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## *Research-oriented development and new regional partnership*

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**Summary:** In this article we examine the regional development and new regional partnership in Finland on three levels. First, we analyze the general outlines of the Finnish regional politics focusing in particular on the regional development discourse of the Finnish welfare and innovation policies. Second, we specify questions relevant to the methodology of regional development. Third, via an example, we describe user-oriented and **event production** as a tool for building partnership, welfare and a new entrepreneurship culture.

**Keywords:** regional development, partnership, research-oriented development,

# Research-oriented development and new regional partnership

In this article we examine the regional development and new regional partnership in Finland on three levels. First, we analyze the general outlines of the Finnish regional politics focusing in particular on the regional development discourse of the Finnish welfare and innovation policies. Second, we specify questions relevant to the methodology of regional development. Third, via an example, we describe user-oriented and **event production** as a tool for building partnership, welfare and a new entrepreneurship culture.

## I. Viewpoints on Finnish regional policy

Traditionally Finnish regional policy has focused mainly on underdeveloped regions with the objective of narrowing regional welfare disparities. Various administrative measures, such as welfare policy reforms (among others, relating to comprehensive schools and health care centres) and the decentralization of the higher education system have been of core importance in this work (Kortelainen 2010, 350-355.)

Since the 1990s, the course has shifted towards a “new regional policy”, which embraces all regions in the country. The policy emphasizes the significance of competitiveness and regional partnership. Regional innovation systems and networks have become new topics of discussions. Different development programs and their coordinating organizations, as well as development companies and technology centres, hold a more pronounced position (see Harmaakorpi 2010).

The new policy definitions see a close connection between regional welfare and competitiveness: on the one hand, welfare is considered as a factor in reinforcing competitiveness; on the other hand, growth of competitiveness creates possibilities for improved and more evenly distributed welfare (Kortelainen 2010). Altogether, the traditionally stressed points of welfare and the continuously strengthened emphasis on innovation policies and economic competitiveness live next to and complement each other in the Finnish regional policy.

### 1. Welfare policy

In his traditional welfare theoretical division, Gösta Esping-Andersen (1990) separates three kinds of welfare state models. Before all, he takes a close look at the part of society which supports welfare: the market, family or state (c. Jordan 2010; Moreno 2010). Finnish society has been developed methodically on the basis of the Nordic model, which highlights the role of the state. The point of departure lies in universal social policy where social security and benefits are largely statutory and apply to all citizens and permanent residents.

Public social and health care services hold the central position in the Finnish welfare state. During the past couple of decades, however, the production of welfare services has shifted towards the so-called welfare mix model, where private service providers operate along with the public sector (c. Kangas & Palme 2009). Municipalities hold the responsibility to organize welfare services, but they can buy social and health care services from private service providers. Moreover, community economic welfare policy has been underlined beside market-oriented welfare policy (Laurinkari 2010, 82–89). The responsibility of the citizen society and social networks has also drawn more attention than before.

The revisions have not only emphasized the clients' rights to high-quality services, but also the significance of the choices the clients make. Yet, regardless of the new points of emphasis, the system-oriented tradition in Finnish social and health care services remains strong.

### 2. Innovation policy

Finnish innovation policy took off in earnest along with the growth of Nokia around the turn of the millennium. At first, the focus was on centralizing knowledge/knowhow, as well as on technological innovation. Gradually, learning networks where representatives of entrepreneurial life, research and development organizations and the public sector were to exchange their views and expertise became a topic of discussion. Open networks that could open up possibilities for creating generic ideas and co-learning were raised to the same

level as companies' internal product development. In 2007, Finland shifted towards a broad-range innovation policy that puts emphasis on solid fusion of social and technological innovation (Evaluation... 2009).

In the national innovation policy, demand- and user-orientation became points of emphasis (Government's communication... 2008). Whether innovation activity proceeds from top-down or bottom-up can be seen as a crucial choice regarding the work on regional development. Strategy-driven development largely represents top-down type development approach, even if it may contain some participatory elements. In bottom-up type regional development work the development processes are formulated in intense cooperation with different regional actors. Hence, the users play an important role in directing the development.

