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Meanings of 'The Local' in a Swedish Rural Development Organization – All Sweden Shall Live!

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Abstract

Organized rural development in Sweden can be described at two levels; a local level with a large number of local actors organized in a so-called village-action movement, and a national level where political parties and the government present different suggestions on how to develop rural areas. However, characteristic for Sweden is also a close relationship between these two levels and a bottom-up perspective encouraging local initiatives, which is exemplified by All Sweden Shall Live (ASSL); a general rural development organization characterized by both policy-making ambitions and support of local development projects.

A central but also ambiguous concept in the organization ASSL's campaigns and ideology is 'the local,' and with discourse theory, as a point of departure, this case-study examines how different meanings of 'the local' are used to advocate investments in local perspectives and local measures. Special attention is directed towards how meanings of 'the local' form a 'fantasy,' an emotional and ideological worldview, and how this worldview is of importance in the organization's self-legitimization and for its potential as an agent of political mobilization. While ASSL is a Swedish organization, the subject is of general relevance because ideological investments in both 'the local' and 'the regional' are common, for example, in processes of relocalization—local responses to globalization—and in arguments about the importance of localities and regions in a global economy. Furthermore, the paper illustrates how such investments can have unexpected effects such as the transfer of responsibility for rural development from the government to local actors.

Keywords: rural development; local; discourse theory; ideological fantasy; urban norm

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1.0 Introduction

Organized rural development in Sweden can be described at two levels. First, there are so-called village-action movements that operate primarily at a local level that consist of a large number of different actors—sometimes organized into neighbourhood councils or local history societies—whose ambitions are to locally develop (or at least preserve the history of) villages and rural areas threatened by depopulation. The village-action movement can be seen as a manifestation of the general Swedish popular movement. Second, rural development is a question of politics and policymaking on a national and regional level. Political parties, the government, and county administrative boards present different suggestions for how to develop Swedish rural areas and to counteract the processes of urbanization and the dismantling of the

welfare sector in rural areas. Characteristic for Sweden is the close relation between these two levels (Gunnarsdotter, 2003) and a bottom-up perspective that encourages local initiatives (Havnevik & Malmer, 1999). This ambition can be exemplified by All Sweden Shall Live (ASSL), a national rural development organization that comprises both policymaking ambitions (or efforts to influence policymaking) and support of local/regional actors and local/regional development projects.

ASSL was founded in 1989 as a response to the depopulation of rural areas and as a result of a national campaign with the same name. The organization receives government funding (around 15 million SEK/year), and it has assisted in the formation of almost 5000 village associations or action groups. ASSL also takes part in the organization of the National Rural Parliament, a biennial meeting that involves a large number of village representatives (up to 1000) and is considered to be a direct link to the government (Hedström & Littke 2011; Bond 2011; Halhead, 2004).

ASSL's general ambition has been described as follows: people should be able to live and work everywhere in Sweden, and the standard of living should not differ to any great extent between rural and urban areas (Elfström & Lundqvist, 2012, p.4). More precisely, ASSL's purpose is to support and provide information to local development groups and to provide tools for successful local work. Furthermore, ASSL describes itself as a member organization for local development groups and not a party political organization or a formal top-down organization (see Herlitz, 2002). Thus, questions regarding 'the local' are important aspects of ASSL, and the subject of this paper is the meanings ascribed to 'the local' by the organization. The word 'local' surfaces repeatedly in the documents produced by ASSL, and it is simultaneously the object of engagement as well as the subject in the organization's struggle for a living countryside.

1.1 Aim

With the ASSL organization as a point of departure, the aim of this paper is to describe and analyse different meanings of 'the local,' and how (ideological) investments in 'the local' are motivated. Special attention is directed to how meanings of 'the local' form a 'fantasy'—an emotional and ideological worldview—and how this worldview is of importance in the organization's self-legitimization and for its potential as an agent of political mobilization. While ASSL is a Swedish organization, the subject is of general relevance because ideological investments in both 'the local' and 'the regional' are common, for example, in processes of relocalization—local responses to globalization (Woods, 2013)—and in arguments about the importance of localities and regions in a global economy (Florida, 1995). Furthermore, this paper illustrates how such investments can have unexpected effects such as the transfer of responsibility for rural development from the government to local actors.

1.2 Perspectives on ASSL and 'The Local'

This paper relates to investigations of local and rural development corporations and organizations (Uphof, 1993; Silverman, 2005) and investigations of local responses to global changes (Woods, 2013; Persson, Sätre Åhlander & Westlund, 2003). It also has connections to research on sustainability as an aspect of development organizations and to research on rural development in general (Pierce & Dale, 1999). Research specifically on ASSL is rather limited, and the organization usually figures in reports simply as an example of one

rural development organization among many others (Ikonen & Knobblock, 2006; Madzarac, 2010; Johansson, 2013).

