



Tapestry of Rural Lives

Trust and Ties within BYGDSAM association

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Abstract

Local communities across Europe have been experiencing a decline in population and public services. To counter this trend, civil society often steps up through voluntary associations. Sweden has a strong tradition of voluntary associations (föreningar) that serve a variety of functions in the community, from small repairs to organizing cultural and sporting events. These associations rely heavily on local networks but there has been an attempt by governments to utilize voluntary associations and localize rural development strategies. In this thesis, I have investigated a newly started project by Örnsköldsvik Municipality in Sweden called BYGDSAM, a collaborative project between the municipality and local civil society that works for the goal of rural development.

This thesis examines how the strength of interpersonal ties between different members influences work within the BYGDSAM association as well as outside of it. Through looking at the ties created and their strength I aimed to investigate what role weak networks play in organizing for a common goal. In this thesis, strong ties are conceptualized as relationships that exist between individuals who have frequent interactions, while weak ties are characterized by less frequent interactions and a lesser amount of emotional investment, and often operate through a more extensive network of acquaintances. I studied how different kinds of ties influence BYGDSAM's ability to organize with other actors in the area for a variety of objectives: making the area more attractive to live in through increased services, employment, housing, and tackling depopulation. Additionally, the aim of the study was to shed light on what role trust and social capital play in this organization.

Using a qualitative methodology, I investigated three out of four BYGDSAM associations currently active in the municipality. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and gathering of extra material that was later thematically analyzed. The study found that BYGDSAM utilizes both strong and weak ties. Strong ties were more common between the members of the association while weak ties were found between BYGDSAM's board members and other actors in the area such as small business owners and other civil associations. It was also shown that BYGDSAM acts as a bridge and facilitator between different actors in the area through facilitating cooperation, connecting actors with municipal channels, and connecting actors that would otherwise work alone. Finally, the study found that BYGDSAM areas that have a lower presence of different associations have challenges getting actors to engage in their work. This seems to be due to fewer ties between different actors.

The significance of these findings is that they open the potential for further research into the importance of weak ties within rural development. It also opens a possibility of creating a rural development policy that focuses on establishing a link (such as BYGDSAM) that can facilitate cooperation between already existing actors such as civil associations and small business owners.

Keywords: weak ties, civil associations, rural development.

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Abbreviations

BYGDSAM Swe: Bygden - village, and samverkan - cooperation.
Village in Cooperation

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Case Study

The North of Sweden has been suffering from problems such as poor infrastructure, negative media images (Eriksson, 2008) and youth slowly emigrating to more prosperous cities (Rönnlund, 2019).

Rural areas in Sweden have over the years seen a continuous decline of service in the countryside. The disappearing services such as schools, gas stations and the post office make living in the countryside difficult. Sweden is by no means unique in this regard. Rural areas all over Europe are facing the situation of population decline (Hospers, 2013) but, despite a smaller number of residents, the need for services such as education, health care, road maintenance and other public services continues to exist (Meijer and Syssner, 2017). Local communities become affected by depopulation not only through losing citizens but also in the sense that local governments often meet depopulation with localizing welfare services such as preschools, schools, elder care, public transport and similar (Meijer and Syssner, 2017). In other words, in response to the shrinking population, the local governments cut back on services they used to deliver or chose to redistribute these tasks to the citizens to handle.

This process of government cutting down services is called double devolution or a shift from one tier of governance to another, as well as the shift from formal to more informal planning practices. (Davoudi and Madanipour, 2015 as cited by Meijer and Syssner, 2017). When faced with challenges such as lack of services, different actors have different ways of responding.

While top down and formal way of planning is the characteristic of higher levels of government such as a municipality, non-governmental actors have a more spontaneous and unregulated manner of planning, and they build on their informal networks and everyday interactions (Meijer et al., 2015).

In Sweden, the empty spaces in both planning and development by the receding government are often filled by actors from civil associations who work often on a principle of volunteering. These have been at the heart of Swedish rural policy and strategies for governance as partners in bringing about ‘development from below.’ (Arora-Jonsson, 2017).

1.1.1 Örnköldsvik:

Örnköldsvik municipality, located in the north-east of Sweden has been struggling with depopulation and lack of service for years (Egnor Byström, 2022).

With decreased population growth, service provided by the municipality also decreased from the countryside in the area.

To try solving these problems they started a project called “Village and City in Balance” (Stad och Land i Balans) (Bygd o stad i balans, 2017) The Village and City in Balance project was the starting point to having local project managers that come from civil society. (Satsning på bygd och stad i balans, 2011).

In Sweden, the concept of civil society is used to denote an arena, separate from the state, and the individual household, where people organize and act together in common interests. The area includes everything from networks, non-profit organizations to religious denominations and more. (The Civil Society, 2019).

In 2016 the Village and City in Balance project was expanded out of the need to have an umbrella association that would represent different rural areas (Små projekt växlar upp Örnköldsvik – Tillväxtverket, 2021) With the core of it being local project leaders, others in the area were attracted into forming a community cooperative. A community cooperative is defined as a multi-functional enterprise working within a limited geographical area (Mårtensson, 1985 as cited by Lorendahl, 1996).

This cooperative was called BYGDSAM. Further down, I will refer to BYGDSAM as an association rather than a cooperative since their work is not purely economic.

1.1.2 BYGDSAM

The name BYGDSAM comes from a word play of two Swedish words, Bygden - village, and samverkan - cooperation. (Bygden i samverkan- BYGDSAM, 2017). The name is supposed to echo their purpose - to serve as an association that works on rural development through cooperation.

The agenda of BYGDSAM is “a blooming countryside”. This is a blanket term for any activity that the locals consider beneficial for their area. They include:

1. **Services:** the presence of schools, post, healthcare providers (hospitals, pharmacy), gas stations and basic grocery stores.
2. **Housing:** this includes anything from promoting houses on sale, to cooperating with the municipality in order to build new residential areas or running marketing campaigns in order to attract new residents to the villages.
3. **Jobs and population retention:** this includes helping local businesses such as factories or small entrepreneurs advertise themselves, attract workforce or similar. Furthermore, population retention includes attempts to raise awareness amongst the rural youth about job prospects in the area.
4. **Other activities:** BYGDSAM mostly works with the topics mentioned above but their work is versatile and can include activities such as: organizing market days, cleaning local areas, promoting tourism in the area, or encouraging youth associations to apply for project funding.

While their range of activities is broad, BYGDSAM does little on their own. Instead, they are described to have “three constitutive pillars”: companies, associations, and the municipality.

The board includes representatives from the three parties who work on a non-profit basis. A coordinator (project leader) manages their activities on behalf of the board. Most of the activities consists of facilitating cooperation between different actors (for example the municipality and a local sporting association).

The board of about 12 people with clearly defined roles such as:

5. **Chairperson** - whose task is to open the meeting and make sure it is run according to the pre-set plan.
6. **Project Leader**- the project leader's main task is to make sure applications to projects are done correctly. Should a member of either the local population or the local business come up with an idea that would be beneficial for their district, the project leader takes up the idea and further presents it to the board. The project leader also serves as the face of the association.
7. **Local actors / board members:** volunteers often represent a certain group within the village like the church, local entrepreneurs, or villagers from a certain district within BYGDSAM's borders.
8. **Municipal representative:** one municipal representative - the person responsible for Örnköldsvik rural development, sits within every board. Her responsibilities are primarily to convey information from the municipality such as: the possibility of financing a project.

1.1.3 Organization of borders:

BYGDSAM's work is geographically contained, and its borders might seem random, but they seem to be carefully chosen based on an already existing separation into the district. Furthermore, the separation into districts comes from an older tradition of separation into parishes. As such, districts replaced parishes when the Swedish government and church were separated in 1999/2000. (fieldnote, 2021).

As such, four BYGDSAM are described below together with the districts that form them, starting from south-east and moving in a clockwise direction.

1. BYGDSAM Nätradalen: districts: Nätra and Sidenjö (Bygdsam Nätradalen, n.d.).
2. BYGDSAM Anundsjö: districts: Anundsjö, Skorped and Mo (Älska Anundsjö, n.d.).
3. BYGDSAM Gideälvdal: districts Björna, Trehörningsjö and Gideå (Bygdsam Gideälvdal, n.d.).
4. BYGDSAM Grundsunda: districts: Arnäs and Grundsunda (GFG Bygdsam, n.d.).

