

Study Programme on European Spatial Planning

Strategic study “Towards a new rural-urban partnership in Europe”

2.3 Selected issues of relevance for a partnership on rural and urban development

CASE STUDY: HELSINKI REGION

by Tytti Viinikainen & Kaisa Schmidt-Thomé
Centre for Urban and Regional Studies
National Focal Point: Finland
20.9.1999

Maps: Kari Oinonen & Ville Helminen
Finnish Environment Institute

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1 Introduction

This case study deals with the region of Helsinki, especially the rural-urban partnership and interaction in the region. The study does not concentrate on any specific policy innovation or development project in the area, but examines the trends in rural-urban interaction in general. Being the capital, Helsinki region is a geographically wide area and both functionally and administratively a big complex. Specific themes examined more profoundly in the study are firstly, the growth of the commuting area, and secondly, the information society. When regarded in the matrix of four rural-urban relations, Helsinki-case can be placed in the urban-rural category. Additionally, chapter 2 also deals with questions belonging to the urban-urban category.

The study is structured as follows: Chapter 2 presents some general data about the Helsinki region and its growth, plus some essential features in its future development. Chapter 3 takes a different point of view, examining the region in the rural-urban dimension. Finally, in the conclusion chapter, some policy implications are suggested.

2 Helsinki region

2.1 Background: Helsinki region in the national context

Helsinki was some 250 years ago still a little town with 4000 inhabitants. When Finland became an independent state in 1917, Helsinki had already grown to be the most significant urban centre of Finland. The growth continued, especially after the II World War II. The changes in the structure of the Finnish economic life were very rapid. They were connected to a strong migration wave (Great Move 1965-75) from the rural areas to the centres. Like in many other European cities, the construction of new suburban areas was a quick and an inexpensive way to house the new labour force. Also the municipalities neighbouring Helsinki got their share of the new suburbs, especially from the late 1970s onwards. As a functional entity Helsinki city was gradually turning into Helsinki region with four cities in its core. In the 1990s the growth has gained strength again, and Helsinki region belongs to the fastest growing urban regions in Europe. The growth tendency can be observed in many ways: in employment, in population and in economy.

During the 1990s, the changes of the Finnish territorial structure have been the strongest since the Great Move. The migration has also become more concentrated - the number of urban regions getting significant migration surplus has decreased. They comprise of only Helsinki, Tampere, Turku, Jyväskylä and Oulu. The well-educated, as well as young people entering work-life or starting their studies, are the most active migrants. The peripheral regions see themselves losing not only residents but also its present and potential skills. This further decreases the number of successful regions, at the cost of the others. Helsinki, one of the few gaining regions, has become an incomparable centre in the Finnish scale. Its special strengths include international interaction, know-how and private sector services.



Figure 1: Helsinki region on the map of Finland

2.2 Present state

Helsinki is by far the largest urban region in Finland. The capital city Helsinki forms the central node of the region, but the densely built-up core area includes also large areas of the neighbouring cities (Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen). The area of dense settlements continues further, along the major lines of infrastructure. The commuting area of Helsinki includes an even larger area, a set of nearly 30 municipalities, with over 1 350 000 inhabitants (the total population of Finland being 5,2 millions). The commuting area has here been defined to include those municipalities, where at least 7,5% of the employed labour force works in the core area, plus over 20% works outside of the own municipality in general. The region includes a wide variety of areas: large forests and agricultural areas, villages, small cities and the polycentric urban core area. The region has also a long Baltic coastline with numerous islands.

