

# Local associations and networks as important players in rural development

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## Introduction

This paper<sup>1</sup> is based on the results of a study of the impact of local associations and networks in a rural municipality named Helle. We have focused on the impact of these associations and networks in the municipality, including their future potentials in relation to the development of the local area.

One of the reasons why the Danish Centre for Rural Research and Development undertook this study was that studying the possibilities for development in rural areas is one of the aims of the Centre. In relation to this aim one can ask for instance who the present players are, and who the future players in this development process could be. In this study we have chosen to look at local associations and networks as possible players in the development of rural areas.

The Danish Centre for Rural Research and Development has also been encouraged by other parties to make this study. The motives have been numerous, but there is no doubt that most people have the impression that the activities in associations and networks are both comprehensive and important in Danish rural areas. Moreover it is also a fact that today Denmark is one of the countries with the largest part of its population organized in associations (Torpe, 2000). However, these associations have not always been there. They are the product of developments in society in general during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where agricultural co-operatives and folk high schools gained ground. This link to the culture of agricultural society leads us to believe that local associations and networks have had a larger impact in the country than they have had in towns; but no systematic knowledge currently exists relating to the situation of local associations and networks in rural areas today. We wanted to make an attempt to close this gap in the literature by drawing a picture of such local associations and networks and their various impacts in a chosen rural municipality.

As such, the purpose of the study was to answer the following question:

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a study published in: Nielsen, M. B. & Thuesen, A. A. (2002). "Foreningslivets betydning i en landkommune – Helle Kommune". Working Paper 2/02. Esbjerg: Center for Forskning og Udvikling i Landdistrikter. ISBN: 87-91304-01-6. The publication can be ordered by contacting Tel: +0045 6550 4146, Fax: +0045 6550 4197 or e-mail [connyc@cful.sdu.dk](mailto:connyc@cful.sdu.dk) at the price of DKK. 175.00.

*What is the impact of local associations and networks in the municipality of Helle today, and what is it likely to be as regards future development?*<sup>2</sup>

## Inspiration from recent theories on local development

The study was inspired by a number of research contributions and theories relating in particular to local development. Many of these theories attest to the societal influence of local associations, although none of them work explicitly with local associations as we have in Denmark. In particular, two recent angles of approach using different partial-theories for understanding the potential impact of local associations on local development have attracted our attention, they are:

- Impact of place and local feeling of belonging as elements of identity creation
- Impact of (local) networks

Both approaches are regarded as very important to the global economic development. They both focus on the relation between the uncertainty each individual feels in society as a whole in connection with (the threat of) change on the one hand, and potential innovation and development on the other. So these approaches are central in connection with the regional prerequisites and impact of significant leaps in technology. In this schism perhaps local associations can help to overcome the new challenges faced by providing – either completely or partly – safety, knowledge, influence and by ensuring that (or preventing) “the new things” are generally accepted. In fact, local associations can be the local social and cultural infrastructure that comes into effect in connection with socio-economic development and change.

## Impact of place and local feeling of belonging as elements of identity creation

Ulla Herlitz, who is a source of inspiration, has worked with the concept of place ideology (Herlitz, 2000). She has mapped and thoroughly analysed thousands of local development groups in Sweden. Based on a comprehensive empirical study she sees a change of paradigm in the way democracy works in society. The old industrial society was based on conflict orientation, vertical contacts and political parties, whereas knowledge society today is based more on consensus solutions, horizontal networks and “place related”, i.e. local groups. This has had the impact on local associations such that place ideology today has replaced party-political ideology as the value standard for local political action. Today geographical place is the common denominator, and group member’s work for the

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<sup>2</sup> In most of the remaining text associations and networks will be named associations.

common good of place more than for any party-political purpose. The village, the parish and the local society form the centre of the common interest, and it is a matter of a unified whole, i.e. the development of the cultural, social, physical and economic *milieu*. In this connection it is important to mention that these associations are voluntary and open to all inhabitants of an area, and everybody is needed in this work. The local groups that Herlitz studied in Sweden have all come into existence because of a locally felt democratic deficit, where the locals led by “fiery souls” have taken matters into their own hands. By virtue of such local co-operation a “we-spirit” and a common identity connected to the local area or perhaps more to local society has emerged. Herlitz’s theory can therefore throw light on the background to the burning of such a large amount of energy on voluntary work by local people in some areas for the benefit of local society.

