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The villagers' perspective

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Rural community development through competitions, prizes, and campaigns: the villagers' perspective

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Abstract

Withdrawal of strategies and universal welfare ideals in relation to rural community development in Denmark has given more weight to initiatives such as competitions, campaigns, and prizes aimed at villages and awarded to villagers by public authorities, philanthropic foundations, and interest groups. For rural communities and villagers to obtain funding or win prizes, demonstration of villagers' skills is required, for example, using private funds and volunteer work. Also required are positive outcomes, such as upgrading physical environments and increases in the number of inhabitants. This article analyses whether the criteria and qualifications required to secure funding or win prizes match theoretical understandings and recommendations for rural community development. Based on interviews with villagers and field observations from a prize ceremony, the article addresses how the competitive aspect affects the people involved in rural community development. It thereby provides a novel contribution by giving voice to the villagers on the opportunities and constraints related to competitions, campaigns, and prizes. The article concludes by discussing these initiatives as a new type of steering or metagovernance for rural community development in Denmark.

Keywords: Rural community development; Competitions; Villagers perspective; Metagovernance.

1. Introduction

Rural community development can be described as a complex and wicked problem (Rittel and Webber, 1973) characterised by a general lack of agreement on the nature, scope and importance of the problem, with no simple formula to follow. Conditions for rural community development have changed along with general neoliberal policies involving increased competition, shrinking public sectors and shifts in service and infrastructure delivery (e.g. Amin and Thrift, 1994; Tonts and Horsley, 2019). Rural community development is furthermore affected by changes in governance arrangements, where various types of networks are expected to contribute to the creation of development (e.g. Jessop, 1998; Torfing, 2012). Theories of metagovernance stress new roles for politicians and public managers as governors of self-governance (Sørensen, 2006) or organisers of self-organisation (Jessop, 1998). In line with this, Sørensen (2006) has suggested a reframing of the role of public authorities with both hands-on and hands-off instruments that can be used in combination by public authorities and other actors engaged in steering rural community development by targeting action, enlarging capacities, creating narratives etc. Such instruments thus strengthen the actions politicians and public managers can take (Meulemann, 2008).

In Denmark, a range of rural community competitions aiming at villages and villagers have been initiated by different metagovernors like ministries, regions, municipalities, national organisations or non-government foundations. Some of the competitions, prizes or campaigns target individual villages, defined statistically as settlements with more than 200 inhabitants, whereas other initiatives target village clusters or larger rural communities and settlements with 1,000 to 2,000 inhabitants. A significant element of competitions, prizes, and campaigns in rural community development is the exposure of the success of the winners, and this may overshadow villagers' struggle to uphold service functions and physical surroundings as well as their communities' imagined coherence (Jones and Woods, 2013).

This paper provides a piece to the puzzle on rural community development in times of changing governance structures exemplified by competitions, prizes, and campaigns. Firstly, by reviewing literature recommenda-

tions on rural community development set against criteria for winning competitions etc. and secondly, by discussing the potentials and barriers of such new governance instruments in the eyes of villagers. The paper thus attempts to answer the following question: *To what degree do criteria related to competitions, prizes, and campaigns match theories on rural development, and how is rural development, steered by competitions, prizes, and campaigns, experienced by villagers?*

A 2015 study on village competitions in the Czech Republic (Pospech et al. 2015) found that the national village of the year contest favoured representations and images of 'the good village' centred around everyday life and social activities of the inhabitants and thus produced a specific type of rural idyll (p. 68). A study from Finland (Kumpulainen, 2016) reviewed the criteria for a national village of the year competition in which strategic planning, development projects, self-responsibility for local welfare, and a focus on cultural heritage and community spirit were core elements in line with the neoliberal approach. Kumpulainen found that the community's internal factors had become the key to success or the cause of decline (p. 61) and concluded by saying that the 'competition can be considered a governing technique that constructs norms and an ideal for rural communities to pursue' (p. 55). Kumpulainen further stressed that no one has investigated how competitions are experienced by the villagers. Knowledge on whether such competitions are grounds for increased inequality if 'the winner takes it all' or whether competitions represent an opportunity for the villagers is an important and neglected perspective at a time when the voices of rural populations in the global north are generally portrayed as protests due to feelings of 'being left behind' (Carolan, 2019, Winther and Svendsen, 2012).

Our paper thus attempts to investigate how competitions are regarded by the villagers by presenting the views and experiences of both winners and losers of a village competition in Denmark. The empirical basis of this article is five competitions, campaigns and prizes directed at rural community development in Denmark: 1) the annual 'Village Prize' run by the Central Denmark Region, 2) the 'Rural Award' run by the Ministry of Industry, Business, and Financial Affairs, 3) the National Association Villages in Denmark's yearly nomination of a 'Village of the Year', 4) the 'Thriving Village' certification scheme organised by the Rural House consultancy firm, and 5) campaigns initiated by the non-governmental philanthropic organisation, Realdania.

In our study the annual 'Village Prize' run by the Central Denmark Region has been given most attention. Based on our observations, we find that villagers comply with the competition as a foundation for rural community development, that they experience positive endogenous and institutional capacity-building processes related to competitive frameworks but also aspects of steering. We further find that a competitive setup for rural community development mainly supports already strong communities and conclude that while competitions, prizes and campaigns give incentive to some villagers, other types of public support and development facilitation should be directed towards less strong villages.

