

The Best Village in the World



Text Ulla Herlitz
Illustrations: Anders Persson
& Thomas Norberg

*Hela Sverige
ska leva!*



Text: Ulla Herlitz

Illustrations: Anders Persson and Thomas Norberg/Ateljé Tjärnvik

Graphic design: Lotti Jilsmo

Work group: Inez Abrahamzon, Staffan Bond, Karin Wenström and Regina Westas

A New Sustainable World Order

In the new global world that is opening up to us, the local perspective is becoming increasingly important. We have the small world close by to engage ourselves in, where we can get an overview, and understand and influence the context. While the big crises of today –environment, energy and finance – lay bare the greed and rapacity of society. These crises indicate a need for change. A paradigm shift is essential to build a sustainable future. It is all about “changing tracks”. We need to transform society.

In many places, people are already joining in, taking the initiative to develop their home areas. This is a movement going on in rural areas and in townships. Each and every development project is essential to create a sustainable local living environment, and to create a sustainable global world.

By working together in horizontal networks made up by local initiatives within the country and internationally, we can influence global development. All local initiatives may together provide the setting for a new world order that sees differently on nature, democracy and economy; a world order that takes as its starting point our fundamental values as regards sustainable usage of natural resources and the equal value of all people.

The Vision of a Village

The Best Village in the World is both vision and reality. It is a vision in so far as it does not exist in its entirety in the real world, but, at the same time, it is reality because everything that happens and exists in The Best Village in the World is reality somewhere, but not all in the same place. We have been inspired by approximately one hundred of the almost 5 000 village action groups, all members of All Sweden shall Live.

In one village, people may have come together to form an economic association to save the Health Care Centre, while the villagers somewhere else have developed a work plan for the future, etc. Our vision is to gather all these initiatives in one place. The Best Village in the World is founded on real examples with real people who have taken the initiative to develop together. We do not need to fantasise or invent the future; it is enough to look around to see what is going on. The sustainable society of the future is waiting around the bend.



Welcome to The Best Village in the World



It is Friday Afternoon . We are visiting The Best Village in the World. It is Friday afternoon, early autumn. A lush greenery still reminds us of the lovely summer that is now fading. "The Returnee Day", celebrated in mid holidays had been the greatest thing. A novelty this year was all the associations in the village displaying their projects and activities, on top of working with all the practicalities. It all turned into a great festival for all people and attracted a lot more visitors than earlier years.

Villagers who had moved away seemed to take the opportunity to visit their old native village this day. During the years that had passed, they had been able to follow the life as it developed in The Best Village in the World by reading the Village Group blog, but that is so different from meeting old friends and acquaintances "live".

The visitors inspected the wind power plant that they had bought a share in, and they amused themselves with games for the kids and the grown-ups and auction, chocolate wheel and lotteries for the benefit of the old community building; they watched the local variety show about the big local news, and listened to the dance orchestra by the dance pavilion, which was decorated with fresh leaves; they also stayed by the hard rock festival arranged by the village youths.

The highlight of the year, however, most people agreed, was meeting with the ambassador of All Sweden shall Live, the World Champion in arm wrestling from the village of Ensamheten. This was really something. Much laughter and cheering were heard when the strong men of the village had to fold.

Now, the school holidays have come to an end, harvesting time is here, school has started and every day life has taken over. Passing by the farmers market in the village square on Friday afternoon is only natural. The eco farmers in the area sell their produce and the farmers sell meat and sausages, liver pies, ham and other delicatessen. The locally produced food has had a major boost when the production kitchen and the butchery were established in the old closed down factory, using the small financial support obtained from the Leader Group in the area – such initiatives fitted exactly into the rural programme of the European Union.



A Look Around the Village

People are bustling, going off in different directions, in different manners and on different errands. Some children and young people are quite noisy as they cross the square on their way to the parish house where the Village Council is housed. They form part of a project called "Children and Young People in Rural Areas" and they are looking forward to a 48 hour LAN party that is coming up in a couple of months time.

