Well-being experiences of mothers who have moved to Sodankylä in recent years
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1 Introduction

This report discusses the well-being experiences of mothers who have moved to Sodankylä in recent years. The report is based on a Master’s thesis focusing on migratory families’ well-being in mining societies. The thesis is part of the Regina project, which is funded by the Northern Periphery and Arctic Program. The three-year project was started in October 2015 and it is carried out through the cooperation of five countries. The project aims to enable municipalities and local communities, in collaboration with research institutes, to develop ways to benefit from such major industries as the mining industry in sparsely populated areas.

Sociologically, families can be considered as the foundation of society. The family is a child’s first stepping stone toward the surrounding community. It is the place where a child learns the rules and structures of society and the way to become a member of it. Family well-being has a crucial effect on the present and future of children. In society, families can be seen as builders of tomorrow and as an investment in social sustainability. Support for families strengthens parenting skills and, subsequently, reduces mental and behavioral problems in children (Lammi-Taskula & Karvonen 2014). In municipal services, families should be seen as units in which each individual has a unique role. The well-being of families benefits the entire municipality in terms of both working life and the emerging generation.

Mining is a global business governed by international economic trends and the world market prices of minerals. The mining sector therefore involves many uncertainties on the individual and local community levels, which makes the meaningfulness of life, integration into society, and well-being important factors when families consider their future in mining municipalities.

Leena Viinamäki’s research group (2015) has reported the results of the MineHealth project regarding the social and economic challenges of mining in Sodankylä. The research focused mostly on miners’ well-being at work. Women did not get a chance to be heard, which is why they were chosen as “the voice of the families” for this research. Women’s attitudes and experiences are socially significant because especially remote areas suffer from
the out-migration of young and well-educated women. Enhancing the well-being of families may also encourage working-age women to settle down in the municipality. This is one of the demographic challenges that the Regina project (see www.reginaproject.com) aims to meet in collaboration with the municipality of Sodankylä.

The following chapter discusses the theory of well-being on the basis of studies conducted by Erik Allardt, Timo Hämäläinen, and Tuuli Hirvilammi. Chapter 3 focuses on group interviews as a research method. Chapter 4 summarizes the results into practical suggestions to develop the well-being policy of the municipality of Sodankylä. The last chapter brings up ideas that could serve as a basis for the municipality’s strategy of sustainable well-being.
2 Dimensions of well-being

The theoretical frame of reference in this research draws on Erik Allardt’s (1976) dimensions of well-being. According to Allard, Nordic well-being was based on the following three categories: (1) standard of living (having), (2) community relations (loving), and (3) opportunities to self-actualization (being). These three categories were based on knowledge of what causes people to suffer, the goals that people express through social activities, and knowledge of the human linguistic expression of wishes and valuations. With having, the standard of living, Allardt meant material and impersonal resources, such as income, housing, employment, working conditions, food, and health. Allardt presumed already in the 1970s that the values and resources associated with the physical environment will rise in the future as elements of the standard of living. These include among other things the need for clean air and water. This also relates to the causes of the global refugee crisis: droughts, lack of drinking water, and food shortages have led to wars and conflicts around the world. Allardt referred to the second category of well-being as loving, which depicts the human need for social interaction, love, acceptance, and tenderness. Allardt saw community as an important resource that helps individuals to fulfill other values. Community at the local level also acts as a resource when it strengthens and supports the individual. On the other hand, Allardt recognized the risk of small groups getting isolated on account of strong solidarity, which inevitably leads to the exclusion of other groups. In the long run, being left outside a community and lacking a sense of community may have a direct impact an individual’s mental health. Community requires also the ability to empathize. Allard’s third category, referred to as being, dealt with opportunities to self-actualization, which is an important part of well-being as a whole. Among other things, self-actualization involves the indispensability of the individual in a community, the value granted to a person by the community, recreational opportunities and leisure activities, and the possibility for political activity. According to Allardt, the more easily an individual can be replaced, the more he or she resembles an object, a commodity. And vice versa, the less easily an individual can be replaced, the more he or she resembles a person, an individual (Allardt
Today’s fragmentary working life and fixed-term contracts tend to multiply the challenges related to the experience of indispensability.