Other recent research contributions also focus on the impact of identity in connection with the place in which one lives, in particular here we refer to the work of Terry Marsden and Jonathan Murdoch (Marsden & Murdoch, 1994). Their starting point is that in some rural areas of England a so-called counter-urbanization process is taking place, meaning that relatively well-to-do families, engaged in active employment, which used to live in urban communities, are now moving into the country.<sup>3</sup> Their theory is that this can be explained as middle-class people seeking identity by owning and showing their own property and thereby realizing their dreams of life and a house in the country. The authors regard it as a part of the class struggle and see this trend as a reactionary expression, as the newcomers try to exclude others or prevent further development in the area. In Denmark you can see many new households take up residence in rural areas near to the larger cities. If this trend is to be explained in the context of Marsden and Murdoch’s approach we would then expect to see the local associations or voluntary communities in such areas being, in principle, opposed to changes or more development in their local areas.

Realizing the dream of living in areas with magnificent natural surroundings belongs in particular to that part of the work force regarded as key manpower for the new business types, typically people with degrees and higher education. This fact is taken more and more into account when strategies for trade and industrial development are made. This is reflected for instance in the present political interest almost all over Denmark in providing better possibilities for settlement in attractive places. So there is a close connection between the place key employees with the right qualifications want to live, and where the new trades and industries can be developed, because in principle they can be located everywhere. Although this is probably not the reason why associations exist, they can call attention to local values and make it attractive to live in a specific area, which may keep and

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<sup>3</sup> This counter-urbanization takes place all over Europe.

attract people with many resources, and thereby gain influence over how to strengthen the development of trade and industry.

## The impact of (local) networks

In both the socio-political and economic literatures there are a number of theories on the concept of networks. Unfortunately there is no set or agreed definition, with each source often describing the concept quite differently, though all agree that the concept itself is of great importance, both regarding the quality of life for each individual and regarding the status of each enterprise. We do also have theories of the impact of such networks on local development. A few will be mentioned in what follows below.

The “network” of Robert D. Putnam is described in relation to the concept of social capital (Putnam, 1993). Putnam says that an important prerequisite for growth in a local area or a region is the presence of social capital, which can be described as the relations between people, often illustrated by the presence of choirs, or the space where mutual understanding, common values and trust arise. Trust in particular is a central or key concept for accepting change and innovation and thereby becoming a dynamic participant in the economic development process. Social capital is seen as production factors such as physical and human capital, and it seems obvious to see associations and their activities as organisers of this social capital. As such, associations should be able to play a larger role in future in relation to economic, trade, and industrial development, in spite of their direct purpose being originally formulated somewhat differently.

Reidar Almås also has something to say in connection with local development. On the basis of many years of study he concludes that, in order to make local development work successful, some prerequisites must be present (Almås, 1995). There must be co-operation between the various players: local participants, external participants and the public sector. This is called the “necessary triangle”. These prerequisites can be regarded as a process, where initially local resources are mobilized while the idea and the project are rooted. An external stimulus often acts as a catalyst here, while public support, makes it possible to carry out the project. Almås’ theory argues that the local players can be local associations but he also points out that to achieve more success, co-operation with external parties and the public sector is necessary.

Bengt Johannisson points in the same direction, as he also stresses the importance of interaction between local (horizontal) networks and non-local (vertical) networks as a prerequisite for local development and growth (Johannisson, 2000). He sees local networks as place bound, culture supporting and trust based networks, built on social capital, and thus they are the ones to best ensure the possibility of developing the local area, whereas non-local networks entail the

economic (structural) possibilities for the same development. In this regard it is easy to see associations as local networks.

One can find similar approaches to those of Johannisson for instance in the theory of institutional thickness by Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (Amin & Thrift, 1995). The ability of the locality to ensure economic growth and thereby development depends, apart from economic factors, also on the local presence of institutional thickness comprised of social and cultural factors. Institutional thickness is constructed locally and is related to the strong presence of institutions, a high level of interaction between these institutions, a sharply defined structure of dominance and/or coalition patterns between the institutions, and the mutual consciousness of the common project and the common agenda. The theory of institutional thickness is based on local trades and industries, but if we use the theory to deal with associations we can see that they are theoretically able to carry future growth in the economy and in trade and industry, if such associations become part of the institutional thickness of the trade and industry sector, or if the associations themselves form their own layer of institutional thickness.

All of the theories mentioned above can allocate to associations a very important purpose in connection with local development. Indeed, the potential is probably much greater than many of the members of the associations themselves conceive in their daily life.

To put it in a simplified fashion, the two approaches outlined above, concerning the impact of place and local networks, can be connected by the fact that activity in associations is characterized by their attachment to local society and to local feelings of belonging, which acts as a creator of identity. Associations as local networks provide the base necessary to encourage support for, and the promotion of the potential for future local development. Whether or not this development is initiated also depends on other factors such as the presence of mutual trust, co-operation between the right players and the way the players act.