In the parking lot outside of the merchants' house, the president of a venture company chats along with a few non-locals; maybe they are discussing a new company with plans to establish itself in the area. A family has borrowed the village's electric car and they silently pass by on their way to the community building to prepare for the upcoming celebration of someone's 50's birthday. Some people have finished their errands and take a rest at one of the village cafés. Others are already at the pub and

fervently discuss how to convince the Transport Authority and the Railway Company to reopen the railway station that has been closed down for such a long time. A cyclist stops by the village group's announcement board to see what is going on in the village.

Digital Houses offer an online world premiere at the Met. Weaving course in the community building, Time to book the baking house, Girls – 97 play home game against the neighbouring village, Hunters' association prepares this season's moose hunt, Planning meeting about this autumn's harvest market, Who has seen my kitty? Our beloved cat disappeared last Saturday. Be a contact person and help immigrants in the village. SWOP: I have a tent for two persons but need a kayak. Welcome to the Council's Monthly Meeting: Presentation of the village group's local development plan...

It Still Watches Over the Area

The church rooster has been sitting where it sits since the Middle Ages when the christening of Sweden took place for around 800–900 years ago. Churches were built, parishes set up, and community tasks, such as caring for the poor and education were organised, but in the end of the 19th century the church said goodbye to these worldly assignments. Municipalities were formed within the same geographical areas as the churches. Around 2 500 municipalities, many using direct democracy, survived until the 1950's when the mergers of several municipalities began. The large municipalities of today proved too small for overall issues, but they were also too large for local issues. For this reason even larger regions were created, as well as various forms of direct democracy on a village level.

In The Best Village in the World, they chose to install a local Village Council, appointed through direct elections. The Council is chaired by a Mayor. The tiniest village in Europe has a mayor, so why not us, reasoned the villagers. The Village Council is a formal administrative body with a regulated right to make decisions on a local level. It is financed by taxes and appointed through general elections of individual candidates. It is held at the same time as the elections to the European Parliament. Once again, the villagers can influence and decide on local issues. The elected representatives in the Council make the definitive decisions, but the Village Group investigates the issues and prepares the propositions.

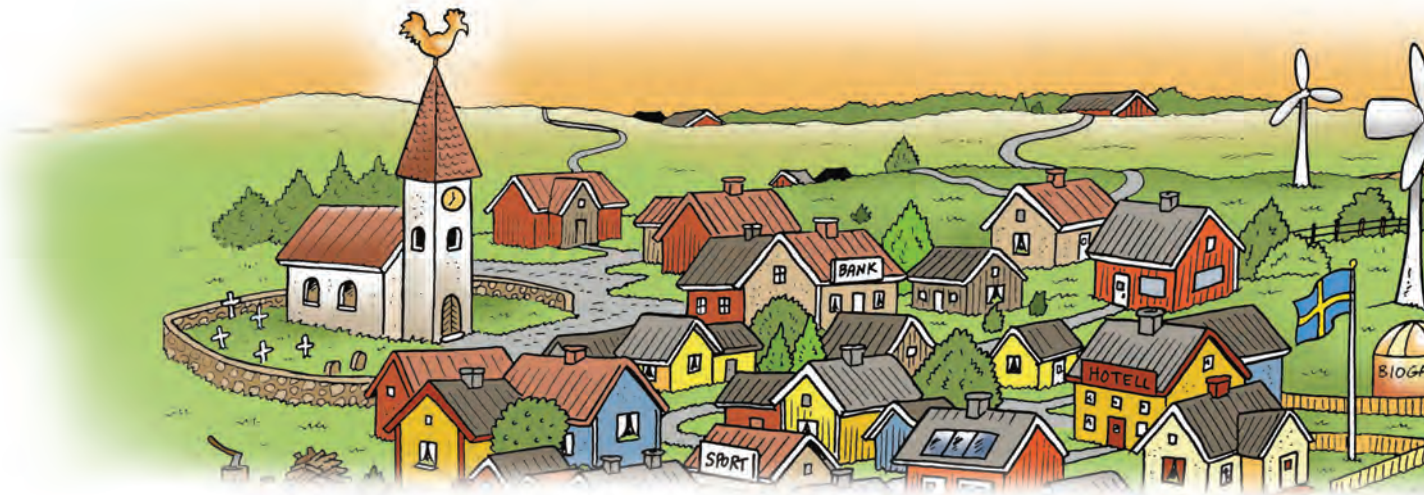
The combination of democratically held elections and the opportunity for all villagers to involve themselves directly with issues that interest them is one of the advantages of this system. The representatives in the Council have the legitimacy to repre-

