

PETER EHRSTRÖM¹

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF FOOD AND NEW PRODUCER-CONSUMER RELATIONS
THE CASE OF SUNDOM, VAASA, FINLAND

DOI: 10.18030/SOCIO.HU.2016EN.82

ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the social role of food and new producer-consumer relations influenced by socio-economic and demographic transformation in an urban rurality. These topics will be addressed and enlightened through a case study, Sundom, a small urban rurality and district of Vaasa, on the west coast of Finland. Interviews highlight that transformation may influence the creation of new producer-consumer relations, but these may also be regional rather than local. New demands and tastes in food are influenced by an inflow of well-off, well-educated, new consumers. It is argued that conscious new preferences of demands and tastes may, for example, result in local consumer food circles. It is also suggested that it is not solely concerns for the quality of food that initiates the circles, but also aims to strengthen and create new social bonds in the neighborhood.

Key words: transformation, food, social role, producer-consumer relations

¹ Researcher, PhD Adult Education Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University peter.ehrstrom@abo.fi

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF FOOD AND NEW PRODUCER-CONSUMER RELATIONS

THE CASE OF SUNDOM, VAASA, FINLAND

INTRODUCTION

A global paradigm shift occurred in 2007 when, for the first time, a majority of humankind was considered urban-based, not rural. This paradigm shift, as well as contemporary trends of urbanization and counter-urbanization, motivates new studies of the urban-rural borderland and urban-rural relations. In this paper I study one small urban rurality, Sundom in Vaasa, Finland. My main focus in this paper is the social role of food and new producer-consumer relations in an urban rurality experiencing transformation.

My main research questions are:

Does socioeconomic and demographic transformation influence or create new producer-consumer relations in a locality and, if so, how?

Has the social role of food increased or changed due to (socioeconomic) transformation?

My hypothesis is that major transformation does influence producer-consumer relations and the social role of food. Transformation may, for example, lead to rural gentrification and an inflow of wealthier and well-educated inhabitants, assumed to support middle-class values and tastes as well as a more refined view on 'healthy food habits' and world cuisine trends. This inflow of new or increased consumer preferences is in turn assumed to influence new producer-consumer relations and influence, perhaps even increase, the social meaning of food.

I will first present a theoretical background as well as a general presentation of my case study, Sundom. This is followed by a presentation of methods and materials. I will then present the results of my study and discuss my conclusions.

The Sundom case exemplifies that an inflow of new (middle-class and well-educated) inhabitants may have an effect on new local food demands and tastes. It is probable that new consumer demands influence new activities, such as consumer circles or other direct producer-consumer relations. The Sundom case also exemplifies that new food trends and new producer-consumer relations spread down the urban scale. Interestingly enough, new producer-consumer relations and consumer tastes seem to be much less noticeable in the traditional fish sector in Sundom than for products like vegetables and milk. In the latter cases relations have developed mainly between regional producers and local consumers, rather than local (Sundom) producer-consumer relations.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Dünckmann (2012) argues that the key processes for the current transformation of the countryside are a shift from productivism to post-productivism in agriculture, transformation of rural areas from production space to consumer space, increased susceptibility to gentrification processes that transform rural areas to 'middle-class territories' and increased disintegration and differentiation of rural places (Dünckmann 2012: 58). This is on par with what Andersson et al. (2012) describes as the new middle class's '*quest for the natural, the healthy, the genuine and the authentic*' (Andersson et al. 2012: 6). A countryside that is no longer the traditional farmer's countryside, but rather what Murdoch et al. (2003) considers a differentiated countryside. In addressing the future of farming Woods (2005) note that twenty-first-century agriculture more than ever is driven by '*the capitalist imperative to maximize returns on income*'. Increasingly, however, this means improving the product, as opposed to maximizing production (Woods 2005: 57).

According to Dünckmann (2012), however, the rural areas need not lose their rural character as the new settlers may influence a revival and reinforcement of certain 'neo-rural' elements, perhaps romanticizing a rural way of life or searching a more sustainable, green, way of living. Thus, transformation is not only socio-demographic, but also political and cultural transformation on the local level:

'Newcomers who move from the urban areas to the countryside in order to "escape" the city bring along their urban cultural background and with it a set of values and ideas. In this manner, they soon start to question the traditional socio-political structure of local politics... The ideal picture of rurality held by the newcomers contains central social values of the middle-class like community, stability or order' (Dünckmann 2012: 76).

Raynolds (2002) argues that '*numerous studies document how the widespread questioning of agro-industrial values and practices has promoted the rise of alternative agro-food networks based on ecological and locality specific production consumption relations associated with organic, local food shed, and other alternative values... Research on alternative agro-food networks has generally emphasized the "localness" of domestic qualifications tied to subjective knowledge, face-to-face relations, and spatially proximate production*' (Raynolds 2002: 408, 410).

Govindasamy and Nayga (1997) argued that farmer-to-consumer direct markets gained importance as producers '*can receive a better price directly from consumers*' while on the other hand consumers '*can get fresh, high-quality produce for a better than supermarket price.*' They also list other advantages, such as recreational activities, preservation of agricultural lands and community development (Govindasamy–Nayga 1997: 31). At the same time, as for example Ragaert et al (2004) argue, contemporary society is characterized by '*increasing health consciousness and growing interest in the role of food for maintaining and improving human well-being and consumer health*' (Ragaert et al. 2004: 259).