Following this introduction, Section two presents the metagovernance approach taken in the article and a literature review of approaches to rural community development. Section three describes the methods applied. The first part of Section four evaluates criteria in the five competitions, prizes, and campaigns against the literature, while the second part analyses qualitative interviews on the villagers' perspective of the Central Denmark Region Village Prize along with field observations from a prize award ceremony. Section four discusses the findings, and in Section five, we make conclusions and recommendations.

2. Context and background

The pressure on rural parts of Denmark is related to urbanisation and structural adjustments within the agricultural sector, causing a decline in population and changing demographics due to the outmigration of young people and an ageing population (Andersen et al. 2014; Kommunernes Landsforening, 2014; Nørgaard et al. 2010; Sørensen, 2014). These developments pose challenges for rural municipalities when they attempt to provide and adapt services to a declining tax base while maintaining an acceptable level of services to prevent further depopulation (Jensen et al. 2014).

Rural parts of Denmark are further pressured by a structural and administrative reform passed by Parliament in 2007 as part of a package of reforms that centralised functions and institutions and placed responsibility for development on rural municipalities, local action groups (LAGs), and rural communities (Nørgaard, 2011). National policies (MEF 2006, 2010 and 2013) relate to regional policies in the European Union (EU) that

emphasise the necessity for competitiveness, employment and growth, and a territorial approach to development based on the 'New Rural Paradigm' (OECD, 2006), which stresses a place-based approach aiming to identify and exploit the local development potential in rural areas (Nørgaard, 2011). Thus, allocation of financial resources is based on the ability of rural communities to demonstrate their capacity; a development that Søndergaard (2017) termed 'the socio-spatial investment state,' asserted at a time when traditional egalitarian Nordic welfare ideals are under pressure.

2.1. Aspects of governance in rural community development

The governance concept fruitfully grasps the rural reality (Murdoch, 2000), where networks contribute to the creation of rural development and 'no single actor can alone account for contemporary governance' (Torfing et al., 2012, p. 6) characterised by interdependencies between authorities and local actors (Stoker, 1998). The public sector needs volunteers to take responsibility for service tasks, and they need to maintain contact with local associations to legitimize the increased distance to politicians following the amalgamation of 271 municipalities into 98 in 2007 (ISM, 2006; Vrangbæk, 2010; Nørgaard, 2011; Thuesen, 2017).

According to Sørensen (2006), metagovernance comprises the four tools: 1) Policy and resource framing, for example, goal steering, setting budgets, and rules; 2) Storytelling through, for example, speeches, conferences, and guides; 3) Support, facilitation, and process management that supports self-governance; and 4) Hands-on participation by politicians and public managers in networks. Agranoff (2003) posited that metagovernance concerns leveraging of networks and indirect manners of exercising influence and providing coordination. By using metagovernance, politicians are attempting to '… facilitate, manage, and direct more or less self-regulating processes of interactive governance without reverting to traditional statist styles of government in terms of bureaucratic rule-making and imperative command' (Torfing et al., p. 122).

The analytical value of including a metagovernance 'lens' in a study of rural community development through competitions is that it functions as a frame to address the steering elements involved, which, as shown in the analysis, draws attention to the exercise of goal and framework steering, storytelling, and support and facilita-

tion (Sørensen 2006). We thus argue that competitions are examples of metagovernance because they are tangible illustrations of discursive and strategic attempts on the part of actors to alter the conditions for rural community development (Torfing et al., 2012, p. 123 and p. 130). The analytical value also stems from addressing various views on metagovernance, making a discussion of the positive and critical aspects of village competitions possible.

From a consent perspective, metagovernance through competitions could provide direction to positively empower endogenous institutional capacity-building processes in rural community development. From this perspective, the competitions are examples of institutionalisation of incentive structures and games to provide better overall public governance (Kooiman, 1993). The normative rules developed through best-practice storytelling in the ongoing media publicity to promote the village competitions are understood as important and strong identity-producing means to steer self-governing actors. By producing new 'logics of appropriateness' (March and Olson, 1989; Sigelman, 2006), the competition initiators 'seek to influence the network actors' perception of themselves and the context they are part of' (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007, p. 175).

From a critical governmentality perspective, metagovernance is, however, observed to be the state executing power through calculative governance at a distance by subjectivating network actors through use of technologies of agency alongside disciplining technologies of performance (Foucault, 1991). From this perspective, nominating competition winners without mentioning the losers or those who did not enter the competition is considered 'governing through communities' (Rose, 1996; Woods et al., 2007) and an advanced form of subjectification of villagers towards self-responsible citizens. Critical aspects involved in metagovernance through campaigns and schemes in rural Scotland (Creamer 2015; Dinnie and Holstead 2017) have indicated that the energy and impetus that could have been created is crowded out by bureaucratic difficulties. Creamer (2015) also found that cooperation between rural communities is limited due to protection of individual strategies and chances for funding. She further indicated, that administration demands lead to that 'many grassroots groups could be discouraged from attempting to apply due to the resources and skills required' (p. 990). Creamer (2015) also identified conflicting goals between state policies and local communities, whereas Dinnie and

Holstead (2017) found examples where villagers change local community goals to adjust to state requirements for funding, which indicates a strong influence of metagovernance through goal steering.