In addition to objective well-being issues, Allardt (1976) discussed subjective, or experienced, well-being. Research on welfare was still conducted in the 1980s, but since then the interest has waned gradually. During the last decade the discussion on subjective well-being has resumed owing to the transition of the welfare state. Citizens’ resources and opportunities have improved along with the development of the Finnish welfare state, whereupon the standard of living has become rather high. There is enough food and water, the health and housing conditions are satisfactory, and the living environment is safe (Hämäläinen 2006). In the 2000s, ways of measuring experienced well-being have been developed in a number of countries. Possibly the most significant pioneer is currently the United Kingdom, where the idea of the welfare policy is that well-being depends on factors other than material resources. Thus, people themselves know the best ways to pursue well-being in their local communities. The aim of the British welfare policy has been to give citizens, families, and communities more freedom, but they are also given more responsibility in pursuing the desired level of well-being. The first results concerning the impacts of the new welfare policy were published in 2012. They showed that the experienced well-being was still mainly connected to resources, that is, to work, income, housing and health, but there was also a linkage to social relationships, especially family relations. Except for social relationships, the above-mentioned issues already exist in the Nordic welfare policy action programs. Enhancing the measurement of experienced well-being has been also on the agendas of the OECD and EU (Simpura 2012).

Tuuli Hirvilammi (2015) has updated Allardt’s theory of well-being with the fourth category doing. She has also developed further the concept of sustainable well-being, according to which the impacts of humans on the environment should be taken into account more in welfare research. The basic premise of sustainable well-being is the notion that individuals, as well as social and ecological systems, need to remain vital. With the doing category Hirvilammi argues that people are functional beings who expresses themselves and their well-being needs by doing. Doing also reflects a person’s values and goals. People are capable of reflecting on, changing, and taking responsibility for their action. They can direct their action toward improving their own and other individuals’ well-being. In terms of people’s everyday well-being, their choices are manifested in how they organize time between paid work, domestic work, and leisure time. From the perspective of sustainable well-being, doing includes for example adjusting of work into ecologically, socially, economically, and humanely sustainable limits; active citizenship in terms of aspiring to influence
society and engaging in housework, leisure activities, mind refreshment, voluntary activities, education, and learning; and going in for outdoor activities such as gardening, skiing, and hiking. The sustainable development perspective is easily forgotten in the pursuit of well-being. According to Hirvilammi, securing people’s needs should not compromise the resilience of ecosystems, that is, nature’s ability to adapt and renew itself. There are certain limits concerning ecosystems within which the present generations should remain in their pursuit of well-being (Hirvilammi 2015). The high standard of living of any group, including Western societies, should not weaken the opportunities of other groups to use natural resources (Hirvilammi 2015).

Timo Hämäläinen (2006) has reflected on the well-being and cohesiveness of life in the rapidly changing modern society. In the field of sociology, he has expanded and continued defining Aaron Antonovsky’s concept of coherence, referring to the comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness of life. According to Hämäläinen, people’s freedom of choice brings with it many opportunities, but it also brings the requirement of life management. The endlessly increasing opportunities also increase the amount of decision making. "Modern society’s hectic and complex everyday management requires completely new types of life-management skills that are not taught in the Finnish school system" (ibid. 34). The modern wealthy society is also becoming more egoistic and shortsighted. It enables new lifestyles and practices that may increase well-being in the short run, but it has become increasingly difficult to predict the long-term consequences of the present way of life. According to Hämäläinen, the cumulative effects of an individual’s negative choices may lead to great personal or social problems. Such choices and their consequences may include for example obesity leading to lifestyle diseases and the related problems, excessive devotion to work or hobbies resulting to parenting problems, divorces leaving single-parent families in poverty, reduced birth rates leading to the aging of the population, and increased traveling leading to its adverse effects on the environment (ibid., 34–35).

The development of the welfare state and the nation’s growing prosperity have placed charity, the sense of community, appreciation of others, and self-actualization to the core of well-being. The growing need for community and self-actualization reduces the role of material consumption in people’s well-being because consumption does not contribute to social relationships or bring about appreciation in a wealthy society. Hämäläinen points out that a person’s well-being in fact suffers from the competition and status-centeredness present in consumer society. When a sufficient income and wealth level has been reached, areas outside the material world become more important in terms of well-being. On the other hand, people’s sense of security has also decreased because of mounting
uncertainties in daily life. The factors behind this development include the unpredictability and fragmentation of working life, living in a constant rush, and increased problems with relationships (e.g. marital problems). According to Hämäläinen, many current trends reflect people’s effort to reduce the uncertainties of everyday life. For example, people decorate their homes as safe nesting places; long for simplicity, peace and quiet; downshift their lives; cherish traditional habits and values; and demand strong political leadership (Hämäläinen 2006, 18–19).

