If you have picked up this book, you are probably one of many people who are interested in ‘the north’. You may be a ‘northern development’ practitioner, you may be working in a community project, or at a local, regional, national or other level of government or you may be an industry stakeholder. Maybe you are part of a group of students or academics who shape and contribute to the various debates around northern development in Sweden or beyond. If you are interested in demography, economics, geography, history or political science, you will find that these topics are central themes in this volume.
Rather than solely indicating an area on a map, we use ‘the north’ for communities, places and regions that others would define as peripheral or remote in surroundings characterized by infrastructural and demographic challenges. However, we contest the idea that the scattered populations living there are disconnected from each other and the world, and reactive instead of proactive, for example because they live in timeless tranquillity amidst abundant nature or ‘wilderness’. Although we focus on northern Sweden, we also present similarities and differences with cases in the Nordic countries, northern Australia, Canada and beyond. The chapters thus position northern Sweden within a global context.

*Dipping in to the North* describes and explains how changing (im)mobility and migration is affecting the social, economic, cultural and environmental characteristics of various northern communities, villages, towns and cities. The volume is a collection of chapters structured around three themes: (i) who lives, (ii) who works and (iii) who travels in the sparsely populated north. Within each themed section, the chapters focus on different forms of mobility, migration and immobility, placing people who live, travel and work there at the centre of the issues at hand and within their historical and contemporary contexts. Together, these sections nuance the popular overall myths that portray SPAs either as perpetually struggling with a series of challenges or as timeless rural idylls.

**Myths Portraying SPAs as Dull and Struggling**

When people think about northern rural development, they tend to think of social conflicts and problems (exemplified in Box 1.1, from a broad perspective). We do not deny that some rural areas (like urban areas) are facing socio-economic challenges, but we do argue that the complexity of these challenges has often been reduced for certain groups of people, for example indicating a ‘rural dull’ for youngsters to make migration decisions or other (political) solutions seem more straightforward (Forsberg et al. 2012).

For instance, many media coverages and migration studies in SPAs highlight outmigration, at times due to the downsizing of extractive industries. This leads to a situation in which the idea of rural exodus
Box 1.1 Municipalities in SPAs Under Pressure

Ingemar Elander

Regional and local policies in Sweden are strongly adapted to a social-liberal ideological framework stating that capitalist economic development is closely connected with a spatial concentration of population. Provided regional policy follows the perceived economic growth logic, technology and competition will prepare the ground for a higher living standard, and through redistribution result in more equal individual and collective consumption in terms of education, health care, social care and culture.

Symbolized by the Swedish parliament’s adoption of the ‘Sweden Plan’ (Swedish Government bill 1972:111), regional policies were then adapted to an ideological framework allowing for a more precise and flexible set of measures, including a classification of municipalities according to perceived welfare society needs. According to the official policy this way of constructing the regional question made it possible to handle the tension between ‘the necessary and the desirable’ in regional development, thus manifesting Social Democratic ‘consumption socialism’ (Elander 1978; Elander and Montin 1994). In line with this logic the meaning of life boils down to something like “work harder and more efficiently, to be able to consume more and better goods and services”.

Following a huge increase of refugees in 2015 and subsequent additions, many small and financially poor municipalities with declining population (not only in the north) took the opportunity to welcome groups of immigrants as potential resources in terms of future work force, social and cultural life, while other better off cities refused, instead arguing that these newcomers would only become a burden and a threat to ‘Swedish values’. However, for a poor municipality to provide basic social care for many newcomers lacking jobs and financial means may be difficult in the long run, especially with initial central government support fading.

Consequently, and accelerating over the last few years, regional differences between stagnating, small, rural municipalities and bigger urban agglomerations have grown significantly and at the time of writing emergency plans and actions are demanded by many local governments and the Swedish Association of Local and Regional Authorities (Dagens Samhälle 2019). Meanwhile, protracted investigations and debates considering a radical regionalization reform are still far from a political solution (Johansson et al. 2015). In February 2020, launching the result of a parliamentary investigation the chairman stated:

*In our opinion, polarisation between Sweden’s municipalities is increasing, and it becomes ever harder for many of them to accomplish their welfare assignments since their economic conditions and labour force are ever more strained. Efforts are needed soon, but most of all we*
Box 1.1 (continued)

need efforts to strengthen the municipalities’ capacity to combat the challenges to guarantee equal elderly care, schools and other municipal services for all citizens in Sweden in the long run. (Karlsson 2020: my translation)