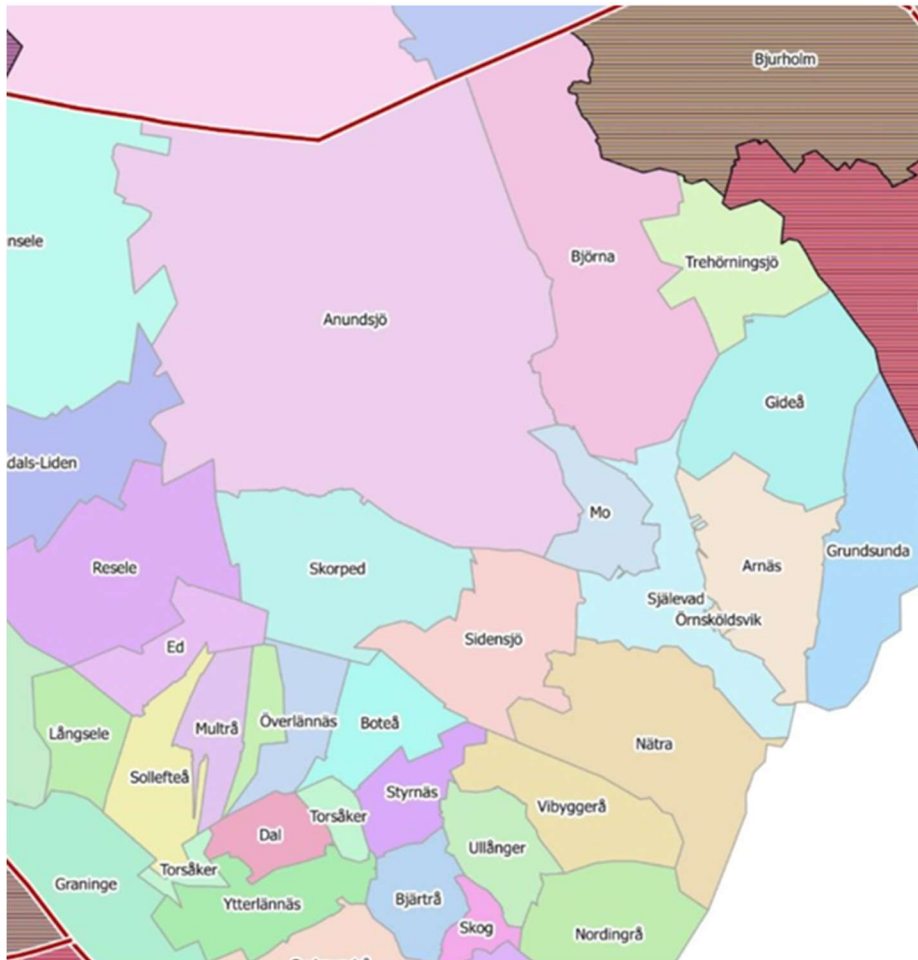


Figure 1: Districts around Örnköldsvik Municipality, Lantmäteriet

As it can be seen in figure 2, the city district itself stands apart from any of the four aforementioned areas. This is because BYGDSAM only operates in areas that are considered either the countryside or sparsely populated (Ornskoldsvik.se, 2014).

1.2 The aim of the study and research question

This thesis intends to investigate the effects of interpersonal ties between actors in the Swedish countryside which previously faced depopulation. The study investigates three civil associations that go under the umbrella of a rural development project called BYGDSAM.

BYGDSAM is a joint project between Örnköldsvik municipality and civil society organizations (associations and business owners) that has local actors as project leaders (thus offering them a certain degree of freedom from the municipality). As such, analyzing BYGDSAM offers insight into how actors in the countryside organize, what the nature of their ties to each other is as well as to other actors outside BYGDSAM, and the role social trust and networks created through ties play in organizing for a common goal.

The common goal of each BYGDSAM is defined as rural development and it falls under the Örnköldsvik's rural development strategy. However, each BYGDSAM approaches this goal differently.

The motive for conducting this study is that BYGDSAM is a new project. I chose to focus on the role of social trust since trust has been known to influence how we interact with each other for a long time (Paxton, 2007, Rothstein, 2005, Keating and Ruzicka, 2014) and association membership has been pointed out as a factor that increases trust. (Paxton, 2007). Having a strong tradition of association has been shown to positively influence democracy and successful building of social capital (Putnam 1993; Paxton 1999).

As mentioned above, the idea behind BYGDSAM is to have local actors as project leaders. In this paper, I would argue that trust is a key factor that enables BYGDSAM's work and their relationship with other actors.

Additionally, I chose to investigate networks created between actors, to understand what kind of ties create the networks (strong, weak, or non-existent).

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how social trust and networks are central parts in the construction of BYGDSAM. A wider aim is to understand the underlying patterns of organizing for a common goal in the countryside, and especially in areas that have faced depopulation.

The question I aim to answer in this research is:

1. What is the nature of the ties between actors in the area?
2. What role do weak ties play in organizing for a common goal?

To further deepen my understanding of BYGDSAM I will also focus on a few sub-questions:

1. What role does BYGDSAM play in the community?
2. What role does trust play in organizing for a common goal?
3. What are the broader effects of BYGDSAM in creating trust and social capital in the area?

2. LITERATURE

For this thesis I did a literature review on several topics that I saw as relevant for my research. The first topic I looked into was the theory of weak ties. I looked specifically for articles that used the theory of weak ties in the context of civil associations or community organization. Weak ties are a central concept in my research because I used them to see if there is a difference in trust and willingness to organize between actors that use both strong and weak ties in their networks. While I discovered that the theory of weak ties was used in different contexts, not enough research dwelled into the importance of weak ties for civil associations especially in the context of rural development.

Mark Granovetter introduced the distinction between strong and weak ties between individuals. With strong ties being relationships that exist between individuals who have frequent interactions or meetings while weak ties are characterized by less frequent interactions and lesser amount of emotional investment creating a more extensive network of acquaintances. (Granovetter 1973).

His research found that a kind of network based on weak ties provides various benefits to its members, particularly in terms of job searching (Granovetter 1973). Similarly, weak ties have been shown to be beneficial in relation to job mobility and career choice (Tümen, 2017, Yakubovich, 2005) as well as the building of trust in large projects. (Wu et. al., 2020).

Furthermore, I found that both strong and weak ties are both important to the personal well-being of college students (Wang,et al., 2015, pp. 1189). Research has found that little pieces of information and advice from different people, disseminated through weak ties, may “nudge” a person toward better health practices (Erickson, 2003 as cited by Wang et al., 2015) as well increase access to diverse information, thus increasing awareness of other milieus and enriching understanding and adaptability in students. (Wang,et al., 2015, pp. 1189).

Similarly, weak ties are found to be associated with better subjective well-being in the case study of older Chinese adults (Pan and Chee, 2019).

Some research into how weak ties influence communities has shown that communication through weak ties positively influences perceived neighborhood walkability: that is, that people are more inclined to exercise and walk in neighborhoods with higher rates of communication between neighbours connected through weak ties (Yamamoto and Jo, 2018).

These examples are just some of the research of where a network of weak ties had an impact on actors (such as improving their health). However, I could not find much about the theory of weak ties in the context of associations, and since the subject of my research is a civil association in Sweden, I looked into research that concerned itself with association membership in Sweden, primarily in the context of networks and trust. Here the literature was more diverse.

Firstly, from a broader historical perspective, it is important to note that Swedish democracy has deep roots in popular movements. There were different popular movements in Sweden across the years such as unions, the farmers, temperance movement, various associations, and free churches (Rothstein and Stolle, 2003). These popular movements in Sweden had strong local branches. These local branches secured mass participation of members and helped to form a united national entity and linking individuals and local branches to the nation as a whole (Rothstein and Stolle, 2003).

Furthermore, most popular mass movements saw themselves as protest movements against the bureaucratic, clerical, aristocratic and capitalist elite who dominated Sweden around 1900. The idea of a ‘movement’ implied that society should be changed, and that the vehicle should be mass organization from below. (Rothstein and Stolle, 2003).

This history of organizing is still very visible in Swedish society, for example: through civil associations. In 2019 there were 256 657 civil associations in Sweden gathered around different goals, some of them with a long tradition (The Civil Society, 2022). For example, The Association for Outdoor Promotion (swe. Friluftsfämjandet) has organized volunteer led outdoor activities since 1892. (Friluftsfämjandet - Om Oss, 2018). Similarly, The Association for Innovation (swe. *Svenska Uppfinnareförening*) a volunteer led innovators exchanges knowledge and together with government organizations and the academia supports new inventors. This helps to turn ideas into new and growing companies. (*Svenska Uppfinnareförening*, 2023). These are some of the examples of associations that have a long history of working that are still active and relevant in Swedish society. Due to this long history of popular movement in Sweden, research about it, as well as about civil associations has been varied.

Organization for a common goal has been previously researched in relations to protest against outmigration, service cutbacks, and welfare retractions (Lundgren and Nilsson, 2018) and as means of economic development (Lorendahl, 1996) as well as a model for localized planning in depopulated areas (Meijer and Sysner, 2017).

A particularly important aspect of civil associations is the creation of trust. Trust has been long known to influence how we interact with each other (Keating and Ruzicka, 2014, Rothstein, 2005) and association membership has been pointed out as a factor that increases trust (Paxton, 2007).

Trust created through association membership such as sports associations, neighborhood groups and women's associations comes from the social structure in which an individual is embedded when joining an association (Paxton, 2007). Norms are spread through groups to influence processes in which attitudes and behaviors are disseminated among individuals through networks (Marsden and Friedkin 1993).