2.2. Paths to village development in the literature

The possible scope of studies to include is broad, and distinctions are observed between geographical scales and the definitions of villages (Nørgaard, 2009; Johansen and Nielsen, 2012). The literature included here spans from rural community to regional level, but has been limited to studies with a developmental and guiding focus. For the development of rural regions, primarily the local milieu models and territorial innovation models (Terluin, 2003) are relevant. The basic understanding in the local milieu model is that local development is produced by local impulses and grounded in local resources, just as benefits tend to be retained and local values respected. The territorial innovation or mixed endogenous/exogenous models (Terluin, 2003) stress the interplay between local and external networks as essential for the development process. According to this literature, it would thus be important for metagovernors to support the promotion of local resources, endogenous capacity building, and internal and external networking to assist development.

Another approach (Amin and Thrift, 1994) also operating at the more regional level proposes the concept of institutional thickness as a condition for development. Institutional thickness exists in a location when the following are present: an abundance of diverse institutions; a high degree of interaction between institutions; collective representation of interests that are normally sector-based and individual; and common awareness of participating in the same undertaking. Institutional thickness is a potential for an area's ability to learn, be innovative and build trust. Institutional density can, however, also lead to reluctance to change (Amin and Thrift, 1994, p. 15) and it is not a panacea, as Amin and Thrift write: '…if it was possible to maintain a connection with strengthened national and supranational regulatory regimes able to represent the interests of "weaker" economies, its visibility decreases. Ultimately, the question of local fates can be a matter of the type of policy choices that are made, rather than a predetermined necessity for governance structures at the local level' (Amin and Thrift 1994, p 19). Healey et al. (1999) also emphasised this notion by focussing on institutional capacity understood as knowledge- and relational resources and mobilisation capacity and the extent to

which the local resources change the structures that influence the political agenda. These authors, therefore, did not subscribe to the idea of interdependencies between local and national actors often present in the governance literature. Despite their focus on local activism, Healey et al. (1999) and Amin and Thrift (1994) emphasised that societal structures should be appropriate for local capacity to develop.

The empirical studies on the dynamics of rural areas (DORA) in Scotland, Germany, Greece, and Sweden (Bryden and Hart, 2001), and the Danish equivalent '68 villages with population growth' (Johansen and Eskildsen, 2008), have leaned on the mixed endogenous/exogenous or neo-endogenous (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019) development approach. DORA concludes that areas performing well primarily do so because of their efforts, skills, and success in obtaining funds from support programmes. By contrast with Amin and Thrift, the DORA project found no evidence of the influence of centrally inspired initiatives or heavy external investments (Bryden and Hart, 2001, p. 50-51). Johansen and Eskildsen (2008) focused on explaining why 68 village communities in remote areas of Denmark experienced population growth from 1997–2007. The study stressed the importance of local resources (nature, culture), infrastructure, and agents that put the local resources into play and attract public investments (Johansen and Eskildsen, 2008, pp. 10).

The EU LEADER or community-led local development approach is considered an umbrella for another group of neo-endogenous theories of relevance to rural community development. Here, the focus remains regional, but includes a local dimension at the project level. Important dimensions in this approach relevant for rural community development are the area-based approach, bottom-up approach, innovative approach, and network approach, which are also part of OECD recommendations (OECD, 2006). Empirical studies on LEADER in, for example, Denmark, Italy and England, have emphasised social capital (Teilmann, 2012; Nardone, 2012), inclusion (Shortall, 2004, 2008; Shucksmith, 2000; Thuesen, 2010), endogenous and neo-endogenous development (Ray, 1999a and 1999b; Shucksmith 2010), institutional capacity (Scott 2004), and democracy (Connelly et. al, 2006; Thuesen, 2010) as important for rural development.

A final group of research stems from more place-based local literature, for example, a Swedish study by Herlitz (2000) on the importance of a feeling of place identity, and Gieling et al. (2018), who demonstrated that social

attachment and 'selective love for the village' (p. 7) is predictive of local volunteering in Dutch villages. From a comparative study from Ireland and Pennsylvania and Alaska in United States, Brennan et al. (2008) emphasised the importance of an open local culture and community agency for rural community development. Svendsen and Sørensen (2007) also highlighted the importance of such intangible resources when they leaned on the DORA study and investigated why two Danish rural communities with comparable structural conditions experienced different developments. They found that the communities differed in their ability to use their tangible and intangible capital and concluded that it is insufficient to have only a stock of capital because it must also be activated.

In summary, the literature identifies local communities' skills, ability to activate local capital, and mobilisation as critical components for rural community development in combination with relevant external support. In addition, openness between several social fields contributes to the formation of community agency. From the consenting metagovernance perspective, the role of public authorities would thus be to develop campaigns and initiate activities, incentives, and games that support the rural communities' ability to form community agency, which would lead to better rural development and overall governance of society. This viewpoint, from which it is good and societally fruitful to govern through capacity building and agency, makes an investigation into whether the criteria in village competitions match the recommendations in the literature notable; however, rural areas' readiness for joint action must, as emphasised by Amin and Thrift (1994) and Healey (1999), be supported by adequate societal structures and political decisions made at higher tiers of governance. The recommendations in the literature could thus also be interpreted as part of the governmentality trend described by Herbert-Cheshire (2006), that is, self-help as a development strategy has come to dominate the rural community development agenda. From this perspective, metagovernance through capacities is a power exercise that, if necessary, must contain strong considerations regarding inclusion on the part of 'weaker' rural areas (Woods et al. 2007) if metagovernance is to result in better overall public governance. We pursue the consenting and critical approaches to metagovernance in our analysis.