Finnish regional policy has changed its course from administrative-oriented policy towards steps for improving the regions' vitality. At the same time, the focus has moved from welfare policy to innovation policy (see Harmaakorpi 2010, 21-34). During recent years, stressing user-orientation and networking has been characteristic to both innovation policy and welfare policy. Placing bottom-up innovation policy to the same level with top-down approach (Research and Innovation Policy Guidelines for 2011-2015) signifies a change in regional development. In the following analysis, we examine what this means from the viewpoint of development methodology.

## II. Conceptual analysis

### 1. The concept of research-oriented development

There has been various attempts to analyze the theoretical and methodological starting points of development activities and regional innovation policy. Mika Kautonen (2008, 69-71), for instance, has separated science and technology-based Technopolis model and experience-oriented learning economy model. Kautonen (2008, 73-74) underlines the versatility of regional innovation activity, as well as the fact that a significant part of innovation activities takes place outside of universities, research institutions and R&D units (see also Dreyfuss, Zimmerman & First, 2010).

Theoretical starting points for regional development work that emphasizes participation, communication and learning of the actors can be sought out in the field of action research, among others. Characteristically, the action research approach strives to develop practices, it is a spiral process, and its subjects are also participants in the research (see e.g. Carr & Kemmis 1983). The same qualities generally apply to user- and actor-oriented regional development work as well. On the other hand, there is a certain difference in emphasis between regional development work and action research. In spite of its practice-orientation, action research is first and foremost research as such, whereas in regional development work, the operative word is 'development'. The frames of reference between research and development contain certain essentially differing points of departure. (see. e. g. Reason & Bradbury 2008)

First, the endeavour to produce reliable and verifiable information is the baseline of research. In different research approaches, the knowledge interest and criteria for reliability vary; however, the effort to provide reliable information interconnects different scientific fields and paradigms. In contrast, the primary objective of development activity is typically to succeed in developing a material or nonmaterial product or, for instance, the systematization and streamlining of a process. In general, development activities attempt to modify something concrete rather than produce knowledge in the sense of research<sup>1</sup>.

Second, the activities have different institutionally defined values. The value of research is largely determined through discussions within the scientific community. In regard with development activity, viability is of essence. Viability can be defined either from the perspective of its advantages to an individual company or organization or with a broader emphasis on its social or regional effectiveness.

Third, there are certain differing methodical emphases between research and development activities. Research primarily attempts to answer research questions by using research methods, as well as producing and analyzing

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<sup>1</sup> Here the term 'knowledge' refers expressly to scientific knowledge (see Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny 2006).

different empirical data. In turn, in development activity it is not essential to concentrate on verbally expressed questions; its core is action directed to reach the determined goal. Development activity is objective-driven.

Nevertheless, R&D activities are not disconnected from each other. They indeed share a common interface, which means that the same activity can represent both research and development. Yet, it is two different issues to talk on the one hand about action research, for instance, which resembles development and on the other hand about research-oriented development where research-like activity serves development only as a tool (Toikko & Rantanen 2009). In research-oriented development, research guarantees the dynamism of development activity: research enables the continuous re-evaluation of the goals and means of development activity. Research brings the voice of the users to development.

## 2. Methodology of regional development

The methodology of research-oriented regional development can be approached from the methods of development procedures, paradigmatic trends or methodological commitments. The selection of methods in research is part of the research strategy and related to research questions, whereas in development activity the grounds for method choices are not often explicit. There is a multitude of methods applicable to development activity for instance in the fields of project management, group work and evaluation research. However, there is a risk of using the development methods disconnected from their hypotheses. For instance, traditional tools of project management are relatively poorly suited for such user-oriented regional development where the objectives, work methods and networks change continuously. Hence, there is reason to always discuss development methods in relation to their paradigmatic points of departure and methodological commitments.

The paradigmatic orientation is a core part of the methodology of research-oriented development. The approach can be related to action research, developmental work research (Engeström 1987) or, for instance, evaluation research. A large part of tendencies situated in the terrain between research and development are generated expressly within the scientific community; however, also working life developers have successfully innovated new trends such as those related to the Living Lab activities (e.g. Ståhlbröst 2008).