## Method

### Concepts

The question posed above deals with the concepts of impact and development, however they need to be defined more precisely in order that we are able to better understand how they have been looked upon and used in this study.

#### *Impact*

Analysis of the impact of local associations was split into a number of subjects, with each contributing to answering part of the question. The chosen subjects all

originated from the two theoretical approaches and partial theories commented on above. The subjects are:

- The extent of local associations.
- The purposes and actual activities of the local associations.
- The motives for becoming involved in local associations.
- The broadness of participation in local associations.
- Co-operation entered into by local associations.

### **The degree of development-orientation of the local associations**

#### *Development*

Development is normally regarded as a dynamic process, where a change “in a positive direction” takes place. This understanding of the concept has been used in the study, where development is regarded as an extension of something that already exists, or as the start of something new. Furthermore, the concept has been extended to also include the maintenance of something that is already declining, or is at risk of declining.

In the study the focus was put on development activities in relation to local associations. To limit our enquiry to a manageable size we chose to focus exclusively on the impact of local associations on development in relation to the local community, inclusive of the trades and industries.

Where development activities are mentioned in the study note should be made of the fact that “development” was differentiated into its direct and indirect forms.

By *direct development* we mean that the local associations form the actors that take a concrete and clear initiative towards a particular development activity that concerns the local community.

In the study we work with three simplified groupings of purposes and activities for the local associations, all of which are of relevance to direct development. The categories are: “functional”, “policy based on place” and “policy based on a certain idea” of purposes and activities. These categories were defined as follows:

- Having a functional purpose or activity means to execute or to take care of a specifically defined task, often of a practical, economic or administrative character. Such a task can be public or private in nature.
- Having a “policy based on place” purpose or activity concerns the efforts used to control or influence development in a place understood as a relatively small geographical area.
- Having a “policy based on a certain idea” of purpose or activity concerns the efforts to control or influence development in a certain direction based on an idea.

The specific development activities we have found in the study can be summarized into physical planning of the local area, marketing of the local area and economic development in the local area. Most often the development activities contain more of the above-mentioned definitions of purposes and activities.

In *indirect development*, however, the local associations are involved in activities that in an underlying way form the basis of direct development, possibly by creating social and cultural infrastructure.

In the study we also work with three simplified groupings of purposes and activities for the local associations, which are all of relevance to indirect development. These categories are: “cultural and social”, “sports” or “religious” purposes and activities.

## The municipality of Helle in short

The study was carried out in the municipality of Helle, which is a rural municipality<sup>4</sup> of 8,366 inhabitants covering an area of 280.5 km<sup>2</sup> and with a population density of 30 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. The municipality of Helle has seven parishes.

As a consequence of the Municipal Reform of 1970<sup>5</sup> the municipality of Helle was established through the merger of a number of parishes, which had not until then had significant relations with each other. This municipality differs from many other Danish municipalities in the way that it does not really have an urban centre and therefore no natural centre. The sports centre of the municipality is almost the only thing placed in the geographical centre of the municipality. The place chosen for locating the sports centre is of symbolic significance, and today this centre represents the place to which the citizens connect their common identity. So the solidarity of the citizens has changed from an administrative assertion to actually entering into existence through common leisure activities.

The municipality of Helle is situated in the south-western part of Jutland with the neighbouring municipality being Esbjerg, which is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest city in Denmark with approximately 83,000 inhabitants. Helle is a part of the regional labour market and is in all respects a part of the hinterland, not least in relation to manpower. This is reflected in the extensive commuting activity in the municipality. The in commuting of persons working inside the municipality is 28.7 per cent whereas the out-commuting by employed people living inside the municipality is 49.6 per cent. So there are jobs within the municipality, and the

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<sup>4</sup> A rural municipality is defined as a municipality where the biggest town on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1994 had less than 3,000 inhabitants.

<sup>5</sup> During the Municipality Reform in 1970 more than 1300 municipalities were reduced to 275 municipalities and the number of counties were reduced from 23 to 14.

number over the last ten years has remained at a constant level of approximately 3,200.

The municipality can be described as a rural area, as in addition to a low population density it also has a large number of enterprises within the “Agriculture, fisheries and raw material extraction” sector (52.9 per cent) and a large part of the population working in the same line of business (16.3 per cent). The dominance this line can most likely be used to explain the comparatively large number of self-employed people (12.6 per cent) in this municipality.