sent the village and they are held responsible. If, in the opinion of a villager, a member of the Council does not do a good job, his or her mandate will probably not be renewed in the Village Council.



Everybody is needed. There are almost as many commissions of trust in the village as there are youths and grown-ups. These voluntary commissions are found in all associations that run the store, the fire station, the library and the crèche, as well as the health care centre and the old people's home. This is the government sector in a new guise and, partly, with a new content – this kind of social economy is here to stay. In some cases, services are bought in from the associations, and, in other cases, enterprises are run entirely as businesses, in a private or cooperative regime. Social economy is signified by an element of idealism. People who work as volunteers join forces with those who are employed.

The Village Council cooperates with the villagers in many areas, not only in the service and social sectors. One important area is planning – it is important to make use of local knowledge and the locals' ideas already on the planning stage, and, on occasion, in cooperation with external expertise. The local plan for the future – with goals and implementation plans – that will be discussed on the next monthly meeting has been prepared by six work groups during 12 months. They have held meetings on their own and all together. And they have checked things with the Municipal Community Board and the Municipality. No less than 25 meetings have been held. And now, finally, it is time for the members of the Village Council to make the formal decision.



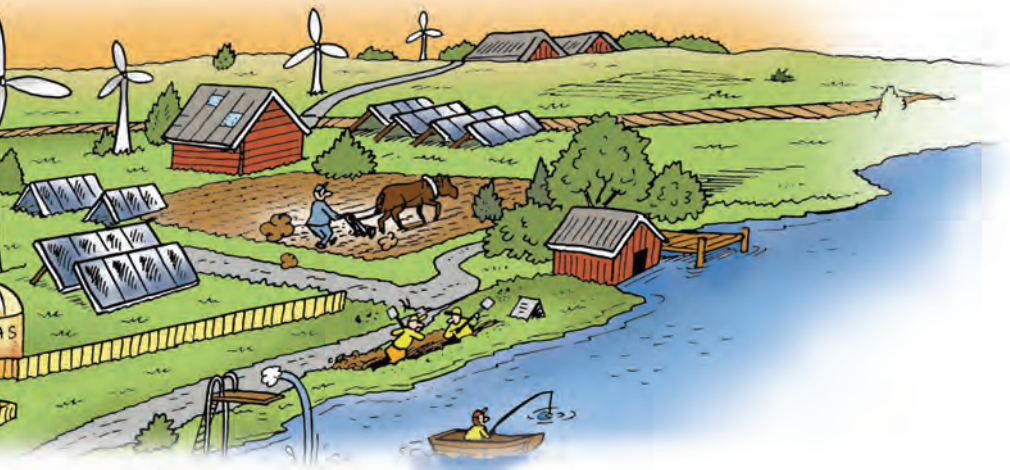
Cultivating without Exhausting

The work with “A Plan for the Future” activated many villagers. Especially since the environmental crisis and the peak oil business really got to people. During the last ten years, an increasing number of people have asked for ecological or local products, and, today, everybody is sorting out their garbage. The villagers started to think about the larger context – about their and their neighbours’ life styles. Yes, it is good to sort waste, but isn’t there too much waste to sort? The thoughts expanded to the entire complex of overconsumption and the role of the packaging industry. How can we make it possible to cultivate and exploit local natural and cultural resources both to develop the local area and to save the world? What can you, as an individual, do to contribute to reducing the discharges of carbon dioxide

and diminishing your ecological foot print, and what could the village do as a whole?