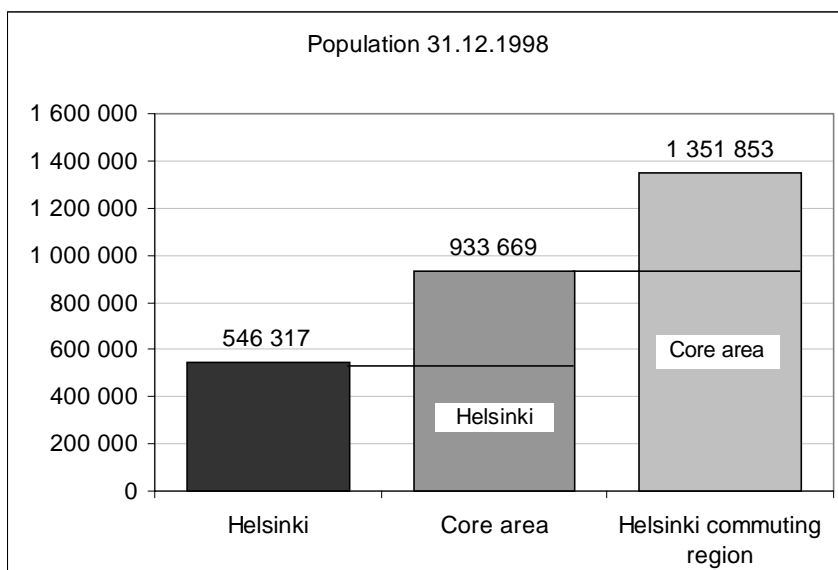
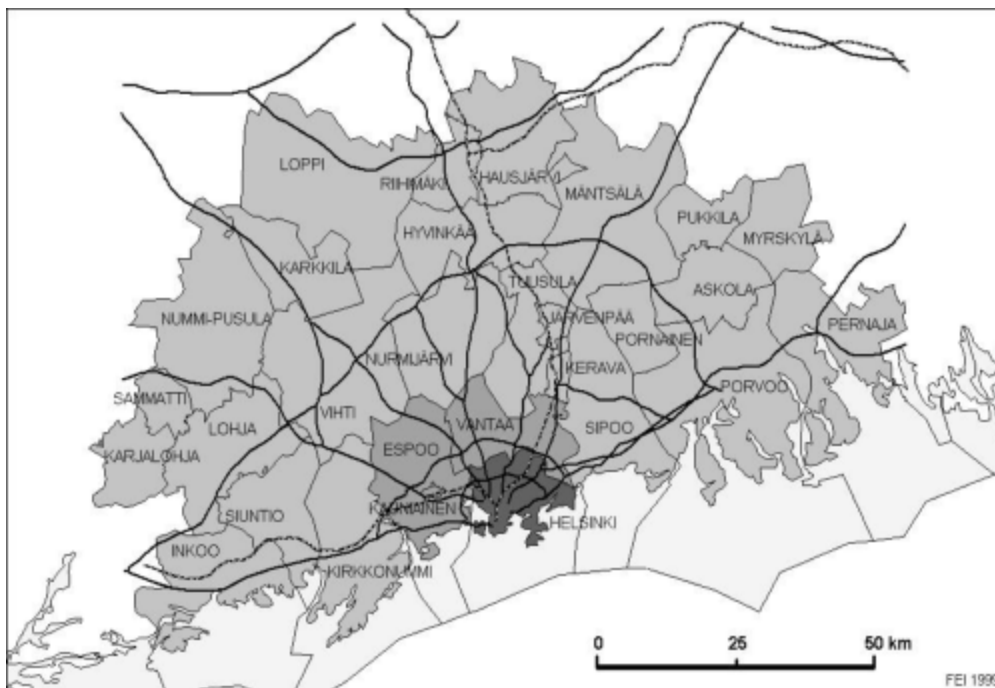


