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How do local actors understand and tend to work toward local economy?

– A case study from Åres Gröna Dalar area, Jämtland, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

'Local economy' concept is often present in the Northern Sweden rural setting as a common objective that sub-regional actors, especially LEADER (one of the four initiatives financed by EU structural funds to help local rural actors while providing direct support) programs want to reach. Same actors in the meantime express a lack of knowledge and interest by local inhabitants. That reveals the question of how local economy is understood by different actors. Using “perspective” and “meaning attribution” concepts of symbolic interactionism and local economy debate led by social movements such as Woods, Transition Towns - TT and New Economics Foundation - NEF, this paper investigates understandings and practices of local economy in Åres Gröna Dalar LEADER area, Jämtland, in Sweden. It argues that **a)** observed actions and experienced happenings of key actors towards local economy are widely approved by local inhabitants. But the level of approval decreases when the local economy perspective is tried to be communicated through rhetorical, verbal and ideological symbols, **b)** there are four main meanings attributed to local economy : “buy local” and “support for small-scale entrepreneurs and tourism” compose the narrow approach while “individual empowerment and community mobilization” and “decentralization and new way of thinking” are of the wide approach, **c)** local actors' proposals for actions towards local economy can be analyzed in four categories: “support for small-scale business”, “raising awareness and participation”, “networking and collaboration” and “local saving company”

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EU : European Union

GFL : Genomförandestrategi för Landsbygdsprogrammet (Implementation Strategy for Rural Development Program)

JiLU:

JV : Statens jordbruksverk (Swedish Board of Agriculture)

LAG : Local Action Group

LEADER : Liaisons Entre Actions Pour le Développement de l'Economie Rural
(Linkages between Actions for Rural Economic Development)

NEF : New Economics Foundation

NGO : Non-governmental Organization

RDP : Rural Development Policy (of European Union)

SCB : Statiska CentralByran (Central Bureau of Statistics)

TT : Transition Towns

CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCING THE STUDY

1.1 Conceptual Background

1.1.1 Wanted by LEADERs of North : Local Economy

Rural development is a wide concept regarding its topics and geographical areas. Furthermore, it tackles different issues and social phenomena in a large temporal and spatial variety. In other words, although one can find similarities between different rural settings in different periods of time, every locality has its uniqueness about their primary issues, limitations and dynamics during a certain time period. For instance poverty, food security, land access and natural resource depletion are considered as common primary problems in Sub-Saharan Africa, while empowering small-scale rural entrepreneurs, creating off-farm and value-added rural livelihood opportunities, preserving ecological diversity, supporting cultural heritage and increasing social activity are seen as the primary focus areas in European rural settings (RDP 2007-2013).

The rural context of Northern Sweden offers its own dynamics as well, with its historical, economical, socio-cultural, climate and natural resources aspects. One may find for instance, exploring the focus areas and goals set by Northern Sweden LEADER¹ areas (JV, 2010), similarities on problem analysis in sub-regional scales, together with common goals and objectives. Such an overview reveals that these sub-regions thrive for stronger and more diversified demographics, small-scale entrepreneurship initiatives covering both on-farm and off-farm activities and ensuring a transition to secure, relatively self-reliant and sustainable local economies. Visions about local economies are especially eye-catching although the local and regional actors seem to lack concrete methods and “good practices” to reach their goals². The situation gets even more interesting when observing local actors who claim to be working for local economy, such as LAG for LEADER, “thriving for stronger participation of local inhabitants” (JV, 2010), and complaining about “a lack of willingness by local inhabitants” (Gerald, 2011). That reveals a crucial question: How do local inhabitants perceive 'local economy', and how do they tend to act on it?

¹ LEADER is a European Union framework program ran by Local Action Groups (LAG) in order to support Union's common goals and objectives of rural development in local basis. It's abbreviation for “Liaison Entre Actions De Développements de l'Economie Rurale”, which can be translated as “Links between Actions of Development of Rural Economy”

² This is an observation I made during my three months-long field study, including participation to many local and regional meetings on this issue and covering a number of local and regional publications.

An important step to investigate this question is to get a better understanding of perceptions and tendencies of local inhabitants towards local economy, and thus to provide a starting point for the local actors to design and implement strategies to achieve their goals. I also believe that case studies such as this one are a necessity in order to gather academic knowledge towards creating a consistent local economy theory. In this regard, this study aims to investigate how the local economy is perceived and interpreted by different local actors in Åres Gröna Dalar LEADER area in Jämtland region, Sweden.

The thesis is composed of four chapters. In this first chapter the study is introduced with its thematic and local-contextual background, research questions and methodology, and the theoretical framework within which the acquired data is analyzed. The second chapter investigates cognitive perceptions and communication of local economy through “symbols” in a process of constructing different understandings of local economy. The third chapter introduces the acquired data on local economy as a set of actions in order to provide supportive inputs on exploring how local economy is understood. The last chapter offers compact and short conclusions and suggestions in order to offer concrete starting points for local and sub-regional actors to develop and implement their strategies towards local economy.

1.1.2. Jämtland: “An ocean of forest with tiny islands of habitations”³

Sweden is a Northern European country with approximately 450.000 km sq area and a population of more than nine million by 2011. Its population is concentrated in southern part of the country⁴ where the climate is much milder and the landscape allows relatively big-scale conventional farming, and where geographical conditions permitted the historical development of naval trade routes. The northern parts of Sweden, Jämtland region in this case, is known for its long winters, relatively mountainous landscape (covering 16% of the regional area), vast needle-leaf forests (50%), streams and fresh water surfaces(9%), together with a very low population density which might go below 1/km sq in some specific rural settings (SCB 2011, Rural 2010, GFL 2007-2013).

Jämtland is an inner land with no shores to the Baltic Sea. That is a crucially important aspect in

³ This quote was shared one of the key informants, Erik, as the definition of the region by local people.

⁴ Six larger cities in Sweden are all located in the southern half of the country and hosting 45% of the total population. These cities are Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, Uppsala, Linköping and Västerås.

Swedish context where most of the trade and transportation have historically been conducted via naval routes. As a result, the region has not seen the historical growth of cities as accumulation centers for trade and capital. A 42 year old key informant working as a farmer and “deeply interested with local economy”, Eric, explains the foundation of the only city in the area, Östersund:

“A king usually likes cities, because he is then able to practice more authority and collect taxes easier. That's why one of our kings ordered the construction of a city, which became Östersund, in the center of Jämtland. So the wealth would accumulate there and tax could be collected easily.”

A quick overview of Östersund's history verifies this story, explaining the city's foundation in 1786 to stop faring trade that the region was famous with until the arrival of railroad in late 19th century⁵. Jämtland has also been a historical “middle-zone” between Norway and Sweden and the Jämts intensively traded with Norwegian communities, a fact that often is referred to point out the high enterprises' capita/person ratio in the region (see Table 1, p. 33).

The region had a population of 113.000 by 2009, ending up with a population density of 3,5 person/km sq, which is among the lowest in Europe. When the city of Östersund where half of the regional population is located is left out from the calculation the figure goes down to 2 person/km sq (SCB).

The map prepared by the Swedish authority Tillväxtverket (2007) points out a downward trend on the total number of inhabitants living in the area. As shown by numerous studies (Gunnarsdotter 2003, Waldenström&Westholm, 2009) and official statistics (SCB), there are relatively strong immigration flows of especially women and youth from rural areas to in-region habitations such as Östersund and to bigger cities in south of Sweden. These demographic dynamics are often referred as both the cause and result of rural depletion in the region with severe consequences such as diminishing economical activities and markets, failing of welfare-state services and further population decrease (Hopkins 2008, Cruickshank 2009, Gunnarsdotter 2003). An unpublished field study that I've done in Jämtland Rural Development Institute - JiLU in 2010 also shows strong causality links and feedback loops between these dynamics which seems to create auto-catalytic downwards dynamics in regional and community scales.

⁵ Wikipedia offers compact information on this point. For more details : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jämtland#Provincial_character, checked 13th April 2011

1.1.3. LEADER for Local Economy : Åres Gröna Dalar

The case study area of this study is Åres Gröna Dalar, a LEADER area in North-West Jämtland, being the smallest one in Sweden with around 10.000 inhabitants (JV, 2010)⁶. Its area is essentially overlapping with the official borders of Åre Municipality which is located in Järpen.

The history of Åres Gröna Dalar LEADER area reveals a political struggle, which I believe is relevant for understanding the local dynamics, that took place in the early 2000's. According to a key informant who has also been involved in the process of establishing the Local Action Group (LAG) for LEADER, the municipal body of Åre was divided into two blocs, one supporting the idea of establishing a small LEADER area and the other one insisting to join with eastern communities to form a bigger area with more public and EU funds. Eventually the decision was taken in favor of having a small area, especially after “some evidences showing the support of local inhabitants were brought to the attention of politicians” according to Erik. As a result, the area is practically focused on five main settlements (Mörsil, Järpen, Undersåker, Åre and Duved) aligned on the shores of Indalsälven stream and railroad, and containing half of the total LEADER area population(SCB). To have a small LEADER area where the communities “are really and already interacting a lot” as Julie (another key informant working for LAG) points out, might be considered as one of reasons for local economy “being a high priority for this area” according to Alicia, 38 years old woman directly involved in local politics.⁷

This sub-region has an interesting economical aspect: The town of Åre. It's a small district with a registered population of 1.260 by 2006 (SCB)⁸ but it is also one of the most famous winter tourism destination in Sweden, if not the whole Scandinavia. Following a continuous progress since late 19th century, Åre is entirely developed for and by the tourism sector. The last few dozens of years gave birth to nearby locations such as Edsasdalen, Trillevallen and Duved which also develop along the same patterns but Åre is still the dominant destination by far, also considered as one of the strongest “asset” of entire Jämtland region (Vikström 2008) as Jack, a 45 years old man working in public-civil sphere for rural business development and incubation, expresses.

⁶ With those figures, the area barely fills the criteria of “being inhabited by at least 10.000 individuals” for becoming a LEADER area.

⁷ This perspective seems to be shared also by the local inhabitants : 18 out of 22 informants of the questionnaire state that “establishing a local economy is (absolutely) a high priority for all the actors in the area”.

⁸ It has to be noted that Åre's population is subject to strong seasonal fluctuations. Therefore the “real” population during peak seasons seems to be much more than 1.260, reaching ten folds of this figure.

The presence of Åre as a strong tourist attraction destination seems to be creating both opportunities and restrictions for local economic dynamics. On one hand, it brings in a growing and diversified tourism sector sustaining a strong market for different products and services that can be (if not already) produced by small local enterprises. On the other hand, its growth seems to be pushing the local authorities and private investors to be concentrated in Åre both for infrastructure investments and job creation; and that causes a more centralized sub-regional context around Åre. The recent demographic figures support this argument. From 2000 to 2005, the registered population of Åre increased by 25%, while other towns and villages have a stable or slightly decreasing population (SCB). Gerald, a 40 years old man working in civil sector for community development and vocational education contributes to this argument from another perspective, stating that there is a “big brother-little brother syndrome in the minds of people living in small communities around Åre” But still, the nearby towns of Åre, such as Undersåker which is 25 km south-east, seems to mostly benefit from Åre's presence. George, a 37 years old grazer and sledge dog professional states:

“I was born in southern part of Sweden. I decided to move to Undersåker with my wife few years after visiting friends who were working in Åre. It's good here, close to Åre, near to social stuff when you want to do something. But if you go further north, they are mostly sleeping communities. Kind of dead.”

The Åres Gröna Dalar LEADER area includes five relatively big communities which host half of the total population in the area. They are all located along the railroad connecting Östersund (and Southern Sweden) to Trondheim in Norway, following the western part of the Indalsälven River. Listed from south to north, the communities are:

1. **Mörsil** : 674 inhabitants, mid-way between Östersund and Åre which are two main locations for job opportunities.
2. **Järpen** : The administrative center of Åre Municipality with almost 1.500 inhabitants.
3. **Undersåker** : A community with 384 inhabitants, situated 25 km south of Åre.
4. **Åre** : The “big star” of the region with its especially winter tourism attraction, providing a lot of seasonal job opportunities even for young people from big southern cities, like Stockholm. Its population is 1.260 (2006), yet it climbs up to several folds in high seasons
5. **Duved** : The center for the sub-regional parish with 637 inhabitants, close to Åre, late

development of ski lifts to attract a part of the tourist income generated by Åre.