Furthermore, norms of trust and cooperation are particularly likely to be spread among members in associations (Rousseau 1989 as cited by Paxton, 2007). These shared norms as well as rules and interpretations of the world increase predictability that in its turn increases trust, for the members of an association (Paxton, 2007).

Additionally, having a strong tradition of associations has been shown to influence democracy and successful building of social capital (Putnam 1993; Paxton 1999). In the context of my research, it is important to note that not only Sweden, but Scandinavia as a whole, is said to perform well with regard to many aspects of social capital, such as the level of trust and the density of membership in association (Rothstein and Stolle, 2003).

Therefore, I chose to look into what role trust plays in an association in Sweden through examining whether trust makes actors more ready to interact with an association like BYGDSAM, their members, or participate in their projects. I also looked into differences between associations that are more connected with others (through both weak and strong ties) as connected associations are said to promote more trust (Paxton, 2007) and contrast them with those that might not have a broad network of connections to see how this influences their ability to organize for a common goal.

As such, this research will add to the knowledge on the importance of existing trust between actors in civil associations for rural development in Sweden with the focus on trying to explain internal workings of the civil association (or community cooperative) BYGDSAM. While a study on BYGDSAM has been done already (Bergman, 2021) it aimed to describe the purpose of BYGDSAM, rather than its inner workings. This study will complete the already existing material on BYGDSAM through focusing on the need for trust, social capital, and already existing networks in creation of not only BYGDSAM but similar associations as well.

Furthermore, it will help fill the gap in knowledge about the influence of different ties between actors who work for rural development. This will be done through looking into which type of ties exist between members of the BYGDSAM association.

How do both strong ties form (within the inner group) as well as the role of weak ties when working with actors outside of BYGDSAM. Finally, this thesis will investigate potential benefits of trust and networks created through different ties in organizing for a common goal in the countryside.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Worldview and Research Design

This study will be written with the constructivist worldview in mind. Social constructivist worldview assumes that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

Additionally, constructivist researchers address the processes in the interactions among individuals. They focus on the specific context in which people live and work to understand the participant's historical and cultural settings. (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

I have designed this study with the guiding idea that BYGDSAM is a natural result of previous networks and interactions between those living in the countryside as well as the tradition of associations present in the Swedish countryside. This guiding idea came from my time as an intern where I shadowed different actors, read about the history and geography of Örnsköldsvik municipality and its countryside. This included weekly study visits to different locations in the countryside followed by an open-ended discussion about the visit with my supervisor Linnea Egnor Byström.



Figure 2: A Servicepoint in Myckelengsjö, taken by me in 2021

3.2 Methods

My research was geographically limited to the Örnsköldvik municipality, and within it, I primarily investigated the Nätradalen area. I gathered data through participant observation and interviews with actors from BYGDSAM Nätradalen. I've spent time at their office in the locality Bjästa from the middle of December 2021 to the middle of March 2022. Additional interviews were conducted with key actors from BYGDSAM Anundsjö and GFG Grundsunda. I have visited the central localities (Bredbyn and Husum) and sat present at several meetings of two BYGDSAM during my internship conducted in 2021.

In total I carried out eleven qualitative, semi-structured interviews (three of them already in 2021). Furthermore, I followed the homepages of three BYGDSAM as well as their Instagram page both during my internship and in 2022.

Participant observation means being immersed in a culture and learning to remove yourself every day from the immersion in order to intellectualize what you have seen or heard, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly. (Bernard, 2006).

Given the fact that I come from a different background, immersion into local ways was an important step to getting closer to understanding my research.

Following Bernard's (2006) advice on using your personal connections to gain access to the field, I tried to meet as many people around the village as I could. This was primarily possible due to being an intern within the municipality a year earlier. My internship lasted from January 2021 to March 2021 and during that time I was shadowing and working closely with the municipal representative, Linnea Egnor Byström. Through association with her, I was introduced to both BYGDSAM members and other actors around the municipality. Most importantly, I was able to participate virtually at BYGDSAM's meetings already in November 2021, which helped me identify key actors and established a trust with them. I believe that being already familiar to the committee members helped in their willingness to participate in interviews. Finally, I was given a tour of the municipality which usually consisted of study visits on Fridays when we finished with work. This experience was immense in value since I gathered a sense of space as well as got to see places I would later describe.

The review of BYGDSAM's homepages helped me with gathering background information (such as which village falls under which BYGDSAM) and helped me to get in contact with the project managers. While I asked each project manager directly for an interview, the remaining members were chosen according to their willingness to participate. This was done by emailing all three groups (BYGDSAM). I received an answer from thirteen participants in total:

Table 1. Number of participants from different BYGDSAM organizations.

Location	Participants	Women	Men
Nätrådal	7	3	4
Anundsjö	3	2	1
Grundsunda	1	1	1
Independent actors	2	2	

The interviews were from half an hour to an hour in length and semi-structured in nature. Such an interview is open-ended but still has a general script it follows and covers a list of topics. (Bernard, 2006). Finally, I followed BYGDSAM's social media and collected any content I saw as important. This ranged from posts on their official sites to their Facebook and Instagram page.

3.3 Restrictions on Research

Already early in my research I have come upon two restrictions that influenced my research.

The first restriction is due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The meetings scheduled for the end of January/beginning of February were moved to digital platforms: Teams and Zoom respectively.

The reason was cited as safety measures due to another wave of infections. The other restriction that made it hard to attend meetings physically is the irregularity of public transport. As I do not own a car, I was dependent on the local public transportation which in many cases does not drive after 18:00 and some of the meetings (Bygdsam Anundsjö) start at 18:00 o'clock. As such, my research is primarily focused on BYGDSAM Nätrådal as their main office as well as its members were in the vicinity.

3.3.1 Ethical Concerns and Reflexivity

Sufficient reflexivity in qualitative research happens when researchers record notes during research, reflect on their own personal experiences, and later consider how these personal experiences may shape their interpretation of results. (Creswell and Cresswell (2018).

Reflecting on my research, I can find three things that in my opinion might have influenced my research and that I was consciously trying to stay aware of during my time in the field.

Background and Language:

Coming from a different background obviously influenced the way I see both the field and the participants. As I write further down, due to coming from a country with little presence of civil association, it was hard for me to clearly identify associations at first. I tried to counter this by asking the informant about what associations existed in the area as well as following members of BYGDSAM Nätråden in the field while they met with members of other associations.

This has given me some sense of how associations work in the area. An additional obstacle was the Swedish language; I chose to conduct all my interviews without an interpreter as I believed my knowledge of the language was sufficient.

In order not to misinterpret anything, I recorded all interviews and later ran them through a transcribing program with the settings for the Swedish language. I tried to stay as faithful as possible to the context while translating and used the help of the Swedish dictionary database in translation.¹ Still, it is important to reflect that I might have misunderstood some things, despite my best efforts not to.

¹ <https://svenska.se/>

Familiarity with the field:

Another thing that I would like to address is the fact that, due to my previous time as an intern and familiarity with the field I was constantly aware not to get too familiar with the local actors.

I did participate in some mutual lunches and coffee breaks and gatherings. In order to stay objective, I've minimized the social contact after my participant observation was done and focused on following BYGDSAM's social media for any updates about their projects.

As an intern, I participated mostly in the meetings of BYGDSAM Nätradalen and BYGDSAM Anundsjö. My familiarity with BYGDSAM Grundsunda is limited and that's why I have written less on this BYGDSAM than on the other two. I have no intention of evaluating or comparing BYGDSAM Grundsunda to the other two, merely to emphasize the issue with motivation that was mentioned by members of all three associations.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Weak Ties

The analysis of weak ties, applied in this paper, comes from notions developed by Mark Granovetter. Granovetter (1973) presented a theory for analyzing aspects of small-scale interaction. It starts from the concept of the strength of interpersonal ties in order to show how the use of network analysis can relate to phenomena such as social mobility, political organization, and social cohesion in general.

The strength of an interpersonal tie is defined as: the combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity as well as the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize it. So, ties can be strong, weak, or non-existent (Granovetter, 1973)

To understand how interpersonal ties relate to larger structures, we can first analyze a set of individuals called A and B in addition to a set called S (= C, D, E,) which comprises all people with ties to either A or B. From this Granovetter derives the main hypothesis that enables us to relate the tie between A and B to larger structures: the stronger the tie between A and B, the larger the proportion of individuals in S to whom they will both be tied, that is, connected by a weak or strong tie. (Granovetter, 1973)

In this research both strong and weak ties have emerged as important, however a prominent feature of weak ties called the bridge is more important to focus on. A "bridge"; is a line in a network which provides the only path between two points (Harary et al. 1965 as cited by Granovetter 1973). In other words, a bridge is the only route through which information or influence can go.

Granovetter puts an emphasis on weak rather than strong ties, saying that while a strong tie can be a bridge only if neither party to it has any other strong ties, (unlikely in a social network of any size but possible in a small group) - all bridges are weak ties. (Granovetter, 1973) Of special importance are bridges that provide the quickest path from one point or another – so called local bridges. Weak ties which are local bridges create more, and shorter, paths through which information or influence is spread. A larger network consisting of weak ties that act as local

bridges enables whatever is diffused through it reaches a larger number of people, and traverses greater social distance (Granovetter, 1973).

