



# The Right Livelihood Award

*for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people*

## Kylätoiminta / Finnish Village Action (Finland)

### Honorary Award (1992)



*for showing a dynamic path to rural regeneration, decentralisation and popular empowerment.*

Kylätoiminta representatives

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Finland experienced rural depopulation. By 1974, however, there were first signs of a modest rural revival, which, in 1976, came to the attention of Lauri Hautamäki, later Professor at the University of Tampere in the Department of Regional Studies. He started a project of Action Research into this embryo movement, to evaluate the potential for revitalisation of rural communities. The new ideas of the project (e.g. "concrete utopias") caught the public imagination. In less than ten years (1977-1985), the number of Village Committees rose from 50 to 2,000. In 2009, there were about 4,000 villages in Finland, almost all of them with their own Village Committee or Village Society to co-ordinate the development work of the village. In addition, village activists have organized provincial Village Action Societies in all twelve provinces of Finland. Even on the national level there is an organization, Suomen Kylätoiminta ry., founded by some country life oriented associations, which supports the work of the villages.

The Village Committees are an expression of small-scale collective action over individualism. Communal facilities are emphasized or restored, as are public and social services, such as health, postal or transport services. One academic wrote in 1986: "Although village activity has achieved much that is of positive value, its importance lies much deeper. In the long run its greatest importance is in the change in people's attitudes. The former passivity and submissivity have given way to a new vigour, self-reliance and community spirit and to better awareness of opportunities for activities and assistance.

Over the years, the tasks of the Village Committees have changed. In the 1980's and early 1990's the main work of the Committees were to arrange activities to collect money for village projects. The main method was the traditional Finnish voluntary team work "talkoot," to achieve the commonly chosen goal. Since Finland joined the European Union in 1995, the financing of the village projects through EU programs became possible, especially through the LEADER-program. However, there is some discussion about whether the European Union programs have spoiled the original idea of the Village Action Movement, and there are some villages who refuse to use any EU-money. Yet, most Village Committees still trust that they can accept LEADER-money without losing the original idea of "taking the faith of the village in their own hands".

The Village Committees have taken an active role in the execution of regional and rural policy (bottom-up development). There is evidence that they have also revived and created a new cooperation between their more traditional organisations (farmers' organisations, trade union branches, youth societies, country women clubs etc.) and entrepreneurs. Household and farming extension services have also revived, especially, in the latter case, in the field of organic agriculture. All these groups and organisations are a further expression of the growing determination among

rural people to preserve the dynamic, quality and variety of their lives against the continuing trends elsewhere of urbanization, centralization and loss of rural local control and self-reliance.

The Village Committees combine vitality and creativity, expressed in a very broad range of activities, with flexibility and efficiency of organization, and evident knowledge of and love for their village, its culture and traditions and their natural environment. Their activities encompass the arts (music, drama, painting), crafts (both traditional and modern), economic development and the encouragement of entrepreneurship, sports, especially winter sports, and social events of all kinds, involving the whole village and generating a palpable enthusiasm and liveliness.

For instance, Tapio Mattlar's village Vuorenkylä in Central Finland only counts some 150 inhabitants, but the Village Society has been one of the most active in the whole country. In the 1980's, Vuorenkylä Society started a skiing centre that is still in the business and brings thousands of tourists to the village every winter. They also wrote a 500-pages history book with numerous historical photos, which was published in 2006. The next publication will be a two hours long DVD-film about the village. Both the book and the film are financed without any help outside the village. Another new project is a modern windmill, mirroring the old slogan of the Village Action Movement that is: "We are not fighting against windmills, but for them!"

### **Quotation**

*"We are not willing to regard economic values as more important than the quality of life. We believe in the right of people to decide over their own lives. We are particularly happy if our movement can be an encouraging example for rural people, demonstrating that vibrant village life is not inconsistent with development."*

Tapio Mattlar (Village Activist)

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