Sparsity as Luxury? An analysis of rural politicians' views on building rights for low density areas in Finland

Maarit Sireni
University of Eastern Finland[1]

Abstract

Due to the need to curb climate change, increasing attention is paid to land-use planning in Finland. A key question in this debate is to what extent the construction should be concentrated in existing (densely built) settlements and whether the tradition of granting building permissions for sparsely populated areas should be constrained.

This paper reports on an empirical investigation concerning the views of local policy-makers on the above-mentioned issues. The data is based on an internet-based survey conducted by a regional newspaper in western Finland before municipal elections in 2008. The analysis utilizes deductive content analysis.

A majority of these electoral candidates challenge the need to constrain traditional building rights. This is an indication that the political debate on environmental issues and climate change is conditioned by domestic policy traditions and locality-specific issues.

Key words: land-use planning, rural areas, Finland

1. Introduction

In comparison to European averages, Finland's spatial structure is very different. The key difference has traditionally been described by comparing population density, which is only approximately one-tenth of that in Western and Central Europe. More recently, the concept of sparsity has been introduced to identify the distinctive features of Finnish (and Nordic) spatial characteristics, and their implications. This refers to the fact that, in addition to a low average population density, the settlement pattern is dispersed – most parts of the country are thinly but thoroughly populated rural areas (see, e,g., Gløersen et al. 2005).

The impacts of this distinctive spatial structure receives a lot of attention in political and scholarly debates.

[1] Karelian Institute, PO. Box 111, 80101 Joensuu, Finland
maarit.sireni@uef.fi

With regard to domestic regional development policy and EU cohesion policy, for instance, it is common to argue that sparsity poses challenges to the key targets of these policies, that is, an inclusive society and a competitive economy, basically for the reason that local demand is low in such conditions. This raises unit costs in public and private service provision, infrastructure costs are high, and agglomeration benefits are not available: "Sparsity leads to a series of challenges in terms of economic development and public and private service provision." (Damsgaard et al. 2008, 7) In addition to these well-established arguments, the implications of sparsity have been increasingly discussed from the perspective of environmental sustainability, in recent years. This emphasis, which reflects the prevalent European and global trends, is clearly set in primary planning documents. In 2006, the Ministry of the Environment published a document presenting its vision on the long-term development of land-use and spatial structure in Finland, including the statements that "(T)he existing built environment and infrastructures are used extensively", and "regional and community structures are geared to decrease the need for transport " (Ministry of the Environment 2006, 17). Three years later, the revised national land-use guidelines formulated this aim in more operational terms in the following way:"Climate change will mainly be curbed by reducing the volume of traffic, which is the aim of creating a more coherent urban structure" (Ministry of the Environment 2008, 7).

Clearly, the question on the interdependencies between settlement structures and environmental sustainability primarily concerns urbanized areas – in short, urban sprawl (Helminen & Ristimäki 2007). In the Finnish conditions, however, a rural variant of this phenomenon is also worthy of specific attention, and it basically concerns the overall sustainability of dispersed rural settlement patterns. Its practical importance is highlighted by the fact that irrespective of a rural decline in many remote areas, a continuation of a dispersed settlement pattern is clearly visible in many thinly populated rural regions. Detached houses and second homes (that are often used all year round) are built far away from population centres, in many cases along lakesides, and this trend is actively supported by rural municipalities, which tend to see rural living space as one of their few real competitive resources (e.g., Mäntysalo et al. 2010). In fact, they utilise a "Space as Luxury" type of argumentation when marketing building sites, and providing migrants with various incentives. Clearly, this challenges the views which emphasize the need to build compact housing areas with efficient public transport connections to centres of work and services.

Against the background outlines above, this paper attempts to shed light on the ongoing political debate in rural areas focusing on development strategies with regard to the triangular objectives of economic competitiveness, social and spatial equity, and environmental sustainability. The empirical investigation analyses the views of prospective municipal decision-makers concerning spatial structure: whether they (that is, those responsible for land-use planning and building rights at a local level) would like to promote a dense or dispersed settlement structure, and which arguments they put forward in support of their views.