The politicians aim at the continued equal and decentralized development of the municipality, so that the six catchment areas remain intact with regard to institutions, trade and industry, and services.<sup>6</sup> The general picture today is that there is only one convenience store left in most of the local areas. But instead of launching a business strategy the predominant political position in the municipality is to concentrate on settlement.

The study was split into three sections: the registration of local associations, the study of questionnaires sent to the associations registered, and interviews on the parish and municipality levels.

## The registration of associations

Information on the registration of local associations in the municipality of Helle was gathered from electronic reference books. We were interested in reaching as broad a spectrum of resource persons as possible, and therefore the only criterion set up was that the associations had to be represented by a committee, council or board.

The associations were sorted by name. A list was made of the registered associations geographically related to the municipality of Helle. Then the associations were divided up into the seven parishes, each association belonging to the parish to which it had the closest connection. Those associations connected to the municipality as a whole, were gathered into a separate group. Those associations with names that indicated a significant connection to the region (for instance to the county) were screened out, given the overall the aim of the study.

The same procedure was used when the associations, based on their names, were split up into the 24 types of associations, of which the study comprised. A total of 155 local associations were registered in the municipality of Helle. The 24 types of associations are:

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<sup>6</sup> The six catchment areas are situated in six different parishes. So one parish does not have its own school.



- Aerial associations
- Athletic associations
- Children- and Youth associations
- Co-operative societies
- Environmental and Nature associations
- Household associations
- Hunting associations
- Other associations
- Political associations
- Religious associations
- Senior Citizens associations
- Village Halls
- After-school (recreation) centres
- Boy and Girl Scout associations
- Citizen- and Parish associations
- Cultural associations
- Historical associations
- Humanitarian associations
- Kindergardens
- Parochial Church councils
- Recreational classes
- Schools
- Trade and Industry associations
- Waterworksassociation Survey

All associations registered were given a questionnaire with questions on the age of the association, its purpose, its main activities, the committee members, and the number of members, its geographical working area, and the habits of co-operating with other players. The questionnaire was sent out to the presumed chairmen of the associations. Apart from answering the questionnaire they were also asked to send us their articles of association and other relevant material.

Of the 155 associations to which the questionnaire was sent, 70.3 per cent (109 associations) answered the questionnaire. Four of the questionnaires were returned without having been completed, so in total 67.7 per cent of the questionnaires were filled in. The percentage varies significantly from one locality to another and also from one type of association to another.

## Interviews

The last part of the study was comprised of interviews with the associations on parish level as well as those on the municipality level. Chairmen of all associations in each parish separately were invited to an evening meeting in their own local area. The interviews carried out were loosely structured on the basis of questioning guide lines, where focus was initially put on the motives for joining local associations and participating in their activities, secondly on the co-operation with other players, and finally on how the associations viewed themselves in the context of the development of the local area.

Out of the 155 associations invited, 55.5 per cent (86 associations) participated in the interviews. So participation was somewhat lower than in the questionnaire

survey. The attendance levels varied considerably both from one locality to another and from one type of association to another.

The results of the study must be seen in the light of the fact that the study was based solely on information from the local associations themselves. This means that there are some factors of which we have no knowledge, but which are of relevance to the result of the study. The study does not include:

- What people outside the local associations thought of the impact of these local associations?
- What the municipal authorities thought of the impact of the local associations.
- What kinds of trades and industries were present in the municipality of Helle, and what they thought of the impact of the local associations?

Based on the purpose of the study there are, when the impact of local associations on development is examined, a number of limitations to the results of the study, as they can show us only how the committee members in local associations look upon themselves. Moreover there is no possibility of examining the actual economic effect of the impact of local associations on the local community with the data provided by this study.

## Results

The study has yielded much information and a summary of the results will be presented here.

The main result of the study was that the impact of local associations in the municipality of Helle is significant, as these associations undertake numerous tasks, which would surely be missed if they were not taken care of. The local associations for instance hold many spare time activities, joint parties and cultural arrangements in the municipality. In addition the local associations have undertaken tasks such as nominating candidates at elections, supplying citizens with water or television programmes, and taking care of the local interests of the various parishes. So a number of tasks are carried out through voluntary work in the local associations, and if they did not take care of these tasks, resources from elsewhere would be needed to maintain the same variety of possibilities for the citizens in the municipality.