The talks led to study circles organised by the educational associations and The Best Village in the World was one of the first to join All Sweden shall Live and ”Transition Sweden” that form part of The International Transition Movement that originated in Totnes in Great Britain. Contacts have already been made to exchange experience with groups who work with transition issues in other countries.

One tangible issue that concerns both the environment and the wallet is the heating of houses and other buildings. In the energy group that was formed last year several villagers with solid

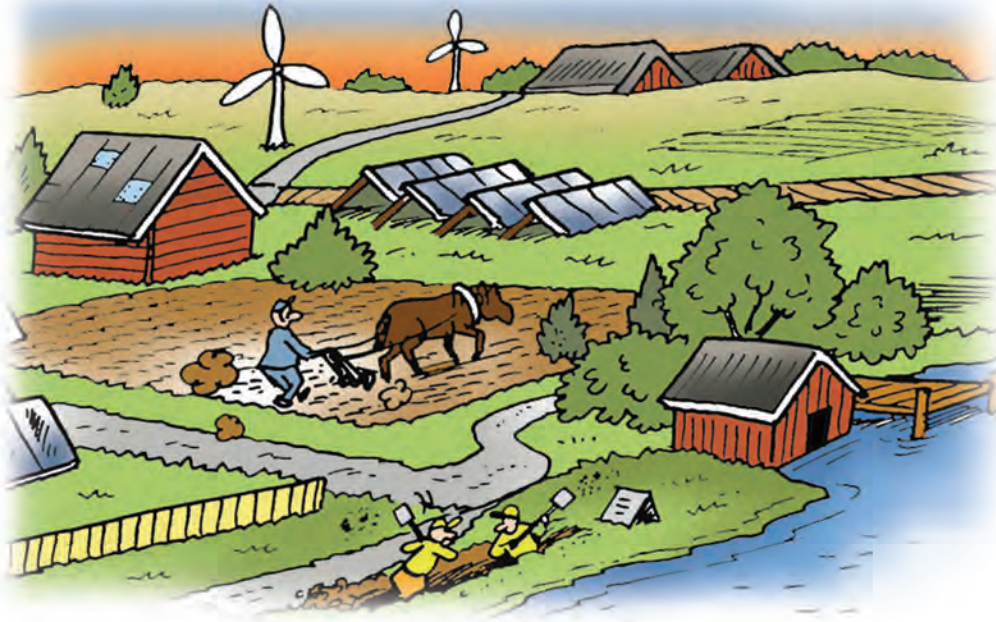


local knowledge and technical expertise in the energy sector in such diverse areas as wood chopping and control systems participate. Together they mapped the energy needs of the village and studied energy supply solutions that other people had tried.

The meetings were many, but it was fun to meet in different constellations and the village spirit was strengthened. The members have made study visits to other village groups and gathered inspiration and knowledge. One of the visits resulted in the construction of a solar cell lighting device for the notice board in the village centre. The technology was not very advanced but it inspired people. In another location that they visited, the village group had taken over a water power plant and made a profit of 500 000 Swedish Crowns per year. The money would be used to

invest in the village infrastructure. The energy group has studied local heating centrals and district heating networks and looked into waste heat, oats, wooden chips, bio energy, solar energy, wind and water. In *The Best Village in the World*, there was no mill, no saw, nor any energy plant to take over. That is why wind power was the only option.

The winds of discussion grew strong during the autumn meeting of the village group. The question was whether to construct the plant in company form and be the owner of the plant or try to attract an external investor and negotiate the proceeds to be given to the village. There were villages that had reached agreements of 0.5 percent of the gross revenues from the electricity production. The result of all this was the forming of a new asso-



ciation "The Wind that Turned the Area", and a 25 meter tall 800 kW turbine placed on the mowable bog – the best place ever.

