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Challenges for the Local Communities

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Working paper

Challenges for the Local Communities

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Social relations and local communities

This working paper aims at paving the way for further research on the changing relations between citizens and the local environment in which their everyday activities take place. The starting point is the human side of “globalisation”; the forecasted changes in the nature of place-relations following the “disembedding” of social relations from its place specific character (Giddens 1990).

It is based on the discussion going on within the social sciences about the effects on the functioning of places that follows increased mobility and border crossing activities among the citizens. This discussion has been intense for some years within sociology, anthropology, political science, geography etc. The problem has been approached both in terms of globalisation, as a discussion on the disappearance of social capital, as a cultural theory discourse etc. These approaches are largely theoretical and the connection to politics and planning is generally weak. Hence, there is not much of empirical evidence on how much and how these phenomena affect the functioning of cities and towns. Not the least in Sweden, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how this changing “reach” of people reshape the conditions under which local societies is developed.

So, does everyday life and action of individuals span an increased geographical space? Are distanced networks becoming attending an increased focus by the individual? Are the lives of individual split up in various spatial and social environments. If so, how does it affect the local social relations? Does it mean that localities are losing their ability to offer locally based identity, trust, and other basic human needs.

This kind of questions are becoming increasingly important. Since decades we have a regional research tradition focussing on economic restructuring, regional policies, migration, etc. The increasing spatial unevenness with another round of fast urbanisation is raising new questions demanding a deepening understanding on the nature of social and economic changes, putting them into a perspective of increased globalisation not only of the economy. In many parts of Sweden we are witnessing a depopulation while in others there are obvious problems related to growth. This situation activates an interest in the very nature of the relations between individual and the place. Is it possible to develop politics and planning towards strengthening the

bonds? This is something that will have to involve the infrastructure/built environment as well as the institutions, the activities, the forums for social relations. In the end such a process should aim at a planning process that can promote the development of place-bound identity and “lived experiences”. Planning for place rather than placelessness.

The research must be able to detect the variations between various types

The breaking up of the local

Anthony Giddens (1990) describes a long-term transformation in which social relations are lifted out of their local sphere of interaction and restructured into unlimited space. These changes could be considered part of the modernisation process (as for Giddens) or of the globalisation which is now broadly recognised. In the following, the impact of these changes on the local community is discussed.

Barbro Blehr (2000) has recognised four characteristics of the “the local” as it has been traditionally used in anthropology and sociology. The first is that local individuals are interacting with others that are not anonymous to them. The relations are multiplex, i.e. they interact in more than one capacity. The second characteristic is the intimate relations and familiarity that individuals living a “local life“ develop to the natural landscape and to the built environment. The third point is about the deep historical place-relations that the individuals have. The time dimension of identity is accumulated over time and slowly rooted in the inhabitants, paving the way for a place-related identity. The fourth characteristic of “the local” is about its self-sufficient character, indicating that “locals” tend to stay in the familiar locality an environment that is largely taken for granted. This separates the “locals” from the “cosmopolites” who cross the borders travelling, who’s every day lives are multi-located, who go beyond the local horizons in their understanding of the surroundings etc. A possible fifth point is that the existence of “the local” is supposed to promote the development of local culture. The main conclusion of Barbro Blehr is that modernisation and globalisation not only alter the conditions for the community, they “also undermine in every aspect the characteristics of the local.”

Appadurai argues (1996) that a *general rupture* in the tenor of intersocietal interactions has taken place in the past few decades. He sees it as one of the problematic legacies in western social science that it has steadily reinforced the sense of some single moment creating a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present, between tradition and modernity. Yet, Appadurai argues, the world in which we now live involve a *general break with all sorts of past*. The fundamental new that is taking place is that media and migration give rise to interactions of a new order and intensity. Individuals and groups incorporate the global into their own practices. Group identities are becoming less spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious and culturally homogenous. When bonds between the individuals are weakening the base for a cultural reproduction in the local environment changes. “The local” as a lived experience is fading away which does not mean that the world is getting culturally homogenous. These changes are something that various societies are exposed to and adapt to in various ways.

