

Rural youth policies in Estonia: promoting leaving or staying?

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Introduction

The notion of 'rural youth' rarely emerges in policy documents: in Estonia, there are no special policy strategies concentrating on rural youth in particular. The policies concerning the rural youth are covered by different ministries and strategies, involving youth policies, regional development strategies and educational regulations. The aims and scopes of these documents are not always in accordance with each other and some may have conflicting aspects in them. **The aim of this paper is to open up some of the contradictions that young rural people are objected to.** Briefly describing the social conditions around young rural inhabitants today, it also opens up the major points in policies that concern their lives and the representations of rural lives, as well as the discourses of youth transitions surrounding them.

Estonian rural youth context

As in many other European countries, young people are the most rapidly urbanising demographic group in rural areas. Most commonly, young people migrate to urban areas for studying purpose and do not return due to the lack of qualified job prospects in rural areas. In Estonia, more than a half of the rural youngsters choose urban school already during the secondary education (gymnasium grades, from 9th to 12th, starting from the age of 16) and as much as 38% choose a gymnasium outside their home parish even if there is a gymnasium there (Värnik *et al.* 2011).

The diminishing proportion of young people is also caused by changes in demographical behaviour in Estonia. In contrast with other European countries, in Estonia the birth rate was rising until the end of the 1980s, when it reached its peak with 25 060 babies born in 1988, while the mean age of giving birth to the first child was 23 years (mean age of giving birth was 26). As the women started to postpone having kids and the age of giving birth rose, there was a sharp decline in birth rate (postponing results usually also with having less kids). As a result, only 12 167 babies were born a decade later, in 1998 (though by 2008 it had risen to 16 028). Today, mean age for giving birth to the first child is 26 years (mean age of giving birth is 29 years). Contextualising these processes in rural areas, this means that while in some rural schools there are 20 youngsters in the average gymnasium class, there are only 10 going to school. In some regions the numbers are even smaller. While one can still see a lot of youngsters aged 18-25 around, in ten years from now there will be an inevitable decline.

Policies concerning rural youth

Regional and educational policies

In the regional development strategy document (2005-2015) the problem of youth migration is pointed out, stating that more than half of the young people graduating from the school intend to leave their home area, which diminishes the population numbers in small areas and makes the age structure of rural areas 'problematic' (*Regional Development Strategy*, 2005: 15). It also states that the aim of the regional policy is to ensure that all Estonian regions would be attractive places to live as well as to do business (*Regional... 2005*: 3).

To ensure that these aims are fulfilled, there are several regional programs launched, many backed with the money from European Union's Development Fund. While the funding involves multiple fields, the most visible are the investments in buildings. Several rural schools have been recently renovated, youth centres been erected in renovated buildings, centres of culture or sporting venues have been built or renovated. To be sure, these developments have an effect of creating an atmosphere of (positive) change and development and make the areas more attractive. However, in the light of demographic changes these investments may remain unfruitful. Though in many places the renovated buildings are huge enough to host the pupils of the biggest urban gymnasiums, the number of kids attending the schools is diminishing rapidly. In addition, the new gymnasium legislation initiated by Ministry of Education (*Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act*, 2010) presupposes the dividing of primary schools and gymnasiums in the future. It also aims closing down smaller gymnasiums: the idea being that all the remaining gymnasiums offer options of studying different study branches in depth. If we consider the diminishing size of the age group that will soon be in gymnasiums and the proportion of those preferring urban gymnasiums anyway, we can see that in many places closing down gymnasiums in rural areas due to small numbers of pupils is unavoidable. However, often functioning educational institutions are considered prerequisites for preventing the extinction of rural areas (Kovacs, 2012; Haartsen and Van Wissen, 2012) as entire families may consider moving away. Thus, often the regional policies that invest into buildings do not consider the larger demographic and migration processes or the aims of educational policies, creating conflicting signals for the rural youth. Enormous freshly renovated school buildings with little or no pupils in them can create a sense of abandonment and senseless investments, undermining the reputation of the authorities.

Contemporary youth work in rural areas

The youth policy strategy (*Strategy of Youth Work 2006-2013*) states that society needs young people with constructive initiative who are actively contributing to the development of a better society; it also states that in contemporary society, responsibility and activism is expected at very early age (2006: 15). The strategy is concomitant with the overall developments in the society of individualism, according to which self-realisation and finding one's path is the responsibility of the individual (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 1998). Rather than presenting one's life as a walk along a predetermined path, this approach presupposes choice as the responsibility of the young and youth work has to create the atmosphere and opportunities for this. This type of youth work is in contrast with the youth work prevalent in the Soviet era, when most of the young

people were recruited to youth organisation (pioneers, komsomol) and attending the activities was almost compulsory.