More than 150 individuals in the village and non-local friends bought shares for millions of crowns in the wind turbine, and a little less than half of the shares were kept by the village group who took a loan from the local savings association for the investment. The success leads to new initiatives being taken. There is a positive pioneering air in the village that engages more and more people.

It was not only the well-to-do-farmers who were inspired. There are also the six families who have started to cultivate together. The local newspaper tells of the group of six families who have grown tired of the project hysteria and who now have fun with

"Spinach and songs". The families have rethought their lives. Why chase project financing to the point of absurdity? We've already got the resources – ourselves and the earth. Why not make use of them for business and pleasure. Said and done.

The first common harvest of ecological chard, spinach, onion and much more gave good results. They cultivate both vegetables and culture. Each month the cultivator group meets to discuss and to party. Children and grown-ups get to know each other and once in a while they "cultivate and refine" stories, songs and dances across generation and cultural borders. The educational association now offers cultivating classes, very popular among young newcomers.



All Development is Local – Even the Global

Around ten years ago there were a handful of farmers, a shoe factory, a few small businesses; the rest of the people living in the village commuted to work in the town. The newcomers to the village during the past few years have increased the basis for local services. The village group has been working actively with creating places to live and plots for building at attractive sites.

Among other things they have built apartments for old people so that retired people can sell their farms and houses but still stay on in the village. Returnees, families with children and people who come for holidays have been attracted by the positive and creative climate in the village, and they have decided to stay indefinitely – amongst these a few immigrant families from the Netherlands and a few who come from even further away but had stayed in Bergsjön in Gothenburg for a few years.

The school that was threatened with closure made it through thanks to the new families with children, and, in the long run, the Village Group counts on continued growth. The fact that there is a school in the village is important to attract young couples that are looking for a home in the countryside. The school houses are also used for study circles, adult education, activities of the learning centre as well as library. It is a meeting point for people of all ages.

The Digital House is also a success. With modern technology the village can set the same dates for movie premieres as they do in Stockholm. The cooperative store has gained new members and customers thanks to new people moving to the village. In addition, a crèche and a day care centre for 6 year olds have moved into the empty premises next to the store. Eco and local



products from the store are delivered both to the school, the crèche, the day care centre and to the old people's home – these places are now known to serve delicious food.

In The Best Village in the World the Village Council and the Village Group together took the initiative to coordinate the public and private service sectors as well as the services given by various associations. In response to this, the cooperative that runs the store also took responsibility for the home-help service, a cafeteria, being the agent of Swedish games, the pharmacy and the liquor store, as well as for selling fishing permits as an agent for the Fishery Conservation Association. In the same manner, the voluntary part time fire brigade manages a number of service activities such as bus lines, taxis and the mobility service, car rentals and the village gas station.

More people, better services and a stimulating environment – an increasing number of commuters have started to work from home a few days a week. Other people see opportunities in

new business concepts and leave their old jobs, completely or part time. The village hotel saw the light of day in this way, and the IT company that now have customers all over the country, as well as the Arts' Park in the former vicarage that attracted a great number of visitors last summer. The Village Company, a combined venture company and business association, was formed using a share capital of 2.7 million crowns invested by private persons and companies. The company has been able to support business development and invest in strategic infrastructure, such as housing, broadband and education.

Right now, a special training operation focusing on women's businesses is carried through in collaboration with the county's university college. It turns out to be a very successful venture with many participants. Many additional jobs have been created within the tourism and service sectors, but also in other areas, such as art, agricultural sciences and advanced energy technology. The focus on transitional work in the village has created businesses in the electric vehicle line and solar cell develop-



ment. The skills of the Recycling Association has become an export commodity.

The local effort to preserve and develop various cultural and natural resources, for example, the mowable 14 acres bog project, has created a large working site offering guided tours, a nature and culture school, a café, a shop and a camping site. Many new jobs have been created. The project was started with volunteers only, but quickly grew into having 6 employees. Thanks to employment measures there is also a work group that helps out with the establishment and the bog.