The Åres Gröna Dalar LEADER area publicly states that its primary focus is to establish a strong local economy and seek for increased involvement of the local inhabitants (JV 2010). This, I believe, proves the relevance and importance of the aims of this research.

1.2. Research Questions and Methodology

1.2.1 Research Objective and Questions

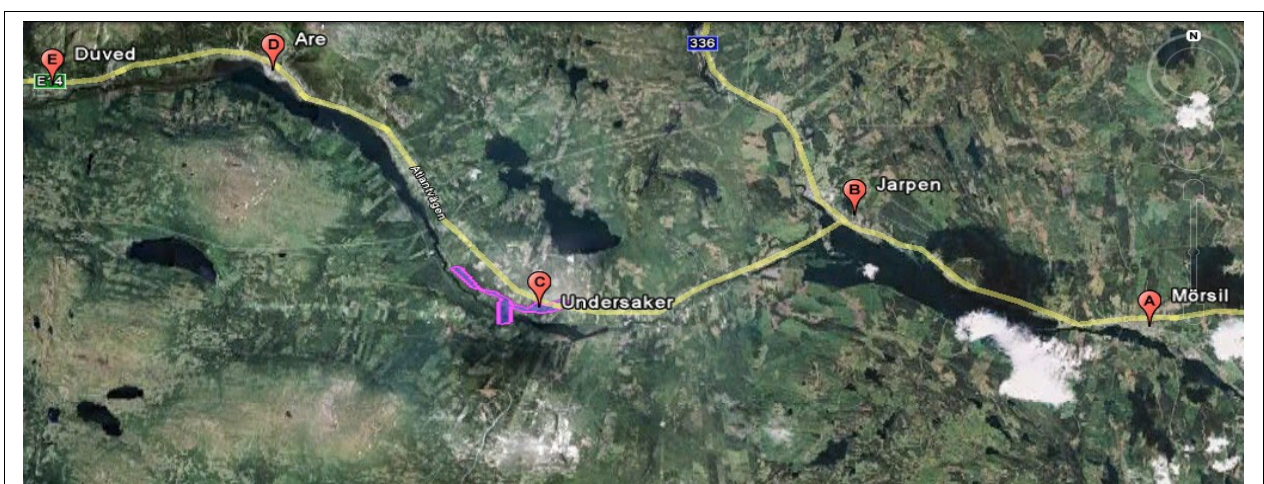
The thesis aims to understand the perceptions and actions of local actors towards local economy in Åres Gröna Dalar. In order to reach this aim,

- a) The main dynamics affecting process of co-shaping the “local economy idea” are revealed,
- b) The meaning attributions to and understandings of the local economy concept are explored and a categorical analysis is offered, and
- c) The intended and already-in-place actions for local economy are critically discussed in link with different understandings of local economy.

1.2.2 Geographical Scope

The field study is conducted primarily in the mentioned **five communities in Åres Gröna Dalar** (see Figure 1 & 2), but the informants are asked to give their opinions and perspectives in the whole “locality” as they individually defined. As many inhabitants in the area live and work in different communities, I argue that this study should be considered having valid outcomes for the entire Åres Gröna Dalar region although having above mentioned five communities in focus. Anyway, most of the informants give Åre Municipality as the geographical borders of their understandings for what is local although few of them state that Jämtland region as a whole can be considered within local boundaries as well. Alex, a 32 years old “ex-urban” university graduate farmer explains: “There are so few people living here, and long distances between different good and service providers. So local is big here”.

It also has to be noted that the validity of the study can be increased further by including various actors from other smaller communities. However, financial and time scope of the study restricted the field study to the geography described above.



1.2.3 Data Gathering and Processing Methodology

The empirical material of this study is **mainly** based on the ethnographic methods of participant observation and supporting interviews. As explained below, five data gathering techniques are primarily used (put in order of relevance, importance and data-collection weight)

- 1) I've realized two long field studies in the area. In Spring 2010, I've made my internship in JiLU (Jämtland Institute for Rural Development) which is located near Östersund, approximately 30 km away from Åres Gröna Dalar LEADER area. During my internship in JiLU, I've participated to a daily field trip to Åre together with an international group of rural development experts. I've met an active group of inhabitants directly related to LAG of the Åres Gröna Dalar LEADER region and to Fjällbete, a local economic association focused on sheep grazing and co-owned by over 150 local stakeholders. After that short visit that has been very interesting for my both personal and academical interests, I've stayed in contact with this group and then revisited the area for the field study of this research from January to May 2011. During this second stay, I've had an active participant observer role not only within this above mentioned group, but also in the whole area as I've been connected to other inhabitants and local actors on various opportunities. That enabled me to collect crucial first hand data and be part of informal talks with many individuals providing important data for the research. For ethical and anonymity reasons, I will be quoting them with fake names and short and occasional information about their background.
- 2) I've had the opportunity to participate, as an observer, to several local meetings which had the local economy and other directly related topics as subject. Some of these meeting are:
 1. Three community meetings on participatory land-use planning by local inhabitant and using interactive web 2.0 tools such as customized Google earth maps.
 2. One Municipal Board Meeting and one Fjällbete Board Meeting, both attended together with a guest expert on sustainable land-usage from USA.
 3. The General Assembly of Åres Gröna Dalar LAG, April 2011.
- 3) Nine semi-structural and open-ended interviews were made with important local actors including a politician from Åre Municipality, board members of community development groups, sub-regional supervisors of national NGOs and parish leader of the area. The

informants are also quoted with fake names occasionally accompanied with short background information of the individual.

- 4) A questionnaire (see appendix) was distributed to every post-box in a preset area in Undersåker (see Figure 2) and put on the local ICA store. This geographical scope for the questionnaire was decided after consultation with LAG and other key informants. The questionnaire aimed to seek both qualitative and quantitative data for the main questions that the study is based on. The return ratio of the questionnaires, following two weeks of given time, is 22%⁹. This unfortunately is not high enough to provide a strong ground for a quantitative argument, together with the possibility of some questionnaires being filled by key informants that I already interviewed. We can safely assume that return ratio did not reach 50% due to two main reasons: **a)** The topic of local economy is often defined by most of the key informants as “something people are not really familiar with” as Amanda comments on, or “a topic that people would probably not be very keen to comment on.” as Julie points out; and **b)** the lack of common public ground where people periodically meet, therefore the lack of simple and efficient methods for promoting and reminding of the questionnaire, which is especially true for an outsider like myself. On the other hand, the 22 questionnaire that was filled and returned show strong interests of the informants with many comments and arguments. For these reasons, I'm using data acquired by the questionnaire mostly as a supplement to data acquired by other methods, but also to provide little quantitative estimation as can be seen in the second and third chapters. The quotes from answered questionnaire will be used with references to 'Q' (Such as Q1, Q2, ... ,Q7 etc.)
- 5) Official documents and strategy papers of local/regional decision and implementation bodies are used to verify the acquired data. Moreover, the customized analysis made by SCB upon the request of Åres Gröna Dalar LAG group was very helpful with precise quantitative data.

1.2.4 Research Ethics

⁹ 218 questionnaires were distributed to approximately 200 postboxes. 50 of these households are estimated to be unoccupied during the implementation of questionnaire (based on their post-boxes being full and comments from other inhabitants), and another 50 are estimated to be working places for small/local enterprises. Therefore the estimated number of total number for households is 100, which fits with the official population records that amounts to between 310 and 340, since Edsasdalen, Trillevalen and Holland communities, which are officially within Undersåker district, were excluded from the implementation of the questionnaire.

The study has been conducted in cooperation with LAG of Åres Gröna Dalar LEADER area. LAG gave financial support for the research by paying printing costs of questionnaire and paying me a sum of 3.000 SEK for “the study's contribution to LAG's primary goals in the area”, which has been decided and done after completing the research. LAG was also an important gatekeeper for connecting me to other local actors initiatives. This collaboration, in addition to being very fruitful, dictated three important ethical requirements for the study:

- ⤴ A clear and transparent explanation of the situation to the informants during the interviews and for the questionnaire.
- ⤴ An increased need of attention for keeping the informants' feedback anonymous.
- ⤴ A clear and mutual agreement on the independence of the research with LAG, especially since a financial contribution was involved

This process was mutually and clearly communicated with LAG from the beginning. There wasn't any attempt to dictate the focus, methodology or conclusions of the research from LAG side, nor any attempt to influence my orientation as a researcher beside individual inputs, suggestions and comments that were more than welcome by my side.

During the study, I've been hosted and logistically supported by a group of people working actively on local economy through a local and multi-stakeholder grazing company, Fjällbete. This situation, while proved to be very helpful and crucial for the success of the research, dictated two important aspects to pay extra attention:

- ⤴ A continuous effort to keep the “participant observer” position, without getting attached to the group and “going native” beyond a point that could disturb the research.
- ⤴ An increased care not to incidentally share (especially during informal chats) private data and comments gathered from other informants

As can be seen in Appendix, the questionnaire was clear and transparent, explaining the aims of the research, the collaboration with LAG for LEADER area, and the methodology that would be used for using the acquired data.

For the formal interviews, all the required explanations were given to the informants and the approval of the informants was always asked.

In the end of the whole process, I firmly believe the ethical and methodological requirements of the study are met.

1.3 Components Shaping the Frame of the Study

1.3.1 Symbolic Interaction Theory

I use, extract and analyze the collected data mainly with the insights of conceptual perspectives and theoretical approach that Symbolic Interaction theory (Charon, 2007, Blumer 1969) offers. Why?

a) It “has” me: I believe that researchers, just like all human beings, always have a set of pre-assumptions and initial channels of attributing meanings to what they observe and try to understand. In fact, these pre-assumptions also largely shape the initial questions that the researcher intends to ask and answer. At this point, I argue that being aware of the general frame shaping his/her way of understanding social interactions is crucial for a researcher to conduct a scientifically solid study. In other words, I firmly believe that being aware of what you think any why is the only way to be able to change the way you think, beside being able to understand and explain your actions since they're shaped by your thinking. This is especially the case in a participant social study such as this one. After this rather long explanation, I might say that I find insights of symbolic interaction appropriate and consistent to understand how especially “new” symbols such as local economy are interpreted and attributed with meanings by different actors and interactions between them. For this reason, I use symbolic interactionism(SI) as the main framework to interpret and give meanings to the ethnographic observations I made during the field study.

b) It's possible: SI as a frame to understand social phenomena needs extended and in-deep participant observation process in order to understand how the informants are “defining reality” through their interactions by symbols such as language, daily routines, behaviors and more. In this regard, small details that can be reached only through long, active and intense participant observation process may become crucial data bits for the researcher to cross-check her/his analysis, reflect on the basic assumptions, and critically re-think of the validity of already-existing data. Such an ethnographic method is directly linked with the frame that symbolic interactionism offers. As I have spent relatively long time (in two different occasions, first in 2010 and then in 2011) in the area as an active participant observer, I believe this methodological need for reaching conclusions

through symbolic interactionism has been fulfilled, which gave me another holding point to use SI.

c) It explains: Symbolic interactionism argues that there is no reality “as such”, but the observer attributes meaning to what s/he observes (Charon, 2007). It emphasizes the concept of “perspective” as a conceptual framework (ibid) which do create new realities out of any social interaction happening in the society. Moreover, the continuous interactions between different perspectives create a very dynamic social process where new symbols emerge and old ones get new meanings. Same with the interactions between the actors; take the word “Muslim” as a symbol for instance : It might be argued that the meanings attributed to this concept changed quite a lot following the events of September 11th. It might also be argued that it has quite different meanings for an American living in Texas then for a farmer in Sub-Saharan Africa; simply because they are subject to very different social interactions making them attribute different meanings to the word.

If we recognize the reality as perceived differently through the perspectives we have, then the communication between individuals become a process of exchanging different meanings and understandings of the reality through a set of limited symbols: simple words, complex concepts colorful pictures, basic sounds, etc... That's especially true for relatively new concepts that emerge from new situations. How would you define a new idea expressed with old symbols (words, for instance)? And when you succeed to create a relatively new symbol for this new “reality” as you perceive it, can you be sure that other individuals that you communicate this new symbol will draw the same or a similar cognitive picture as yours? The same or very similar meanings are attributed to the word “water” perhaps, since it refers to a simpler and more similarly experienced symbol; but is that the case with the word “democracy” for instance?