Youngs (2003), who studied consumer perceptions and attitudes of farmers markets in North West England, noted that 95.5 per cent of consumers perceive that farmer's markets sell fresh produce while a vast majority (in some cases almost all participants) also listed quality produce (92.6 per cent), tastier food (90.5) and healthier food (76.5) (Youngs 2003: 518). Govindasamy et al. (1999) conclude by reference to 'several studies'

that farmers are increasingly utilizing direct marketing to consumers in order to increase income. These marketing channels include retail outlets like temporary farmstands, wagons and pick-your-own operations. They further argue that farmers, by direct retailing, receive higher net price and higher returns (Govindasamy et al. 1999: 76, 81).

In contemporary Finland one such alternative marketing channel and direct retailing system is the so called REKO local food networks. REKO comes from the Swedish word *Rejäl konsumtion* (proper/reliable consumption) and the founder of the REKO idea is organic ostrobothnian farmer Thomas Snellman, who got the idea when visiting France. The producer-consumer REKO network is totally Internet-based, or more to the point, Facebook-based, which means that persons who do not use Facebook currently cannot place orders to REKO-producers. This must be seen as a limitation. However, in November 2014 the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle reported that some 8000 Finns were members of approximately 20 local food networks² In early December 2015 (4.12) as many as 103 local REKO food networks (local food rings) were listed on one organic food website, for example.³ Thus far, there is not much research conducted on REKO networks, and it is vital that experiences of REKO networks are studied more thoroughly in future studies.

As Govindasamy et al. (1999) concluded, *'Farmers today are looking for ways to increase income by increasing productivity as well as by incorporating non-traditional alternative activities in addition to conventional farm operations'* (Govindasamy et al. 1999: 82). REKO networks can be seen as one such current trend. According to Thilmany et al. (2007) up to 30 per cent of consumers prefer to buy their fresh produce from farmers' markets and direct from producers (Thilmany et al. 2007: 1). This growing trend Thilmany et al. exemplified with USDA figures that the number of farmers' markets in the USA more than doubled to over 3700 during the period 1994–2006.

Current statistics show a continued fast-growing trend: *'As of National Farmers Market Week, (the first full week in August), there were 8,476 farmers markets listed in USDA's National Farmers Market Directory. This is a 2.5 per cent increase from 2014.'*⁴

Lehtonen and Tykkyläinen (2012) observe a periurbanization process creating a prosperous urban fringe in the vicinity of the urban center in a remote region while Dünckmann (2012) argues for a wide variety of interconnections between urban areas and their surrounding localities and observes a radical transformation of many rural areas in Germany, often involving social, economic, political and cultural transformation. Urban influences are spilling over the urban fringe, from suburbs to the nearby countryside, as these metropolitan and urban ruralities attract new and commuting middle-class settlers. Due to their increased attractiveness these ruralities are on the verge of, or already experiencing, gentrification, as new middle-class inhabitants move into these traditional rural areas.

However, earlier observations in a smaller, non-metropolitan, urban rurality, Sundom in Vaasa, Finland, suggests that most of the new middle-class commuters moving in has in fact a rural rather than urban background, exchanging a former rural domicile for living in another rural locality, rather than being exurbanites

2 (http://yle.fi/uutiset/lahiruoka_tulee_nyt_parkkipaikoille__tarjonta_ja_tilaukset_hoituvat_facebookissa/7598523).

3 <http://luomulaakso.fi/luomu-ja-ekolinkit/reko-lahiruokarenkaita/>

4 <http://www.ams.usda.gov/services/local-regional/farmers-markets-and-direct-consumer-marketing>

'fleeing' the city (Ehrström 2013). However, they also clearly stress middle-class values, and much in the same manner (community, stability, order) as Dünckmann observes, but at the same time bring with them a rural or rurban cultural background rather than urban.

Woods (2005) sees counterurbanization as a product of the economic restructuring of both urban and rural societies, in combination with societal and technological changes that mean that people are *'more mobile physically and socially than in previous generations.'* However, the attractiveness of the 'rural' will for most in-migrants be *'just one of many factors influencing the multi-stage decision-making process that is followed in the sequence of deciding to move, selecting an area to move to, selecting a community in which to live, and selecting a particular property'* (Woods 2005: 75, 77).

As transformation and inflow of urban and rurban values increases, this is expected to influence a rurban identity in these urban ruralities, combining urban and rural values. Most likely this will also influence local food habits and preferences.

Rural areas, then, *'seem to be laboratories for new kinds of rural-urban lifestyles, new industries and livelihoods, as well as new kinds of governance and regulation'* (Andersson et al. 2012: 18). Buciega et al. (2009) emphasise that the growth of new development possibilities in rural areas often depends on their location, in particular concerning rural areas under pressure and influence from metropolitan areas. As Andersson and Sjöblom (2013) note: *'it is important to recognize the potential of local variations and new rural-urban coalitions as drivers for citizen participation and for innovative locally initiated strategies and solutions'* (Andersson–Sjöblom 2013: 254).

'The underlying causes of the urban to rural migration of the affluent, are complex, producing a variety of new countrysides, variously interpretable... However, one must remember, the exurbanites are expecting the rural world to be recreated in their image!' (Walker 2000: 106, 111).

