



# Planning for socially sustainable rural housing in Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse and discuss policies and planning for rural housing, with a special focus on social sustainability. In this endeavour, we review research with such a focus and put this in dialogue with an analysis of the contemporary situation regarding rural housing challenges and policies in Sweden. Countrysides in Europe, including Sweden, are diverse and face different housing-related challenges. The literature illuminates spatial as well as socio-economic inequalities. Both a low demand for housing related to a shrinking labour market and out-migration and a high pressure on the housing market triggering restrictive or conditional measures to avoid speculative developments and rural gentrification affect social sustainability.

Our case study on policy and planning measures that deal with rural housing in Sweden shows that there is a need to further investigate and understand the role of housing in rural areas for various groups and people with fewer resources, including further elaboration on the connection between mobilities and housing needs. A narrow focus upon housing provision that does not take into account access to services and communications as well as contemporary mobility flows of different groups challenges equality and well-being in rural areas. In Sweden, housing is primarily a municipal, local responsibility. However, exogenous forces or trends mean that housing issues play out at both the regional and national levels and put the municipalities in a difficult situation.

## 1. Introduction

Housing, geographical mobility, and changes in the composition of the population in rural areas are key to social sustainability. Planning for housing in the countryside in European countries takes many forms and often does not take place at all. Where it does exist, it is generally characterized by the dual policies of facilitating in-migration and seasonal mobility through new establishments and restricting construction of new housing to protect the rural landscape from over-exploitation. Housing provision is closely related to rural development, an often-overlooked dimension in housing policy and planning practice (see Gkartzios and Scott, 2014; Scott and Murray, 2009).

Rural areas in Europe are seeing a rise in spatial and socio-economic inequalities connected to housing (Gkartzios and Ziebarth, 2016). Conditions that affect access to housing are the temporary fluctuation of rural labour markets, booming/busting industries, and economic decline in traditional economic sectors, but also changing mobility patterns towards rural areas due to a changing working life, not least in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gallent et al., 2023; Colomb and Gallent, 2022). In short, rural areas in Europe and elsewhere are characterized by

spatial imbalances and inequalities regarding access to affordable housing. The need for housing is universal and social sustainability in rural areas means (among other things) that there is housing available for households with different socio-economic resources; that is, resource-rich as well as resource-poor households.

In this article we set out to explore the role of policy and planning for rural housing and social sustainability in rural areas through a general overview of studies and perspectives in research as well as a case study on policies and planning in Sweden. The theme of this special issue, *urban-rural migration*, infuses the discussion in this study in many ways. Urban to rural migration is complex, and different groups move to the countryside for different reasons; however, this is always pre-conditioned by the obvious but not so often discussed issue of access to housing.

This work is conducted against the backdrop of a quest for socially sustainable development in rural Sweden (SOU, 2017:1) and Europe (EU, 2023). Social sustainability is about finding solutions that promote equality and well-being among all groups, particularly vulnerable groups in society. A core ambition of this article is to highlight social sustainability issues and how they are integrated in discussions on

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planning for rural housing, such as housing provision for all in accordance with the writings of the Sustainable Development Goal 11 on human settlements. Socially sustainable housing in rural areas, according to this perspective on social sustainability, is about housing available to groups with fewer resources, but also groups that might work in the segment of low wages and are crucial for keeping private and public services and welfare at acceptable levels. Rural areas with spatial socio-economic imbalances regarding housing markets and uneven access to housing are not socially sustainable and risk reinforcing geographical inequalities in other areas as well.

We depart our discussion on rural housing and social sustainability from a notion of mobility as the most indicative feature of our contemporary society (Urry, 2007). Mobility affects how places and regions develop, how housing and infrastructure is built, and how social relations develop. Short-term, seasonal, and voluntary/involuntary movements of people transform the countryside in material and social ways. How groups of people choose (and are forced) to move and migrate affects how both those with more and those with fewer resources – ‘the haves and have nots’ (Lapping et al., 2011) – can navigate and find their place in the rural, and also how rural communities and social relations in the rural are formed and reproduced (Baerenholdt and Granås, 2008). These processes and individual trajectories are influenced by the specific political, economic, and social contexts where different actors promote certain rural futures.

Many rural municipalities in Sweden are characterized by shrinking populations and strive to manage service needs with fewer resources. At the same time, other rural municipalities increase their population seasonally due to a strong development of tourism, or more permanently because of an increase in distance working and multiple dwellings as a lifestyle for certain groups (Åberg and Tondelli, 2021). The availability of new jobs in expanding sectors such as tourism or resource extractive and ‘green technology’ industries is also a driver of housing shortages in some rural areas in Sweden (Boverket, 2023b). Altogether, these spatial inequalities and local differences highlight the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how rural housing is connected to issues of the social sustainability of specific ruralities and the possibilities of different planning measures to promote a more socially sustainable countryside.

In light of this, our objective is to analyse and discuss challenges related to policy and planning for rural housing with a social sustainability lens. In this endeavour, we review existing research on planning for rural housing and social sustainability – conceptualized as spatial and socio-economic inequalities – and put this in dialogue with an analysis of the contemporary situation regarding policy and planning in Sweden. We identify and describe some key features of the current rural housing situation that create challenges for planning. This is followed by an investigation of the status of planning measures and possibilities to approach and steer rural housing in Sweden based on a review of official reports and policy documents available in databases and official records online. The article ends with a concluding discussion that highlights two main challenges regarding planning and policy for housing in rural areas in Sweden, as well as a concluding reflection on the impact of planning structures and organization and how to approach future research and planning practice within this field.