Since symbolic interactionism asks these fundamental questions, I believe that it is the most appropriate theoretical approach for filling the aims of this study. I also argue that “local economy” as a concept is nothing but a symbol that different local actors use to refer to a set of meanings, actions, ideas and visions that they have for their individual and community lives. Therefore all the communicative actions around local economy concept in Åres Gröna Dalar region can be interpreted as the co-shaping process of the desired future both in individual and community levels. Thus in fact, local economy is a key symbol in the interaction between actors for communicating and “negotiating how their future lives should look like”, as Julie points out.

For these reasons I will interpret all the findings of the study as different meanings attributed to the reality through different perspectives. I will also seek common patterns in order to suggest conceptual categories where individual perspectives can be interpreted in relation to each other.

1.3.2 Local Economy by NEF

New Economics Foundation (NEF) is putting important efforts for developing and communicating a local economy concept based on consumption dynamics within a limited geographical area. Using metaphors such as “bucket” (the total amount of wealth within a community), “umbrella” (mechanisms for spreading the generated income among local enterprises) and “irrigation channels”(creating trade relations between small/local enterprises), Sacks&Ward(2002) is putting the focus on making the money circulating as much as possible within the local context, thus triggering multiplier effects. It's argued that an increase on local circulation of money would create more jobs, improved life qualities and stronger self-sufficiency in local. NEF also proposes LM3 method, which is an indicator for the local circulation percentage of the money “getting in” (through tourism, public funds, capital brought by people moving in, etc.) to the community.

This concept of local economy does not argue for a policy change that would create barriers and obstacles for “free market” to operate, but it rather supports a change on expenditure of public funds to create multiplier effects together with consumption behavior of individuals living and enterprises operating in local community preferring locally produced/offered services and goods over the non-local ones (Sacks 2002). In the case of public expenditure for new housing in local context for instance, NEF proposes that a short term vocational education and incubator opportunity should be first offered in the locality which would give raise to local housing companies that can then compete for the housing building contract (Sacks 2002).

NEF demonstrates that money spent for buying a service or good produced and/or offered by a local actor instead of an external (or monopole) supplier would generate income for the local suppliers which would in return spend this income for buying goods and services from other local suppliers, and so on. As the most common and basic argument for local economy, an intentional change on consumption behavior can therefore create a stronger and/or secure income level for all the local inhabitants which means to be economically beneficial for the initial consumer as well. Saying that,

NEF puts the emphasis on the “opportunities” that a stronger local economy can and would create.

This rather new and still-developing concept of local economy uses “buy local” as the core idea (Sacks 2002; Ward & Lewis 2002) together with support for emergence of local suppliers that can make “buy local” possible in the local context. As it will be seen in the following chapter, this core idea is one of the common ground between different understandings of “what local economy is” in Åres Gröna Dalar. This consistency, I argue, might be considered as another reason for selecting NEF's work as a component of the framework of this study.

1.3.3 Resilience by Transition Towns

A similar approach is developed and used by Transition Towns - TT (Hopkins 2008) while putting the focus on the “resilience” concept. In that regard, TT have a more direct reference to Woods (2008) who points out the new social movements in rural context resulting from a set of rather common threats perceived by rural communities all over the World. Even though Hopkins(2008) often use the words “hope” and “opportunity”, he has strong and continuous references on the negative motivations (threats) that he generally defines as “twin crisis”- Climate Change and Peak-Oil (Hopkins 2008). Therefore he promotes the concept of local resilience as the best and only way to save the local communities from a potential apocalyptic future.

Hopkins recognizes the importance of the idea of “buying local” for reaching a resilient community yet he seeks deeper and more structural changes which would and should create a radical shift in lifestyles. It's also possible to see strong references to the past when it's about daily life practices in rural setting. Gradually yet quickly replacing the capital-intensive technology by genuine hybrid systems that would mix the “old knowledge” with today's simple yet revolutionary inventions, which seems to be inspired from Schumaer's “Small is Beautiful” (1973), is often put as one of the main methodology for resilience concept, together with an increased self-sufficiency in terms of economical production in the local area.

I find this different yet not-contradicting duality between NEF and TT very interesting and relevant for two reasons : **a)** It corresponds to the difference between perceiving “threats” or “opportunities” as the primary motivation to achieve a sustainable future, and **b)** there are strong correlations between the NEF-TT duality and the different understandings of local economy among actors in

Åres Gröna Dalar area, as can be seen in following chapters.

1.3.4 Woods' Social Movements in Rural

The last component of the study is based on Woods' attempt to understand the “social movements” in rural settings (2008). Woods explains this rather new social phenomena as a set of “grassroot movements of rural residents mobilized to fill the leadership vacuum and defend cultural and economic interests” (ibid). He also quotes Diani's definition (1992) of “a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity” in order to distinguish this new social phenomena as a shift “from from rigid, hierarchical organizations to fluid and polycentric groupings; from electoral and policy interventions to direct action and mediations; from sectoral representation to integrative campaigning and coalition building; from economic bargaining to post-materialist and identity politics” (Woods quoting himself 2003; 2008).

Woods' findings are relevant to this study for two reasons: **First**, both motivations of and models of collaboration between the key actors in the research area show a strong consistency with Woods' explanation. The language used and expressed motivations of these actors reveal that they consider their ideals and actions directly linked to a global shift that is already happening and/or about to happen. **Secondly**, and in relation with the first reason, both NEF's work and TT practices can be shown as appropriate examples to Woods' definitions of social movements. Therefore Woods offers a wider and more theoretical aspect to evaluate and criticize these two practices.

What I find the most relevant is that Woods somehow demonstrates that these rural social movements mostly emerge by “perceived threats to rural cultures or identities from legislation, environmental regulations, corporate decisions [...]” (2008). This points out to the possibility that negative motivations might be playing a stronger role in initiating a social movement in a rural setting, such as the local economy movement in the research region. I ask myself, “Perhaps, fears and threats is the main trigger to get mobilized around an idea, a future projection.. And then comes the possible benefits, aka the positive motivations, that might arise from getting rid of the threats and even of the “systematic issues” that emerges them in the first place”. This very question which can be easily found also in a comparative reading of local economy advocacy of TT and NEF, helped me in the categorization I offer in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2 : UNDERSTANDING LOCAL ECONOMY

This chapter is devoted to the different and common patterns of perceptions and understandings of local economy in Åres Gröna Dalar. It consists of five parts: **First**, the question of whether the concept of local economy is heard of and/or known among the inhabitants is investigated. The **second** part aims to explain why the practical examples and actions are more successful than rhetorical communication in relation with “the list of good things for the community”. The **third and fourth parts** offer a classification of four different types of the meanings attributed to the local economy within two categories while investigating their common grounds. This will also serve as a ground for the **fifth** part which focus on symbols of different actors that are used to co-shape and communicate the process of local economy.

2.1 Is there an understanding at all?

“We use local economy thinking without even being aware that we do it. When I need an electrician, I don't go to Åre but to my village, to these people I know. They know my needs better. I go to them because I trust them more, nothing to do with local economy. I just know them. Also I know their family, when I hire the electrician, I know he will get better economy, will have better income, better community, and when I market my products I need a better community with more income.” (Alex)

During the field study in Åres Gröna Dalar region I have heard different key informants saying, rather often then occasionally, something along the lines of “people in general do not know what local economy is”. An informant working on local economy who also very kindly helped me to translate the questionnaire in Swedish, Amanda, made a similar statement : “I'm actually not sure how to translate the 'local economy' in Swedish. Beside us, people just don't use it and they probably don't know what that is about”.

I believe this kind of statements are very interesting for two reasons. First, they reveal that most of, if not all, the actors working for a stronger local economy co-create an identity and belonging to a certain group of actors who “know what local economy is”. In other words, a perceptual categorization is present between the ones who do know what “it” is, and the ones who do not. This argument can be supported as well with the fact that when these informants are encouraged to name the ones working in local economy, they mostly name each other (ie: Erik, Julie, Gerald, Alicia),

even if they work in different organizations with different roles and activities. Secondly, it seems to be feeding a feeling of “we're pioneers working with a very very new idea” which is also commonly found among the actors claiming to be actively working with and for local economy.. These two aspects point out to a group building process through meaning attributions that are believed to be very parallel and similar.

To check if the concept of local economy is really unknown among inhabitants might therefore be a good starting point. The questionnaire conducted in Undersåker began with the question of “Have you heard of the local economy concept before?” which was followed by “If so, please explain” and “If not, what does it make you think of in the first place?” (See appendix). The results show that 13 persons out of 22 are familiar with the concept. I'm aware that this figure might be misleading for two reasons : **1)** The percentage of returned questionnaire, as explained before, might not be enough to draw healthy quantitative conclusions, and **2)** several key informants stated, both before and after the implementation of the questionnaire, “it's most likely that people who are already involved or interested in local economy will answer the questionnaire more than people who are not interested at all”. However, there is an interesting fact : The “local economy” descriptions of 8 respondents who claimed having never heard the concept before are very similar to the ones stating their familiarities with the concept. In other words, a common ground of local economy seems to exist between the ones who have been using it as a symbol for communicating a set of ideas and the ones who have been not.

The question then remains still : “Do local inhabitants know what local economy is?” Most of the informants who clearly state “a lack of knowledge and awareness” among inhabitants in this issue do also express a cautious hope : “People are now getting the idea, but still...” (Erik, Julie, Gerald, Dan). The words of a key informant, Alicia, show this “confusion” among some of the “local economy pioneers” very clearly :

“Very interesting thing is the local people [...] We have all these needed components here, three parts [entrepreneurial culture, network&communication channels, support mechanisms] to succeed[...] So if it's any place we could succeed with this thinking [local economy], it's in here, in Åre. Because now we have the three parts put together. So... But now we're still too few persons who see this, who see understand this. Me and..”. [quote continues with the names of people “who see and understand this”]

These apparently contradicting statements of the informants, the quantitative findings of the questionnaire and the ethnographic participant observations all together could lead me to argue that there is a clear confusion in key informants' mind about whether there is an understanding of local economy in the area or not. However, such a conclusion would be incomplete, if not mistaken. I argue that all these findings demonstrate a clear need for dividing the initial question into two:

- ⤴ Do the local inhabitants have perceptions of rather similar threat and opportunities originating from their daily life experiences in the local/rural setting?
- ⤴ Do the local inhabitants have a theoretical grasp of local economy concept including the causality links and set of actions it suggests?

I answer the first question with a “yes”. It's true that every “self” is experiencing the ongoing interactions and happenings in a unique way as a result of her meaning attribution to the certain interactions (Blumer 1969, Charon 2007) happening on her life. On the other hand, it can be argued that the number and variety of interactions in a local/rural setting make the emergence of a shared symbolic ground possible. For instance, the only local ICA store in Undersåker seems to be commonly perceived as something more than a grocery store, probably as a common ground in relation with the local identity (Amanda, Nathan, Q9, Q11, 2011). Woods (2008) explains this situation as a result of rapid daily life changes in local/rural settings (schools, ATMs and stores being closed; decrease in population, job markets shrinking, etc.), that organically create “new social movements” in rural settings. I don't claim that every individual in the community experience the closure of local store with the same perspective. I claim that all would observe the closure of local store as an important and relevant happening since it's the only one in the area.

The second question is harder to answer since I lack the sufficient quantitative data to support my ethnographic observations. However it can still be argued that the theoretical (and/or academic) knowledge about local economy is quite low among the inhabitants. I believe that it would be rather a mistake to interpret this as local inhabitant not being able to “see and understand the idea” as some key informants honestly state. As I already discussed above, the inhabitants see and experience “what is happening” even though they all most probably attribute different meanings to what is “happening”.