2. Empirical Setting

The empirical data was obtained from an internet-based survey in the Southern Ostrobothnia region in western Finland. In a European context, this region can be seen as an example of an area of low population density and dispersed settlement structure (Gløersen et al. 2005), even if it is not the most extreme case of such sparsity in Finland. The region covers an area of 14 000 sq. kilometers, and its total number of population is a bit less than 200 000. With the exception of the regional centre, Seinäjoki (56 000 inhabitants in 2009), the municipalities are relatively small (from 1500 to 17 000 inhabitants). In the Finnish context, Southern Ostrobothnia can be characterized as representative of conservative and rural traditions in comparison to national averages.

The internet-based survey was conducted by the leading regional newspaper Ilkka[2] before the municipal elections in 2008, and it comprised 11 to 15 structured questions on the topics which were seen as contested political issues at a national and/or local level. One of the questions was related directly to land-use planning and spatial structure. The electoral candidates of different political parties were given the following question and options:

What is the main aim of planning: what kind of spatial structure should municipalities promote?

a. Municipalities should promote a dense and concentrated structure. Construction should be allowed only for areas close to existing services and infrastructure.

b. All areas should be developed.

Why? (For a candidate's free form comments)

This paper examines 1025 structured answers and 554 free form comments by prospective local politicians, that is, electoral candidates, from 21 municipalities in Southern Ostrobothnia. Firstly, local politicians' views on spatial planning and land-use are compared with the views presented by the political parties which they represent. Here, the main issue concerns whether there are differences between the views of national level politicians and those of local level politicians on the need to control and constrain building rights. A brief summary of the arguments put forward by the main parties is presented in Box 1.

[2] The circulation of Ilkka is approximately 54 000 (in 2009), and it reaches 50-65 % of the households in the municipalities of Southern Ostrobothnia (see http://www.ilkka.fi).

Box 1. Political parties' views on a settlement structure: what kind of structure and why?

Left-wing parties:
Social Democratic Party: Dense structure for environmental reasons (climate change).
Left Alliance: Dense structure for environmental reasons (climate change).

Right-wing parties:
National Coalition Party: Dispersed settlement must be avoided for economic (extra costs in providing services) and environmental reasons (climate change).

Liberal parties:
Centre Party: Dense structure in urban areas for environmental reasons (climate change). In rural areas, a dispersed structure is acceptable. Building rights in sparsely populated areas should not be restricted.
Christian Democrats: Dense structure for environmental reasons (climate change).
Greens: Dense structure for environmental reasons (climate change).

Right-wing Populists:
True Finns: Individuals' rights should not be restricted for environmental reasons. Land-use planning must not hinder individuals from building wherever they want to live.

Sources: The Finnish Social Democratic Party 2008: 11-13; Left Alliance 2008: 3; National Coalition Party 2008: 26-27; The Centre Party 2008: 13-14; The Finnish Christian Democrats 2008: 13; The Greens 2008: 2; True Finns 2008: 16-17.

It is worth noting that every national party holds a clear-cut view on how and why changes in settlement patterns should be controlled. Another interesting finding is that most parties support a dense and compact settlement pattern for environmental reasons (in order to reduce traffic and greenhouse gases). The important exception is the Centre Party[3], which argues in support of building rights even in sparsely populated areas. Also the True Finns, representing the Finnish version of populist parties, makes an exception, emphasizing individuals' rights and opposing planning and what it referred to as "over-protection" of environment.

In the second phase of analysis, the free form comments by local politicians were analyzed to investigate whether local politicians primarily refer to 1) environmental issues, 2) competitiveness, or 3) interregional equality when they argue against, or in support of the need to develop a more concentrated settlement structure. This investigation utilized deductive content analysis with the help of a classification framework,

[3] The ideology of the Centre Party includes ingredients both from social democratic and liberal movements. It is a member of the European Liberal Democrats Party (ELDR) at the European Parliament. In comparison to the national averages, left-wing parties are relatively weak in Southern Ostrobothnia, and the Centre Party and the National Coalition Party are relatively strong.

which was created a priori [4] (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 97-99). It transpired that new categories were needed on the basis of the empirical material, because all typical arguments used by local politicians did not fit into this classification. After a step by step process, the final classification framework comprises eight categories.

