

2.2 Local and regional development towards more sustainable communities and regions in rural Komi

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Introduction

A complex palette of understanding and interpretations of the meaning, purposes, and implementations of such a broad concept as sustainable development is detected when applied to the context of the Circumpolar North. Both diverse and unique natural and social systems of the region influenced by multiple processes at the local, regional, national, and international scale underlie the understanding of this phenomenon. This chapter addresses the question of sustainability in the Circumpolar North at the community level and aims to highlight the role of local and regional development in this regard. The research and development project of the University of the Arctic's Thematic Network on Local and Regional Development in the North which has been implemented in the Komi Republic since 2011 is used as a case study. This chapter does not focus on particular results of the project, but on its capability to contribute to sustainability in northern rural communities, specifically in Russia.

Sustainable development paradigm

The concept of sustainable development is problematic given its ambiguity. It has been defined in various ways across numerous disciplines. The definition which is most frequently used as a starting point for further discussions is from the Brundtland Report. It defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987, p. 27). The definition stresses the long-term aspect of sustainability and introduces the principle of achieving equity between generations. Despite criticism, sustainable development as a concept spread rapidly and became central to the mission of modern society.



Some authors, particularly Young (1998), consider sustainable development as an analytical framework intended to provide a basis for systematic thinking about human/environment relations. He places an emphasis on development, stressing that priority should be granted to human concerns pertaining to health, education, and welfare.

There is a shared sense that sustainable development brings new insights into the linkages between economy, society, and the environment. These are often seen as three pillars: economic development, social equity, and environmental protection.

Community development and sustainability

In recent decades, the concept of sustainability has entered the discussions over community development. Understanding of sustainable community development is parallel with the general concept of sustainable development discussed above, with the difference in geographical scope. In this vein, a sustainable community meets its own economic needs, protects the local environment, and enhances local social relationships. A sustainable community has the ability to use its resources to ensure equity for community members and future generations while maintaining the integrity with the local ecological system on which their life depends (Maru and Woodford, 2007). Sustainability of a community is defined in a long-term perspective — one that is focused on both the present and future.

Community development focuses on a specific location. It capitalizes on the strengths of the community and individuals within that community to improve its conditions. It is expected that the residents exhibit high level of participation in the decision-making. Literature review has revealed several elements that are crucial for sustainable community development process.

Local economic diversity is among the main aspects of sustainable community development. Diversification generates local employment opportunities and contributes to *community self-reliance* (Bridger and Luloff, 1999). The development of local markets, local production, local processing of previously imported goods, and greater cooperation among local economic actors are vital for communities to successfully govern their own lives and economies. Self-reliant communities are still linked to larger economic structures and processes, but they are more independent and resilient to external changes and interventions.



There is a common understanding that *participation in the decision-making process based on the traditions of democracy and cultural appropriateness* is critical for community sustainability (Fraser, Dougill, Mabee, Reed, and McAlpine, 2006). Building new types of social relations involves equal participation from the public, private, and voluntary sectors: municipal authorities, educational and research institutions, regional authorities, associations of entrepreneurs, NGOs, etc. Sustainable community development is born on the convergence of their interests and competences. The implications of such a shift in thinking about participation are far-reaching: it requires new participative methods and partnership organisations. The strategy cannot be a one-off initiative; it needs to be an ongoing participatory process, with monitoring, learning, and continuous improvement. In the absence of such efforts, narrow economic and/or political interests are most likely to dominate.

The role of local capacity to create more sustainable societies is a major area of interest within the field of community development. It is assumed that building a community's stock of *social capital* enhances efforts of sustainable community development. Social capital studies call for the strong and reciprocal horizontal and diagonal ties between the members of a community (Aarsæther, 2004). Trust and cooperation have been recognised as the critical components in building and bridging social capital (Adger, 2010; Bærenholdt and Aarsæther, 2002; Stirrat, 2004).

Another fertiliser that fosters community development is *networking* (Virkkala, 2007). Good relationships between individuals and organisations are often the first step towards effective collaboration. Networks are shaped around a common sense that one can assist others in leaning, experiencing, and sharing contacts. A well-connected community aims to strengthen and extend informal networks, support partnerships, and promote social cohesion.

The role of local government is the contribution they make to social and economic development. The position the local authorities take towards a particular initiative often underpins the outcome of local development. As it is not a mandatory function for local governance, municipal authorities can take diverse roles in enabling local development to take place in commercial or civil life, ranging from comprehensive support to being inaccessible or even an obstacle. For numerous reasons, municipal authorities can perform differently towards different initiatives and change their attitudes with time (Aarsæther, 2004).



Sustainable development on a community level may be a more effective means of achieving sustainability than when the concept is applied in broader national or global scales. Community development places sustainability in a specific context where the odds of achieving concrete results are increased. A community-level approach towards sustainability allows for the design and implementation of policies and practices adapted to local opportunities and constraints.

