

Wellbeing in Hyrynsalmi, Finland: A Plan for Sustainable Development

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*What is this fragrance around me?
What is this quietness?
What is this knowledge of peace in my heart?
What strange, great, new thing is this?
I can hear the flowers growing
and the talk of the trees in the wood.
I think all my old dreams are ripening,
all the hopes and the wishes I sowed.
Everything's quiet around me,
Everything's gentle and sweet.
Great flowers are opening up in my heart
with a fragrance of deepest peace.*

— Eino Leino, a poem we feel embodies this report & our Hyrynsalmi experience

Statement of Positionality

Writing this report, we acknowledge that very few of us are from Finland, nor have we studied this country. This reality presents various challenges to conducting equitable research; key cultural context is lacking, language barriers are present, and there is the risk of perpetuating an unjust power imbalance. This is especially true given the nature of our specific research, studying a community vulnerable to existential-level changes. Throughout our research and broadly throughout this report we have worked to minimize these potential risks. We have taken steps to challenge our pre-existing notions of what the community may need and what challenges people face, rather than listening to community members as they have worked to define this for us—something we are immensely grateful for. Additionally, during the duration of our research we remained aware of possible neo-coloniality within our work, challenging and breaking down moments when thought or dialogue would move in such a direction.

Understanding that it would not be just—if possible, even—for us to prescribe a ‘solution’ for the challenges Hyrynsalmi is facing, our hope is that through this report, we can offer thoughtful substantive ideas that *could* be applied within the community, *should* members of the community feel such ideas would be appreciated, helpful, and welcomed. Moreover, these ideas have been directly informed by the community and as such, that is where credit must reside.

Acknowledgements

Above all else, we thank the community of Hyrynsalmi for the warm welcome we received. This report would not have been possible without the active participation of the community and, as mentioned above, we could not be more grateful for what was shared with us. We would also specifically like to extend our immense gratitude to the Municipality of Hyrynsalmi as well as the Mustarinda Art Association; *thank you* for making us feel at home in your beautiful community.

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INTRODUCTION

The municipality of Hyrynsalmi, located roughly 630 kilometres northeast of Helsinki, is shrinking. This is not an unusual or an unexpected scenario—countless rural communities around the world have been depopulating for decades. At the whim of forces such as globalisation, mass urban migration, ever-digitalising industries, and negative birth rates, rural communities are particularly vulnerable to the changes most associated with depopulation. Such changes present various challenges to municipalities including, at times, existential questions. While for some it may be easy to disregard such communities as forgotten or left behind, such notions disregard an immensity of important work that community members—the people who call these communities home—steward to ensure their communities remain not only healthy, but well.

Participating in the NordPlus program, we—students from five different Baltic and Nordic countries—had the opportunity to spend time in Hyrynsalmi, conducting research at the intersection of the community’s shrinking population and sustainable development. Choosing to centre our research around the concept of wellbeing as defined by the community, through various methods both digital and in person, we investigated community perceptions regarding what it would mean to increase wellbeing in Hyrynsalmi. This report will provide an in-depth look at the municipality, analysing exactly that: the actions people are already doing, and what they need, to live well. Following that direction, after providing a thorough community profile of Hyrynsalmi, this report will give an overview of the data collected through the study, specifically centered around the question: what does wellbeing mean to members of the Hyrynsalmi community, and how could this greater sense of wellbeing be realized?

From that question, our research pursued the following aims:

- a. To learn the meaning of wellbeing for this specific community, as defined by community members;
- b. To utilize participatory engagement in an effort to consider specific strategies to improve wellbeing in the community;
- c. To eventually contribute to the revitalization of the community through improved wellbeing, guided by our research findings.

Drawing upon our findings, this report will conclude with a series of three recommendations: for the municipality to develop a community grant program, working specifically towards a revitalisation of Hyrnsalmi's main street; to encourage and engage in increased nature-based activities, including environmental protection; and to steward improved communication and genuine dialogue with community members. With such a strategy, we believe there would be ample opportunity for increased community wellbeing, and through that, just and equitable sustainable development.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Considering our research question along with the specific aims of this research, it is essential to situate this work within the broader context of academic scholarship. When doing so, it quickly becomes evident that our research touches upon varying concepts, most of which exist within wider academic conversations already taking place—and, importantly, certain key topics that appear to be lacking among contemporary academic literature. As such, the following section will explore these key topics—ranging from depopulation and conceptual approaches such as smart shrinkage to the idea of wellbeing—providing the key contextual background necessary for the remainder of this report.

The concept of depopulation is at the core of our research; as discussed above, Hyrynsalmi is depopulating rather quickly. There is a vast amount of literature regarding depopulation, with the concept being widespread both academically and within policymaking. With mass rural out-migration beginning in various places around the world in the mid-20th century and broader rural and urban migration continuing since, a vast amount of literature has been produced on the topic. While definitions of depopulation can certainly vary, they generally share key commonalities. Namely, depopulation is widely considered a long-term, sustained decline in the total population of a locality driven by a natural population decreases (sustained low fertility alongside an aging population) and out-migration (Johnson & Lichter, 2019; Lichter & Johnson, 2025; Merino & Prats, 2020; Reynaud & Miccoli 2018). These factors limit the reproductive capacity of the population from being maintained (San-Martín González & Soler-Vaya, 2024). Yet, other definitions do exist. For example, Johnson and Lichter (2019) define depopulation as, “chronic population losses that prevent counties from returning to an earlier period of peak population size.” This definition, more specific, contextualizes depopulation within the fixed metric of peak population size. While temporal or consequence-based inclusions may be helpful in certain cases, within our research we will adopt the more general first definition, preferring the flexibility and universality it allows for. There is a non-neutrality embedded the temporally bound example above; by comparing population against a benchmarked peak or discussing challenges within a definitional context, there could be an implication of negativity within the present depopulation situation, and while such negativity *could* be the case, it is not *necessarily* the case. Or, in other terms, depopulation is not inherently a negative phenomenon.

Within the field of depopulation research there is a gap regarding residents who decide to stay in rural depopulating communities (Adams et al., 2022). This poses key questions relating to depopulation research, primarily that of who the research is for. As Adams et al. (2022) aptly identify, if the primary focus of depopulation research is to study those who decide to leave a locality, the economic impact on shrinking communities, or how depopulating places can reverse course and grow—these being only some of the primary topics oft considered in depopulation research—important opportunities are being disregarded. In all communities, regardless of whether they are shrinking or growing, there is important ground-up work being done by community members. Within depopulating communities, activists continue working to make the places they care about more liveable (Adams et al., 2022), yet this trove of information is missed if residents who choose to stay in a community aren't considered. As such, within the research for this report, we have attempted to remain consistently conscious of this gap so as not to perpetuate it further.

The disregard mentioned above is related to another commonplace issue within depopulation research: growth for the sake of growth. For aspects of capitalism, growth is generally acknowledged as a necessity (Cahen-Fourot, 2022). From such a perspective, any potential reality or outlook unaligned with growth—let alone something intentionally aligned with degrowth—can be viewed negatively. Regarding communities and (de)population, this is an ever-present issue. If a community is shrinking, a focus solely on trying to grow by any means necessary can lack equity; such an approach raises questions about how and why growth is beneficial, and who the benefactor *actually* is (Pike et al., 2010). In many cases, it may not be members of the community (Schackmar et al., 2021). Repopulation efforts often centre new industries, which is not inherently problematic, though if such efforts do not consider and equitably plan for those who already live in the community—people who could certainly be experiencing a decrease in liveability due to the shrinking—the approach is not just, even if it succeeds in attracting new residents (Schackmar et al., 2021). Trying to grow a shrinking community is not inherently problematic, though who the growth is for must be considered alongside whatever specific strategies are pursued.

When considering the challenge of equity in depopulation research, there is a broader challenge relating to the issue of stigmatisation of shrinking: a perception that a shrinking community is failing, or that it must inherently be fixed (Mykhenko, 2023). Deeply problematic, this line of thought moves toward neo-colonial community development—from a starting point of

‘fixing’ an externally perceived issue, local voices can easily be disregarded, with strategies (or even a perceived need) for growth coming from outside rather than within. Rural shrinking communities may at times lack the expertise or capacity to navigate depopulation solely on their own, yet the important work, actors, and capital intrinsic to the community must not be disregarded. Work to address depopulation without acknowledging what is already being done from the ground-up is counterproductive, removed from the actions residents are often already taking to create more liveable, fulfilling communities for themselves (Mykhenko, 2023). This recognition is not intended to minimise challenges—there are a plethora of issues that a depopulating community may experience, and that they may not be able to address alone. Yet, it is inaccurate to view a depopulating community as merely a victim. As Mykhenko (2023, p. 9) argues, shrinking communities “have continuously sought capacities to help themselves in the face of dramatically changing circumstances,” and this should not be understated.

In opposition to the notion that depopulation is an intrinsically negative force is the concept of smart shrinking. This concept, alongside depopulation, will be central to this report and the directions we recommend Hyrynsalmi consider. Smart shrinking is a process through which a locality may lose population, though maintain or develop a high quality of life nonetheless (Hollander, 2011). This approach is antithetical to an inherently growth-based approach to depopulation. Smart shrinking does not aim to reverse depopulation or lure new residents to a community (Hackworth, 2015)—though such attraction may be an unintended consequence—rather, it emphasises the wellbeing of the existing population, maintaining the community as a good place to live, despite its decreasing population (Panagopoulos and Barreira, 2012). There are numerous examples of smart shrinking, as discussed by Makkonen and Inkinen (2023). For example, they cite strategies as varied as repurposing empty buildings (a frequent symptom of a decreasing population) to be used for recreation, to reorganizing local governments to improve efficiency around depopulation-related issues; from increasing cooperation and removing competition (e.g. eliminating redundancy of businesses or services), to reimagining the regional image and what is most important to people. At its core, smart shrinking necessitates the acceptance of depopulation and therefore an investment in the shrinking community’s needs from that reality.

Smart shrinking is not without its potential challenges, particularly pertaining to implementation. In their seminal work, *The bounds of Smart decline: a foundational theory for planning shrinking cities*, Justin B. Hollander and Jeremy Németh outline three significant

potential challenges that must be avoided: 1) a top-down approach, 2) an assumption that the community is a blank slate, 3) and the misconception that residents will be eager, or even desperate, for change (2011). Like the discussion regarding just and equitable depopulation research above, navigating these potential pitfalls of smart shrinkage requires a social justice approach. By centering fairness and equity, “making a real difference on the ground” can become a reality within shrinking communities (Hollander & Németh, 2011, p. 363). It is from within this framework that we ground our research.

One of the primary methods of this research was a survey centering on wellbeing. After hearing that the topic was a key priority for the Municipality of Hyrynsalmi, though noticing a seemingly lacking—or conflicting discussion about what it tangibly meant, we decided that the concept should be a central focus of our research. While the specifics of how we researched wellbeing will be discussed at length in the subsequent sections, it is imperative to review and define the term here.

Both practically and theoretically, the meaning of wellbeing can vary extensively; a rudimentary search of the term will yield results from disciplines as wide-ranging as medicine and psychology, geography and placemaking, philosophy, sociology, and public policy. Given its cross-disciplinary application, as well as its subjectiveness, wellbeing often lacks a clear and useful definition and conceptualization (Jarden & Roache, 2023). As such, we will not be attempting to apply an objective, all-encompassing definition to the concept—doing so would be nearly impossible. Within the context of *this* research, considering the community of Hyrynsalmi, a practical and widely cited definition can be borrowed from economics (Jarden & Roache, 2023). In the academic handbook, *Measuring Well-being: A Guide For Practitioners*, wellbeing is defined as, “how people feel and how they function. Both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole” (Michaelson et al., 2012, p. 6). Again, we recognize this definition is not applicable across all disciplines, nor is it without its challenges. For instance, it is unlikely that everyone would categorize their own personal sense of wellbeing in this way; there could be a discrepancy between how the word is defined academically versus how it is used in an ordinary, day-to-day context (Jarden & Roache, 2023). While we recognize this, this definition nonetheless provides a conceptual framework to work from as a point of departure. Moreover, given our research encouraged respondents to apply their own subjective understanding of wellbeing, we maintain that this concern—a tension between the academic application versus every day-use of the word—is eased. This recognition and research approach aligns with another

important consideration among wellbeing literature: “that only people themselves can report how they feel their lives are going” (Atkinson et al., 2020, p. 1905).

2. CASE STUDY AREA: HYRYNSALMI

2.1. Geographical Location

The municipality of Hyrynsalmi is located in the central portion of the region of Kainuu, Finland (see Figure 1). The municipality has an area of 1521,37 km², of which 99,92 km² is water (National Land Survey of Finland, 2025a). Hyrynsalmi neighbours the Kuhmo, Puolanka, Ristijärvi and Suomussalmi municipalities, and the administrative centre of the municipality is the villiage of Hyrynsalmi, sharing its name with the broader municipality (*Hyrynsalmen kirkonkylä*).