3. What kind of spatial structure should municipalities promote?

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of local politicians' views on the spatial structure which municipalities should promote. A clear-cut majority, 74 percent of these (prospective) local politicians, are of the opinion that "all areas should be developed". What is particularly interesting here is that this view is neither dependent on the place where these politicians live nor the party they represent. There seems to be at the local level a widely-shared consensus that there is no need to promote a dense and more concentrated settlement structure, which is in contrast to the official views of most political parties (see Box 1). For instance, the electoral candidates of the Social Democratic Party and the National Coalition Party do not seem to share the mainstream aims of their parties to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

The fact that local views, to an important degree, deviate from those at the national level is not particularly surprising. For instance, it is obvious that spatial planning, especially land-use planning, is by its very nature a contested and highly debated issue, and local politicians, that is, decision-makers, negotiate with individual citizens and other relevant actors, and their interests are not always equal. This decision-making process comprises compromises in local physical, social and economic conditions, which the politicians have to take into account. As has been recognized in previous studies, it is difficult to attribute one single reason for spreading housing development (Mäntysalo et al. 2010). In addition, the internet-based survey itself, which can be understood as an integral part of the electoral campaign, may encourage politicians to avoid arguments they which assume to be unpopular among their potential voters (e.g. Reunanen & Suhonen 2009).

[4] The analysis was carried out in co-operation with human geography students at the University of Joensuu in 2009. The participants of the course were: Seija Heikkala, Jarno Pääkkönen, Tuomas Turpeinen, Heidi Hiironen, Hanna Jantunen, Matias Luostarinen, Elli Seppä, Tero Härkönen, Anne Mäkelä, Jenni Kylliäinen, Antti Hiltunen, Laura Felin, Emmi Malin, Taina Mustonen and Maija Pajunen.

Table 1. What is the main aim of spatial planning: what kind of urban/rural form should municipalities promote? Local politicians in 21 municipalities in the Southern Ostrobothnia region in western Finland (n= 1025).

Party	A dense and concentrated structure	All areas should be developed	Missing answer	Total
Centre	43 (10 %)	346 (82 %)	35 (8 %)	424 (100 %)
National Coalition	89 (28 %)	208 (66 %)	19 (6 %)	316 (100 %)
Social Democratic	41 (33 %)	79 (65 %)	2 (2 %)	122 (100 %)
Christian Democratic	6 (10 %)	42 (74 %)	9 (16 %)	57 (100 %)
Left Alliance	2 (10 %)	15 (71 %)	4 (19 %)	21 (100 %)
Greens	8 (80 %)	2 (20 %)	0 (0 %)	10 (100 %)
True Finns	1 (2 %)	47 (90 %)	4 (8 %)	52 (100 %)
Other parties/political groupings	0 (0 %)	19 (83 %)	4 (17 %)	23 (100 %)
Total	190 (19 %)	758 (74 %)	77 (7 %)	1025 (100 %)

In the following, the free form comments (n= 544) given by the electoral candidates are investigated: first those in support of a dense structure (Chapter 4), and then those claiming this turn in land-use planning is not needed (Chapter 5).

4. Arguments supporting a dense spatial structure

The free form comments arguing for a compact and concentrated settlement structure (131 of the 554 altogether) are classified into four categories. The first one comprises comments highlighting issues such as environment, climate change, and sustainable development. The second and third categories include arguments emphasizing competitiveness on two different grounds, either stressing savings that a dense structure would bring, or arguing for a dense urban milieu as an attractive environment for enterprises, tourists and migrants. The fourth category of comments includes the views of a relatively large group of local politicians who are of the opinion that although a dense structure is an ideal, planning is a case-specific process and a matter of discretion. In the following, these four categories are described and illustrated with examples.