An additional business project is all about historical tourism. Thanks to online marketing, the Pilgrimage had many visitors from all over the world already in its first year. For the moment, there is work going on treating the time of the Vikings from a development point of view. Work groups participate in an international project with substantial interchange with corresponding groups in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. In the Village

Company's trading house, there is a company that has focused on the production of wine made from birch sap, which has created an echo far beyond the borders of the village. The wine is now sold in liquor stores across the country. The Village Company also took over the old shoe factory that was threatened by closure, and saved the jobs.

Through the Internet, the entire world opens up for business, and you can sell everything from shoes to birch wine. When it comes to broadband, which was a prerequisite for all this, the company literally dug the channels and laid down the cables. The machinery business in the village also joined in to make it all a bit easier. Through these and other creative solutions for jobs and every day life, the new life style seems to work just as well as the old one, and even better. There is now more spare time in which to see family and friends.



Room for Local Economy

The ambition of The Best Village in the World is to become a model village for sustainable development from an ecological, social and economy point of view. The village has embraced and implemented the recycling idea and the church tower principle (the idea that activities should target an area that is no larger in circumference than can be observed from the church's tower) to solve the environmental and energy crises.

The economy, i.e., to include money in the sustainable development concept, has been a tougher nut to crack. To invest capital in economic associations or buying shares in local companies has worked well. But to move one's savings from commercial banks where the savings always have been kept has been difficult. People have been faithful to their banks through thick and thin,



irrespective of what kinds of “businesses” or ventures the bank has been involved in. The force of habit is strong, and it has really been tough.

Just as the villagers has learnt to reorient and buy ecological and local products, they have, in their sustainability work, started to regard money in the same manner. The first step was when Coompanion, Statistics Sweden and the County Council offered to support a local project to do a LEA analysis (Local Economy Analysis) of the village. Where did the money go? How much of it left the village and how much came into the village. The discussion expanded and the participants made an inventory of the resources available in the area and how the villagers could act to stop the leakage of money out from the district.

This resulted in a proposition from the local economy group to start a cooperative bank branch with a mission to lend the invested savings to local investors according to the church tower principle. The municipality acquiesced. They had for a long time observed that the commercial banks were unwilling to invest in rural areas. The Municipality opened a savings account and deposited 5 million crowns into the new local bank. Many villagers and companies, associations and the Village Council have also opened savings accounts, and now millions of crowns form part of the local circulation of money. The wind power plant is the largest investment the bank has made so far.

New Perspectives

In The Best Village in the World, we have had the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the future and of a different way of looking at the world. We have seen local models of a good life, and we have observed natural recycling. In this village, women and men of all ages and from different cultures can realise personal life projects in a constructive way and in cooperation with others while taking part in forming a sustainable society.

By way of introduction we stated that we live in a time when the limits of nature and greed become increasingly clear to us. People, organisations and companies in the Swedish countryside, just as in many other places on earth, have been affected in a bad way. The effects of global problems and crises can be handled in various ways. In our vision of The Best Village in the World, we have gathered real examples of local initiatives where people creatively and innovatively have found solutions and alternatives in almost every area – from cultural life and democracy to consumption, production and economy.

Within the village movement, new values and theories of social, ecological and sustainable society have rooted, and they are beginning to shape the community of the future. Village action groups that form part of All Sweden shall Live have the qualifications needed to develop a sustainable transformed community with active citizens, natural resources and a good living environment. Resources that stimulate an enterprising spirit and business activities. The expectations are that The Best Village in the World will inspire village groups in the country to take new steps towards a sustainable society. This changing of tracks is not only about local initiatives. The political challenge is to recognise and support the local new perspective initiatives.