Figure 2: Helsinki commuting region

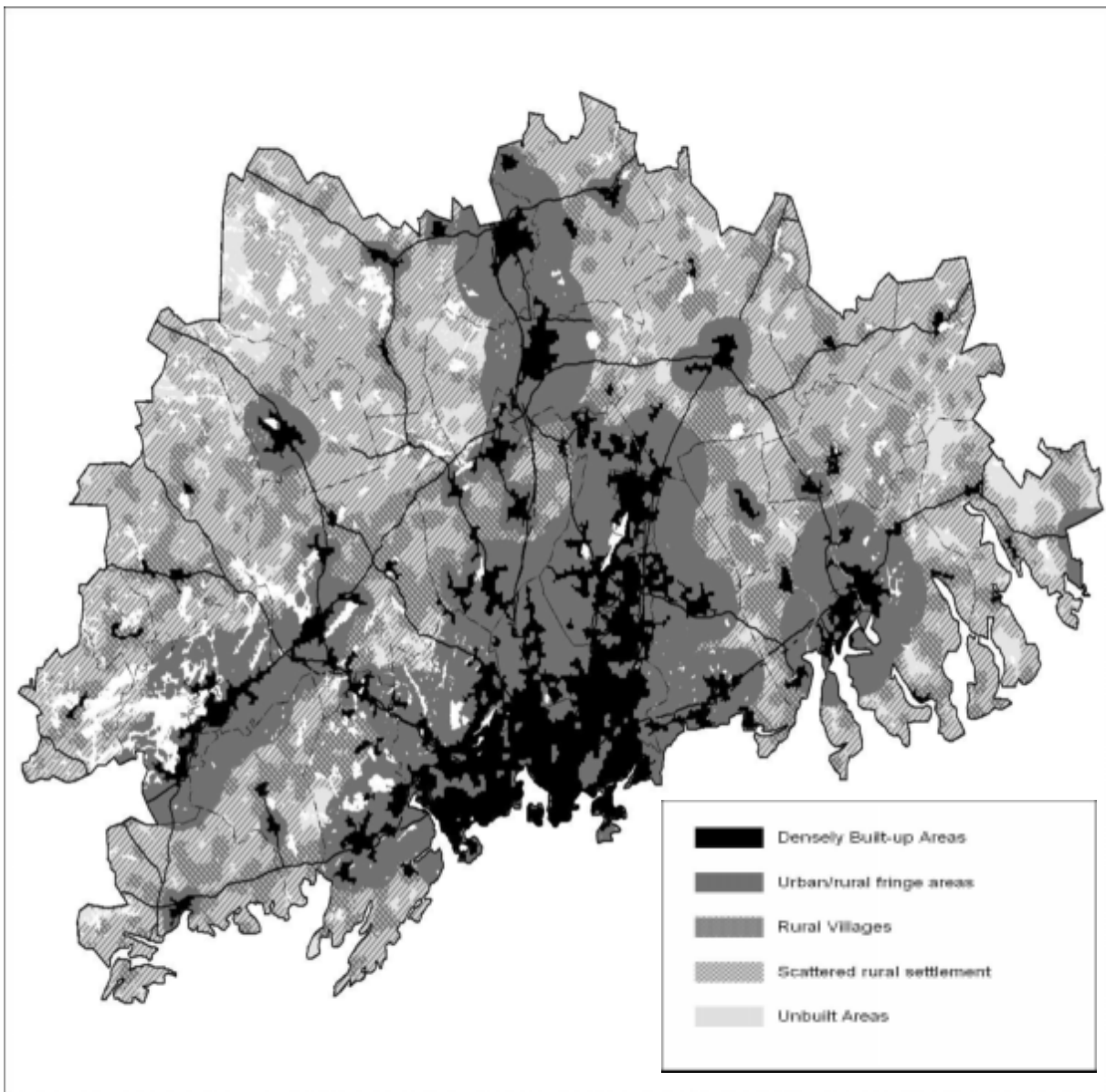


Figure 3: Settlement structure of Helsinki commuting region

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Urban-rural fringe areas are defined to cover a 5km-wide zone outside the main centre and 1 to 3km-wide zone outside other centres (depending on the population of the centre). *Rural villages* cover areas with a minimum of 17 buildings in max 1 km's distance from each other (not counting densely built-up areas). *Scattered rural settlements* are, respectively, defined to cover areas with 1 to 16 buildings in 1 km's distance from each other.

The densely built-up area and its fringes (black and dark grey areas) cover 38% of the commuting region and house the vast majority (97%) of the population (Table 1). Respectively, the rural areas outside of the dense settlements cover 62% of the area and house 3% of the population in Helsinki commuting region. These areas are rather well connected to the main infrastructure networks - thus the majority of the rural areas in Helsinki region can be classified as “accessible rural”, following the common sense typology of the Study Programme.

Table 1: Population of different settlement types in the Helsinki commuting region

Settlement types	Population	Jobs
Densely built-up areas	94,4 %	96,6 %
Urban/rural fringe areas	2,5 %	1,6 %
Rural villages	2,1 %	1,2 %
Scattered rural settlement	1,0 %	0,6 %
Unbuilt areas	0,0 %	0,0%

The dense settlements and their fringes account for 97% of the some 540 000 available jobs in Helsinki region, and the core area of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa alone for two thirds. There are 11 other centres with over 1000 workplaces each. In comparison with the other urban regions of Finland, the structure of the economic activities in Helsinki region is very service-dominated, and the structure of the service sector is closer to the other metropolitan regions of Europe. Typical functions comprise of financial and business services, wholesale trade, electronic and graphic industry and building. As usual in the capital cities, the role of national governance is notable. Also a lot of the decision making in the Finnish economy is done in Helsinki, as most of the headquarters of large companies are located in the capital. The role of the informational and cultural industries has been growing quickly during the decade. Some high-tech sectors even suffer from labour shortage.