That brings the discussion to a very interesting point: communication between actors through the symbols. Symbolic interaction theory argues that every kind of communication is conducted through symbols: letters, spoken words, body gestures, images, etc. In that regard, terms like local economy, resilience, local, climate change, capitalism, entrepreneurship are nothing but symbols that are used to communicate one's attributed meanings (to a specific symbol) with others. We may all have different meaning attributions for each symbol (Charon 2007). That's especially true for abstract, relatively new and not-commonly-used concepts such as “local economy”. At this point, I argue that the so-called “lack of knowledge and awareness among inhabitants” is nothing but a communicative distortion originating from the use of new and abstract ideas and symbols that are attributed, by some of the inhabitants, to rather commonly shared observations of changes in daily life routines and perceived threats to and opportunities for community's future.

That may also explain the commonly found feeling of “being a pioneer” that most of the key informants express. In that case, two communicational aspects are simultaneously experienced by these actors: **1)** “People do not understand my ideas – I'm not understood” , and **2)** “There are some other individuals who have probably similar ideas and who are not understood neither.” I believe that the emergence of these two conditions is the main dynamic that creates the initial phase of a social identity of “being a local economy pioneer”. This social identity creates a “social safe zone” where “the pioneers” are felt understood and/or trusted; a safe zone that emerges around the use of and the meaning attributed to symbol of local economy.

In the lights of these findings, I argue there is a strong presence of rather common understanding of local economy as “something that is good for the community”. This understanding seems to not exist on dialogue with big and idealistic words or rhetorical level, but emerges from communicative actions - as “a list of good things for the community”. I investigate this in the following part.

2.2 Are actions more powerful than words?

When key informants express their hope on “people starting to understand it...” (Gerald, Dan, Alex, Alicia), they usually give the example of a concrete action which was taken in direct relation to local economy and which was widely supported by community members. Therefore the key actors for local economy actually acknowledge that they're supported for what they're doing, although maybe not on what they're just speaking about. A very clear example can be given about a local

food company in the area (located in Undersåker) evolved and operating through the use of “local economy” concept, Fjällbete. The company has approximately 150 stakeholders, all being local inhabitants and small businesses such as restaurants and hotels. Fjällbete is most often shown as a good example of local economy both by key actors but also by inhabitants in Undersåker (Q14, Q17, Q18, Kate, Nina, Gerald). Its sheep herd is often visited by local inhabitants for recreational purposes¹⁰, and the local inhabitants often express their pleasures of seeing the sheep grazing in their lands during summer time. Therefore the company and its co-founder (faked as NN here) are supported for their actions, even though s/he's not “totally understood”. Gerald states:

“NN has a very lined up concept. And it's such a big concept so it's a bit hard to understand what NN actually wants. If it's hard to understand his/her goals, it's also hard to go and change the methods. It's easier to let it go, because it's a good thing. I know s/he has a good mind on things. S/he has basically same ideas that I have of sustainability, environmental thoughts and more.. I believe s/he will do a good thing.”

Another informant, the leader of Duved parish – Dan, expresses very similar points:

“I've met Fjällbete and the idea before. But... NN.. I really liked her/him. Because s/he has a mission and s/he believes in this mission. And that's why. When I meet people who believes in their mission, I always try to support them in one or another way [...] S/he had a right spirit. And that is in a combination with you. It was fantastic. So I said we (the parish) buy a piece of Fjällbete. Because it was very local but with an international perspective. And that's good. That's always good. You have to be also wide-looking.”

Another point making the later statement even more interesting is that the same informant admits, just few minutes after the statement above, that he “has heard about but cannot explain” the new form and destination that the company decided to take. In other words, there is a strong approval based on the basic visions and actions. It seems that this approval do not need a complete understanding of ideas, but it mostly emerges by observing that actions perceived as “good for community” are taken. It might thus be argued that a basic common ground on “what is good for the community” exists and observing such actions (ie “seeing the animals grazing in our lands”) may mobilize local actors to, in this example, become part-owner of the company.

¹⁰ Beside the routine visits by community members, Fjällbete organizes a “open-doors day” every May. When asked the reason, the members of leading group explain : “We see it as our duty to the community.” In the “open-doors day 2011”, the sheep herd was visited by approximately 80 individuals, with a good share of young couple with new born babies.

Observing, experiencing and perhaps even getting involved on actions related to local economy idea seems to be creating the feeling of “[them] doing good thing for us” (Q6, Q7, Dan). This “them” and “us” separation in such expressions might show that the identity reconstruction process around “being a local economy pioneer” is also recognized by some other locals who are not considering themselves among these pioneers.

On the other hand, “local economy” as a linguistic symbol seems to be creating a confusion and gets more resistance. Symbolic interactionism would explain this situation by the different meanings attributed to the concept. I would also argue that “local economy” expression as a verbal and/or written symbol has a more abstract, larger and potentially more controversial spectrum of possible meanings attributed than observing and experiencing a herd of locally grazed sheep coming back home does.

That's why, most probably, organizing a “sheep pride” in Undersåker is commonly seen as a good-for-community action but the attempt of communicating the idea behind it might easily fail. It might be also argued that local inhabitants with different ideologies, life experiences and perspectives might consider an action as “good-for-community”; but explaining “why it's good” seems to shrink the common denominator.

The importance of actions seems to be acknowledged by most of the key informants as well:

“The understanding and practical examples to understand [local economy]. You have to find ways to communicate what it is.” (Amanda)

Two other informants also clearly state:

“Let's say we will make an invitation for people to come and visit the sheep... We used to write texts that included lots of word-games, sophisticated concepts, long sentences and more.. Why?! Why we simply were not writing 'Come and visit the sheep. You will like it?' But now we do like this. That's good.” (George)

“I think now we need a much understandable language, not talking but doing .We can't build a local economy with preaching about it. We just have to do it!” (Alex)

Putting these findings on Woods (2008) perspective, a list of “good things for the community” seems to be co-shaped by the inhabitants who collectively yet differently see and experience the daily-life implications of the changes that their localities are going through. It may happen that an activity or happening is collectively considered as “a good thing” through different and maybe even contradicting reasons. For instance “keeping the landscape open” and “producing local food” seems to be collectively considered as “good”, but why? Because it would decrease the dependency to tourism income as Dan argue, or because it would increase the tourism activity in the area as Erik claims? That's what I mean by actions having a wider common denominator than the ideas behind them: The “local economy” symbol offers a lesser range of interpretation for local inhabitants, perhaps because it's already insistently used by some of the actors with a certain set of meanings that are not shared by some other actors. But the actions itself enables every single inhabitant to attribute her own meaning within their perspective.

Another reason for actions being more powerful than words is that labels and concepts such as “local economy” are newer than the set of actions and ideas that they correspond to. An informant working on a community development organization affirms this argument with her answer to the question if they use local economy idea and concept in their work :

“In this community developing group, we use the idea of local economy. But I don't think that we have been using the word before... I haven't been thinking of it... It's interesting, because I think we should be using it.”

Finally, as I will discuss in details in following parts, the motivations behind striving for a stronger local economy differ; meaning that every actor has an at least slight different expectation from the outputs of local economy idea. This is another reason why aggressive verbal communication of the idea behind an action may decrease its chance to get approved by other actors. There are informants who envision a more simple and less materialistic life-style with a reference to the past as the ultimate result of a local economy (Erik, Julie, Nathan), which refer more to resilience concept of Hopkins (2008), while others see the local economy concept as a way to ensure and enrich their income and livelihood stability (Q1, Q8, Q12, Nina, Arnold). In that regard some actions might be and is (support for small-scale business, for instance) proposed and approved by both groups with

focus on different expected outcomes, while starting from the words and ideas (as sets of symbols and attributed meanings) might end up with decreased possibility for the action to take place at all.

Narrow or wide? Four main ways of understanding the local economy

The participatory observation process and the findings from the interviews and questionnaire reveal a set of different understandings of local economy in the area where the study is conducted. I explain these four different meanings attributed to local economy within two main categories: narrow and wide understandings of local economy. The terms narrow and wide do not refer to any “better” or “more appropriate” ways of understanding the local economy. They mainly distinguish two main approaches; “narrow” referring to more measurable and observable dynamics concerning the network and set of relations for economical production and consumer behavior within a certain geographical area being very similar to local economy concept proposed by NEF (Sacks 2002; Ward & Lewis 2002) while the “wider” approach covers a larger and deeper thematic area including social and political relations within and between communities, as well as individual empowerment, mostly referring to resilience of TT (Hopkins 2008) but also acknowledging the importance of local economy of NEF as a common ground of agreement. Yet one can argue that both categorizations fit with the “social movements in rural” frame that Woods (2008) offers.

2.3 Narrow approach local economy

2.3.1 “Keep the money and the food in”

This first category of meanings attributed to local economy directly corresponds to the theoretical framework drawn by NEF as explained in the first chapter : Keeping the money circulating as much as possible within the local boundaries.

“I primarily define [local economy] as production of goods and services produced and consumed locally, and with a local ownership and local control involved. They should be possible to be measured with a tracking system for how many times money circulates before it leaves the area. I think it is vitally essential that there is a local awareness about this flow and how it can improve profitability for the area as a whole” (Julie).

Local economy is then explained as a preferred consumer behavior that prioritizes the goods and services produced and supplied within local boundaries, as NEF argues. In the questionnaire, one third of answers for defining local economy are given in this frame, stating that buying goods and services from local providers is one of the fundamental points in the list of “good things for community”. The answers vary between “being loyal and shopping in local ICA” (Q9, 2011), which is especially interesting since keeping open/having the local stores open is often referred of crucial importance for the short, mid and long-term well-being of rural communities in countries such Sweden where the rural demographic and social/economic/cultural depletion is a serious issue (Lorendal 1996, Gunnarsdotter 2003), and “shops selling local goods” (Q12, 2011). An informant relates this “buy local” concept directly with the list of good things for the community :

“I mix locally produced and local economy together I think, but they go hand in hand. When I buy, I know where the money goes in. When I buy from you, I know that you're a good person and you will do good things to community.” (Alex)

Another informant mentions the same “good for the community” dimension in relation with regional self-sufficiency :

“For me [local economy] means “be aware of that almost everything I need would be available here, in the region at least. And more aware I'm of that, others would also be aware. I think we're building an awareness that **it's good to shop** in your region. You can find most of the stuff to consume here.” (Laura)

The reflections of “Buying local” as a preferred consumer behavior can be seen in the results of the questionnaire where 19 out of 22 of the respondents state “they would chose locally produced goods and services if they're offered with similar prices to other goods and services”. When the same question is asked “in case of locally produced goods and services being offered with higher prices”, the positive answers drop to 9 out of 22, and 8 respondents chose “I don't know” as an answer. One can therefore argue that majority of the actors who define local economy in this first category are not yet decided, if not negative, to “sacrifice” part of their income for local economy idea. In other words, the local economy is maybe not a high priority for the ones who define it within this first sub-category as it is for the ones who attribute a wider understanding to local economy? It's of

course a risky generalization that is not supported by strong quantitative findings yet still worth to keep in mind as a question mark.