The nearest city to Hyrynsalmi is the provincial centre of Kajaani, located roughly 70 km southwest of the municipality by road (Google, n.d.). Following Kajaani, the nearest major population centre is Oulu, located roughly 180 km west of Hyrynsalmi centre; the capital city of Helsinki is located 630 km southwest of the municipality. There are 15 villages located in the Hyrynsalmi municipality – Hyrynsalmi (the centre), Kytömäki, Luvankylä, Moisiovaara, Oravivaara, Tapanivaara, Väisälä, Teerijärvi, Haapolanvaara, Hoikka, Pekankylä, Lietekylä, Karpinvaara, Hakokylä and Nuottikylä (Finnish Environment institute, 2023a; Finnish Environment institute, 2023b).

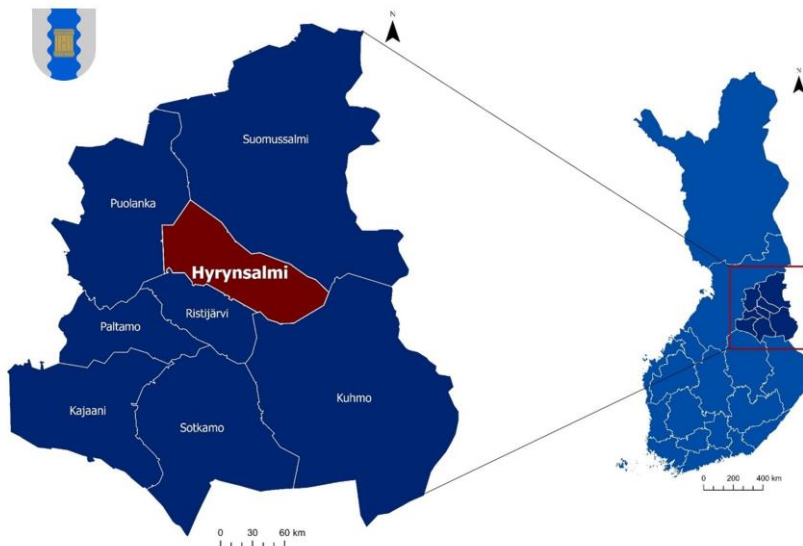


Figure 1: Map of the location of the municipality of Hyrynsalmi (Esri, 2025a; Esri, 2025b)

2.2. Physical geography

The landscape of Hyrynsalmi, which extends from southeast to northwest, is dominated by forested hills, ravines, marshes, and flowing waterways. Most of the municipality is covered by forests, but also lakes, bogs and agricultural land (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Satellite view map of the municipality of Hyrynsalmi (Esri, 2025c)

The western parts of the municipality belong to the Kainuu slate area, the central parts have a wide gneiss-granite area, and the eastern parts are crossed by a zone of alkaline slates (Rikkinen et al., 1986). The most common soil type is moraine, which in places forms soft-featured ridges and hills. There are ridges in different parts of the municipality, on the sides of which there are undulating sand and sandy soils. There is almost no clay and silt soils, but there is extensive peat.

Hyrynsalmi is a high and varied region in terms of topography (see Figure 3). The terrain rises from the level of Lake Hyrynjärvi in the central basin of the municipality towards the peripheral areas, except in the direction of the Emäjoki River. Several of the hills in the eastern and western parts of the municipality rise to a height of almost 400 m. The highest elevations are Paljakka and Tuomivaara.

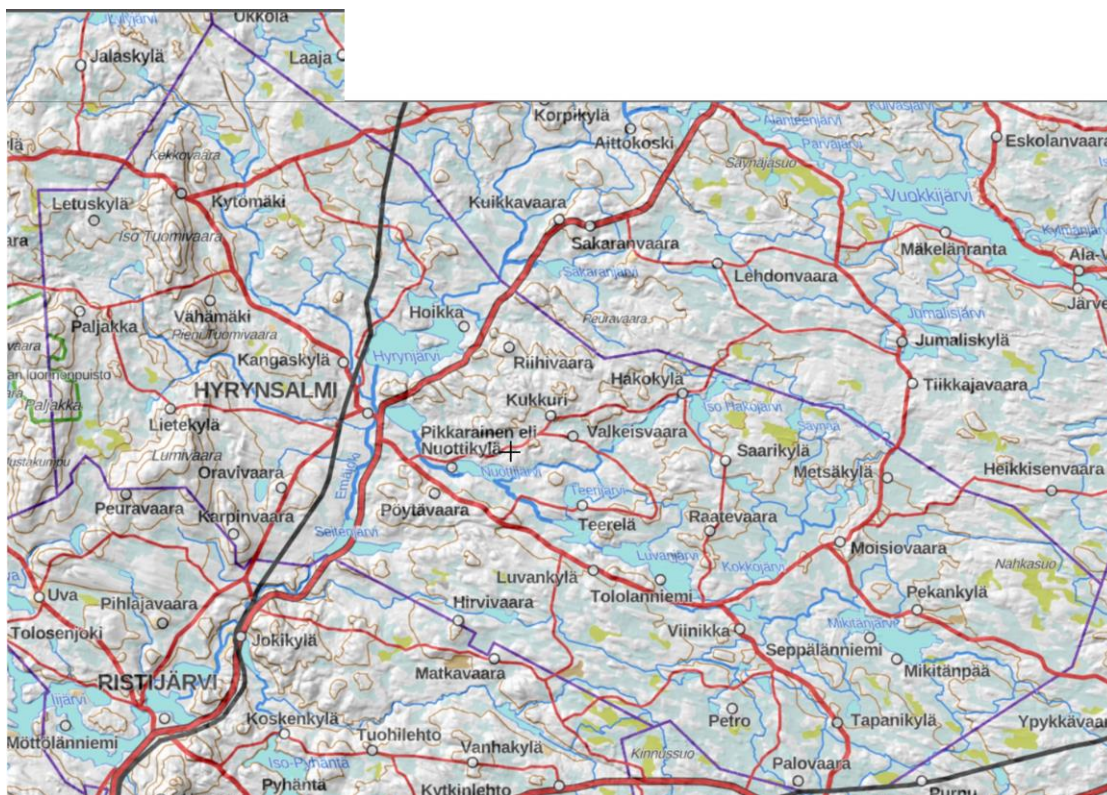


Figure 3: Topographical map of the municipality of Hyrynsalmi (National Land Survey of Finland, 2025b)

Forests and bogs make up the majority of the municipality's vegetated land area (Rikkinen et al., 1986). Pine-dominated forests are most common in the northern and eastern parts, while spruce-dominated forests are commonplace in the western and southern parts of the *Kainuun vaaramaa*. In terms of vegetation, Hyrynsalmi is a transition zone between southern and northern species. Bogs are most abundant in the eastern part of the municipality. CORINE Land Cover monitoring (see Figure 4) conducted in 2018 shows that most of the territory of the Hyrynsalmi municipality is covered in coniferous and mixed forests, natural grasslands, water bodies (lakes) and peat bogs, most of them (as mentioned previously) being in the eastern part of the municipality (Copernicus Land Monitoring Service, 2020).

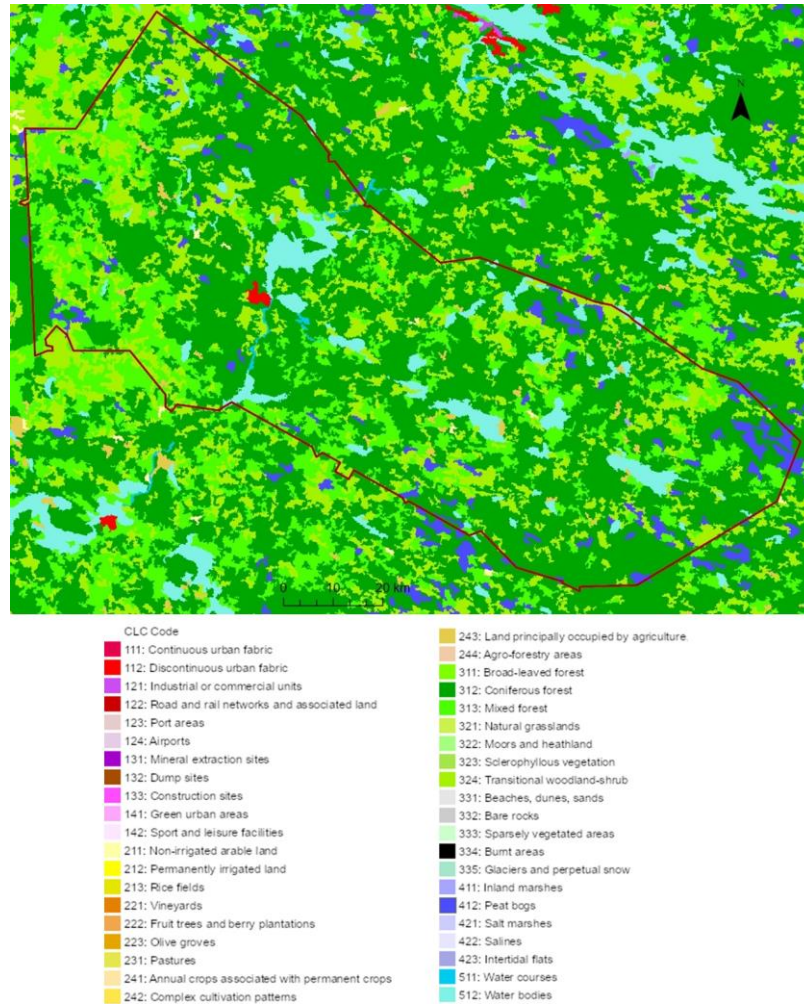


Figure 4: CORINE Land Cover (CLC) 2018 map of the municipality of Hyrynsalmi (Copernicus Land Monitoring Service, 2020)

The municipality's waterways are entirely part of the Hyrynsalmi route (Rikkinen et al., 1986). The main river of the route is the Emäjoki, which is joined by the Luvanjoki in the eastern part of *Kainuun vaaramaa* area and the Tuomijoki and Lietejoki in the western parts of the municipality. The largest lakes are Hyrynjärvi, Luvanjärvi and Mikitänjärvi.

2.3. History of Hyrynsalmi

Hyrynsalmi has been inhabited since 8,000 BC (Rikkinen et al., 1986). The oldest settlement in Hyrynsalmi is evidenced by the Stone Age sites found in the central part of the municipality. The area was permanently settled in the 1550s, when Savonian settlers moved in.

The settlement was destroyed by the Russians in the 1570s and 1580s, and the area was only repopulated after the Peace of Täyssinä in 1595. Considering the religiosity of the region, Hyrynsalmi initially belonged to the Liminka and later Paltamo parishes but was separated into its own parish as early as 1786 (Rikkinen et al., 1986). The chapels of Ristijärvi, Suomussalmi and Puolanka only separated from Hyrynsalmi in the second half of the 19th century. The Hyrynsalmi church, built by Jakob and Carl Rijf, was completed in 1786 and continues to be an important religious-social site contemporarily.

The population earned their livelihood primarily from agriculture and reindeer husbandry, also continuing to this day (Rikkinen et al., 1986). Hyrynsalmi is the southernmost reindeer herding area in Finland.

Iron smelting was introduced by the people of Hyrynsalmi as early as the Middle Ages, and numerous iron huts, or iron burning sites, have been found in the municipality. The Kaunislehto farm museum has a replica of a hut at Hyttiniemi in Kokkojärvi, Moisiovaara, which was used in the 16th century. The forging of the Tommi knife was started by blacksmith Kalle Keränen in the Mustalahti house in Oravivaara around 1870.

The narrow-gauge Hyrynsalmi-Kuusamo field railway, also known as the "Death Railway", was built between Hyrynsalmi and Kuusamo by Germans during the Continuation War in 1942-1944 (Rikkinen et al., 1986). The name "Death Railway" comes from the local people who had noticed the high death rate of prisoners of war building the railway. The Taivalkoski-Emmäsaari railway was later built at the site. Today, Hyrynsalmi railway station is only used for freight traffic.

2.4. Demography

As of the beginning of 2025, Hyrynsalmi is home to 1,996 residents (Statistics Finland, 2025a). Out of the municipalities in the Kainuu region, it is the second smallest by population. Nationally, Hyrynsalmi ranks far below average in terms of population size. The population is mostly concentrated (See Figure 5) in the primary locality (*taajama*) *Hyrynsalmen kirkonkylä*, which has a population of 1,148 (Statistics Finland, 2023). This is the only locality in Hyrynsalmi. In Finland locality (*taajama*) is defined as a population center that has over 200 inhabitants (Statistics Finland 2025b). Closer definition is constructed using geospatial methods with population and building information (Statistics Finland, 2025b). Outside the main locality of the municipal center, 882 people live in sparsely populated areas of the municipality (Statistics Finland, 2023).