### 1.1. Materials and methods

This study is based on a systematic literature review of research connected to the specific topic of planning for socially sustainable rural housing and on an in-depth analysis of the contemporary planning framework related to rural housing in Sweden. For the systematic review, we conducted a literature search using Web of Science. We used the search terms ‘housing’, ‘rural OR countryside’, ‘sustainab\* OR unsustainab\*’, ‘planning’. These terms were ironed out after trying different combinations of similar terms and scanning the results for a relevant scope. We combined the search terms in such a way that any hit

should include all these words. We did not limit the time range, and all in all the search resulted in 653 documents. A first scan was conducted to rule out articles that mostly dealt with technical issues, such as housing construction and environmental sustainability. After this scan we decided to also limit the study to European countries, with a few exceptions, which resulted in a narrowing down to 51 documents. As we had found several articles that were not included in our first Web of Science search, we also decided to specifically search Scopus and a few selected journals as well as some books that focus on planning in rural areas and contain specific information on housing that the initial search did not cover. Adding certain studies manually meant that we stepped away from the strict use of the first search for the systematic review; this turned out to be necessary to capture relevant studies in the field, since the concept of social sustainability has many different interpretations and possible related sub-terms. The definition of social sustainability that we use in this article entailed that we wanted to make sure that the topic was covered, rather than including studies using specific words regarding social sustainability, such as studies on social inequalities, groups with certain housing needs, and issues of social well-being or the lack thereof. Key studies in related fields referred to in the articles included in the review have been added accordingly. The research articles were analysed through a thematic analysis where key sub-themes and aspects for each theme were identified. Each theme was then examined separately, and the content was summarized and discussed by looking specifically for aspects concerning social sustainability in the planning for rural housing.

The Swedish case study was carried out through a review of policy and planning documents of general character as well as reports from national, regional as well as municipal levels – material that could be called ‘grey literature’, produced by government, not-for-profit, academic, and business actors (in total 25 documents). These include, for example, Swedish Government Official Reports, other public reports and investigations at the national level, and a few reports of regional and local initiatives and planning measures, which here serve to exemplify certain trends (rather than claiming to constitute a total survey of Swedish municipalities). Since rural housing is rarely connected with discussions on planning and social sustainability, the documents covered in this study are what could be found at the time of data collection in 2023–2024. The documents were analysed with the purpose of detecting how rural housing is mentioned and discussed in policies and planning and how planning is talked about in documents concerning rural housing, all with a special focus on issues of social sustainability according to the definition above. Media articles are included primarily to inform the case study in regard to certain examples or effects of (lack of) policy that have garnered specific attention, but there is no ambition to cover the media discourses in a comprehensive manner. The documents in the case study were analysed thematically, grouping together certain types of approaches or measures and discussing them in relation to the findings in the literature review.

## 2. Research overview

The theme of rural housing has been identified in at least two research reviews. In a literature review focusing on rural housing and inequalities, Gkartzios and Ziebarth (2016) conceptualized mobilities in terms of counter-urbanism and amenity migration, retiree relocation and ageing-in-place, and guest workers, immigrants, and ‘illegal aliens’. These examples emphasize diversity and increasing inequalities in rural spaces. The authors called for further empirical and public policy research, suggesting that a lack of adequate housing data and analysis hinders the development of the field. Kordel and Naumann (2023) proposed an understanding of ‘the rural housing crisis’, emphasizing mobility of capital and of people as crucial factors. Based on their literature review, they concluded that social selectivity and exclusion of less affluent groups is constituting the crisis.

Thus, based on these initial research findings in previous reviews,

there is a pronounced need for further investigations of planning regimes and regulations of the countryside; those who need measures are rarely the ones who are organized and heard, while more privileged groups have their needs and demands catered for (Gkartzios and Ziebarth, 2016, 15). These insights highlight the need to look at planning for housing (or lack thereof) in rural areas as a process that produces and reproduces spatial as well as socio-economic inequalities, and a need to interlink the literature on rural mobilities and population movements with spatial planning and housing research (Gkartzios and Scott, 2010).

In the following sections we present findings from previous studies and conceptualizations of the issue of rural housing from a social sustainability perspective. The structure for this section is built around the literature's focus on spatial inequalities and socio-economic inequalities. Such inequalities are often understood as the result of a policy where the market's influence has increased while the state's will and/or opportunities to influence development have decreased. Such processes, often referred to as neo-liberal philosophies and practices, are argued to be constituting an international model, besides national peculiarities (O'Neill and Argent, 2005; for Sweden, see: Bengtsson et al., 2022). With regard to rural housing, this means increasing prices and a lack of affordable housing for groups that contribute to society's well-being by working in local services and bringing diverse forms of vitality (Gallent, 2023).

### 2.1. A mobile population and spatial inequalities

In their review article, Kordel and Naumann (2023, 12) state that gentrification is a spatially uneven process and involves heterogeneous groups. It may be caused by high demand due to in-migration and driven by physical qualities including outdoor activities and recreation. The transformation of working life includes increased opportunities to work from home, such as telecommuting, leading to a demand for second homes as well as flexible accommodation in line with contemporary 'lifestyle mobilities' and a search for well-being and a slower pace of life in the countryside (Nuga et al., 2023; Eimermann and Carson, 2023; Müller, 2021). Another more recent tourist phenomenon is 'digital nomadism' (Hannonen, 2020), which affects rural housing. An example of rural places with high housing demand are mountain resorts or coastal villages with a service infrastructure that also drives the hospitality industry and establishments of seasonal accommodation. Particular attractive rural locations drive in-migration, tourism, second-home ownership, and, evidently, also prices (e.g. Mikulić et al., 2021), which can make it difficult for some local households to enter the housing market. This is a general phenomenon noticed in many previous studies in relation to tourism. In rural areas where there is a strong tourism and hospitality sector, social sustainability related to housing is threatened, as the availability of year-round housing for local people who want to work in these businesses is limited (Gill and Williams, 2016). It has been noted that such situations in tourism destinations require specific and directed policies and planning measures targeting sustainability (Gill, 2000).