Rural gentrification can most easily be described as traditional gentrification, but in rural areas. The drivers behind rural gentrification and transformation of metropolitan ruralities are traditionally a growth of ecological, 'green', and sustainable-driven assessments by part of the middle classes. The return of the middle classes to the urban core has duly been studied and reported, for example by Lees, Slater and Wyly (2008), Williams (2002) and Lilja (2011). It could be argued that a similar, but weaker, ecologically driven counter wave occurs to urban ruralities. This outward migration (to urban and metropolitan ruralities) was followed by a more suburbia-minded middle class migration, as a consequence of upgraded attraction and increased commuting. There might be a significant difference between urban and rural gentrification, argues Phillips (1993), and rural studies appeared to lag behind urban studies *'in recognizing the diversity of ways one can interpret and understand gentrification'*. Phillips further draws attention *'to the need to delimit precisely how one is conceptualizing the term gentrification, while at the same time linking the understanding of gentrification into wider debates over social restructuring and the process of class constitution'* (Phillips 1993: 138).

In his study, Phillips found evidence both to support that gentrifiers are embodiments of capital and to suggest that other motives and social relations were significant in creating gentrification. Phillips also notices commonalities and differences between rural and urban gentrification as well as within gentrification in various rural localities (Phillips 1993: 138).

In this paper food tastes are suggested as a possible marker of lifestyle differences between traditional inhabitants and new middle-class/highly-educated inhabitant groups. It is suggested that new consumer tastes and new consumer demands and behavior, such as consumer circles, are influenced by a transformation of the local socioeconomic and demographic structure.

CASE STUDY SUNDOM

Sundom is a village in Ostrobothnia that has been part of the city of Vaasa since 1973. In 1976 the bridge Myrgrundsbron between Sundom and Vaasa was inaugurated, and the distance between the urban core and Sundom was shortened from approximately 30 to 10 kilometers. A direct consequence of these improved communications was an increased inflow of migrants to Sundom.

Sundom has strong historical traditions and a wide range of cultural activities. More than 30 local associations are active, the yearly publication *Murmursunds Allehanda* has been published for more than 60 years, and a local TV-channel has broadcast programs for almost 30 years (Fjällström 2008: 47). Part of the historical village is preserved, but new housing areas have also been planned and are being built. Two thirds of the area consists of the archipelago, sea and small islands.

Socioeconomic and demographic transformation

Since 1973 the population of Sundom has increased by over 1000 inhabitants, to 2422 in 2013. There has also been a simultaneous linguistic transformation, as two thirds of the migrants in 2005–2010 had Finnish as mother tongue in traditionally Swedish-speaking Sundom. In 2013 Sundom had 1806 (74.6%) Swedish-speaking inhabitants, 589 (24.3%) Finnish-speaking and only 27 (0.1%) inhabitants with another mother tongue. Traditionally Sundom was a fisherman's and (small) farmer's village, but this has significantly changed over time (Sundom byaplan 2012: 9). A large majority of Sundomers are wage earners, commuting to work outside Sundom, mostly in Vaasa. Contemporary Sundom is also one of the most well educated districts in Vaasa. Only the statistical unit Gerby had a higher degree of highly educated inhabitants in 2009, as 38.8 per cent of Sundom's working population were university- or college graduates. That year income/capita in Sundom was 28 088 euro, which places Sundom third among Vaasa's districts. During the period 2001–2009 the degree of well-educated inhabitants increased faster in Sundom than anywhere else in Vaasa and the highest increase in income/capita during this period was also noted in the Sundom district (Kommonen 2011). Also worth noting is that the unemployment rate in the district simultaneously was among the lowest in Vaasa (Kommonen 2011). This signals a shift from the traditional small farmer and fisherman's village that Sundom once *was* to a highly educated, well off urban rurality that contemporary Sundom already *is* and *will become*.

The work force in Sundom consists mainly of wage earners. The public sector and administration dominates as employing sector 2001–2010 and has increasing its share more rapidly than the other employing sectors. Academics employed at universities and colleges are part of this sector. Industry, commerce, hotels and restaurants, was also a growing sector 2001–2010 (Ehrström 2015: 118).

Mean income statistics show that the most well-off group in Sundom is employed by the industrial sector. Industrial employment, then, is mainly white-collar in Sundom, not blue-collar.

This is perhaps not so unique, as Woods (2005) note that research in the UK indicated that some 40 per cent of in-migrants to rural areas 1970–1988 were members of the so called service class and further concludes:

‘... the recomposition of the class structure of many rural areas is an indisputable observed fact, and the increasingly middle class nature of many rural communities is reproduced not just by political intervention, but also as a simple result of middle class involvement in the rural property market’ (Woods 2005: 86–87).

Real estate prices have increased during the last decades, according to statistics from the National Land Survey of Finland, but as the locality (and therefore the statistical material) is very small, major atypical real estate transactions may strongly influence the statistics. However, there is a perception of increasing real-estate and housing prices in Sundom, which is noted in the interview material.

There are places in Sundom that especially attracts new middle class migrants. The areas Bumlingestigen, Svarvarsbacken and Ollesbacken are noted in the interview material. According to a survey conducted in 2008 ‘the new part’ of Svarvarsbacken consisted of 17 houses that were alike *‘in form, color and choice of material’* (Wiklund–Engblom 2008).

According to Wiklund–Engblom (2008) all households at Svarvarsbacken moved in between 2003–2008, and only one out of 34 adult inhabitants had a prior connection (roots) in Sundom. Thus, Svarvarsbacken has a very distinct socioeconomic profile, and clearly represents ‘new Sundom’ as well as ‘new Sundomers’. Roughly a third of the grown up population, 10 inhabitants, worked in the industrial energy cluster (seven at the largest enterprise in Vaasa, Wärtsilä). Five were teachers; five had a university position. The rest were academics (3), entrepreneurs (3), a medical doctor (1) and other professionals (6), mainly in social- and health-related professions (Wiklund–Engblom 2008).