There are, however, some studies where ASSL is described and analysed in more detail. David Vail (1996) explained the 'success' of ASSL with references to Sweden's "extraordinary 'organizational density'" and its "web of relationships that links public administration with economic and voluntary organizations" (1996, p.72). He furthermore referred to the importance of the organization's media propaganda and its "blend of forward looking and backward looking elements: a radical conservatism" (1996, p.72). ASSL was also the subject of investigation in Ivanova´s (2010) study of two local development groups in rural Sweden and their relation to ASSL as an umbrella organization. There was, according to Ivanova, a divergence between how the local groups defined their purpose (as a preservation of historical knowledge) and how ASSL described them (as a general development of the countryside).

Besides research on ASSL, the present investigation relates to studies of 'the local', i.e., how 'the local' or 'locality' is ascribed different meanings and how it is used for different (political) purposes. The concept of the local is often contrasted to ideas of the national, the regional, and the global, and in relation to the latter, it often stands for something completely different (Glynn & Cupples, 2011, pp.102-103). While ´the global´ represents standardization (homogeneity), ´the local´ signifies economic and cultural diversification (heterogeneity) (cf. Hardt & Negri, 2000; Woods, 2007). The diversity of 'the local' is illustrated by Blehr (2000) (see also Uphof, 1993) who identified four different meanings of, or expectations of, 'the local' in anthropological and sociological thinking. First, in local circumstances, individuals are assumed to interact with people they know, and they interact in multiple relations, i.e., in different capacities. Second, in local life, people are said to have an intimate relation to the physical environment. Third, the local dimension and local knowledge are expected to accumulate over time. Fourth, the local is considered to be introvert and self-sufficient, and 'unable' to deal with the foreign and unknown. While cosmopolitans are believed to exceed local boundaries, local people are described as living in a home-like narrow environment that they take for granted. Blehr also speculated on a fifth aspect according to which the local is expected to be the origin of a distinctive culture.

The local is also regarded as being interconnected with the national (Slettan & Stugu, 1997), and the global is thought to exist within locales rather than just encompass them (Jauhiainen, 2006). According to Woods (2007), globalization can be "defined as a dynamic and multifaceted process of integration and interaction that enrolls localities into networks of interconnectivity organized at the global scale" (Woods, 2007, p.487; see also Steger, 2003). Thus, the local and the global are regarded as closely related, and different localities will be impacted in different ways by global processes (Woods, 2013:114). This is an idea that is also present in Hardt and Negri's (2000) statement that there is a "false dichotomy between the global and the local" (p. 44) because local identities are not "outside" or "protected against the flows of capital and Empire" (p. 45). Thus it follows that we cannot regard the local simply as the opposite of 'the global,' but we have to focus on the production of locality, i.e., on the (re)creation of identities and differences that are recognized as local.

'Production of locality' is also a perspective present in Appadurai's (1996) writings, and locality is, according to him, not mainly a question of place or spatiality, but something that is relational and contextual and is continuously created as an aspect of social life. It provides a structure of feeling and an

ideology of community and belonging among a group of people. This structure of feeling or ideology is a historical but fragile construction, and it must constantly be maintained through the reproduction of common ideas and rituals.

My ambition in this paper is not to define what 'the local' or 'locality' actually represents, but to investigate different dimensions or uses of 'the local' with ASSL as a point of departure. Similar to the studies mentioned above, I am interested in how 'the local' is 'produced,' but with special attention to the emotional (i.e.; fantasmatic) and legitimating aspects of this production within a national rural organization.

2.0 Theoretical Perspective and Concepts

In line with the discourse theory perspective formulated by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), 'democracy' can be understood as an empty signifier, a concept without a precise and permanent meaning. 'Democracy' is also at the centre of a continuous historical struggle to assign it (slightly) new meanings, new 'freedoms,' and new equalities, for example, through the incorporation of the rights of women, religious and ethnical minorities, and workers. As Zizek states, "The very plasticity of the signified content (the struggle for what democracy 'really means') relies on the fixity of the empty signifier "democracy"" (1997, p. 94). Thus, and as a general remark, the process of symbolization is related to the fixation of an empty signifier (e.g., 'democracy'), and this fixation relies on ideological struggles and power relations.