3. Methods

First, the study used document analysis (Andersen et al., 2012) of internet sites to identify key elements of all five competitions, prizes, and campaigns. This type of analysis allowed a comparison between criteria for winning competitions and recommendations for village development identified in Section two. Second, an analysis of the criteria was input for interviews with villagers to represent the winners and losers of the Central Denmark Region's Village Prize. Field observations in a prize award ceremony and a related one-day conference for the Village Prize supplement the interview data.

The five competitions, campaigns, and prizes were chosen to provide a broad picture of the rural community competition landscape. The Central Denmark Region was selected for further empirical investigation because it is the only region involved in such a competition. Our background is as reviewers of applications for the Village Prize in the period from 2009–2018 and as participants in the village ceremony. The Central Denmark Region's Village Prize is part of this regional authorities' attempt to profile rural community development. Research has shown that the Central Denmark Region is the most active region when it comes to supporting rural community development (Thuesen, 2013).

The interviews provided qualitative insight (Brinkmann and Tanggaard, 2015) into the villagers' perspective on the competition by asking about reasons for applying and effects of winning or losing the prize. The interviews further explored whether villagers experience the competition as an impetus for development, and whether the competition affects relations with other communities, leads to cooperation etc. The interviews also provided input on how the competition criteria are evaluated by villagers and if they view the criteria as a type of steering on the part of the Central Denmark Region. The interviews were recorded and verbatim transcribed and coded to identify clusters from the data.

The field observations (Harboe, 2013) at a prize award ceremony attended by residents from different villages, candidates for the prize, public managers and local and regional politicians contributed with additional perspectives on the value of the prize.

The Village Prize was initiated in 2009, the most recent competition was announced in late 2018, and the winner was found in early 2019. The informants were selected among candidates for the Village Prize in the period from 2010–2018 Half of the participating ten villages had won the prize, whereas the remaining half had not won. Some of the villages had entered the competition three times without winning, whereas others had entered only once and won. Altogether, ten interviews were completed; one for each of the eight village communities and two for a village cluster. The informants were chairpersons in the local community or development associations: six women and four men aged from mid-40s to late-60s.

4. Results

The results presented comprise two parts. The first part presents and evaluates the policy framing through goal setting in five competitions, prizes, and campaigns against the literature's recommendations on rural community development. The second part comprises our findings on the villagers' perspective on the prize, and to what degree they view competitions as positive and stimulating or as an unequal approach to rural community development.

4.1. Competition content compared with literature

The 'Village Prize' is part of the efforts made by the Central Denmark Region to create a balanced region. Villages have the chance to win a prize of EUR 20,000, and the winner is selected for best overall performance based on a set of criteria. The Village Prize was initiated in 2009 and over time, key criteria were increase in population or reversal of a negative population trend, implementation of major projects that demonstrate innovative development along with restoration/improvement of the physical environment. Furthermore, a strong commitment and collaboration among individuals, organisations, businesses, and local authorities and a large volunteer effort and contributions of private money count in favour for the village contestant. It is also considered favourable if the village has defied particularly difficult circumstances and demonstrated strategic and long-term plans and efforts within the last 3–5 years. In 2016, a new criterion was added to the Village Prize,

emphasising cooperation between villages (Central Denmark Region, 2016). Each of the region's ten LAGs can nominate one village and usually does.

The National Association of Villages is an organisation that supports cooperation among village residents, politicians, and authorities working to develop rural communities' physical, cultural, and democratic potential. Since 2002, the 'Village of the Year' competition themes have directed villages to measure progress based on feeling of community, increases in inhabitants and jobs and improved communication. A common theme during this period has been to stress and favour the importance of grassroots enthusiasts, community, voluntarism, popular engagement, and local unity for village survival and to increase well-being (National Association of Villages, 2012). Since 2013, the Rural Council has hosted the competition and placed further emphasis on population increases and job creation.

The Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs initiated a rural award in 2012, which honours those who have made a special effort in rural development. The award celebrates one or more individuals, businesses, or associations based on criteria of creating growth and/or jobs, cooperation, partnership, and networks. The main criteria are that initiatives, efforts, or projects have had a positive effect on a local community and demonstrate value for other local communities. The award is thus a showcase for successful projects to inspire and motivate others. Since 2015, the initiative has been transferred to the Ministry of Industry, Business, and Financial Affairs (Ministry of Industry, Business, and Financial Affairs, 2017).

Another guideline for village development is the 'Thriving Village' initiative, a certification that villages can obtain. The aim of 'Thriving Village' is village development based on local activities and dialogue. The programme comprises five levels where villages must fulfil specific criteria at each level to obtain one to five 'flowers'. Examples of the criteria relate to network and community and local associations and clubs. Furthermore, cultural diversity, images, and visions that demonstrate villagers' aspirations and plans for local development are required. The programme is aimed at villages with 50–1,000 inhabitants; which means that 4,050 Danish villages can participate ('Thriving Village' certification scheme, 2018).