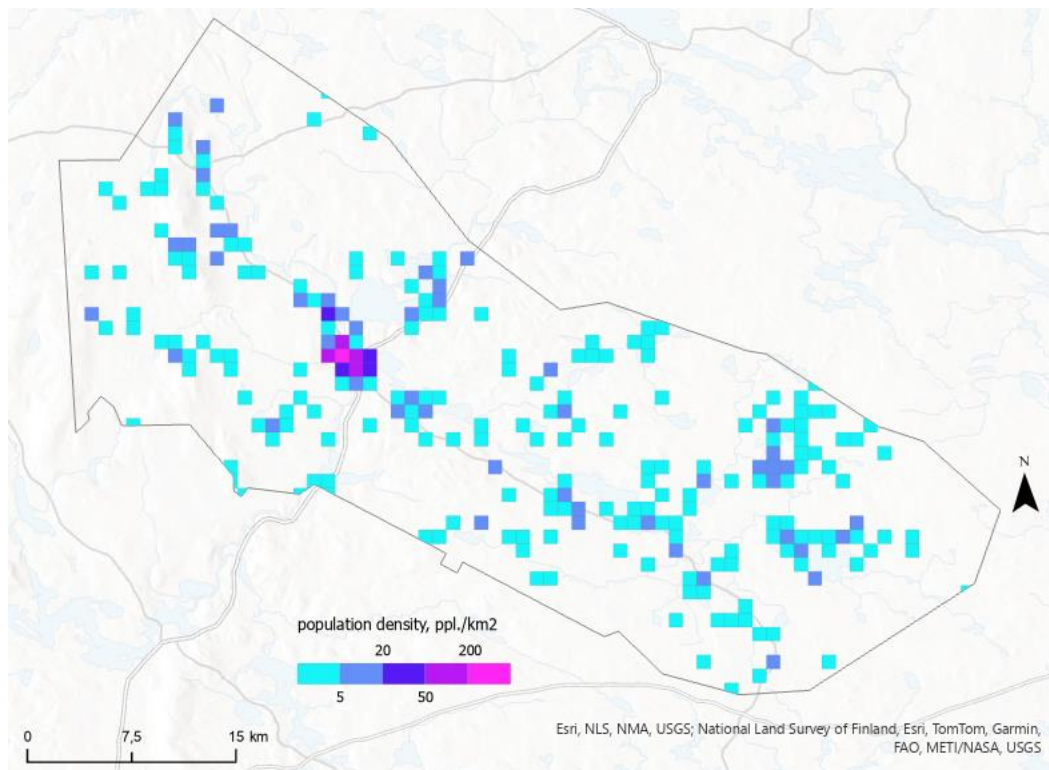


Figure 5: Population density of Hyrynsalmi (Paituli)

Hyrynsalmi has experienced steady population decline (See Figure 6) during recent decades—a trend that continues today. The population has halved since the late 1980s; in 1987 the municipality had a population of 4,201. By 2005 it had declined to 3,096 and, as mentioned above, is now at 1,996. This can mainly be attributed to high mortality and a low number of births. The birthrate of Hyrynsalmi has dropped significantly during the late decades. In the early years of the 1990s it was common for births to reach an annual number of 50. For the last 15 years there has been single years with less than 10 births (Statistics Finland, 2024). The age structure of Hyrynsalmi has changed significantly, representing both a consequence and system of ongoing depopulation. It can be observed that the share of young population groups is significantly lower than it was in the past. Residents under 15-years comprised 9.5% of Hyrynsalmi in 2023 compared to 20.2% in 1987. Simultaneously, the working age population (15-64 years old) has diminished from 68.% in 1987 to 45,5 % in 2023. Meanwhile, the share of elderly people over 64 years has grown from 11.7% in 1987 to 45.3% in 2023. As will be discussed further in this report, these demographic changes represent a significant challenge for the municipality.

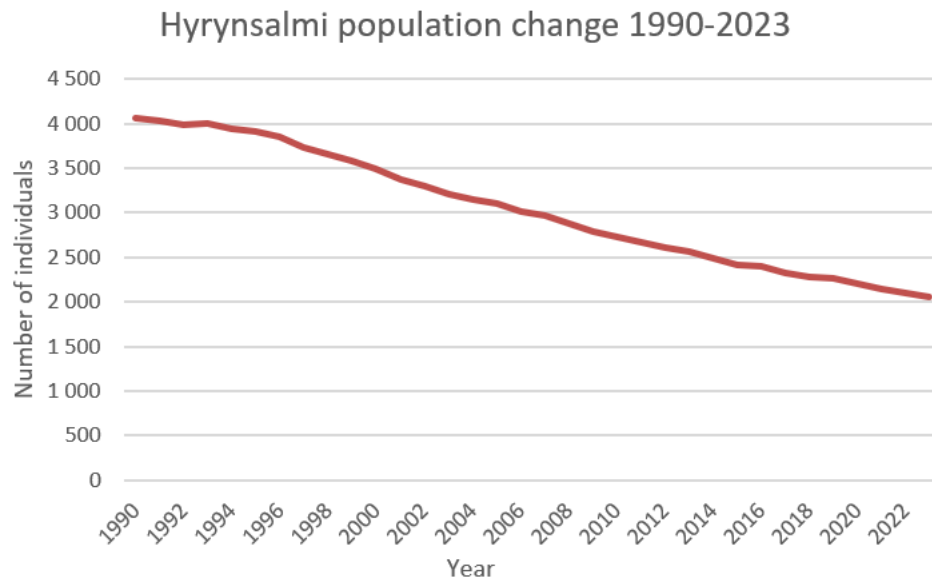


Figure 6: Population change in Hyrnsalmi between 1990-2023 (Statistics Finland, 2024)

Gender distribution in Hyrnsalmi is uneven in several age groups (See Figure 7). There are less women than men in almost every age group. However, these trends change when considering elderly people over 80, where there is a proportion of women. This demographic situation is very typical for small rural Finnish municipalities. In Finland, young people, especially young women, are more prone to moving abroad and to larger cities within the country. According to Aro and Siltanen (2020), jobs in the service sector and higher education jobs are concentrated in larger population centres, which generally align with the education preferences of women (acknowledging this is a generalization). It is suggested that this research correlates with the lower birthrates in rural municipalities (Aro & Siltanen, 2020).

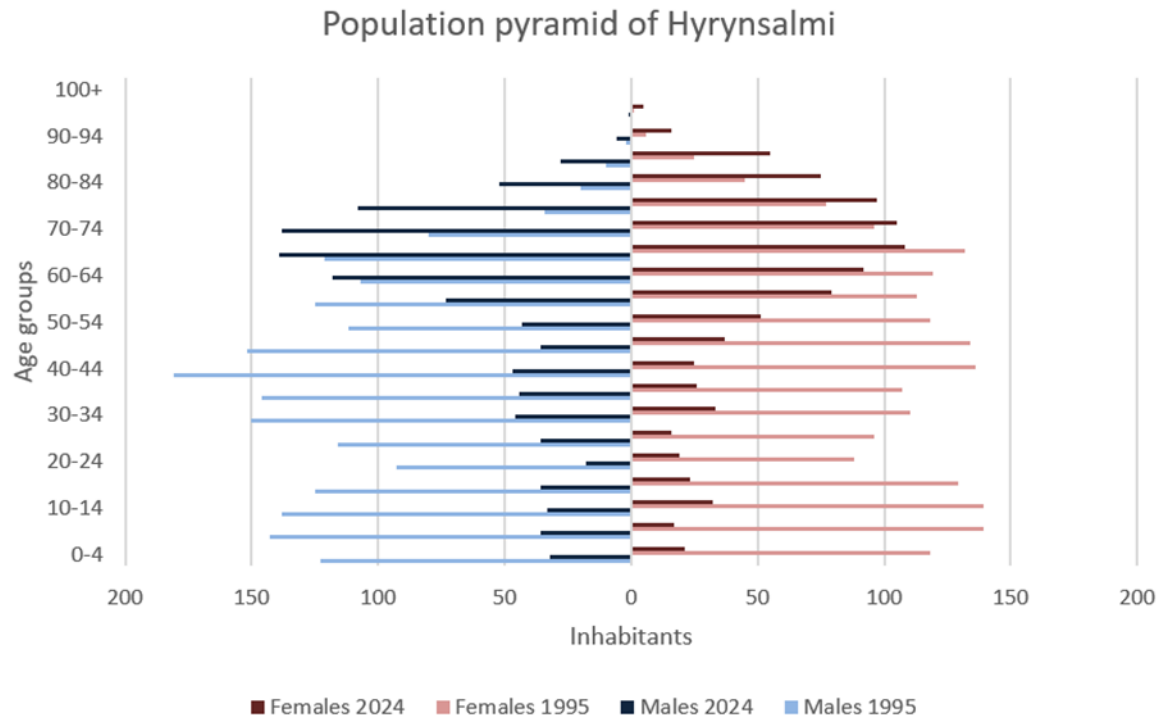


Figure 7: Population pyramid of Hyrynsalmi 1995-2024 (Statistics Finland, 2024)

Predictably, Hyrynsalmi is almost entirely Finnish speaking, with 97.8% of the population speaking Finnish as their primary language. There are 43 foreign language speakers as of 2024. The share of foreign language speakers has grown from 0.2% in 1995 to 2.1% in 2024. Russian is the most common foreign language in Hyrynsalmi, with 14 speakers in 2024. The second national language, Swedish is nearly nonexistent in Hyrynsalmi, with only 2 speakers as of 2024 (Statistics Finland, 2024).

In 2024, an overwhelming majority of 82.8% of inhabitants in Hyrynsalmi belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland—the church mentioned in the above section. People with no religion consist of 15.1% of the population of Hyrynsalmi, a rise from 4.1% in 1995. Religious groups other than Evangelical Lutherans account for 2.1% of the population (Statistics Finland 2024.)

2.5. Socio-Economic Challenges

2.5.1. Limited Job Opportunities

Finding a job can be hard while living in a remote area that is also quickly depopulating; there simply is not much work available. This is true in most depopulating areas, including Hyrynsalmi. There are a couple of reasons why Hyrynsalmi is facing such limited job opportunities:

- Small and aging population – with almost 2,000 inhabitants and almost half of them being in the age group that is 65+ years old (stat.fi, 2025) – reduces active workforce as well as the local demand for goods and services. It often happens that potential businesses look over municipalities like Hyrynsalmi because there is very little workforce and even if there is a working age population they often move to bigger cities to find broader work opportunities.
- Narrow economic base – Hyrynsalmi is surrounded by vast landscape with forests, thus naturally the economy is primarily based on forestry, agriculture, and nature-based seasonal tourism (e.g. skiing). Much of the more available work has generally fallen within male-dominated industries, such as forestry. It is not uncommon for generations of men to work in the forestry industry, as we learned in our interviews. A lot of women are traveling or even moving to the other towns so that they could find a job and make a living. It is worth mentioning that lack of diversity regarding industries, for instance, technology, advanced manufacturing and healthcare is playing a huge role in Hyrynsalmi's narrow economic base.
- Poor infrastructure with limited access – plays a huge role regarding limited job opportunities. Speaking about poor infrastructure, there is a need to point out that road quality differs in different parts of the municipality. For instance, in the Hyrynsalmi's city centre road condition is quite good, although if we would look at the road condition outside city centre – they are less favourable (the Global Economy, 2019).
- Limited access to transportation is also one of the key elements that leads towards limited job opportunities. Even though buses are passing and stopping at Hyrynsalmi, it is a different case with trains. In previous decades, trains would stop at Hyrynsalmi making it easier for people to reach their jobs in other towns or bigger cities as well as make it easier for people from other towns to reach our research area, although now –

there's not even one train that stops at Hyrynsalmi which is in a way forcing people to rely on buses and own cars to reach their work.

2.5.2. Dependence On Tourism

Hyrynsalmi is a place surrounded by forests, beautiful landscape and a rich artistic community; despite attracting plenty of tourists the attraction is felt only during peak summer and winter months. During said times, population in Hyrynsalmi is temporarily increasing (it sometimes can reach even 3,000 residents), the local economy has a small boom, and limited year-round jobs are being created which gives opportunity for permanent residents (especially younger ones) to find a job at least for a season. Even though 'heavy' tourism can be beneficial for places like Hyrynsalmi – there is also some drawbacks for it. The main negative aspects are infrastructure strain as well as earlier mentioned narrow economic focus. Infrastructure strain can make limited local infrastructure struggle to accommodate tourists during the peak times of the winter (when the skiing as well as snow football season begins) and summer (when the wakeboarding and swamp football seasons starts (suopotkupallo, 2025)). Without seasonal tourism opportunities, what is left is mainly hiking through the forests in Hyrynsalmi and even though hiking can be done all year round – most tourists are choosing summertime. As mentioned before, Hyrynsalmi, or to be exact Mustarinda (an arts residency in the municipality), could be considered a rural artistic hotspot. Although Mustarinda is one of the biggest attraction places for the artistic community and there is always a long list of applicants that are trying to get temporary residency (usually two to four weeks) in the village, only a couple of them get the chance to stay.

