



Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet  
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Faculty of Natural Resources and  
Agricultural Sciences

## Together where we are

– Associational life in a small rural town

*Simon Dagson*



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## **Together where we are**

*– Associational life in a small town*

*Simon Dagson*

**Supervisor:** Kjell Hansen, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences,  
Department of Urban and Rural Development

**Examiner:** Örjan Bartholdson, Swedish University of Agricultural  
Sciences, Department of Urban and Rural Development

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## Abstract

Associations and other civil society organisations are active and present in most rural areas of Sweden, and the tradition of associational life is strong. The variation among the associations is large, varying in size and level of activity as well as the goals with the invested engagement.

I will investigate the associational life in the local community of a small town to further discuss the role and structure of the civil society organisations in a rural context of a small town. This study investigates the varying forms and motivations existing within the civil society organisations in Malmbäck, and how they relate to the town and those who live in it. The theoretical concept of community has been used as an analytical tool to understand the qualitative empirical material, based on interviews and observations. Beyond the different core interests that the associations are based upon, there are activities with a clear social function where the whole community get together. In the social interaction created by the associations' activities, experiences and memories are shared and a sense of belonging is created and maintained. The role kept by the civil society organisations in this case, appears to be centred around the local community itself and the sense of belonging. This aspect of civil society differs to other views of rural associations, hence highlighting the variety of the civil society organisations and the need for a nuanced discussion.

*Keywords:* Associational life, community, civil society, rural civil society, rural associations, civil society organizations

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*Simon Dagson*

*2017*

# 1 My first meeting with Malmbäck

I stop in front of the bulletin board in the entrance to the small grocery store, one of the last service institutions in the small town of Malmbäck. The first poster that catch my eye is a poster asking for help to find a missing cat. Next to the missing cat is a note from someone looking for an apartment, an ad for zone-therapy and a local garage where they repair all sorts of vehicles including rust and tire-service. As my eyes wander further a poster of an annual meeting catches my attention. The Local History Association (Hembygdsföreningen) lures with a presentation about a local duke in the 1600s and his life in connection to their meeting. It is the beginning of the year and the season for annual-meetings and a little further to the right, the Community Association (Malmbäcks samhällsförening) has a poster with an invitation to their annual meeting. I continue to browse through the posters. There is a poster of a missing dog and one informing about the different activities for children arranged by the Church of Sweden. There are two matching posters from the local Swedish National Pensioners Organisation (PRO) with pictures of a choir in uniform and some elderly citizens sitting by a long table looking away from the camera. Someone walks by with their shopping cart and a light nudge brings me back to the present, I am here to pick up some groceries for dinner. I cast a last look at the bulletin board and see a professionally made poster for a concert along with another missing cat before continuing into the store.

There seems to be a lot more going on in this small town than what one would imagine. On the bulletin board in the grocery store in Malmbäck there are quite a few associations represented, through some activities and the mandatory annual meetings. Civil society has attracted increasing attention within research during the last decades, and I wonder what their role is in this town. The bulletin board provides some information about the associations and their activities, but my mind goes to what might happen that is not presented there, and the role of civil society in the small town.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Aim & Research questions

In this thesis, I aim at investigating the associational life of a small rural town to discuss the role and structure of civil society and how it relates to the everyday life in the local community<sup>1</sup>. As my fieldwork progressed, my attention turned to the local social interaction, and the cohesive aspect of the civil society organisations within the local community of the small town. Therefore, the thesis will primarily discuss the cohesive aspects of the civil society organisations rather than other aspects of associational life such as class, gender, age and power structures. The roles of the associations in the everyday life in Malmbäck are most visible through the events happening in the town, hence the research questions are centred around those events:

- How are small and large events organised in Malmbäck and what is the role of the civil society organisations in that?
- How are the activities and events in the civil society organisations in Malmbäck relating to the people living in town and the local government?

### 2.2 Malmbäck

Malmbäck is a town with about 1100 inhabitants located a little under 40 km south-east of the city of Jönköping and 20 km south-west of Nässjö, the municipality town. In Malmbäck, there is a school with classes from preschool to grade six and a library. The town emerged along the railway between Nässjö and Halmstad, built in the late 19th century. It is situated in the heavily forested landscape of Småland, timber and furniture industry has been dominant in the town with a multitude of workshops producing different kind of furniture for domestic and export markets. The many small workshops did different parts of the process and then passed on the products to other workshops in Malmbäck. At its peak, Malmbäck had grocery stores, cafes, banks, a radio and television-shop, banks, hairdresser and hardware store.

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<sup>1</sup> Samhälle in Swedish

With the emergence of an industrially-produced furniture market worldwide, the market for handicraft made furniture in Malmbäck gradually decreased with the competition from foreign factories and furniture arriving in assembly kits. Many of the local furniture crafters started to shut down. Like many other rural towns in Sweden with an industrial past, the banks along with the cafes and other stores have closed since the “glory days”. The town square that was once surrounded with shops and cafes now holds a small grocery store, a hairdresser and a pizzeria along with a yarn shop and a second-hand shop with limited opening hours. However, despite how it might appear when looking in the rear-view mirror, Malmbäck is by no means a dead town. On the contrary, Malmbäck has a lively social life for its size and there is a lot “happening”. There are a multitude of active civil society organisations, from Klockargårdskyrkan, the local free church, organising a Christmas concert every year, to the sport club having practices and games, the Swedish National Pensioners’ Association having weekly sewing meetings, the Local History Association having waffle-nights at the open-air museum (hembygdsgård), the Event Association (Malmbäcks evenemangsförening) holding the yearly Rock’n’Roll night with old cars and live music in the park, to the Parents’ Association of the school arranging discos for the children, to the Church of Sweden having weekly activities in the open preschool and the Community Association organising Tomtabackens dag at a local lookout tower with music and other activities.

### 2.3 Rural civil society - Scientific context

Civil society, also known as the third sector, is a labelling of the organisational sphere constituting the social organisation in society together with the public and private sector (Bäckström 2014). Civil society includes the popular movements in voluntary associations, organisations and networks, being arenas where people act together for common interests, towards the “good society” through being both voice and actor (ibid.). During the last decades, civil society has attracted growing attention and its functions have been increasingly discussed. The discussions include viewing the civil society as a voice carrier, a provider of social services, an institution for

democratic education, a creator of community<sup>2</sup>, and a provider of innovative solutions as a part of local development (Bäckström 2014; Harding 2012; SOU 2017:1). Studying civil society directs attention to the organisations constituting it, in a similar way that studying the private sector directs attention to companies. Civil society organisations, CSOs, are defined as non-profit voluntary associations and foundations, institutionally separated from the government and dependent for their resources on voluntary work, donations from individuals/corporations and public funding to varying extent (Wijkström & Lundström 2002). Just as the wide range of functions in the discussions about civil society, the organisational forms of the CSOs vary from large nationwide organisations with extensive activities to smaller associations with a handful of members meeting more seldom. While civil society has primarily been studied in urban contexts, there are some studies that have commented on differences between the urban and rural engagement in CSOs. Even though the whole of Sweden has a long and strong tradition of associational life, there is a higher density of associations in the rural areas than in urban areas (AOL 1:6, n.d.). CSOs active in rural areas have different objectives and action repertoires than urban areas (see Berglund 1998; Forsberg 2010). Inhabitants in rural areas and smaller municipalities also do more voluntary and non-paid work than those living in larger municipalities (Svedberg et al. 2010; von Essen et al. 2015; Trägårdh et al. 2013). Anette Forsberg (2010) writes in her dissertation about people organising in associational form as a politicised struggle for survival in a small town in Västernorrland. Other views of rural civil society include people organising through existing organisations, or through forming new ones to fulfil services or functions they feel lacking. This includes functions that serve current needs, such as organising to establish local broadband or taking care of arriving refugees, as well as taking over existing functions such as convenience stores, schools and eldercare where public and private actors no longer provide them (see Bygdell 2014; Cedering 2016; Cras forthcoming; Hansen et al. forthcoming). In a government report labelled *For the rural areas of Sweden*<sup>3</sup>, civil society is described as a developing force, creating

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<sup>2</sup> Gemenskap in Swedish

<sup>3</sup> Freely translated by author

attractiveness and identity as well as developing and providing service and infrastructure (SOU 2017:1). This relates to a growing tendency in Sweden to view CSOs increasingly as providers of public services (Svedberg & Vamstad 2006). The field of study of rural civil society has not been thoroughly explored and this thesis aims at contributing to the further discussion of the role and structure of the civil society in rural Sweden.