The population in Sweden’s 290 municipalities varies between less than 2500 in Bjurholm (northern Sweden) and almost one million in Stockholm. Together, half of all municipalities in Sweden comprise only 14% of the population. Calculations made in neighbouring Nordic countries estimate that there should be at least 20,000–30,000 inhabitants in a municipality to be able to deliver financially stable welfare output to their inhabitants (Karlsson 2020). Although the report suggests a number of reforms to improve the capacity of the municipalities to accomplish this, there is of course no quick fix in sight and the political preconditions for solutions are scant.

Since the 2018 elections the Swedish Government is based on a parliamentary coalition including Social Democrats, the Green Party and the Centre Party, the latter being the most market-liberal party of all in the Swedish political landscape. Paradoxically, an ‘unholy’ coalition consisting of the Left Party, the Conservative Party (Moderaterna), the conservative Christian Democrats and the retrotopian Sweden Democrats in early spring 2020 demanded financial boosts to the local and regional government sector. However, the suggested financial additions to the sector were modest, and they have to be related to substantial taxation cuts decided and implemented by the conservative-liberal government 2011–2014. As I will address in Box 20.1 the corona virus haunting most countries in Europe and the rest of the world since March 2020 added still more financial and political pressure on Swedish municipalities.
what the consequences and impacts of such migration flows can be. As such, we challenge the idea of rural exodus as the only discourse on population development in SPAs.

We rather view rural villages and areas as complex and heterogeneous spaces, often with their own unique challenges and opportunities. To address changes and developments in how (im)mobility and migration affect SPAs, we need to consider historical processes regarding population development, economic, agricultural and industrial diversity and natural resource use including production, recreation, consumption and nature protection. Considering the multifaceted realities of rural areas and where all activities are seen as complementary, the importance of diversity in how we portray rural areas becomes highly motivated and evident.

Myths Portraying SPAs as Rural Idylls

British rural geographers have described a typical rural idyll as “physically consisting of small villages joined by narrow lanes and nestling amongst a patchwork of small fields […]. Socially, this is a tranquil landscape of timeless stability and community, where people know not just their next door neighbours but everyone else in the village” (Boyle and Halfacree 1998: 9–10). This sounds like an adequate description of Swedish rural idylls as well. This concept was regarded as passé for a while, but it has emerged again over the past decade, often related to perceived possibilities for sustainable living (e.g. in contrast to polluting and crowded cities).

Tavelsjö and Rödåsel are thriving places (Box 1.2, with a local perspective). Yet their location in the periphery of Umeå municipality brings challenges. They struggle with decisions made around population, migration, housing, entrepreneurship and commuting, decisions made from urban viewpoints. The problem here is that urban populations may find it difficult to imagine the possibilities for development in a transforming rural space. A rural that is no longer synonymous with agriculture, forestry or manufacturing and where the possibilities are changing. The municipal planners and politicians are often living and working in central places like Umeå (in this case). Since the 1960s, this booming town
has been attracting more and more people who find work in local or regional public administration, at one of the universities, or in forestry, the car industries, construction or elsewhere. The goal is to grow from its current 125,000 to 200,000 inhabitants in 2050. However, affordable housing is hard to find in central Umeå, so some new inhabitants purchase property in the surrounding villages like Tavelsjö.

Box 1.2 Civil Society-Based Local Development in Rural Areas

Håkan Appelblad, Marco Eimermann and Göran Sundqvist

The dependence of rural development (as a policy field) on local and civil support from the people living in the affected rural areas is increasingly recognized. The Swedish Government bill A coherent policy for Sweden’s rural areas (2017/18:179) suggests that rural development should be framed within a multi-level model where national, regional and local actors and sectors are coordinated and cooperate. As exemplified by the active locally based rural development association TuRe (In Swedish: ‘Tavelsjö- och Rödåbygdens utveckling, ekonomisk förening’), cooperation on the local level relies heavily on the existing civil society.