Erik Allardt’s theory of well-being covers its basic concepts and thereby works as an umbrella for my research. Furthermore, Tuuli Hirvilammi’s theory brings the perspectives of sustainable development and human-caused environmental impacts into well-being theory, while supplementing Allardt’s theory with the fourth category doing. Timo Hämäläinen has an up-to-date theoretical understanding of well-being and the cohesiveness of life in the rapidly changing modern society. According to Hämäläinen (2006), subjective well-being is still not well understood. It creates the problem that Finnish society will be developed according to old practices, even though the conditions and needs related to well-being have changed over the decades (ibid. 13). Allardt’s theory is reinforced by Hämäläinen’s thoughts of well-being in modern society and the cohesiveness of life – a sense of coherence consisting of comprehensibility, manageability, and the meaningfulness of life.
3 Group interviews as a research material

Group interviews are in place when the focus is on the interviewees’ opinions and cultural backgrounds. This technique reveals the norms of the group and the larger community, even if they are not specifically referred to. Group interviews are also a time-efficient data collection method that can be used whenever convenient to collect information from more than one person at a time. The interviewees also get support from the group: they can reminisce together, encourage one another, and generate ideas for the future. At its best, a group interview can create cohesion and work as an empowering data collection method (Eskola & Suoranta, 2000).

The research material consists of four group interviews with 2–3 persons, where mothers (aged 28–38 years) who had moved to Sodankylä in recent years got a chance to discuss well-being and the comfort level of everyday life in the municipality. The interview questions were divided into themes according to Allardt’s three dimensions of well-being, and they were reinforced by Hirvilammi’s theory of sustainable well-being and Hämäläinen’s concept of coherence.

The interviewees were found with the help of the maternity clinic. The clinic advertised the interview and the participants contacted me by phone or e-mail. On 1 April 2016 there was Families’ Open Living Room in Sodankylä, through which were found four interviewees. The first interview group consisted of specialists who worked with families and who had also moved to Sodankylä with their families quite recently (well-integrated). The second group came from Sattanen village (well-integrated) and the third one consisted of mothers who had small babies (poorly integrated). The fourth interview was held with an international group (poorly integrated). The interviews were informal discussions on the chosen themes and they lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. In addition, there was a 20-minute conversation with one more specialist who works with international families. The conversation served as a secondary source and as background information for the interview with the international group. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed in accordance with the principles of good research ethics.
4 Development suggestions for the municipality

4.1 Integration

Based on the interviews, the greatest problems encountered when moving to a sparsely populated municipality appeared to be loneliness and a lack of networks. In the notes written after the interviews, was seen rather strong emotions displayed by the members of the poorly integrated groups. A note from 12 April 2016:

"In the international group, the presence of loneliness and isolation was tangible. The group reflected the solitude, hopelessness and grief that follows when you’re left outside the community."

A variety of approaches can be taken to facilitate the integration of families. For example, Sodankylä has a new integration program that could be further developed through practical implementation. According to this program, an integration plan can be made to persons who are (1) unemployed job seekers and registered at the employment agency (TE office is responsible for this), (2) receivers of a supplementary benefit from the social services (municipality is responsible for this), or (3) immigrants requesting it (Kotouttamisohjelma/Integration Program 2014–2017). From the point of view of families, however, for example housewives and people who have moved into the area for occupational reasons may easily be excluded from the social integration program. The program also lacked an S2 language teaching plan for preschoolers, which will be necessary if families with pre-school age children move into the municipality from abroad. The city of Kemi has done also a fantastic job drawing up a material package in connection with pre-school curriculum planning. The package is freely available and serves as guidance and as an everyday working tool in migrant children’s early childhood education and pre-school education. (See Finnish as a second language (S2) teaching in early childhood education and pre-school education.) Many municipalities in Finland have already begun to develop new social integration plans. Examples and tips are also available on the web pages of the Ministry of Employment and the
Economy’s Integration Competence Centre and the At Home in Finland pilot projects (www.kotouttaminen.fi).