1997	Employment
Primary	1,1 %
Secondary	20,4 %
Tertiary	76,4 %
Unknown	2,1 %

Table 2: Employment structure of Helsinki region

The education and research infrastructure of the region is diversified and of high quality. The investment in R&D activities is at a relatively high level. In Finland, nearly half of the people working in the informational sector had their workplaces in Helsinki region in 1995. The growing knowledge-intensive production together with the culture and media related industries are preconditions fostering the role of the region as the most important economic region of the country. This is also supported by the education level of the population in Helsinki region, which is above the national average. In 1997 13% of the Finnish adult population had a university degree. In Helsinki region the share was over 20%. Also the proportion of young people is at a higher level than the Finnish average. The unemployment has been falling rapidly, to the level of 10,2%, which is less than the Finnish average, 13,6%. However, there are no signs of reduction in the long-time unemployment.

2.3 Growth of the region

The recent trend of the Finnish regional development is tending towards a further concentration of the population. Migration surplus is, as mentioned, experienced in the few urban centres having a rich variety of economic activities, increasing international connections and a university. Helsinki region gets the largest share of the migration surplus. Alone in 1998 the population of the region grew by approximately 20 000 inhabitants. The core area receives approximately two thirds of the surplus, the surrounding municipalities the last third. The absolute growth is thus still highest in the core set of cities, but the zone of high relative growth in the

neighbouring municipalities. The more distant, separate sub-centres of the region (Hyvinkää, Lohja, Porvoo etc.) have also grown within the last 20 years, especially in the vicinity of their centres and the main traffic routes. In the rural areas some negative growth can be found in the areas of the lowest accessibility.

The growth in the core's neighbouring municipalities is also expected to continue. For example, the population of Kirkkonummi municipality (40 km to the west of Helsinki) is expected to rise from the present 29 000 by 10 000 within the next ten years. An interesting feature in the migration patterns of such rapidly growing municipalities is the origin of the population. The majority of the new Kirkkonummi residents, for example, come from the densely populated core of Helsinki region. They usually have far higher education and income levels than the population in Helsinki region on the average. This is also the general pattern: the municipalities neighbouring the core have managed to attract high-income families better than the other municipalities.

As the workplaces have not spread as far from the core of the region as the housing has, the journeys to work have grown in length. However, due to the faster traffic connections this has not always meant, that the journeys had grown in duration as well. The volume of the commuting from the municipalities outside of the core of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa has tripled since 1970. However, the majority of the population working in the core area still also lives in the core area. Within this area some 50% of the journeys to work are done by public transport. The people commuting from the more distant municipalities are more dependent on private cars. These long-distance commuters from the outside are mostly former residents of the core area.

Besides the growing linkages between the densely populated core and its neighbouring areas, new kind of linkages can also be seen within the core area. Travelling to work is increasingly criss-crossing the core area. The Helsinki city centre is losing its dominance as a centre of work, and the role of the sub-centres has grown. These sub-centres can also offer their inhabitants an increasing set of such services, that formerly were available only in the city centre of Helsinki.

The Helsinki region differs from the other growing urban regions of Finland in the sense that also most of the rural municipalities of the region benefit from the immigration surplus. During the periods of the economic growth the possible overheating of the real estate markets can first be seen in the most important commuter municipalities. Later this can be felt also on the fringes of the commuting region, as the search for dwellings and building land is directed to the more distant municipalities. The present growth cycle has again meant, that in several areas of the inner commuting region the available, readily planned plots of land owned by the municipalities have been sold out. This applies mostly to one-family housing, the demand of which has grown quickly. The rising prices of land and building seem to again channel the new settlements even further from the core area. The threat of uncontrolled urban sprawl is evident.

2.4 Opportunities for future development

Several actors of the public sector participate in the spatial development of Helsinki region. In Finland the field of spatial development is characterised by the strong role of the municipalities, and also by the recent establishment of the regional councils, which coordinate and focus development work in their respective areas. Most of the Helsinki region belongs to the area of Uusimaa Regional Council, the eastern municipalities to the neighbouring council. Additionally, the cities of the core area (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen) have established a joint municipal organisation (called YTV) for cooperation in waste management, public transport, air quality management etc.