## 3 Methods

### 3.1 Fieldwork

The fieldwork that this thesis is based on has been qualitative in nature, consisting of semi-structured interviews, observations as well as web-based information about the CSOs and their activities. The bulk of the fieldwork consists of 13<sup>4</sup> semi-structured interviews with representatives from the local associations and other related actors, such as the owner of the local grocery store and the local government. The fieldwork was carried out during two weeks in Malmbäck in the spring of 2017. As there is no obligations to register associations in a universal register, I started with the associations I could visibly see and contact in the small town. Through the so-called snowball sampling, the field of study has been expanded to include further associations and other important actors through tips from my informants (Kvale & Brinkman 2009). The empirical material include CSOs based outside the actual town of Malmbäck, which have been important for my understanding of the associational life even in a rural area. However, the discussions in this text are centred around life in town and the town itself.

My entry point to the town has been through my aunt and uncle who live a little over five kilometres outside of town, and who are members of the free church as well as of the Local History Association. As with any point of entry, it provided me with my first encounter with Malmbäck and the initial contacts to some of the associations. When I introduced myself and the study, I also presented how I had chosen Malmbäck as the town for my study. In some cases, having a connection helped me establish trust with the informants and made them more willing to speak to me, but it also affected my selection of informants to include people my aunt and uncle knew about. The semi-structured interviews were carried out with an interview guide covering predetermined topics while mimicking a free-flowing conversation (cf. Bryman 2012). Observations have been used with the aim of orienting myself in the fields in which the informants and their associations are active and to acquire first-hand experience of some of the activities the associations carry

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<sup>4</sup> see Appendix A

out. Through my entry point I have had easier access to the associations in which they were active and I attended an annual meeting for the Local History Association as well as Sunday services and a language café organised by the free church. Other observations have included walks and drives through the town as well as visits to the grocery store. Where available, web-based sources have served to guide questions as well as complement the information from the interviews.

### 3.2 What keeps it together?

People meet in the associations and make things happen together with others in the local community. The concept of community includes an aspect of belonging as well as an aspect of social interaction and practices that connects belonging to a group of people sharing an interest or a place (Delanty 2003, p.3). The concept has been used in different ways, and different scholars have focused on different aspects of the concept of community. My understanding of community is in the intersection between the idea of community as an imagined unity and localized everyday interactions in which the unity is lived. In this thesis, I use the terms *imagined community*, or *sense of community* when referring to the imagined unity and the mental idea of what makes up the unity (cf. Andersson 1983; McMillian & Chavis 1986). The term *interactive community* is used when referring to everyday interactions constituting the lived community. The terms express the practical and theoretical aspects of belonging. Belonging can be created through three different ways; doing things together, creating common visions, and pulling in the same direction (Wenger 2000). The imagined community motivates people to act as a community and acting as a community with those around them, affirms the imagined community.

In his classic book *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985) Anthony Cohen focuses on the symbolic aspect of the imagined community, functioning as a boundary marking identity in the growing ontological insecurity of the late modern world. He writes: “*The reality and efficiency of the community’s boundary – and, therefore, of the community itself – depends upon its symbolic construction and embellishment*” (Cohen 1985, p. 15). Discussing community in terms of effects of symbolic activities focuses the

immaterial aspects rather than the practical everyday interactions within the spatial limits of a small rural town. Life in Malmbäck includes contacts with the outside world, but for what goes on in the local community, the social interactions are closer to a classic local community expressed in Tönnies' concept of *Gemeinschaft* (Asplund 1991). The imagined community has its basis in the social interactions within the interactive community, and people's motivation to care about the imagined community stems from the experiences, activities and places they have shared with people they know (Amit 2002). Existing within the relational world of interaction, community is a lived reality and is most clearly seen in the everyday interactions of its members. Drawing from the field of cultural geography, where community happens is in the anthropological place, which is: "*...formed by individual identities, through complicities of language, local references, and the unformulated rules of living know-how...*" (Augé 1995, p. 101). The anthropological place, constructed through social relations, is contrasted by space or non-place, where there are collective identities based on functions rather than relationships to others and the specific place (Cresswell 2004). The local references and the unformulated rules of the living know-hows are developed, expressed and learnt through the localized interaction of everyday life, both constituting and expressing the community. The notion of anthropological place brings in the place as a point of reference since all actions and interactions are situated in the local, social reality somewhere.

## 4 Malmbäck as a community

*“...Community arises out of an interaction between the imagination of solidarity and its realization through social relations...”* (Amit 2002, p. 18)

In this chapter I will discuss Malmbäck as a community. I will start with discussing if there is an idea of solidarity and then proceed to discuss how the idea of solidarity can be expressed in Malmbäck. I will also comment on places as markers of the community of Malmbäck and the role of CSOs in ways of expressing solidarity and interaction as well as their importance for the places.

### 4.1 Belonging in Malmbäck

#### 4.1.1 Belonging at the annual meeting

I visited the annual meeting of the Local History Association, held in the Church of Sweden's parish house. I had been there before; I met the chairman of the local division of Swedish National Pensioners' Organization while his wife attended one of the weekly sewing meetings. Sewing meetings take place every other week in the regime of the Church of Sweden and every other week in the regime of the pensioners' organisation. We hung our coats in the hall and walked towards the meeting room. We were ten minutes early and the two long tables prepared for the meeting were already half full, where people were smiling and chatting. To the left, just before the small door that led into the meeting was a table that was not there during my previous visit. Behind the table sat a man selling lottery tickets at five crowns a piece, with the chance of winning prizes at the end of the night. Later I learnt that the prizes had been the same since “the beginning of times”, packages of coffee, orchids and scratch-lottery tickets. I was not prepared for this and, as usual, my wallet did not contain any cash and it did not seem the kind of place where you would ask to pay with credit card. My uncle whom I arrived with came to my rescue, we got some tickets and sat down at one of the tables. I looked around me at the table and saw men and women somewhere between sixty and eighty, all with at least a couple of tickets on the table in front of them. I was prepared to feel a little out of place given that my presence noticeably lowered the

average age in the room, but the small detail of not having cash made me feel stranger than my age. It appeared that the local custom was to carry cash on you at a time like this – something that would be unnecessary where I live.

It seemed as though the annual meeting included so much more than what was on the formal agenda of electing people for vacant posts and reporting financial results; and they all seemed to know what to do. Small symbolical gestures, such as greetings, are highlighted by McMillian and Chavis (1986) in the creation of a feeling of a sense of community<sup>5</sup>. Buying a lottery ticket can be seen as a gesture that confirms belonging to the community, a gesture through the interactive community of the lived know-hows in an everyday setting. Those present have all been to many meetings and know the drill, bringing cash and buying lottery tickets is a natural part of the meeting, yet marking belonging, which becomes visible in the contrast of an outsider not yet knowing how to act. The belonging itself is undramatic through the small actions, no members register was checked at the door, no manifests were proclaimed; almost unknowingly, the participants confirmed their belonging to the community by going to an ordinary meeting. Membership in associations are thought to increase the general trust, as voluntary institutions are key for collective action and aggregation of interests, and show the importance and positive side of collaboration (Trägårdh et al. 2013). The activities show both positive aspects of collaboration and of collective interest within the association where they unite around interests for sports, religion, old cars, local history etc. In Malmbäck the happenings were also geared towards the community itself as the associations collaborate between themselves and share a collective interest around the community, by making things happen and creating and maintaining belonging in social interaction.

People come together around an interest in an association, in this case an interest in local history. The interest serves as a cohesive to keep the core members together, not only in regards to the interests they share, but also by providing them with opportunities to meet and have meaningful social interactions. The interactions include, but stretch beyond, those with an interest for the local history. The Local History Association arranges waffle nights during the summer, well-being evenings (*trivselkväll*) to meet and

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<sup>5</sup> *Gemenskap* in Swedish.

socialise along with Walpurgis and midsummer celebrations at the open-air museum. The gatherings have the historical aspect present, either as a topic for a presentation as in the annual meeting, or through the very physical presence of the open-air museum. However the social aspect is very present in both of them. The associational form allows for the shared interest of a core group of members to create a social event stretching beyond the historical interests to include the whole town. The associations create events which are meeting grounds where people maintain localised social relations over time (Gunnarsdotter 2005). The annual meeting is a place where interactive community takes place, where the know-hows of the community can be shared and people create memories together, without it being a dramatic event for the sake of preserving community (cf Forsberg 2010).

Lottery tickets, and other things, to support an association and confirm the community reoccurred at other events my informants told me about. It seems to be a part of the events where they come together. One of these events is the Rock'n'Roll evening, or as it is known in town “the greaser gathering” (raggarträffen).