4.2 Social Capital and Trust

The term ‘social capital’ has been the focus of many studies in social science as well as policy debates. Its prominence also means that there are different understandings of the term. This variety of definitions comes from different understandings that are given by the key authors such as Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam (Bebbington, 2009).

Bourdieu sees social capital as the collection of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu, 1986 p. 241-58).

It constitutes one of several ‘forms of capital’ variously referred to as economic, cultural, symbolic, and social. Bourdieu insists that these forms of capital – though not reducible one to another – must be understood in relation to each other. That is, the distribution of social capital is related to that of economic capital, and together with cultural capital is used (consciously and unconsciously) to reproduce power relations and forms of access to resources that tend to reproduce existing distributions of power and capitals (Bebbington, 2009).

In contrast, Robert Putnam defines social capital as networks that enable cooperation. Social capital for Putnam is embodied in forms of social organization such as civic groups and informal community networks (Bebbington, 2009).

Furthermore, the underlying network or the social structure within which the actor is located is the source of social capital. We can differentiate social capital from other types of resources by the specific dimension of social structure underlying it; social capital is the resource available to actors as a function of their location in the structure of their social relations (Adler and Kwon 2002). A part of Putnam's theory which is interesting for this paper is also trust. For Putnam, the levels of trust and reciprocity present in a society are both the product of civic participation but also the assets which are available more generally to all members of that community (Hanlon, 2020). This is important, as a strong tradition of association membership has been shown to influence democracy and successful building of social capital (Putnam 1993; Paxton 1999).

Further, Barber defines trust as “a set of socially learned and socially confirmed expectations that people have of each other, of the organizations and institutions in which they live, and of the natural and moral social orders that set the fundamental understandings for their lives”. (Barber,1983 as cited by Paxton 2007 pp.48).

In this paper, the concepts trust, social capital, and trust point out to the same thing which is the key social element that underlines all BYGDSAM interactions.

Finally, the word engagement is periodically mentioned in the paper, and I would like to point out that engagement in the local discourse is like what Weisinger and Salipante (2005, as cited by Meijer et. al. 2017) called motivation. Their framework, there are three basic ingredients needed to produce social capital: opportunity, motivation, and ability. First, a network of ties is needed that creates opportunity for social capital. Secondly, actors must be motivated to use their ties for collective action. And thirdly actors must be able to perform activities: without time, resources and knowledge networks have no ability to develop social capital. I have chosen to use the word engagement since it is a direct translation from the local discourse (in Swedish “engagemang”). Engagement (motivation) will be briefly discussed as an important factor of creating trust and social capital.

4.3 Governmentality

The work of one BYGDSAM association will be analyzed through governmentality. Foucault (1982) defined governmentality as the “conduct of conduct”.

Dean (1999) further elaborated this as the “any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by the multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and knowledges, that seek to shape conduct through working through the desires, aspirations, interests, and beliefs of various actors, for a definite but shifting goal.”

I have used this theory to explain the goal the association is trying to achieve of “the perfect citizen” of the area – one that stays – rather than moves away and is involved in the activities in the village. For this, I have also used the theory of Li et al. (2016) that explains the means used to maintain the people in the area. These Li et al. called hard factors such as their consideration of information about labor markets and salaries, but also other “soft” factors such as culture, education career opportunities, social reasons, etc. (Li et al., 2016).

5. FINDINGS

5.1 CHAPTER I – THE LONG ROAD THROUGH THE VILLAGE

In this part I will discuss the work of BYGDSAM Nätradalen. It will be focused on solving current issues in the village such as lack of specific services and creating ties between different actors such as other associations.

The information below comes from interviews with Sofie and Agneta – project leaders for BYGDSAM Nätradalen as well as interviews with several members of the council and a conversation with a member and local business owner Lars. Finally, it is complemented by information from my observations of the members.

Bjästa is a locality with about 2000 inhabitants, just south-east of Örnsköldsvik. The main road runs through the locality, with both houses and small stores nested on each side of the road. The road is Bjästa's main lifeline, and both cars and people frequent it. If one wishes to be seen, it appears the best thing to do is set up shop by the side of the road. Should one decide to walk down, north to south, they would first encounter a florist shop, that according to our taxi-driver counts as the best in Örnsköldsvik. Then they would find a cozy antique store, a closed tattoo parlor, and further down south there is a friseur salon, a repair service store, a large ICA, two pizzerias, a church, pharmacy, and a few local eateries. The river Nätra runs through the town and low hills surrounding the village like a wreath of pine forests.

Växtplats Nätradalen, the main office of the BYGDSAM association is situated on the right side of the road, right in the middle of the village. It is on the first floor of a house built in small, yellow brick. It is here that BYGDSAM Nätradalen usually holds their meetings. The locale has four large, shop-like windows facing the main street. The windows to the right are decorated with paintings done by a local artist, depicting mostly scenes from nature.

In the left window are some plants and in the far corner BYGDSAM's standing flag. The office space itself is open and spacious, with white painted walls and a high ceiling dotted with light sources.

The main room is separated into few parts: the small conference table, the large conference table with a screen door, a flat TV screen for distance calls and presentations and twelve gray office chairs. Next to the large conference room is a small kitchen with utilities such as a fridge, coffee machine and bins for sorting rubbish for recycling. The conference part of the entry room is separated by a set of curtains from another space where there are four working spaces, equipped with screens and keyboards.

Behind it is a small lounge space with four gray chairs and a small white coffee table. The curtains seem to be new and are hardly ever closed.

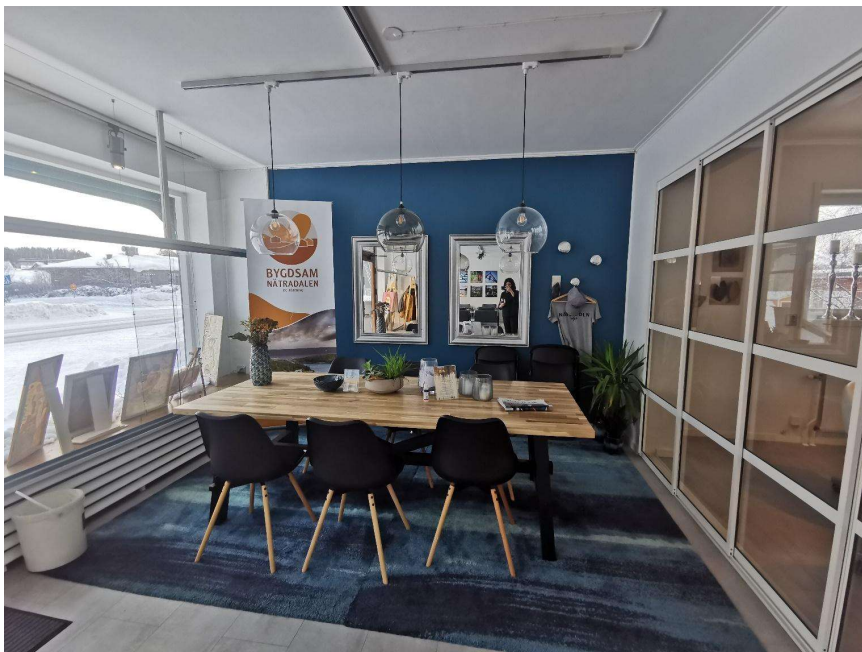


Figure 3: Växtplatsen Nätrådalen. Photo taken by me.

The people working in the office are both BYGDSAM members and local entrepreneurs, municipality workers or anyone wishing to come and work together. It is booked for a sum of 100 SEK, though municipal workers don't have to pay it. The office is clean and spacious, it is designed in the style of modern city offices with open space and clean minimalist furniture.

The one thing that is different from any generic city office are the many prints representing places around Nätrådalen: a woman in a flannel shirt walking over a cliffside, a large statue of a skier in the foreground of a green field that rolls down towards a clear blue lake and fading into gray-green hillscape. The pictures, paired with evergreen plants make the space cozy, giving it a feeling of personality, something to set it apart from countless, similar, open-space offices it was modeled after. One feels comfortable sitting and working here, and there is a feeling of closeness to the local community.

The people walking by stop and look in, those sitting inside can see them and hear the crunching of snow underneath their booths as they continue with their daily affairs.



Figure 4: Prints in the office, photo taken by me.

5.1.1 The Council

I met the members of BYGDSAM Nätradalen over a video link first. Despite living just a few meters from their office in Bjästa, I was confined to do an interview with Sofie Holmgren – their project leader, digitally. Covid cases still surged and so did the stomach flu.

Two days before our meeting, Sofie lets me know that this is probably for the best. Sofie is 36, an even-tempered and calm woman. She holds her hair in a simple ponytail and wears a sweater she knitted herself. As she starts talking about BYGDSAM, it feels like we're meeting up for a cup of coffee rather than an interview. I've met Sofie before, in January last year, when I was an intern for Örnköldsvik municipality. On our first meeting in 2021 she told me a story about how a questionnaire was conducted where children described what they liked the best about living here.