TuRe covers a geographical area consisting of various villages and settlements such as Tavelsjö (450 inh.), Rödåsel and Rödånäs (about 100 inh. each), located at a 20–40 minutes’ bus or car drive from Umeå (Northern Sweden). The area is traditionally characterized by agriculture and forestry (Fig. 1.1), and it has no formal border since it consists of the locals’ common interpretations. Many locals have a background in farming, but new generations are working with IT or as tourism entrepreneurs as they rent out parts of their houses, run restaurants or organize outdoor activities. The landscape is characterized by the so-called Norrland terrain, a hilly and mountainous land covered by boreal forests, including many lakes and a Biosphere reserve along the Vindel river.

The starting point for a more comprehensive and joint development work was the investment in the broadband net that started in 2002 through the NGO Tavelsjö Byanät. The experiences from the cooperation to complete the net linking the villages revealed the advantages of collaboration. By working together, the villages received a stronger position in development issues. A spin off from the positive experiences of working together was the association TuRe (Tavelsjö- och Rödåbygdens utveckling, ekonomisk förening) that was formed in 2010, with the overall aim to make the area attractive by developing local businesses, public transport and the hospitality industry while respecting environmental issues and other local stakeholders. This added value in terms of new jobs and increased

(continued)
attractiveness can later mean that visitors become part of the area as they move in or start to work there. Sundqvist:

*Since its start in 2010, we have learned that this can only be achieved through collaboration with many different interests. Politically, publicly and locally in various areas such as work, leisure, service, communication, infrastructure and ownership. An important part is spreading awareness through public media, social media and the internet.*

TuRe is intended to work as an umbrella for the non-profit activities occurring in the area, without replacing any of the existing associations there. As such, TuRe has formalized a unity connecting people inhabiting single villages and settlements with attachment to the area. A bachelor thesis on the topic (Weinehall 2018) argued that there is a need for devoted volunteers who invest their time and efforts to uphold non-profit activities that stimulate local rural development. People engaged in TuRe are often also involved in other local associations. However, although TuRe is well manned with active, talented, skilled and motivated people, there is room for a wider demographic spectrum than the current overrepresentation of older age groups. It is a challenge to engage newcomers and young people to take part in local rural development issues.
These uneven spatial developments in northern central and peripheral places and unbalances in political power are two reasons why locals collaborate in TuRe. Apart from working for a vital community by organizing information meetings, seminars and sports events, TuRe representatives write opinionating newspaper articles (e.g. Wennebro et al. 2018). They draw our attention to their struggles, for example to be granted municipal permission for apartment construction, for an elderly care centre or for better bus connections to and from Umeå and between the villages. In the end, this is about urban planning and the ideology that most services and facilities should be concentrated in central Umeå—leaving less central places like Tavelsjö and Rödåsel with fewer resources. Similar dynamics occur in inland municipalities, for example between central Åsele and the ‘peripheral’ village of Gafsele.

**SPAs Today: (Post-)Productivist, Multi-Functional or Something Else?**

We want to problematize how such challenges and opportunities often are framed from the outside, by people in central places such as Umeå or Stockholm (in Sweden), Brussels or London (in Europe), New York (in North America) or Sydney (in Australia). Defining typical challenges for SPAs is not the purpose of this book, because they are complex and difficult to grasp. Instead, this book actively analyses diversity and change, which are at the core of rural development (Andersson 2007). We relate these issues to a study by Swedish human geography professor Klas Sandell who proposed a set of metaphors to understand how people with different backgrounds can view rural areas differently (Riksantikvarieämbetet 2006: 13). Sandell described these perceptions through the metaphors of the ‘factory’ (in which people work hard), the ‘museum’ (which functions to conserve local heritage) and the ‘hembygd’ (which indicates historical bonds between long-rooted locals and a place, e.g. through kinship). These metaphors provide insights into clashes
between different people’s perceptions of villages and rural areas. For instance, locals could view their surroundings as a factory in which they work, or a hembygd with which they feel strong social ties. On the other hand, newcomers may view the wonderful area of Tavelsjö and Rödå rather as a museum, a place that should stay the same to relax at after hard work in town, without investing too much time and effort in it.

