

Developing and maintaining trust in rural place leadership: The case of partnerships for better place attachment in two post-Soviet countries, Latvia and Estonia.

Joanna T. Storie, and Mart Klvik

Abstract

Changing from a totalitarian state to one using participatory processes, where people feel the values they hold for the place to which they are attached are respected, is problematic, with no clear route through the process. This is seen in Latvia and Estonia in moving away from a Soviet state-imposed management of rural landscapes to the introduction of local organisational structures and devolved or privatised management after independence. The Soviet-era legacy, where inhabitants had little input in decisions affecting their environment, has inevitably led to passivity amongst inhabitants that fears challenging authority and a lack of trust. This paper highlights the challenges that inhabitants and authorities face in adjusting to life after the transition from totalitarianism.

Data was collected from semi-structured interviews using the snowball method and convenience sampling in rural parishes in Latvia and Estonia between 2011-2017 and the personal observations and experiences of the authors, a UK national living in Latvia and an Estonian national. The results are presented as narratives to allow the voice of the inhabitants to be heard.

In the Soviet era, management decisions were set top-down via a hierarchical structure to local collective farms. After the Soviet Union collapsed, land was reallocated to previous owners or their descendants. However, a fear of sanctions and a lingering sense of distrust between inhabitants and the authorities, exacerbated by continued top-down and shame-based approaches, remained. For example, this approach was a distinctive feature of how the authorities dealt with wild boar management in Latvia; farmers' fear of sanctions was a barrier to effective participatory development.

The lack of trust is a thread that runs through the observations, from the distrust of local inhabitants to make local management decisions to a lack of trust in the authorities to take note of local conditions. It is also evident in inter-community conflicts over land management, which is exacerbated by the reserved nature of Latvians and Estonians.

Our results confirm that building and maintaining trust in local communities to overcome the Soviet era legacy requires a dynamic and inspirational leadership. It is important to help people build place-based trust and create local, supportive networks and business relationships. It is also key in building bridges between public institutions and inhabitants by giving them a voice on issues related to their home.

The investigations, however, showed that building trust and reducing the fear of sanctions and shaming, requires the authorities to identify and engage with stakeholders whilst being aware of power structures that hinder engagement. Participatory methods incorporated into good practice guidelines would facilitate this process but is not enough. Better communication is needed between the authorities and the local people to enable inhabitants to understand place-based decision-making processes and management options. It would also enable wider access for feedback and suggestions for local solutions. Involving inhabitants to devise management plans would additionally help resource-constrained authorities.