

## Connectivity of rural older people in a changing countryside

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This afternoon my contribution will concentrate on the *demand side* of the subject of connectivity which is central in your project. I will ask your special attention for the *people* in the 'people-link-activity' model, especially older people, their well-being and life satisfaction. My *leading questions* are: Are people - and more in particular older people - able to do what they want to do, also in remote rural places, and is a remote rural place demanding and/or supportive for older people? And of course I will try to answer the question what role digital connectivity can play for the activity patterns of older people in the countryside.

My presentation is structured on *two main topics*.

*First* of all I want to discuss *rural change*. Too often 'change in the countryside' is described as local loss. Consequently the solutions for participation and connectivity problems of rural inhabitants are too often developed without an adequate analysis of what is going on in rural places and the implications of rural change for the inhabitants. My perspective being the people, rural change is not about areas and regions but more about rural settlements, villages, and about villagers. And older villagers, older adults living in villages, are first of all ordinary villagers.

In the *second* part of my contribution I will pay special attention to the topic of *rural ageing*. I will summarize some lessons learnt from European research projects directed at the life satisfaction of older people in rural areas in which I was engaged, together with some conclusions from smaller research projects at my university. The OPERA project (Older People in Europe's Rural Areas) was directed at providing comparable empirical data about the *social integration* of older people in rural areas in six European countries. The European Study on Adult Well-Being (ESAW) was more ambitious in the identification and modelling of factors contributing to *life satisfaction* of older people. I will also present some figures about the *use of internet* by older people in the Dutch countryside.

First of all I would like to warn you as participants in an international European project. I will of course not deny that projects like *Itract* are useful. They always offer participants a chance to understand their own situation better and to learn from good practices in other countries. But although you are all focused on *rural areas*, I want to emphasize that *rurality* is still 'nation specific' within this part of Europe.

According to OECD criteria, the Netherlands have no countryside. However, from a national survey we know that 5 million (out of almost 17 million) inhabitants in the Netherlands live in settlements that inhabitants themselves regard as rural. Almost 2 million people live in rural settlements that are small and remote within the Dutch context. But the meaning of words like 'rural', 'small' and 'remote' *differs* between European nations. In the Netherlands the inhabitants of villages are generally *positive* about the local quality of life, even *more* positive in comparison with the inhabitants of urban areas. This feeling is created by a good residential quality, a strong local commitment and good access of service and employment centres. This last quality results from a

high rate of car ownership, a sufficient infrastructure and a settlement system with relatively short distances to centres with at least 40.000 inhabitants in the whole country.

*Rural change* in the advanced and urbanised countries in this part of Europe is often characterised as a *transition from a productive order towards a consumptive order*. Changes in the economic structure and the technology of mobility are at the basis of this transition. Economies dominated by agriculture and manufacturing were transformed into *post-industrial economies* dominated by the tertiary and quaternary sector. Developing transport technology and growing prosperity resulted in rising car ownership which stimulated *individual mobility*. These developments changed the 'day path' of many villagers - the daily routines, especially home-work movement - completely. As I will show you later on, this development is still going on. Many relations, especially the functional-economic ones, changed from a local level to a regional level.

From a *perspective of individual villages and the villagers* rural change is often described in a negative way, regarded as loss. And indeed from a local perspective much employment and many services disappeared in the latter half of the previous century, and this process of restructuring is still going on. Many small villages even lost services that were seen as *basic*: like a grocery shop, a primary school and a bus stop. At the same time the *residential function* became more and more important locally. And even here we saw an important change. Villages have become part of a regional housing market. Instead of living in the village where you were *born and have grown up*, living in a village became a matter of *choice* for a growing number of rural households. Sometimes even for a certain period in the life span. Thus the 'life path' - the migration history - of many villagers changed also.

The change of villages can be described as a *transition from relatively autonomous villages towards more or less residential villages* within regional housing markets. The result of this regionalisation of especially functional-economic and social relations in the past fifty years is that villagers are less attached to their villages functionally and socially. In a recently published report of the Netherlands Institute of Social Research the attachment of Dutch villagers is analysed. In the report different types of local attachment are discerned. For *functional attachment* the upscaling of life is most evident. Most Dutch villagers work, shop and go out mainly outside their village. Almost all inhabitants leave the village at least weekly, and a large minority (42 percent) do so almost daily. The importance of the outside world is also evident for the *social attachment* of villagers. Most villagers have more friends and acquaintances living outside than within the village and a third of all Dutch villagers have no friends at all in their own village. This regionalisation process naturally had immense consequences for the activity patterns of the rural population. For most villagers the consequences are *positive*: the number and the quality of opportunities for participation in all kind of activities has grown tremendously. A Dutch journalist recently described the changes in the latter half of the previous century in the Dutch society as 'the *Golden Years*'. And we have no reason to doubt that in general the inhabitants of Dutch villages took part in this positive development.