In 2011, the philanthropic organisation Realdania independently initiated a campaign 'Land of Opportunity', followed by 'Place matters'. Through these campaigns, Realdania granted more than EUR 30 million to support projects and development in rural communities. Realdania favours investments in the physical environment, and the two campaigns have been followed by initiatives that stress processes and cooperation related to village development. Since 2015, another initiative by Realdania, 'On the Front Edge', has aimed to strengthen conditions for village development. Realdania has managed the campaign and included the municipal interest organisation Local Government Denmark and the Ministry of Growth and Development (Realdania, 2017).

Table 1: Criteria for the competitions, campaigns, and prizes on village development

Criteria	**Competitions, prizes and/or campaigns**
Voluntarism, grassroots enthusiasts, strong commitment, local unity, popular engagement, associations and clubs.	The 'Village Prize'. The 'Village of the Year' competition. The 'Rural Award'. The 'Thriving Village' certification scheme. Realdania campaigns.
Collaboration between individuals and stakeholders from the different sectors; collaboration between village community representatives and the municipal council; an emphasis on outlook and network.	The 'Village Prize'. The 'Village of the Year' competition. Realdania campaigns.
A success story that can motivate and inspire others. Demonstration value.	The 'Rural Award'. Realdania campaigns.
Restoration and renovation of buildings and the physical image of a village.	The 'Village Prize'. The 'Thriving Village' certification scheme. Realdania campaigns.
Initiation of major projects and initiatives that show new methods to innovate and develop.	The 'Village Prize'.
Donation of private money to local development for sustainable financing.	The 'Village Prize'. Realdania campaigns.
Reversing the trend of declining population.	The 'Village Prize'. The 'Village of the Year' competition (recent years).
Job creation.	The 'Village of the Year' competition (recent years).

As shown in Table 1, in four out of five of the competitions, campaigns, and prizes, the overall goal setting intended to frame village development stressed the importance of large volunteer efforts that matches the literature's emphasis on intangible capital, endogenous development potential, and building of local institutional capacity/thickness. Furthermore, the requirement for cooperation is consistent with the literature's emphasis

on interplay between local and external networks, upholding of an open local culture, relational resources, and mobilisation capacity.

Other criteria are less evident in the literature, for example, the criteria regarding restoration of buildings and improvement of the physical appearance of villages, which, however, correspond with the literature's recommendation concerning the activation of tangible capital. Additionally, the criterium concerning the success stories and projects with demonstration value that can motivate and inspire others, which was not apparent in the literature, indicate that the competition providers want to create storytelling that extends beyond the individual village. This criterion can also be interpreted as a safeguard of the different metagovernors interests in publicity.

A last group of criteria, which manages the effects (curbing population decline, job creation, and investment of private money), is not part of the literature's recommendations for village development, which rather stresses processes expected to indirectly contribute to such impact criteria. The use of impact goals in village competitions accentuates that the responsibility for rural community development is being placed on the individual community, regardless of structural conditions. Hence, these criteria narrow the circle of villages that can participate in the competitions to include only the strongest, which goes against Woods et al.'s (2007) assertion regarding equity considerations when governing rural development.

4.2. Villagers' experience with the Central Denmark Region's Village Prize

Based on interviews and observation data related to the Central Denmark Region's Village Prize, we pursue the consenting and critical perspectives of metagovernance identified in the literature and thus address the positive and negative aspects of villagers' experience with competitions, prizes, and campaigns.

4.2.1. Goal steering as positive, but necessity for professional skills makes it difficult

As shown in the document study, participating in the competition for the Village Prize demands the villages to document and fulfil specific criteria, which the Central Denmark Region considers relevant for rural community development. The interviews show that the interviewees did not give the specific goals set up by the region much thought, but when asked, most found that the goals were reasonable and that the criteria do not conflict with local goals. These findings are similar to the study by Creamer (2015). Some villagers expressed that the criteria have a political purpose by signalling that it is considered important to move in a particular direction. More importantly however, all the villagers stressed that the motivation to initiate new projects is from their desire to develop the place where they live and thrive. The villagers also stressed that development is driven by initiatives and ideas from villagers and not aimed at fulfilling specific criteria. The villagers do not initiate activities to enter a competition but because they find it meaningful. Some of the villagers even stress positive aspects related to the requirements, such as an awareness of the village's strengths and weaknesses, and that the criteria aids villagers in setting a direction. The interviewees are thus generally positive towards this type of political goal steering; however, as shown in the first part of the analysis, the Village Prize includes a rather structural impact goal on reversing declining population. By contrast, Dinnie and Holstead (2017) found that goals and criteria related to competitions or public funding lead villagers to adjust local community goals, but this is not the case according to the interviewees who find that the criteria match their own goals and that the prize is awarded based on their long-term efforts in creating local development. An observation is that the possible economic gain from winning the prize of EUR 20,000 has been an important impetus for the interviewees. Representatives from two villages that had applied without winning said:

> We applied hoping to get the prize and the money which could have initiated some new projects and development (applied in 2016 without winning).

> We really wanted to win the money, and we also thought that it would be nice to win the prize (applied in 2016 without winning).

Challenges like administration demands and the need for skills and capacity to secure funding (Creamer, 2015) are, however, reflected in the interviews. The interviewees stress that application processes requires many hours of work; both the Village Prize competition and especially the major foundations such as Realdania, where requirements for co-financing accentuate the necessity for villagers with strong skills to develop proposals. Thus, most of the village representatives experienced that professional skills are required, both to identify relevant foundations and prepare proposals. Although the villagers have managed the task, they consider it demanding and express a need for help and support:

> It would be good if there was help available to write the proposals. That's where the problem is. Of course, it would be nice to get more money but what is really needed is help with identifying relevant foundations and preparing proposals (applied twice and won in 2018).