Within geography the fundamental importance of places and the processes that reconstruct place is under continuing debate. The notion of “place” is not exactly translated into the concept of “local” used by anthropologists but in terms of how they are constructed they come close. Harvey (1993) has stressed the forces that are continually working to reconstruct the place. The struggles that people fight for a better society is always physically located, Harvey argues. We don’t abandon the places because we are plants that needs roots. Nevertheless places are threatened by technological change, rationalism, mass production and mass values. This takes Harvey to a cry for place-politics, politics that are based on and rooted in the fundamental urgency of place for humans.

Another path in the discussion on changing relations between individuals and the local community is promoted by Robert Putnam. In *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam shows that the direct contacts between people are on a rather quick decline in the US. Both the number of activities in voluntary associations and the private relations have decreased since the 1970`s. Putnam is building on two kind of sources. One is the share of the population that are members in or and active in organisations and formalised activities. Putnam is able to show that fewer go to the church, fewer are active in charity organisations, the men does not go to “the club” as much as before etc. The other type of source is studies on private life where Putnam finds that people does not visit each other as before, there are fewer picnics, less card playing etc. The response in Sweden on Putnam´s findings has largely been about the validity of his results in Sweden. Our problems are partly different and perhaps more connected to what kind of social activities we take part in. The membership crisis, for instance, is obvious in the political parties, while the sports clubs are keeping and recruiting members as before. Rohtstein/Kumlin (2001) have questioned Putnam from another departing point; they argue that the public sector institutions are more vital to create a trustful society than the associations studied by Putnam. Putnam stresses that the disappearing “social capital” have been replaced by loneliness and TV. When the bonds between individuals in a local society decline, the society itself becomes weaker. With less trustful relations there are fewer agreements made, indicating some kind of limited activity in the society.

The picture painted here where Blehr describes *globalisation as undermining every aspect of the local*, with Appadurai appointing a *general rupture with all sorts of pasts*, with Putnam describing a *disappearing social capital* leaves us with the question about how to create a sustainable local society, whether a city, a town, a quarter of a town or a village based settlement.

What has been described is largely a loss of relations and nothing about what might have replaced the losses. The arguing of Putnam for instance, about loneliness and TV consumption, is not the only answer to what is taking place with local relations. We can expect variations depending on class, gender, ages etc. While some are becoming more vulnerable or even victims, others are developing new kind of social relations that are not fully recognised precisely because they are different and gradually coming into existence. One important change since 1970 is that the women have entered the

labour market. This might be one of the main reasons for the declining of social capital. Women, as Putnam pointed out, were “social capitalists” paving the way for the men to go to the club. But is it fair to look at it as only a loss of social relations? What if women have got new, work related, social relations that give trust and identity to the individual? Although the work relations may not give rise to so many dinner parties and local associations they can still be seen as assets for the local community.

So, how can we detect new forms of social relations that are developed in other geographical scales and relate them to the local community? These relations may be built on travelling, commuting, internet, telephone etc. and are being reinforced by the medialisation of the society. In all probability they affect both private life and work life. A development of a more dialectic approach to the changes opens up for the possibility of an influx of impulses resulting from an increased “non-local“ interaction of culture and values in the direction that Appadurai and Blehr points out. These interactions will certainly affect the local community in various ways. Therefore they are a necessary points of departure for a planning of the built environment/infrastructure/institutions etc that aims at sustainability.

If there is a double side of the coin - at the same time increased loneliness/ declining relations on the one hand, and the emergence of new kind of relations on the other, we have to make an important distinction: there may be winners and losers. The individuals that are developing new relations may have nothing to be really sorry for. Others who are left “with the local” may be making a loss if the locally based relations are eroding and places are getting “disintegrated”. This is only one possible situation. Keeping in mind that Putnam’s findings are largely unproved in Sweden there is also the option of “the locals” strengthening their local relations while getting away from the “self-sufficiency” with drops of global influx.

There is always both integration and disintegration going on locally. Integration, when the local becomes local, is occurring every time there is a meeting, when a local paper is produced or someone get’s involved in a local institution. Disintegration is when the local becomes less local, when the activities and contacts tend to dissolve the integrating elements. In a typical local community with little external interaction there is little renewal of the base of experience and the vulnerability to changing conditions (markets, politics) may be profound. When the disintegrating forces are increasing there is the risk of the local community becoming weaker and less able to supply the individuals with their place bound needs.