There are however *three additional issues* to be discussed here. *Firstly*: the regionalisation process is strongly dependent on high connectivity, which means a good infrastructure and almost individualised means of transport. And as always there are *winners and losers*. *Secondly*: regionalisation also means another frame of mind: the identity of places and the way villagers are attached to their village is changing. *Thirdly*: policymakers are faced with complex problems since the

path of rural change differs between places and between people, which makes it difficult to do social justice and to be efficient.

There were - and still are – both *winners* and *losers* in Dutch villages in the regionalisation process of functional and social relations. Not everybody is able to take part in this process because of *resources* and *competences*. Villagers without a car and without a driving license can have access problems to carry out their activities. Children, handicapped people, older women without a driving license, the rural poor and older people with dependencies can be vulnerable in small and remote villages. Especially because public transport does not offer a suitable alternative for the private car. The cited research of the Netherlands Institute of Social Research concludes that certain groups of villagers are not attached but *tied* to their village: less mobile villagers such as people aged 75 or older and villagers with limited financial resources show a relatively high functional attachment to their village and at the same time they have fewer social contacts in the village and feel less valued by fellow villagers. This may be an even bigger problem when these inhabitants are ‘trapped in’ the village, because they are not able to make a move within the regional housing market to a place that offers better access opportunities.

Regionalisation also implies a *mental change* and a change in the *character of local attachment*. Apart from the upscaling of functional and social relations, the emotional attachment to the village is changing. This relates to the fact that cultural relations and political relations show a *downscaling* instead of an upscaling. Because of the growing importance of the own dwelling, people have become more and more interested in the quality of their dwelling and the immediate residential environment. The emotional place attachment of villagers is changing from a traditional *village bond* based on local roots towards *local consciousness* or *village pride* based on the choice for a specific dwelling within a regional housing market. Today the experienced local quality of life depends more on ‘*person-environment fit*’. Feeling at home in the village and having a say about the quality of the immediate environment, things like safety and annoyance, are crucial. However, when villagers fear another local loss - the closing down of a local school, changes in the frequency of public transport, or the move of a local firm to a regional business park - they are often inclined to reflect from a frame of reference that corresponds with the autonomous village. Even when villagers themselves show a regionalised activity pattern they quite often reflect very traditionally on local change. This resistance to change is in my opinion more the result of feelings of uncertainty about the future and a resistance against a changing identity of their village. However, at the same time a growing number of inhabitants faces change with a frame of reference that belongs to the residential village.

Policymakers in the Dutch countryside are faced with constant change and with different kinds of rurality: differences between places and differences between people. The *diversity of villages* is moving from an old diversity of relatively autonomous villages to a new diversity of residential villages. Most villages are somewhere in between, at a different stage of this transition, but they are all changing in this direction. At the same time *villagers are different and changing* in the way they face this changing reality. As a result rural policymakers are confronted with different realities and different opinions about reality. It is difficult for them to do social justice to people and to be efficient at the same time. Although many issues are presented on a local scale, the scale of the village, this is seldom the appropriate level to find a solution. A regional approach with attention for individual justice is more realistic and more efficient than a local approach with attention for territorial justice in which case all inhabitants are dependent on a local solution.

I will conclude this part of my talk with a presentation of unpublished maps, made by Poorthuis and Tordoir, which describe the *changing movement patterns of the Dutch population for the period 1985 – 2009*. The maps describe the changes in the structure of daily movements of citizens for work, education, recreation and social relations between municipalities and can be split up for motives and personal characteristics. The maps illustrate the ongoing process of regionalisation, most of the time within urban but also rural regions. The difference between the two maps presented illustrate a generation effect. The population over 40 shows a growing orientation on nearby municipalities and the nearest urban centre. The population under 40 shows a declining orientation on nearby urban centres and a growing orientation on urban centres at a distance. It illustrates that we experience a new stage of regionalisation in functional and social relations.

What about *older rural people in the regionalising countryside of Europe*?

What lessons can be learned from the two European projects I mentioned in my introduction? The population of Europe is ageing and *rural regions are ageing even faster*. This is caused by general changes in population structure and age selective migration patterns. However, within Europe important *national differences* in rural ageing exist. In the OPERA study the patterns of integration and participation of older people in their villages varied across the countries and a simple East-West divide was not found either. This diversity can be understood as resulting from the cultural context of European nations and the way the civil societies have developed nationally. The ESAW study also concluded that differences between Europe's nations are important for the life satisfaction of older people in Europe. Interestingly the effects of national differences were even more important for differences in life satisfaction than age-related differences. National differences could be interpreted as a result of national differences in age structure, the economic situation and the welfare system. Although data were collected for urban and rural older people in each of the six ESAW nations, the differences in life satisfaction were only studied with attention for the meaning of the national context. Regarding the Dutch part of the study Marieke van der Meer also paid attention to the consequences of differences between local contexts. I will discuss this later.

Another important conclusion from these projects, and also conceptualised in social gerontology, is that the *diversity of older people in rural areas is growing*. Part of this diversity is *age-related*. Most obvious are the many differences between the young-old and the old-old. There are however *two groups of age-related characteristics of older people*. The first group is related to the process of growing old: loss of health, social roles and social capital. The second group of characteristics is related to the date of birth and the connected life history.