Some villages have established working groups to manage the challenges of applying for funding or entering competitions, but the interviewees stressed that some rural communities may be discouraged from applying due to the resources and skills required, which not all communities possess. Most villagers experienced that the provided training and capacity building was insufficient, and that rural community development mainly depends on communities to organise, build capacity, and mobilise local resources themselves. Setting up small competitions and campaigns involving goal steering and storytelling, should, according to the interviewees, be supplemented with hands-on support and facilitation to ensure everyone can participate in the competitions. The interviewed villagers are thus in line with Woods et al. (2007), who stressed the need to consider inclusion when metagoverning through competition. One villager said the following

> It takes a lot to write the proposal. That in itself is a competence. If no one in the village has those qualifications, it's very difficult to get through (applied in 2010, 2012 and 2014 without winning).

Although the villagers experienced the objectives and goal steering related to the Regions Village Prize was helpful, they also found a need for process management in the form of facilitation, support, and leveraging of

community efforts to enable more rural communities to participate, which would provide more generally endogenous and institutional capacity building.

4.2.2. Accepting a competitive setup for village development and necessity to prioritise their own village

As explained, national Danish strategies for rural development following EU regional policies' territorial approach and emphasising the need for competitiveness have been in effect since 2006. Interviews with villagers clearly show that they have, or have developed, a pragmatic approach to competition as a foundation for rural community development and expect to make an effort to receive funding, as expressed by the following:

> No one is going to do things for us. We need to do it ourselves. That's necessary. In this part of the country, things don't just happen (applied once and won in 2017).

Villagers further stress that they are not required to enter competitions but are pleased with the opportunity and that the prize is utilised as a qualification for funding of local projects or for co-financing of larger projects. No villagers, however, experienced that the Village Prize made notable changes. It is rather the difficult work and the sum of projects that make a difference, many of which are entirely financed by private contributions and volunteer efforts. Far from all the villages have won the Village Prize, but most villages have succeeded in obtaining other funds from the municipality and foundations like Realdania. In essence, both the 'losers' and 'winners' of the village prize experience competitions as an impetus and inspiration for rural community development. Most interviewed villagers said that winning the Village Prize did not affect the overall relations with neighbouring communities, but some statements, however, revealed possible negative aspects of the competion between villages, as expressed in the following:

> It's hard to say if it's envy (laughing). It's not being said directly, and we all have different backgrounds and opportunities (applied once and won in 2015).

The literature encouraged interplay between local and external networks (Terluin, 2003), the upholding of an open local culture (Brennan et al., 2008), relational resources, and mobilisation capacity (Healey, 1999). Additionally, in the Village Prize competition, a criterion related to development of village clusters was added in 2016. Although some villages have long, established relationships with neighbouring villages, others' relationships are more recent and needs-based, for example, being able to set up a soccer team for the local children and sharing day-care facilities/schools after municipal cuts in services.

Only one of the interviewees described a strategic partnership with neighbouring villages. When asked about cooperation to win the prize with other rural communities, most interviewees say that everybody wants what is best for their village. Due to the volunteer nature of local efforts, and scarce time resources, it makes most sense to focus on their own community. This means that despite the focus in the literature and competition criteria on collaboration and interplay between local and external networks, most interviewees focus on development within their own community partly based on a competitive logic of consequentiality and partly due to time constraints when performing voluntary work. These findings thus correspond with Creamer (2015), who stated that public schemes and campaigns result in limited cooperation in rural communities.

All villagers, however, expressed in a positive manner that sharing common goals and working together internally in the village to win the prize and other funds had brought the villagers closer, created unity and community cohesion, and enhanced local skills. In the consenting perspective, this type of games' creation of internal unity is observed to be positive. It does, however, not provide the external cooperation results deemed important in the literature on rural community development. One of the interviewed villagers, who did attempt to initiate cooperation said:

> I asked if the neighbouring village wanted to send in a joint application, but they declined. They would rather apply on their own but didn't win. I knew the criteria quite well and it was clear that we had a better chance than them, but we didn't want to compete. So, we waited until the following year and won the prize (applied once and won in 2017).

In this case, the winning proposal was uploaded to the village website as an inspiration to other villagers, and some villagers do look for inspiration elsewhere. Still, the villagers stressed the importance of finding one's own unique path and not simply copying someone else, a statement corresponding with the Village Prize criteria regarding the necessity to demonstrate new means to innovate and develop.

4.2.3. Recognition, pride, and visibility as important aspects

Most of the villagers apply for funding from a range of sources, thus winning the Village Prize is not crucial. However, recognition of villagers' efforts and achievements is essential, and most recipients and non-recipients of the prize discussed the profound acclaim associated with the prize and that receiving the prize has, or would, make them very proud. This opinion was expressed in different ways, but all the interviewees stressed that the appreciation of villagers' efforts is important. As one villager said:

> Just being nominated for the prize is recognition (…) It means a lot to be recognised for what we do. All our work and effort. You can't get too much thanks and appreciation. That means a lot to all those doing voluntary work (applied in 2015 and 2017 without winning).