2.5.3. Service Desertification

Hyrynsalmi, like many rural Finnish municipalities has essential road maintenance and emergency services, however overall road service is less dense with fewer roads and longer distances to travel to reach better amenities. This affects the travel times, especially in winter or during poor weather conditions. A few elderly citizens also remarked on the lack of banking services through a physical bank branch. Maybe for some digitalization has made in-person banking redundant, but this leaves others—especially an aging population—less comfortable. Retail options in Hyrynsalmi are limited and only a few local grocery stores serve the population.

This limited retail space creates a void in the sparsely populated regions making residents feel the need to travel to larger towns for a wider selection.

The basic education is in line with Finnish national standards with comprehensive schools serving children aged 6-15 in Hyrynsalmi. The school, last renovated in 2016, reflects gleaming interiors with access to modern educational facilities including art and music. For more advanced or diverse educational opportunities the children above 16 years are expected to move to a larger town nearby, generally Kajaani.

Health and social care services in Hyrynsalmi are organized and provided by the Kainuu Social Welfare and Health Care Joint Authority, which serves all municipalities in the Kainuu region, including Hyrynsalmi. The main point of healthcare services is the Hyrynsalmi Health Care Center located in the town with limited workdays opening hours, initially assessed by a nurse through phone or in person. The nurses form the foundational network of primary health care services required for the patient's need for treatment. Nurses provide timely care, follow-up for chronic conditions, wound care and health counselling.

The essential components of modern primary health care (PHC) service delivery consist of continuous and coordinated care, which is both comprehensive and people and community-oriented (OECD, 2020). Finland is one of the leading countries at the level of digitalisation in the EU (Majcherek et al., 2023). However, significant regional differences exist, with the accessibility being poorest in northern and eastern Finland. The impact of Finnish social and healthcare system reform has been felt by the small community of Hyrynsalmi. One of the aims of the reform was to decrease regional inequalities. However, the wellbeing service counties are facing high budgetary pressures, which is leading to the consolidation of the healthcare centre network, closing of hospitals and around-the-clock emergency departments (Väisänen et al., 2025). As per observations shared by a local project manager, to create savings for the municipalities many of the medical laboratories and clinics only operate a few days a week. Welfare areas have reduced the amount of laboratory tests ordered from patients. This means that the laboratories will not get as much funding as they used to, by sampling and analysing different samples, so they adapt to make these intrinsic changes in their function. This is creating a vacuum in the primary health care system in the rural communities, characterized by a low availability of healthcare professionals including nurses and general practitioners. Patients in Hyrynsalmi must often travel long distance to either Kajaani or Oulu to receive medical consultation which increases their travel time up to one to two hours. Travel distances and travel times to services are very long in certain places,

especially in the northern and eastern parts of the country, but poor accessibility affects only a relatively small number of people (Kotavaara et al., 2021). These small number of people are generally lured by better healthcare services and opportunity to reach primary health care centre using public transport to the urban centre of Kajaani.

The aged population which constitutes around 50% in Hyrynsalmi, face higher rates of chronic illness and need greater overall care. This invariably increases the workload and complexity of cases for limited staff available. During our discussion with the local regional officials, they expressed their growing concerns on the drop of applicants to become nurses especially after covid.

Although the rapid rise of telehealth services offers some improvement in access but also introduces new pressures as not all patients are able to use digital services. Telehealth may inadvertently increase inequalities, rural residents of Hyrynsalmi may lack digital literacy placing further strain on professionals to bridge these gaps. This combination of high workload and professional isolation is probably the reason that nurses from abroad are being recruited, such as the awaited onboarding of nurses from Philippines in Hyrynsalmi. General practitioners (GPs) are also not keen to work in rural areas, as often they have a wider scope of responsibilities and are required to balance primary care with specialist care.

To cope effectively with the need of geriatrics in the community efforts such as Medibiili ‘Doctor van’ has been introduced recently to provide remote services by bringing doctors directly to the centre of the municipality. When needed, the doctor also makes home visits especially important for elderly or mobility-impaired clients (www.medibiili.fi). Although this innovative solution is a step forward, it echoes the doubts of the people as centralized services try to hastily serve the sparsely populated town. ‘Maybe our services are not very good’ reflects of one of our interviewees, summing up the challenges of the multifaceted pressures of the aging rural population.

2.5.4. Infrastructure

Infrastructure and its quality are one of the most important aspects of every urban area and as well for Hyrynsalmi. While we are talking about infrastructure the first thing that comes to mind are roads, railways and in connection with other towns and cities, however in Hyrynsalmi’s case there’s also sustainable energy and digital infrastructure that needs to be mentioned.

2.5.4.1. Sustainable energy and digital infrastructure

Sustainable energy and digital infrastructure are already a huge part of Hyrynsalmi in result of their active sustainable energy and digital infrastructure developing. Predictably, sustainable energy infrastructure in Hyrynsalmi includes wind energy projects. We can distinguish two projects regarding wind energy projects:

- Lumivaara Wind Farm – it became fully functional in 2024, to add, this project consists of eight Nordex turbines with a total capacity of 45.6 megawatts. Produces around 157 gigawatt-hours of clean electricity annually which is enough to power around 29,000 homes (Neoen, 2022).
- Kivivaara-Peuravaara Wind Farm – is an onshore wind energy project that is in the municipalities of Hyrynsalmi and Suomussalmi. Commissioned in January 2017, the wind farm comprises 30 Nordex N131/3000 turbines, each with a capacity of 3 MW and mounted on 144-meter-high towers to optimize wind capture in the forested and hilly terrain (Ghorbani, 2024).

Another example of sustainable energy infrastructure in Hyrynsalmi is the Seitenoikea Hydropower Plant, which is located on the Emäjoki River in Ristijärvi, and was completed in 1961. This Plant has a capacity of 39 megawatts and plays a key role in the Oulujoki river system's hydroelectric network and in the effort supports Finland's National Fishway Strategy which aims to improve river biodiversity.

Speaking about digital infrastructure, there is little in Hyrynsalmi, although, there is an idea of building a mid-sized data centre. This centre in Hyrynsalmi could be used for housing computer systems as well as related components (servers, networking equipment, storage devices, it also acts as the central hub for processing, storing and managing applications and data). Building a data centre would not only help the municipality to attract more investors but also use up and invest the excess energy that wind turbine plants are producing. Just like everything has its own positive aspects, it also has negative ones too. Building a data centre would cause some main drawbacks such as:

- High energy consumption – keeping data centre requires quite a lot of electricity which could sometimes strain local power grids while also increasing greenhouse gas emissions.

- Water usage – majority of data centres uses water-based cooling systems which could potentially lead to utterly large water consumption.
- Leaving environmental footprint – building a data centre requires clearing up forests as well as rural areas that could be used for large facilities can damage ecosystems. Moreover, data centres releases heat which can affect local microclimates (unless they are managed).
- High maintenance cost – construction of data centre is also quite expensive as well as maintenance, cooling, software and upgrades.

2.5.4.1. Transport connectivity and digital divide

Transport connectivity plays a huge role in people's everyday lives, especially in Hyrynsalmi. Quality transport connections are important for a couple of reasons, like travelling every day (to work and school) as well as for tourists to reach Hyrynsalmi more easily. Since infrastructure connectivity is quite poor – even more people are becoming dependent on their cars and taxi's. If we would look up bus schedules, we would see that buses from Hyrynsalmi to Kajaani drives only 6 times per day with average of 2 hours intervals (first bus leaves at 7:55 AM and the last one at 20:50 PM) (Perille Mobility Services Oy, 2025). Talking about railway connectivity, there is none for people to travel within different cities; since 1991 the railway station is not being used (vaunut, 2025) for its original purpose which left residents in a need to rely on their own vehicles or on rarely passing buses. As for now, the train station is left being unused for its original purpose, however, railway is still being used, although not for passengers' usage but for transporting wood. Hyrynsalmi residents used to have better transport connections, although with depopulation increasing trains that would stop at Hyrynsalmi were discontinued, on top of that, the number of bus stops were reduced as well. Thus, infrastructure conditions with transport connectivity suffered as an outcome of the depopulation that is still happening, which also causes stopping the arrival of new people because of a poor transport connectivity – creating a continuous loop.

Digital divide can be understandable in a rural municipality such as Hyrynsalmi because of its low population density with extensive geography. Fixed broadband infrastructure reaches its full capacity in the most inhabitant populated areas, in this case – the centre of the municipality. Though, the further inhabitants are from the community of Hyrynsalmi the more fiber-optic

networks become limited in the remote areas (Kainuun litto, 2023). Of course, there is a possibility of choosing a better mobile fiber-optic operator, however, coverage can be inconsistent, especially indoors as well as in remote areas, due to factors such as distance from base stations and environmental obstructions. What is worth mentioning is that there is a “Finland’s Digital Infrastructure Strategy 2025” which is a national initiative to provide all households with at least 100 Mbps connections by 2025 (Ministry of Transport and Communications, 2018). This initiative emphasizes the expansion of high-speed networks in underserved rural areas which is important for places like Hyrynsalmi. Thus, creating expansion of high-speed networks, especially in rural and remote areas will help to reduce the still existing digital divide.

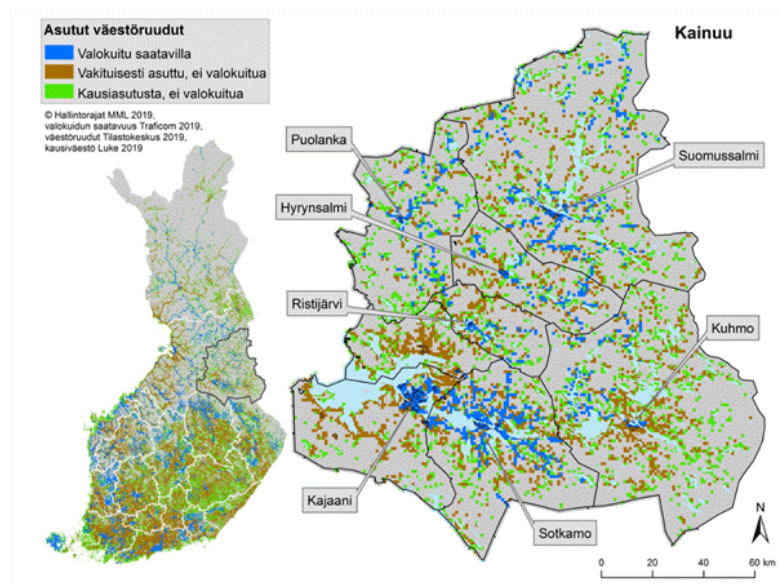


Figure 8: Inhabited population squares with Fiber optic availability (Traficom, 2019). Blue – has fiber; brown - permanently occupied, no fiber; green - seasonal accommodation, no fiber

2.5.5. Environmental Challenges

As mentioned in the previous sections Hyrynsalmi is known for its outstanding forests, clean waterways, and of course, rich biodiversity. However, like many rural areas in Finland as well as in northern parts of Europe, it faces growing environmental challenges that threaten its natural ecosystems and the potential of saving them. The main concern in Hyrynsalmi is intensive forestry which causes habitat fragmentation as well as water pollution from nearby industrial activities. Climate change also has a huge impact on snow covers and species distribution in

Hyrynsalmi. Addressing these issues is crucial in order to preserve the region's environmental integrity as well as to ensure a balanced coexistence between nature and human activity.

Forestry plays a major role in Hyrynsalmi's economy and in residents' lives. Forests dominate most of the landscape in Hyrynsalmi, although intensive logging and modern forestry practices have significantly altered ecological structure. Large-scale clear-cutting, removal of deadwood, and forest drainage have led to habitat fragmentation and degradation, particularly affecting species that rely on old-growth forests, such as certain birds, moss or fungi.