#### 4.1.2 Rock'n'Roll, Christmas concerts and sports practices – for Malmbäck

About 200 neatly-parked classic vintage cars frame the square's park in Malmbäck one Friday evening. This is an event that occurs every August. Live music is playing from the scene in the park with the town's “own Elvis” and two other bands are playing some classic rock'n'roll. It is an evening when you meet others and have a good time with friends, family and old acquaintances. The event has been called the “returners night” (hemvändarkväll) by some, since it is a night where many people who moved from Malmbäck return home for the event. It is open to the public, and while centred around cars and music, there are also a lot of other activities going on. There is a bouncy castle, food such as hamburgers, hotdogs, fika<sup>6</sup> and candy. There is a chocolate wheel<sup>7</sup> (chokladhjul), dart throwing and yet again lottery tickets. The event is organised by Malmbäcks Event Association but other associations are also represented; the chocolate wheel and dart is

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<sup>6</sup> Roughly translated to coffee and some kind of pastry

<sup>7</sup> A roulette-like lottery game with chocolate as prizes

managed by different divisions of the Sports Club and the lottery tickets by the Swedish National Pensioners' Organisation (PRO). Through the presence of the associations you can meet people that you might not meet on a regular basis otherwise, discuss the latest results of soccer games, and other activities going on within the local community. At the same time, you can also contribute to the financial situation of the associations and support their efforts to make more things happen in Malmbäck by testing your luck on the chocolate wheel. It is a night of coming together for the whole community, where there is something for the entire family. One of the leading members in the association behind the Rock'n'Roll night said about its development:

*The first year, it might not have been too appreciated by the people here in Malmbäck. People... well, how should I word it... it attracted a lot of greasers,<sup>8</sup> and greasers might not have the best reputation. They [the people in Malmbäck] didn't know what was going on. We have kept it a family theme and it is more and more appreciated in town now, we have worked on making the event into something for Malmbäck...*

*– Tobias, Malmbäck Event Association*

Compared to the annual meeting of the Local History Association which is primarily for members of the association, the Rock'n'Roll night is a celebration of the community. With an active intention of including everyone, young and old, with or without a passion for cars and music or not, it is an event celebrating Malmbäck and belonging (see Hansen 2002). Between the idea of Malmbäck as an imagined community and the interactive event is the concept of pulling in the same direction (see Wenger 2000), the same direction as the town itself is going, showing what the imagined community consists of. The event started as a collaboration between some friends who shared an interest for cars and music. After a while discord developed between the founders over personal and financial issues and those who continued the event in Malmbäck started an association. Starting the association was a way to show that all the money they received was accounted for and to be credible for their sponsors. The event is primarily sponsored by local companies but the list also includes the local grocery store and other CSO's such as the Church of Sweden and the free church. Through contributing financially, they get acknowledged as one of the local companies

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<sup>8</sup> Raggare in Swedish, including an interest for American cars from the 50's, a rockabilly clothing style and rock'n'roll music.

that contribute towards the common good of the town. In the terminology of capital (see Bourdieu 1995; Putnam 2000), this can be seen as financial capital being converted into symbolic capital. When contributing, the companies are being a part of pulling in the same direction, contributing with what they have.

The Malmbäck Event Association does not only receive sponsoring but also contributes back to the community, not only by arranging an event, but also by distributing the surplus to Malmbäck. If the Event Association would dissolve, the remaining assets will be given for activities to the youth in Malmbäck according to the statutes. They have made some donations to the local swimming area Klappabadet<sup>9</sup>. In a similar way, the free church arranges a Christmas concert the second weekend in advent every year. The concert is sponsored by local companies and tickets are sold through the grocery store. The surplus is used for the churches mission work as well as donating to Klappabadet. Over a weekend they do five concerts, with adjacent serving of traditional Swedish julbord which is a smorgasbord of Christmas food, to three of the concerts, one each day for between 100-150 people. It is a show including Santa and Christmas trees but also the Christmas gospel. The concerts engage a lot of people throughout the year, in the planning, choir practices and food preparation. It includes people that stretch beyond the members of the church, especially when it comes to youth and children.

#### 4.1.3 Engaged – for the associational interest and for the community

Many of the regular activities were directed towards the youth. Besides sports and scouts there are children's choirs, the Church of Sweden has after school for the fifth and sixth graders. Some of those engaged in the Sports Club arrange extra physical activity once a week for the fifth and sixth graders. The Parents' Association for the local school arrange discos and collect money that they give to the classes to use towards school trips, something fun to play with at recess or whatever they want.

*...the local community doesn't work without the engagement in the associations... all the voluntary work put into it, it is key for the youth to turn out alright. If they don't have anything to do, then they can*

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<sup>9</sup> Further discussion of Klappabadet in chapter 4.2.2

*derail. The Sports Club and the churches are very good at that [making something happen for the youth]...*

*– Peter, owner of the Grocery store*

When a town loses service, workplaces or population, it can have a negative effect on the youths' engagement in their local surrounding; this effect is reduced if they are surrounded by grown-ups who are engaged in the children's life (Salamon 2003). While not outspoken in the terminology of creating or maintaining the community, the stressed importance of doing something for the children to turn out alright along with many activities serves to provide a foundation for the children to get engaged in the associational life in the town. The activities also teach the know-hows of the community, a community based around the small town they live in. There is a lot of engagement in the associations in Malmbäck, and the engagement is seen as something positive for the local community. Svedberg et al. (2010) and von Essen et al. (2015) show that inhabitants in smaller municipalities and rural communities do more voluntary and informal work than those living in larger municipalities.

*...I think there are mostly good things with living in a small town, if you have the [right] mind-set... it is important that you look after each other in a small town like this...*

*– Pernilla, the Church of Sweden*

The voluntary work directed at the youth is one way that the imagined community, here expressed as what it means to live in a small town, is carried out in the interactive community. The engagement seems to be a natural aspect of life in Malmbäck, a town that one belongs to, where people look after each other.

Engagement and voluntary work can also be a source of irritation. Forsberg (2010, p. 57) writes about a tension between a sense of pride of the voluntary work and a feeling of injustice when obliged to put in un-paid work for things that those in cities got for free. The chairman of the Sports Club told me that the local Sports Club manages the lawns at the football field on a voluntary basis but that some other Sports Clubs' fields in the municipality is managed by the local government. The scheduled cutting of the grass by the local government was unable to accommodate varying conditions for the cutting and the Sports Club decided to do it themselves to improve the quality of their

field. One of the engaged in the Friends of Tomtabacken joked and asked me: “do you know what the 50-sign<sup>10</sup> means?” I answered “no” and he continued with a twinkle in his eye: “here ends voluntary work”. While bringing up that they do more voluntary work than others, I did not sense bitter feelings of being forced to, but rather stating it as a part of what it means to live in rural areas. What they accomplish together with their voluntary work is rather talked about with a sense of pride; when they carry it out it is done better than what it would have been if carried out by the local government, since they are physically closer and more present than the local government can be.

The engagement and activities in the associations have some connection to the associations’ main interest such as sports, local history or religion but also include a varying degree of the outspoken social goal of being together with others in the community, for the youth to turn out alright, or so that “something happens” for those who live in the town. When the Local History Association has their well-being nights, when the Church of Sweden has their soup-serving once a month, when the free church has their “11-coffee” where people meet and have fika together on Tuesday mornings or when the sewing meetings are held in the parish building it is quite outspoken to be gatherings in the name of coming together. Arranging the rock’n’roll evening has an element of coming together, but also an element of an interest in cars and music. The football practices bring people together but are primarily focused on playing sports. However, during the matches the Sports Club opens their kiosk, selling coffee and candy, making it into an event stretching beyond football. They also arrange the Malmbäck Sports Club-day (MIF-dagen) with matches for all ages as well as chocolate wheel and music entertainment that has a wider aspect of coming together.