Methods and material

A triangular study of statistical data⁵ and an interview analysis of perceived and experienced transformation was earlier conducted in order to study transformation in Sundom. Early results were first presented in Ehrström (2013) and followed up in Ehrström (2015). This material included eight interviews explicitly on the topics of transformation, socio-economic and demographic change and urban-rural relations. Three interviewees represented ‘old’ Sundomers of various ages (Male 96, Male 46 and Female 41). Four represented ‘new’ Sundomers who had fairly recently moved to Sundom (Male 43, Male 51, Female 43 and Female 50+). One represented the ‘new’, but was nevertheless a fairly long-time resident Sundomer (Male 71). Five men and three women were interviewed: two Finnish-speaking and six Swedish-speaking. The interviews were conducted in Finnish or Swedish.

⁵ The statistical material was obtained from the City of Vaasa and National Statistics Agency, except land price statistics that was obtained from The National Land Survey.

A further six interviews, focusing on the role of food and new producer-consumer relations, were conducted in the spring of 2015. The analysis presented here takes all the before-mentioned 14 interviews in account, but focuses mainly on the latter six. These six interviews were conducted with three men and three women. Two were identified as 'new' Sundomers, three as 'old' Sundomers and one as a former ('old') Sundomer.

Two interviewees (Male 48 and Male 56) represented 'old' Sundomers who could perhaps be considered 'conscious' food consumers. Male 56 takes part in the organized producer-consumer direct trade circles in Sundom while Male 48, even though he is a consumer of so-called eco-products, does not. Both have long-term experience of commuting to white-collar work in urban Vaasa, thus suggesting that the new social role of food may rather be a question of middle-class choices and consumerist trends than a division between old and new residents.

One 'old' Sundomer (Female 43) is a descendant of a long-established fish industry/fishing family, but has never personally taken part in the fishing business. She is a journalist, commuting to work in nearby Vaasa.

The fishing industry is represented by one interviewee (Male 46), part-time fisherman and chairman of the local Fishing Guild. He is considered a 'new' Sundomer, even though he has been a resident of Sundom for some years.

A 'new' Sundomer (Female, 34), is interviewed as the initiator of the food (first vegetable) and, later, milk consumer circles in Sundom.

A former Sundomer (Female, 23), represents new food trends. She is a restaurant entrepreneur, managing an organic food restaurant in nearby Vaasa.⁶

Thus, focus in this article is more on consumers than on producers, and the social role of food is at the center of the paper.

PERCEIVED AND EXPERIENCED TRANSFORMATION

This section is based on the interviewees' perceptions and experiences of transformation in Sundom. The interviews conducted in 2013 clearly point out perceptions and experiences of transformation in Sundom. Ehrström (2015) notes that there is a large positive consensus in Sundom that all is well and that Sundom is a prosperous village district in Vaasa, with a favorable future ahead. There also seems to be extensive consensus regarding the need to preserve the rural heritage and the village structure, as well as for Sundom to remain a rural village and not be redeveloped into a semi-urban or suburban district of Vaasa.

However, there also seems to be only partial mixing between new and old Sundomers, as the population in older parts of the village are mainly 'old' Sundomers, and 'new' Sundomers are more clustered in newer

⁶ All interviews were conducted as semi-structured, with some structured questions, but all interviewees were given possibilities to dwell on certain other or nearby questions if appropriate. Of the 14 interviews most were conducted in Swedish, and two in Finnish, as the majority language in Sundom is Swedish. All interviews were recorded except one, due to technical problems with the recorder. For that interview written minutes were used instead. All adequate quotes have been freely translated into English, which means that they are transcribed and presented as close to the original quote (in Swedish) as linguistically possible.

housing areas like Svarvarsbacken and Bumlingestigen. Both the results in Wiklund–Engblom (2008) and my interviews (Ehrström 2015: 114) underline that there are ‘villages within the villages’:

‘If I compare (this) to Bumlingestigen and Svarvarsbacken, they live their own life together, but I estimate that they don’t participate so much in outward activities within the village. But we have members in the village association who come from these places, so there’s no sharp or absolute border’ (Male, 71).

‘I think it’s easier to move to a place where many are in the same situation (as you). If you move where there is an older population you are there on their terms and have to adapt to their ways of approach’ (Male, 43).

There are some signs of newly built as well as municipality-led gentrification in Sundom. Even though there is virtually no evidence of direct displacement (Ehrström 2013), one can’t exclude possible future risks for tensions, potentially caused by increased social divisions. This is something that ought to be considered in upcoming municipal plans for Sundom.

Interestingly enough, Sundom seems to mostly attract newcomers with a rural background, who commute to work in Vaasa, rather than urban migrants. Thus, the new Sundomers are more likely to be ‘exruralites’ rather than exurbanites. Most interviews confirmed this view and mentioned birthplaces that are to be considered rural rather than urban, for example Närpes, Munsala and Pörtom. In interviews it was also pointed out that Sundom is valued as a place based near the urban town Vaasa, but still distinctly not urban.