Another type of so-called 'hot spot' emerges when opportunities in the labour market change rapidly due to structural change and re-industrialization, which leads to heavy pressure on certain rural areas, such as in the vicinity of mining and small industrial towns (Hermelin, 2023). 'Boom and bust' has also been used as a framework to illuminate the lack of predictability and an implicit pressure on local communities to adapt to sometimes rapidly changing circumstances. Raised hopes could develop into mistrust when it turns out that private stakeholders are partners in planning and development during booms, but have no legal responsibility towards public bodies in times of bust (Browne et al., 2011). In some areas, rapid growth in industries in remote or rural regions has led to a system of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workers, who do not participate in the local life of the municipalities and do not pay income tax there. These two types of 'hot spots' in rural areas – the amenity and lifestyle-led mobility and the booming industries and mines calling for

an increased local workforce – clearly illustrate challenges in terms of planning for socially sustainable rural housing.

There is more to the quest for rural housing than inflows of urban people, counter-urbanization, and gentrification. In their study in Ireland, Gkartzios and Scott (2010) argued that a considerable component of residential mobility was rural-to-rural migration and local movement. The authors argued that planning for rural housing throughout the 2000s and 2010s has focused on restricting and managing counter-urbanization (urban people working in urban areas), which is considered to be damaging the landscape, leading to an increased car dependency as well as driving up prices and gentrifying rural areas. In addition, policy has been developed to promote and cater for local rural housing needs in villages to ensure affordable housing for people working and living in the countryside. This has been done by restricting building permits for people registered in urban areas (Gkartzios and Scott, 2010). The Ireland case included a study on rural in-migrants, showing that the main reasons for moving to rural areas were social and physical qualities of the place and a better quality of life, not economic factors. Many of the in-migrants were also born in and had lived in rural areas before, even though they were currently moving from an urban location. A conclusion is that the division between types of housing needs and the discourse of rural housing as housing for either urban or rural people is causing problems and is too narrow and simplified (Gkartzios and Scott, 2010).

Spatial inequalities in terms of rural housing may also be conceptualized through the acknowledging of the existence of 'cold spots', which emerge where there is a surplus of housing and prices are low, as a consequence of out-migration, shortages of jobs, and/or insufficient infrastructure and services. When there are too few inhabitants to fill the vacancies in the welfare sector and the few remaining inhabitants are not able to successfully keep up a minimum of social capital for the functioning of local associations and services, the rural community faces severe challenges to social sustainability (Meijer and Syssner, 2017). Abandoned houses and deteriorated buildings are material and symbolic signs of a place becoming a 'cold spot'. This affects the identity and well-being of those still residing in the area, which sometimes gradually erodes the rural community (Hernández-Ramírez et al., 2022).

Abandoned houses are problematic in areas of high as well as low attractiveness. In 'hot' areas, they constitute an untapped potential, often seldomly used second homes, while in 'cold' areas, incentives to maintain them may be reduced, thus contributing to aesthetic deterioration and insecurity. The challenge of abandoned houses and the possibilities to restrict 'non-local' people from keeping them or buying them as holiday homes was discussed in a study from Spain (Hernández-Ramírez et al., 2022) where informal policies in rural villages are set to restrict so-called non-locals from buying property. However, these restrictions are ambiguous and have been criticized, since the definitions of who is a local and who is not can be debated, especially in the context of lifestyle mobilities, where these boundaries are blurred (Cohen et al., 2015). This is yet another example of the problem with narrow and simplified categorizations of people.

Some 'cold spots' might occasionally be subject to relocation and displacement of households, a process sometimes termed 'social dumping'. Social dumping implies that standards and demands in one area are lower compared to other areas and that such inequalities invite mobility where people with few resources or socially vulnerable households are referred to the location and residence by an official in a municipality with lack of housing (Statskontoret, 2020:19; Stenbacka and Heldt Cassel, 2023; Lidén et al., 2024). Rural areas that are becoming cold spots may then be challenged with not only economic problems but also severe social issues when socially vulnerable people with few resources are concentrated to specific rural places with few possibilities to cater for their needs. So, both the hot spots and the cold spots in rural areas see problems related to housing provision and social sustainability, since the spatial inequalities driven by economic processes and mobilities also give rise to more or less severe planning

challenges.

## 2.2. Socio-economic inequalities – rural housing for different groups

There has been extensive research conducted on the diversity that characterizes the rural population. Themes such as the impact of social constructions of the rural, who belongs and who does not, exclusionary processes, and different access to resources all tap into the notion of social sustainability (Philo, 1992; Cloke, 2003; Neal, 2016). Studies are also rich in regard to migration patterns of different groups, such as young, older, or international migrants, or a combination thereof (see Finlay and Hahn, 2024; Niedomysl and Amcoff, 2011). However, only a small portion of the previous studies that have connected rural residency with different demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic differences) have dealt with the rural housing supply itself, or focused on issues concerning planning for housing in ways that promote social sustainability. The needs of vulnerable groups are closely linked to such critical issues; for example, access to adequate housing for young people, for older adults, foreign-born migrants, people receiving income support, and workers in low-wage occupations in the service sector.

A large proportion of older people in the population in the countryside poses challenges to the planning for housing. Health and functionality decline with increasing age and the lack of alternatives means that older adults often remain in housing that is of either low or high quality, but equally difficult to manage. Examples from research on planning for older adults show that the outcome is better if measures include several groups. For example, ageing well can include children having the opportunity to live nearby; thus, being age-friendly includes ‘the construction of suitable housing for older adults, and affordable housing enabling younger adults to stay closer to ageing parents; the influence on design or inclusion of downsizing options; and upgrading of sheltered housing stock’ (Lee et al., 2022, 14). Thus, ageing well in rural areas is not only about housing, but also about networks and access to health care and care. Several European countries are characterized by a shortage of care workers, and even if there were individuals to recruit, they would also need somewhere to live. It is a challenge to both attract and retain the workforce, partly due to a lack of housing, as studies in England, for example, have shown (Dorling and Thomas, 2016).