Gunnarsdotter (2005) compares the sense of community, by her labelled as abstract sociality, rising from working together in the agrarian setting in earlier generations with the associational life today. She finds that the sense of community is a stronger and more important part of today’s association but argues that the activities would soon stop if they were only directed towards keeping the community together (ibid.). The associations’ core interests and focus on community is present in varying degrees. It is important in itself and

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<sup>10</sup> The traditional speed limit when entering towns.

as a motivation for the social interaction that creates and maintains the imagined community. The core interest and the social aspects in the activities are inseparable. The Church of Sweden includes a prayer, a song or the blessing, in their activities, but there is also a relational aspect in the deaconry work with charitable aspects. The pastor in the free church answered when I asked him what motivates their activities:

*... furthestmost it is a kind of mission to spread the gospel, from the Christian gospel we shall "go out in the whole world, starting in Jerusalem, Galilee, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"... Then I think there is a feeling of being a positive force in the community, not on the expense of the faith, but to not be exclusive and for ourselves... This is our Jerusalem. There is another passage: "seek the best of the place you live in, with the help of God" ...*

*– Mattias, the free church*

The associations have their own concrete goals with their activities, yet they still share the commonality of doing something in the community of Malmbäck, to some extent for Malmbäck. They share not only the common place for these events but also see their activities as contributing to what happens in the small town, making Malmbäck what it is. Such activities thus become like the symbols that constitute the community in Cohen's (1985) sense, i.e. something that can be shared even though the interpretations of them can vary. The Sports Club adds an athletic aspect, the Event Association adds an automobile and music interest and the church adds a religious aspect. There is a considerable overlap between the different associations, where members in the churches are also members in the Local History Association and the Sports Club, the Parents' Association, or the PRO. No clear distinction was made between those engaged in their "own" association and other associations, but engagement in the associations overall were generally appreciated. Doing something together for Malmbäck, is not actively chosen to be a symbol, but becomes something the community unites around. Symbols, to mark differences towards others are more important for the creation of an identity in groups where there is less feeling of community (Trägårdh et al 2013, p. 101). I interpret the multiple memberships and engagements in different associations as there being less of a need to mark the differences between the associations, because of the sense of community that exists. Belonging to one association does not mean negative feelings

towards another one; in the pursuit of things happening in Malmbäck, they stick together.

*...we have a pretty good collaboration. From the point of the Sports Club one has always made sure not to collide with the activities in church. They have scout evenings, on Thursdays I believe, and then we never have practices on Thursday evenings. The selection of activities is narrow in a town like this, and then you should of course be able to take part in everything that is offered...*

– Jan, Malmbäck Sports Club

Besides an overlap in memberships the associations also collaborate between themselves. The Church of Sweden sponsors the Sports Club, and in return they can borrow the sports facilities kitchen and bathrooms when they arrange Barn-vasaloppet, a ski race for children. When the Church of Sweden arranges a floor ball tournament for the kids during a school break, they can borrow the gym hall for free. When the school has the summer break ceremony they are in the free church's buildings. While there might not be as many different activities to choose from as in larger towns and cities, the activities in the small town are for "everyone" to partake in. "Everyone" include those whom it may concern, those who live in Malmbäck. The imagined community, where activities are for everyone, helps the associations collaborate, which can be discussed in terms of high levels of local trust. Local social trust (lokalsamhällestillit) is distinguished from the general social trust (generell tillit) towards strangers and the particular trust (partikulär tillit) towards family members, relatives and friends (Trägårdh et al. 2013). People who trust others in the local community and trust that they will contribute towards common solutions in the local community are more willing to contribute themselves, thereby facilitating collaboration (ibid.).

The three free churches that existed side by side in Malmbäck merged into one eighteen years ago. In the process of uniting, they bought a plot next to one of the churches and started to expand the existing church to that property, and gradually sold the other buildings. In this process of building they actively wanted to be "the church in the middle of the community" both physically and figuratively:

*...when we built the church I remember a journalist came and asked why we were going through with the construction of the church, and*

*someone said, “well, someone has to have faith in the local community”, it stuck with us...*

*– Mattias, the free church*

The church building is one of the larger facilities available in the small town, besides the Sports Club's house and the parish building belonging to the Church of Sweden. The free church's facilities are, besides the churches' own activities used for meetings such as hunters' associations, and information meetings about the broadband expansion in the small town. The will to be a part of the community was also shown when the local government needed to expand their day care in Malmbäck. The church heard that the local government was looking for a facility to use for their new department of the day care, and brought up their facilities as an alternative. After looking at two different facilities, it was decided to open a temporary day care unit in the basement of the church. Offering their facilities to help provide day care for the town is described as a win-win situation. They appreciate there being more movement in the building during the weekdays, when there are not that many church activities, and see it as a way of welcoming people into the church, as well as a contribution towards the church's economy. The collaboration between the associations and the local government as well as between the associations themselves makes it easier for the associations to make things happen in Malmbäck, which in turn works to reinforce the belonging in the small town.

#### 4.1.4 Continuing what we have in Malmbäck –engagement in the associations

Getting people engaged in associations is an issue experienced in many associations across Sweden. The ones being engaged tend to pull a large part of the workload and the engagement is sometimes seen as something heavy, something you would rather be without (Forsberg 2010, p. 56). So why do people get engaged in the associations? Conny, who is book keeper in the Local History Association as well as in other associations, has been trying to step down from some of his positions during the last year because of the time it takes. He told me about the work they do in preparations for the waffle nights at the open-air museum and while he expressed a mild frustration with the time it takes, he ended with saying:

...but it is nice! We enjoy the performance together, people come and make the waffles, I take care of the money and talk and socialize with people. It is nice, very nice actually...

– Conny, bookkeeper

The social aspect keeps returning as a reason why people get engaged, to meet people. When people get engaged and put time and effort into the happenings in the associations, it creates events where people meet and have a good time together where. In creating happy memories together a sense of community is created. With the increased movement of the late modernity (see Giddens 2013) people move more and work less together with the people they live close to. For those who move to the town, the associations are a way into the social life of the town (Gunnarsdotter 2005). Meeting people and doing something for the community are intertwined; Henrik, chairman of the Parent's Association answered about why he got engaged:

*There are two reasons; one is that we moved here, and getting engaged in one of the associations is a good way of getting into the local community. There was a parent in one of our boys' class that asked me if I wanted to join and I thought it would be fun to do something in the neighbourhood<sup>11</sup>. The second one is that it is nice to do something for the children, to help with something in the village; to get to know people and to do something for the kids.*

– Henrik, Parents' Association

When moving to a new place, a position or an engagement in an association can work as a way to get into the formal contacts and network in the associations. The contacts can develop into more informal networks, being a way to become a member of the community. In their engagement in the association they get to know people with whom they share experiences and memories, creating a belonging to the community. The overlap of memberships and collaboration between the different associations helps with the coordination between the association but also serves to widen the network. Being active in social situations and having a network is correlated with higher levels of local trust (Trägårdh et al. 2013). Through the contacts they entail, the associations and the activities they arrange are meeting grounds where local trust, and a will to be engaged in the local community, can be created. The associations are also a platform where the will to be engaged can create new activities. When refugees arrived to the refugee quarters some

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<sup>11</sup> Bygd in Swedish

kilometres from town, one of the members in the free church, who lives close to the refugee quarters asked at the coffee after the Sunday service at church if someone there could do something, and things started happening. It resulted in a language café in the basement of the church once a week and Swedish lessons at the refugee quarters twice a week. Along with the language oriented activities it also sparked the initiative for sewing/knitting evenings with the women in the quarters and a small second hand store where donated clothes are sold to the refugees. Through the engagement in the associations the inhabitants unite over doing something together for the community and widen their social network. Through the social encounters, new engagement arises.

The social aspects are also a part of what led to an engagement in the associations; either they were asked directly by someone already in the association, like Henrik, or they decided to do something together with people they knew and started up something new, like the Rock'n'Roll night, for the community. Wanting to do something together creates opportunities to create memories and share experiences that constitutes the interactive community, and. These shared experiences motivate them to care about the idea of the imagined community and make things happen together (Amit 2002). The will to meet people and to do things for the community are intertwined and there is no clear-cut difference between the two motives. The social aspect is also expressed through the understanding for people's shifting engagement in the associations. While there is a heavy workload for those engaged, there is also an expressed understanding for people stepping down from posts, because of personal reasons or changed life situation:

*We had some who had been in the board a couple of years, who for natural reasons felt like it was time to let go of that engagement...It is how it is today, many people work a lot and are tired, with both parents working, and kids, everyone has a lot, you know how it is. That is how it is in society, it is hard for all associations to get people to help out...*

*– Henrik, Parents' Association*

*Now he [the person who organised it earlier] stepped aside. He just got his third child and is working in a different way, so he felt the time did not add up*

*– Jan, Sports Club*

Contributing to Malmbäck does not have to consume all your time and you do not have to put all your energy towards it. There is a flexibility in the

engagement. There is a scale in the support for an association, from paying the yearly membership fee to buying the occasional lottery ticket, helping at events, being an active member of the board and starting up new events. The level of engagement can depend on the want to do things, but also from what is needed to establish or keep ones belonging or “membership” in the community. Whereas those who move into the small town can become a part of the social networks through their engagement in the association, those who grew up in the local community are already a part of the networks. Visiting the events could be enough for them to keep their belonging. Being a passive member in the association and paying a membership fee is marking the belonging to the community in a low intensive way. Overall, the engagement in the associations is cherished by all and, while there is no rush to the vacant posts in some of the associations, the seats are filled in one way or another and the associations carry on their work. In the Local History Association those who wanted to step down from their position on the board agreed to sit one more term before leaving, when no one was found to replace them. In the Parents’ Association, they posted on social media that they needed new members in the board and it filled.

