

## Abstract

Title: Meeting places in rural areas: the Elderly, Community and Activities.  
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This dissertation studies elderly, meeting places in rural areas, social community and activities. The purpose is to describe the existence and purpose of volunteer programs for seniors in rural areas and to describe and understand the significance of volunteer programs for elderly in rural areas. The study was carried out as a quantitative exploratory study in three municipalities and as a qualitative case study of seven meeting places. The study is based on three themes which have also generated research questions: 1. The impoverishment and counteracting forces in rural areas; 2. The civic society and its relationship to the welfare state; 3. Seniors and their need for meeting places.

Data was collected through surveys, observations, interviews and a study of documents. The exploratory study consisted of a survey which was sent to organizations and similar associations. The methods for data collection for the case studies were: observations in meeting places and organizations' meetings; interviews with participants, organizers and with representatives of organizations; as well as through studies of documents such as minutes from meetings, articles from the local media and local documents.

The results of the exploratory study show that while there are voluntary programs for the elderly, their purpose varies. The results of the case study show that there are several reasons for why there is a need for new meeting places. These include both the fact that rural areas have become impoverished, and that the ways of socializing have changed as well as the fact that many seniors are healthy and feel the need to get together. The meeting places' character is similar to organizations' structure and municipal operational plans. Changes in the welfare society have produced a new way of organizing and executing these programs and it has given rise to a new culture of community.

The meeting places provide the term community with meaning and value to activities that are aimed at creating meaning. In these places everyday meetings take place between seniors from the local area. Aging has its own meaning and character and meetings between seniors consist, to some extent, of conversations that look back. Together they remember, understand events and view them from a new perspective. The meeting places are also an arena in which the elderly get important information and knowledge that enable them to promote their rights. The meeting places are an arena both for socializing and for various forms of activities and both parts are equally important. The meeting places are an expression of a cultural pattern. Socializing most likely contributes to developing weak ties and various activities help the elderly to stay healthy and postpone help from relatives and municipal care.