What probably distinguishes Sundom (and other non-metropolitan urban ruralities) from metropolitan ruralities is that (gentrifying) immigrants typically have a more rural than urban personal background. They are not urbanites moving out of the city, but rather commuting ‘ruralites’ moving near or nearer attractive cities. For example, most of the (new) inhabitants in Svarvarsbacken in Sundom 2003–2008 had grown up in rural or rural areas. Thus it is rather a question of *‘rurbanites moving between rural environments’* than *‘urbanites moving in’*. The combination of commuting to an urban workplace and a residence in a rural/rurban environment is the prevailing way of life for many (if not most) new Sundomers. But this is by no means unique, as Woods (2005) argues: *‘Overall, commuting is a growing practice’* (Woods 2005: 264). This is underlined by figures presented by Schindegger and Krajasits (1997) that commuters in significantly rural regions in Canada increased by 50 per cent in just ten years, 1980–1990, and in the UK by 25 per cent during the same period.

THE SOCIAL MEANING OF FOOD—AND NEW PRODUCER-CONSUMER RELATIONS

In this section I present results from the interview analysis with quotes from the interviews⁷. I then go on to discuss the empirical findings and my conclusions. The social meaning of food and new producer-consumer is here mainly exemplified by the introduction of local consumer food circles (mainly for vegetables and milk). The situation is different concerning traditional local fish food products, as there is no noticeable consumer activity (or food circle) concerning fish. That there is a new consciousness of food trends and tastes in Sundom, and that this is influenced by the inflow of new inhabitant groups, is evident in the interview material.

⁷ Interviews were translated by the author, as the interviews were conducted in Swedish and Finnish.

'There's a boom of young couples moving in and many of them are aware and want locally produced food. I think many grow something themselves or are participating in the ecological group' (Female, 31).

That new middle-class migration locally influences new food is also argued for by Male, 56:

'Those moving in are a certain socioeconomic group and therefore more conscious of food trends. Old Sundomers that stayed (here) are perhaps part of another socio-economic group and community and perhaps don't understand these trends in the same way. It's a question of values, what you choose to go in for... The new middle class would gladly buy from these different food circles, ecological vegetables, root vegetables and so on' (Male, 56).

Thus, the interviews suggest a divide between old and new Sundomers concerning food culture, a divide that might be seen as class based, as new food trends are connected to inflow of new (middle-class) inhabitants. There seems to be no division here whether or not a newcomer is exurban or exrural. Most, but not all, newcomers in Sundom seem to be exruralites rather than exurbanites. However, the divide in food culture may also be age-based, as Male, 48 suggests:

'I don't think there's any difference whether you are a young Sundomer or you migrated (to Sundom). Preferences are formed by other aspects than where you live' (Male, 48).

Female, 31, also perceives a potential for future restaurants in Sundom serving new (class- and age-related) consumer groups in Sundom:

'Earlier it wouldn't have been possible (for example a vegetarian restaurant), but now, as Sundom is growing (in population) and there's a new generation I absolutely think it's possible. It's actually been only the last two years that it has been like this.' (Female, 31).

There is, however, currently no signs of a 'new food' restaurant/café entrepreneur/culture in Sundom. Perhaps it is still early days. However, there are also some signs of food conservatism among 'old' Sundomers, or lack of new food culture entrepreneurship and local restaurants:

'There's so much thoroughfare traffic and so many summer guests (second homes), but the only thing that has been managed is the Grill in the center of the village' (Male, 56).

In an increasingly middle-class and well-educated Sundom, new producer-consumer relations may best be exemplified by producer-consumer direct trade circles. These circles are based on direct trade in biodynamic, ecological, locally-grown food between local (or in this case regional) producers and consumers. Consumer circles are very popular in Sundom, as some 60 families are members. An example of new producer-consumer relations is that the consumer circles in Sundom were initiated by a new Sundomer with prior regional contacts with producers. At the same time, according to a (new Sundomer) respondent (Female 34), initiating a consumer circle was also a way of getting to know people and neighbors, strengthening social bonds in a new domicile, and at the same time promote the use of cleaner, better food. The social aspect is believed to be a reason for participating mainly for new Sundomers. For example, one of the respondents does not mention the social aspect as a reason for participating in the circles:

'You have 100 per cent knowledge of where the food products are coming from, and mostly they are of a very high quality. And perhaps it isn't much more expensive either, because the wastage is quite small

when you buy good things' (Male, 56).

Other respondent, on the other hand, is all for buying 'all sorts of' ecological products, and mention wine, milk and vegetables as examples, but doesn't participate in the circles:

Are you taking part in the circles?

'No, you don't need to be a member, you can just order, and get it delivered.' (Male, 48).

Have you ordered (food) via the consumer circles?

'No, we have not used that. I don't know, we buy our food at (named supermarket), that's where we usually shop.' (Male, 48).

There are both food (mostly vegetable) and milk consumer circles that bring together *local* consumers—mostly new Sundomers, but also some (middle-class and commuting) old Sundomers—and *regional* producers. However, the few local producers are currently more into selling to stores/wholesale. This is something that local consumers are well aware of.

'I have a feeling the farmers in Sundom are rather huge, mass producers... I think it's another form of production here (locally)' (Male, 56).

'There are farmers here, but they are producing grain' (Male, 48).

Production-wise the local focal point is the 'Sundom herring'. It is a national brand and all interviewed mention Sundom herring as a strong brand (for Sundom). 'Sundom herring' is nationally a well-known product, even though Sundom the village may be totally obscure. A respondent (Male, 46) however, points out that perch is the cornerstone of the fishing business in Sundom. This respondent is a fairly long time resident of Sundom (10 years +), but still considered a 'newcomer'.