Inspired by this take on discourse theory, this paper investigates 'the local' as an empty signifier whose varying content is a result of ASSL's ideological struggle to impose their world view on a wider audience. As will be illustrated further on, 'the local' consists of several notions in ASSL's writings, for example, small villages and idyllic landscapes as well as traditions and social skills. Articulation is a central concept to understanding how 'the local' is attributed different meanings. Through a close reading of the material, I have focused on how ´the local´ is constructed in different ways and how it is linked to other notions and phenomena. For example, 'the local' is linked to ideas of an imbalance between urban and rural areas, where the latter are regarded as being neglected and mistreated—as a victim. I have also focused on how the arguments for ´the local´ were structured, on the assumed benefits of local perspectives and the main obstacles to achieving these benefits. For example, in a discourse of sustainability, 'the local' is considered to be the main solution. According to ASSL, it is only through local activities that a sustainable society can be created. At the same time, an unlimited consumption is regarded to be a threat against a sustainable society.

Taken together, such ideas of 'the local' form an ideological fantasy (Glynos, 2008) that legitimates some actions and identifications and dismisses others. An ideological fantasy is not the same as a total fiction; instead, it is a worldview or illusion embedded in social structure. The fantasy supports this embeddedness by making a specific perspective—in this case, the local perspective of ASSL—seem unavoidable and by enabling subjective feelings of jouissance (e.g., enjoyable feelings of local belonging and of contributing to a sustainable society). People can be aware that they are following a fantasy, but they still reproduce it because of the fantasy's potential to fulfill subjective needs. Furthermore, a fantasy can comprise contradictory ideas as long as they are within the realm of the fantasy. This flexibility is an aspect of the power of

fantasies, and such flexibility is seen in ASSL's different and seemingly contradictory ideas about the local and how it can be understood.

Thus, the fantasy makes it possible for people to invest emotionally in, and to reproduce identities through, different notions of 'the local,' and it also legitimates ASSL as an organization working in favour of rural areas, i.e., local areas. In other words, 'the local' as a fantasy can be regarded as a strategy of legitimization as well as a strategy of mobilization.

3.0 Methods

The material consists of texts and pictures/videos presented by ASSL on the organization's website (Hela Sverige, n.d., www.helasverige.se) during 2016. The texts can be categorized in the following genres: reports, research results, debate articles, brochures, news, self presentations and policies. I have also followed up on links found on the website regarding ASSL's engagement in the European Rural Parliament.

The organization's website comprises headings such as 'About us' (Om oss), 'What we do' (Vad vi gör), 'Projects' (Projekt) and 'News' (Nyheter). The 'About us' page briefly describes the organization's background, purpose, and economy (besides governmental funding, it depends on membership fees and sponsors). Under 'Projects' there are subheadings for the different kinds of projects that are supported by the organization, for example, 'Small-scale consumer-supported food production' (Småskalig konsumentstödd matproduktion), 'Resistance' (Motkraft), and 'Local service' (Lokal service). The aim with the latter is to work for the development of sustainable service solutions where stores, petrol stations, or other service providers are used as the point of departure for extended service. The heading 'Completed projects' (Avslutade projekt) comprises many examples of projects supported by ASSL, for example, 'Local funding' (Lokal finansiering), 'Local planning' (Lokal planering), and 'Local wind power' (Lokal vindkraft). Other headings are 'Local bank' (Bygdebanken), 'Free methods' (Fria metoder) (for local development), and 'Transition Sweden' (Omställning Sverige), Sweden's new movement for a sustainable society. A survey directed at village shop owners is also presented on the website.

The heading 'Resources' (Resurser) has multifaceted content, including, for example, research results, videos, and debate articles. "Dangerous stereotype of the countryside" (Farlig schablonbild av landsbygden (Bergström, 2016)) and "Do not forget the local perspective" (Glöm inte det lokala perspektivet (Classon & Nilsson, 2016)) are examples of titles of debate articles. Under 'Research articles', one can find student theses, research reports, and the results of surveys with a rural perspective. Research reports deal, for example, with the production of the countryside in policy documents and the effects of urban normativity (e.g., Rönnblom, 2014). As it is stated on the website, ASSL is also present on social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and Instagram.

Thus, ASSL's website, and the material it comprises, are quite comprehensive, and I have focused the organization and analysis of the material on documents produced by representatives of ASSL, especially documents that are related to the organizations' policies (e.g., Rural Policy Programs). Furthermore, I have concentrated on meanings attributed to 'the local', i.e., how this concept is linked to other concepts, ideas, and emotions and the effect of such links in processes of meaning making.

4.0 Results

In the following, I will explore different meanings of 'the local' in the material available from ASSL's website. I will start with two central points of departure for ASSL's work that characterize the material—the notion of an imbalance between urbanity and rurality, and the notion of risk production in a global perspective. Different and sometimes contradictory ideas of 'the local' as well as of ´local development´ are, as will be illustrated further on, important in ASSL's ambition to correct the imbalance between different geographic areas and to handle the risks of contemporary society, i.e., to create a sustainable society. Thus, articulations of 'the local' are an apt entrance to the study of how a rural development organization makes use of a multifaceted concept in its struggle for a prospering countryside and a sustainable society.