*Growing old* means *loss* now or in the near future. But higher education, a better lifestyle, changes in cure and care and new technology can postpone and compensate losses. As a consequence the relation between loss of health and dependency of older people is less strong nowadays than in the past. With regard to new technology in connectivity, the electronic bike and mobility scooter, are examples of this positive development.

The second kind of age-related characteristics describe *differences between successive generations*. Characteristics that people take with them when they grow old. Important characteristics for the Dutch older rural people are their level of education, experience with paid labour, car use of women and ICT experience. Other important generation differences are migration history and activity patterns. The 'young-old' often have a much wider 'life path' and 'day path' than the 'old-old', with

important consequences for support networks and the kind of place attachment. The maps of Poorthuis and Tordoir illustrate that this development of scale enlargement has not finished yet. As a result the old people of the future will be very different from today's older people.

A more important aspect of the growing diversity of rural older people is the difference between *successful* and *vulnerable* older people, between the 'elected' and the 'excluded', between those older people able to choose a residential location consistent with their wishes where they experience 'person-environment fit' and those older people who reside in a village that they had to take for granted and where they experience rejection and marginalisation. I already mentioned that less mobile Dutch villagers, like older villagers over 75 and villagers with a low income, are at risk because they are tied to their village and at the same time have fewer social contacts and feel less valued by fellow villagers. Older people over 75 are at the moment underrepresented in Dutch small villages, especially in regions with a shrinking population. This relates to patterns of selective migration because of special housing and old people's homes in key villages. This pattern will change because of the tendency for older people to remain independent in their own dwelling as long as possible.

*Vulnerability* of older people is a multidimensional and cumulative concept. Older people who have to cope with functional dependencies at an individual level and with a lack of resources, a low income and living alone at the household level, are more often dissatisfied and feel unsafe in a *demanding* local environment. *Demanding places* for older people are the less affluent neighbourhoods and villages in the Netherlands. This was one of the conclusions by Marieke van der Meer within the Dutch part of the ESAW-study. Looking at the differences between various regions within the Netherlands and between various residential environments within these regions a variety of patterns can be discerned. In a relatively peripheral region like Drenthe, the less affluent, less popular villages are probably the most demanding, whereas within urban regions in the Randstad the less affluent neighbourhoods in the big cities are the most demanding. The less affluent villages in Drenthe show relatively large numbers of older people with a low level of satisfaction, numbers which are even higher than the less affluent neighbourhoods in the regional centre and almost as high as the less affluent urban neighbourhoods in the Randstad.

Will the demanding character of small and less affluent villages be *compensated* by a *supportive village community*? Although stereotypical images exist of older people deeply embedded in a supportive village community, this image is not supported by recent evidence. The Netherlands Institute of Social Research concludes that small Dutch villages show a limited social attachment and that the inhabitants of small villages are not notably more willing to help their neighbours.

In what ways can ICT contribute to the well-being of older people especially in small villages? In the recent report about Dutch villages carried out by the Netherlands Institute of Social Research, a table is presented about daily use of ICT in different types of rural settlements. I asked Lotte Vermeij of the Netherlands Institute of Social Research to make an additional analysis about the use of ICT by different groups of older people in different rural contexts. With such figures it will be possible to test the assumption in the paper of Salemink and Strijker, which states that application of ICT is lagging behind in rural places, especially for those inhabitants in need of such technologies.

The *use of ICT* is an age-related variable of the second kind. It shows strong differences between generations and we may expect a continued use of ICT in later life when it was started at an early age. This diagram shows the percentages of Dutch villagers not using the telephone and not using the

internet in three different ways, for subsequent age groups. Telephone use is clearly not age-related. One may conclude that many Dutch older rural people are non-users of ICT at the moment, especially the potentially vulnerable older age group. But the proportion of older rural people that will use ICT will increase in the future decades. The idea that the rural population living relatively remote from ICT-infrastructure is more often non-user is not strongly supported. People living outside the village are slightly more often non-users with respect to only following people and posting information on the internet. A summarising variable combining the frequency of the three types of internet use, controlled for individual characteristics, also show a little lower use in villages with less than 1000 inhabitants and for people living outside of the villages. But the differences are very small.

I would like to finish with some conclusions.

- Rurality and rural ageing are in Europe still nation specific. Changes in the national context will have important implications for (rural) older people.
- We are on the eve of a new period of regionalisation which will change the geography of our countries and the position of rural places.
- We are witnessing a growing diversity of rural older people: a divide between older people with multiple disadvantages (unhealthy, lonely, poor, less mobile, living in demanding and less-supportive villages) and older people who are able to choose a rural place with a beneficial 'person-environment fit'.
- Small remote, less affluent villages are potentially demanding environments for vulnerable older people. At the same time expectations about the supportive character of these communities are low.
- Many rural older people are still non-users of ICT. There is no strong evidence that lack of adequate ICT infrastructure within the countryside is related to the application of ICT-use.

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