Unravelling sustainability in the Circumpolar North

Applying sustainable development principles in the Circumpolar North in general follows closely the 1987 Brundtland Commission definition. However, an understanding of sustainability is limited without acknowledging the diverse and unique natural, social, and cultural systems of the region along with rapid changes induced by anthropogenic and natural drivers. The northern ecosystem is usually defined as fragile because of its high susceptibility to disturbances and slow regeneration. The social conditions vary, but in many places they include acute economic hardship, deepening poverty, rising unemployment and inequity, poor infrastructure, human insecurity and regional disparities, and youth out-migration. Reindeer herding, fishing and other traditional livelihoods of cultural importance often conflict with other land uses, such as intensive resource exploitation or tourism.

The need for sustainability practices is pressing in this vibrant environment. The reality for the northern communities is how to make the wisest use of a situation and find satisfactory ways to cope with changes. However, forms of development that may be applicable as sustainable in other parts of the world could be culturally unsustainable in the region. Therefore, sustainable development requires new practices, institutions, and legal frameworks that is responsive to local and regional needs. Moreover, circumpolar communities need the human capacity on individual, institutional, and societal levels to tackle important local and regional issues.

Local and regional development in the Circumpolar North: From theory to practice

The goal of the Thematic Network on Local and Regional Development in the North is research and development for local and regional development in rural municipalities of the Circumpolar North. Developing and introducing new ways of decision-making and capacity building, its



projects aim to provide local communities facing complex socio-economic situations with the knowledge and means to handle the challenges.

The extensive knowledge base, competences, and experience of the Thematic Network's leaders and partners accompanying with study programs made it possible for the Thematic Network to implement local and regional development projects in various Circumpolar countries. Among these Circumpolar countries, the socio-economic and environmental challenges for northern rural communities and the imperative for capacity building are considered to be greatest in Russia.

With the purpose of development of Komi rural areas, the Thematic Network on Local and Regional Development together with Russian partners initiated the project "Izhma development partnership and workshops". The decision was made during the Gargia 2010 Conference where representatives of Komi-Izhemtsy and regional administration participated. Since 2011, when the project was commenced in Izhma region of Komi Republic, the experience has been spread to Ust-Tsylma and Kortkeros region due to support from the regional Ministry for National Policy of Komi Republic as well as interest from regional administrations and other stakeholders.

The Olympic results in Izhma

Izvatas, or Komi-Izhemtsy, is the most northern ethnic group of Komi people living in the Pechora river basin and its main tributaries Izhma and Usa. The Izhma region is seen as a periphery in the Circumpolar concept. Komi-Izhemtsy make up the largest share of total population (up to 87%) in the region. The process of formation of Komi-Izhemtsy as an ethnical group was principally completed during the 17th and 18th centuries. As a result of long-term reciprocal ethno-cultural interaction, the Izhma obtained certain Indigenous features and also developed a specific dialect of the Komi language.

Komi-Izhemtsy sustained a complex economy with different sectors therein complementing each other; the entire system was relatively flexible and adapted to the environment. Reindeer herding was the main form of subsistence for the people – they had borrowed and adapted this approach from the Nenets, taking not only the method of keeping animals, but also the entire cultural complex, including clothing, mobile homes, vehicles, and folklore. In addition to



reindeer herding, they were also involved in hunting and gathering, fishing, animal husbandry and, to some extent, gardening; they traded across the entire northern part of Russia and west Siberia and supplied their goods to Moscow and St. Petersburg. The economic and practical application of these skills seemed to be more efficient than that of the Nenets, or the Sámi, or the Khanty. In addition, Komi-Izhemtsy assumed the role of buyers and market suppliers for products from Nenets (and also Khanty and Sámi) households. Therefore, the Nenets and partly other ethnic groups considered Komi-Izhemtsy as competitors (Sharapov and Shabayev, 2011).

Throughout the history, Komi-Izhemtsy demonstrated innovative and adaptive capacity as well as ability to combine traditional and modern cultural ideas and values. Nowadays, in a situation where industrial development and a reduction in central government transfers have occurred, the people in the periphery have to respond to the challenges of the post-industrial era and globalization in innovative ways.

The innovative and adaptive capacity of Komi-Izhemtsy was considered as an asset for the success of the local and regional development project. Three communities were selected for the development workshops: village Sizyabsk (1,232 people), village Diur (745 people), and the regional center of Izhma (3,753 people). The business-school was held in the regional center and lasted for 2 weeks.

The Izhma development project, first of all, intended to help start new businesses and develop already existing entrepreneurial initiatives by joining the forces of community, local public authorities, the business community, civil society, external development agencies, and educational institutions. The business school has provided locals with missing knowledge in the sphere of management, entrepreneurship, accounting, and business psychology. Participation was open for any community member who had ideas for productive or/and social projects and intentions to bring the ideas to life.

At the end of the Izhma business school several projects were presented. The majority of the developed projects are in the category of micro and small business enterprises with a strong social and/or ethnic component. Projects are mainly in the spheres of tourism (based on sport, ethnic, cultural, and educational activities), farming (animal breeding, milk and meat processing), wood processing industries (production of blockhouses, plank wood, window packages, parquet floor, etc.), construction (mainly interior repair works, reconstruction),



information and transport services, seen separately or in relation to other social, cultural, and/or economic activities. A need for commercialisation of national holidays and festivals of Komi-Izhemtsy, including the annual “Lud” festival held in July that is supported by the Izhma administration and republican government was expressed.