"Safe, one of them wrote " said Sofie and repeated the word again "Safe - what kind of a twelve-year-old uses the word safe. They must have heard it from their parents and for us." she added with a smile "it's a proof of what we do here is working."

While she is not the original representative of the village, Sofie started working for BYGDSAM Nätradalen already in their first year and she has been the spokesperson and the face of the association ever since.

While Sofie is the project leader, BYGDSAM is in total composed of about twelve other local actors representing associations or local businesses, mostly men past 50. Other than Sofie there were four other women ranging in age from early 30s to 65 years. The council members are chosen by voting.

Potential members are recruited through advertising the position. For example, to better represent a certain area or a gender, they can advertise looking specifically for a young woman from the Islands that belong to Nätradalen with a certain competence.

This way, they try to make sure all areas are represented as well as a fair gender balance. It is not uncommon for current members to disseminate information through their network.

This is an example of how strong ties influence who gets chosen or recommended for a position. To recommend someone, trust is required. Tilly (1991) described this as trust networks. These networks consist of interpersonal connections made up of strong ties within which people are willing to put at risk long-term resources or enterprises. (Tilly, 1991).

BYGDSAM's work is such an enterprise. The members share information among those they trust, in order to minimize failure.

As mentioned above, besides the municipality, BYGDSAM is made up of members of civil society, such as business owners and associations. And as such it is built on fertile ground since the core of association work usually includes coming together for a common purpose. Tilly (1991) points out that associations are important parts in the organization of local social life. He uses the example of obstacles, saying that compliance to domination consists of "pursuing personal agendas by maneuvering among obstacles, obstacles put in place by other people and past experience."

In the Swedish countryside obstacles are things such as lack of service or closeness to government. These obstacles are often put by governments in urban centers such as Stockholm and previous experience of for example rural youth and depopulation. Tilly further points out that often people who share agendas, maneuvers, and obstacles; are ripe for collective action." (Tilly, 1991).

In this thesis, the focus is not on direct resistance but rather on mobilization for "maneuvering among the obstacles" and pursuing a communal goal through trust and social capital.

Associations such as BYGDSAM (swe. föreningar) are groups of people clustered around a similar goal and their goal of this mobilization is permanently shifting according to the obstacles placed and range from snow plowing in the winter (in places where the municipality doesn't offer this service) to dances, bingo nights, or sport associations for the children. In the local narrative, this is aptly called "getting by on your own" (fieldnote, 2022).

When I was finally able to meet the BYGDSAM members in person, I walked over to their office in Bjästa. Located in the center of the village Bjästa it is an open space office, facing the main village road. The large windows are clustered with BYGDSAM themed pamphlets and art by local artists, all with the intention of being seen by the public.

As Sofie puts it "if we're not seen, we don't exist" (fieldnote, 2022).

Inside the office, some members of BYGDSAM such as Sofie and Agneta, a new project leader, work daily. They come around eight, and work at a set of computers placed next to a large window. For a large chunk of her day, Sofie goes around answering phone calls, sometimes regarding projects she is a part of but often from outsiders calling to ask what exactly it is they are doing with BYGDSAM. Her presence is further extended to the social media accounts she runs. There, every successful project, interesting activity in the village, or a slice-of-work-life is documented with care.

By establishing both an open, physical office, and a social media presence, BYGDSAM Nätråden is aiming to gain trust and increase their own social capital. Trust can be defined as a set of expectations, socially learned, and socially confirmed that people have of each other, organizations, and institutions in which they live, or of the natural and moral social orders that create the fundamental understandings for their lives. (Barber, 1983 as cited by Paxton 2007). For BYGDSAM, other than being visible, a key element in creating trust are their members. Almost all their members are older, with a certain social standing in the village. They are either retired government employees, teachers, or local business owners.

One such is Lars, who runs a car glass shop in Bjästa. Lars is past fifty, stocky and humorous. Often wearing a fluorescent work suit, he drives around in a dodge pickup always on one errand or the other.

He usually comes in around eleven to the BYGDSAM office. As a successful business owner in Bjästa, Lars seems to be well connected with other local businesses in the area. This was best visible at the end of February when he called other business owners on the phone, asking if they would participate in a whip up fund easily organizing a substantial sum to send to Ukraine at the beginning of the Russian occupation. (fieldnote 2022: bygdsamnåtråden, Instagram). His connections allowed him to start the fundraiser and gather a substantial sum in a matter of few days as according to Sofie, other business owners were happy to follow his lead (fieldnote, 2022).

As we've seen from this example BYGDSAM's work is not only built on trust, but also on flexibility. Some of their activities can include helping a youth organization apply for funds for a new hockey park they can quickly turn into gathering funds for an influx of refugees in the village in moments of crisis. While this gives them a lot of freedom in their work, this lack of fixed area of activity makes it hard to define what they "exactly do" (fieldnote 2022).

I observed that it is usually Sofie who informs the other members of some potential problem that needs solving. She stands, her hands crossed in the middle of the office, when Lars comes in, her posture is not hostile, if anything it seems they have been through this a few times and have a well-rehearsed routine. Instead of sitting down at the lunch table, they stand, face to face, and go straight to discussing the closing of a shop in Bjästa. The shop is located at the very end of the main village street and serves both as an addition to the gas station, a kiosk (a store where you can buy anything from lighters to ice-cream and cinnamon buns), and a pickup destination for online orders. If the shop were to close, the village would feel it

acutely in terms of loss of service. Lars listens to the issue and then leaves. He comes back again after a few hours. I solved the problem, he tells Sofie. I found someone who is willing to take over. He laughs a little and says “I’ve found her on the street” when they inquire about the potential new owner.

It turns out, the old owner of the store asked BYGDSAM if they could help as she no longer feels like running the establishment. This information was given to Sofie first, and she further notified Lars. He went ahead and sought a potential replacement to take over the store from his network within the village.

At the time I was observing this interaction it seemed the transition would go smoothly, and the new owner took over the shop in the end of May (fieldnote, 2022).

For the countryside where BYGDSAM operates, Lars is a trusted person. The fact that Lars is trusted is due to two components, economic and social capital. Bourdieu explained that economic capital refers to material assets that are 'immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights' (Bourdieu 1986).

Lars is mentioned to own not only a large business but also a few locales in the area that he rents, among them the office BYGDSAM uses. On the other hand, social capital is seen as the ability of an actor to advance his or her interests.

Social capital is accumulated through a membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ (Bourdieu, 1986).

This group can be an organization, a family name, tribe etc. and according to Putnam it acts like a network that enables cooperation. (Bebbington, 2009.)

Bourdieu explains that various types of capital influence each other, and in Lars’s case he gains social capital from already having economic capital that is being recognized by his position in the village.

As he pointed out to me during a coffee break “everyone knows where my shop is” (fieldnote, 2021).

He is recognized as an owner of a business that provides good service in the village. He uses this economic capital to fund ventures that further increase trust among the local actors and his own social capital, like regularly donating for the local community such as sponsoring (among other actors) a first aid kit with a defibrator for the local ICA (fieldnote, 2022).

This makes his network a broad one, consisting of actors he met through either his shop or through being “known of”. This means, it features both strong and weak ties.

This explains how he managed to find a replacement for the shop owner easily as his standing in the community makes it easier for someone to consider a potentially risky business venture at his request.

His previous engagement in civic associations similar to BYGDSAM supplies him with additional social capital and broadens his network, including those within the community that are also involved in local projects.

The access to his extensive network helps spread ideas BYGDSAM wishes to promote through a network. One such idea is the responsibility of business owners towards local development.

As one informant claimed:

“Once they come in contact with BYGDSAM the business owners start realizing they too have a role to play and “a responsibility to do good in Bjästa and do not just wait for someone else to do it.” (fieldnote, 2022)

Another day in the office, I was left alone with Agneta – the newest member of the BYGDSAM Nätrådalen team. At first, we spoke little, here and there.

Unlike Sofie, who knew the workings of BYGDSAM by heart, Agneta was new to the process. Her and Sofie spent three out of five workdays in the office and the remaining two they chose to work from home or not work at all. One day, at the very end of the workday we touched upon the topic of headaches, and she told me how nice it was to work a flexible schedule and be able to decide where she wanted to work. As it happened, she was a shop owner before, selling clothes in a village near Köpmanhomen. Suffering from migraines, she told me she would sometimes darken her shop to lessen the pain.

According to her, this was a risky move because it could give an impression of a closed shop and her reputation as a shop owner depended on it having a consistent schedule.

Through her business she heard about BYGDSAM, that they are a new association, but she had little knowledge about what they do. It wasn't until Lars, who happened to own the locale she rented approached her with a suggestion of joining BYGDSAM.