The study shows that the *extent* of the local associations is large in the municipality of Helle, as regards the total number of associations, the number of members and the level of activities. In an earlier study of local associations the rate of urbanization is said to be of importance to the number of associations in a municipality, where a lower rate of urbanization leads to a higher rate of associations (Ibsen, 1994). This also seems to be the case in the municipality of Helle. With 54 citizens per association, nothing indicates, however, that this

municipality has neither more nor less associations than does other rural municipalities. In addition to the impact of the rate of urbanization there also seems to be a connection between the number of associations and citizens even down to the parish level, as parishes with few inhabitants also have, comparatively speaking, many registered associations. The number of memberships and activities also underlines the extent of the local associations. So not only are there many local associations in the municipality, these associations also have many members. Each citizen in the municipality of Helle has 2.4 association memberships. Apart from the many associations and members there is also a high level of activity in the associations, each association holding on average 14.7 events per year.

A listing of the *purposes and actual activities* of the local associations shows that most of them in terms of both purposes and activities can be classified within the cultural and leisure time areas. Here purposes and activities include something cultural, social, sporting or religious. These associations contribute to the creation of a social and cultural infrastructure, which makes it pleasant to live in the area, and they deal with subjects that in an indirect, underlying and partly invisible way has an impact on the development of the local community. A few of the associations work directly with the development of the local area. Most of these associations can be classified as functional problem-solvers who take care of specifically defined tasks of a practical, economic or administrative character such as waterworks associations and aerial associations. Some, such as citizen- and parish associations and trade and industry associations have a “policy based on place” basis where the development of the local area is one of their aims or one of their activities. Other associations have a “policy based on a certain idea” basis with the purpose of promoting a matter related to a certain political idea, of which political associations are perhaps the best examples.

There are many reasons why people choose to engage in local associations. Some of the *motives* given for their involvement are for instance a desire to work for the associations and an interest in obtaining influence, just as some become engaged because their children participate in the activities of the associations. Furthermore, people become engaged because of a sense of duty, or to pay back to the community what one has earlier received through associations and other peoples’ engagements and efforts here. It is also of significance that one can meet new people when joining associations, i.e. the social aspect of local associations, just as it is significant for in terms of engagement that the activities of the associations are aimed at the parish level. When the geographical focus in the work of the associations is removed from ones local parish for instance to cover the municipality as a whole, there seems to be a decline in interest in engaging in the associations, unless some of the other incentives are very important to the engagement of the individual. The fact that most of the associations actually

focus their work at the local level underlines the meaning of the local area in connection to the local associations.

There is a huge level of *participation* in the organizational work of the local associations. If one compares the number of committee members with the number of inhabitants in the municipality, one will find that there is a committee member for every twelve inhabitants in the municipality of Helle. As 87.8 per cent of the committee members are members of only one committee, the organizational work is spread out among many different citizens in the municipality, giving broadness to the organizational work. It is a problem, however, to make people volunteer for committee work in spite of the fact that associations put much effort into this. This situation may very well become one of the future problems of local associations. Compared to the general age composition of the committee young people in particular are hard to attract, and the reason given for this is that this section of the population has a lot of other offers as regards how to spend their spare time. After the age of 30, peoples' interest in the organizational work of the associations seems to rise. Apart from the group of young people there are also fewer women involved in committee work, as they make up only 41.4 per cent of the committee members. There does not seem to be considerable differences between the participation rates of local people and newcomers in the organizational work in associations. Regarding occupation, the group of self-employed is strongly represented in this work; as for roughly every 4<sup>th</sup> wage earner in the committee one is self-employed, whereas for about every 8<sup>th</sup> wage earner in the total workforce in the municipality of Helle one is self-employed.

The associations are open to *co-operation*. As many as 88.1 per cent state that they co-operate with others. This co-operation can be with other associations, with the local government, and to some extent with the trades and industries. This takes place to provide as many resources as possible to carry out the desired activities that people want to attend. As such, co-operation between the associations extends the possibility of carrying out events and arrangements that one of the associations on its own would not have been able to carry out, either for economic reasons or due to insufficient member numbers. Co-operation takes place on two levels. On the one hand it takes place within the parish between various types of associations, while on the other, there is co-operation between the parishes and up to the municipal level, between identical types of associations. This co-operation is divided such that 82.3 per cent of the associations co-operate with the same type of association as themselves, while 37.5 per cent co-operate with another type of association. Co-operation with the local government takes place partly to influence the political decisions made in the municipality, partly to get economic aid to carry out the activities or to establish buildings. 40.6 per cent of the associations co-operate with the local government. Co-

operation with the trades and industries also takes place for economic reasons, as it is often in connection with sponsorships that the trades and industries are contacted. 14.6 per cent of the associations co-operate with the trades and industries. The basic line is that there is a mutual connection between the associations, between associations and the local government, and between the associations and the trades and industries, where the connection to other associations is strongest and the connection to the business community is weakest. In return for what the associations receive through their co-operation with the local government and the business community respectively, the associations undertake the maintenance of local activities including functional tasks.