*It was tough last fall...we asked if there was someone that could join us, and we got a lot of response. And some wrote me and said “if you don’t find someone, I am in, we can’t let this go, it must continue”... Half the board is new, and they took it, rod line and sinker, and took on tasks, it will be great!*

*– Henrik, Parents’ Association*

The associations are dependent on engaged individuals, but it does not seem to stand and fall with one enthusiast<sup>12</sup> as described in other descriptions of small rural towns (Forsberg 2010). In contrast, the engagement seems to be more evenly distributed between people in the different associations and new engagement appears when needed to maintain the things that are happening within the community. While it may appear as if there is no solution on how to fill the void of quitting members of the board, in some ways it is solved. The organisations and associations in Malmbäck seem to be directed at meeting each other and keeping activities going, rather than being arenas for

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<sup>12</sup> Eldsjäl in Swedish

political mobilisation in the face of degradation as described by Forsberg (2010).

## 4.2 Places in Malmbäck – where it happens

Some physical locations are more important than others for a town. Through the interactions happening there, where people meet, talk and share experiences they become places, loaded with meaning and memories, as opposed to spaces being physical areas without emotional meaning (Augé 1995). Here I will discuss some of the places in Malmbäck, and which part the associations play in relation to those places.

### 4.2.1 The square's park and the grocery store – our grocery store

The square's park and the scene that the Rock'n'Roll night is located at is in the middle of town. This is also where the Community Association arranges the celebration of the national day. The scene is owned and managed by the Star of Malmbäck Foundation (Stiftelsen Malmbäcks stjärna), which is a foundation constituted by the associations and churches in the small town. The scene was first built in the 1980s for a concert with the Swedish band Edin-Åhdal playing at the sports grounds on the initiative of the Sports Club, and then moved to the square. The Church of Sweden lights advent candles on the scene at Christmas time. In the summer, the churches arrange music evenings together on Saturday evenings in the park with live music and some fika where the people in Malmbäck can meet up and have a relaxed evening together, enjoying a cup of coffee while listening to live music in the undying sunlight of the Swedish summer evening. There are also other things bringing people to the town square, that are not directly related to the associations. By the other end of the park there is a playground surrounded by a low fence. It is a modern playground in metal with bright colours, frequented by the children in town during the spring and summer months. It was chosen to be one of the investments to improve the attractiveness of the square's park as a meeting point. The playground was financed by the Malmbäck million, an initiative from the local government where one million crowns were set aside for the inhabitants of Malmbäck to decide about physical investments in the small town. Some years back the roof of the scene was replaced and the scene

was repainted. The painting was done by volunteers organised by one of the members in the free church. In different ways associations both make things happen and are an active part of the maintenance of the scene as a meaningful place in the community of Malmbäck.

On the other side of the square is the small grocery store. The grocery store is brought up as an important aspect of the town's survival and attractiveness. When asking my informants what they think about Malmbäck as a town, they are positive for its future. They bring up the increasing house prices that mark the beginning of the trend of Malmbäck being increasingly attractive with affordable housing in combination with services such as a small school, a library and a grocery store. Malmbäck is becoming an appealing alternative for families commuting to the expanding industrial area south of Jönköping.

*...sure we don't have opening hours from 8-21 on the weekend, we have 9-15 on Saturdays and 11-15 on Sundays, but it's still something, and we have to cherish and care for that. If we have to start driving everywhere to get groceries then I don't know anymore... [talking about the survival of the town]*

*– Mikael, Community Association*

Mikael continues to tell me about another small town where there once was a well-sorted grocery store that now resembles more of a kiosk and remarks what a blow it would be to lose the store. In the grocery store in Malmbäck you can get basic groceries to fulfill your everyday needs. The store also functions as a distribution agent for services such as postal (Post Nord), shipping (DHL, Schenker), banking, pharmacy, liquor (Systembolaget) and betting (ATG, Svenska Spel). The previously mentioned bulletin board in the entrance gives the visitors a chance to see what is going on in town, from meetings to missing cats. Naturally, many of the inhabitants pass by the store on a regular basis and during my stay in town, I managed to run into people I had previously interviewed in the store during my short stay there. Sometimes a closed store is missed more for its social functions of meeting grounds than for the provision of foods (Amcoff 2009).

*...people come into the store and talk about just about anything. [As a store] you are everything, a hub in the community in many ways. People come and ask questions, give reflections and sometimes personal issues (chuckle). Being a small store, we take care of most things...*

*– Peter, owner of the grocery store*

The local grocery store fills an important social role as a meeting point and a hub in the local community where people can speak to others and confirm their belonging in the community. Its practical function as a localized store is also important for the social life by facilitating other's activities. When the Sports Club buys candy to sell in their kiosk at the games, they buy it from the local grocery store at a discounted price. When the church buys food for the julbord at the Christmas concerts they buy their food from the local store, creating a mutually beneficial connection and support. Mathias, pastor in the free church puts it this way: "...the church has an outspoken policy, that if we are buying something, we will buy it in **our** store, and they are very service minded and orders what we need" (bold by author). *Our store*, expresses the imagined community, where the store is a central part of the town and its future a common responsibility for those who live there. The store owner is aware of the importance of the store in the small town and he is taking active steps towards keeping it open. Through long term investments in the store, such as exchanging the freezers, refrigerators and lighting for more energy efficient ones and adding a cooler for the fruit, he is trying to secure the store's existence so that someone could take over after him.

The store is ultimately dependent on the costumers for its survival; with many people commuting into larger towns and cities for work, they also stop and do some of their grocery shopping in the supermarkets on their way home. During the last summer holidays the financial results showed signs of a declining sales which, in the long run, would mean the end of the store. The store owner communicated the negative results:

*I said to someone: "it's tough now". You have got to be honest, you don't want to pretend everything is fine and then all the sudden, you stand there without a store. And it spread through social media, and people started to stop and think. When you calculate it's no big numbers, if everyone bought for just 10-15 crowns more every time they came in, it would be no problem... and I have noticed, people stop and think and shop more here now*

*– Peter, owner of the grocery store*

The results got better again and the store is still running, and it remains the meeting ground in the middle of town. The store owner is a member of the free church, active in the local firefighting department and involved in the Company's Association (företagarförening) in Malmbäck. How much of the

changed behavior came from the associations and the contacts he has through them is impossible to tell. However, the associations provide further contact surfaces where the message can be shared for example: between the spectators of the soccer games, at the coffee tables after Sunday service, at choir practices and other gatherings. The store is an important part of the imagined community of Malmbäck. When people are reminded that the store is in jeopardy, they respond by increasing their spending in the store, living out the idea of belonging together and sharing the responsibility. Hence the actions keep up the imagined community, and the imagined community is motivated through the conversations and interactions taking place in connection to the grocery store.