Lars and Agneta's relationship were that of landlord-tenant and rested primarily on trust that is created through a professional relationship. Lars acted like a local bridge, distributing the information about a possible position within BYGDSAM. Had this tie not existed there is a reasonable doubt that Agneta would not choose to apply for a job in BYGDSAM.

To establish themselves as a reliable bridge in the community was not easy though. The initial problem, as Siv, one of my informants explains is the fact that already existing associations were afraid of what BYGDSAM might mean for them.

Siv, who described herself as retired but engaged is an elderly lady, filled with vivacious energy. She is one of the project leaders that was involved in Village and City in Balance, the precursor to BYGDSAM. In her words the associations wondered:

“What do you benefit from this? It was not so easy, and some associations felt afraid. They said: well, now it is someone here who will decide over the association life.” (Siv, 2022)

Despite Sofie assuring me that there are over 80 associations in Nätrådal alone, from my observation I could not identify these associations as visibly as BYGDSAM. Unlike BYGDSAM there were no other associations that had a visible office or a shield with their name. Some of them such as the Retiree Association, do have a notice board at the local ICA, but to recognize it, one must have the background knowledge to know what their acronym (PRO) stands for.

This could be due to my background, growing up in a country without a strong presence of associations it was hard to tell which ones there are and what it is they are doing without previous knowledge or direct access to the community through an already established actor. This is something BYGDSAM used to their advantage. They see themselves as a “spider in the net” (Sofie, 2022). They have a knowledge of existing associations, and their network is diverse, consisting of both strong and weak ties that extends from the rural youth, sporting associations, specific municipality workers, local actors, and more.

In order not to feed into the fears of other civil associations existing independently in the area, BYGDSAM choose to position themselves “behind the screen” (Sofie, 2022) and avoided being seen as one that would “decide over association life”. As another informant explained:

“if another association is already doing something, we back away unless they need us “ (Janne, 2022).

Instead, they further extend their network through for example, renting their meeting room to any member of the public that needs a place to hold a meeting such as to board of the local ICA store. Through this they gain additional trust and strengthen their ties within the village as ICA is the primary “meeting spot” for anyone living in Bjästa. It is here that the main exchange of information happens, between rows of fruit and freshly baked bread.

How their role in the community became that of a “bridge” (Sofie, 2022) in an elaborate and constantly expanding network is illustrated below:

1. BYGDSAM council members: promoting BYGDSAM through their own work or other associations they are members in.
2. Adaptation by a larger network through weak ties (members of the civil society joining BYGDSAM as independent members, sharing information about BYGDSAM or adopting the BYGDSAM coined name Nätradalen into their own vocabulary)
3. BYGDSAM is trusted more. This leads more members joining, helping position BYGDSAM as the centerpiece of association network in the area.

This can be seen as an example of the strength of weak ties. It is through networks such as these that small-scale interaction becomes translated into large-scale patterns, and that these, in turn, feed back into a small group. (Granovetter, 1973). The recognition and trust make it easier for BYDSAM to further be involved in projects that fall under the description of a “blooming Nätradalen” drawing from an increasingly larger network of ties of various strengths.

The strength of a tie is a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie. The ties vary in strength from strong, weak, and non-existent. (Granovetter, 1973).

While BYGDSAM utilizes weak ties, its network is comprised of both. Within BYGDSAM Nätradalen, actors that work closely together create stronger ties, such as the council members that live in the same area (observation, 2022). This is best visible in their interactions with each other as their way of talking to each other is more relaxed, they joke freely, and certain members spend more time with each other outside of BYGDSAM. (Observation, 2022 and 2021).

However, instead of focusing solely on this small circle, they regularly forge weaker ties with others for example local youth association In a collaboration with Leader – BYGDSAM Nätradalen announced that they will be financing a project focused on improving the lives of the young people in the area. As Agneta told me before we left for Drömme, a small but prosperous village, in west from Bjästa:

” the problem is that we didn’t really set any criteria and then they didn’t know what they could do?” (Agneta, 2022)

When we met them, it was a group of eight teenagers aged 13 to 18 that live in Drömme. The teenagers did not apply individually, while they had an idea what to do with the money: renovate their meeting center (one girl suggested getting some new lamps while another lobbied for buying a new flipper machine) they are all members of a local association called Junis led by a local woman called Brigitta. This association has been operating for the last 50 years. Located in a yellow, three-story house called Valhalla, Junis shares space with other local associations. This way both the young and the old (a group of ladies that take weaving classes on the second floor) come together in the village. (Junis, 2020)

Drömme, which is included in BYGDSAM Nätrradalen is an example of a village that has an active association life. In Drömmebygden's, there are three active associations that are the cornerstones of the district's development, and they are Drömmebygden's Interest Association, the IOGT-NTO movement Drömme and the Valhallalokalen Association and has recently been voted as Village of the Year by the organization Hela Sverige Ska Leva. (Årets by är rena Drömme(n) – Accent, 2022).

Facilitating collaboration between themselves and the associations in Drömme, BYGDSAM brings actors together that might have a similar goal but operate on a more contained geographical area (a village).

This strengthening of networks is done through both creation of weak ties (collaboration with Junis that can act as a local bridge) and facilitating trust through having members with significant amount of social capital from the area as a BYGDSAM member.

The chairman of BYGDSAM Olle was previously active in civil life, in Drömme and was the chairman of a local association in 2020. (Årets by är rena Drömme(n) –Accent, 2022).

Collaboration with other civil associations is one pillar of BYGDSAMs work. It is also important to further mention their collaboration with local businesses for the goal of a “blooming Nätrradalen”.

In this network Sofie or Agneta play the role of the main informant or central individual (Granovetter, 1978) in here as well as they are the first contact with those outside of the smaller circle. Here, actors such as Lars or Janne, a shop owner from Sidensjö help add to the trust, as they both run successful businesses within their community and act as local bridges between the BYGDSAM and other business owners.

Such as their work with the tourism group which aims at supporting and bringing together a group of local actors all interested in promoting local tourism (fieldnote, 2022). According to Sofie, it is common that people start their own small companies (or family-owned companies) that for example offer tourist tours rather

than working together with someone else due to the administrative paperwork, division of money etc. This is where BYGDSAM works as a bridge, doing the nitty-gritty of administration and connecting the two actors together. Making sure “that it happens that the tourist company is created. That they get the conditions they need to be able to do their thing” BYGDSAM influences local development:

“Which in turn benefits more companies what benefits the area as a whole. Because we get more visitors here” (Sofie, 2022)

Discussion

“ It is so difficult to measure the job we do. Because it's the background, this is like the glue between things. It's us.” (Sofie, 2022)

The obvious problem of BYGDSAM, one that was brought to my attention several times during both my observations and my time as an intern, is that “people don't know what BYGDSAM does”. Their work is flexible but lacks a clear area of activity. A sporting association and the retiree association have a clear area of activity (promotion of a certain sport, retiree activities etc.) while BYGDSAM works for rural development which can be hard to define for others outside the organization.

This is the problem local actors see as the key one in their aim to connect themselves more with other actors.

Connected associations that facilitate the generalization of trust have one key factor: they expand their networks beyond a single association. Through these ties that span across voluntary associations individuals to transfer the trust gained within their association to individuals outside the association.” (Paxton,2007).

BYGDSAM might be slowly gaining trust of the countryside through involvement with other actors through weak ties, but their “role” remains hard to define for most people.

This was best visible in the case of two women who turned to BYGDSAM for help. They met through sharing the same idea about how to help those recovering from burnout through a recovery garden.

I met them in a small house, crammed with colorful vision boards of people relaxing in nature and newly delivered seeds ready to be planted. As we discussed BYGDSAM, they shared a laugh, struggling to clearly describe what is it BYGDSAM does?

However, it's important to note that despite not being able to define the work BYGDSAM does, they knew they could get help from BYGDSAM when it comes to writing up a pilot study project. This obscurity and being the “glue between things” means it is not only difficult to see and define what BYGDSAM does, but also that it makes for a perilous position in relation to municipality.

The municipality's job is not to “rule” but to mediate but perhaps more importantly, the municipality finances with SEK 190,000 per Bygdsam and year. BYGDSAM seems to take the long route of establishing themselves it makes it difficult to measure their work in conventional sense which leaves open the question: can their work be measured simply in terms of projects finished?

"But what I have understood over time myself is that BYGDSAM is not a finished concept, but it is also under development all the time" (Sofie, 2022).

5.2 CHAPTER II – LEAVE, STUDY, COME BACK HOME

In this part, I will present BYGDSAM Anundsjö. The focus will be on explaining the role the members think they have in the community as well as the work they do with the local housing market, retaining their youth as well as collaboration with local companies to provide jobs. The information presented below come from interviews with following actors: Josefina - the project manager for BYGDSAM Anundsjö, and two council members: Patrick and Ann Catrin.