On the other hand, the municipality of Sodankylä might want to evaluate whether it is possible to make a low-threshold integration plan for all in-migrating families, for example as part of the municipality’s family services. It should concern not only immigrants and expats but also internal migrants. This could be considered as preventative family work that makes it possible to address the challenges of families before they escalate into serious problems. Moving to a new area and starting a new life is a great mental challenge for a family. It is also a phase of life in which a great deal of assistance and support is needed. There are no limitations on how a social integration plan, should be made in practice. It does not require the resources of a big city. Local resources and circumstances suffice to get people integrated. A family worker or some other dedicated support person could meet with the family at least once to tell about the municipal services and to plan the following steps that the family should take towards integration. All families are unlikely to need constant support, but especially expats may require more help than internal migrants because of a language barrier for example when applying for daycare. The basic idea of social integration is to create a home for people both in a physical and in a mental sense, to make them feel a part of the community, and to help them become equal members of the municipality.

Each interviewed group hoped for a municipal service leaflet for families, presenting the third-sector services and activities available in the municipality. The leaflet or info package could be distributed through the maternity/child health clinic, on the first day of school, or in the first meeting with the family’s support person or the municipal family worker. The info package could also be available on the municipality’s website, so that all possible services and family-oriented activities would be accessible through a single page. Also, it would be important to have an English version of the package to allow equal access to the information for everyone. It takes approximately 5–7 years to become a fluent speaker of Finnish (Frantti-Niemelä 2016). Therefore, regarding immigrants and expats who do not speak Finnish when arriving in the municipality, it would be extremely important to provide municipal information in English. This also applies to all other important messages/letters sent by the municipality.

The maternity/child health clinic had introduced the idea of reaching out to new families by having a family worker and the school social worker pay joint visits to their homes. Families with schoolchildren are no longer covered by the child health clinic’s services, so they are in danger of missing out on information about municipal services and recreational opportunities. Home visits have so far not been arranged owing to a lack of time. On the other hand, this information could be distributed by sending
an information package to new families with school-age children, during the first school-day or during the visit with a family worker.

Immigrants, expats as well as internal migrants can be seen as a resource in Sodankylä. Newcomers have much to give to the local people: internationality, language immersion, new recreation groups, expertise in their own field, and new ideas and innovations. Well-functioning municipal services need people. When newcomer families get integrated into the community, highly educated workforce and services will remain in the municipality. In the case of Sodankylä, the population growth will continue and the village view will become more international. Sodankylä will become “a lively, comfortable, and evolving Lapland’s star municipality” (Municipality of Sodankylä strategy, 2014).

4.2 Support for families in their daily lives

Preventive family work can bring large savings to municipalities. There are experiences of this in Mäntsälä and Pornainen, Finland, where the municipalities hired home aid personnel to provide low-threshold help. Eija Rintala, the head of basic social security in Mäntsälä, has stated that the recipe for family work is ultimately very simple: “When adults are doing well, kids are doing well.” Mäntsälä and Pornainen chose not to wait until families’ problems escalate before offering them help. Family work in the municipalities has been part of families’ daily lives at an early stage – preventively and as an investment to well-being. Schools and youth workers have also cooperated closely with the social services and maternity/child health clinics (Yle 14.6.2016).

The interviewees mostly missed support persons – for example substitute grandmothers and sisters, support networks, and friends – to alleviate their loneliness. Many who had moved to Sodankylä did not have acquaintances or friends in the municipality. The third sector, a support person, or a family social worker could deliver contact information of substitute grandmothers and sisters or of people registered for voluntary friendship services. Above all, the municipality lacks a sense of community – there is a need for solidarity where everyone would be willing to assist and to support those who are lonely. Newcomers should be seen as equal members of the community regardless of their background or nationality. In the city of Pudasjärvi, Finland, this approach is referred to as “the principle of normality”, which means that all people are equal and residents of the same municipality (Pietiläinen 2016).