#### 4.2.2 Klappabadet – maintaining common places

From the town square we turned left and proceeded on the road that runs through the community. I caught a glimpse of the train leaving for Nässjö through the leafless trees of a February afternoon before we turned at the free church. After a while we passed the “pancake curve” which, according to local folktale, is the result of the family living in the property persuading a government official to stretch the road around instead of through the property over a meal of pancakes around the kitchen table. We followed the road some four-five kilometres from town through forested sections before a small sign appears on the left. Half covered by the spruce it is attached to, it lets us know that our destination, the local swimming area, is just beyond the narrow dirt road that turns into a parking lot. Beyond the wooden fence marking the end of the gravelled parking lot, a small, metal gate with white paint lightly peeling from the handle led us on to a small grassy area. The grass continued until it reached the edge, marked by a rigid, metal fence where concrete stairs led down to the two wooden jetties where the ice is slowly melting. Alone in the middle of the grass is a flagpole, accompanied only by some fallen pinecones and brown needles from the pine tree further towards the water. To the left at the stairs, is a wooden deck leading up to the small, red building with white corners overlooking the lake. Through the windows I can see stacked outdoor furniture on the wooden floors next to a fireplace, waiting for the season to start and the café to open. There is something sad about a

deserted swimming area during the off-season I think to myself. However I have been told that it is more lively during the summer. The children who just finished fifth grade from the local school sell sandwiches, home baked goods, candy and ice cream here, earning money towards a school trip the coming year. Children of all generations have enjoyed happy summer days in the sun here and families from the small town have gotten together throughout the years. It is a meeting point in the summer where homemade pastries, baked by the parents of the former fifth graders, are enjoyed together on sunny days, it is:

*...the finest swimming area in the whole municipality! It is the only swimming area in the municipality not owned by the local government, we own it in the foundation. Its unique, a swimming area in the municipality that the local government doesn't own. We own it! Malmbäck owns it! All the associations and the churches in Malmbäck together.*

*– Conny, bookkeeper in the star foundation*

Built by the sobriety movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the swimming area is now owned by the Foundation Star of Malmbäck constituted of the associations in Malmbäck. It is kept through donations to the foundation, money from wills of deceased locals, as well as part of the surplus from the free churches Christmas concerts and a yearly grant from the local government. The swimming area was renovated some years ago partly with the help of the Malmbäck million. The staircase down to the water was redone, the fence was replaced, the house was renovated and a small changing room was built behind the house. Some of the masonry work was carried out by paid professionals, the rest was done by voluntary labour from local companies and other inhabitants. It is a place of local pride for Malmbäck, the finest swimming area in the municipality, formally owned, managed and frequented by the inhabitants in Malmbäck, as well as with others they know and care about. The associations play a crucial role in maintaining such a place, through formally owning it together in the foundation, but also enabling the financing of the swimming area. They contribute financially, the free church being a significant contributor among other donators. Through being a part of the foundation the associations also contribute to the development and sustainability of the foundation. The formal organisation makes it easier to receive funding from the local government. Foundations

and associations keep book over their finances, securing that the money is used for the right purposes. It would be considerably harder for individuals and other institutions to donate to individuals owning the swimming area for its upkeep and to keep it open for the public if not for these formal organisations. The associations are crucial to keeping the swimming area a place where happy summer memories among friends and family are created, constituting the community.

#### 4.2.3 Tomtabacken – continuity

Another place managed by an association is Tomtabacken, a lookout tower located nine kilometres outside of the small town. The tower is located on the beautiful nature path of the highland trail (Höglandsleden), going through the highlands of the county of Småland. The tower was constructed during the second world war as a fire and lookout tower on the highest point of the county. Some years ago, it was renovated by the county administration board through EU-grants and is now managed by The Friends of Tomtabacken (Tomtabackens Vänner). A handful of active members come from the small villages around the tower and they meet once or twice a year to cut shrubbery, clear the paths, clean around the tower and not least enjoy a cup of coffee together with the magnificent view. They get a small grant from the local government, and some income from membership fees in the association from supporting members.

Biyearly at the tower, the Community Association arrange the day of Tomtabacken (Tomtabackens dag), a day full of activities with a multitude of associations and locals. It all starts with a quiz drive, a quiz with various stops along the road, from the town square outside the grocery store, leading out to Tomtabacken. The lookout tower's normal parking lot is not large enough and the cars are parked on a field which the local farmer has made available for the occasion. Two years ago, when it was last arranged, the theme was *mopeds then and now*. Besides the old vehicles that year, there was a small market with fika, buns, cookies and sandwiches served by the free church. A local, game-butchery company grills sausages, the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF) have a log sawing contest and there is a quiz walk for children, horse-shoe throwing and a mini farm with rabbits, chickens and sheep. There

is a horse and carriage ride, the Sports Club is there with their chocolate wheel along with lotteries from the Local History Association. Companies, associations and individuals sell handicrafts, homemade bread, jams, honey, candy, ice cream and when in Småland of course, you can also buy the local speciality ostkaka<sup>13</sup>. From the scene in a tent, there was live music from a local artist.

*It is a pretty large event, with parking guards, and the whole apparatus, serving coffee, and the farmers who have their fields around there can preferably not plough their fields a week before the event (chuckle) There is quite a lot that needs to be prepared and it is the first time that I am in charge of it as chairman, so I am rather nervous about it. But I have spoken with the others in the board who have been in the association a while, someone has a list with all the contacts we must take, and that will help me.*

*– Mikael, Community Association*

The event started in the 90s and has, just like the Rock'n'Roll night, been a “returners day”, where people who no longer live in the area return for the occasion. People meet here, listen to music, buy lottery tickets, eat sausages and fika, look at local handicrafts and have a good time with people they know. John-Erik is an enthusiast, and one of the driving forces behind Tomtabackens dag, but due to illness is no longer involved in the event. Though there have been discussions between the associations of in what regime the event will be carried out, it will continue to happen. Some activities cease when one engaged individual for some reason, is no longer engaged in that activity and the importance of an enthusiast has been stressed by along with the vulnerability that it entails (Herlitz, 1999). The existence of associations can help bridge the gap after an enthusiast or change of members through its organisational forms, provided they are sufficiently transparent (Dyck 2002, p. 119). With the contact information and routine that exists within the Community Association, the event can continue despite the loss of an enthusiast and changes in the board of the association. The associations contribute towards a continuity in the events and happenings that bring people together in a special and festive way. There is a great variety in the organisational form of the different associations; more regular activities such as floorball practices, scouts, an open preschool, discos arranged by the

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<sup>13</sup> A traditional regional cheesecake hand made from fresh milk, almond and sugar.

Parents' Association or the sewing evenings exists in an associational context with relatively transparent organisational forms. Even though the people carrying out the activity are contributing significantly to the happening, if they stepped down, someone else could replace them because of the organisational form that the association provides. While there being some routines, some associations are more loosely organised. In contrast to Tomtabackens dag, the Rock'n'Roll night is more dependent on individual involvements connected to certain people. The Event Association is largely built up around the two friends who started it and relatives of one of them. When they started, they announced on social media, and through contacts with an interest for veteran cars, the word spread. They have established good contacts with local sponsors, as well as musicians that play during the night. Their personal networks are important assets when organising the event.. If the two main figures in the association would no longer want to organise it, the future of the event is uncertain. Whether the event is to reoccur is decided from year to year depending on those behind it:

*In the beginning, it was to do something fun, it is still fun, and I have said that I will continue as long as it is fun. It is very encouraging when you hear that people appreciate it, then it is more fun to pull the whole thing around. Every year it is like: do we have the energy to do this another year? – It was fun, so we'll go on*

*– Tobias, Malmbäck Event Association*

The Rock'n'Roll evening started from personal wants by those who started it to make something fun happen and they decide year by year if they will continue. The event is more dependent on the individual persons than if there exists more of an organisational structure. As an example, the concept of an "open preschool", a meeting ground for parents who are home with their children, is well established and if the person working for the Church of Sweden with this would quit, she could be replaced and the activities could continue relatively unchanged. Associations vary significantly, and while some associations and events are established, formalised and less dependent on the individual, some are more reliant on the personal networks of those involved. While we can see, and in accordance with Dyck's (2002) observation, associations can help create continuity in the events and

gatherings, the bare existence of an association is not a guarantee of an event's survival, but the nature of the varying associations must be considered.

## 5 Roles/Responsibility

In this chapter I will discuss the roles of the CSOs in relation to their surroundings in regards to service and responsibilities.

### 5.1 A voice and an initiative

When discussing the voice-bearing role of civil society, there is a general understanding that it is through the participation in CSOs that people can affect political and public decisions (SOU 2017:1). The CSOs contribute with better understandings and decisions in their role of voice bearers through a continuous dialog between the public sector and the CSOs, (SOU 2016:13). Voice bearing can be done through associations, but there are also other ways for the civil society to make itself heard and pass on opinions. On a national level, the Swedish National Pensioners' Organisation (PRO) are voicing concerns about the conditions for those who have retired. On a local level, they have activities geared towards "joy and companionship" for their members. A clearer local voice for a certain group of members is the local division of the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF) representing farmers' interests and views. They are an official referral body for decisions that concern them, such as nature reserves and implementation of regulations of environmental protections. The voice is primarily that of the farmers and forest owners. When it comes to the small town of Malmbäck, the Community Association, a Facebook group called *Our Future Malmbäck* (Vårt framtida Malmbäck) and a less formalised group of individuals involved in the discussion of physical investments in the "development group" are the most prominent voice bearers.