Not many studies focusing on rural housing have included a gender perspective. An exception is a study from northern New South Wales, Australia, which paid attention to housing pathways and gender norms. Responsibilities for children, labour market participation, and disadvantaged earnings contribute to vulnerabilities of women on the housing market (Hartman and Darab, 2017). Structural constraints associated with for example relationship dissolution and caring practices act as barriers. When women migrate to control or limit accommodation costs, they might find that there is a lack of transport and a lack of services, and that housing is substandard, which accentuates their poverty and their precarious position in the rural housing market (Hartman and Darab, 2019, 241).

Finding housing for young people with fewer financial resources in rural areas can be equally challenging. Housing in the countryside largely consists of own homes, which require both financial capital and a long-term approach to housing. In addition, young people value flexibility, and the sense of being on the move – ‘avoiding fixity’ – can form a part of the identity that does not associate with rural living (Pedersen, 2018, 693). There are some exceptions. In a Polish study, some reasons mentioned for staying in rural areas were connected to available housing. These opportunities include the possibility of moving in with their parents or in-laws, building an extension to the family house, and constructing a house on land received from their parents (Matysiak, 2021). Out-migration of young individuals from rural places is often seen as problematic, and problems related to the interplay between transport, employment, and housing, addressed by Gallent et al. (2003), are still to be solved. Shortages of affordable housing in connection with low-paid

jobs and car dependency characterize the situation for many young people in rural Europe.

According to a study in rural Ireland (McGrath, 2001), a low level of support for social housing, a lack of controls and accountability in the private rental sector, as well as a housing policy focusing on owner occupation are affecting young people’s access and affordability, which makes it difficult to stay in the region. In areas characterized by tourism, residential property becomes highly valuable, which makes it even harder for young people to enter the housing market. In addition, renting accommodation on a long-term basis is difficult since many landlords want to serve the tourist population during the holiday season. However, among farming families, children might be provided with plots and housing opportunities.

From this review, it stands out that planning measures involving the dividing of individuals and households into categories such as local/non-local (Hernández-Ramírez et al., 2022) or urban/rural (Gkartzios and Scott, 2010) does not contribute to sustainable housing and risks excluding people or missing the target. In addition, housing cannot be separated from other spheres in society; access to employment, services, and communication impact how housing is experienced and how it intervenes in identity building (Gallent et al., 2003; Hartman and Darab, 2019). As the discussion above shows, housing for vulnerable groups and social sustainability are, apart from the availability of affordable housing, also closely connected to the situation in the local rural labour market and the availability of infrastructure and social support.

## 3. Rural housing challenges in Sweden

This section describes and discusses the situation regarding access to rural housing in Sweden as it is described in grey literature, reports and public investigations. We identify current streams of policy development including quests for policy transformation and proposals for policy measures. We start by introducing the Swedish context. This is followed by an account of the two problematics: rural hot spots under pressure from high demand and rural cold spots under pressure from a surplus of housing in combination with unmet demands from certain groups.

### 3.1. The national context and housing as a social right

In Sweden, housing is a social right, but it is a so-called programmatic right. This means that society must take measures to ensure that citizens have opportunities for a certain housing standard, but not that the individual citizen can demand access to a home. However, the institutions in society that are supposed to facilitate access to housing have been hollowed out (Bengtsson, 2022), while household housing costs have risen in parallel. The editors of the book *Everyone’s Right to Housing* listed some features that have come to be of great importance for this development, such as growing economic gaps where housing constitutes both an investment and a source of income; a policy aimed at increased privatization and profit requirements on publicly owned housing companies; and a decreased share of rental properties in the housing market. The authors state that the housing issue has gone from being marginal to becoming a contentious issue within Swedish politics (Bengtsson et al., 2022). In Sweden, social housing at a limited cost is not included as a measure; instead, housing allowances (*bostadsbidrag* in Swedish) for certain groups is the main strategy for impacting access to housing. Families with children, pensioners, and young people (who have turned 18 but not reached 29) may be entitled to housing allowance (SOU 2015:58).

The Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket) is responsible for the legal and financial conditions related to the provision of housing and works primarily with issues related to planning, construction, and housing on a national level. Boverket pays attention to the needs of different groups: youths, students, older people, people with disabilities, newly arrived immigrants, resource-poor households, and homeless individuals (Boverket, 2023a). The regional

level is represented by County Administrative Boards and Regions. Their role is above all to provide advice, information, and data, including methodological support to the municipalities to facilitate planning for the housing supply. The County Administrative Board must also work for the exchange of experience, discussion, and consultation between municipalities (Boverket, 2024).

It is the responsibility of the municipalities to create the conditions needed for everyone in the municipality to live in good housing (SFS 2000:1383, 2000). The municipalities' role is to act reactively and proactively in regard to planning for the construction of housing; to act as a facilitator of cooperation between the broad interest group at the local level and those involved in construction; and to finance housing construction or facilitate funding (Qvist Eliassen et al., 2020, 64). Civil society is seen as a crucial actor or partner. This is pronounced explicitly in the government investigation on improved financing for housing:

*In places where neither rental apartments nor tenant-owned apartments are built on market terms, it may be possible to obtain small projects by promoting and harnessing the commitment of a group of citizens. (SOU, 2017:108, 274)*

Municipalities are thus locally responsible for the implementation of policy and planning and for housing provision, and many smaller municipalities have difficulty creating a balanced housing market.

### 3.2. Hot spots: a high demand and increasing housing inequalities

#### 3.2.1. Industrial transitions

Industrial booms contribute to an increase of in-migration of workers to mining and manufacturing industries in rural regions. The so-called green transition is affecting regions in northern Sweden (Karlsdóttir et al., 2022) and entails that both mining and some major steel-working industries are seeing labour shortages, as are factories producing new technology batteries and energy transmission devices. This re-industrialization of regions puts pressure on municipalities and current governance models when it comes to planning for service-provision and housing. An assessment in relation to the industrial transition shows that up to 100,000 more people will be needed in the northernmost regions of Norrbotten and Västerbotten (Interpellation, 2023/23:189) in the coming years. Swedish media has reported negative social consequences of the housing shortage affecting vulnerable households, including families with low income, single women who are living under threat from previous abusers and need safe accommodation, but also FIFO workers who are directed to reside in barracks or at camping sites (SVT, 2024).