Figure 9: The railway behind the original Hyrynsalmi train station, now used for timber storage before transport. Source: Vosilytė, 2025

In today's context there are around 159 support activities for forestry companies (dnb, 2025) which show that the demand to profit from the Hyrynsalmi's forests is high. The outcome of this intense forestry industry is, of course, acute deforestation consisting of clear-cutting and mechanized harvesting methods that lead to cutting down old-growth stands, disfiguring forest fragmentation and removing the majority of deadwood (which is one of the main key elements for thriving biodiversity). These mentioned practices disrupt wildlife corridors as well as make conditions for more sensitive wood-inhabiting fungi, lichens and species harder to support their population. The Siberian flying squirrel (which habitat is located in the old growth forests around Mustarinda (Mustarinda.fi, 2025)), is one of the examples how intense forestry can affect the

wildlife population in Hyrynsalmi. For species like the Siberian flying squirrel, it is vitally important to live in old-growth, spruce-dominated forests which are used for creating tree holes that will be used for nesting (Mustarinda.fi, 2017). Further, nowadays increasing drainage of forested wetlands also enlarges timber productivity and even further degrading ecosystems. While sustainable forestry is being promoted, balancing economic interests with ecological preservation is quite hard to manage, especially in the region where forestry creates majority of workplaces and is “integrated into people’s nature,” as one interview respondent noted.

Hyrynsalmi being a sparsely populated rural area, it is not surprising that invasive species can be found in the municipality. Multiple invasive species are contributing to the decline of ecosystem resilience as well as can be considered as the long-term threat to natural environment of Hyrynsalmi’s biodiversity.

- *Lupinus polyphyllus* (Garden lupine): is common along roadsides and disturbed areas, this invasive plant outcompetes native meadow species, reducing floral diversity as well as altering pollinator network.
- *Solidago* spp. (Goldenrod): Though less widespread, species like Canadian goldenrod can colonize open spaces and suppress native vegetation through dense growth and allelopathic effects.
- Invasive forest pests: according to the ecologist who is based in Hyrynsalmi municipality, climate change has increased the risk of forest-damaging insects, such as the spruce bark beetle (*Ips typographus*), which may become more active in northern areas like Hyrynsalmi.

Ongoing monitoring and early intervention could potentially help to limit the spread of these invasive species and minimize the negative ecological impact that they are creating in Hyrynsalmi. It is important to mention that increasing deforestation and clean-cutting, traditional agricultural landscape decline in Hyrynsalmi also helps invasive species (especially *Lupinus* and *Solidago*) to spread even quicker. As mentioned, abandonment of small-scale traditional agriculture land use further leads towards overgrowth that usually consists of meadows and pastures, which causes loss of natural and semi-natural habitats. Thus, these landscapes that were changed with the help of rapidly increasing forestry industry can be considered as proof of how biodiversity and habitats that were once thriving with plant and insect diversity can with time become generic and lose most of its biodiversity.

Wind power development is not inseparable from Hyrynsalmi's landscape. While the renewable energy contributes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions – its implementation on the other hand has ecological impacts on Hyrynsalmi's landscape as well as nature. As mentioned before, habitat fragmentation and loss are also a result of the wind power plant contribution. Wind development usually requires clearing and clean-cutting land for turbines and infrastructure that need to be made, leading to drastic impacts on habitats and natural fragmentation. This fragmentation disrupts various species that are more sensitive to habitat changes which makes it difficult for them to survive in even a little anthropogenized areas. Rotating wind turbine blades pose collision risks as well as even the presence of turbines sometimes leads to animals staying away from the areas where they previously used to live, further impacting their migration patterns (Bennun and others, 2018). Even though Hyrynsalmi is facing numerous environmental challenges, the municipality is trying to find ways to approach increasing wind power plant farms and how to place them more sustainably so that there could be less of a negative impact on environment.

3. METHODOLOGY

To gather detailed data at the case study location, the research employed multiple methods, including an online survey, unstructured interviews with local residents and people who work in the municipality, as well as firsthand observations we made through staying in the area and interacting with the community there.

The most important research method was the online survey. The main objectives of the online survey was to get a perspective about how local residents of the municipality of Hyrynsalmi, as well as those who stay there only a few months a year or work there temporarily, perceive well-being in Hyrynsalmi. Additionally, we assessed what difficulties and problems people face in their daily life in the community, and what they would personally like to change in Hyrynsalmi to make it more conducive to a fulfilling life, choosing from our offered range of options (activities related to culture, education, recreation, community etc.). Respondents were also given the option to make their own personal suggestions. The only survey was made in Finnish using Microsoft Forms, it contained 12 questions (combined multiple choice and open-answer response options) that covered the general demographic information about the respondents and the main objective questions about well-being, challenges and problems etc. in Hyrynsalmi. The survey was posted in the local

Facebook page “Puskaradio Hyrynsalmi” and was also accessible by scanning a QR code on posters (19) around the village that advertised the survey.

The method of interviews was chosen because the study seeks to explore the diverse perspectives of people living in the study area. The interviews with residents of Hyrynsalmi were unstructured, which allowed conversations to develop naturally and gave participants the freedom to express themselves openly, but the primary topic of the interviews was based on the questions the online survey contained. Over the course of five days, interview data was gathered from participants with a range of backgrounds and viewpoints. Most of the interviewees were selected by chance meeting them on the street, in the local businesses, events etc., so around 20-25 informal interviews were conducted. It’s also important to consider how the interviews are conducted and the context in which they take place, as these factors can significantly influence what people feel comfortable discussing and which topics they are willing to address. Participants were asked for their consent before the interview, and any personal information shared during the conversation is kept confidential. They were also informed about how the information they provided would be used.

Our own observations of the study area were conducted mostly in the village of Hyrynsalmi from 14th to 18th of May 2025. The main aim of the observations was to get a firsthand perspective and understanding on Hyrynsalmi’s community’s daily life, social interactions, spatial dynamics. This method helps in the context of providing a more holistic and grounded view of how people live, interact and use their environment in Hyrynsalmi.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Survey Results

4.1.1. Demographic Questions

The survey was answered by 58 people, out of whom 40 were women, 17 were men, and 1 respondent preferred not to answer this question (see Figure 10). This sample accounts for nearly 3% of the registered population in Hyrynsalmi as of 2025 (Statistics Finland 2025a). A higher level of participation from women might be due to a higher concern for community and well-being related topics. Although survey results might be biased towards women’s perspectives on well-being in Hyrynsalmi, these results could be beneficial and bring valuable insights for this study’s

purpose. The number of women in Hyrynsalmi is significantly lower than that of men (Statistics Finland, 2024), and as we will develop further on, they generally struggle to find jobs they would like to do, or they are qualified to do. This poses a problem, as young men struggle to find spouses, and families struggle to form and thrive in this area, pushing natality rates further down, and increasing out-migration to urban areas (Aro & Siltanen, 2020). In 2024 there was 1070 men compared to 932 women in Hyrynsalmi (Statistics Finland 2024).

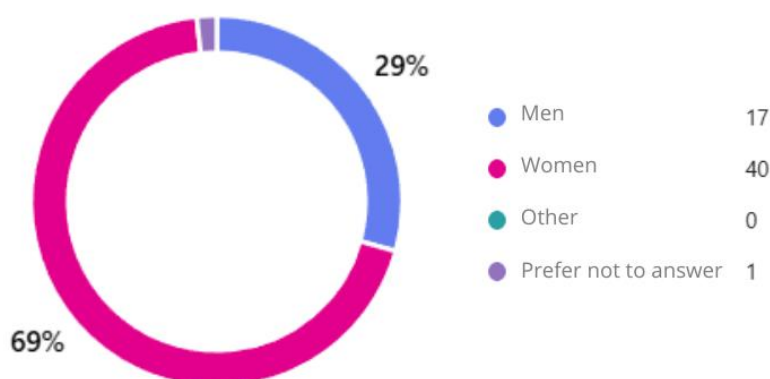


Figure 10: Survey respondents' gender

In terms of age, the biggest age category group among our respondents falls into the 56- to 66-year-old range, with 14 respondents. However, approximately, 62% of our respondents are 55 years old or younger (see Figure 11). The reason why our sample reflects a higher number of younger people compared to the town's demographic structure is partly because the survey was only accessible online, via Facebook or a QR Code. This might have been the main reason why older people did not participate in this survey. The participation of older people would have been desirable as the biggest age groups in Hyrynsalmi as of 2024 are 64-69 and 70-74 year-olds Overall, people over the age of 64 comprise nearly half of the population in Hyrynsalmi (Statistics Finland, 2024). This bias shifts the focus of the survey results towards meanings and perceptions of well-being in Hyrynsalmi for younger groups of people, but this higher focus on younger generations might be beneficial to provide recommendations that align with the goal of revitalizing Hyrynsalmi, and making it more attractive for young folks. Nevertheless, the results might not align with the perceptions and views of the majority.

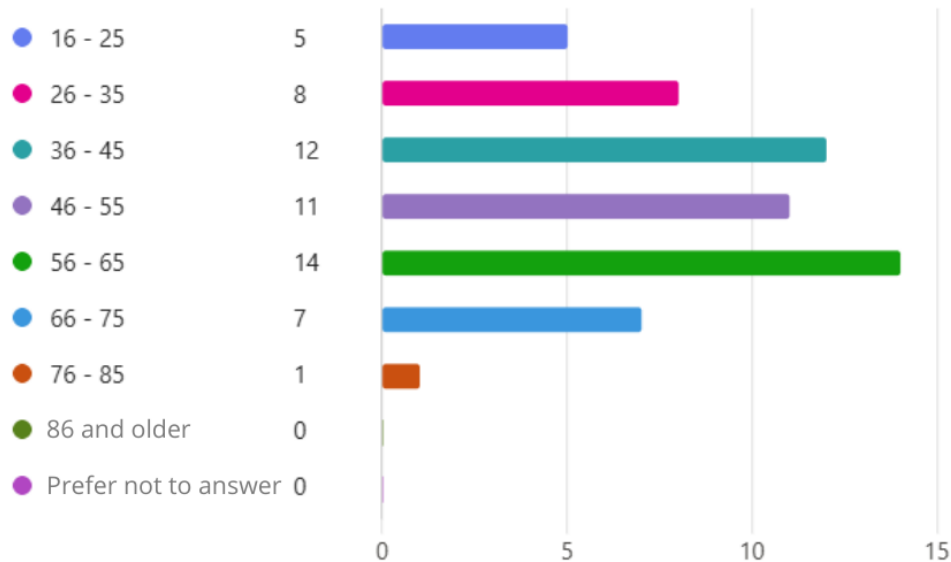


Figure 11: Survey respondents' age

Hyrynsalmi is the home municipality of 66% of our respondents. The rest mostly falls into the group who have second homes, or family in Hyrynsalmi, and account for 28% of our answers (see Figure 12). As mentioned in one of the previous sections, this shows the crucial importance of the “mobility component” in Hyrynsalmi’s population and shows an alignment with the Kainuu Regional Council’s focus into supporting multilocality and second-home population models.

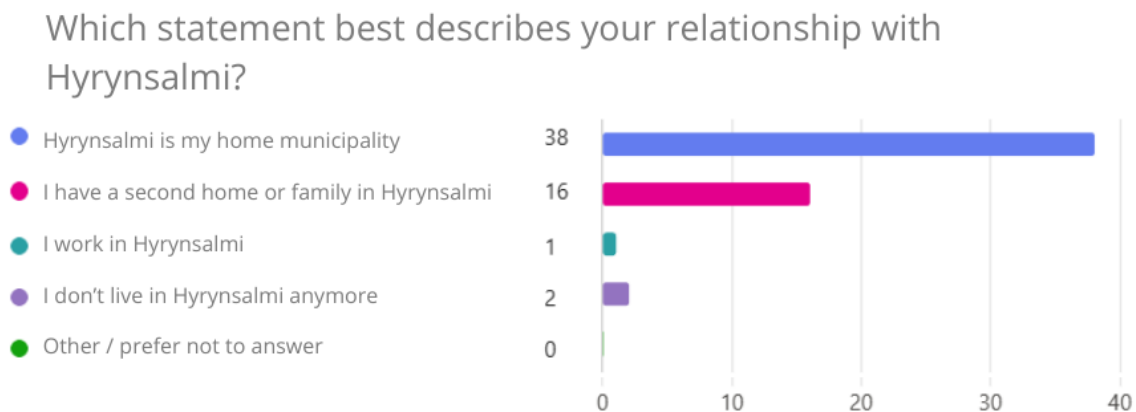


Figure 12: Survey respondents' relationship with Hyrynsalmi

4.1.2. Other Multiple-Choice Questions

It was assumed that there would be some degree of heterogeneity in terms of the relationship that people had with the town, and to better capture how people generally feel about Hyrynsalmi, we added a question where people could agree or disagree with the statement “I am a local in Hyrynsalmi”. Most people strongly agreed (43%), but interestingly, 21% and 12% disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively (see Figure 13). These differences in sense of belonging to the community might be tied to a strong feeling of helplessness by many newcomers, which we will discuss more depth later in the findings from the open-answer questions.