The *degree of development-orientation* depends on the parish where the local associations are situated and on the type of the association. When one particular association of a specific type differs from the other associations of the same type, it often seems to be the locality that is the deciding factor, with the association being influenced positively or negatively by the other associations in the local area. So there is an indication that an effort within development activities can be made with common geography as the basis.

Most activities in the local associations are not exactly direct development activities, more leisure activities such as for instance sports activities and social events like joint parties and debates with cultural/political/religious topics. All of this does however contribute to putting life into the area and some substance into peoples' spare time. Nevertheless, these associations do not have development of the local area as one of their main purposes. They help to maintain the social life of the local areas, which can indirectly have an impact on the creation of more direct development activity in the areas. Basically, the simple presence of local associations can make the area more attractive to settlers. This may make it possible to keep the present inhabitants in the area and make new citizens move into the area.

However, there is also a small group of a certain kind of local associations, who involve themselves in activities of direct impact on the development of the local areas. Most of these activities concern the physical planning of the local area through involvement in municipal and local plans. Some activities, on the other hand, are related to marketing such as "Open City" arrangements, where people are invited to visit the local area, and to the making of PR-folders informing those interested in the activities of local associations and the local business community. In a few cases we can also see economic development activities, for instance job creation, or arranging a concert.

It is not only local associations, however, that become involved in the development of the local areas. Another important "player" is, for want of a better term, the private forces operating independently of associations. Contributions offered by private people are very often economic development activi-

ties, for instance the formation of a private limited company or house building, which has a direct impact on the development of the local areas. Also via various committees and work groups operating independently of associations both indirect development in the form of social activities, and direct development in the form of marketing and spatial planning are created.

So most of the local associations do not actively take part in direct development, and this is so predominantly because of a lack of time. As such, their readiness to participate in future development is very limited. The potential of the local associations are often not initiated until the local area is put on the defensive for some reason.

## Discussion

There is not doubt that the local associations in the municipality of Helle have a big impact on each local area individually, as well as on the municipality as a whole. The question is, however, whether this impact is of any relevance as regards further development. One of the ways of examining this question is to compare the theoretical approaches, which have inspired us to make this study, with the results of the study. Is there any indication that the factors described in the theories are in fact present in the local associations? If the factors exist, the theoretical conditions for a development of the local area are present.

### **The impact of “place” and of the “local feeling of belonging” as elements of identity creation**

Within this theoretical angle of approach the place ideology of Ulla Herlitz is applied. Herlitz notes that people engage in the work of the associations when the matter concerns their own local area. Considering our results this is also the case among representatives of the local associations in the municipality of Helle. One of the incentives for participating in the work of an association is if its activities are directed towards the betterment of the local community. So the attachment to the parish is of considerable impact, when members of the committees choose to undertake voluntary work, and the inclination to contribute is reduced, when the geographical aspect of the work is increased. So it is a fact that peoples' place bound identity leads to participation in local associations. This connection is reflected in the fact that most local associations in the study direct their work towards the local community. For citizen- and parish based associations and trade and industry associations the significance of place ideology becomes very clear through the objects clause in the regulations of the association, as its “policy based on place” purpose aims at developing the local area.

There is no doubt that place bound identity is a widespread phenomenon in the municipality of Helle. The high number of associations, and therefore the high

number of committee members in the municipality indicates that many people are involved in local associations. The fact that most committee members have “only” one post gives considerable broadness to the participation.

According to Herlitz co-operation among the local people leads to a “we-spirit” and to a common identity in the local area. It is not possible to say from the results of this study if participation in local associations leads to place bound identity. It is very likely, though, that the original involvement in a small part of the activities of local associations leads to larger interest in, and awareness of, the local community as a whole.

