Also being such a large group means that many contradictory interests can be found inside the Centre Party group, for example conflicts between the villages and the two central areas, between farmers and other entrepreneurs etc. The Sotkamo mode of decision-making depends very much of the learning process of the local centre party leaders, their skills to balance needs of cooperation and effective decision-making. There can be found contradictory and mutually exclusive evaluation of the decision-making in the data.

Local atmosphere and image construction

Connected especially to Norwegian & Irish themes, partly to Scottish and Italian, too

One particular feature of Sotkamo development has been the way in which its media image has been constructed and utilised. The image construction has connected together the different interests and needs of tourism, sports (baseball), and the municipality. These interests found each other around the mid 1990s, with the threats of the economic slump and the hopes created by the new successes in baseball. The slowdown of economy had instigated more intensive co-operation between Katinkulta Spa hotel, Sport College and other organisations. The local elite was looking for some positive national publicity to replace of the "pauperisation discourse". The municipality had cut down its number of employees and was looking for structures and new ways of action. The co-operation around tourism marketing was changed from municipality driven organisation into contribution driven (one mark - one vote) activity. The decision-making in joint marketing has become more effective and more centralised. The small enterprises felt they lost some visibility and criticised the bigger actors for not really directing client flows into smaller businesses. New marketing aimed for a more streamlined and homogenous image, where tourism, recreation and sport facilities of the Vuokatti Hill area (hills and lakes) would be the focus. The critics say that Vuokatti Hill area is being turned into a "tourist and sport slum", and Sotkamo's development effort are concentrated too much into Vuokatti. One threat is that the development of the municipality centre itself is slowing and withering away.

The development of tourism and the construction of the image have taken place hand in hand. Some new resources available, for example from the EU programmes, have been utilised. The representatives of Sotkamo have secured that the strengths of Sotkamo are listed in the priorities of the Kainuu Regional plans, e.g. tourism, skiing tourism, food manufacturing. Regional programmes have brought funds to several large projects of Sotkamo (such as the Ski Tube, Vuokatti Centre, Half Pipe Tube, Enlarging the Sport Gymnasium). Before them several investments had been made in Vuokatti sport facilities (swimming hall, sport hall, ice hockey hall etc). Focusing the efforts into the strengths has resulted that the municipality has not been eager to put resources into rural development and "small" village development projects, or cultural projects. This has created critical attitudes among these groups.

Turning the image of Vuokatti Hill into a brand has utilised the earlier images and symbols, which have been given a more modern new form. Using the expertise of visual marketing something old has been maintained and turned into something new. The starting point has been the old symbol of the local sport club, which consisted of a triangle with a blue and green background of Vuokatti landscape and letters "SJ" (Sotkamon Jymy), in the front. The traditional colours of sport club were dark blue and white (note that Finnish national colours are blue and white). The old image was replaced with violet background and white wave (profile of Vuokatti Hill) and the word "Vuokatti". Also the municipality of Sotkamo has supported the use of this new image as its logo. The municipality, however, uses also its coat of arms, consisting of blue log profile on silver

background. The Sport College has started to use the new Vuokatti logo and the Vuokatti Ski Team uses the new colours and logo, which are easily recognised in television broadcasts of national skiing competitions. The transition to new colours has not been straightforward; one can see also jackets and images using blue and white.

The threat of In-comers and Russian tourists?

Connected to Norwegian & Irish themes

It has been often said that Finnish rural mentality does not like in-comers or newcomers? Although Sotkamo can be regarded as a relatively international place on Finnish scale, there is still some on-going discussion on these terms. Some persons that have moved from somewhere else in Finland and have been living in Sotkamo may be for decades, still feel that they are in-comers. Amongst the local people there are some prejudices against the Russians, which are an important group of hotel customers during the mid-winter season (especially around the New Year). Some echoes of the war memories can be heard, and there is also discourse about the new rich Russians, and suspicions about connections to Russian Mafia. On the other hand the locals do recognise the economic importance of the Russian tourists for the local economy, because they fill an otherwise low season of tourism. One the important aims of Vuokatti marketing is the levelling out of seasonal fluctuation of tourist flows with emphasising the many-sided nature of Vuokatti area and its services.

Gender and voluntary action in money oriented local economy?

Connected to Swedish, Irish and Norwegian themes

Different views about local development seem to be gender related. The activities around baseball club have been turning into market driven activity, where participation is valued more and more in economic terms. The voluntary activities of sport clubs are seen as one part of the local economic activity. This tendency has been partly criticised by women, who say that before sports became business they used to participate eagerly voluntary work. Can this be interpreted in terms of local anti-globalisation as protest against male-dominated market economy? One should not make the boys of our village into the pawns of markets without any conditions! One may think that also the critic coming from cultural activists against the mainstream of development is also gender related.

The new business-like practices have penetrated the voluntary activities very rapidly in baseball. The new turn took place when the men's baseball team won again, after almost 30 years, Finnish championship in the early 1990s. The Jymy baseball phenomenon has influenced the local life in many ways. It has challenged the weight of different sectors of sport in municipal politics. There have been many investments in the facilities for the baseball. The construction of the new stand in the baseball stadium was a huge effort of many voluntary working hours. The location of the stand caused a contradiction between baseball and track and field. The baseball party won and the stand was built inside the running track of the local sport field, which made the field useless for track and field events. The next large effort was construction of an artificial sand-grass cover of the field, which was also accomplished mainly with voluntary work.

Various identity struggles have been fought inside the general sport club, when the baseball has grown step by step into a separate domain of its own. Nowadays a separate Baseball Club Jymy-Pesis (doing voluntary work) has a deal with the enterprise SuperJymy that is running the super league games. The enterprise Jymy pays also to the baseball club for the use of its players. The municipality is paying money to SuperJymy for its services in Sotkamo image marketing.

New contradictions and tension have come out in connection of the two scandals of top sports in Finland. The latest was the doping scandal of the Finnish national ski team in Lahti World Championship Games. Before that there was a scandal of the Finnish Baseball super league, where several top teams were accused of agreeing the result beforehand (to influence the betting results). These nation-wide scandals have stained the fame of some local heroes (sportsmen and trainers) and this has influenced the attitudes of local people towards sports and towards participation in voluntary work.