> Another villager emphasised that 'We are all very proud' (applied twice and won in 2018), while yet another interviewee said '…it also gave us a drive to show them that we could make it' (applied in 2016 without winning).

The consenting approach supports competitions as an incentive structure and a strong identity-producing mean to steer rural community development. In the view of the villagers, receiving the prize provides publicity and stages a narrative regarding the winning community that can inspire others and show it is possible to achieve

successful local development, which should not be underestimated as a metagovernance mechanism. Regardless of not winning the prize, being nominated was also considered a reward for and acknowledgement of the villagers. Despite disappointment they had hope of winning next time, as expressed by this villager:

> We have applied for the Village Prize three times without winning, but we just don't want to give up. We apply for funding from many sources and in all cases, we think that we are bound to succeed eventually. We would use the prize money for local development and as seed money for applying to the bigger foundations. But most important, we would use it to promote ourselves as a good place to live. We succeed in many other ways to get funding and have actually had newcomers moving into our small village (applied in 2010, 2012 and 2014 without winning).

All the villagers stressed that visibility is essential, and that the most important aspect of the Village Prize is leaving one's mark on the map, as expressed here:

> Now all local politicians know where our village is, even though it is a small village (applied twice and won in 2018).

Villagers thus use the prize to actively promote their community and make their achievements known in the municipality, region, and in some cases, at the national level through nationwide media. All the villagers indicated that the PR-value is important and at least as important as funding. This opinion again indicates an acceptance of the competitive setup for rural community development and the necessity of villages' skills and success when applying for funding.

Press releases and speeches related to the prize are examples of political efforts where storytelling and media coverage promotes the rural village communities, the Central Denmark Region, and the local municipality. Field observations supplement the findings regarding the value of recognition and visibility related to the prize

with an atmosphere of local pride, happiness, engagement, honour, and positive spirit exemplified by the ceremony in the village of Glyngøre that won the prize in 2015:

On the day of the presentation of the Village Prize, flags were waving in the wind along the roads and a big tent was set up in the village park. Crowds of people participated in the ceremony. The region served coffee and cake, and a local children's choir gave a small concert before the presentation. The village had produced merchandise such as bottles of spring water with the village logo indicating that the village had won. The bottles were placed on the tables in the tent. The regional chairman and the mayor of the municipality in which the village was located gave a speech expressing excitement regarding the great results the village had achieved. An obvious element of political publicity was on display regarding the prize ceremony where journalists, photographers and many politicians were present. The local president of the village association gave a speech in which she expressed enjoyment and pride that the village received the award. She said that the village association had sought ideas for how the money could be spent, and she revealed the projects that would be supported. She also explained that the Village Prize was a culmination of several successful projects over the past 5–6 years, after the village had lost many jobs. (field description from the village of Glyngøre, May 10, 2015).

On the same day as the prize award ceremony, the Central Denmark Region arranged a conference to bring together the winners, so they could share and express what they had achieved by winning. Municipal representatives within the region, LAGs, and regional politicians participated in the conference. Four of the previous winners were present, all of whom were very proud of winning the prize. The downside of the competition related to the Village Prize was expressed in public plenary by one village representative referring to the Law of Jante code of conduct, by which it is considered inappropriate to express one's achievements. Another village representative also publicly explained that winning the prize had not made it easier for the village to obtain support from the municipality while another expressed a need for continual efforts and struggles. At the political level, a representative from the Central Denmark Region voiced satisfaction with initiating the Village Prize which was considered good value for money. He said in plenary:

> It's amazing how much work and publicity we get for DKK 150,000 [approx. EUR 20,000].

The representative also said that the best part was all the local development projects inspired by the prize, and that 60-70 rural communities had been competing for it over the last 6 years. Here, the metagovernance aspect of the competitions becomes clear. In a balance between other initiatives, the competition is considered worth the money

The field observations and the interviews clearly illustrate the importance of storytelling regarding good and positive examples of rural community development. Competitions thereby showcase both the struggle and success of villages which both strengthen villagers and inspire other rural communities to try. From a more critical perspective, competitions can be seen to exemplify governing through communities, and thus a power exercise. However, the interviewees do not reflect this view and rather stress their own steering capacity and desire for development in line with Gieling et al.'s (2018) findings that villagers motivation is driven by love for one's village. In line with Foucault (1991), power and governance are social phenomena not only present at the state, public, or system level but also represented in civil society. Thus, to inspire local development, some of the winning villages explained that they had established their own local village prize with a portion of the money they won.

4.2.4. Results and discussion

The villagers chosen for our study have all entered the competition for the Central Denmark Region Village Prize. Some have won, and others have not succeeded in winning, but all stress the value and honour that goes with receiving the prize along with the recognition of villagers' volunteer efforts and achievements. All the villagers also stressed that the visibility related to receiving the Village Prize is essential. Furthermore, the prize money aids development in rural communities by financing local projects and is important as a means for co-financing and qualification when applying for funding from foundations and other organisations. These experiences and views conveyed by the villagers can be regarded as expressions of *the consenting perspective*

of metagovernance that stress positive endogenous and institutional capacity-building processes in rural community development related to competitions.

By contrast, we also found evidence of a *critical governmentality perspective* of metagovernance, where the state executes power through governing at a distance. Most of the villagers have not given much thought to the competition criteria, but they consider them reasonable, although some also assess them as a means to steer rural communities in a specific direction. All, the villagers emphasised that entering the competition is optional and, the steering aspect thus appears two-sided in the view of the villagers in terms of appreciating the capacity-building processes along with acknowledging the governmentality perspective.