Contemporary type of youth work also means that it has become project-based and activity-centred: in order to provide activities for young people, institutions (youth organisations, municipalities) have to apply for money for every project separately either from the European Union Regional funds or the central government, since the stable budgeting financing in this field is scarce on municipal level. During the last decade and especially in connection with joining the EU (in 2004) the project-financing scheme has become prevailing and the financial resources also more prosperous, contributing to the development of youth work in regions with active communities. However, this type of youth work presupposes initiative and enthusiastic adults who take up the work voluntarily (apply for finances for the projects). This also means that human capital becomes crucial and, considering its scarcity in rural regions, this makes the character of youth work shaky and temporary. Regions with lack of initiative (both among youth workers or youth themselves) are probably marginalising further. To put it differently, the aim of promoting activism in youth may not be fulfilled due to this paradoxical policy presuming individual initiative – young people who have not been socialized in these lines (in the regions where active adults are missing) may be left aside.

Leaving or staying?

How do these policies and strategies affect the actual lived young rural lives? The post-socialist changes in Estonian rural areas have been taken place throughout the lives of the contemporary young. As small places are sensible to any kind of changes, these young people may have experienced sharp declines or quick recoveries after the restructuring of the economies. Quite likely, only few young people know any adults with linear life course unaffected by the changes of the 1990s. This can affect the youngsters' perception of the future in many ways depending on the direction of change they have witnessed (for better or for worse). If the home area of the young has been affected by decline (closing down the schools, sudden drop in population, lack of initiative and thus, scarce financing for youth projects), it probably can work as push effect for the young people to leave the area. The negative perceptions of home region may be further enhanced by the media constructions of rurality, which often tend to marginalize the rural areas. However, negative images can cause also 'perceived barriers' (Irvin *et al.* 2012): young people are socialized in a way that tells them there is no better future if they originate from this geographical spot.

Positive change and project-base youth work along with the contemporary discourse of individual self-fulfilment can influence young people to treat their lives as being on the move and encourage them to take (individual) responsibility to change their lives or the environment they live in. Many youth projects in rural areas involve youth exchange all around the world. In combination with recent changes in online media consumption (social media scenes) the world for these youngsters may get smaller and the attachment to a geographical location may be losing its importance (Thissen *et al.*, 2010). These developments can provide young people with possibilities to experience both: being a global citizen, but living at the same time in a rural neighbourhood.

However, providing young people the opportunities of broadening their world beyond the local neighbourhood may also create 'pull' effect for the young people to leave: young people want to explore the world to get more experiences.

In rural societies, social mobility and geographical mobility are often interconnected: those more likely to out-migrate are also those who are prone to experience upward social mobility or those from upper social layers. Migration tends to be class-specific: young people from the educated middle class often leave rural areas in search of a better education or job opportunities (Rye and Blekesaune, 2007). As recent research confirms (Nugin 2014, *forthcoming*), many youth workers also see leaving the rural areas as moving forward: a way of self-realisation, rather than going away. Yet, these patterns are not as straightforward. On the other hand side, strong connection with place and the feeling of being part of the processes that change the area for the better can create a feeling of self-fulfilment as well.

Conclusion

Young rural people have to negotiate their transitions in complicated social conditions. While some have witnessed the decline (closing down vital institutions, massive out-migration), the others have seen quick progress (renovating schools and youth centres, international student exchange, new local initiatives). Yet, most of them also observe contradicting state policies (closing down gymnasiums which have been freshly renovated, project-based youth work which needs initiative which is missing etc.). Late modern ways of building up an identity are complex, and attachment to geographical locations has been diminished. There is another point to it: strong attachment to place is not a prerequisite for staying in the area as well as detachment does not always translate into leaving (Drozdowski, 2008). Sometimes young people use their local attachment as a resource of creating their identities, yet not living constantly there. Contemporary possibilities for mobility and commuting (not only in national state borders but also in Europe, or, the world) means that the essence locational identities are changing and sometimes creating social possibilities for rural youth may also enable them to move forward: away. However, by making rural areas attractive, one could achieve the in-migration of people from other areas (including urban).

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