*You have to fight pretty hard to get a part of the municipality town's<sup>14</sup> glow. I believe the Million might be a way to compensate for that, the voices were raised from the outer towns<sup>15</sup>, so [the local government thought] we might have to do something. If you lay quiet, unfortunately nothing will happen...*

– Mikael, Community Association

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<sup>14</sup> Centralort in Swedish

<sup>15</sup> Kransort in Swedish

The Community Association has contact with the local government about things concerning the community through planned meetings and more spontaneous phone calls when something comes up. The Community Association is carrying out a voice carrying role, being a source of inputs from the local community and they feel like the local government is starting to pay more interest to their requests as the interest is growing for Malmbäck as an alternative for people commuting to Jönköping.

*...my impression is that the local government joins in a little later when they sense that something is starting to catch speed, then they latch on, but they are not the ones starting it.*

*– Mikael, Community Association*

The local government is not the driving force in the things happening in Malmbäck, but it supports initiatives already taken by others. The bidding approach leaves ample room for the associations to take initiative that can create a local feeling of ownership, yet still support the activities:

*We have always painted ourselves, and put in a new floor a couple of years ago, we have never been afraid of doing things at the facility ourselves even if it is not technically ours, it is the municipality's, but at heart it is ours... of course we have a facility grant from the local government, but we have not been afraid to put in of our own money as well*

*– Jan, Malmbäck Sports Club*

When I arrived at the athletic grounds in Malmbäck I knocked on the door and stepped in, and I was greeted by the chairman of the Sports Club. He asked me if I wanted some coffee and showed me to the kitchen. It was newly renovated and had a modern feel to it. As he plugged in the coffee maker, he told me that they had contact with one of the people in the technical board in the local government, who was also a member of the Sports Club, and they agreed to renovate the kitchen. The local government gives a financial contribution towards the swimming area and to the Friends of Tomtabacken for their upkeep of the lookout tower. While some frustration over the bureaucracy was expressed in the applications and reports of grants in contact with the local government, the associations expressed that the collaboration went well. The support from the local government is primarily for physical investments, such as the million, upkeep of the parks, grants to the Sports Club for managing the arena etc. and not for social purposes or happenings.

Through the support for investments, the social activities are facilitated, but the associations stand as the guardians creating and maintaining the community in a social sense.

The financial contributions might also have troubling aspects. When the project of the Malmbäck million started in 2013 there were around a hundred people on the meeting, and then it boiled down to a project group of 10-15 that were willing to put time into discussing the details further. This group gathered around deciding the material of the playground etc., forming the development group. Even though not formally being an association, the associational tradition influences the meeting forms and during the meetings the development group function similarly to an association (see Åberg & von Essen 2013; Åberg 2015). Besides the playground the money has been used for the stair case at the swimming area Klappabadet, benches and lights around the square's park and lights along a walking path from the train station to the sports grounds, and new bark on the lighted running track. The municipal officer keeps meeting this group, about twice a year, and the focus is to discuss how to use the remaining money as well as another 50 000 SEK yearly that the local government has decided to give for four years.

Through the Million project, the local government is shifting the responsibility of decisions on physical investments to the local inhabitants. Including the inhabitants' opinions, wishes and voluntary work in the process of deciding and carrying out the decisions creates an interactive solution labelled governance (see Hedlund & Montin 2009). This process can sometimes be perceived as a withdrawal of the public sector, and gives rise to a feeling of frustration and injustice over voluntary work being needed in rural areas for things that an urban population would not have to get involved in (Forsberg 2010). The performing role of planning could threaten the role of independent voice-bearer in which they are a counter part to the public sector, pointing out problems, faults and suggesting solutions (SOU 2016:13 p.129). At the point when the inhabitants get a say in the process, the amount of money is already decided politically. When the final decisions are being made by civil society, it makes it harder to know where to direct complaints and wishes, and the interactive performing role where they are making the decisions risks replacing the voice bearing role. At the same time, the

intention from the local government is to make the best possible use of the money by including the inhabitants and letting them decide for themselves. According to the project report, the million project has strengthened democracy and the project was generally appreciated in Malmö. The local government backs up initiatives taken by civil society, either organised in associations or as individuals in the project group for the million, and can access the voice and opinions through the meetings held around the million.

*During the Million project, we had more frequent contact, and then other issues came up as we met. We had a clear purpose of the meetings, now we are at a point where we wonder what is going to happen next; the 50 000 SEK a year is good money, but not enough to meet up multiple times a year to discuss what to use them for, then other motivation is needed.*

*–Jennifer, municipality officer*

It was in adherence to the prioritisation meetings that the representatives from the local government could access other opinions and issues, and now that the majority of the money has been used, there will be fewer of these meetings. What other motivation there can be for the development is unknown and remains for the future to tell. Since the development group is formed around the prioritisation of the money from the local government, there are also questions raised about the sustainability of this form of ad-hoc organisation. The continuation of these meetings, with 50 000 to invest yearly for four years, is based on a political decision, what happens after that is unknown.

*...I feel like it could be hard to gain the trust in our intentions when I get out there and meet with the associations if there is not concrete funding involved... as I see it there is a big need for concrete investments out there, but there is not that much I can do about that in my position, it is up for the politicians to decide...*

*– Jennifer, municipality officer*

Bringing money to the table is a way for the local government to collaborate and take part of ideas and expectations. Stepping in with money on a project basis can give the local government a better contact with the opinions and wishes of the inhabitants and is one way for the local government to show that they care. The municipality officer remains saddled with the challenge of finding a new way to secure the continuation of the meetings or alternative ways of accessing the opinions and public voice.

As a part of the Malmbäck million project a Facebook group, *Our Future Malmbäck*, was created. It was one of the platforms for discussing and coming with suggestions for investments. The group survived the initial planning process being over but has taken a different form and now works similar to the bulletin board in the entrance of the local grocery store. Things concerning Malmbäck are posted, missing cats or found keys, the Walpurgis day celebrations at the open-air museum by the Local History Association, someone asking if anyone knows where to find an apartment, but also information meetings for the broadband company, informing that there are wasps at the recycling centre, and when the football practices for children start and so on are all posted here. Initiated as an ad hoc organisation for a specific purpose, it has now become a part of the everyday life. Today it fills a social function in the community, yet may still be a place for members of the Community Association' or the local government directly, to pick up on relevant topics. The independent role as an association existing for other reasons than the contact with the local government, makes the existence of the Community Association' more stable over time than the more loosely organised prioritisation group and there for a more reliable voice bearer.

## 5.2 Doing and supporting

The roads in Malmbäck along with the larger roads are public roads managed by the public authorities. Like many rural towns, Malmbäck is also surrounded by a large number of smaller roads leading out to houses and farms around the countryside. These smaller roads are the responsibility of those who live there who are grouped into road associations that maintain the roads. Based on historical calculations of ownership and usage each real estate has a certain percentage of the road and costs for maintenance are divided accordingly. There are grants from the national transport administration and from the local government to cover large parts of the costs and the organizational form of associations is needed to access these grants. While the membership in the road associations do not have the voluntary character of the other associations but are rather created from outside structures, the personal engagement is still important for the functions of the association. The extent to how much people apply for the grants and thereby

how they are accessed depends on interest, the time put into it and how one relates to the regulations. One of my informants told me about how he became part of a road association when he inherited his parents farm. He took over as president of the associations and looked up the rules and what grants they could apply for. Previously, members had to pay up front for the road improvements and the road was in a pretty bad shape. After finding out what grants they could apply for he told me proudly, yet in a modest way, of how the measures they had done to the road and how the quality of the road had been improved. Through accessing the grants they had managed not only to improve the road but also helped the economy of the road association, which now has money in the bursary for future investments. The road associations are carrying out service functions and are supported by the grants from the public sector.