“Buying local” seems also to be primarily associated with consuming locally produced food :

“I think they [community] have to take really care about the agriculture and that means goat farming, sheep farming and of course, as Lapps do, the reindeer. That's what is important. It's very important also because if they're going to produce food they have to produce it where the people are living and local food is much better then milk from the southern part of Sweden or whatever.” (Dan)

It's rather common to see local food production as one of the firstly-thought examples within both the local economy (Sacks 2002; Ward & Lewis 2002) and resilience concepts (Hopkins 2008). I argue that in Åres Gröna Dalar case, it has three main reasons:

a) “Better quality” and “being proud of historical and regional heritage”: As I will mention in the end of this chapter, a reference to historical identity of and lifestyle in the region is one of the common grounds for actors with different perspectives. The food, and especially animal products traditionally produced through reindeer herding, hunting, fishing and grazing are often described as “much better than the junk coming from South of Sweden and rest of the world.” (Erik, Laura, Dan, Alex). On the other hand, several informants clearly point out to an at least partial preference of the past over today:

“They can do everything in farming because they have been famous for this farming [...] and people have been here producing their farms for many thousands years, and I think we should try to do that another thousands years at least” (Dan)

“Before this area was producing much more food. There was this big dairy house for example, but then it's gone in 70's. How good it would be to rebuild it!”(Erik)

“I think I'm born a bit late. Things were better before. You work with your hands on, produce your own food, and enjoy and share it with people that you care for” (Nathan)

b) Rationalizing the resources management and environmental sensibility:

Another argument that is repetitively mentioned is the “irrationality of the current way of producing food.” (Laura, Dan, Kate). This argument seems to be used as complimentary for the one I explained above, yet it is commonly shared by all the informants. The food is described as “traveling too much” before arriving to customer :

“Everything should be here. Small-scale but still. Now they produce milk in Åre and process it in Östersund and then send it to Sundsvall for package and now they changed it so they send it to Umea for package and that's coming back to here as milk packs after 1000 km. And that's crazy. It's stupid. If you're thinking about environment and things like that.” (Dan)

“I think it's very bad if we keep buying food from very far away.. The fish goes from Norway to somewhere in Asia, and processed, and comes back. It feels like it's not good for resources to work that way. In that way I think it's a better future if we go for local food chain.” (Laura)

“We should learn how to use natural resources in a better and more effective way, I know we can produce more food here. I wish we would have a slaughter house here, so without driving the sheep.. Not only cheaper but also more ethical and better for animals.” (Alex)

c) Direct control on and complete information about the food on the table:

As a third reason for promoting local food, this argument is especially used by local restaurant owners and other inhabitants buying locally produced food. In Fjällbete case for instance, the opportunity to visit the animals any time during the year in addition to the fact that they're grazing 5 months a year in the open pastures in the area seems to be creating a strong safety feeling for the quality of the food itself and the treatment the animals receive :

“You have also a very good information about what you're doing. Because I could remember we bought some meat from Fjällbete. You know it's bred there, it was like this, it was cut in this place, it was frozen and it was sent to us. The whole process we know when we buy the meat [...] I know everything about it. Otherwise it just says “European Union”. or Denmark. [...] And then I've met the guy and asked for some information and he sent me next morning on my computer. So it was very good.” (Dan)

This situation of being in control and informed might also be related to the aspect of

“decentralization” that I will discuss later on. Taking the frame of symbolic interaction, it seems to exist a strong correlation between the process of co-building the local identity and “having the control and the power on my own life”, as several informants emphasize (Alicia, Q17, Q22).

2.3.2 Support small-scale, and spread out tourism

2.3.2.1 “Everybody to their own business”

The support for small-scale entrepreneurs is an aspect commonly found in the worldwide discussions around local economy. The European Union as well put a strong focus on this aspect when it comes to rural development policies (RDP 2007-2013). NEF on the other hand points out the serious competition disadvantages that small-scale enterprises face in a business world dominated by big enterprises that interact mostly with each other apparently because of competencies and scale production issues concerning small-scale businesses (Ward & Lewis 2002).

In the light of these points, it's not surprising to find a strong reference to support for small-scale entrepreneurship in Åres Gröna Dalar as well : One third of the questionnaire respondents give “support for local and small-scale entrepreneurs” as their definition of local economy. The same reference is given by most of the interviewees as well (Erik, Laura, Gerald, Alex, Jack, Nathan)

One may interpret this “usual” since the small-scale business is apparently promoted especially in EU for the last few decades. I however believe that would be incomplete if not a mistake: There is something rather “unique” when it comes to small-scale entrepreneurship in the area. As mentioned in the first chapter, Jämtland region is most often referred to have “an entrepreneurial spirit that always existed in extremes.” (Erik, Alicia) An informant puts it very clearly :

“I have a list from Åre Municipality about how many enterprises exist here. They are several years old. But what! It seems like everybody got enterprises here, but also employed in somewhere else. It's not %100 their own enterprises, but small-scale stuff. I was like 'Oh shit, everybody here has a business even if they have a full time job'. I was astonished.” (Laura)

A customized analysis made by SCB upon the request of Åres Gröna Dalar LAG affirms this observation about very high rates of self-employed entrepreneurs. According to the figures (See

Figure 3), 279 small-scale businesses, 219 of them being self-employed, are registered only in Undersåker which has a total population of 384 by the year of 2005 (SCB; 2006). The amount of registered businesses increases to 596 in Åre which is the economical center of the region. However the amount of relatively big scale businesses increase remarkably in Åre such as “Skistar” with a number of employee of between 200-499.

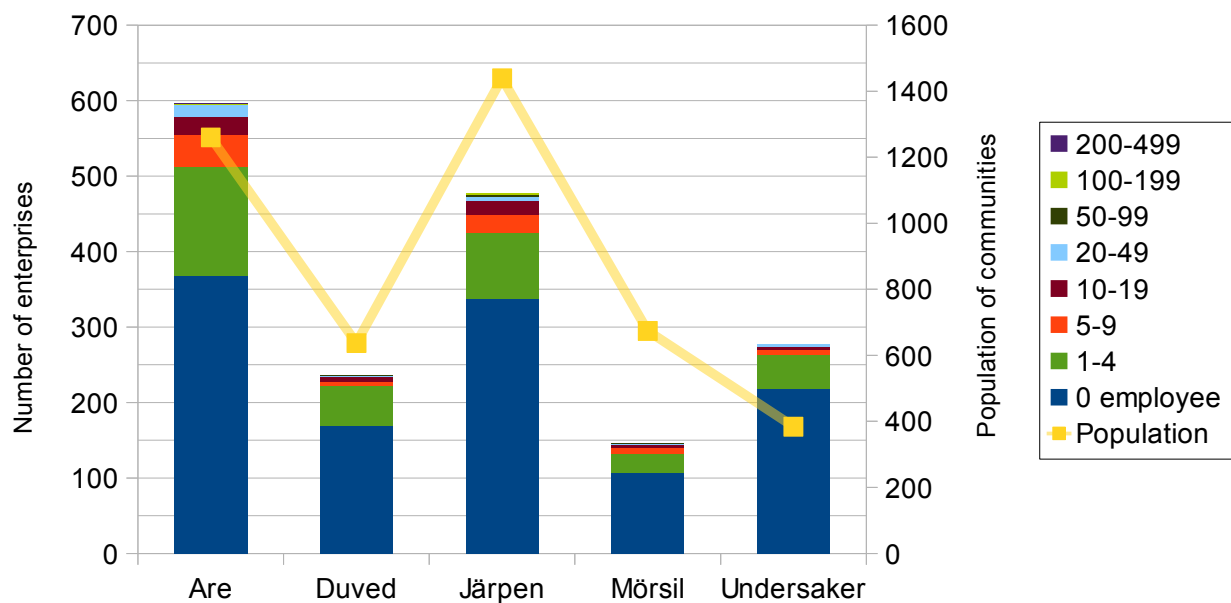


Figure 3: Number and location of enterprises with different sizes. Table produced based on SCB statistics

That creates a sub-regional set of economic dynamics and relations where most of the local inhabitants seems to be, in one way or another and to a certain extent at least, small-scale entrepreneurs. This can be used to explain the rather common perception of local economy as a support system for small-scale enterprises.

2.3.2.2 “Local economy is tourism of course, but...”

The presence of Åre and the amount of tourism income it attracts create a very interesting situation related to the interpretation of local economy. Although I observed a continuous reference to the tourism sector and especially to Åre during my field study, the word “tourism” is directly used by only 3 respondents out of 22, and 4 interviewees established a direct and positive causality link between local economy and tourism.

The tourism seems to be considered as both a threat and an opportunity at the same time:

“[Local economy] is based of course on tourism. But I think they need some more legs to stand on because if there will be some bad winters, you know, and there will be a lot of snow in the southern part of Sweden or there would be another change in the economy and people would go to Alps [...] And now they're [local inhabitants] just looking for tourism. And the tourists would be here from mid-December until mid-April. And what they're going to do then? Just sit and wait [...] They should keep agriculture and then they can have let's say tourism as extra bonus. But still they can't live on the tourism for all the year. And that's the problem.” (Dan)

I believe this situation can be explained with three dynamics that the people in the area continuously experience : **a)** Most of the income generated in the area is directly or indirectly coming from tourism activities in Åre, which creates most of the job opportunities as well **b)** The amount of benefits that other communities receive from not only as economical income but also in terms of social and cultural life in Åre is considered to be insufficient, if existing at all **c)** Tourism in the area is most often directly linked with Åre town and referred to create some “downsides for the rest of the region” (Erik, Alicia). This seems to create a rather cautious perception towards tourism and a “love and hate” feeling towards Åre town :

“...Jealousy between Åre and the villages around... They think Åre gets everything. Åre is the rich part of this community. Sort of big brother - little brother complexity. That is not good. This I would like to try to work on.. I don't want it.” (Gerald)

“It's both hate and love towards Åre. We know that it's this energy [in Åre] that creates jobs and so on but we also see the bad sides when you have this exploiting with all the buildings [for big projects]...” (Alicia)

The relation established between tourism as a meaning attribution to local economy and small-scale entrepreneurs is most often expressed through “spreading out the tourism.” This latter can also be explained together with a strong feeling that the region's capacity is underused because of the weak demographic profile in the area. An informant who move to the region several years ago from Stockholm explains it clearly :

“Small villages also has something to offer to all the ski tourists. Places to visit, to stay... So we could develop Åre as a tourist place, but also the rest of Åre Municipality, not only the hot spot of the mountain. I think it's going to happen, happening already.. But now in very small scale, 97% is still happening in Åre village. If we're lucky then we will have %15-%20 people visiting also other places in Åre Municipality [...] I think it's a very strong area although we're very few living here. It might grow here. Because we have the tourism...”

It might be said that the tourism is one of the fundamental meanings attributed to the local economy as it's currently generating the bigger part of the total income and employment opportunities in the area. The EU's aim of increasing the off-farm activities in rural areas (RDP 2007-2013) and the reference to tourism income within NEF concept of local economy (Sacks 2002; Ward & Lewis 2002) fit with this understanding of local economy.

2.4 Wide approach to local economy

2.4.1 “Move the butt and do something!”

Beside the first two main category of meanings attributed to local economy, “buying local” and “support tourism and small-scale entrepreneurship”, it's also possible to find a wider approach to what local economy means. This wider approach proposes more complex and less observable changes and refers rather to resilience concept of TT (Hopkins 2008). The wide approach can be categorized into two understandings that have a common aspect of putting the focus on society as a whole and individuals as active and involved parts of it, together with recognizing yet giving less attention to the relevance of consumer behaviors.

The first type of understanding of local economy within this category can be summarized as “move the butt and do something” as put by one of the key informants, Gerald. Answering the question of “how do you define the local economy?”, he explains:

“People locally, in the villages, get off their butts and do things, basically. Sit down together, decide together, what to do, what is good for my village, for environment, the society around me.. What is good for me and people around me. I want to do something for it.”

This meaning attributed to local economy is much based on the empowerment and capacity building both in community and individual levels. It's also interesting that the word “social” or “societal” seems to be used instead and/or replacing the word “local” by the informants who take this approach. Another informant who use the term “societal entrepreneurship” as his/her essential role being “working extensively for and in local economy” puts the focus very much on individual responsibility and self-identification processes:

“...to look at themselves and being responsible. And not only for themselves but for the community. Related to being true to yourself then true to your values and try to work with your values. If you see yourself, 'okay I can make a difference' or 'I'm here to make a difference'... The way you look at yourself. Are you a part of something or just someone? So for me it all falls back to you, yourself.” (Amanda)

The informants sharing this perspective on local economy most often agree that buying local (**1st category**) and support for small-scale entrepreneurs and tourism (**2nd category**) are important aspects for local economy, but that is “not necessarily enough”:

“if you really go shopping on ICA, it's important as well, but this other dimension [individual responsibility] is so so important.” (Gerald)

The solidarity and cooperation aspects which are also indirectly referred within “buy local” concept, are expressed through a wider approach by the informants sharing the “move the butt and do something” perspective. These aspects are often used when relating to a local identity of belonging, a will to mobilize for the community without expecting much from public authorities:

“If the government can't supply schools or childcare, we do it ourselves [...] we together can get this part of the world... [...] to work towards a belief in the future. A will to engage, to do things together in the village.” (Gerald)

Among the informants who put their focus on this point, it seems there is a belief that “local inhabitants actually know what has to be done and have real good ideas” (Julie, Gerald, Amanda). The issue then is the mobilization and coordination in community level and empowerment in

individual level. That also explains why the informants sharing this perspective of local economy use the concepts of social and societal entrepreneurship together with or instead of “local economy”: For them, local economy is a mobilization process of individuals and communities through raising awareness, ensuring self-empowerment and providing capacity building :

“When you're not dependent of someone, then you can be part of something. When I say individual it's not being on your own. No, no. But you cannot be part of something if you're not grounded on yourself. That's what I mean by individual. Then you realize: 'I'm part of it.'” (Amanda)

The outcomes of such a process are of secondary importance and/or not clearly expressed, probably because here the process itself is relevant and it would create appropriate outcomes anyway (Julie). Thus this perspective seems to define the local economy as a process to collectively get in, rather than a goal to collaboratively achieve.