The national regional policy of Finland promotes an independent development of the regions and a good regional balance. This is done by means of programme-based regional policy. When considering the economical development, The Centre of Expertise Programme supports regional specialization and cooperation between different centres. There are 14 regional Centres of Expertise and two nationwide networks participating in the programme. The programme of Uusimaa regional council is being carried out by Culminatum Ltd, which was established in 1995, as a joint venture of region's universities and other research institutions, municipalities and private companies. The

aims of Culminatium are to transfer expertise from universities and research centres to business, to promote the establishment and growth of high technology enterprises and to improve the utilization of new technology in SMEs. Special attention is given to the clusters of gene technology, cultural industry, software product business, new media plus active materials and microsystem.

The concept of Culminatium is quite promising in the present situation, where the increasingly international companies need not only the global connections but also a good local operating climate. As the position of Helsinki region in relation to the global production chains is connected to the strong clusters in the area, the ability of the actors to provide the important qualifications becomes crucial. The success of the programme will be proved in the future, but the setting looks encouraging. Separate from Culminatium, the municipalities also continue their independent promotion programmes.

Looking at the situation of the rapidly growing high-tech and other knowledge based firms, one can notice that they have not spread themselves throughout the region, but have become concentrated in certain, rather central areas. The central and western Helsinki together with the eastern Espoo are the most favoured locations. The queries among the high-tech firms of the region reveal, that the most important factors affecting their location preferences are good traffic connections and the presence of other high-tech firms. The more service-oriented firms stressed also the vicinity of the customers, whereas the more R&D-oriented considered the presence of universities and other research institutions as more important. In the future, it seems that the location patterns of the high-tech firms tend rather to concentration than to dispersion. The existing nodes attract new firms as long as there is capacity left for enlargement.

From the business perspective, the regional cooperation in improving the region's qualifications is effective, but the intensive growth of the region calls for such cooperation structures in the other spheres of life as well. The strengths of the region should be gathered together in order to direct them effectively in the key issues of the region's development. For example, the tasks of the mentioned joint municipal organisation (YTV) remain oriented to technical services, but the organisation has no coordinating, strategic role.

There is a special need for the strategic approach in the field of housing policy, which has remained strictly in municipalities' own control. This has fostered competition, especially in attracting the better-off tax-payers. This competitive image game can have harmful impacts, as it does not pay much attention to the general framework of regional development. The estimated population growth in the region would require as much as 200 000 new homes before year 2020. However now, after years of no coordinating measures, new initiatives have been proposed. Last year, as a result of the Regional Council's urban policy programme, a study of possible measures in the field was carried out. This year the Finnish government has published its general working programme of housing policy and later set a working group to study the possible ways to increase cooperation in Helsinki region's housing policy.

3 Helsinki region and its countryside - development opportunities

Helsinki region can well be described with the general trends of European rural development presented in the 2.3. report of the Study Programme (11 June 1999). The urban and rural areas of the region are as such quite dependent on each other. As a general trend, rural areas are turning from production spaces to consumption spaces, and this is true also in the Helsinki region. The accessible countryside attracts migrants, often with its positive image as a place of residence. The countryside can be connected to several positive features, such as security, peacefulness, being close to nature and having control over one's own life. The areas having a positive image as residential areas and offering good environmental quality might thus be the most benefiting areas in the future.

Also the trend of a growing separation between places of residence and places of work can be observed in Helsinki region. As the population grows, the places of residence get spread over a large area, but the places of work remain concentrated. The commuting distances in Helsinki region are notably longer than in the rest of Finland. Not only the improving traffic connections, but also the

rapidly developing information technology may have an effect on the location decisions of people and enterprises. In Finland the use of information and communication technology has been greatly emphasized in several official development strategies. Finland has been pursuing a role as “the laboratory of the information society” in Europe. Thus one could suppose that information technology could be utilized also in the promotion of rural-urban partnership.

3.1 Description of the rural areas

Drawing the line between rural and urban areas is not unambiguous. In the Finnish context, in other words in a large and sparsely populated country, the rural and the urban can mean something significantly different than in central and southern Europe. In Finnish regional and rural policy, the mostly used definition of “the rural” is based on the settlement structure: rural areas include the scattered settlements plus those densely populated zones that have under 500 inhabitants. In this case study, however, rural areas are defined as including the rural villages, scattered rural settlement, unbuilt areas and partly also the urban-rural fringe areas (Figure 3, page 4).