The Hidden Reservation

On the one hand, this village might come across as an idyll. This is a conscious choice we have made; we wanted to create a positive vision of life in this village. On the other hand, we know that it only takes two persons to get a second opinion and sometimes get into a fight over something. Conflicts over how to develop and manage a community are usually handled democratically. The democratically elected village council in The Best Village in the World is responsible and the popularly elected make the final decisions. But the Village Council has chosen to handle the leadership using far reaching opportunities for the villagers to influence and participate in goal setting, planning and implementation.

Furthermore, we have not informed you about the village's links to the municipality, the region, the nation, EU and the world. This does not mean that our view of The Best Village in the World is a closed circuit in all respects. The village has extensive contacts with the surrounding world. It has many visitors and the business life and associations take part in international networks and projects to share experiences and spread incentives. We want to show that a rural district with its inhabitants can take much greater local responsibility. In The Best Village in the World, people are active and form their lives as well as they possibly can within the framework of sustainable development. When all come together and work locally, it could change the world.

In Practice and in Theory – Hand in Hand towards a Paradigm Shift

Fortunately enough, it is not only village action groups who have changed tracks aiming for the necessary paradigm shift. Globally acknowledged institutions, such as The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, have too. How else shall we interpret that Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences?

For the first time ever, since the institution of the prize, it was awarded to a woman and a researcher of social sciences whose theories challenge the conventional view of the “The economic man”. Ostrom has analysed the way in which grass-root people organise themselves to self-manage natural resources; she also analysed what factors were important to a responsible and sustainable usage of resources. Habitually, conflicts regarding usage are solved either through privatisation or through a decision made by a central authority, for example, by imposing politically imperative decisions on how to use the resource, or through taxes and other charges that limit the usage.

The exciting and challenging – and inspiring – thing is that Elinor Ostrom has identified a third solution to the problem. She found that people are able to cooperate, that local actors can organise themselves in a way that is both fair and reasonable for all involved and simultaneously considers the long term sustainability of the resource. Mutual trust among the local actors is a key factor, as well as the participation in the process of creating the rules that should apply to the common activities, rules that also stipulate the consequences of violating them. The safeguarding of local knowledge and the stimulation of taking local responsibility are two advantages of local self management systems.

The research of Elinor Ostrom strongly focuses on issues of local participation and self-management. She speaks of social systems where local self-management is in force without any imperative rules being imposed from the outside, and where it is combined with the overall rules of society to counteract abuse of power and discrimination.

The study visits made to The Best Village in the World are manifold. All Sweden shall live - which is not any social movement, but a movement that sees local development work as the way towards a sustainable society – regards the award of the Nobel Prize in Economics to Elinor Ostrom as an additional sign of us approaching the necessary paradigm shift from different directions.



The Village Community Bank (Bygdebanken) – an Online Bank of Knowledge

You find it at www.helasverige.se and it comprises around 1 500 Village action groups and some 13 000 activities. In the Village Community Bank you can gather detailed information about the local groups and what they have been working with. The table below displays the most common activities and the percentage of the groups that are active within each area.

| | | | |
|--------------------------|-----|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Well-being/festivities | 78% | Roads | 29% |
| Culture | 70% | Engaged in study visits | 29% |
| Meeting places | 59% | News letters | 29% |
| Tourism | 42% | IT | 28% |
| Environment/nature | 40% | Encouraging newcomers | 26% |
| Activities for the youth | 36% | Hosting study visits | 25% |
| Study circles | 36% | Schools | 22% |
| Local markets | 35% | Local development plan/ planning | 22% |
| Bathing/sports | 32% | | |
| Hiking/riding tracks | 31% | | |

It is a sphere
I tread with my sole
Where is central
on the surface of a globe?
I choose Pjätteryd
to be the centre of it all
I stand tall

(Alf Henriksson, freely translated into English)



All Sweden shall live

Stortorget 7, 1tr • 111 29 Stockholm
phone +46 (0)8 -24 13 50 • Telefax +46(0)8-24 28 05
info@helasverige.se • www.helasverige.se