Anundsjö is a locality that nested in the hoary peaks of the High Coast can rightfully be described as inland. Driving towards it, takes one through the winding countryside dotted with red houses, lakes and misty peaks. After a while the road turns quiet, with long rows of seemingly endless industrial pine forests. And just when one gets used to this scenery, Bredbyn – the central locality of Annundsjö appears. The edges of Bredbyn are visibly marked, with one side by the large Polarbröd factory and the Anundsjö Maid a two-meter-long wooden doll dressed in white and red Anundsjö folk clothes, her hair parted in two long red braids. This combination of tradition and modern entrepreneurialism seem to sum up what the locals call the Anundsjö spirit.

As a locality of some 1,186 people, Bredbyn is centered around a large yellow inn with a fanciful mansard-roof. It is here I first met Josefina, project leader for BYGDSAM Anundsjö, when I worked as an intern within the municipal office.

Due to another flair up of the covid-19 virus, we met again over a zoom link a year later.

Josefina is 34 years old and the first thing she chose to tell me was that she had grown up in the countryside. In her own words, she grew up in a small village where her family owned a general store. The store closed due to its inability to align their cash registers to ICA standards. For Josefina the fact that she grew up in the countryside means that she “understands the importance of community and association involvement that also facilitates a feeling of community” (Josefina, 2022).

The way of working in Anundsjö is similar to the description from Nätrådal:

“BYGDSAM is a collaborative association where the municipality, associations, and businesses have joined forces and work together with rural issues, simply development issues in rural areas within geographically defined area, you could say so.” (Sofie,2022).

However, Josefina adds another important and Anundsjö specific actor: the church. This is an example that while being under the same umbrella, every BYGDSAM chooses to do things their own way and pull from the available network of ties to create their own board.

5.2.1 Engagement and Governmentality

Already from the beginning, there is a strong sense of individuality and pride in Anundsjö.

Unlike the perhaps more subtle BYGDSAM Nätrådal, they are clear in making their stance when asked if people know about them. “Those that are engaged usually know” (Ann Catrin, 2022).

We can look at BYGDSAM as through governmentality. It is the deliberate “conduct of conduct” as Dean (2010) further elaborated as the “any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by the multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and knowledges, that seek to shape conduct through working through the desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs of various actors, for a definite but shifting goal.”

In case of BYGDSAM the multiplicity of authorities is “the municipality, associations and businesses” they work together in order to shape the conduct of those living in a geographically defined area, for the shifting but definite goal of rural development. This goal is also described in terms such as “a blooming Nätrådal” (Sofie, 2022) or a “living countryside” (Älska Anundsjö,n.d.). which in themselves can mean a lot of different things.

Governmentality through BYGDSAM is separated into two stages: idea and implementation with the final goal of creating good citizens of the district. The first stage: idea is the creation of an abstract of a good citizen. For BYGDSAM, these citizens are the locals living in the district who create ties and engage with development of Anundsjö.

“The commitment is to have a vibrant and rich society that is fun to live in that you enjoy with nice, good and happy people. A village that develops instead of deteriorating.” (Patrik, 2022).

The second stage are the project that aim to conduct specific behavior that enable the creation of these ties and engagement.

One such project focuses on the idea of staying local that drives BYGDSAM Anundsjö’ population strategy.

Like many others in the Swedish countryside, Anundsjö suffers from having young people leave the countryside after they graduate (Rönnlund, 2020). Individuals make the decision to move from the countryside to cities based on their consideration of information about labor markets and salaries, but also by virtue of other “soft” factors such as culture, education career opportunities, social reasons, etc. (Li et al., 2016). For BYGDSAM Anundsjö, the perfect citizen is first and foremost a citizen that lives in Anundsjö.

Dean (2010) explains that those looking to govern often borrow from already established rationalities or alternatively emphasizing the emotional value through a-rationality or using sentiment and emotions in order to influence behavior. BYGDSAM Anundsjö combines both to influence the “Anundsjö diaspora”:

“This is how we work, through promoting items that are for sale. We also work to encourage and engage in the sale of your house, or your empty house, uninhabited house. This can be an encouragement through sending postcards that informs about the possibility to post your object, i.e., your house on our website “Move to Anundsjö”. We take every possible opportunity to also make those who live here understand that we have a people who want to move here. There is value in trying to sell your house, so we work on that all the time.” (Josefina, 2021).

Through using the rationality of the housing market, BYGDSAM Anundsjö tries to create citizens who realize the value of living in the area, both the monetary and emotional value of Anundsjö. Furthermore, as Josefina highlights their work on immigration, she points out that there are jobs in the area but lack of workforce. They try to solve this problem through promoting the idea of staying to the youth through using the rationality of the job market to those students finishing the ninth class:

“Stay, work and live here. There are jobs, but how do you get them to want to come here and work? One might work to invest in promoting these jobs to those who finish ninth class. These jobs are here. Travel, study and come back and work here.” (Josefina, 2022).

Home, and the sense of roots seems to be in the center of creating perfect citizens for Anundsjö- One of the informants, Patrick who serves as the chairman within the council emphasizes his long-standing roots in the area. He takes pride in running a shop that was started by his grandfather and wishes to see people staying.

Due to this, BYGDSAM Anundsjö use a-rationality that emphasizes what (Li et al., 2016). called “soft factors”: home, roots and social connections when trying to appeal to the Anundsjö diaspora. That is, people that moved away at some point but might have a sense of nostalgia for their “home”:

“I also believe from my own experience, and I read somewhere that people move to people they know. I think that is very important. The people who are just willing to take their pick and pack and just move somewhere without knowing anyone. They are rare. They are difficult to reach and the whole of Sweden's countryside competing for those people. But on the other hand: "come home again, move home." They (those that moved away before) know people here and they know what they are moving to. That way, I think it is easier to attract more people to move in.” (Josefina, 2022).

Discussion:

As Linnea Egnor Bystöm explained, each BYGDSAM does things the way they see fit. She emphasizes that “It has taken time for each of them to find their identity” (Små projekt växlar upp Örnsköldsvik – Tillväxtverket, 2021).

Unlike BYGDSAM Nätrådal who had to gingerly introduce the name and build a community (as the informants disclosed: Nätrådal was not something people identified with”, the fact that Anundsjö was their own municipality (Josefina, 2022) already laid the groundwork for identity. They focus both on weaker ties but also on strong ones and established social capital that comes from belonging to Anundsjö in some way.

Weak ties are utilized when focusing primarily on working with entrepreneurs (Patrick 2021). Here, their main goal seems to be focused on getting people to stay or establish new working opportunities. Unlike other BYGDSAM they do this through utilizing both job market opportunities as well as familiarity (one's roots, family, social circle) and emotions (their tagline is: Love Anundsjö - Älska Anundsjö).

Emotions can indeed be a strong catalysator but there seems to be an issue with keeping this momentum going and BYGDSAM seems to have had more success than its predecessors.

A similar association to BYGDSAM already existed in the area called Anundsjö Future Group, but their projects did not work as planned and it was disbanded after a while. As Patrick explained the problem seems to be engagement:

“What you have to try to achieve that what can be difficult is continuity. But we're talking about being passionate about something and working on it and then taking the next one and focusing on stuff. But some kind of foundation, continuity, commitment to the village.” (Patrick, 2022).

² The word used here was bygden. While bygden can be translated as countryside, I believe from the context it's referencing the village or the district of Anundsjö- again emphasizing the very local focus they are trying to achieve.

5.3 CHAPTER III – EVERYONE KNOWS EVERYONE IN A SMALL TOWN.

In this part I will present BYGDSAM Grundsunda and look into their work as the issues they identified as detrimental for their future work such as lack of engagement from the local population as well as phenomenon they called “association fatigue”. The information presented below comes from an interview with the project leader – Åsa.

As part of my final trip as an intern last year, I was taken to a “study trip” to the area of Grundsunda. It is a small area that snakes up the north-eastern coast. Linnea Egnor Byström took me to a small fishing village of Skeppsmalen . The picturesque red fishing cabins were chained by a layer of ice despite it being March. We took a short stroll and quickly departed unwilling to fight against the onslaught harsh wind from the Baltic Sea. From here, we drove north, following the coastline to Husum. A locality of some 1,647 inhabitants it is the seat of BYGDSAM Grundsunda district.

A year later, when I tried to get into contact with BYGDSAM Grundsunda, I was able to meet their project manager Åsa but none of the other members was interested in an interview.

I attribute this to the relative low familiarity between myself and them. As an intern, I managed to forge a closer connection to BYGDSAM Nätradalen and BYGDSAM Anundsjö.

However, contact with the remaining two was limited, partly due to their reluctance to be interviewed and partly due to my own lack of mobility. Without a car and relying on public transport I was unable to attend their monthly meetings that were held long after the last bus left the area.

Åsa is an expressive woman in her forties, she describes herself as an entrepreneur. Unlike other BYGDSAM cooperatives, this one has a longer name. BYGDSAM: Grundsunda Group for Future.

Åsa proudly tells me that this was an association like BYDSAM, that worked with local development. Later BYGDSAM grew out of this group of people and rests on the already established social capital it gained through their previous work but there was a missing piece between different associations.