In their study of sustainable housing, Hagbert and Malmqvist (2019) concluded that due to a shift from state to market actors in Swedish housing policy, there is an increased conflict of interest between actors regarding short-term versus long-term measures when it comes to housing provision and new housing establishments. As an example, to avoid FIFO workers and offer permanent housing, a municipal housing company in the area invested SEK 80 million in housing projects, soon after they had liquidated housing due to a recent excess in supply (Haikola and Anshelm, 2020). However, the quick solution in many municipalities facing this increased demand is to set up barracks. A housing situation is then created that may bring about unwanted social conditions, exemplified in earlier studies as a rise in drug abuse, trafficking, prostitution, and health issues (Shandro et al., 2011; Sincovich et al., 2018).

Government reports acknowledge the strained situation, and municipalities with weak housing markets as well as sparsely populated and rural municipalities experiencing industry expansion are especially mentioned (SOU, 2015:58):

*Municipalities with weak housing markets and sparsely populated and rural municipalities that meet housing needs based on the mining industry expansion in the locality have different conditions than municipalities in*

*metropolitan areas. To promote sustainable growth and development there is therefore a need to investigate the possibilities for improvement in the conditions for the municipalities' work for housing provision throughout the country. (SOU, 2015:58, 34)*

The emergent need for new housing has been debated in Swedish Parliament as one aspect of infrastructure and service delivery that must be solved to facilitate the increased demand for labour in the area (Riksdagen, 2023). To change the situation, the government has appointed an investigator with the task of promoting the coordination of measures for sustainable societal development in Norrbotten and Västerbotten counties (experiencing industry expansion) and commissioned the county administrations to offer the municipalities special planning support for innovative and sustainable projects and for city and town development processes in the two counties. Proposed measures include contributing capital and facilitating the infrastructure for small and medium-sized companies in the construction and housing development industry in Norrland as well as the introduction of a new state credit guarantee and a state rent loss guarantee, which means that the state compensates for rent losses (Regeringskansliet, 2023). Municipalities that are defined as 'expanding due to industrial development' are covered by these measures.

#### 3.2.2. Increased lifestyle mobilities and gentrification

Earlier studies confirm that there is an increase of people in rural Sweden working at a distance from metropolitan areas, with an over-representation of persons with high education in knowledge-intensive occupations (Andersson et al., 2018). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about new practices for how work is organized and carried out in some sectors of the labour market, and for how rural assets can be viewed and used (Åberg and Todelli, 2012; Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz, 2022). The transformation of working life for a larger share of the population, with possibilities to work away from the office, also connects with contemporary trends of increasing 'lifestyle mobilities', including digital nomadism (Nuga et al., 2023; Hannonen, 2020). This is increasing the temporary population in rural areas, especially in places that already have a tourism infrastructure (Åberg and Tondelli, 2021). For example, resorts are offering co-working spaces and off-season facilities for flexible office workers (e.g. Ståhl, 2021). These new dwelling patterns also give rise to planning challenges when it comes to infrastructure and service as well as access to housing for less privileged people when many houses are transformed to holiday lettings.

Municipal stakeholders and local development actors in amenity-rich and attractive rural areas increasingly claim that pressure from tourists and second-home dwellers is pushing local people out from the housing market, and they express a wish to regulate the housing market in terms of who gets to buy real estate. This extrusion restricts the possibilities of a socially sustainable local development in these municipalities, according to an ongoing debate (Sandahl, 2023). In Sweden, it is not possible for a municipality to regulate the housing market in terms of who gets to buy and own property in a certain village, but the issue is being discussed, and voices are raised for a policy change when it comes to the possibilities for rural municipalities to be able to take measures against speculative development or the transformation of permanent homes into holiday homes. Today, the regulation that may restrict building permits in attractive amenity-rich locations is a policy of protection of shores, influencing opportunities for new constructions along lakes and sealine, but it is also possible to apply and get exceptions from this regulation and there are regional differences in how the rule is applied (Zetterberg et al., 2021).

Policy documents rarely address gentrification; two examples are mentioned here. In a report from 2008, the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning notes that gentrification of the countryside close to urban areas can lead to conflicts when planning for the expansion of the central area (Boverket, 2008). In a report on

'Duvedmodellen' discussing planning in a tourism village in one of Sweden's largest skiing areas (Boverket, 2022, 42), the authors draw attention to how limiting housing projects to tourism and leisure homes leads to gentrification, housing shortage, and a limited tax base, meaning a financial challenge for the municipality and a challenge to being able to offer a full-fledged public service for the local population.

### 3.3. Cold spots: a surplus of housing, but still not meeting the demand

#### 3.3.1. Resource-poor households and local responsibilities

One explanation for the housing surplus in some rural areas is the geographical structure of Swedish industrialization. Many multi-family houses were built in the countryside during industry expansion, and during industrial re-structuring including closures, a surplus of housing follows. The combination of housing shortages in urban areas, the surplus of housing in certain rural areas, and the municipalities' responsibility for housing have in some cases led to a more or less forced in-migration to such surplus housing by socially vulnerable or homeless individuals who are in fact directed there by urban municipalities seeing a housing shortage (Statskontoret, 2020; Gommel, 2021; Lidén et al., 2024).

In-migration of resource-poor households to rural areas with a surplus of housing has been debated as a certain version of displacement, a process sometimes referred to as 'social dumping'. This term entails, among other things, that certain individuals are referred to in a derogatory manner (Alber and Standing, 2000). Another concept is 'active participation in relocation', which refers to the municipalities as agents in directing individuals to certain housing in other municipalities (Statskontoret, 2020). Regardless of which designation is used, the problem entails that individuals with special needs who may have difficulty getting a housing contract in their hometown – be it due to personal problems or the housing companies' regulations (Grander, 2017, 2018) – are offered support to find a vacant home in another municipality, often in a rural area. This can mean that resource-poor households are relocated to places without communications and a low level of service.