4.1 Motivations for Investments in 'The Local'

The overarching motivation for ASSL's work is the idea of an imbalance or an injustice between the urban and the rural. This imbalance/injustice is believed to be economic, political, and social, and cities are regarded to have advantages and to be politically prioritized at the expense of rural areas. In ASSL's Rural Policy Program 2014 (Landbygdspolitiskt program, 2014) it is stated: "The city is the norm, and concentration and large-scaleness characterize the development." This means that rural areas are regarded to be disadvantaged and in a precarious situation, which is reflected in ASSL's formulation of sustainable local service solutions:

> The social services in the countryside have been significantly reduced during the last twenty years. […] In a large part of the country, the dismantling of social services has reached such a scale that fundamental functions of society are about to be eliminated (Hela Sverige, 2016a).

In this example, the countryside is considered to be under severe threat. Fundamental functions of society are being dismantled—a 'development' that is accelerating—at the same time as large cities flourish.

Against the background of ideas of not only an imbalance but also an injustice between different areas, and of contemporary tendencies of power concentration and large-scaleness, ASSL's ambition has been to support the creation of a 'balanced country'. This ambition was directly reflected in the main theme—'Towards a balanced country'—for the Rural Parliament 2016 (which was organized by ASSL and was described as one of the largest gatherings for rural development in Europe). A 'balanced country' means that the living conditions are equal across the country and that all people are included in society (Verksamhetsplan, 2016, p. 2).

The idea that there is a need to correct a geographical imbalance is also reflected in some of ASSL's projects, for example, projects focusing on young people and their future possibilities in the countryside. 'Opposing Force' is an example of a project whose purpose is to 'combat the on-going drain of young adults in rural areas' (Hälsinge Utbildning, 2016) by stimulating lifelong learning and young peoples' possibilities to build a future in the countryside (Hela Sverige, 2016b). The project is, in other words, supposed to be an opposing force to the processes of urbanization that characterize many rural areas and that result in a demographic imbalance. ASSL's desire to function as

an opposing force and to challenge the urban norm was also manifested in one of the organization's projects named #ungapålandsbygden (youthinruralareas):

> … many young people in rural areas have to defend themselves against the urban norm in which we tend to view people who move to cities as more successful than those who do not. By creating a public debate about the urban norm, we can change these norms and attitudes as well as the conditions for young people in the countryside (Hela Sverige, 2016c).

This example—besides pointing at a general negative discourse of rural areas according to which people in the countryside are deemed less successful than people in cities—illustrates how ASSL both reproduces and counteracts an urban norm and how this norm functions as a prerequisite for ASSL and its endeavours.

A further example of this is the notion that the urban norm is not only a national problem but something that characterizes the whole of Europe. ASSL took part in the European Rural Parliament 2015, and with references to a common European manifest for the countryside ASSL stated that it is important that measures be taken "to keep the European countryside alive and to limit the rampaging of urbanization" (Hela Sverige, 2016d). Here there seems to be a direct clash of interest between urban and rural areas, and thus it is seen as important for the development of the countryside to hinder processes of urbanization and the expansion of cities.

The notion of an imbalance between urban and rural areas, and of ASSL as an organization working in 'opposition' to urban-centred politics in contemporary society, are central for the organization´s self-representation and for its general ambitions. By linking rural areas to ideas of being disadvantaged and in need of defence, and by taking part in projects, both nationally and internationally, against an urban norm, the organization can legitimate its existence and ambitions. Another prerequisite for ASSL and its accentuation of the local is risk production in a global perspective.

4.1.1 Risk production Unlimited growth within a limited system (such as the earth) does not work. Greater consumption is not the solution to an economic and ecological crisis due to dwindling natural resources. […] We have a lot to gain by focusing on health, quality of life, and content of life instead of increased material consumption (Forsmark, Walldén, & Thiel, 2012, p. 11).

This example illustrates an important theme in writings of sustainability, i.e., risk production, according to which society is threatened by unlimited consumption and an exaggerated belief in growth. Many risks are reproduced in the material, and, as will be illustrated further on, 'the local' is considered to be the main solution for these risks and to be the foundation for a sustainable society. Risks are articulated in terms of crises, threat levels, and vulnerability. An example of the latter is, according to ASSL, that 'we' (humanity) have created a society that is too sensitive to disturbances by depriving ourselves of important historical knowledge and by importing things that we used to produce ourselves. Beside this vulnerability, there are several examples of notions of crises in the material. It is stated that there is a climate crisis, and that the climate changes are occurring faster and becoming more dramatic than the experts had previously estimated (Hela Sverige ska leva, 2010, p. 8).