Methodological commitments are one starting point of all development activities even if they were not clearly analyzed. It is possible to either highlight the reliability of information in planning, documenting and evaluating development activities or rely on non-systematic experiential knowledge in assessing the usability of certain operation methods. Moreover, it is possible to either emphasize concrete and unambiguously definable goals, operation methods or results measures or perceive the developing reality as thoroughly interpretative<sup>2</sup>. In regard with our analysis, perhaps the most fundamental methodological question is: What are the interests regional development is based on? Development can be either system-oriented or client-oriented. It can originate either from economy or from the citizens' welfare. We can talk about bottom-up and top-down models of innovation policy.

## 3. The concept of user- and actor-orientation

During recent years, user-orientation has become highlighted both in product development and welfare services. However, the points of emphasis in the discourse on user-orientation have varied. The traditional usability planning connects usability with effortless learning, efficiency of use, easy memorability, paucity of errors and subjective pleasantness (Nielsen 1993, 25). Even though user is the subject of interest in usability research, general usability measurement is the chief focal point. In contrast, user-oriented planning invites product or system users to participate in the planning process, and qualitative phenomena are also a point of interest. Living Lab activity emphasizes the development and testing of the product in real-life situations.

In the field of welfare service development the role of citizens, clients and service users in developing the services has been discussed. This has formed the basis for citizen-oriented approach. For instance, in UPQA (User Participation in Quality Assessment) evaluation the development proceeds from user group interviews to worker interviews, and continues up to the management level and decision-makers (Krogstrup 2004). Respectively, client forum work has been developed in order to utilize client experiences (e.g. Tammelin 2010). On its turn, actor-oriented process development is a development orientation where project actors determine the

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<sup>2</sup> In the last analysis, the question is of the relationship between realism and constructionism. In regard with development activities, a realistic starting point has commonly been emphasized. However, there are strongly constructionistic trends to be found for instance in the fields of action research and evaluation research.

direction and measures of development. By researching Finnish social and health care field projects, Riitta Seppälä-Järvelä (1999) has observed a shift from central administration-oriented development towards actor-orientation.

All in all, participation of actors is discussed with varying concepts and from different viewpoints. The unifying notion is that the direction of activity is determined by the actors themselves instead from the top down. The hypothesis of the unpredictability of the process is also common. Development is seen as a social process characterized by reflective action (Schön 1983; Carr & Kemmis 1986).

We claim that in the new citizen society needs bottom-up type regional development work. This is built on the basis of user-orientation, emphasis on networks and research-like quality. Along with these, clear cut methods for regional development work are certainly needed. Hence, we continue by analyzing one Finnish project and its methodical development.

### III. User-oriented event production as a method for building partnership

Symbio Living Lab (2009-2012) is a ESF project<sup>3</sup> realized collaboratively by two Finnish higher education institutes (HAAGA-HELIA and Laurea UAS). The objective of the project is on the one hand to support entrepreneurship of creative fields, welfare field and travel industry in the Porvoo region (Porvoo is a small town situated about 50 kilometres from Helsinki). The project's core goal is to support networking of entrepreneurs, as well as entrepreneur education for young people. The other central theme is to provide support to the welfare of the citizens; children and youth in particular. Moreover, the project endeavours to construct a novel Living Lab learning environment<sup>4</sup> on the higher education campus.

The paradigmatic point of departure in the Living Lab environment construction is the learning network model of Finnish innovation policy, as well as the Triple Helix model. Triple Helix model is based on the idea of close cooperation between businesses, the public sector and higher education institutes (see e.g. Etzkowitz 2008)<sup>5</sup>. However, deviating from the traditional model the Symbio Living Lab underlines the role of citizens or service users with the starting point of solid commitment to user-orientation. The central development method focuses on user-driven event planning and production. Through different events an attempt is made to collect the Porvoo regional actors together. Principles of user-oriented planning are followed in generating ideas for, planning and preparation of the events. At the same time the concept of user-driven event production is further developed.