*At the same time, we have been able to conclude that active participation occurs and that in some municipalities it can create problems, both for the municipality and for the people who have been forced to move with the help of active participation. It is primarily in smaller municipalities with strained finances and poorer labour market conditions that active participation can cause significant problems. Whether active participation poses a problem or not is related to the receiving municipality's structural conditions, such as size, economy, unemployment, and housing market. (Statskontoret, 2020, 52)*

When in-migration is mentioned as a social problem, it often coincides with poor housing quality at the destination, when estates are owned by private landlords who do not take care of or cater for the upkeep of the apartments. In June 2022, a government inquiry was decided upon with the aim of 'contributing to the work against segregation and countering the fact that some municipalities renounce responsibility for their residents' (Dir, 2022:56). In December 2022, the investigation was closed prematurely, without a result being presented, which has been questioned by politicians in the opposition (Interpellation, 2022/23:147).

#### 3.3.2. Housing shortages for certain groups

In some rural areas there might be a demand for housing, but this is not enough to activate market forces. In two current reports, Boverket concludes that the national problems with housing supply also can be expected in rural areas, especially for some groups. They are concerned with whether there is a general lack of housing in rural areas or whether certain groups, such as youth, newly arrived immigrants, or older people, experience limited access to housing (Boverket, 2019a, 53). The report on housing and places for young people (Boverket, 2019b)

emphasizes that meeting places (public buildings) are of great importance for young people and for young people's participation in society, also in rural areas. A survey referred to in the report shows that 230 out of Sweden's 290 municipalities report imbalance or deficit with regard to housing for youth. Reasons are, for example, that available housing is too expensive and too large. A need for regional and local analyses are emphasized.

In current policy, access to rural housing for certain groups is linked to economic development (SKR, 2016; SOU, 2017:1; Boverket, 2019a):

*Attractive housing can be a prerequisite for obtaining the needed labour force to settle in rural areas. Housing is required so that the municipalities can keep young people and newcomers and facilitate their education and entry into the labour market. An increased settlement in rural areas also broadens the basis for commercial and public service. (Boverket, 2019a, 55)*

Other contexts and reports have also emphasized rural housing for young people and its connection to rural development. Some have drawn attention to the phenomenon that many older people stay in their own houses for a long time, which makes it difficult for young families to find a place to live (SKR, 2016; SOU, 2017:1; Boverket, 2019a). From a societal perspective, lack of housing for certain groups will affect well-being and social sustainability in rural areas, simply because housing is closely interlinked with societal functions at large.

The housing needs of certain groups are not always met by the market. For the household, constraints such as lack of knowledge among newly arrived in-migrants, access to capital for young people looking to invest in a home, or lack of affordable options in manageable locations for older people limit the options. Older people living at a distance from centralized services become increasingly car-dependent. Abramsson and Hagberg (2018) pointed to the risk that women, who live longer than men and are more likely to stop driving, risk become 'stranded women' (see also Bailey 2004). A Swedish study showed that older people are less inclined to move if they live in rural municipalities, municipalities with extensive tourism, or in large cities (Abramsson and Andersson, 2016). This is in line with a study from Nordregio (Qvist Eliassen et al., 2020, 12) pointing at internal population dynamics in rural areas that involve an increasing number of single households in addition to an ageing population. Both situations where older people remain in their residence and where they leave their homes require efforts with regard to housing and care. Research has pointed to risks of older people facing limited services and a decreased quality of life when relocating to cheaper housing in remote areas (Hartman and Darab, 2019). The Swedish case points to similar problems when migration does not occur.

While a long-term trend is that the rural population is getting older, other factors also contribute to spatial variations. The proportion of the population with a foreign background has increased and in-migrants are younger than locally born people. In-migrants help stabilize the basis for the service supply and also fill vacancies in the labour market. Many rural areas and smaller towns see a shortage of labour in many sectors, such as in education, care, and welfare (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2018). International migrants, refugees, and labour migrants have been described as the key to meeting existing local labour needs; however, taking the role of a contributing societal actor requires local structures and welfare (Stenbacka and Mathisen, 2023), including housing. Rental housing has been identified as an option for certain groups. A wished-for scenario is that while renting their homes, people establish emotional and functional relations and thus stay there permanently; they continue renting if they lack financial resources, or they buy a permanent home (Qvist Eliassen et al., 2020, 68).

A current policy measure aims to strengthen projects where a group of households come together to realize a housing project. The Act on Support to 'Byggemenskaper' or co-housing projects (SFS, 2019:676) was introduced in 2019. A co-housing project (*byggemenskap* in Swedish) is a model or form of organization for planning and realizing a building project, usually a housing project. This measure is meant to strengthen

initiatives from residents with special wishes regarding how or where they want to live, and to support housing projects in places where there is a lack of commercial interest. The measure can be said to bring together civil society and municipalities, which are involved in the planning and possibly grant land, and the state, which provides a financial contribution. Co-housing (and co-living) projects are seen as a tool to partly meet the demand for special types of housing (e.g. housing for older people) and partly increase integration and interaction between people.

Such projects can enable certain groups to design their accommodation according to their own wishes. However, it requires certain knowledge and skills, and for socio-economically weak groups it can be a demanding process. If these forms of housing are to be made available to vulnerable groups, additional public efforts are needed (Vamstad et al., 2024).