2.4.2 “Moving in a dark cave” with a “new way of thinking”

Similar to the third main local economy understanding, the fourth and final main approach to local economy can be summarized as “moving in a dark cave” as Alicia puts. Actors that express this perception consider local economy in an even wider perspective that includes political dimension not only through local political parties but also within the “new rural social movements” that Woods defines as a way to explain the emergence of poly-centric groups with direct action, integrative campaigning and post-materialist self-identifications (2008).

Adding to the third perspective expressed as empowerment both at individual and community levels, this approach includes direct references to a fundamental decentralization process in decision making practices. Alicia shares a recent story which fits to these dynamics that Woods (ibid) refers to. It also clearly shows how the local economy can be considered as a political manifestation that is based on bottom-up community development linked to a rural identification process:

“A wind park with 50 wind turbines was planned to be built here, all the way from here down to Järpen along E14, each 180 meters high. And we have some agencies and business in international levels that works in ecotourism here. And they said, 'If you

build wind turbines here, then all this feeling of wilderness is gone'. [...] Because you see [wind turbines] from everywhere because they're so big and high and you have the sound and when you build so high you have to have some lights on top of them. We said to the municipality politicians 'We're more than 1000 people refusing them, please don't allow this' [...] But [municipality politicians] were not specifically interested on local way of thinking, they were very more interested in the national level [...] All these people sitting in the municipality don't work for us but for their careers [in national parties]. [...] They don't work for us here. They just work for their careers.” (Alicia)

This perspective of local economy is often embedded within the aspect of self-identification by “a group of individuals knowing and understanding the big picture”. The respondents sharing this perspective often identifies themselves, as mentioned before, as pioneers of a new way of thinking “that will and has to be the new paradigm in not only their local communities but on a global scale”. That is also related to them often having strong and up-to-date knowledge and interest in global issues:

“You see Egyptian people are now fighting for a change [referring to political struggles in Spring 2011]. Because the system was not able to satisfy or compensate their needs before. Now it's not the case anymore. That's very interesting that Egypt had recently become an oil importing country after decades of being an oil exporting country. These kinds of revolts will happen everywhere. The oil-based society will collapse. People will understand this new way of thinking more and more.” (Erik)

The informants sharing this perspective often relates the political history of Sweden with local economy concept (Q17, Erik, Alicia). The welfare-state system is often referred to have downsides such as keeping the power centralized in the hands of few :

“In Sweden we've forgot how to feel the power [...] I can get it on my own. I have my own power, I believe in my own power. And I have it. And I can do good things with it. [...] Because for many many years we had opposite political. 'You don't need to take care of yourself because I do it for you.' And then you stop thinking, you don't need thinking, you don't need to use your own creativity, and because of that you just do as others say, and stop thinking. It's very bad. Very bad. [...] **It's a way of getting power.** If people don't think, then it's easier to have power over them. [...] But now they need people to think to their own **because it's very expensive to have people that don't think.**” (Alicia)

The same informant continue with explanations that clearly put her perspective within Woods' (2008) frame:

“Because local economy is very much about how we can build up something that we believe on and we feel our own power and energy and where we can do something... The will that we can build something that we want [...] So when you want to succeed with this new way of thinking you have to start it somewhere in the society where you have a little bit left of this way of thinking. And where in Sweden do you have something left that you can think this way? It's in the village. Outside of the big town, in rural areas. [...] Because it's harder to live here. You have to take care of your own. And you have long distances, few persons, social way of thinking that we need to help each other and so on. So I say that the way you live in Swedish rural is the way to succeed with this new political way of thinking. That we get more power to the people to create their own life.” (Alicia)

This approach seems to be shared by a lesser number of actors, which might be contributing to the emergence of a group identity, the “safe zone” as mentioned, around this perspective and its recognized holders. One of the informants states that “People always thought I'm a weird guy with weird ideas. That's normal. It's just about time... And the time is coming with all global stuff going on”. Similar statements can be heard by few other informants, which points out to a self-identification process through the fact that this perspective about local economy is considered to be not understood and/or shared by the majority of the inhabitants. Interestingly, these informants seem to end up with a higher importance attributed to “local economy” in their private life priorities, together with professionally and openly working in this frame. Is it because the meaning attributed to local economy becomes the meaning attributed to life itself, for the holders of this perspective? Does it become a substantial part of the answer given to the question of “who am I”? Symbolic interactionism offers supportive arguments for such an argument, but I prefer to leave it here as a question.

The informants who refer to this “new way of thinking” acknowledge the importance and relevance of the meanings attributed to the local economy by the other three main perspectives. Yet they often mention “the big picture” to point out a direct link between the concept of local economy and a paradigm shift in social, economical and political spheres that directly refers to TT's resilience concept(Hopkins 2008). They use the term “big picture” to communicate this perspective, and

“bigger picture” when they compare this perspective with (their understandings of) other actors' perspectives. That, as can be seen in the final chapter, creates a commonly shared ground of local economy understanding with the three other proposed categories.

2.5 Symbols, hopes and fears: The underground world of local economy

One of the questions directly and/or indirectly asked to the informants was their motivation(s) for having a positive approach (if that's the case at all) towards local economy.

For this, two different statements were put in the questionnaires and respondents were asked to mark an answer scaling from 1 to 5 (from “I absolutely agree” to “I absolutely don't agree”). First statement was putting a positive motivation based on local economy of NEF(Sacks 2002; Ward & Lewis 2002) that was referring to local economy as an opportunity to enrich the community, create more jobs and improve the life qualities of the inhabitants. The second statement was putting a negative motivation that was referring to local economy as a necessity in order to preserve the current life quality in the area. The latter was therefore mentioning the energy and economical crises “that would continuously and severely happen in next decades” and proposing a collapse scenario for the current economic and social system, thus directly referring to resilience concept of TT(Hopkins 2008).

Before conducting this study, I assumed that positive motivations as “creating opportunities” would be much more widely and easily accepted than negative motivations that are proposing future collapse scenarios in case of not acting.

The results of the questionnaire were only partially supporting this hypothesis: 19 respondents out of 21 stated their approval with the first statement (13 for “I absolutely agree” and 6 for “I agree”), while two respondents were answering “I don't know”. For the second statement the figures are slightly different. The number of respondents choosing “I absolutely agree” drops to 10, the number of “I agree” remains same, “I don't know” increases to 3, but two respondents mark “I don't agree”.

A similar situation arises when exploring the answers given by the interviewees. The positive motivation is a common ground shared by all the actors. The negative motivation is mentioned, in

the cases where the question of “if they see the local economy as a way of escaping the collapse” was directly asked, by five interviewees out of 9. The negative motivations in these cases are not seen as stronger as the positive motivations are, but rather as a complementary reason:

“When the energy is more expensive in the future, it will be more sustainable. Local economy means our local area will last longer... It's more resilient, more prepared to other conditions. 100 years ago, it was like this.” (Alex)

The same informant, when asked about what kind of actions should be done, goes one step further and suggests a deterministic process :

“I think it has to come from ground, you can't regulate it. I see it as a natural thing that will happen, I think in the end everything fall in place. There is only one way that is more sustainable, there must be... And if it's local economy, then that will happen automatically, eventually. You don't have to regulate it.”

There is also a positive correlation between “sharing negative motivation” and “having a wider understanding of local economy”. When asked about why essentially he is working for a stronger local economy, one of the key informants clearly states : “I don't want my daughter to have to carry a gun” (Erik), which reflects a clear perception of threats as mentioned in resilience concept, beside suggesting complex links between social, cultural and economical dimensions of everyday life.

Another underlining motivation is that inhabitants in Åres Gröna Dalar have a common need for demographic growth and diversification in the area, even though Åre Municipality is one of the few sub-regions in Northern Sweden with a not-shrinking and even slightly increasing population (SCB). It's rather often that a direct link is established between local economy and “new people moving in” (Q12, Q13, Q16, Erik, Laura, George). That may be rooted in rather shared idea of the area being underused: “There is lots of space to move here!” and “We always want new good people to settle down here” are statements that I have often heard during the four months of field study. In this case, local economy is seen as a methodology to increase the use of sub-regional capacity through demographic expansion.

CHAPTER 3 : ACTING FOR LOCAL ECONOMY

This chapter investigates what the local actors propose as appropriate policies and actions for a stronger local economy. I will explore the suggested actions and policies in four parts which will be put in relation with the categories on different understandings of local economy that are explored in the second chapter.

3.1 Public support for business

One of the most common suggestions by the informants is public support for small-scale business initiatives. Local food and small-scale tourism activities are put as the primary targets of this support. In that regard, the second category of understanding local economy (support for small-scale entrepreneurs and tourism) goes along with this action.

Åre municipality is referred to the word “public” in two different dimensions :

3.1.1 Direct financial and technical support

This dimension is often mentioned by informants (Nina, Dan, Alicia, Q10, Q21) although not explained in details how it should be done. However, tax relief and facilitated bank credits for new businesses are proposed as two concrete actions(Q15, Q21). A department solely focused on business support exists within Åre Municipal body, but it seems like there is a need of clarifying its aims and working methods. I also observed lack of clear knowledge about the availability of municipal funds for financial supports to small-scale business initiatives.

An interesting fact is that when asked if “the public institutions are responsible for developing a stronger local economy” only 8 (out of 22) respondents answer with a “yes”. There are similar statements by some of the informants (Dan, Amanda). This can be interpreted as local inhabitants not expecting the Åre municipality to “take care of” the local economy, but to “take part of” it. That would make possible to argue for a rather unrevealed tendency towards the wide approach to local economy which propose a decentralization process and community mobilization. Furthermore, this can be affiliated with the historical implementations of living in rural with welfare-state system

existence to lesser extents, and “being used and obliged to take care of yourself together with your neighbors” as already mentioned within the third and fourth types of local economy understandings.

The concrete support of the municipality on the other hand is not asked only for commercial enterprises, but also for local/non-profit organizations such as community development groups that can trigger, facilitate and multiply the local economy process through community mobilization:

“...[Would be good to have] a person working for and in Åre Municipality, who knows all the department. So it would be easy to present ideas. Someone we can ask if we can look for money, and where for a project. A resource person whose mission is to help all of them working for free in the small villages with local groups.” (Mia)

3.1.2 Change in policies and facilitating new initiatives

This aspect, different then the first one, is expressed in more details proposing concrete actions (Q12, Q15, Q16, Julie, Laura).

One interesting policy change proposal is about taking the model of Norway as an example of rural development and agricultural policies (Q4, Q9, Dan). Different informants (Erik, Nathan, Claudia) state that Norway has bigger subsidies for on-farm products, which might relate the intention of this suggestion to support small-scale enterprises especially within local food production.

There are also two proposals directly linked to the motivation of “making people move here” . These proposals include decreasing land prices and connection fees to the regional grid (Q12, Q15, Q12) and improved child care and school systems (Q16, Nina). That again, directly refers to rather common perception of (the resources in the) area being underused

There is also a change proposal within the local education system. Including entrepreneurship skills and practices in gymnasium education is considered as a way to “spread out the entrepreneurial spirit” among the youth (Erik, Alicia, Q4, Q11)

3.2 Raising awareness and participation

As I discussed in the second chapter, a lack of awareness and participation is often mentioned in relation to the local economy. As a result, raising awareness and ensuring the involvement of “as much as possible” individuals are suggested as actions towards local economy (Q6, Q7, Q8, Q13, Q14, Julie, Dan, Amanda, Alicia)

There are two concepts that are referred to by the word “awareness”: First, it seems that “buy local” is seen as an obvious truth that some people might just not be “aware” of. This would mean that the issue is not related to a lack of dialogue or negotiation about why “buy local” is good, but as a one-way communication “explaining” why it's good (Dan, Nathan, Q13). That also supports my argument about “buy local” being the common ground between different understandings of local economy.