Environment is the primary concern

Climate change and other issues related to environment are not common arguments or main motives for the support of a more compact and concentrated settlement structure; in fact, only 12 percent of the 131 free form comments fall into this category. Among these respondents, this is typically an urban argument; most of the prospective politicians who invoke a need to protect the environment represent the regional centre, Seinäjoki. In rural municipalities, global warming is not seen as an important motive for the restriction of housing development in low density areas. What is also noteworthy here is that local politicians are very careful in how they formulate their answers, for instance, those who favor a dense structure do not refer to a need to restrict individuals' rights to build in sparsely populated areas or present any changes into prevailing practices. In general, the views of local politicians are in contrast to the programmes of political parties:

"Smart planning and building benefits everybody. Simply, climate change, high energy prices, a need to develop public transport and services are all such factors which support a more dense structure." (A social democratic candidate, Seinäjoki)
"A more concentrated structure is good for nature; however, municipalities should not prevent people from building in small villages." (A centre party candidate, Alavus)

Competitiveness: benefits from a centralized structure

In more than one quarter of the free form answers supporting a dense structure, economic gains are seen as the key argument. According to these views, dispersed settlement structure is assumed to lead to major challenges in maintaining services, public transport and infrastructure in rural areas, whereas a centralized structure would bring savings to municipalities.

"A small municipality has no other choice than to promote a dense and more concentrated structure. Otherwise, it is not possible to guarantee basic services for citizens in the area they live". (A candidate of the True Finns, Kuortane)
"It is very expensive for a small municipality to build infrastructure in every corner. We need the money for the care of elderly people, for instance". (A candidate of the National Coalition Party, Soini)

Competitiveness: attractiveness of urban milieus

Several politicians, who favor a dense structure, argue that spatial concentration is a "natural" tendency in current Finland. In their opinion, people are no longer that interested in living in sparsely populated areas, and demand for urban environments as living places is gaining more ground. The attractiveness of urban

milieus (for enterprises, tourists, and migrants in particular) is the argument underlying this line of thinking. The free form answers in this category typically derive from the assertion that the most effective way to develop a municipality is to develop a strong and attractive centre so that this "engine" generates welfare for other parts of the municipality.

"In the case that we want to develop an attractive town for citizens and tourists, we must get rid of oat fields in the city centre. Let's build a new urban image of Seinäjoki. A densely built town also brings more savings."(A social democratic candidate, Seinäjoki)

"It would be ideal to keep all areas inhabited, but under these circumstances this is hardly possible. It is obvious that a strong centre attracts new inhabitants. Thus, only when we have the chance to attract new tax-payers, we will have some chances to also keep small villages alive." (A candidate of the National Coalition party, Kurikka)

Towards a local consensus: compromises are necessary in planning

Approximately one quarter of those free form answers, which in principle favor a dense structure, represent compromise positions between the two contrasting views on the aims of land-use planning. On the one hand, it is claimed that municipalities should promote dense and concentrated patterns of land-use, and construction should be allowed only in areas close to existing locations of services and infrastructures. However, this is qualified by the argument that all areas should be developed equally. Typically, these local politicians are of the opinion that planning is not a straightforward process, that is, they tend to emphasize that there is usually no one single answer to a question, but an answer depends on particular conditions in each case. Following this line of thinking, a compact settlement structure must be the main goal of planning in some cases, but there are circumstances in which it is not important or preferable. Overall, variants of this view are common among rural policy-makers; many of them seem to favor a case-specific, ad hoc approach to spatial planning and land-use.

"The town centre of Lapua should be compact and concentrated, but at the same time, we must take care of the viability of other areas, too" (A Centre Party candidate, Lapua).
"The aims of planning depend on the case". (A Centre Party candidate, Ilmajoki)

5. The majority view: we are for all areas

More than three-quarters of the free form comments (423/554) claim that all parts of the municipalities should be developed, and this is also the guiding principle in land-use planning issues. The first category of

these arguments refers explicitly to (spatial) equity, and contests the need to develop a more concentrated settlement structure. The other three categories of these views are formed inductively on the basis of the empirical material. Firstly, there are local politicians who emphasize individuals' rights to build wherever they want. Secondly, some politicians stress that maintaining inhabited rural areas is the foremost priority. Thirdly, one group of politicians does not support a dense structure for the reason that they consider space and sparsity to be a key resource for a municipality in attracting new inhabitants and tax-payers.

Equality between regions

Almost one quarter of those electoral candidates who argue that all areas should be developed emphasize that citizens, regardless of the place where they live, should be in an equal position in terms of services and infrastructure. They direct their message particularly at those people who live in remote parts of municipalities, paying attention to their role as tax-payers. In general, the provision of services dominates this discussion, that is, the location of, and access to, services is seen as the key-issue in planning, whereas housing development largely remains on the sidelines.