The mothers who were interviewed appreciated the “Open Living Room” family activities that had just started in Sodankylä and were still
taking shape. To further develop the activities the mothers suggested increasing joint action and involving international families more efficiently through bilingual events. In addition, the mothers wished for the following: open day care centers which would enable family work in small groups, clubs for children while mothers go shopping or see a dentist, and child care assistance in emergency situations – for instance if they have to travel to Rovaniemi (130 km) to give birth in the hospital. The interviewees also suggested a confidential mommy group. This could lower the barrier for seeking help in the midst of babyhood challenges and, on the other hand, would make it easier to find friends from among other stay-at-home mothers and peers in a similar life situation.

The interviewees also pointed out the need for various forms of therapy in Sodankylä. For example, there is a need for family/couple therapy and occupational therapy. The mothers found it challenging to take their children to occupational therapy because it was located far away in Rovaniemi. In practice, that meant taking unpaid days off, as well as extra travel and food expenses. Occupational therapy can be seen as a low-threshold form of therapy that makes it possible to prevent a greater need from emerging at a later stage. Having this type of assistance available in Sodankylä could prevent family crises.

The interviewees reported that during the years of a child’s infancy and the busiest years of parenting, help would be appreciated especially in connection with marital problems. Low-threshold aid could be offered by third-sector actors in the form of relationship days or weekends, during which the parents would have quality time together while the children would naturally be looked after. However, a serious relationship/marital crisis calls for couple therapy organized by a licensed therapist.

4.3 Comfortable residential area

The interviewed groups raised the idea of a joint village house: a place to meet people, to do things together (through language courses, arts and crafts, music, and sports), and to enjoy a cup of coffee also in the evenings, after work, and on weekends.

Working mothers longed especially for evening activities and summertime events. The interviewees experienced that there were more opportunities for social life when they were still at home with their children than after returning to working life. Working parents still missed their friends and peers during free time even when their children had already reached daycare or school age.

The interviewees were also asked about the dreams they had regar-
ding the development of Sodankylä within the next 5–10 years. The responses varied from a swimming pool and a bowling alley to more shops and cafés with longer opening hours. The mothers felt that life stopped in the municipality centre already at 17 o’clock. There were no other evening activities in the municipality than grocery shopping after work. On the other hand, the short opening hours complicated daily life if a mother for example needed to buy a new pair of shoes for a child. The mothers were very eager to support the local shops and entrepreneurship by doing their shopping in the municipality, but they felt that online shops were easier to reach because of the local shops’ short opening hours and limited selections. Some of the mothers had suggested new products to be included in the selections, but the entrepreneurs had not acknowledged their suggestions.

New recreational opportunities and free time activities were requested from the municipality. At the same time, the interviewees felt great concern for the future of the currently available activities. One mother pointed out that her child cannot afford being sick, because otherwise the whole team is excluded from the games. The interviewees were also very worried about public services staying in the municipality. The mothers wished that the municipality would stay lively and have better transport services, for example railway and air connections to southern Finland, so that it would be easier for them to meet their relatives.

The mothers felt that Sodankylä was mostly a safe and good place to live and raise children. Everyday life was more easygoing than in a big city because all the services were near. The clean environment was also appreciated. The good and close-knit community worked as an anchor for families that had moved to the municipality in recent years. The families wanted to stay and raise their children in Sodankylä so long as they had become part of the community first.
5 Conclusion

The concept of well-being could be applied to the lives of individuals and to the community as a whole. It could also be included in the municipal well-being strategy. This would encompass the following:

- **Having** referring to a high standard of living: a good and functional environment (flexible infrastructure), versatile economy and jobs, vitality, a municipal supplement to home care allowance (a Finnish social benefit for families taking care of their children at home rather than using day care services), growing entrepreneurship, etc.

- **Loving** referring to a sense of community: having a caring, tolerant and multicultural community, taking care of and encountering one another, acting as a surrogate grandmother, grandfather, sister or brother, walking side by side supporting and encouraging others.

- **Being** referring to self-actualization through education, hobbies, culture, art, or perhaps by exploring nature.

- **Doing** referring to civic influencing, citizens’ activity, and participation.

- **Coherence** referring to the comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness of life; meaning that an individual’s influencing possibilities and experience of the meaningfulness of life are strengthened.

All this can be used to accomplish sustainable well-being, contributing to a vital environment and community for the decades to come. It is a challenge that can be met with today’s choices.
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