But the climate crisis is not the only crisis, and it is regarded as interacting with other crises and can be viewed as an environmental crisis, a poverty crisis, and an economic crisis. Regarding the latter, it is said:

> Today our local economies are leaking. Those who supply food, clothing, energy, and other materials are often large companies whose goal is to make the maximum profit. Profits are also made in the very short term by speculation, by the artificial increase in the value of housing, or by lending money for consumption. These loans have led to a very high private debt situation in Sweden and high national debt in many other countries, which could have fatal consequences (Forsmark et al., 2012, p. 19).

Thus, an economy of speculation is considered to have fatal consequences, and the economic situation is furthermore described in terms of a 'historically unique' global crisis (Hela Sverige ska leva, 2010). Such a crisis, according to ASSL, cannot be met with traditional political measures, for example, economic stimulation, because there is a risk for undermining governmental finances and creating social chaos (Hela Sverige ska leva, 2010, p. 12). Instead, 'we' have to downsize before it is too late. Furthermore, it is said that we have to lower our energy consumption and to create a fair re-distribution of the global use of resources. Thus, risk production is a theme characterizing the material, and it gives the impression of a global crisis threatening humanity in general.

4.2 Meanings of 'The Local'—Local Democratic Solutions

What then, are ASSL's suggested solutions to both the global crisis and the imbalance between urban and rural areas? ASSL is, according to Operational Plan 2016 (Verksamhetsplan, 2016), an organization with a mission on three levels. On the national level, ASSL seeks to influence the government when it comes to questions of rural development. On the regional level, ASSL's activities are directed towards county administration boards and county councils. And on the local level, ASSL works with local development groups and municipalities. In addition to these levels, ASSL also has the ambition—as was mentioned before—to be a political force in a European perspective. However, on all of these levels 'the local' is a focal point and a recurring theme. It seems as if 'the local' is the foundation (for the development) of rural areas as well as for the creation of a sustainable society in general.

While writings about 'the local' recur in the material, the expression seems to lack a precise definition. With regard to physical space, for example, it is not obvious how widespread 'the local' is or if it is a question of population density. 'The local' can refer to development in rural areas in general, as well as specifically in the countryside or in small villages. Furthermore, local areas are highly valued and are associated with positive aspects such as traditional knowledge, social skills, and a holistic perspective that urban areas appear to be missing. When linked to small villages, 'the local' seems to be something authentic, representing places where people know each other, produce food locally, and take care of and interact with the environment (cf. Blehr, 2000). Additionally, local identity is considered to be of primary importance because it gives people's lives meaning in a global age that is characterized by rapid changes and uncertainty (Herlitz, 2002, p. 5). Local aspects are also regarded

to be the foundation of society as a whole at the same time as they stand in opposition to urban areas and the global. 'The local' occasionally seems to have similarities with 'idyllic rurality' (Horton, 2008; Baylina, & Berg, 2010) where people are living in harmony with nature and have a high quality of life—free from the demands and constraints of urban life. This idyllic rurality is suggested in texts (Herlitz, 2002) as well as in illustrations, and an example is a picture of a young girl standing on a rock in a sunny flourishing meadow with her arms stretched out like she is about to fly away on the wind1 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. An Example of Idyllic Rurality or a Sign of an Urban Norm?

Source: www.helasverige.se; photo: Linnea Ronström.

The underlining of the word 'Hela' (All) is another interesting aspect of the picture because it illustrates the influences of an urban norm. It is only by emphasizing 'All' in 'All of Sweden shall live' that rural areas are put at the centre of attention. That urban areas already are living, is taken for granted.

In the following, I will more closely explore different ideas of 'the local' in the rhetoric of ASSL with special attention on the two main themes that characterize the material in general—democratic development and sustainability. These themes could be said to condense the expected advantages of investments in 'the local.'

4.2.1 Democratic development and inclusion ´Local democratic development´ comprises ideas of the importance of people organizing themselves in local democratic groups that work with local development. Local democratic groups mentioned on the ASSL's webpage have been active in different areas, including school preservation, improved road maintenance, and business development (Herlitz, 2002):

> There are local development groups all around Sweden. They have
>
> different names, such as resident associations, society associations, or
>
> special interest associations. What they all have in common is that they
>
> work in favour of their own locality and its development. […] In short,
>
> these groups perform a critical public service. They vitalize democracy
>
> and create enterprising and sustainable settlements throughout Sweden
>
> (Vi utvecklar Sverige, 2016).