5.3.1 Association Fatigue:

To Åsa BYGDSAM serves as a mouthpiece for “harder questions” and an association that will “lock hands” with others:

“Many years ago before it became BYGDSAM, they did a survey. So it was out of a survey, it was found out that there was a need for someone (an association). A spider in the web or a coordinator. Someone who could take some conversations and questions at some point during the day. Someone with whom you could talk to. (Åsa,2022).

In other words, there was no bridge between local actors as Granovetter (1973) called it that could coordinate and help both local associations as well as members of the public and local businesses: for example, navigating them to the right person within the municipality.

However, unlike the larger BYGDSAM areas such as Nätradalen where local civil associations (swe: samhällsförening) work with smaller problems and cooperate with BYGDSAM, there is no separate association working in the villages that fall under Grundsunda district. The villages thus lack a council of their own. This makes the creation of ties that would facilitate an expansion of a network difficult as well as creates an image of BYGDSAM as the sole decision maker, an image the other two have so far successfully steered clear from. Åsa also pointed out that there are other kind of associations in the area (such as the sporting association) but “many small associations tend to work separately?”

Not enough connection between different associations in the area seems to be the problem perceived by the local actors as not enough engagement. The key feature of connected associations is that facilitates the generalization of trust is the expansion of their networks beyond a single association”. (Paxton, 2007).

This is similar to issues faced by other two BYGDSAM and it was mostly ascribed to lack of engagement (Patrik, 2022) or the initial disinterest in what is going on outside their own village (Sofie, 2022). Åsa, however thinks the problem is something she calls “association fatigue”:

“And association fatigue it is like an expression of that. It is difficult to get people to get involved in the associations. Many times, those who are in associations will get very tired, because there are few people who can do almost everything. Many people can sit in several associations.” (Åsa. 2022).

I would argue that association fatigue, is due to the lack of connectivity between association members and a lack of weak ties that would spread influence faster in the area and help with a quicker collaboration and organization.

If we look at the issue of trust alone, Zucker (1986) explains that when voluntary associations are linked, even weakly, the networks of interaction created by these connections help to pass and solidify morals and assumptions across groups, increasing predictability of interaction across society and therefore, trust (Zucker 1986).

The key feature of connected associations that facilitates the generalization of trust is the expansion of their networks beyond a single association. This expansion occurs because of the multiple memberships of individual members. If a member belongs to two or more associations, he or she links those associations, and therefore, creates a network across the associations. This seems to be consistent with Granovetter's theory of weak ties which in case of BYGDSAM Grundsunda creates a problem of engagement. Not enough people are connected even weakly.

We've seen that BYGDSAM fills this role as the missing central piece that connects them and tries to counter the lack of engagement and streamline focus on a common goal, but it can be hard when the group is smaller.

Discussion

Due to their small size, the lack of alternative associations might be what creates a problem for BYGDSAM Grundsunda. The actors seem to have a network of stronger rather than weaker ties unlike BYGDSAM Nätradalen and Anundsjö that operate on a much larger geographical scale. The lack of weak ties and local bridges make it harder to create engagement.

If we use Weisinger and Salipante's 2005 (as cited by Meijer and Syssner 2017) framework of ingredients to produce social capital: opportunity, motivation, and ability, we see that in the example of three BYGDSAM association the main issue in creating social capital seems to be the second factor: motivation.

Both BYGDSAM Nätradalen and Anundsjö seem to have an established network of ties that opens the opportunity for social capital, yet they say that they struggle to get the people involved in their work and lack the desired visibility. In the local discourse this is described to different factors such as isolated thinking and a lack of collective identity (Nätradalen) and depopulation and outmigration of youth (Anundsjö) as in rural communities out or in- migration can have significant impact on sources of social capital and the possibilities to develop community initiatives (Tisenkopfs et al., 2008 as cited by Meijer and Syssner, 2017).

The associations seem to be aware of this issue and seem optimistic.

However, there is a question that inevitably opens: Given that BYGDSAM is a project funded by the local government and falls under the umbrella of Örnköldsviks rural development strategy: will it be given enough time to develop the necessary trust and social capital within the community that can be used as a driver for further development?

And if not, what happens when trust is damaged in the community and what are the implications of previously failed association work on engagement and rural development?

6. DISCUSSION

BYGDSAM comes from an already existing tradition of organizing for a common goal. Associations in the Swedish countryside come and go. As I was only half-jokingly advised during my internship, the solution to everything is to: “Do the Swedish thing, start an association”

The merit of BYGDSAM seems to be its role as the local bridge between diverse parts of society. As such, it is highly flexible and works with already existing associations (for example in some community’s church officials are part of BYGDSAM while not in others).

It plays the role of a facilitator between different actors, enabling easier contact between them and offering support where needed but without positioning itself as the decision maker.

This is done through a network of both weak and strong ties. The strong ties connect the actors within BYGDSAM while the weak ties are more prevalent between BYGDSAM and other actors – such as other associations in the area. These ties facilitate easier organization and contribute to a larger network creation. The role as a bridge between different associations and actors in the area makes it easier to organize for a common goal.

For example, if a youth organization wishes to renovate their hockey pitch, BYGDSAM can connect them with different sources of fundings (local companies willing to sponsor them, the municipality, external funds such as the EU) as well as with other youth organizations that might seek similar projects.

Afterward, they can help with guidance in writing and sending the project application. Due to this, BYGDSAM is slowly becoming a trusted actor in a broad network.

The broader effects of BYGDSAM’s work are not only collaboration between different associations on small-scale projects. They are helping, though slowly, in reversing effects of depopulation to a degree through for example housing projects, tourism initiatives, and retention of service in the area.

The most important implication for rural development that has come from this study is the research about weak ties and their importance for association work. In research weak ties have been used to explain different types of relationships, as we've seen in the literature review, but there is a lack of research about the importance of creating both strong and weak ties in context of locally led development. I would argue that for contexts like the Swedish countryside, it would be good to look at the already existing networks of weak-ties and their distribution before starting projects in rural development. Certain areas might be easier to connect into a functioning network that will exchange knowledge and collaborate while keeping a degree of independence, keeping it safe from collapse should the project fail.

Another important implication is the need to look into how associations in the countryside survive, and what role does trust, and networks play in keeping associations – and locally led development – alive.

The lifespan of associations in Örnskoldsvik area seems to be versatile, including associations that have been strong for 50 years to some that extinguished in a matter of few years.

The question therefore is: What seems to be the secret to association longevity and can BYGDSAM emulate it?

Each BYGDSAM seems to answer this question differently. While some focus on working in the back to weave the already existing associations for a common goal other do that through creating a strong network that is based on and a feeling of identity and belonging, but the overarching goal stays the same, creating a life in the countryside that is based on trust, and works for a common goal: “a blooming countryside.”

Engagement of the public seems to be an issue all three BYGDSAM shared. Associations working in silos seems to be an issue that was present in the past where either the locals were not interested (or were actively hostile) about what happened in villages outside of their own (Sofie, 2022) or associations that were started quickly ran out of their momentum (fieldnote, 2022) when the members got tired.

Without engagement and the interest of the public, BYGDSAM's role in local development becomes compromised as fewer weak ties, and with it, fewer bridges are being created. Influence and information are not being further distributed. This in turn feeds on the disinterest of the public and lack of trust in the association.

Without a network of weak ties, they risk becoming one of those associations mentioned by Lars, the informant from Nätrådal, that “were only talk but no action” (Lars, fieldnote 2021).

As we've seen, if association members chose to utilize weak ties it can extend their reach beyond just their association and help projects and development to be done easier and within a broader network (for example retirees, church members, parents, rural youth, newly arrived, immigrants, etc.) This kind of involvement can create a strong sense of belonging within a rural community since problems are solved together and thus feel more relevant and manageable.

BYGDSAM has used the already existing networks and aims to expand.

Given its status as municipality project, a question can be raised: what will happen if the municipality chooses to close the project? This can happen for a variety of reasons such as a change in political leadership, prioritization of urban over rural development etc.

I can't answer this question for certain, however it appears that BYGDSAM has gotten an identity and a life of its own that relies on networks and connections within the countryside. As such, I am confident that it would continue to exist independent of the municipality.

Finally, I would like to point out that while trust, ties and social capital emerged from my research, I would like to propose some alternative ways how BYGDSAM can be analyzed:

1. How does BYGDSAM's work change the narrative about living in the countryside within the local population?
2. BYGDSAM as an example of double devolution in planning. Double devolution implies a shift from one tier of governance to another, as well as a shift from formal to more informal planning practices. (Meijer and Syssner 2017) Every BYGDSAM has a project that involves planning (for example: such as the empty houses project) and it would be interesting to research if and how their work influences migration patterns.
3. Lastly, in a few instances the members of BYGDSAM mentioned that previous associations were quick to run out of motivation due to a phenomenon called "association fatigue". (Åsa, 2022) This seems to be a part of the local discourse as a reason why civil life in the region has not had as much success as they hoped.

Due to time constraints, answering the question "How real is association fatigue and its implication for civil life" was beyond the scope of this paper. However, it opens an interesting topic for a possible phenomenological study.

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