The second concept referred to by “awareness” is local economy itself. A need to provide more and better information to local inhabitants about what local economy is stated (Q9, Q13, Q14, Julie). It might be interpreted in relation with the claim of “people do not know what the local economy is”, but I argue that it's mostly about starting a mobilization process (as perceived essential by the third type of local economy understanding) through a higher involvement of local inhabitants, although an informant clearly mention a need for “educating people and actors” in that manner (Amanda). An interesting action in that regard is suggested and planned by the church in Duved:

“We also try to support by having a church service together with Fjällbete up in Duved where the fields [pastures] will be open. And then we have to talk about how important it is to keep this landscape open. Not just to put the trees everywhere. Because it's not very nice to live in a forest with spruces two meters from where you're living. It's a bit too shady [...] We're gonna have lots of services like that. Same with the Lapps and reindeer herders. It's very important to find a long-term strategy for these things and for community. Not just for the tourists coming here for few months. So they [locals] will make up their minds. 'Please use this. Please buy the meat instead of buying the cheap meat coming from Denmark'. That's very important for us. [...] We have to take care of this creation. And this is our local creation.”

A higher participation of people is one of the most basic “wishes” that local actors have.

Participation of youth is especially pointed out by an informant (Gerald). I deliberately use the word “wish” because the usage of a simpler language (Nina, Alex, George, Nathan) and more focus on practical examples (Erik, Alex, Amanda, Kate) are often emphasized as the main guidelines for revising the way the local economy is communicated. However there exists a lack of concrete action plans to ensure the “higher participation” that is clearly stated as a need.

3.3 Networking, collaboration and solidarity

As a way to initialize and ensure a social mobilization process through participation and community-based action, collaboration and networking are considered as main methods.

Collaboration is referred to in different levels : Some of the informants (Q2, Q8, Q10, Q18, Q21) refer to an inter-sectoral collaboration between tourism and agriculture, while others (Q1, Q3, Q6, Q7, Gerald, Amanda, Alicia) mention a wider and less clear collaboration concept between assets that individuals and groups possess in community level. An informant tells the story of an action as an example to the latter:

“We have spring clean up day. After the snow is gone, lots of garbage everywhere. Last spring was the first time. Great fun! 30-40 people came with plastic bags. And the village looked like so nice! We're trying to find activities like that...” (Laura)

Another example of the collaboration between individuals can be seen in form of “entrepreneurs factory”. Mentioned by different key informants in various occasions (Laura, Alicia), it's a mechanism to ensure networking between individuals and support to small-scale enterprises:

“...many times when you have local businesses you have some problems, I can see [...] 'Oh, they're really good to work with sledge dog but they're not entrepreneurs in this manner.' So they get very good being guides and so on, but they're not good to work with business. So my idea is to put the artist and the manager together. The artist is no artist if he does not have a good manager. And vice versa. Have speed dating, or match making [...] 'Okay I'm an artist and I'm good on this and this...' This is one part of it. Then you have to support it with the community politics, that's important.” (Alicia)

This action proposal seems to be covering both the support for small-scale entrepreneurship and the need for gathering/finding people (Q4) and coordinating the different initiatives (Q7) as a mean of networking. In that manner a special importance is attributed to LEADER as a channel :

“Åres Gröna Dalar, the LEADER project is great. Really good. Leader strategy is essential to develop areas like this. Everybody work together, enterprises, public and volunteers. We have this project here for 1,5 years and already done new networks active in this village. Just by talking, meeting, 'we want to do this, do you know any person knowing about tree planting?' People get to know each other, next time they need someone they're gonna call this person instead of someone in Östersund.” (Laura)

The concept of “solidarity” is also mentioned by informants as one of the important aspects of local economy. “Working together” (Q8), “helping hands” (Q1) and “a feeling of 'us'” (Gerald, Q6) are used in the context of solidarity although concrete action plans and strategies to increase the solidarity are not proposed. That reflects that local economy is seen, at least by several informants, as a collective goal that should be co-shaped and reached through collaborative actions implemented with a rural community identity.

3.4 Local Saving Company (“Sparbolaget”)

I chose to mention this action proposal separately for three reasons : **a)** it's a concrete, well-defined and potentially large impact plan **b)** it seems to be on the “top-priority” list of some of the key local actors such as LAG for LEADER, and **c)** I've been able to closely follow its development process as an initiative.

The idea is about creating an investment structure where individuals and organizations will be able to directly invest financial resources to new small-scale business initiatives through a “middle man” that will evaluate applications with a set of criteria such as financial viability, ecological sustainability and social contributions to the community at local level. Ideas that will get a “pass” mark will be offered to the pool of investors with different options of becoming involved. Erik explains the idea with following statement :

“So let's say the idea is to start a dairy. A body of voluntary representatives from the community will evaluate the business plan, if it's good in terms of natural resources management and if it contributes to the community. Then they will say, 'okay, if you put

a minimum of 100.000 SEK on it you can become a part-owner of the enterprise. Or if you put between 10.000 and 100.000 SEK then you will not become a shareholder but instead will get for free a certain amount of products it offers.' So everybody will be able to get involved the way they want.”

Erik further motivates the idea from the perspectives of both investor and the entrepreneur :

“When you put your money in the bank, you have no control over it. You don't know what will be supported with your investment. And as we saw in the recent past, this shiny international banking system can collapse one day without even a warning. Just like that! And if you're the entrepreneur, now the only way to find investment is to go these guys with ties. And they would only check your business idea, nothing else. And of course what you can put in hold as a guarantee if your business fails. So if you don't have some stuff from your parents, you can't really get investment. But in this 'Sparbolaget', it will be totally possible if you have a good idea that the community needs, a smart plan and also good intentions towards the community.”

A respondent of the questionnaire mentions the same idea while emphasizing the need of not being “fuzzy”:

“Local bank! Form a strong group anchored to the municipality and county level! Avoid "fuzzy"! Develop what is really "something" and don't try to show goofy attractions”
(Q17, 2011)

By the date of May 2011 the idea is on the phase of getting started with an initial group of investors who define themselves “being actively involved in local economy”. Its bureaucratic structure is ready on paper and contacts have been made on national level with Swedish Board of Agriculture which “has shown high interest” to the idea, according to Erik.

A spare set of questions about this idea were asked to the respondents through the questionnaire. The questions were mainly aiming to investigate the essential conditions for local inhabitants to get involved to “Sparbolaget” and their potential expectations from it. To begin with, the respondents were asked to mark what they think about the idea of investing and saving locally. 14 respondents out of 22 expressed a positive impression , while 5 of them abstained and 3 expressed their disagreements.

Following that, seven questions were asked to investigate the requirements they have in order to

invest within such a structure. Keeping in mind the low return rate of the questionnaire that makes problematic to draw healthy quantitative data from it, the results have shown that :

1. There is a clear need for “closely knowing the person who come with the business idea”. That might be interpreted as the importance of social capital in rural settings when it's about economic relations and partnerships.
2. There is a clear need for “a skilled and trustworthy middle man who can monitor and ensure the economical viability of the business idea”.
3. The respondents in general do not seek economical profit/interest from the project in the short-term. However, they in general seek economical profit/interest from the project in the long-term. That can be explained by putting the emergence of a new local enterprise in the area as a higher priority than individual economic benefit, as NEF also argues with its local economy concept; but still not wanting to invest in an economically dead venture.
4. The respondents are interested to have good quality & useful products and/or services provided to them by the project.
5. There is a strong expectation from the business to be environmental-friendly.
6. There is a strong expectation from the business to contribute to the social life in the community.

The idea of “Sparbolaget” does not seem to be widely and publicly communicated yet. The reason for that is related to the dimension I raised in the second chapter about the difference between communicating ideas and actions:

“Now we're thinking if we should announce the idea and wait for people to participate to start, or if we should start it as an initial bunch of people... The latter seems smarter. You know, not to talk about the idea with big words but to show what it is with the action itself.” (Erik)

The local saving company is proposed and developed mostly by the actors who are sharing the fourth type of local economy understanding which focus on resilience concept and “future threats” on economical, social and political spheres due to an expected collapse of current society. On the other hand, the idea itself proposes a concrete action having potential to directly contribute to “support for small-scale”, “buy local”, and “community mobilization”.

This is another reason for me to put special focus on this action plan: It seems to offer, being based on the common ground of local economy, a channel of “increased dialogue and mutual understanding”(Charon 2007) between different interpretations of local economy. Moreover, as it's not a rhetorical idea but an action proposal, it gives the space for different actors with different understandings to interpret it from their perspective along with commonly agreeing on it as within the “list of good things for the community”.

CHAPTER 4 : CONCLUSIONS

This chapter aims to 1) draw compact conclusions about the findings of the study, 2) propose communicative actions and strategies for the local actors working for local economy in Åres Gröna Dalar, and 3) suggest important questions for further studies.

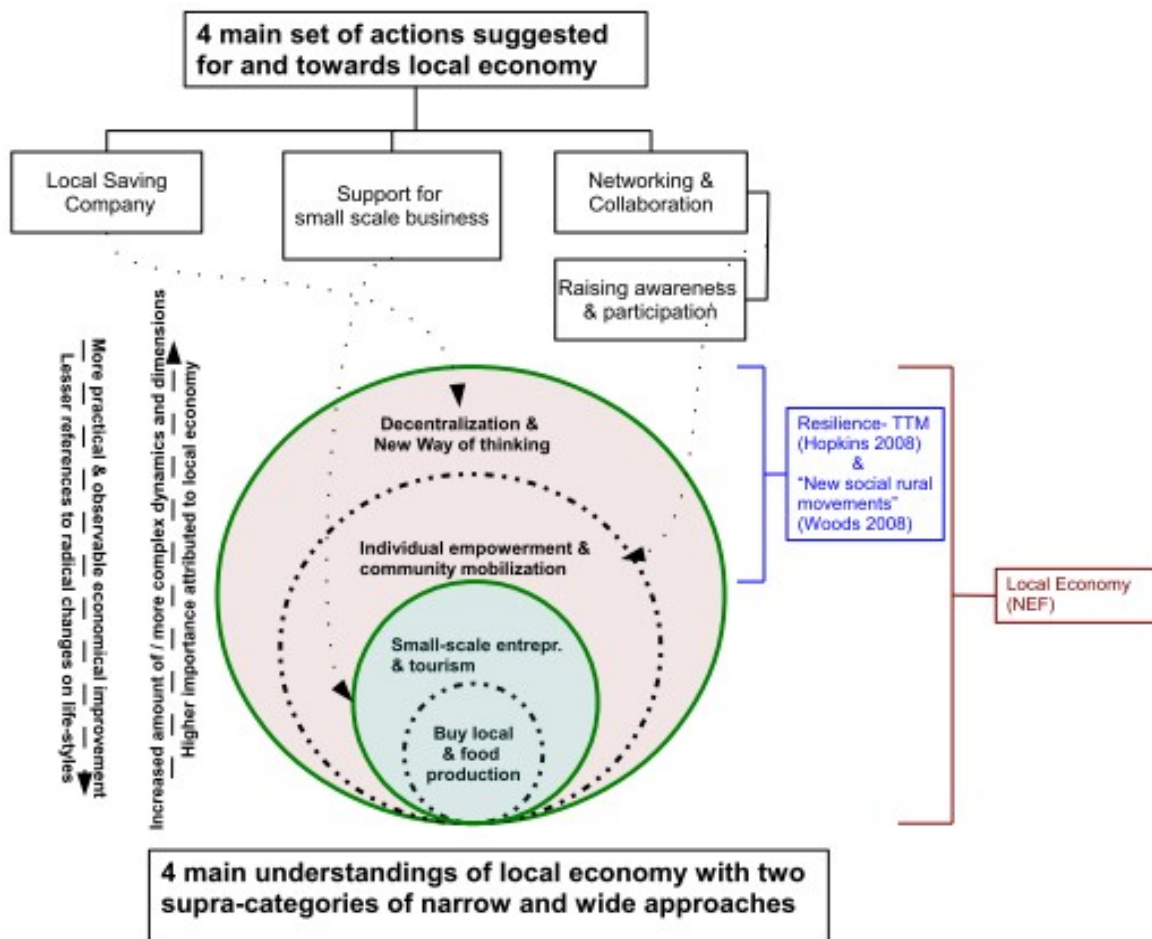


Figure 4: The four main understandings of local economy in Åres Gröna Dalar and its linkages with suggested set of actions by the local actors

4.1 Conclusions from the study

Contrary to the widespread perception among key local actors, there is a common ground of local economy understanding in the area as a list of “good things for the community”. There are different

and sometimes even contradicting motivations and perspectives of why a certain set of things are good for community while others are not, but it doesn't change the fact that such an unwritten list exists with rather common points in it.