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[1] The potential 'lift off' might also be seen as a metaphor for the Rural Parliament's ambitions for the future of the countryside.

> Thousands of local groups across Sweden see the whole picture locally in their districts and work towards the local public good. What great work for democracy they perform!" (Hela Sverige, 2016g).

These examples demonstrate that 'local development groups' can mean different things, including resident associations, society associations, or special interest associations. They also illustrate how 'the local' is attributed to positive values, and two central meaning-making aspects can be noted. First, the statement that there are a great number of local groups ('thousands') and that they are spread all over the country gives the impression that this is a major movement of great importance. Second, and more important, the local groups are said to be working locally in favour of their own village—with the advantage of a local perspective—while at the same time their work is given wider significance; they are also making efforts for the public good—they are doing 'great work for democracy'. This generalization is an example of a strategy of legitimization. Through claims of a large number of groups struggling for the common good, not only the groups themselves but also ASSL and 'the local' are linked to positive values. The work on a local level seems to be a central resource and to have great democratic significance for the whole (local) society.

The democratic contribution of the local level is also reinforced by the idea that municipalities can gain from cooperation with local groups. ASSL states that "there are large profits to be made" (Hela Sverige, 2016) if municipalities are forward-looking enough and cooperate with local groups, i.e., groups that ASSL represents. It is, however, not obvious what these profits are in detail, but the linking of local groups (and indirectly ASSL) with words such as 'profits,' 'influence,' and 'forward-looking' make them seem important and as integral parts in the democratic work of municipalities.

Ideas about local democratic development are also present in discussions of 'local administration of natural resources.' In a conference in 2015 with the same name—where ASSL was one of the organizers—one of the speakers promoted the advantages of local administration:

> It is a way to take advantage of engagement and provide influence and co-determination over common resources. It also means that people are given the possibility to make their living through, for example, management or development of the tourism industry. The voluntary commitment in the county will be strengthened, as well as the cohesion and sense of identity. Local democracy is growing, and social capital is increasing (Hela Sverige, 2016e).

Thus, local administration is both directly and indirectly associated with democratic aspects. It is explicitly stated that 'local democracy is growing,' and notions such as 'engagement,' 'influence,' and 'co-determination' also indicate the democratic possibilities of local administration. Overall, there seem to be no negative aspects of local administration (for example, a lack of overview), and—as one of the other conference speakers mentioned—the main problem is the resistance from central administrative authorities. Hence, the local as an aspect of local administration is constructed as something positive,

not the least regarding its democratic potential, and as something opposed by central instances of power.

The democratic character of 'the local' is also illustrated by its inclusive character. It is, for example, stated in a brochure from ASSL with the title 'We Develop Sweden' (Vi utvecklar Sverige): "Everybody is needed if the village is to flourish." This inclusive tendency can also be identified in descriptions of how ASSL as an organization works. In ASSL's self-representation, it is stated that openness and solidarity are central aspects of the organization and its history. A representative for ASSL said as a comment to the organization's history, "Our openness and solidarity with everybody, no matter where they come from, has been constant" (25 år med Hela Sverige ska leva, 2014, p. 25). ASSL's secretariat regards the organization as "a rallying point where all rural people from near or far are welcome" (25 år med Hela Sverige ska leva, 2014, p. 15). This is also said to be the case in an international perspective: "The window of ASSL has always been wide open towards the surrounding world" (25 år med Hela Sverige ska leva, 2014, p. 22). Thus, openness, solidarity, and inclusiveness are themes that legitimate ASSL and lend it an air of positive (but imprecise) values. That ASSL is described as 'open' and 'inclusive' is also an example of how the organization argues against common prejudices about the countryside as being closed-minded and xenophobic.

The link between the inclusive ambitions and the notion of 'everybody is needed' (Hela Sverige, 2014) and concepts of 'the local' might not be obvious, but the rhetoric of ASSL is characterized by a folksy, democratic, and nonhierarchical tone—it is said that everyone can join the organization and be included. This ambition of inclusion is also present in writings about 'the local.' For example, local communities are regularly linked to positive traits such as cohesiveness and fellowship. Furthermore, local people are usually associated with positive characters, especially those who are engaged in and work in their community and in local democratic development groups without any thought of personal gain. Thus, an investment in 'the local' has many advantages, according to ASSL, because it not only contributes to local democratic development but also to the common good and to a balanced and inclusive society.