Although Helsinki region belongs to the most densely populated and urbanised areas of the country, large areas in the region can be characterised as dominantly rural. Economically these areas are integrated to the core area and other centres. Culturally and socially there are no major differences between the rural and urban areas, neither in lifestyles nor in the standard of housing. The dense urban and infrastructural network in the region is as such a good base for the rural-urban interaction. The large volume of built areas cuts the rural areas into smaller entities than in the other Finnish regions. However, the region includes also wide agricultural landscapes, a variety of natural environments, and many old cultural landscapes. The rural areas have a diverse employment structure: services have a smaller share than in the centres, industry and agriculture a bigger share.

Creating a typology of the rural areas of Helsinki region, the majority can be classified as rural commuting areas. This type stretches out from the core area along the railroads and motorways and also surrounds the more distant centres of the region. In the rural commuting areas the city-based and traditionally countryside-based functions get mixed. Housing, recreation and other new functions can be in conflict with the traditional rural activities, but at their best, they can support the existing services and sources of income as well as create new ones.

In addition to the rural commuting areas, Helsinki region includes coastal rural areas and the Baltic islands. They are characterised by old cultural environments, Swedish-speaking population, fishery traditions, agriculture and an employment structure dominated by the service sector. There are lots of summer cottages along the coastline. The nature on the islands is very vulnerable.

Thirdly, Helsinki region includes also traditional rural areas, where agriculture still is a relatively important source of income. In the whole Helsinki region the primary sector accounted for 1% of the employment structure, secondary sector for 20% and tertiary for 76%, in 1997 (the remaining 2%: unknown). In the small, distant and thus less commuting dominated municipalities the primary sector still accounted for 15-30% of the employment, the Finnish average being 6%.

3.2 Rural sources of income - old and new

Regarding the natural conditions, Helsinki region belongs to the best agricultural areas in Finland. The relatively mild climate with a longer growing season has favoured especially grain cultivation. There have been some signs of a turn towards multifunctionality: many farmers have additional sources of income. The vicinity of the large urban region as such has no decisive role in the agricultural production. At least according to the local farmers, the problems of profitability (e.g. due to situation influenced by the CAP) are present also in this well-off part of the country. It can be noted, that the agricultural production in Helsinki region has not especially concentrated on meeting the new potential demand from the consumers’ side, such as organic farming. This kind of products could well become popular among the well-educated, middle class population living in the capital,

many having ecological values. The future options of agriculture in the region point into two directions, similar with general European trends: either increasing the size of the farms, or specialisation combined with additional sources of income.

In the field of tourism, Helsinki region can offer large areas of protected nature, recreational areas and old cultural landscapes. The entrepreneurship of rural tourism is not of a very large scale. This can be explained partly by the strong tradition of grain cultivation, partly by the other employment opportunities available in the large urban region. The following weaknesses in the tourism services have been observed: lack of suitable attractions and packages for half-day or one-day trips, lack of farm tourism and bed and breakfast -services and the scarcity of services in the archipelago. The potential market for short-term recreational activities and tourism would be big.

In Finland the ownership of summer cottages is very common, and there are plenty of them in the Helsinki region as well. In some rural municipalities summer residents can even double the population. These part-time or summertime residents bring additional buying power to the rural areas and can thus support the service network. On the other hand, summer housing and tourism can harm the environment especially in the coastal regions and in the archipelago.

3.3 Housing and commuting

As explained in chapter 2, the urban-rural relationship in Helsinki region consists mainly about the spread of housing to the surrounding municipalities and rural areas. Although this causes pressure on land use, in this respect Helsinki region differs from many European urban regions. While in central and southern Europe the urban sprawl can be problematic due to the loss of agricultural land, in Finland the lack of such land is generally speaking not a big problem. Locally, at the village or farm level, urban and rural land use forms and values may of course collide with each other.

The development trends of rural population are connected to the above-mentioned changes of Finland's territorial structure - concentration on the national scale and parallel spreading of housing on the regional scale. The growth of the municipalities bordering the core area is directly connected to the enlargement of the region's real estate markets towards the areas of lower prices of land. These municipalities get new residents and can benefit from the dynamic image, but have to face serious challenges of providing the building land and the required services. Commuting is naturally strongest in the bordering municipalities, where the share of residents commuting to the core is close to 50%. The volume of commuting is clearly dependent on the time distance from the core area.