The other theoretical contribution here deals with counter-urbanization as described by Terry Marsden and Jonathan Murdoch. Marsden and Murdoch state that middle class, well-to-do families, engaged in active employment, move into the country, after which they try to prevent further development in the area. If this theory applies for this study, local associations are also used for protecting the existing community against further development. The results of our study cannot confirm that the local associations serve as mouthpieces for development resistance. People are more likely to say that newcomers are very welcome in the local area, so that neither village houses nor farms are left empty. Locally, efforts are made to establish large lots of land, which to some extent must be interpreted as a desire to attract well-to-do families. So newcomers are more than welcome, which probably means that they do not cause any serious problems. One of the signs of this is the significant representation of newcomers in the committees of the local associations, and that they therefore participate on equal terms with local people in the organizational work of the local associations. The problem with newcomers arises if they do not want to participate in local associations, as this is not popular with the locals. This passivity does not mean however that newcomers oppose the ongoing development of the local area. One of the parishes does however refer to newcomers as being opposed to development. Because the parish lies close to the city of Esbjerg the newcomers cover their requirements here and therefore do not want the parish to develop. This reluctance does not mean that they are opposed to the development measures taken, but only that they do not back development activities up.

### **The impact of (local) networks**

We must also look again at Robert D. Putnam’s social capital theory in this context. Putnam says that an important prerequisite for growth in a local area is the presence of social capital, which can be described as the relations between people and the trust built for instance through participation in local associations. We do not know if they have trust in each other in the municipality of Helle, but we assume they have. At least there is nothing in the study to indicate that there is any kind of mistrust among the representatives of the local associations. This is

supported by the fact that the social aspects of associations provide incentives for many to enter into this kind of work. Irrespective of this, the basis for trust is present due to the high number of associations, the many committee members and the high number of members. So in the municipality of Helle there are many possibilities for people involved in local associations to meet some way or the other. As such, the local associations can form the forum where people meet at various levels and most likely build up trust in each other. Thus Putnam's contribution suggests that all associations, including those with cultural, social, sporting and religious weighting can have an influence on the development of an area, if only there is trust present.

The second contribution within this theoretical approach comes from Reidar Almås, who has described what he calls the necessary triangle. Almås says that co-operation between local, external and public players are necessary to achieve local development. At the same time this co-operation takes place in a process with first, the organization of local resources, then an external stimulus, and finally, public support. The results of the study enable us to comment on the co-operation among the various players, but we cannot say anything about the process of work. The players we focus on in relation to co-operation are:

- Local associations as the local player.
- The business community as the external player.
- The municipal authorities as the public player.

Many associations have said that they co-operate with other players. So this fulfils the first prerequisite in the necessary triangle. In the municipality of Helle there is often co-operation between the local associations and local government. Such co-operation is mostly related to physical planning in the local area in connection with municipal and local plans. There is also some co-operation between local associations and the business community, but here it is often a question of sponsorships. There are, however, a few examples of development activities being initiated by associations and the business community in co-operation, mostly as regards marketing activities.

Situations where all players join in the common aim of the future development of the local areas are scarce, the only example being the Helle Tourist Trade and Industry Association. This association is quite unique in its construction, as the local associations, the business community and local government were invited to participate in the work of the association, and thus to promote tourism and the business community in the municipality. So based on the study we can say that the conditions of the necessary triangle concerning co-operation between local, external and public players are not fulfilled in the municipality with the players we chose to use in the analysis. However, the prerequisites are present as co-operation between the players does take place, and therefore the



superior link between the three players should be within reach. Helle Tourist Trade and Industry Association took the first tiny step, and it may then be here that the initiative towards the more all-encompassing and progressive work to develop the municipality will be taken.

The third contribution within this theoretical approach comes from Bengt Johansson. Johansson maintains that the prerequisite for local development and growth is that an interaction and a coupling between the local (horizontal) networks and the economic (vertical) networks take place, With the local ‘place bound’ networks being represented by the local associations in the municipality of Helle. The question is: is there a coupling between these networks and the economic networks? In our study the business community and the self-employed are regarded as representatives of the economic networks.<sup>7</sup> As previously mentioned, the co-operation between local associations on the one hand and the business community on the other is not very close. Although co-operation rarely concerns local development, a contact has however now been established between the two kinds of networks. The starting point for a coupling here is better when we look at the self-employed as individuals. The results of the study show that the self-employed are over-represented in the committees seen in relation to the total workforce in the municipality. We do not know why this is the case, but it is a fact that through the presence of the self-employed in the committees, the business community is represented as the economic player. They have made it clear, however, that they act as private persons and therefore do not represent the business community as such. Notwithstanding this, contact between the two types of networks is present, and because the self-employed are over-represented, the prerequisite for local development is very much present in the municipality of Helle.

The last contribution within this theoretical approach is the notion of “institutional thickness”, described by Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift. Amin and Thrift show how local institutional thickness decides whether or not the local community has the ability to ensure economic growth. Institutional thickness means many institutions, interaction between the institutions, coalition patterns between the institutions and a common agenda. The question is, whether the local associations act as a part of the institutional thickness of the business community, or whether the local associations themselves form a separate layer of institutional thickness?