4.2.2 Sustainability. 'All development is local—even the global' Sustainability is another important theme in the material, and there are references to the international movement for transitioning to a more sustainable society.2 Sustainability—in line with the transition movement—comprises ideas of social, ecological, and technological resilience. It also embraces notions according to which health and quality of life are regarded to be more important than material consumption and economic growth (Hela Sverige ska leva, 2010, p. 6). How, then, can a sustainable society be created? According to ASSL, the transformation model includes twelve steps of action. These steps include the creation of local working groups, good relations, and local transformation plans as well as increasing consciousness, recapitulating lost knowledge, and celebrating the fact that the transition has already begun (Hela Sverige ska leva, 2010:14-44). An essential and positive aspect according to ASSL is that many solutions already exist in local communities, for example, in villages and counties:

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2 ASSL represents Transition Sweden (Omställning Sverige), which is a part of the international Transition Network. Transition Sweden supports local initiatives for a sustainable lifestyle.

> The models of a sustainable future are right now being created by
> people who have a thorough understanding of their local community.
> Only through such knowledge can holistic solutions be formed. The
> next step, once the knowledge has been built up and the structures
> have been put in place in small communities, is to transfer the
> experiences to larger towns. With the power and knowledge of the
> districts, we can create a sustainable world. For all development is
> local—even the global (Hållbara bygder, 2009, p. 3).

According to this example, it is necessary that a sustainable society takes the local community as a point of departure. It is in local communities that people are regarded to have the 'right' knowledge and an understanding of their society that makes it possible to create sustainable structures that are transferable to larger places. Here it seems as if the local is the most suitable foundation regarding knowledge, holistic perspectives, and power for the creation of a sustainable world.

However, it is not always stated that local communities are the same as rural local communities, but it usually seems to be the case that 'the local' is closely related to rurality:

> We believe that rural areas will play an important role in the changes
> that need to be made in society as a whole. It is in rural areas that
> natural resources, food security, and energy are available, and at the
> same time it is a sought-after habitat. Many people have knowledge
> about nature and how to use it for different purposes. In rural areas
> there is also a habit among people to interact and to organize with the
> purpose of finding common solutions. These skills make rural areas
> and rural residents essential resources in the coming transition work
> (Hållbara bygder, 2009, p. 4).

Thus, a central notion in the material is that local communities, especially in rural areas, are fundamental for the transition. It is, according to ASSL, too risky to wait for political actions alone regarding the transition because politicians will not make the necessary but uncomfortable decisions until they feel the pressure to do so from below (Hela Sverige ska leva, 2010, p. 4). Thus, local initiatives are needed, and the changes in society must, according to ASSL, start in people's own local communities, and it has to build on will, desire, and a holistic perspective (Hela Sverige ska leva, 2010, p. 5).

Ideas regarding local initiatives and sustainability are also connected to notions of decentralization. According to the following example—where the author refers to one of ASSL's political programs for rural areas—it is important that planning, decision making, and administration are linked to the local level:

> Local administration and control over common resources is a point of
> departure for a sustainable society (Herlitz, 2002, p. 10). […] Planning

and decisions regarding the local level must be made as close to the people as possible (Herlitz, 2002, p. 11).

This example is closely related to the discussion of democratic development, and it illustrates how democracy and sustainability are articulated together. Planning and decision making should be questions for the local level, and these represent the foundation for a sustainable society.

5.0 Discussion

A division between rural areas and urban areas was central in the material produced or presented by ASSL. While rurality was often represented as something threatened and declining, urbanity was regarded as being prioritized and growing. ASSL described its mission as being to develop rural areas and to counter the processes of urbanization.3

'The local' was an important sign in the rhetoric of ASSL, and as an empty signifier, it was allocated several meanings. It could, for example, refer to rural areas in general or to traditional rural villages and traditional knowledge, as well as to idyllic rurality and holistic perspectives. 'The local' was also highly valued. It represented areas where people were regarded to be working in harmony and to be self-sacrificing in their efforts to create an inclusive society and to save the countryside from destruction. Furthermore, 'the local' represented the foundation of society and the point of departure for development strategies that reflected livelihood perspectives according to which sustainability and resilience is already existing aspects of rural life strategies (cf. Scoones, 2009). Connotations of the local were in some cases related to the meanings identified by Blehr (2000), for example, that people in local circumstances interact with their neighbours, have a close relation to the environment, and represent a distinct culture.

Thus, 'the local' could not be regarded as something given or fixed in the material (cf. Hardt & Negri, 2000). Instead, it was produced in different and sometimes contradictory ways by recognizing certain ideas and phenomena as local. Taken together, such recognitions could be said to lay the foundation for a fantasy (Glynos, 2008), an ideological worldview according to which 'the local' was considered to be under-valued and threatened as well as something that was highly valued, that was expected to function as a resource for mobilization against negative global processes, and that was considered the main solution for the future of rural areas and society in general.