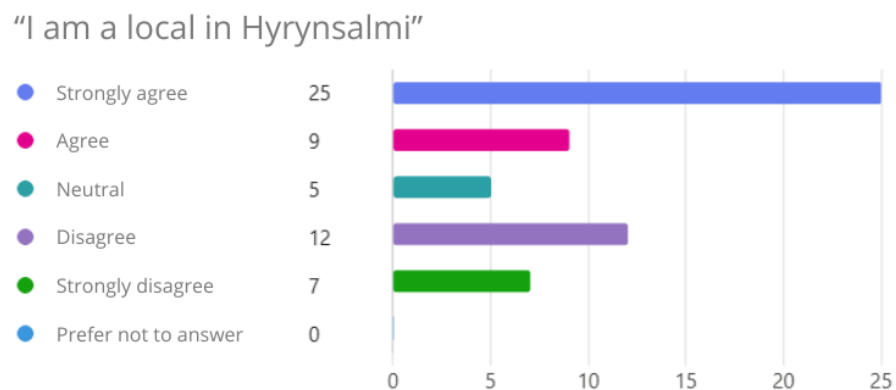


Figure 13: Survey respondents’ feelings of locality in Hyrynsalmi

We also decided to add a multiple-choice question, where respondents could choose as many options as they liked, where they could tell us about their main areas of interest, or what types of activities they are missing most in town (see Figure 14). The most popular option was “Food (e.g. bars, restaurants, cafés, local markets)”, which was voted by 59% of respondents, followed by “Sports (e.g. Competitions, practices, sport facilities)”, “Education (e.g. workshops, training, professional development opportunities)” and “Recreation (e.g. organised activities in nature, walking groups, clubs)” with 48%, 45% and 43% of votes, respectively.

What kind of activities, events, or organizations would you like to see more of in Hyrynsalmi?



Figure 14: Survey respondents' preferred activities

4.1.3. Cross-sectional Analysis

To better understand the differences in sense of belonging, we compared them across different demographic groups:

- Sense of belonging in terms of age
 - 100% of respondents under 26 and over 75 years old feel local (“strongly agree” or “agree”), where the vast majority “strongly agrees” with the statement “I am a local in Hyrynsalmi”.
 - In almost every other age category, answers are polarized.
 - The highest proportion of “strongly disagree” answers is found in the 26-35 age group (37% of respondents).
- Sense of belonging in terms of gender
 - Women seem to be more polarized than men (15% of women strongly disagree, while only 7% of men).
 - This might be a result from a smaller sample size for men (n=14).
- Sense of belonging in terms of their relationship with Hyrynsalmi
 - Respondents who have a second home or family in Hyrynsalmi do not necessarily feel like locals (50% “strongly agree” or “agree”, 50% “strongly disagree” or “disagree”).

- Most of the respondents living permanently in Hyrynsalmi feel like locals (43% “strongly agree” or “agree”), but a high portion of the local population “disagrees” or “strongly disagrees” (26%).

We were also interested in seeing which were the most interesting activity categories for respondents depending on their demographic niche, as well as their relationship with the town and sense of belonging.

- Activity preference in terms of age
 - Younger people seemed to have more "hunger" for things to do and generally chose more options than other groups. 100% of respondents 35 years old and younger voted for “sports”, while “education”, “recreation” and “food” seemed to be the next most important for this group.
 - “Food” was the most consistently important activity across age categories, but mostly for people between 36 to 55 years old (92% voted for it in the 36-45 age range, and 73% in the 46-55)
 - “Culture” gained importance for older age groups, while “education” received less votes.
- Activity preference in terms of gender
 - “Food” was the second-most voted activity for men (47%), and the most voted one for women (63%).
 - The most voted activity for men was “education” (59%)
 - “Sports” seemed quite important for both genders (48% and 47% for women and men, respectively)
 - “Recreation” especially important for women (48%), but men to a lesser extent (35%)
 - “Community” and “art” were generally more important for women than for men
- Activity preference in terms of the respondent’s relationship with Hyrynsalmi
 - “Food” was the most consistent interest across categories by far, followed by “sports”, “education” and “recreation”.
 - “Culture” was more important for people whose home is in Hyrynsalmi

- There was a higher emphasis on “recreational activities” (and “community” to a lesser extent) for people with second homes or family in Hyrynsalmi
- A big percentage of permanent residents in Hyrynsalmi answered "other", and not all of them specified their answer. This can be interpreted as a hunger for even more activities, or as a protest response, as some respondents seemed to be happy with the amount and quality of the activities already available in town.
- Activity preferences in terms of sense of belonging to Hyrynsalmi
 - “Food” was again the most consistent interest type across these respondent categories, followed by “sports”.
 - “Education” seemed to be more important for those who have a stronger sense of belonging.
 - Respondents who answered “neutral” and "agree" to the belonging statement are those most open to community activities.
 - Respondents with a weak sense of belonging ("disagree" and "strongly disagree") seemed to be more interested in “community activities” than respondents with a strong sense of belonging (“strongly agree”).

4.1.4. Qualitative Analysis

The first open-answer question asked about the meaning of well-being for people in Hyrynsalmi. Answers to this question included a sense of positivity, as if well-being was already achieved, but many respondents’ answers sounded more like aspirations. Some remained hopeful, while others were quite negative about the idea of well-being in Hyrynsalmi, and used this question to complain about, for instance, a bad ambience within the community (especially for people who moved in from elsewhere), lack of services, or wind development. From our interpretation of the answers, the general feeling about well-being in Hyrynsalmi can be grasped in the figure below (see Figure 15).

Feelings about well-being in Hyrynsalmi

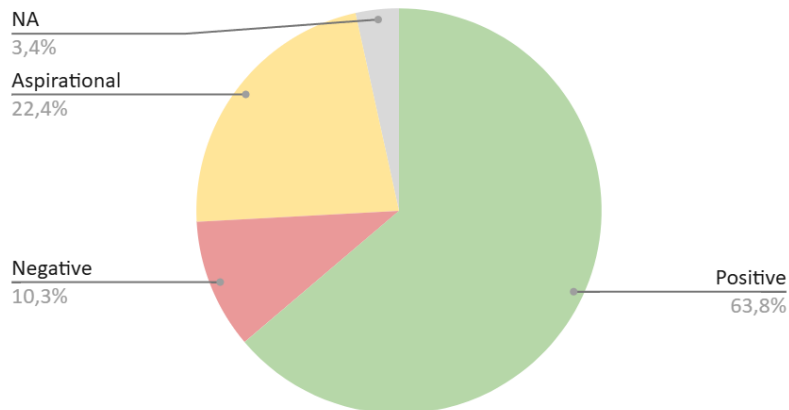


Figure 15: General feelings about well-being in Hyrynsalmi, retrieved from question 5 (“When you think about well-being in Hyrynsalmi, what comes to your mind?”)

The majority of the respondents referred to nature and outdoor activities as their first thought in regard to well-being (see Figure 16), and these respondents are most of those who have been represented as feeling positive about well-being in Hyrynsalmi. In our understanding, some patches of the forest around Hyrynsalmi are still well preserved, and people from the municipality still have quality spaces to enjoy nature, so all the answers who had the word “nature” in it have been classified as “positive”, unless specified otherwise.

When you think about "well-being" in Hyrynsalmi, what comes to your mind?

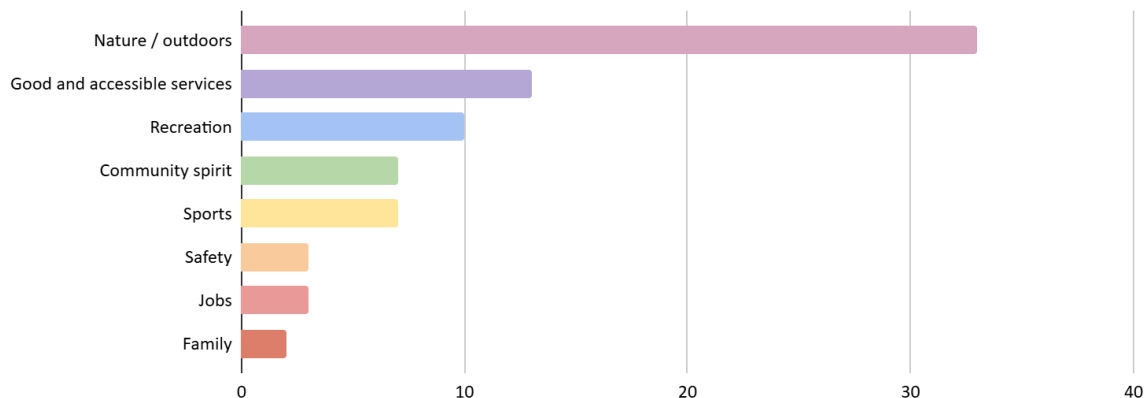


Figure 16: General topics from the answers to question 5 in the survey

The next question asked about the biggest challenges of living in Hyrynsalmi. Most of the respondents referred to a lack of services available, due to their disappearance from the town, and

the need to travel long distances by car to access them (see Figure 17). The bad quality of roads was insisted upon, and poor winter service in peripheral areas of the municipality was also mentioned as another limitation towards basic service accessibility.

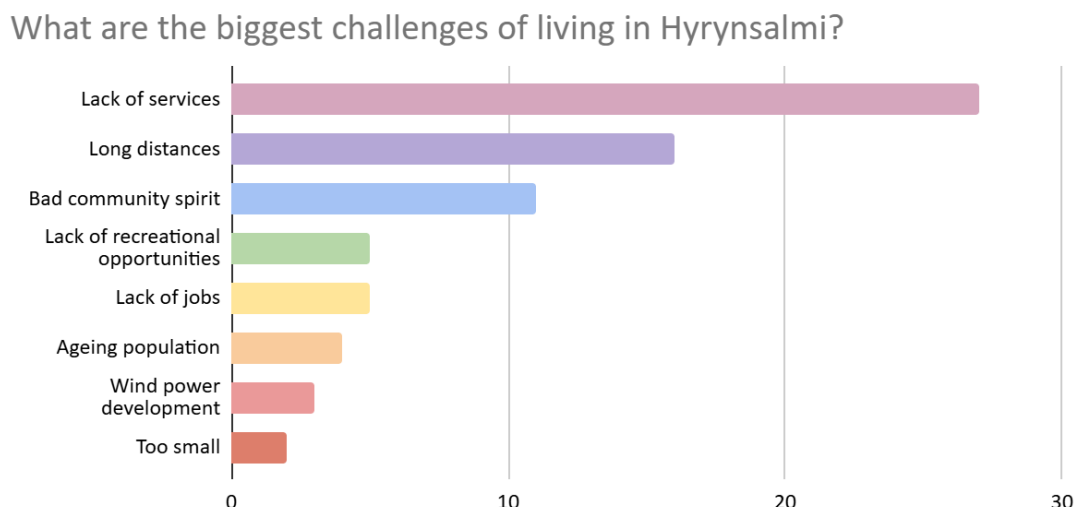


Figure 17: General topics from the answers to question 6

For the respondents who specified which services they felt they were lacking access to, or which ones would need improvement, health was the most mentioned one. Access to shops or commercial services was the second most popular type of missing service mentioned by survey respondents, followed by banking (see Figure 18).

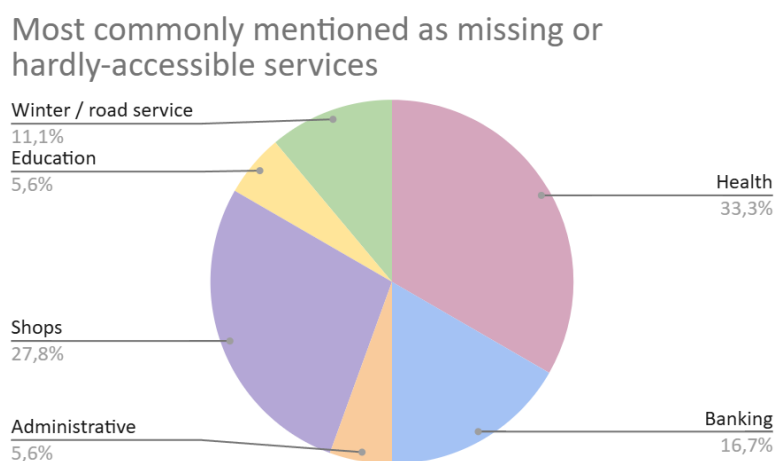


Figure 18: Specification of the answers referring to a lack of services

The next question asked about what the respondent would change to make life more fulfilling in Hyrynsalmi. The most popular topic we encountered is, in general terms, and as one of the respondent's put it, a "face-lifting" of the town (see Figure 19). We decided to include different things in this category, such as everything that had to do with the renewal, demolition, reuse or cleaning of abandoned or unused buildings, as well as the feeling of longing for a revitalised "village street" or "kylänraitti" in Finish, or a need for a "streetscape renovation".