From a land-use perspective, farming and forestry are still important. Although the dependence on labour has decreased, the production is still high in traditional sectors and in certain geographical areas. Almstedt et al. (2014) have studied this referring to ‘post-productivism’, indicating that arable land no longer only serves the purpose of producing the highest possible yields. Rather, other industries, services and knowledge development are complementing hyper-productive, large-scale and efficient extractive industries. For instance, small-scale tourism businesses (run by locals, lifestyle migrants from Europe or people with an Asian or refugee background) producing and selling local food in co-creation with tourists are highlighted as important for the diversity in rural areas. This process has changed and will continue to change the conditions for economic activity in the north but can however only in part solve the structural issues such as ageing population and low education levels in some sparsely populated areas. We question how the political efforts to follow this as a road to recovery or as a tool to achieve desired rural development will succeed: How many downshifters, goat cheese producers or B&Bs can SPAs accommodate, and how can we expect to secure rural futures based on volatile tourism markets not least in the light of the ongoing pandemic of the Coronavirus?

In the best of scenarios, different resources can complement instead of compete with each other. We could call this a multi-functional perspective (Brouder et al. 2015), which highlights the capacity of sparsely populated and rural areas to produce and include various goods and services. This type of approach also requires that politicians take into consideration all sorts of values and understand the complexity that emerges when production, recreation and nature protection have to coexist.
The Purposes of This Book: Beyond Dull and Idyll

This book examines who lives and works in the north, the impacts and consequences of those visiting the north, how and why this has changed over time and what those changes mean for how the north might develop in the future. The various chapters in this volume show that similar developments are going on in the north as elsewhere, but at times with different outcomes. Together, they identify novel challenges and opportunities for northern areas, while presenting views and voices from within instead of from the outside.

We problematize centre-periphery dualisms that portray rural areas as dull and homogenous countrysides surrounding vibrant cities with heterogeneous populations. As such we adhere to geographic perspectives that have approached people’s practices through relational theories of space and place. For instance, Granås (2018) connects mobilities, working and place making in northern Scandinavia with a view on space as relational since it exists, evolves and is at work within relations among humans and between humans and their environment. Such relations are thus spatial relations (Massey 1995: 264–65, 2005: 101) and space is socially produced as a result of people’s daily lives (Simonsen 1996). Geographic perspectives view society as a complex dynamic fabric of many coexisting spatial relational processes. The concept of ‘place’ denotes where spatial relational processes are ‘thrown together’ (Massey 1995, 2005). Place can both be an open meeting place and an ambiguous and heterogeneous concept (Eimermann and Trumberg 2015). Different conceptualizations of place thus provide platforms to understand, develop and negotiate questions such as what and who is a region like northern Sweden for (Granås 2018: 49).

Rather than studying rural and urban spaces per se, we approach them as interlinked entities. Some study functional and human urban-rural structural practices in housing, employment, education, transport, tourism and resource use (e.g. Zonneveld and Stead 2007; Dubois and Carson 2017). This includes social transactions, administrative and service provisions and the movement of people, goods and capital (Preston 1975;
Such relational approaches to space and place can shed lights on the irregular expansion and acceleration of local, regional and transnational place-to-place connections on a daily basis and over the life course (Hedberg and Do Carmo 2012; Eimermann and Karlsson 2018).

The themes in this book all relate with Agenda 2030 and the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in general, for example goal nr. 11 (sustainable cities and communities). For instance, although TuRe representatives are working for a good cause, most of them seem to be middle-aged or older men. But how do women and youngsters engage in the future of their villages? Throughout the remainder of this book, we and our colleagues connect these issues with considerations of class, gender and power. We have reflected on what different people and places can contribute with in times of turbulence, insecurities and change due to global political struggles, climate change and pandemics such as the 2020 worldwide Corona outbreak. Reading the chapters, you will see how the north of Sweden and similar areas are characterized by heterogeneity instead of homogeneity (as the artist’s impression in Fig. 1.2 illustrates). In other words, different people in such areas experience various opportunities and threats, while at the same time (in)directly enabling or hindering developments in other parts of the world.

If we take specific parts of the SDGs as a point of departure they are also highly relevant for this book, for example through concretized target goals such as nr. 11.B “By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement […] holistic disaster risk management at all levels”. We invite you to take the 2020 worldwide Corona pandemic as a concrete example, and to rethink what you think you know about northern sparsely populated areas. We are happy and grateful that Ingemar Elander was willing to make such an attempt at the very last moment before submitting this book’s manuscript. For inspiration and a way to put the book’s chapters into perspective, you could turn to Box 20.1 in the final chapter addressing growth paradigms and degrowth possibilities, before reading the rest of the book.
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Fig. 1.2  “May we live here?”. (Painting: Paul Breddels (A Dutch artist living in Sweden), 2012)
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