The communication of “local economy” concept through rhetoric is often problematic for three reasons : a) The term itself is relatively new. It's a new symbol that emerged from a relatively new set of situations, happenings and conditions within the rural setting of the everyday-life that is perceived differently by different individuals. b) Its rather ideological resonance seems to create confusion, doubts and fears among the local inhabitants about the intentions of its users. c) The discussions about its meaning and content are not followed by all the locals to the same degree.

On the other hand, the practical implications of “good things” for the community seems to be much more effective since they give a greater freedom of affiliation to the actors to “interpret” it from their own perspective.

For these reasons, the communication of the local economy through the actions and good practices seems to ensure and enlarge the common ground, in addition to making it visible by all the involved actors.

The local economy concept is understood mainly in four different ways. Wider the attributed meaning gets, more complex dimensions such as individual empowerment, community mobilization and political decentralization are proposed, but by a lesser number of actors. Narrow approach is based on buy local concept especially focused on food and support for small-scale entrepreneurs with a special focus on tourism. The narrow approach has two main aspects: First, it composes the commonly shared ground of understanding the local economy, and second, it thematically covers most of the actions plans and strategies suggested for and towards a local economy in the area.

The understanding of local economy among local actors and inhabitants emerge from either positive motivations in terms of “opportunities” that local economy would and could create as NEF argues for, or from negative motivations in terms of “threats” that communities would

face in case a strong local economy is not established, as resilience concept of TT stands for. The positive motivation seems to be more widely accepted among the inhabitants and thus composes a commonly shared affiliation.

There is also a strong positive correlation between having a wider understanding of local economy and acknowledgment of resilience concept. Moreover, a reference to historical heritage and pre-modern life-styles in rural can be observed in several informants. It seems to exist a positive correlations between having a wider understanding and reference to past, but there are also informants with a narrow understanding of local economy yet having strong reference to past.

Actions proposed for and towards local economy can also be categorized into four categories. Public support for small-scale businesses refer to Åre Municipality but it's much more concrete when it's about policy changes than when it refers to direct support. Moreover, there is also a tendency for less-municipality-dependent strategy which fits into the rural life being historically tough and less-welfare-state-present and the historically high rates of “entrepreneurship”, in terms of “taking care of my own life” in the area. Participation, collaboration and solidarity refer to a social mobilization with the help of LEADER program and networking channels between actors working in similar thematic areas, on consumer-producer relations and bringing different individuals with complimentary assets together in order to facilitate and coordinate new initiatives.

Local saving company, “Sparbolaget”, is lately proposed as a concrete action plan involving many actors both in regional and national levels to create a stable and viable local financial system. It's relevant since it's considered as “high priority” goal by key local actors. Moreover, it can be a good example in using the common ground between different understandings of local economy through an observable and clear system where local inhabitants can participate in various ways even if with different priorities of expectations and attributed meanings.

4.2 Proposals for local actors

- ▲ Focusing on common grounds between different understandings of local economy instead of

differences. This would facilitate involvement of locals for two reasons : a) A bigger space for more actors with different perspectives to get involved with their own expectations and interpretations, b) Avoiding the risk of creating a monopoly over the definition of local economy which would severely decrease the involvement of people with “different” definitions as a result of “lack of recognition” feeling.

- ⤴ Focusing on local meetings and gatherings without the agenda of promoting local economy but enabling local inhabitants to freely discuss, explore, negotiate and co-shape their future visions for community. Special methods and care has to be implied to ensure the trust of the inhabitants to the process.
- ⤴ Preferring concrete and observable actions, rather than rhetoric and visions, when it's about communicating and suggesting local economy as a collective aim. Using relatively more stable symbols than concepts like local economy during the process.
- ⤴ Making research showing the practical results of actions taken for and towards local economy goal. Sharing the results in a transparent way and facilitating group discussions about them.
- ⤴ Offering and facilitating effective, user-friendly and adaptable web tools for communication and networking between local initiatives, ideas and groups.
- ⤴ Organizing social and cultural activities targeting young people. That would contribute to increase the social attraction of rural which is crucial for keeping youth in the area, in addition to providing an important platform for new ideas and collaboration for local economy to emerge.

4.3 Suggestions for further studies

Local economy is often expressed as an objective not only in Åres Gröna Dalar area, but also in several more LEADER areas in Northern Sweden. In that manner, to seek the questions of this study in other regions would contribute to achieve a wider understanding of common and

differentiated meanings attributed to local economy in a wider geographical scope.

Making quantitative evaluations of local economy in mentioned areas with LM3 methodology would also give valuable and complementary insights about the economic dynamics of local economy, in addition to enabling comparative studies between different areas and time periods.

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Sample of Questionnaire implemented in Undersåker (English version)

Dear inhabitant of Undersåker,



My name is Durukan Dudu and I'm a 25 years old master student at **SLU, Uppsala**. I'm here in Undersåker for writing my final thesis within "Rural Development and Natural Resources Management" master program.

For my final thesis, I'm now conducting an academic study about "perspectives about and tendencies towards local economy" in Undersåker. The study is realized with the collaboration of **Åres Gröna Dalar LEADER area**.

You're getting this questionnaire as an inhabitant of Undersåker. Your participation will be extremely useful for an accurate study.

The purpose

The aim is to **investigate** different understandings and intentions towards the local economy concept. The questionnaire that you will find in the following pages is the main and most important data collecting mean for this study.

For these reasons, **I kindly ask you to fill out the questionnaire** that you can find in the following pages. It would take around 10 minutes to fill it completely. Your answers will be **very important and relevant** for the study and my thesis. It will be also a valuable input for LEADER area to develop its future strategies and projects..

How to fill the questionnaire?

The questionnaire consists of three parts. Most of the questions require you just to mark a simple check. For some questions however, you're expected to fill the provided empty spaces with your own words.

You are very welcome to answer the questionnaire in **Swedish** or in English.

IMPORTANT : All your answers will be kept completely anonymous and confidential.

How to return the questionnaire?

Only one questionnaire is left to each house in Undersåker. If there are more inhabitants in your house who would like to fill the questionnaire, please send me an e-mail and I can quickly drop additional questionnaires to your house.

There will be a box in the entrance of local ICA store, where you can leave the questionnaire. The **deadline** for handing in the questionnaire is **15th of April 2011, 19:00 o'clock**.

You will be able to read the final thesis on SLU's web page in September 2011.

I'm sincerely thankful for your precious contribution to this study.

Durukan Dudu 21.03.2011

Clip here -----

If you would like to be contacted for updates and focus group interviews, please write your e-mail below, clip this part and put it separately to the box
My e-mail address

(following page)

DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS

This part contains demographic questions about yourself. This information is required for the accuracy of the academic study.

Your age :

<18	18-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61>
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Gender :

Woman

Man

You are...

born and live here	born here then moved here back	moved here	live here seasonally
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You are working... (you can select multiple, if that's the case)

In your own business	in a company (private sector)	public sector	not working, please explain :
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LOCAL ECONOMY

This part contains questions about the concept of local economy. The aim is to understand what you think of local economy. If you haven't heard it before, please try to answer the questions with the thoughts and ideas that the term itself reveals in your mind.

Have you heard of the concept of local economy before?

Yes

No

If yes, please explain it with your own words :

If no, please explain what does it make you think of in the first place :

Please read the two following statements and mark whether you agree or not :

"A strong and viable local economy would increase the prosperity of our communities. If we can increase and diversify the services and goods produced and used in local level we can create much more jobs for inhabitants. It would also make our social life richer and attractive. Therefore to establish a flourishing local economy is the best way towards a better future for our community."

What you think of the statement above?

I absolutely agree	I agree	I'm not sure	I don't agree	I absolutely don't agree
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"For the next two decades, the world will face severe and repetitive economic crises. As the oil will become less available and more expensive, the current economic and trade system will cease to exist as it does today. For those reasons, we certainly need to create resilient local economies in our communities. That's a must if we want to preserve our current prosperity and leave a viable community for the next generations."

What you think of the statement above?

I absolutely agree	I agree	I'm not sure	I don't agree	I absolutely don't agree
--------------------	---------	--------------	---------------	--------------------------

Questions about local economy in Undersåker and its nearby area.

	I absolutely agree	I agree	I'm not sure	I don't agree	I absolutely don't agree
There is already a strong and viable local economy here.					
There exist positive initiatives and projects that move towards local economy.					
Creating a strong local economy should be a high priority for all of us living here.					

The municipality and public institutions are responsible for developing a local economy.					
The companies and entrepreneurs are responsible for developing a local economy.					
The community as a whole is responsible for developing a local economy.					
I have clear idea of what local economy can bring to my life and to the community.					
This region has many advantages and assets to create a local economy					

Do you have any additional comment about the current situation of local economy in Undersåker?

STEPS TOWARDS LOCAL ECONOMY

This part contains questions investigating possible actions and contributions from your point of view to create a stronger local economy.

In your opinion, what should be done in order to create a stronger local economy?

Do you think your own capabilities and actions might contribute towards local economy in Undersåker?

I absolutely think so	I think so	I'm not sure	I don't think so	I'm sure not.
-----------------------	------------	--------------	------------------	---------------

Which of the following points might be a possibility for you to contribute to create a local economy?
Please mark between **1 = Absolutely Not** to **5 = Very strongly**

	1	2	3	4	5
I might financially invest to good local economy entrepreneurship projects					
I have practical skills and capabilities that I could offer for production of local goods and services.					
I can contribute to the frame and process of local economy with my theoretical knowledge and/or experience about this subject.					
People would be more positive about local economy and associated projects if they see me involved.					
I'm within strong social networks so I can gather different actors to collaborate for projects and initiatives.					
I have some local entrepreneurial ideas and projects that can be implemented.					
I would happily chose locally produced goods and services if they're offered with similar prices as other goods and services.					
I would happily chose locally produced goods and services even if they're offered with higher prices then other goods and services.					

Please read the following statement and mark whether you agree or disagree with it

Creating an opportunity for inhabitants to save their money and invest on local entrepreneurial projects is an efficient and powerful way to create strong and viable local economies. That would allow the community to co-own viable local businesses and be the fundamental part of the change these entrepreneurship would bring.

What you think of the statement above?

I absolutely agree	I agree	I'm not sure	I don't agree	I absolutely don't agree
--------------------	---------	--------------	---------------	--------------------------

SAVING AND INVESTING LOCALLY

This short and final part contains questions focused on your ideas about one specific dimension of local economy : investing for local

businesses ideas.

“In order to invest and become part-owner of a local entrepreneurial project...”

Please mark between **1 = Absolutely Not** to **5 = Very likely**

	1	2	3	4	5
I need to closely know people who are in charge of the project					
I need trustworthy & skilled middle-person who can ensure economic viability of the project					
I would look for financial profit from the project in the short term.					
I would look for financial profit from the project in the long term.					
I would check if the project can provide me useful&good quality service and/or product					
I would consider if the project is good and positive for environment.					
I would consider if the project would contribute to the social life in the community.					
What are the other necessities and circumstances you would look for? Please explain.					

Do you have any additional comment or thoughts about any of the questions in the questionnaire?
Please explain

Follow-up :

In the mid-April, I will be organizing a short follow-up session with the participation of the interested respondents. Would you like to participate in this event? (date and place to be decided together with the participants). I would be more then delightful to see you joining us. If so, please send an e-mail to durukand@gmail.com so I can arrange a gathering with a fika perhaps.

Thank you very much for your time and interest on the questionnaire. Your contribution will be a most important and relevant part of my study.
Durukan Dudu