The project organizes events with the theme of entrepreneurship specifically for young people's needs, as well as other events that support the region's business and working life. In the spring of 2011, for instance, a one-week long Porvoo works event was organized in the higher education campus. During the preparation process of the event, a broad network was created with entrepreneurs in the region, and they held a central position in the actual preparation of the event as well. The event itself drew about 500 participants, and 70 entrepreneurs and other actors in the region participated in the preparations and activities. The event consisted of various performances connected to working life, professions and entrepreneurship, as well as participatory situations for young people. Some parts of the program were designed for the region's work communities to support occupational wellbeing.

#### 1. Research design

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<sup>3</sup> The project is coordinated by HAAGA-HELIA UAS with M.Sc. (Econ.) Sirpa Lassila as the project manager. Teemu Rantanen works as a researcher-developer in the project.

<sup>4</sup> Eriksson, Niitamo & Kulkki (2005) define Living Labs as a research and development methodology whereby innovations, such as services, products, and application enhancements, are created and validated in collaborative, multi-contextual empirical real-world settings.

<sup>5</sup> The project was adapted some features from action research, like an interaction between development and research, and participants' active role in development activities. However, action research wasn't seen as a strictly defined methodological framework.

Next, we analyze the cornerstones of user-oriented regional development work relying on the experiences gained from the Symbio Living Lab experiment. Our data is comprised of the documents collected throughout the project (memorandums, plans and designs, progress reports, etc.) and group interviews.

Group interviews were conducted in late fall 2010 and late spring 2011. Group interviews (3 groups, n=11) were based on Michael Billing's (1987) rhetorical social psychology and argumentative method of qualitative attitude approach (Vesala & Rantanen 2007).

The informants were presented arguments (claims), which had a connection to the project's implementation (for instance to the project's planning processes and its' outcomes). Following Billing, it is suggested that by answering the arguments, the informants also explain their opinions (values and assumptions), which they think are shared in their own social and cultural groups. By analyzing interviews it is possible to get knowledge from a particular group and its' socially and culturally shared assumptions. The data was analyzed one argument at a time placing them in data-oriented and content-thematic categories.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Results

According to our research results, event production was a well-suited means for regional networking. Networking combines supporting welfare and promoting entrepreneurship. On the basis of the completed analysis we can distinguish four central features of user-oriented regional development work:

First, the data brings forth the multi-level significance of events: each event is its own, separate activity with its own certain goals. In the best scenario, separate events form a chain of events where the effects are repeated. Even though the visible core of Living Lab's activity lies in events, the most essential effect germinates - according to the conceptions of the actors, at least - in connection with the preparation process and, specifically, networking. Networking enables exchange of ideas and adopting of new viewpoints. The region's entrepreneurs get acquainted with each other, as well as how the higher education institute operates and what are young people's points of view. In turn, young people learn the game rules of working life and entrepreneurial life in particular. Furthermore, the interviewees bring forth their observations of how cooperation also unsettles the city's customary operation mode a little.

Second, the data unearths the significance of the user-orientation that applies to the entire process. The traditional usability research sets out from the perspective of a completed product. Correspondingly, the Living Lab type testing takes off from the prototype of a product. Symbio Living Lab's basic notion is that user-orientation is linked to all different phases of the event production process. Already developing ideas aims at user-orientation. According to the experiences of actors, the roles certainly change during the different phases of the process. For instance, entrepreneurs are important in brainstorming ideas, whereas the responsibility for organizing the event is largely left to the project team.

Third, through the data, a picture is construed of the utmost importance of a creative and research-like approach. This means that user-oriented planning processes are process-oriented and at least partly unpredictable: developers are required to have a creative approach and the capacity to learn from new situations. Research-like quality has been a central part of the project already from the very beginning. Through research, it has been attempted to reach the users' viewpoints on issues. In the Symbio Living Lab project the significance of research-like approach became emphasized particularly in the project's initial phase. According to the data, the most central meaning of research activities lies in the fact that researches ignited discussions and hence directed the activities in the beginning of the process.