Two main arguments, which were also promises, characterized 'the local' as a fantasy—democratic development and a sustainable society. Regarding the former, it seemed as if democracy was a quality that especially characterized the local level, and that democratic processes in society, in general, had a lot to gain by incorporating local perspectives. Local development groups were, for example, described as contributing to the common good. 'The local' was also considered to be the central solution to a sustainable society: the establishment of sustainability in a global perspective could only be realized locally, an idea illustrating that the local was not always regarded as the opposite to the national or the global (Glynn & Cupples, 2011, p. 102-103), but was directly

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3 In reality, local rural places can adopt other strategies than trying to directly counter processes of urbanization, such as suburbanization and redefining the meanings of rural life by becoming a dormitory to a city (Carmo, 2010).

linked to or was a prerequisite for the global (cf. Woods, 2007; Jauhiainen, 2006).

Thus, 'democratic development' and 'sustainability' represented important resources that made identifications and mobilizations possible (e.g., for people living in rural areas and for representatives of the organization), and as aspects of the fantasy (as a structure of feeling (cf. Appadurai, 1996)) they opened the way for emotionally satisfying investments in 'the local' and in the possibilities of 'local' knowledge. Identifications with locality seemed to be the same as being in favour of democratic development and sustainability, while at the same time this identification represented a collective and inclusive unity standing in opposition to urban power centres and an urban norm.

The power of the fantasy, and its potential for identification, can in a wider perspective be related to (nostalgic) ideas of the People's Home of Sweden (Folkhemmet), which was a view of society inspired by the inauguration of social insurances in Germany in the middle of the 19th century and introduced in Sweden in the beginning of the 20th century. 'People's Home' can be seen as a metaphor for a society characterized by consensual politics, equality, and cooperation. The society—a strong national welfare state—was regarded to have responsibility for its members, which was manifested, for example, by the introduction of a general pension system in 1935, two weeks' vacation in 1938, and general health insurance in 1955. 'People's Home' was closely related to the Swedish model, which was a political compromise between a market economy and capitalist interests and ideas of social responsibility and equality. In the late 20th century, the Swedish model and People's Home have been challenged by the international trends of neoliberalism, globalization, and a multicultural society. A reaction to such challenges was the advent of People's Home nostalgia in the 1990s, according to which the People's Home represents "a kind of paradise lost or future past […] in which notions of the old, 1930s or post-war functionalist and rationalist society are glorified while change becomes something fearful and troubling" (Andersson, 2009, p. 239). It is in relation to such trends (which have a parallel in 'Ostalgie,' a nostalgic view of the old East Germany) that the local fantasy of ASSL can be understood. 'The local' can be seen as a metaphor of a People's Home because 'the local' comprises similar ideas regarding a society characterized by uniformity, democracy, and equality. In other words, ASSL's fantasy of the local is legitimized by indirect allusions to the People's Home of Sweden—to ideas of a former and desirable Swedishness—and at the same time, such allusions could have a mobilizing function.

What then, is the major impression of ASSL and its focus on the local? To begin with, it has to be pointed out that ASSL is a relatively important political actor on the national level, which is illustrated by official governmental recognition and governmental funding of the organization. It is also clear that ASSL emphasizes the importance of local work and local initiatives because policymaking on a national level has not been able to stop the negative development of rural areas in Sweden. However, one can still ask if the organization's focus on the local might result in an 'involuntarily' de-politization of rural issues on a national level because such a focus goes hand in hand with a further transfer of responsibility for the future of rural areas from governmental politicians to local actors and local entrepreneurs. One can also ask if this de-politization is an expression of the ongoing and intensified dismantling of the Swedish welfare state and of the withdrawal of governmental politicians and municipalities from their 'obligation' to take responsibility for rural areas. ASSL and the government's funding of the

organization will then—together with the political support of other local actors and local initiatives—indirectly function as an alibi for the lack of an active rural policy from the perspective of the state.

6.0 Conclusion

ASSL's multifaceted use of 'the local' as a fantasy can be regarded as both productive and counterproductive. The many connotations of 'the local' make it a powerful tool for the legitimization of the organization and motivations of local perspectives in a global world. However, the tendency to one-sidedly focus on the local as only including rural areas can contribute to a depolitization of these areas on a national level through a transfer of responsibility for rural development from the government to local actors and organizations such as ASSL.

A next step in studying ASSL would be to interview representatives of the organization about how to handle the dilemmas mentioned above. How can ASSL as an organization funded by the government support non-profit local development groups and at the same time avoid the depolitization of rural areas that such support can result in? Furthermore, what are considered to be the risks and possibilities in the long run of ASSL's linking of ´the local´ with 'rural?' Will it further emphasize the division between urban and rural areas, and implicitly reproduce an urban norm? Or, will it contribute to more nuanced views of rural areas?

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