Villagers competing for the Village Prize are clearly pragmatic, regard competition as necessary for future development as well as an impetus and inspiration for local development. Our study shows that rural community development driven by competition leads villagers to proliferate their own community rather than cooperate with other villages. Competition for funding and recognition may thus aggravate rivalry.

Although the interviews show that villagers accept competitions as a foundation for rural community development and value the Village Prize, the number of applicants has declined; there was five in 2017 and eight in 2018 compared to the time when the prize was introduced in 2009 where 22 rural communities entered the competition. Possible explanations could be that villagers can access better opportunities for financing elsewhere or perhaps have given up hope for winning in times when the criteria have started to include more explicit impact results like job creation and population increases. Other possible explanations could be conflicts between the competition criteria, for example, cooperation with other villages and villagers' development plans, or that villagers are opting out of the steering aspect of the competition. Our study does not provide answers for the decline in the number of villages participating in the Village Prize competition but demonstrates the ability of rural communities to engage with new and competitive conditions for rural community development.

5. Conclusions

This article examined whether criteria related to competitions, prizes, and campaigns match literature recommendations on rural community development and how villagers experience development based on competition. Our study thus directs attention to 'the individuals who lead, work for and are active within the structures of rural governance' (Woods et. al, 2007, p. 215) and contributes to the emerging literature on the influence of competitions related to village development (Pospech et al., 2015; Kumpulainen, 2016). By focussing on the voices of the villagers, our study also contributes to the understanding of how the competitive and territorial approach to regional and rural community development apparent in the 'New Rural Paradigm' (OECD, 2006) is experienced by villagers.

The review of criteria in five competitions, prizes, and campaigns shows a high degree of correspondence between competition criteria and literature on rural community development, especially concerning endogenous development potential, voluntarism, and cooperation; additionally, some requirements do not relate to the literature's recommendations. Criteria in competitions and campaigns demand a large volunteer effort, grassroots enthusiasts, strong commitment, local unity, popular engagement, local associations and clubs. In addition, collaboration between individuals and stakeholders from the private, public, and voluntary sectors and collaboration between village community representatives and the municipal council are valued. Outlook and network are also emphasised, but mainly in a narrow sense within the home municipality. Furthermore, explicit impact criteria like population increases and job creation are part of the competition criteria, whereas the literature recommendations focus on process input likely to lead to impact at a later stage.

Our study adds knowledge on how rural community development steered by competitions, prizes, and campaigns affects the dynamism of villagers and shows that villagers seem to accept and adapt to a competitive setup for community development. The villagers interviewed have very similar perceptions in terms of viewing competition as a strong impetus for villages, and that winning a prize and receiving acknowledgement for achievements is important. Villagers have, however, also taken on a discourse regarding other villages and villagers as either winners or losers, which may cause tension and result in disappointment and perhaps envy

on the part of the 'losers' as well as increasing inequality between villages. By contrast, the Village Prize is considered valuable for the Central Denmark Region by inspiring villagers to initiate local development and because of the inexpensive publicity related to the competition and prize award ceremony.

Our study had as its starting point that competitions, prizes, and campaigns must be viewed in relation to a trend in which egalitarian Nordic welfare ideals are under pressure by neoliberalism. In the case of Denmark, the absence of a national strategy for regional and village development has opened the field to non-public authorities, for example, major foundations such as Realdania, to strongly influence the direction of rural community development. Within this framework, we found that municipalities and regions form new strategies based on competition for investment, economic development, and settlement, where the responsibility to create development is clearly placed on villagers. In our study, we also recognise the strong integration between strategies at the level of the nation state and the EU, which can be characterised as a multilevel system of help to provide self-help in bottom-up rural development projects, as expressed by Søndergaard (2017). According to Søndergaard, the foundation of this system is based on a multilevel selective investment logic where municipalities and regional authorities make investments and support places that demonstrate potential, thereby privileging active citizens and communities. This may result in increased inequality due to the uneven distribution of resources within rural communities. Winning villages are paradoxically the ones who already manage to attract funding and use their success actively, creating a 'snowball effect', while others lack qualifications to identify the possibilities for funding and prepare proposals.

The outset for our article was that competitions, prizes, and campaigns can be regarded as steering rural community development. By using concepts of metagovernance, we found that storytelling and political goal steering in competitions can be viewed as positive discursive and strategic attempts on the part of actors to change the conditions and processes in rural community development (Torfing et al., 2012). Despite this, we also found grounds to conclude that rural community development has increasingly become a practice of unregulated self-regulation, where villagers are supposed to take the lead in the local development of their areas, without responsible metagovernors. Contrary to much empirical research on metagovernance, responsibility

for the 'wicked' village development problem solving has not been handed over to the local networks because they are more democratic or because they are more efficient in solving public problems, as it is usually justified. Rather, it seems that 'the wicked problem' of rural community development is left to villagers because it is difficult to solve and because of a competitive agenda in combination with limited public resources. Our study shows that competitions as a metagovernance tool in rural community development are mainly targeted towards strong communities. We thus identify the need for different metagovernors to take on the responsibility for capacity building and supporting mechanisms aimed at more invisible and less resourceful rural communities.

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