There's no denying that the fishing sector is central for Sundom's image and for rural goods and services (RGS) in Sundom. Over time, fish production has gone from small-scale smoking of fish in the archipelago to more industry-like smokehouse activities in the village.⁸

One of the respondents (Male, 46) notes that transformation of producer-consumer relations increase the need for product development and new marketing tools. New fish product brands have been discussed, but no real marketing or selling of new fish products to new middle-class consumers have emerged in Sundom.

'There is need for more branding in fish products and other Sundom products. I have thought of smoked fish steaks, 100 % fish, smoked in Sundom ovens and well-spiced. It could be called "Sundom 100%".' (Male, 46).

Still, there is also a resistance towards new ideas within the fishing sector. This respondent (Male, 46,) is clearly worried about the age structure within the fishing business in Sundom:

'There are only two smokehouses that are (run by someone) somewhat younger, and with younger I mean (persons) just under 60 (years)... This is a real bottleneck... I think I'm the youngest member of our (Fishing) Guild. I think 70 is the average age of fishermen in the village of Sundom. Something has

⁸ An interviewee (Male, 46,) estimates that the smokehouses in Sundom have 3-4 ovens/smokehouse, with a capacity each of 100 kg (at a time, which totals 500–1000 kg/day/smokehouse. Usually it takes only two persons to handle a smokehouse.

to happen... There is no natural continuation, taking over the family fish smokehouses. Without a new generation there is the risk that the fishing business in Sundom will die' (Male, 46).

This worry is supported, and also exemplified, by a native female member of one long-time fishing business family. She states that she *'never has considered taking over the smokehouse business.'* (Female, 43).

Both respondents (Male, 46 and Female, 43) note that young people are not interested in such an unsure business with long, working days. One respondent (Male, 46) states that as almost all fishermen in Sundom, has another, part-time, occupation. Or as another native respondent (Male, 48,) harshly puts it:

'Why would anyone start working with that (fishing), when there's no profitability in it?' (Male, 48).

The Sundom case exemplifies that an inflow of new (middle-class, well-educated) inhabitants, most likely will have an effect on local food demands and tastes. It is probable, then, that these new consumer demands also create or influence new activities, like consumer circles or other direct producer-consumer relations. However, interestingly enough there is no noticeable consumer activity for creating a consumer circle for fish products, even though the Sundom herring is nationally known and widely recognized as a vital part of the Sundom heritage. Nor is there evidence of new consumer tastes or consumer behavior in Sundom concerning fish products. It therefore seems that newcomers influence demands for healthy and homemade food, but have not initiated new consumer trends or tastes concerning the tradition-based local fish products. This is somewhat surprising, but may suggest that Sundom herring and local fish products are somewhat taken for granted. Male, 46, however, warns that the fish sector is at risk of vanishing from Sundom (due to an aging professional society, a conservative non-inclination to change and harsh working conditions for the fishermen). But this is still not reflected in new consumer activity or in new or strengthened local demand for fish food products. However, fish sector representative Male, 46, strongly argues for product development and new marketing tools (on the regional and national market). Here, then, is a potential for strengthened relations between new consumer tastes and producer's product innovations.

CONCLUSIONS

A significant inflow of new settlers with a different socioeconomic profile is both a challenge and an opportunity for the community. Inflow of inhabitants with large socioeconomic and cultural capital may increase the inflow of capital, investments, and municipal planning (infrastructure, schools...). At the same time transformation and redevelopment plans need to respect and take into account the locality's cultural and historical values.

It must also be emphasized that the statistical material is usually more limited and smaller in urban ruralities (like Sundom) than in metropolitan ones—with fewer property trades, fewer inhabitants and fewer voters, for example. Earlier studies of the Sundom case prove this point. Unfortunately, this also makes detailed studies of smaller localities vulnerable to the impact of extremes. In Sundom we see this in the property price statistics, where one extremely divergent property affair may influence the statistics unacceptably much. This is a problem that must be considered, and taken into account, as it may limit the capability to draw certain conclusions. Studying smaller urban ruralities, however, is important for understanding general processes in

ruralities, irrespective of scale, and should be carried out even though the statistical material may partially limit the value of the findings. This, then, increases the value of qualitative research and on triangular studies, combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

This case study suggests that there is a consumer interest in direct producer-consumer relations and (consumer interest) in local food. This may, as for example Govindasamy and Nayga (1997) and Ragaert et al (2004) have argued, be explained by an increased interest in cleaner, healthier food. A further explanation may be a wish to develop new, or strengthen social bonds, and thus expand the social meaning of food. This is by no means unique for Sundom, as we have seen earlier, and may for example be connected to more global trends, like the new paradigm Woods (2005) sees emerging, replacing top-down, state-led development with a new approach of regenerating rural areas by enhancing and adding values to local resources, according to the priorities and preferences of the local community (Woods 2005: 158). And as Woods further notes: *'there is substantial evidence of a qualitative shift in the experience of life in the countryside, with change often experienced as a consequence of a number of inter-locking processes'* (Woods 2005: 301).

New well off inhabitants are expected to prioritize contemporary quality food trends and request clean, locally grown food, which opens up a market for new local food products as well as new challenges for production and marketing. This is also suggested in the interview material:

'If Sundom continues to attract middle-class settlers, there may emerge a foundation for other things. If you get hold of commodities and are able to target food trends. This (could be) combined with extreme locations (in Sundom) like the Meteorian (meteor crater) or the archipelago' (Male, 48).