The enlargement of intensive commuting can be explained, in addition to the population pressure and high prices, also by the increased private car ownership and the rapid traffic connections. Also the typical Finnish housing preferences have affected the migration patterns. When the tight bond between places of residence and places of work is loosening, the migration decisions can increasingly be based on one's own housing preferences. For the most of the Finns the ideal is a one-family house in a sparsely built, close-to-nature environment. The Finnish urban culture has been described as very thin and young: the massive urbanisation started relatively late. It has also been said that the Finns have moved to the cities without really adapting the urban way of life. The strong appreciation of the described housing ideal can be connected to this fact. Also the present trends in people's values, such as individualism, might have contributed to the will to move to the countryside. From this point of view, the main strength of the Helsinki region rural areas is their appreciation as a residential environment.

It is also interesting to study the background of the people migrating to the countryside. In a research project analysing the composition of the commuter flows it has been found out, that a typical commuter is a white-collar employee working in the service sector. Another study on the professional "elites" working in information technology and cultural industries has shown, that the people working on the cultural sector preferred living in the urban surroundings, whereas the high-tech professionals lived more often in the suburban and other more remote areas.

3.4 Communication and information technologies

The increased commuting distances and the migration to the areas outside the dense settlements cause dispersion of the settlement structure, which has negative effects on the environment. In the municipalities outside the core area that have access to the rail, over 50% of the commuters use train on their journeys to work, but elsewhere outside the core area the private car is clearly dominating. Teleworking has often been proposed as a good way to reduce the negative impacts of long-distance commuting. (Here teleworking is defined as part-time or full-time work outside the main premises of the employer, often including the use of advanced information technology.) Teleworking is beneficial both for the city and the countryside, and thus a good starting point for partnership and co-operation. The use of information technology in general has rapidly grown in Finland, but teleworking has not become as usual as wished. In Helsinki region the opportunities to increase the number of teleworkers are evident, as the journeys to work are the longest in Finland and the number of people employed in the informational sector is high. Also such teleworking that requires weekly visits to the core area is here unproblematic. Especially the municipalities in the outer fringe of the commuting area would be suitable areas for the increased teleworking.

A study among the commuters to the core area of Helsinki region it was found out, that one third of them worked also at home. Those working also at home were mostly white-collar employees or entrepreneurs. The share of work done at home increased with the length of the journey to work. There was a clear interest in increased use of teleworking - far greater than the present organisational settings in the workplace and the attitudes of the employers allow.

The potential promise of information and communication technology includes also teleservices. In Finland, the development of both private and public services is characterised by increasing size and decreasing density of the service units (compare: SPESP report 2.3. and imposing economy of scale on services). After the disappearance of the local shop and the post office, the elementary school is the last remaining service of many rural villages. Although the cycle of disappearing services is more severe in the peripheric rural areas, the same threat is present also in the more accessible countryside. In Helsinki region, those rural commuters that use private cars on their way to work very often buy their daily goods outside the municipality they live in. The commuting has thus negative impacts on the availability of services in the local community. One possibility to maintain necessary services is to bring them together into "multiservice-centres". The communication technology can also support the services of the villages, with the help of teleservices. However, while all the services and employment opportunities can be found in the nearby centres, the will for improving locally-based services and entrepreneurship is not very strong.

3.5 Policy example: Local community and the rural-urban partnership

What does the vicinity of the core area mean in an individual rural village of Helsinki region? All the villages have not lost population or jobs, nor services, though the threat is often present. The villages of Helsinki region are relatively heterogenic in their population structure. The villages with many commuters can socially get divided into two parts - the community of newcomers and the one of "original" residents. This is how rural-urban interaction can weaken the local community.

Villages can serve as important nodes in avoiding the dispersion of the settlement structure. It would be reasonable to channel new housing to the villages. This would also support the strength of the village community and the preservation of village landscapes. Finland has got a long tradition of village activity groups, and the EU-based and -funded rural development initiatives are often put into practice in the village level.

Rural-urban interaction can also be promoted culturally, starting from the local initiatives between individual villages and urban quarters. An example of such interaction is the project of

Rural-Urban Interaction (1997-99) launched by the Uusimaa Regional Council. The purpose of the project has been to support the partnership by the exchange of experiences and by getting to know the lines of action of different local actors. Ways to increase the interaction have included co-operation networks of schools, NGOs and the village boards, development initiatives of tourism, projects for increasing the environmental quality, development of enterprises' sub-contracting and co-operation networks, improving the producer-consumer contacts in agricultural product marketing, teleworking and cultural co-operation, and the establishment of a common, electric information network among the participating villages. Among the intended target groups of the project were the village activity groups and their counterparts in the urban quarters, other voluntary organisations, schools, universities and private firms. Within the Helsinki region 11 villages and numerous urban counterparts have participated in the project.