### 3.3.3. Low attractiveness and the market context

Rural challenges regarding empty houses and a lack of suitable housing for certain needs are a reality not only in Sweden but throughout the Nordic region (Qvist Eliassen et al., 2020). Places with low attractiveness face problems connected partly to a surplus of housing and partly to the difficulty of financing new constructions and renovations with loans. Among the Nordic countries, only Denmark is trying to transform the housing supply by reducing it to achieve a better balance (through state co-financing demolition or renovation); that is, reducing the downward pressure on house prices. Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are trying to transform the economic context with regard to demand by providing access to loans. In Swedish rural areas with limited demand, market prices are low, which means that banks are reluctant to offer loans. The shortage of housing is thereby reinforced. The result is a lack of housing for particular groups such as older adults or young people (Qvist Eliassen et al., 2020; Handberg, 2023).

In the government report entitled 'For Sweden's rural areas – a coherent policy for work, sustainable growth and welfare' (SOU, 2017:1), specific measures are advocated to make it easier to build homes in rural areas for those who want to. These measures are linked to legislation regarding infrastructure – reviewing water and sewage legislation and ensuring that the reformation of the coastal protection regulations in rural areas are having their intended effect (SOU, 2017:1, 135-143). The regulation has entailed restrictions along any kind of water, regardless of location. For certain municipalities, adjusting the coastal protection regulations regarding building along lakes is a matter of increasing attractiveness. Since 2010, new rules have been introduced that aim to increase the opportunities for municipalities to invest in rural development in areas that are covered by these regulations, and further measures in that direction have also been proposed in the latest rural investigation (SOU, 2017:1).

The same report emphasizes that the financing problem related to housing construction needs to be investigated and developed. The main principle would be that the bank, the state, and the individual share the financial risk of the loan for the construction and re-construction of housing in rural areas to a greater degree than they do now (SOU, 2017:1, 143). In June 2018, the Swedish government assigned Boverket with the task to produce proposals for measures that can facilitate the financing of housing construction in rural areas (Regeringen, 2018). The measure that is opted for in the report involves the introduction of a government top loan, a measure that aims to facilitate the financing of new homes and the reconstruction of own homes in the countryside and thus attracts or keeps tax-paying households in the municipality.

In some cases, municipalities see empty houses as a resource that could fill the needs of the local population or attract in-migrants. Projects are initiated to investigate empty or abandoned houses and potentials to get the owners to sell or rent them out to local citizens who are looking for, but have difficulties finding, a permanent residence (Kalmar kommun, 2021), or to potential new residents (Region Kronoberg and Landsbygdsdröm, 2022). This is an example of a local planning practice

where a municipality is trying out new methods to provide housing for permanent residents.

*Bringing new people into existing houses can be the solution to another larger dilemma in that new people both increase the tax revenue and in several ways revitalize the countryside. In practice, 'abandoned house projects' are in a larger perspective a way to revitalize the countryside and the project will quickly include several other aspects such as competence, tax income and a functioning society. (Region Kronoberg and Landsbygdsdröm, 2022, 43)*

## 4. Concluding discussion

To conclude this article, we draw together our main findings and discuss them in relation to previous studies and identified gaps in terms of existing planning and policy in Sweden regarding socially sustainable rural housing. We find that the problem of rural housing in Sweden is emphasized in policy. Proposed measures focus on facilitating the needs of households that want to build their own homes, or on bottom-up approaches that presume agency and skills. Less attention is given to measures aimed at increasing the number of homes for households that lack the needed skills or networks. The emphasis on such bottom-up approaches and endogenous development has been critically discussed in research on rural development (Shucksmith, 2010; Bock, 2019) and it seems that such approaches are not fulfilling the identified needs.

We see two overarching and closely intertwined challenges; while they stem from our study in Sweden, they have general and international implications related to spatial as well as socio-economic inequalities.

*One overall challenge is to plan for mobilities and related spatial inequalities.* Spatial inequalities are related to the fact that the rural population is increasingly characterized by diversity and mobility. Housing is a crucial infrastructure for well-functioning and socially sustainable rural regions, since (lack of) available housing is restricting people from moving to specific rural localities and directing them to others. Thus, access to housing in rural areas is closely related to demographic and social transformations regarding, for example, age, household structure, and the mobility and migration motifs of different groups. One example is when policies and planning facilitate urban-rural migration of certain types of in-migrants or implicitly restrict access of other migrants to specific housing areas. Housing for 'locals' is promoted and restricting practices towards 'newcomers' are developed with the ambition to avoid rural gentrification in certain areas (Hernández-Ramírez et al., 2022). In other rural contexts, gentrification has resulted in a will to preserve a certain character of the built environment and thereby restrict new (affordable) housing (Frank et al., 2020, 774f). However, resource-poor groups are also directed to available housing in municipalities with a housing surplus, sometimes accompanied by a lack of services or jobs (Corfe, 2017; Statskontoret, 2020). Thus, mobilities and migration towards the rural are interconnected with spatial and socio-economic inequalities related to the housing situation, and urban-rural migration may be more or less promoted in policy and planning, as well as more or less voluntary for different groups.

A result of selective gentrification processes in some rural areas is displacement, when people no longer have sufficient resources to stay and are pushed out from rural areas (Kordel and Naumann, 2023). As we have pointed out, it is also possible to be pushed into the rural, as the discussion of 'social dumping' indicated. Thus, mobility and temporary migration does not just take place among the social elite or middle-class office workers; mobility may also be caused by precarity and displacement due to a lack of social and economic resources.

A key to understanding the issue of rural housing and its connection to planning is to view migration as just one feature of the broader concept of mobilities. In research, the new mobilities paradigm has enabled new understandings of contemporary mobilities where migration is often not about the permanent movement from one location to another, but tourism, leisure, and work are intertwined in space and

time in new ways affecting how and where we live (Cohen et al., 2015). This makes the issue of housing and the definition of a local population complex and connects it to the temporality of stays in different dwellings (Back and Marjavaara, 2017). An in-depth understanding of the complexities of rural housing provision takes into account people's mobilities and how they relate to spatial and social inequalities.