Evaluation and conclusion seminars are an important part of the project allowing the organisers to get feedback from participants and attendees in order to analyse their own role in the work. Partners and participants who have already been involved in the project were asked to evaluate the process, announce concrete results, and plan further cooperation and development. New attendees were asked to present their resources, capacities, and relevant experience, as well as tasks and challenges they want to solve, and their vision of collaboration. At the final seminar, it was concluded by most of the participants that the Izhma project had been a great success and was a model of local and regional development worth spreading to other Komi regions. In other words, the region became an “Olympic”¹ champion on the hard road of capacity building.

How local and regional development workshops contribute to sustainable community development?

The project on local and regional development opened a new perspective to bring the principles of sustainable community development to life. It comprised a set of coordinated processes that offer a communicative platform to develop the vision, goals, and means for local development, and to coordinate implementation and review. Based on the project implementation process, and its goals and outcomes, a number of conclusions have been made.

¹ The word “Olympic” is not an empty sound for local people. Olympic champion Izhma skiers are a source of pride and admiration for all Russian citizens and amateurs of professional sport. It is a phenomenon that Izhma region with population of 23,560 people have three Olympic champions. In this connection, the Izhma development partnership pays great attention to traditional sport activities due to their crucial importance for the community. The sphere of sports is represented in the partnership by famous sportsmen originated from the region. They are Raisa Petrovna Smetanina and Vasily Pavlovich Rochev, both former world champions and Olympic champions in skiing. Raisa Smetanina, “White Queen”, is a leader of world ski elite. Both of them play roles of idols for skiing sportsmen.



Role of entrepreneurship for diversified economy and self-reliance

The Thematic Network considers entrepreneurship as a strategic and realistic mechanism that provide basis to sustainable rural communities. Small businesses are sources of employment; they are providers and consumers of goods and services that sustain the local economy and improve local quality of life. Production projects in the sphere of dairy and meat products, wood-working, etc. can have a long-term influence on the prosperity of a community.

In the northern rural context, small businesses also play an important role of solving problems related to social and environmental sustainability. Such socially oriented businesses measure performance not only in profit and return, but take into account a positive return to society. The majority of the projects developed on the workshops, and during the Summer business school in Izhma and Kortkeros, has a strong social and/or cultural element. Many projects are in the sphere of services, tourism and sport, and leisure activities. Projects in information and transport services, construction, and wood-working are also strongly connected to the social needs in these communities.

Participative methods

A lack of mechanisms and institutions of civilised decision-making and problem-solving is the main obstacle for development in the northern periphery. Moreover, the participative methods are relatively new in the Russian realities. Historically, people have not participated in decision-making processes, but are used to trusting leaders and relying on external help. It was one of the reasons why the potential of the development partnership established in Komi Republic has not yet been fully realised.

The participation on democratic principles underpinned the function of the development partnership and workshops in Izhma region. The role of facilitators and moderators was crucial in developing and applying participative methods. It was important to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding, trust, and respect in order to establish a communicative area for civilised decision-making and problem-solving. This role of establishing dialogue and negotiations between stakeholders can be implemented by local administrations, research and educational institutions, and non-governmental organisations. Each of the institutions has



specific knowledge, competences, skills, and resources, the rational combination of which can greatly contribute to sustainable community development.

Social capital and networking

The local and regional development project in Izhma region has revealed the power of networking and the value of social capital on different stages and levels of the project's implementation. At the community level, close relationships and friendships have contributed to generating new knowledge of the business environment and government support of local initiatives. People have shared their own experiences and were open to collaborating and establishing connections. On the level of stakeholders, the project's approach has raised an interest among regional research and education institutions, NGOs, regional authorities, and other municipalities. It has led to resource sharing, and establishing connections and collaborations across various spheres of activities. New initiatives have been developed in educational programs, culture and sport activities, entrepreneurship, and tourism.

Role of local government

Local authorities, especially in northern rural communities, are crucial to initiating and implementing effective strategies for the future development. The rural development projects in Komi Republic demonstrated how different the role of municipal authorities can be in its capacity. In several communities where projects have been implemented, local municipalities have performed as a partner and coordinator. They have been actively involved in projects' activities and shared competences and resources crucial for the community development process. However, the project has witnessed another type of local government's role, when ignoring project's initiatives has not contributed to uncovering the potential of local and development workshops for sustainable community development.

Capacity building

The preparation and implementation of local and regional development workshops in rural communities in the Komi Republic have demonstrated the crucial importance of knowledge and competences for sustainable community development. Consequently, capacity building among partners, moderators, and participants has become a central focus of the project in order to



ensure the success and continuation of the work in Komi Republic. The emphasis was set on training in rural development, project management, business education, social entrepreneurship, public innovations, as well as more practical skills like how to run rural development workshops and business schools, and how to help establish functional development partnerships in communities and regions.

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