Other respondent (Male, 46) expect new arrangements, like more direct marketing to producers, and increased use of social media (including facebook) for direct producer-consumer relations.

'I think it will be more common that producers have to find their niche, and that they produce new products' (Male, 46).

Thus, it's also a question of potential forerunners and entrepreneurs being ready to realize a potential. However, creative marketing, packaging, branding, product-development and securing economic margins for (small-scale) pilot production are major challenges for new production and food-related businesses. Interviews suggest there is interest in product development within the fishing industry in Sundom, but only partial, as most tend to be quite appeased with how things are run now. This may interlock with high average age in this sector.

'You have to think and change in advance because you never know if or when demand will change in the future, and you have to show, that here you are' (Male, 46).

An upcoming change-of-generation is considered a question of destiny for the fishing business in Sundom, but interviewees are noticing that the long hours, tiresome work and financial insecurity of fishing scares young people from the sector.

The Sundom case suggests a need to find new ways of strengthening local/regional producer-consumer relations. This could for example include a combination of organic/biodynamic food production and farm-

based restaurants. Perhaps an ambitious center for 'Sundom' brand products? The established 'Sundom herring' brand is an eye-catcher that might be used for marketing and production of other high-class fish products, organic/biodynamic groceries, foodstuff and, perhaps, other local/regional products.

The Sundom case exemplifies that inflow of new (middle-class and well-educated) inhabitants, most likely have an effect on new food demands and tastes. It is probable, then, that these new consumer demands create or influence new activities, like consumer circles or other direct producer-consumer relations. These relations are thought to be established and mainly upheld by 'the new local middle-class' even though some 'old' inhabitants (that share the same middle-class values) most likely will take part. As argued by Female, 34, food circles may actually fulfill two purposes for the initiators and members; promote and distribute qualitative food stuff and healthy alternatives directly from producers to consumers *and* create and increase social bonds and contacts within the community, bringing these people together for a common cause (good food) and thus increasing the social meaning of food. It is further probable that the social aspects of direct trade circles are more important for new inhabitants in the locality, while qualitative health-related arguments are much more important for long-time residents and well established (old middle-class) consumers.

The material is too small to draw any vast conclusions for the locality, but the social meaning of food seems to increase as a result of the consumer circles. The Sundom case further exemplifies that new food trends and new producer-consumer relations spread down the urban scale, and is not only a reality in metropolitan ruralities. New producer-consumer relations are the result of consumer circles, mostly for vegetables and milk, but in this case it is suggested that these new relations have developed between regional producers and local consumers. Concerning the traditional fish food sector there has been no consumer trend or interest for a consumer circle or expressions of changes in tastes.

Based on the case of Sundom I suggest that socioeconomic and demographic transformation influence new producer-consumer relations in urban ruralities. In Sundom consumer circles were initiated by a new Sundomer and they mostly, but not exclusively, attract new Sundomers. Among traditional Sundomers those participating are described as middle-class and/or highly educated inhabitants. However, new producer-consumer relations were mostly increased between regional producers and local consumers, suggesting stronger local consumer relations but not necessarily new local producer-consumer relations. This was a somewhat surprising finding. The social role of food has therefore increased among consumers, but not necessarily locally between producers and consumers in Sundom. It is therefore suggested that the fish sector lags behind in that respect, due to an ageing professional society, satisfaction with current sales structure and a conservative disinclination towards change. However, an interviewed representative of the sector (Male, 46) acknowledge the need for product development and new marketing measures. This may in turn suggest that new producer-consumer relations may, over time, develop concerning local fish products.

Irrespective of size, new producer-consumer relations and direct trade are created in urban and metropolitan ruralities, influenced by an inflow of middle-class tastes and food trends, increasing the social role of food in the process. However, the social aspects are expected to be mostly stressed by new, migrating middle class, and much less so by established inhabitants in the community. These new relations, and tastes, are fur-

ther suggested in the interview material to be (middle) class- and (young) age-influenced, but a prerequisite for establishing this fact is a much larger study than was committed for this paper.

All interviewed here (and for Ehrström 2013, 2015) expressed a positive sense of place. Even though the interview material is small, this indicates a positive atmosphere, which increases social sustainability and may counteract negative tendencies of gentrification. This includes new producer-consumer relations and the social meaning of food. Here, on the borderland between urban and rural land, it may be possible to realize strategies for involving new and old inhabitants in the community and create new local opportunities.

Lastly, to quote Woods (2005), there are many different countrysides.

And, perhaps precisely therefore, it is time to seriously rethink what is considered 'rural' and a 'Rurality' and how we define the border between urban and rural, and, indeed, the overlapping rural places,