Based on the focus of the study it is not possible to tell if the business community in Helle constitute a layer of “institutional thickness”. Apart from

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<sup>7</sup> This distinction between the local associations as belonging to horizontal networks and the trades and industries and self-employed as belonging to vertical networks is very stylistic. In reality local associations can very well belong to a vertical network as well as the self-employed to a horizontal network.

this lack of knowledge there is only one local association, which can be said to be a part of the institutional thickness aimed at the business community and this is the Helle Tourist Trade and Industry Association previously mentioned. In this association the citizen- and parish associations are invited to join the meetings when the business community and local government make the strategy for the future development of the municipality. So we can establish the fact that at present there is no natural connection between local associations and the business community and thus also no common effort to develop the individual local areas.

But if we regard the local associations as constituting a sort of institutional thickness, some of the prerequisites are present. The number of associations and committee members alone show that there are many “institutions”. Add to this the fact that most of the committee members are members of only one committee, many people are involved in the committee work and therefore also in the human network spread widely across the municipality. Interaction takes place because most of the local associations co-operate with others. Based on a few examples of firm co-operation partners and jointly arranging recurrent events we can see that within local associations there are also coalition patterns and common agendas. These coalitions and agendas, however, are not representative of local associations in the specific local area, and therefore the requisite measure of institutional thickness is not present. There is some anecdotal evidence though that some of the local associations instead act as the representatives of the business community for instance when they involve themselves in the marketing of the local area, both related to settlement and to the health of the local business community by arranging money-making activities such as concerts, and employing people to take care of the obligations of the association. So the conditions for the emergence of institutional thickness in local associations are present, but whether or not it is possible to establish a common agenda for local development among the local associations it is not yet possible to say.

Based on the comparison of theories and results it is clear that place ideology is the only theory to impact significantly in the municipality of Helle. Concerning the network related theories it is obvious that the basis for local development to be initiated is very much present but that the last pieces of the jigsaw are still missing. So within the local associations there is significant potential for increasing the contribution to future development.

There are probably many reasons why this potential is not currently exploited. In the first place, most of the local associations are probably not aware of their actual ability to play an active role in the future development of their local area. If however they were told how to act to participate in the development of their local area it may even be the case that they would act little differently. Many people representing local associations have said that they are satisfied with the

role that their local associations already have, and that they do not really see it as their task to ensure local development beyond what they already do.

Not all of them however think like this, as some have said that they would very much like to take part in the development of their local area. There are, however, some barriers in relation to this further engagement. To initiate and maintain a development process takes individuals who have leadership potential and can thus undertake the roles of entrepreneur and of project co-ordinator. It is here that time becomes a significant problem. Members of the local associations are willing to undertake extra tasks, but they do not have the time to do so. Other barriers are of a more structural kind such as the prevailing legislation in many areas makes it difficult for the local associations to involve themselves in development activities beyond their normal frame of reference.

Although local associations in the municipality of Helle do not completely “comply with” the prerequisites of the theories discussed above, a minor quantity of them are involved in activities that can be regarded as direct development activities, as was previously mentioned. What might trigger the potential among the rest of the local associations is if the local areas were exposed to serious decline, for instance the closing of a school, which would have a significant impact on the inhabitants of the area. The question is then whether they will solve this task in the same way as present or whether the local associations will go the whole hog and follow the direction that the theories tell us lead to local development.

Most likely it is basically “the general condition of the municipality” that will determine the actual impact of the local associations. If a society experiences a crisis, active associations in connection with indirect and especially direct development activities can prove vital to the survival of the municipality. As the municipality of Helle cannot be characterized as a society in financial crisis, the answer must automatically be that the local associations do not at present play a decisive role in the well being of the municipality. On the other hand the efforts made by the local associations should by no means be ignored. Today, the local associations in Helle have so many different functions that the tax burden would have to be raised even if only a part of these functions were to be taken over by the local authorities. Therefore, the local associations are of significant importance to the municipality.

Finally, considerations should be made as to whether it is fair to expect or merely just to hope for active participation by the local associations in the development of the local community in the future, (including the business community), when the prevailing attitude politically is to concentrate on settlement as *the* development strategy. On the other hand some may say that this is exactly why one must trust in the efforts made by local associations.

On the basis of this discussion the answer to our question must be:

## Conclusion

The impact of local associations and networks both today and in the foreseeable future seems most of all to be indirect, so local associations and networks as they are known today must be regarded as a necessary and indispensable but also insufficient factor in the development of the local community, including the local business community.

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