The project has been financed in co-operation with Uusimaa Regional Council, some other regional institutions and the participating municipalities. It has been carried out by one full-time consultant. The main task of the consultant is the general co-ordination of the project "umbrella", under which the concrete ideas of co-operation can freely be proposed. The project also offers the participating actors training according to their needs (e.g. courses on tourism promotion and marketing). In brief, the project is about supporting the creation of networks among the local actors. The new key idea of the project seems to be, that fostering the economic activities and the social/cultural interaction can support each other.

3.6 Governance and policy making: From interaction to partnership?

In the latest regional and rural policy debates and strategies in Finland the rural-urban interaction has been a popular slogan. What is interesting in the Finnish debate is that the word "interaction" is used far more often than the word "partnership". In Helsinki region, the interaction between the city and the countryside is a natural and obvious phenomenon. What then could be a real partnership - understood as an active common policy?

When looking for one single actor suitable for the promotion of rural-urban partnership, the best candidate is Uusimaa Regional Council. The Council covers territorially the whole region, including both the urban and the rural areas - even though some eastern municipalities of the commuting region belong to the neighbouring Council (Itä-Uusimaa). Regional Councils are the official regional development authorities in Finland (although they as joint organisations of municipalities have very little executive power themselves), and thus they have been working actively on rural development. Uusimaa Regional Council has prepared a rural strategy, and also a regional development programme. The status of these programmes is to guide not only the Council itself, but also all the other actors in the region: the municipalities, state authorities, universities, firms and business organisations and other institutions, and they have also been prepared in co-operation with these actors. In practice the programmes have been implemented e.g. through several separate projects, for example the above-mentioned Rural-Urban Interaction Project.

However, in spite of all regional policy initiatives, the power of decision lies strongly in the municipalities. An interesting future question is, what kind of policy do the three big core cities - Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa - adapt towards the rural areas. One could suppose that the ever-increasing population and the housing policy problems would prompt the ideas of rural-urban partnership and regional co-operation. The rural areas neighbouring the core would certainly benefit from co-operation, especially when considering land use policy and public transport systems. It would also be useful to consider the future role of the joint municipal organisation (YTV) in this question. A partial answer to the lack of co-operation in rural-urban matters would be networking of different actors. Free-form, project-based co-operation might better avoid the structural constraints (e.g. two different regional Councils in the region; strong interests and conflicts between the core municipalities; an imbalance between the core and the smaller municipalities).

4 Conclusions

When considering the role of the rural areas in the Helsinki commuting area, it is obvious that they can no way be compared to the large, economically and culturally dominant core area. However, the growth of the region generates a real need for an active rural-urban partnership. On the other hand, the rural areas need the new partnership thinking, if they want to keep their development in their own control. The accessible rural areas of the Helsinki region do survive well with the help of the work opportunities and services of the core area, but through active measures they could avoid turning into a “rural suburb” with no own services, local entrepreneurship or sources of income. In the present situation, interaction between the rural and the urban is of a wide scale in the region; however partnership, understood as an active policy, is only in the beginning.

Helsinki region’s know-how, the growing informational sector and the presence of high-tech and other knowledge-based firms have not been properly utilized in the developing of the rural areas. Thus, at the moment, the key questions in the regional development on the whole are not the same as the key questions in rural development - except in the sense that the rural areas can indirectly benefit from the economic growth of the core area.

What is crucial in the future development of Helsinki region’s rural areas is firstly, the role of small and medium-sized enterprises and their networking capability. Secondly, the countryside can serve as a pleasant residential environment, meeting middle class values and typical Finnish housing ideals, and being suitable for one-family house construction. In fact, when considering the general trends in the regional development in Finland, the role of the accessible rural areas in the Helsinki region can be seen in a different light. While the population concentrates more and more in the Helsinki region, but the values and housing ideals prefer sparsely populated areas, the rural areas of the region may be winners in the future. However, without any active policy or regional co-operation the same development can lead to an uncontrolled and environmentally harmful dispersion of the settlement structure.