REFERENCES

- Andersson, K. et al. (2012) Introduction: Beyond the Rural-urban divide. In Andersson, K. – Eklund, E. – Lehtola, M. – Salmi, P. (eds.) *Beyond the Rural-urban divide – Cross-continental perspectives on the differentiated countryside and its regulation. Research in Rural Sociology and Development, Volume 14*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley.
- Andersson, K. – Sjöblom, S. (2013) Localism in Finland: The changing role and current crisis of the Finnish municipal system. *Local Economy*, 28(3), 240–256, sagepub.co.uk.
- Andersson, K. – Eklund, E. – Lehtola, M. (2006) Finland. In Overbeek, G. – Terluin, I. (eds.) *Rural areas under Urban Pressure – Case studies of rural-urban relationships across Europe*. RURBAN, QLK5-CT-2002-01696: Building Rurban Relations D21, Agricultural Economics Research Institute (LEI), The Hague.
- Buciega, A. – Pitarch, M. D. – Esparcia, J. (2009) The Context of Rural-Urban Relationships in Finland, France, Hungary, The Netherlands and Spain. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 2009, Vol. 11, No. 1, 9–27, Routledge.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15239080902774929>
- Dünckmann, F. (2012) From suburbia to rural backwater: Exurban rural development in Germany. In Andersson, K. – Eklund, E. – Lehtola, M. – Salmi P. (eds.) *Beyond the Rural-urban divide – Cross-continental perspectives on the differentiated countryside and its regulation. Research in Rural Sociology and Development, Volume 14*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley.
- Ehrström, P. (2013) *Rural gentrification and social sustainability: the case of Sundom, Finland*. Conference paper presented at European Society for Rural Sociology's XXVth Congress, Florence, Italy 29.7-1.8.2013 (Abstract published at http://www.ires.it/files/upload/ESRS.Program.def_...pdf)
- Ehrström, P. (2015) Social hållbarhet och rural gentrifiering i Svenskfinland – fallstudien Sundom, Vasa. In Sjöblom, S. – Sandberg, S. (2015) *Finlandssvenska vägval*. Svenska kulturfonden, Helsinki.
- Fjällström, M. (2008) *Sundom tv har verkat i 25 år, in Murmursunds Allehanda – Sundom Bygdeförenings r.f. årspublikation, N2 61, Årgång 55*, 2008, Sundom Bygdeförening r.f., Vaasa.
- Govindasamy, R. – Nayga, R. M. Jr. (1997) Determinants of Farmer-to-Consumer Direct Market Visits by Type of Facility: A Logit Analysis. *Agricultural and Resource Economics Review*, April 1997, 31–38. <http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/31362/1/26010031.pdf>.
- Govindasamy, R. – Hossain, F. – Adelaja A. (1999) Income of Farmers Who Use Direct Marketing. *Agricultural and Resource Economics Review*, April 1999, 76–83.
- Kommonen, J. (2011) Vaasan suuralueet 2000-luvulla. Neljän muuttujan tarkastelu: Koulutus- ja tulotaso sekä työttömyysaste ja muunkielisten osuus. *Vaasan kaupunki*, Kaupunkikehitys, 1.6.2011, Vaasa.
- Lees, L. – Slater, T. – Wylie, E. (2008) *Gentrification*. Routledge, New York–Oxon.
- Lehtonen, O. – Tykkyläinen, M. (2012) The emerging shortage of labour in forestry in a remote coniferous region: A brake on the massive use of biofuels. In Andersson, K. – Eklund, E. – Lehtola, M. – Salmi, P. (eds.) *Beyond the Rural-urban divide – Cross-continental perspectives on the differentiated countryside and its regulation. Research in Rural Sociology and Development, Volume 14*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley.
- Lilja, E. (2011) *Den segregerade staden – Tre kvarter i Stockholms innerstad*. Stockholmia förlag, Stockholm.
- Murdoch, J. – Lowe, P. – Ward, N. – Marsden, T. (2003) *The Differentiated Countryside*. Routledge, London/New York.
- Overbeek, G. – Terluin, I. (2006) Concluding remarks. In Overbeek, G. – Terluin, I. (eds.) (2006) *Rural areas under Urban Pressure – Case studies of rural-urban relationships across Europe*. RURBAN, QLK5-CT-2002-01696: Building Rurban Relations D21, Agricultural Economics Research Institute (LEI), The Hague.
- Phillips, M. (1993) Rural Gentrification and the Processes of Class Colonisation. *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 123–140.
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(93\)90026-G](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(93)90026-G)
- Ragaert, P. – Verbeke, W. – Devlieghere, F. – Debevere, J. (2004) Consumer perception and choice of minimally processed vegetables and packaged fruits. *Food Quality and Preference*, 15 (2004), 259–270. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0950-3293\(03\)00066-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0950-3293(03)00066-1)
- Sundom byaplan – Kyläsuunnitelma 2012 (2012), Sundom Bygdeförening r.f., Vaasa.
- Thilmany, D. D. – Keeling-Bond, J. – Bond, C. (2007) *Buy Local, Buy Fresh? – Exploring local fresh produce consumer motivations and interests. Agricultural Marketing Report No. 3*, May 2007, AMR 07-03, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Colorado State University, Fort Collins.
- Walker, G. (2000) Urbanites creating New Ruralities: Reflections on Social Action and Struggle in the Greater Toronto Area. *The Great Lakes Geographer*, Volume 7, 2000, Department of Geography, Western University, London (Ontario, Canada).
- Wiklund-Engblom, A. (2008) Nybyggare på Svarvarsbacken, in Murmursunds Allehanda – Sundom Bygdeförenings r.f. årspublikation, N2 61, Årgång 55, 2008, Sundom Bygdeförening r.f., Vaasa.

- Williams, G. (2002) City building: developing Manchester's core. In Peck, J. – Ward, K. (eds.) *City of revolution – Restructuring Manchester*. Manchester University Press, Manchester–New York.
- Woods, M. (2005) (reprinted 2006), *Rural Geography – Processes, Responses and Experiences in Rural Restructuring*. Sage Publications, London-Thousand Oaks-Delhi.
- Youngs, J. (2003) Consumer direct initiatives in North West England farmers' markets. *British Food Journal*, Vol. 105, No. 8, 498–530. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/00070700310497273>.