The relation between the public sector and the CSOs in regards to service come up when speaking about the grocery store:

*There has been a lot of discussions about the grocery store in Malmbäck... we have spoken with the Community Association' about how they or, the associational life, can support the local owner. There are examples where associations go in and take over a grocery store, we don't know about that, but it is an ongoing discussion...*

*– Jennifer, municipal officer*

Associations taking over the grocery store could be one possible outcome seen from the local governments point of view. It relates to a general trend in Sweden, of increasing the service providing role of the CSOs (Svedberg & Vamstad 2006; SOU 2015:35; SOU 2017:1). When I talked to the associations in Malmbäck, they talked about how they were supporting the grocery store and how important the grocery store was for the town. For those engaged in the associations in Malmbäck, this does not seem to see the role as service provider as an alternative. Instead of the role as a service provider another role emerged; a dual relationship of interactive support, for the greater good of the community. The public sector is present in some way in the interaction as parts of the dual role are financially supported by the public sector. Some of the associations get support for maintenance and the store gets support for investments, hence the public sector is facilitating the collaboration, though not being an official part of it. The focus of the localized

associations and the store owner is to keep a status quo in the community, keeping the store, the associations and their activities intact. Keeping things happening preserves the possibility of creating and maintaining a belonging to the community. While they do perform some services, such as the Sports Club cutting the field themselves, or the friends of Tomtabacken managing the lookout tower, what they do is connected to their particular interest in the association. Running a grocery store lies within a different sphere and is not a commitment an association is interested in taking at the moment. As Gunnarsdotter (2005) shows, the associational life fills a social role that the new working conditions no longer provides. The decrease of localized available public and commercial service, makes the associations increasingly important as meeting grounds. Those who previously might have met during the day, at workplaces, at the bank, the hardware store or other places in town in the olden days, can now instead meet at the grocery store, the 11-o'clock fika on Tuesdays in the free church, or the day activities provided by the Church of Sweden. While CSOs are increasingly viewed as possible service providers, the majority of the associations in Malmbäck do not see that as their outspoken goal. Instead, the voluntary associations strive primarily to keep the common activities going on in the setting of their community. While the local government contributes towards physical investments, through the million and grants for maintenance, they do not do as much directly for the social aspects of life in town. Hence the associations complement the supportive role of the local government in regards to service. They provide the initiative to the investments supported, as in the case of the road association, the upkeep of Tomtabacken and Klappabadet. But they also create the social gatherings where the interactive community take place, motivating them to care about the community at large, something that the local government could not do.

## 6 Everyday trot – concluding words

The civil society organisations present in and around Malmbäck vary greatly in size and activity as well as what the activities are directed towards. In regards to the organisational character of the associations, different organisational types have emerged. The most prominent one is the associations that have activities on a regular basis in the small town, that are on an everyday trot, of meeting for sports practises, scouts, choirs, sewing meetings, waffle nights at the open-air museum and so on. These associations are centred around a core interest from which their main activities are organised. However, many activities stretch beyond the organisations' core interests or ideologies in Malmbäck, these activities might even play a larger role in the local community than what is written in the statutes of the associations. The lines between what is for the particular interests and what is for the social aspects of community varies in the different happenings. The Rock'n'Roll night is based around an interest for cars and music, but is also actively trying to make it into something for the community. When the churches arrange music nights in the summer, or financially support the Sports Club and the Rock'n'Roll night, it is less connected to their core beliefs than Sunday services, scouts and choirs. In the everyday trot of these CSOs there is an element of interactive community, where people meet and share experiences and create memories together, which creates a belonging and a sense of community that further motivates the meetings to happen. The interactive community creates meaningful memories connected to places that become part of what makes the community a community and creates a place based belonging to Malmbäck. Malmbäck exists as a physically defined area, but also as something to gather around and belong to. Another type of organisation is exemplified by the road associations, existing through laws that are important for the practical aspect of everyday life, but not directly connected to the social life in the community. The organisational form of an association is a way of managing tasks and accessing financial support in the role of an association. A third type of organisational form is the group that formed around the million, an initiative from the outside, taking the familiar form of an association, while not formally being one.

The associations in Malmbäck are not characterised by political struggles, instead their function in society does not seem to be primarily a political voice or steered by political motives, but rather social. What might be considered political is turned into actions, such as maintaining the local swimming area, where they instead could have demanded that the local government should do it for them. The public sector is present though financial support of physical upkeep and physical investments that facilitate the caring for the swimming area and other places important to the associations' activities. There are associations fulfilling the voice-bearing role, such as the Community Association, however they also carry out activities that are geared towards the social aspects of the community. The everyday trot in the associations in Malmbäck are largely geared towards making something happen in the town and doing things together in the community. The trend of increasingly viewing CSOs as service providers does not include the associations in Malmbäck, they express no interest of taking over services in the local community. Yet they still fill an important function for preserving the existing service in the local community through the mutual support and interaction with the local grocery store. The associations are a part of keeping a social network and creating a sense of community in which the store exists. The unification in a dramatic struggle for survival through associations in rural areas shown by some scholars is not present in Malmbäck. While all the activities carried out by the associations in one way or another contributes towards the survival of the town, the survival aspect is not the dominant feature as the activities happen in Malmbäck. The activities do not have the characteristics of a dramatic struggle for survival, but rather of a want for something to happen in the everyday life in the small town.

In contrast to the studies focused on rural CSO's in aspects of service or survival in a dramatic fashion, this thesis shows the community aspect in the varied and undramatic everyday life aspect of the associational life. It complements other views of rural civil society providing one aspect of what roles and functions civil society can fulfil in a local community. A multifaceted image of civil society emerges, which is made up of a diverse set of organisations filling different functions and roles in different places. The conditions in rural areas and towns vary greatly giving different

situations for civil society organisations to exist within and giving a multitude of possible roles. Within the context of the local communities there is a large variation in regards to goals, activities and engagement by members, stressing the importance of a nuanced discussion of the civil society. When discussing CSOs, it is important to not only pay attention to the varying local communities in which they operate, but also what they are doing, with whom they are doing it, what their goals are, and not least what is making them come together. In order to avoid a misleading impression of a homogenous group, the diversity of the civil society must be included in the discussions.

# Appendix A: Empirical Material

## *Interviews:*

- Interview, Malmbäck: Mattias, Pastor in Klockargårdskyrkan, the local free church, 2017-02-21
- Interview, Malmbäck: Mikael, Chairman in the Community Association, 2017-02-22
- Interview, Malmbäck: Jan, Chairman in Malmbäck Sports Club, 2017-02-22
- Interview, Malmbäck: Per & Margareta, Chairman and member of the Friends of Tomtabacken, The Federation of Swedish Farmers, 2017-02-23
- Interview, Malmbäck: Pernilla, The Church of Sweden, 2017-02-23
- Interview, Malmbäck: Conny, bookkeeper in the Local History Association and the Star of Malmbäck Foundation, 2017-02-24
- Interview, Malmbäck: Peter, owner of the local grocery store, member in the Company's Association, 2017-02-27
- Interview, Malmbäck: Kristina & Torsten, Local History Association, local road association 2017-02-27
- Interview, Malmbäck: Göran, Swedish national Pensioners' organisation, 2017-02-28
- Interview, Malmbäck: Enok, hunting association, 2017-03-02
- Interview, Nässjö: Jennifer, municipality officer 2017-03-10

## *Phone interviews:*

- Interview, Malmbäck: Tobias, Malmbäck Event Association 2017-03-15
- Interview, Malmbäck: Henrik, Chairman in the Parents' Association 2017-03-02

## *Observations:*

- Observation, Malmbäck: Annual meeting of the Local History Association. 2017-02-23
- Observation, Malmbäck: Language café, in the local free church 2017-02-22, 2017-03-01
- Observation, Malmbäck: Driving in the Malmbäck area 2017-02-21
- Observation, Malmbäck: Walking in Malmbäck area 2017-02-23

## *Written Material:*

- Minnesanteckningar lokal utvecklingsgrupp Malmbäck 2016-02-02 available at <http://www.nassjo.se/index.php/Specialsidor/Aktuella-projekt/Toolbar-projekt/Avslutade-projekt/Kommundelsutveckling/Utvecklingsprogram-Malmbaack> [online] accessed 2017-06-02
- Minnesanteckningar lokal utvecklingsgrupp Malmbäck 2016-05-18 available at <http://www.nassjo.se/index.php/Specialsidor/Aktuella-projekt/Toolbar-projekt/Avslutade-projekt/Kommundelsutveckling/Utvecklingsprogram-Malmbaack> [online] accessed 2017-06-02
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## *Web sites:*

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- Facebook group Vårt framtida Malmbäck, available at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/235421596583025/> [online] accessed 2017-06-02
- Malmbäcks IF, available at <http://www.malmbacksif.se> [online] accessed 2017-06-02
- Malmbäcks hembygdsförening, available at <http://www.malmbackshembygd.se> [online] accessed 2017-06-02
- Rock'n'rollparken available at <http://rocknrollparken.se> [online] accessed 2017-06-02

PRO Malmbäck available at <http://www.pro.se/Distrikt/Jonkopings-Lan/Samorganisationer/Nassjo/Foreningar/Malmback/> [online] accessed 2017-06-02

Svenska kyrkan Malmbäck available at <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/nassjo-pastorat/malmbacks-kyrka> [online] accessed 2017-06-02

Tomtabackens vänner available at <http://www.tomtabacken.info> [online] accessed 2017-06-02

Facebook group Malmbäcks samhällsförening available at <https://www.facebook.com/MalmbacksSamhallsforening/> [online] accessed 2017-06-02

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