The next most popular topic in the answers to this question was the longing for a more caring and open community, both to new people and to change. Overall, people had more negative things to say about the community atmosphere in Hyrynsalmi than positive. Some respondents talk about experiencing helplessness and sensing negative judgement from other members of the community, especially if you are not born or did not go to school in Hyrynsalmi, and even after living in Hyrynsalmi for decades. Some even consider this to be a limitation to the municipality's development, as outsiders do not always feel welcome in the community, and people sometimes seem to struggle to cooperate and/or accept change. However, our (short) experience as outsiders has been completely different, and a few respondents talk about Hyrynsalmi as a very welcoming town. Moreover, overall negativity towards the community atmosphere seemed to decrease as new answers came in, and the reason could be that the most "passionate" people on this topic answered the survey right away, while more "moderate" people did not rush into it as much. It is true that, nevertheless, this might have something to do with people's sense of belonging to Hyrynsalmi, especially those who live there permanently.

What would you change to make life in Hyrynsalmi more fulfilling?

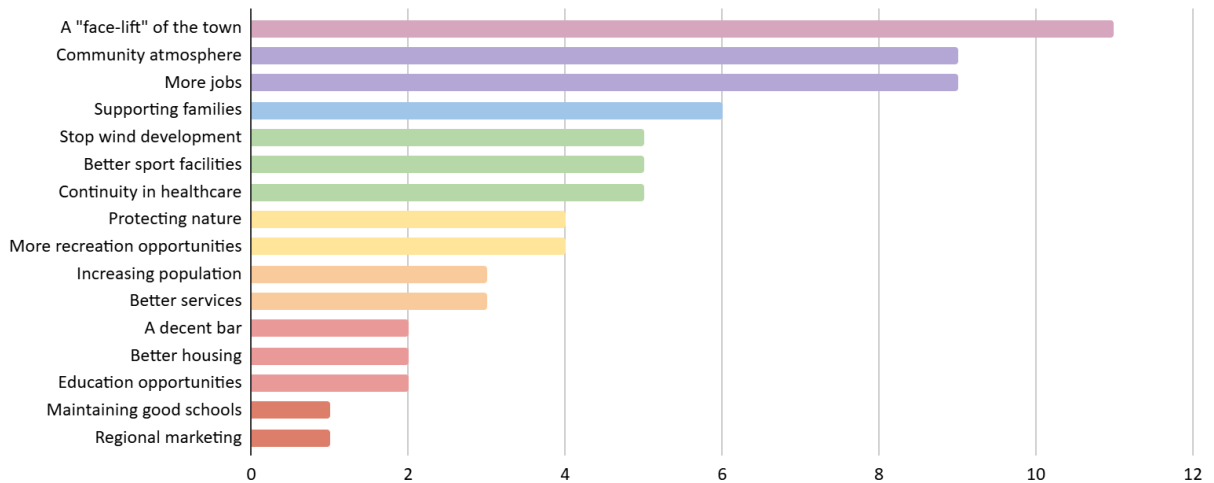


Figure 19: General topics in the answers to question 7

The need for more jobs to keep people in the community, as well as to attract new people was discussed just as much as the community atmosphere as something that needs to change. Some people even pointed out that they would move to Hyrynsalmi if there were more jobs, specifically people with second homes or family there. More jobs, especially diversifying job offer (away from forestry) and allowing for digitalization would be a key component of supporting families in Hyrynsalmi. This is considered critical to bring higher natality rates, reverse the ageing population trend, and revitalize the town.

4.1.5. Key Take-Aways from the survey

The most popular topics throughout the survey were “nature” and “peace”. Together, they were mentioned at least once by 34 respondents (59% of our sample) at some point in their answers. The next most common topic was the bad community atmosphere, with 30 mentions in total, but only by 18 respondents (31% of our sample). Following topics were the need for diversified and/or more jobs, as well as entrepreneurship support (19 respondents, 33% of our sample), and the long distances and poor quality of the roads and/or road service, especially in the winter (also 33% of our sample).

On the same note, people generally felt like it is hard for families to stay or move to Hyrynsalmi, and further steps should be taken to reverse this trend (16% of respondents). Besides

the lack of professional opportunities for both parents (especially women), another reason for this was limited quality housing options. Despite the great number of empty buildings in Hyrynsalmi, and competitive housing prices, many of the buildings are in too bad condition to host anyone without needing major renovations first. For this reason, and for general aesthetics of the town, many respondents mentioned houses should be demolished, rebuilt, renewed, repurposed, and new houses should also be built altogether to attract new people (17% of respondents).

Opinions and perceptions on services' availability and accessibility were mostly negative or pessimistic, although there were some interesting nuances. In terms of healthcare, most were concerned about the discontinuity of the local Health Center, but some respondents mentioned a "good basic healthcare service", also for long-term illnesses, although opinions were more mixed, and older people mentioned poor and generally inaccessible healthcare services. But in terms of good public service provision, people emphasized on the school and its great teaching quality and environment, as well as the quality of the food offered: "School food is better, for many it's the only real meal of the day". Another respondent pointed out that "the children's school affairs were handled quickly through an electronic service" in Hyrynsalmi and that they "went back to the Stone Age" when they moved away to an urban area. The only negative things people had to say about education in Hyrynsalmi was the discontinuity of previously available services, like the upper high school, or a community college.

In terms of Hyrynsalmi's development, people seemed to feel powerless and unable to participate in decision-making. 12% of respondents complained about a lack of consultation and poor participatory processes from municipal and regional governments. Wind energy development was mentioned by 12% of the respondents (different ones), and all of them had a negative opinion about it for the impact it has in nature and the landscape, as well as the noise it produces. Alternative development options that were brought up by the respondents, apart from general entrepreneurship support, was a focus on eco-tourism and regional marketing to leverage Hyrynsalmi's natural wealth and landscapes, paired with a focus on nature protection and restoration (10% of respondents).

Finally, regarding the quality and available activities in Hyrynsalmi, people pointed out the sports and recreational activities as the best/most available ones, and some mentioned Ukkohalla as a vitality hub for recreation, young people and tourism. However, most respondents thought these were still too few, or in the case of sports, advocated for new or better facilities. For recreation activities, some respondents proposed building new hiking or biking trails and making the beach

more beautiful and comfortable. In the case of sports, people advocated for better or new sport facilities, a pool, and more possibilities to practice team sports. Surprisingly, the lack of bars and restaurants was barely mentioned in the open answers, with only 4 respondents asking for “a decent bar” in spite of it being the most popular option chosen in multiple-choice question 8 (What kind of activities, companies and/or organizations would you like to see more of in Hyrynsalmi?).

4.2. Interviews

“There is no place like home. What is home? It is the old homestead, the old neighbourhood, hometown, or motherland. Geographers study places. Planners would like to evoke “a sense of place” (Tuan, 1977, p. 3). To us, researchers travelling from across Nordic and Baltic countries, these questions meant touching the bygone era of a remote town; though, that soon changed when we began hearing stories of how friendship saved the old Railway station of Hyrynsalmi, how lichen emerged from collaboration between fungus—which can’t make its own food, and an algae or bacteria which can—and how teachers are awaiting new students to travel from across Asia to join their pupils.

Places are centres where people foster bonds, raise families, reflect on their experiences and understand the world around them. People are complex beings (Tuan, 1977). Our interviews with the people of Hyrynsalmi were an account of different modes of experience: project managers with their urgent need to act for just causes, artist drawing inspiration from the forest life, citizen charmed by the sudden interest in their ‘well-being’ and drivers in cars with a faint question on their face upon seeing a group of odd guests in their town. Experience thus implies the ability to learn from what one has undergone (Tuan, 1977, p. 9). Our interviews were therefore a collection of people’s experiences, their stories and significant insights unfolding the extraordinary sensitivity to a wide range of comprehensions, sometimes bitter making them distinct and adding character to remember them by. Sometimes the built environment creates illusions, therefore recognising the voices of reflective minds enables us an image more vivid bearing the weight of reality.

4.3. Observations

On the first day of our visit to Hyrynsalmi we reached the Municipality office and noticed the daily routine of the officials. The building reflects the workers functionalist building design,

strategically located at the circular junction of the town's main street. Settlement is mainly concentrated near the municipal centre and eastern parts around the water bodies. The rhythms observed and experienced are with a slow tempo. Predictably, the paces build at peak times, mostly during lunchtime and early evening when people seek being outside, both for purpose and recreation.

The landscape is characterized by rural features: forested pathways, scenic lakes and built environment interwoven with the natural elements. On the contrary, the discussions within the board rooms revolve around on how to compete to leverage the maximum benefits of wind power and tourism potential of the town. The mood of the conversations is bent more towards exploring the attractiveness of the place by means of different choices varying from community spirit to original creativity to sustainable development. Maybe the sustainable envelope is pushed more in conversations but is not visible on the town's streets and highways marked by bumpy potholes worn out by the pressures of heavily loaded trucks of pine and spruce.

Walking provided us with an understanding of the general life of residents. The town's beauty lies in its uniqueness, in its oft-slow way of life, preserved by the attempts of the artistic community and neighbourhood craft workshops. When our conversations prodded more into the reflections of life in Hyrynsalmi in the future, few are more vocal in voicing their apprehensions about how 'Town life is changing rapidly'. Some are aware of the surplus earned by the Municipality and acknowledged that 'Now they were ready to breathe', almost feeling the sigh of relief that the town is just not yet shrinking economically. There is an air of compromise as the possibility of combining resources with other municipalities is getting more real and principles of capitalist urban governance is most definitely prodding in their backyard. These changes were brought for as part of the reform movement, redefining the centuries old way of living to make the town survive and maybe even shine under the green transition model.

The town's peaceful rhythm would not have been possible without the approach of wind farm and logging, but what needs to be studied deeper is the question of maintaining optimisation between people and planning. From an outsider's perspective the implementation of policy has preceded the planning, somehow leaving behind the interest of all the people.; there is a need for a participatory planning process that authentically and meaningfully engages all members of the community. The need to collaborate echoed in the words spoken by one of the residents that, 'there are still some friends in the community'.

4. RECCOMENDATIONS

Considering the results of our research, this section of the report will now present a recommended direction that the Municipality of Hyrynsalmi—along with other key local stakeholders, decisionmakers, and community influencers—could consider regarding future sustainable community development. While we acknowledge the following vision may be aspirational or overly ambitious, we are of the opinion that such visions are crucial to further building and strengthening an infrastructure of wellbeing in the town. The following are our own ideas, though they are entirely informed by the research process conducted in the community. Further, given the broad and sweeping nature of the following recommendations, while they could all be pursued, even if only one or two ideas—or the conceptual notion generally—were applied, we are confident that a community sense of wellbeing would grow.

4.1. Main Street Revitalisation

From a starting point of increasing wellbeing in Hyrynsalmi, we propose a bottom-up main street revitalisation project (see Figure 20). At the core of the project, we envision the municipal government developing a new community granting program, specifically regarding main street revitalisation projects. This project would ease the burden of community revitalisation from the Municipality, decentralising the process by distributing community building power to individuals. The central aspect of the program would be grants, ranging in available size though generally falling within a small-mid level range (e.g. €1,000 – €25,000, depending on project scope). These grants would be open to projects that utilise unused, empty, and/or dilapidated spaces along Hyryntie, the main corridor of Hyrynsalmi. Presently, this is already the primary commercial area for the community, though numerous spaces, both buildings and lots, are currently unused. Projects eligible for the grant should be wide-ranging, though grant applications that include food and recreation, community, education, and/or sport should be prioritised. Additionally, projects cannot impede on the natural environment of Hyrynsalmi; further priority should be given to projects that include an ecological, nature-based aspect. These prioritisations would align with what survey respondents identified they would most like to see more of in Hyrynsalmi



Figure 20: Current commercial land use of Hyrynsalmi's main street

In addition to the primary grant, we envision an additional subsidy that, if awarded, would provide funds for individuals to purchase or build a home in Hyrynsalmi, permitting they intend to reside in the municipality. It is our hope that the grant would be utilised by existing residents of Hyrynsalmi, though by offering a housing subsidy the program could help attract newcomers to the community, incentivising them to make the municipality their home (as opposed to attracting people who own second homes in the community). Aligning with a smart shrinkage approach, growing the community would not be a primary aim of the project, though it may be an unintended positive outcome. Rather, the project will be intentionally focusing on providing residents with opportunities and support to pursue their own sense of agency in developing a community centred around wellbeing (see Figure 21).