One problem with “the local becoming the local” is that the social role of public space is getting little attention in politics and planning. A territory with little public space where direct communication between individuals can take place gives no option to hand over knowledge and experiences (Bauman 2000). The common understanding of the social relations, the physical environment and the history of place will never be reached. Further, the immediate communication that is possible to reach with free and quick means (leaflets, poster etc.) is declining with increased size of the community. Ingelstam (1998) have stressed the importance of actively renewing social capital, to

facilitate for people to organise themselves together. Simple systems, transparency and a re-thinking of the role of the public sector are important to activate the local citizenship. Also Rohtstein (2001) stress the role of the public sector. Popular movements, voluntary engagement, meeting places are still basic to establish social relations.

This discussion demonstrates that within several disciplines and research fields there is an awareness of a long term transformation of the spatial orientation of individuals which have consequences for the ways that our communities is functioning. Research in the field must be within the disciplines, between the disciplines and also aiming at providing tools for policies and planning that can strengthen the various communities. It must be able to detect and analyse the potential threats to the “local” as well as the prospects lying in increasing external relations. This research must aim at giving support to how the physical environment can support the fulfillment of human needs.

Human reach –

Together with Helena Kåks I have developed the concept of “human reach” (*mänskliga räckhåll*) as a tool for understanding and interpreting the relation of individuals to their physical and social environment (i.e. Kåks/Westholm 1998). The concept is based on works by Hägerstrand (1978) and Törnqvist (1993) and offers an analytical approach to variations in the individuals relation to their surroundings. Every individual establish their own reach which is a sphere of consciousness which makes it possible to see “*humans as thinking, feeling and creative beings in the network of inner and outer contexts*”. (Hägerstrand 1978).

If individuals travel/migrate or communicate more and over longer distances it naturally affects their reach. However, these changes, are due, not to the distances involved but to the experiences that the travelling and the communication result in. Instead of physically visit a place or a person it has been increasingly possible to incorporate the “wider space”, for instance with the aid of technique or through other people. The human reach concept help us to interpret data on for instance the ways that the lives of individuals are divided between various spatial and social environments and how the identity can be shaped by elements that are either locally rooted or learned from a wider space.

A prerequisite for the development of the concept is that reach forms around a person who is active in some sense, who makes use of his surrounding world. Reach is the mental world a person acts, at the same time a kind of space for action and a set of tools. Outer contexts naturally influence the way a person’s reach is formed but individuals are themselves to a varying degree also able to form and change their reach. Studying reach then becomes a matter of ascertaining what these human spaces for action look like and contain as of examining how people make use of them and why.

To capture an individual’s reach, we must be able to regard the life situation from various perspectives. The spatial perspective focuses on the individuals relations to

specific places and to mobility as such. The social perspective is about the individual's relations with other people. The social structure arises and is maintained in some form of social context, which means that we can speak of institutional relationships as well as personal contacts. The third perspective, the temporal, teaches us about the attitude of individuals to the past, present and future "and how they are linked to each other in patterns that constitute the starting point for conceptions of social and cultural orientation" (following Lundmark 1989).

The three perspectives on human reach connects to the previous discussion on "place" and "the local", in which for instance Blehr used the same categories to define the local; the social connections, the relations to the physical environment and the historical place-relations that the individuals have. There is a possible fruitful connection between understanding the reach of citizens and the planning of the physical and institutional environment.

The perspective is laid out. During 2002 we are carrying out a study "Ung i ett rörligt samhälle" based on interviews with young people from one local community in Sweden. It is the third phase of a longitudinal study that started 1995. The planned study will be the third series of interviews with the same individuals. Our intention is to proceed with empirical research on the variations of human reach in four different local communities. Preliminary, we aim at working in one city quarter (perhaps Kista, Stockholm or Angered, Gothenburg) and then two other towns or parts of towns. The fourth case would be a more rural environment in order to cover more of the variety in planning situations across Sweden.

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