To fully understand and take on challenges related to mobilities, there is a need to acknowledge the volatility of housing trajectories caused by the temporary fluctuation of rural labour markets, booming/busting industries, and economic decline in traditional economic sectors. The lack of predictability, the local responsibility, and the underlying expectation of adaptation are not temporary events but a continuous state.

Another overall challenge is to integrate planning for housing and planning for service provision to mitigate socio-economic inequalities between groups. International and Swedish research has shown that a narrow focus on housing might put individuals and households into precarious situations; they might be 'stranded' and find that they cannot access services (Abramsson and Hagberg, 2018; Hartman and Darab, 2019). Thus, access to housing must be seen as integrated with access to services and communications, which benefits all groups and thus contributes to social sustainability. In Sweden, after several years with refugee in-migration to rural areas, there are high hopes locally that households with a migrant background will stay or move in, thus filling vacancies in the labour market. This intertwining with several aspects of social and societal development means that housing needs to be integrated into plans and strategies aimed at, for example, changing the demography to increase the share of working-age people, or improving economic development through tourism or other personnel-intensive industries. In Swedish policy, housing provision is closely related to rural development, which is often overlooked in housing policy and planning practice, according to some researchers (see Gkartzios and Scott, 2014; Scott and Murray, 2009). The link to services for the resident population to strengthen the attractiveness of rural housing is, however, not made explicit and problematized.

One way of conceptualizing the differences between rural areas when it comes to demand and attraction is to discuss different situations in terms of 'hot spots' and 'cold spots'. This typologization is a result from our literature review and empirical investigation of the Swedish case. Hot spots on the housing market create a shortage of housing and social imbalances, as low-income households are pushed out. Gentrification induced by lifestyle mobilities or second homes prevents households from settling permanently, which means a lower tax base and a lack of workers in rural municipalities. Such hot spots trigger restrictive or conditional policy measures, but also planning for affordable housing for certain groups. In the literature, hot spots are most commonly discussed in relation to restrictions, while the Swedish hot spots involve the need of certain types of housing.

Other locations see a low demand and a surplus of housing, often coupled with decreasing levels of services and infrastructure due to out-migration, and thus become cold spots. In addition, if social dumping occurs, this means that the site's attractiveness is increasingly threatened, and in-migration and development is hindered. This is difficult to capture in regular municipal planning, but it is inevitable and a prerequisite for a more socially sustainable countryside in the future.

Related to both of the above challenges for planning for socially sustainable rural housing is that housing in Sweden is a municipal, local, responsibility. However, exogenous forces or trends mean that housing issues play out at both regional and national levels and put the municipalities in a difficult situation. Industrial transformation and COVID-19 constitute two examples of external forces having an impact on rural municipalities. Such forces contribute to uncertainties on all levels – nation states, municipalities, and households – and foster diversity among local experiences (Marsden et al., 2005, 1).

Municipalities in Sweden do not have the legal right to direct vacant housing to a certain group, yet new production is costly and does not

benefit those with low incomes. A relevant question connected to this is how different types of housing projects can affect vacancy chains. Can new constructions of a special nature free up other housing, which becomes available to groups in need? Tenancy forms can have an impact on households' opportunities to act and create a housing career. For young households, an opportunity to rent their accommodation for a limited time and at a lower cost might work to increase the incentives and opportunities to live in the countryside.

#### 4.1. Final remarks

Access to housing in Swedish rural areas seems to be a policy area in need of both increased knowledge, knowledge sharing and development. Rural housing questions often remain unanswered in debates and policy formulations. This might be interpreted as a consequence of a national and international pattern that entails 'a centralisation of economic and political power and decentralisation of responsibilities' (Haikola and Anshelm, 2020, 4). Municipalities are facing problems related to housing shortages and over-heated markets, and problems related to out-migration and abandoned houses – some of them at the same time. There is a need for comparative approaches (Gkartzios and Ziebarth, 2016) where we can, for example, discern learning opportunities and possibilities for the travel of housing policy ideas, both nationally and internationally. This overview of how rural housing is discussed in the Swedish context needs to be followed by in-depth empirical analyses of policy and planning practices and studies on access to housing. A step in this direction would be to systematically investigate local approaches to rural housing. This could be based on municipal working methods or strategies, or on projects with their base in civil society actors or private organizations/companies. The market alone cannot solve a complex situation. Civil society can contribute to, but not take responsibility for, a functioning housing market. Planning has a role to play in the pursuit of socially sustainable housing. However, the design of the measures is context-dependent, and it is not uncomplicated to, for example, control access to housing based on a categorization of households (Gkartzios and Scott, 2010).

Finally, some remarks concerning methods. While quantitative register data are important for demonstrating patterns, trends, and the extent to which people actually travel or move, they risk hiding what type of mobility characterizes individuals' practices towards the countryside today. Migration patterns do not show that the use of holiday homes is increasing, or that individuals who are registered in one municipality work half a year in another where they have a holiday home. Studies on migration streams among socially weak households do not reveal whether the act of migration is voluntary. Nor are the international workers who spend periods in one location visible in accessible data. This complex web of mobilities and local and regional development in rural areas cannot be described and analysed with only statistics and population data, but must include qualitative investigations of local consequences and conditions that may form a more nuanced basis for planning for rural housing. Thus, there is a need to draw attention to the importance of qualitative methods for housing research. This involves making observations of villages and towns, noticing how they change (or not) with the seasons, entering properties and municipal offices, and talking to individuals about their everyday observations. What problems do they face? What opportunities are there? How are solutions formulated, both immediate and long-term ones?

The planning system and practices regarding housing in rural Sweden take into account the special conditions of rural areas, in particular the special features of rural hot spots and cold spots, to only a small degree. There is a potential for research contributions and for learning among municipalities as well as regional and national institutions and actors.



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## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Susanne Stenbacka:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Susanna Heldt Cassel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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There's no financial/personal interest or belief that could affect our objectivity. Competing interests don't exist.

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No data was used for the research described in the article.

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