"People living in small villages should have the same rights and benefits as others have. Equal possibilities must be guaranteed". (A social democratic candidate, Töysä)
"The continuous centralization of services causes inequality between citizens". A Centre Party candidate, Alavus)
"Services must be available in remote parts of the municipality as well as in the centre. Welfare must be distributed equally". (A Centre Party candidate, Vimpeli)

Individuals' rights to choose must be respected

In a relatively large group of the free form comments opposing a dense structure (76/423), the political agenda is formulated in terms of individuals' rights and freedom of choice, claiming that land-use planning must not hinder individuals from building wherever they want to live. According to this line of argumentation, planning should serve citizens' needs – not restrict economic activity and migration of new tax-payers. In those rare cases in which the concept of rights is discussed, the constitutional right of people to choose their place of living is mentioned.

"Basically, land-use planning should not be an obstacle to people when they choose their place of living". (A Christian Democratic candidate, Kauhava)

"Everybody should have the right to choose his or her place of living, and planning should not prevent it". (a Centre Party candidate, Lappajärvi)

"In Finland, people have the right to choose their place of living and planning should be used as a tool to help this constitutional right materialise" (A candidate of the True Finns, Vimpeli)

Inhabited rural areas must be maintained

For 13 percent (54) of the 423 free form comments, maintaining rural and sparsely populated inhabited areas is an important value. In this line of thinking, rurality is identified as a central and vital part of the Finnish culture, and a resource for the Finnish nation. For this reason, it is essential to secure citizens' possibilities to live in small villages.

"Living villages with local innovative people are the corner-stone and a resource of the Finnish lifestyle". (A Centre Party candidate, Alajärvi).

Sparsity as an asset

In almost 20 percent of the free form answers opposing dense structure, rural space and sparsity are considered as important resources for municipalities, which can attract new inhabitants by offering spacious sites for building in a beautiful environment. This argument is based on the assumption that potential migrants to rural municipalities are not interested in dense and compact living environments, but that they want space and nature around them. The respondents describe typical migrants as families with children, possibly also with dogs or horses, demanding a lot of space around them.

"One important attraction of Ilmajoki is its sparsely populated regions. I think people should be offered alternatives like that." (A National Coalition Party candidate, Ilmajoki)

"Living villages are important for the countryside. They are also an asset for us, if we want to be able to compete with big cities for new inhabitants". (A National Coalition Party candidate, Kauhava)

"A Finn needs space around him/her. Dense living causes problems for us". (A Christian Democrat candidate, Ähtäri)

"People move to a rural municipality in order to get more space around them. A dense structure and small sites is not a working system. It was tried in the 1970s and now we have realized that the sites are too small for current purposes". (A Centre Party candidate, Isokyrö)

6. Conclusions

In Finland, the Land Use and Building Act gives local governmental units (municipalities) large decision-making powers to interpret policy guidelines in land-use planning and building rights. This paper reports on an investigation concerning local politicians' views on land-use and spatial planning issues in a predominantly rural region, Southern Ostrobothnia, in western Finland. A majority of prospective local

decision-makers, the candidates at the 2008 municipal elections, were found challenging the national guidelines concerning spatial planning and land-use which emphasize the need to utilize the existing built environment and infrastructures extensively, and decrease a need for transport.

In contrast, most local politicians are of the opinion that all areas in municipalities should be developed, including the right to build outside densely built areas. In this vein, environmental arguments, which form the key argumentative thrust of the national targets, are not presented as important guiding principles at the local level. This suggests that local politicians who are responsible for the implementation of these principles in planning and decision-making practice have not yet really digested the guidelines which derive from international agreements, and also reflect an increasing Europeanisation of spatial planning. At the local level, land-use and building primarily follow well-established traditions, the typical features of which are loose guidelines and emphasis on landowners' rights to materialize their own views. This approach can also be seen to derive from the view that environmental sustainability is only one dimension of rural development, in which a working compromise between socio-economic, cultural and environmental considerations is needed.

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