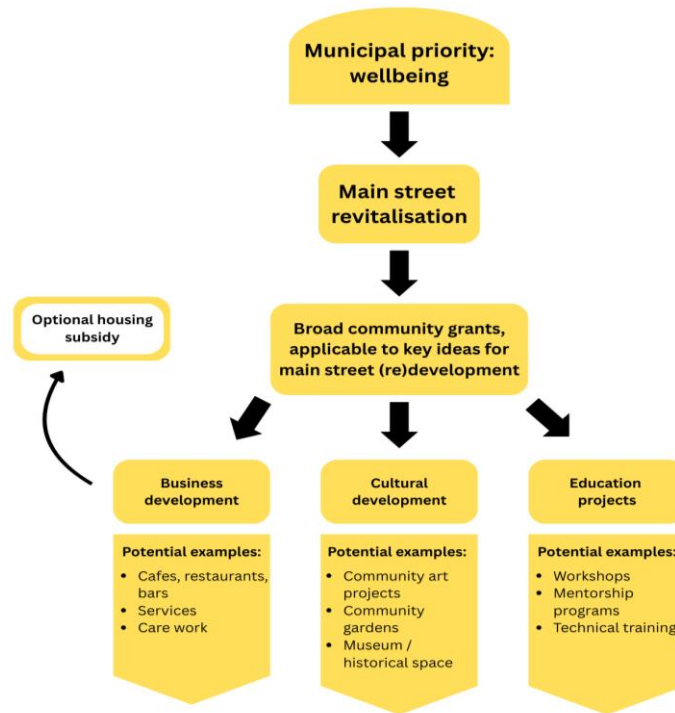


Figure 21: A depiction of the recommended main street revitalisation grant program

Throughout our research respondents consistently shared that a ‘face-lift’ is central to their sense of wellbeing in Hyrynsalmi. Responses on this topic varied with respondents mentioning a wide range of ideas including demolishing or readapting unused buildings, decorating/beautifying main street, and, indeed, redeveloping new businesses in currently empty spaces. With that said, the broad category of investing in beautifying and/or practical changes to the main street was the most frequently mentioned topic when asking what would make life more fulfilling in Hyrynsalmi. This is part of a larger trend as well. Regardless of the specific answer, a desire for revitalisation was clear. People want more life in the community; those who specified what type of services they were missing the most, 27% of respondents answered *Shops* (second only to *Health* at 33.3%). As one respondent concisely states, “[We need] more small businesses and life in the village streets.”

Another key theme of the survey is job creation. Though the community does not necessarily view a lack of jobs as one of the most pressing challenges facing Hyrynsalmi, respondents did list it as the third highest response when discussing what would make life in the community more fulfilling (*Figure 22*). Although our main street revitalisation recommendation would not directly create immediate jobs, over time we would expect it to bring some additional employment opportunities to the community. This is a variable that could not be known, though it

would be possible to ask about this through the grant application process, allowing the municipality to prioritise it as desired.

By a wide margin, the most common theme across all data collected, both through interviews and the survey, was nature and the environment. As stated above, in the survey alone 59% of respondents mentioned “nature” at least once. Nature is truly a core aspect of Hyrynsalmi’s collective identity. As such, we would be remiss not to consider the topic within the context of this recommendation. Envisioned in our plan, the primary way we see the element of nature is through an intense focus on environmental protection. Through the granting process, priority should be given to applications that:

1. Are pursuing an environmentally related cause (e.g. sustainable nature-related tourism, workshops that integrate traditional forest knowledge / activities, etc);
2. And/or demonstrate their business will not harm the local environment, if not support further environmental protection.

We understand these may be lofty goals, though given the centrality of the natural environment to the Hyrynsalmi community, we believe these requirements, if well-communicated, would resonate with potential grant applicants, at least on a local scale.

The budget for this project would not be insignificant for the municipality and while it may be an ambitious vision, we recommend funds be diverted from the increasingly profitable wind turbines throughout the municipality. Through the interview process, we learned there is a significant surplus of wind energy being created by the 33 wind turbines already in operation. Additionally, the municipality has plans to develop numerous more; investing in wind power development is arguably the central focus of the municipal government. Considering that, we believe there should be ample funds that could be diverted to a project of this nature. Through our research, we also learned that wind development is a central issue in Hyrynsalmi, with one interview respondent noting “they just pop up and there’s nothing you can do.” Other respondents discussed how there is a perception that if one is against wind turbines and other high-tech projects, they are against regional development as a whole—the implication being these are the only genuine paths forward for Hyrynsalmi. Yet, regardless of what one thinks of wind turbines, the reality is that the existing 33 are already operating and presumably, they will not be ceasing operation anytime soon. As such, they should be a stable source of capital for the municipality; if there were a dedicated annual amount of this capital devoted to funding the community grant project, immense benefits could occur throughout the foreseeable future.

4.2. Conceptual Overview: A Community Living Room

The tension that we see between the world of wind farms and the natural environment is evident and needs to be carefully orchestrated through this period of ‘alueellinen keskittyminen’. The visit to the community town of Hyrynsalmi, initially felt a bit distant and remote, now seems more like an opportunity to interpret between societies. Our visit allowed us to explore and pay closer attention to the community elders and youth, their resilience and genuine feeling of goodwill and togetherness. It is an attempt to give an equal standing to the culturally defined groups and the normative assumptions underlying existing structures and institutions (Healey, 1999). A smart village main street, managed by numerous village associations, emphasizing the community ownership, celebrating the historical footprints and arranging large- scale gatherings. We call this vision of a renewed main street the *Village Living Room*.

Living a peaceful life and celebrating the nature around them was a valuable lesson learnt, our “living room of the village” aims to be an extension of collective lived experience. It seeks to offer a wide range of services and activities including a meeting space for residents and local associations. This shared general space can be a place to gather and arrange celebrations with the members of the community both old and new. As we walked around the town looking for a place to understand cultural protocols and social values, the reflections came to us in bits and pieces through conversations and small acts of kindness of the community. Although our visit to the local gas station seems to be the only ‘go to place’ to unwind and browse through the social activities, there

The town’s library tucked behind the municipal office, transformed the village for a moment into a crucial place to develop a connection with the community which is open to global synergies. As researchers to the village of Hyrynsalmi we envisioned a space to navigate us to the legendary stories of Hallan Ukko, tales of war heroes and the artistic- history of the heritage town, away from the tourist circuit of the Kainuu region. A storyline narrating the community sense of place through co-creation and participation, designed to engage local folks in the inevitable changing landscape is what we aim to achieve through the ‘living room’. It is important to ensure that the municipality corridors are not the only space for hearing the stories of citizen’s aspirations and coherent narrative. One of the most difficult is to design and facilitate planning processes that can accommodate cultural differences, for this requires planners to extend their thinking into other epistemological worlds- like walking in another’s shoes (Umemoto K. 2005). Working with

communities in ‘left behind places’ needs a growing sensitivity towards ‘culture and cultural difference’ (Umemoto K. 2005).

The visioning of the town’s living room addressing several areas including health, culture, art, family life, economics and above all resilience of the ‘people of hunger land’.

4.3. "Keeping In Touch with Nature"

Nature is the key reason why most Hyrynsalmi’s residents chose this place to spend the rest of their lives. When asked “What do you like the most about Hyrynsalmi?” from all 50 respondents even 33 answered that it is, in fact, nature. We can come to the fact that for Hyrynsalmi’s residents’ nature plays a huge role in their wellbeing, for instance one of the Hyrynsalmian said: ‘This is my home, not the property, not the house but this forest – it healed me’, further a respondent from the survey that was held described Hyrynsalmi has ‘...the healing power of nature is the area's greatest strength’. Hearing these words and understanding how much importance nature and the forest in Hyrynsalmi holds – the following question came ‘how we could keep it that way or even improve it?’. It is important to mention that nature in Hyrynsalmi is also cared for by the temporary residents that used to live in Mustarinda house, which is located next to the Paljakka Nature Reserve, in Hyrynsalmi municipality. Couple of the previous residents that were participating in Mustarinda Nordic Baltic 2021 project recalls this place as ‘our beloved land’ although while having such nice memories and experiences they express their concerns regarding forests and says ‘there is a lack of a ban on clear-cutting forests, there are frequent stories of disappointment when a forest was clear-cut around a person's house, so there is a lack of nature conservation from the side of industrial wood’. From the answers like these – you can easily understand that the nature holds a special place in the Hyrynsalmians hearts.

One of the ways that could be done to preserve nature (including the whole landscape) is to create more protected areas that wouldn’t be touched by a man’s hand. As speak for now – Vaara-Kainuu Art National Park preparatory project (2024-2026) is happening. This project’s idea is to create world's first art national park to Hyrynsalmi and Puolanka municipalities that would initiate the idea of art as power that unites natural and cultural values, sustainable tourism as well as community (Mustarinda, 2025). Creating this park would not only help to preserve nature and its natural habitats, biodiversity with protection from clear-cutting but also to bring more

awareness towards the importance of it (e.g. how nature can be a medium that brings a sense of fulfillment to a person). As covered before – Mustarinda and its residency has its own connection with the nature that it is surrounded by. From visiting Mustarinda and learning that only handful of applicants gets the chance to be in this place and soak up inspiration from this place's surroundings – only shows that Hyrynsalmi's nature is one of a kind. Thus, building similar residency near Mustarinda or even expanding it could create like an art 'hotspot' that would give a chance for more artists to experience Hyrynsalmi's unique aura.

Since Hyrynsalmi is known for its active tourism – module of a passive tourism could be potentially introduced. As one of the respondents from the 'Hyrynsalmi well-being survey' said: 'Nature is our trump card, and it must be maintained and developed in terms of tourism'. This shows that even Hyrynsalmi inhabitants understand the value and the perspective of this area's nature's potential. Introducing something as similar like forest bathing (it is a method of being calm and quiet amongst the trees, observing nature around you whilst breathing deeply which can de-stress and boost health, wellbeing in a natural way (forestryengland, 2025) to the Hyrynsalmi could potentially attract people who cannot have access to Helsinki, Turku and other bigger cities where forest bathing is taking place. Introducing more passive branches of tourism is what Hyrynsalmi could benefit from as it would expand the field of tourism and recreation in nature.

As Hyrynsalmi and its nature are two inseparable things – it is imperative that it should be used in a way that does not harm any of nature's components. It is useful to remember that industry can still be operating without clean-cutting forests and tourism with recreation does not necessarily need to be active. Thus, finding a harmony, especially in places like Hyrynsalmi – is crucial to keep up and potentially improve balance within' a human and nature.

CONCLUSION

Our objective in this study was to learn more about what local people in Hyrynsalmi feel about their wellbeing. During our four-day stay in the municipality, we found out plenty about the views of residents in both the survey and the unstructured interviews in the field. Wellbeing was mostly perceived in positive way in the survey. We noticed that the most common answer in many instances among residents was nature. Wellbeing was understood through nature by majority of respondents in the survey, and more than half of the answers mentioned nature in some way. The beautiful nature of Hyrynsalmi was also experienced by us. This municipality offers a wide range

of opportunities for recreation with access to protected areas and nature trails. Additionally, accessibility to services, and a revitalization of the town were important aspects of the thought of wellbeing among survey respondents. Food, education and sports were among the most desired activities for local people according to our survey.

Our survey included a question about the most challenging parts about living in Hyrynsalmi. Results highlighted three main challenges which were lack of services, long distances (mainly to services), and a bad community spirit. Healthcare, shopping, and bank services were the most desired services among respondents. Bad atmosphere within the local community was noted by us in several responses. Especially people who had not been born in Hyrynsalmi felt that their reception at arrival had been unwelcoming. It is important to increase community wellbeing through creating trust among members of the community and enhancing cooperation to sustain development, especially if wanting to attract people from other areas to move to Hyrynsalmi.

In terms of aspirations of the people from Hyrynsalmi, and what would make life more fulfilling for them, the vast majority referred to a “face-lift” of the town in different ways. All answers including revitalization of the “village street”, demolishing old buildings, renewing, reusing or cleaning them, as well as building new houses altogether. Entrepreneurship support was also seen as an important target of improvement for the respondents, given the poor employment situation, lack of shops, and a general positive attitude to a development model focused on eco-tourism and nature protection.

During our visit in Hyrynsalmi, we managed to spend a lot of time near the main street *Hyryntie* and in the vicinity of the municipal centre. We noticed that commercial buildings of the center mostly lined up along the main street. Based on these observations we decided to suggest a recommendation of main street revitalization project. The population of Hyrynsalmi is mostly centralized in the locality of Hyrynsalmi village, *Hyrynsalmen kirkonkylä*. Makkonen and Inkinen (2023) proposed an idea of empty buildings in rural regions to be reused for other purposes. As a conclusion, we envisioned a reformed municipal centre that could bring local residents together by the means of a viable main street, *kylänraitti*, and a “living room of the village”. This could be achieved by allocating part of the municipality’s surplus to providing financial support for entrepreneurs who have projects which would contribute to (1) the revitalization of the “village street”, (2) more food and restauration options for locals, (3) building a stronger community, and (4) protecting nature.

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