Fourth, the data brings forth the importance of traditional encounter and social media. The Symbio Living Lab project has utilized the Facebook environment for instance as a support for generating ideas for events. Nevertheless, on the basis of project experiences the traditional getting out of the game for a while, so to speak,

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<sup>6</sup> Conducting qualitative research always necessitates making ontological hypotheses; assumptions about what the data may disclose (Mason 1996). We are chiefly fascinated by the shared cultural conceptions or assumptions construed through the project activities (see Schein 1987; Argyris 1993). On the other hand, our starting point is discursive and puts emphasis on argumentation that takes place during interview situations (see Billing 1987). The relationship between paradigms that chiefly focus either on action or on discourse contains certain theoretical challenges (see Alasuutari 1994, 87); however, we do assume it is possible to conjoin attitude research and these two points of departure (see De Rosa 1993). Still, our main interest indeed lies in socially constructed interpretations.

as well as encounters are primary forms of networking - particularly in business cooperation. Based on the actors' experiences, broader network meetings where entrepreneurs see each other are also important. It certainly seems that user-oriented regional development work requires the use of multi-faceted methods that increase participation and initiate discussion (see also Gustavsen 1992; Toikko & Rantanen 2009). According to the completed analysis, face-to-face encounters are still the most central means of participative inclusion. In turn, social media holds its own position in the common development of ideas.

### 3. Reservations

It is necessary to make certain reservations in evaluating the Symbio Living Lab's user-oriented regional development model. First, an action model based on event production and networking cannot replace the traditional means of welfare and entrepreneurship policies. For instance, welfare-supporting event organized for young people are not an alternative for psycho-social services. At best, networking linked with event production is a means for building new regional communality.

Second, we have here introduced precursory research results which are mostly based on the actors' subjective experiences. Measuring the efficiency of a regional development project would be quite a more challenging task. It is particularly challenging in a project with the point of emphasis on the actors' networking. Networking is a multi-level phenomenon, and it takes a long period of time to be able to observe its visible benefits.

Third, the nature of regional development work depends on the characteristic features of the region. The Porvoo region and the enterprise cluster of creative and travel fields have provided a relatively good experiment environment. In the sparsely populated regions of northern Finland or, let's say, the metropolis of the Central and Southern Europe the possibilities and challenges of regional development would have naturally been rather different.

## IV. Conclusion

### 1. From strategies to encountering

In Finland, regional development work has been approached too often from the perspective of regional programs. Symbio Living Lab is a select example of user-oriented approach to regional development. In that context, 'users' refer first and foremost to the region's young people and entrepreneurs; yet, it also embraces other residents of the region, as well as actors of the city, organizations and higher education institutes. 'Activities' mean both various events and networking within the cooperative efforts in arranging them.

The initial experiences of the Symbio Living Lab Project has showed that networking and the different practices of the various actor groups involve some challenges. In order to building an active network means that the actors loosen up and make time for it, so to speak. Only then it is possible to reach all actor groups, as well as bring the region's entrepreneurs around to have faith in the project. User-oriented preparation of events gathers together such actors and actor groups which otherwise would not think of cooperating.

Research-like activity has central instrumental significance in regional development work and building regional partnership. Research activity brings the users' voice and perspective to the foreground, as well as initiates discussion.

### 2. Incorporation of welfare services and entrepreneurial life

In traditional Nordic welfare state, welfare services and business life are seen as relatively separate sectors of social activities. However, the growth of private social and health care services has signified a partial change of course. Furthermore, small changes can be perceived in the role of business life: companies have began to re-examine their social role and the concept of corporate social responsibility continues to grow.

Combining the competitiveness of welfare services and companies is also considered fundamentally important on the national level. The Finnish philosopher Pekka Himanen has stated that the strength of the Finnish society lies in the incorporation of welfare state and information society. Nonetheless, coping with forthcoming

challenges requires reform of the welfare state, new kind of creative economy, as well as activities in accordance with both sustainable development and global culture. (Caring, encouraging, creative Finland 2005.)

User-oriented regional development work represents a novel vision on social development and boosting wellbeing. At best, user-oriented regional development work combines the promotion of both young people's wellbeing and entrepreneurship. The question is of a profound change in the culture of thinking and acting in concern with welfare and its production.

Culture is a multi-level phenomenon, and consists of not only our physical environment and visible activities, but also of articulated values and various activity-directing hypotheses (Schein 1987). Through user-oriented regional development work it is endeavoured to create a regional culture and new communality that puts emphasis on openness and participation. The encountering of young people and entrepreneurs enables the construction of common understanding.

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