

NORDPLUS PROJECT

Sustainable transition strategies and development for depopulating and peripheral localities in the European North.

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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR A SHRINKING MUNICIPALITY: THE CASE OF PALTAMO

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1. Introduction

This research was conducted as a part of the NORDPLUS 2025 programme organized by GeoNordBalt network to support collaboration between Nordic and Baltic universities. The intensive course took place from 9th to 23rd of May 2025 in Eastern Finland, bringing together participants from Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden to focus on sustainable transition strategies and development for depopulating and peripheral localities in the European North.

Many Northern localities experience depopulation and shrinkage, and this often leads to negative views about both the areas and the residents (Albrecht et al., 2023). These issues are part of wider regional inequalities and show that we need to rethink regional development, not just focusing on growth, but on other ways to support communities. Planning in shrinking areas isn't about giving up – it is about making thoughtful decisions. The concept of smart shrinkage helps guide this kind of planning by adapting to demographic decline in ways that support sustainability and well-being (Syssner, 2020).

This study focuses on the municipality of Paltamo, a small locality in Eastern Finland that, like many rural areas, is experiencing demographic decline. In our research we explore how sustainability, smart shrinkage and quality of life can be developed in such a context, building on local experiences and perceptions.

Our aim is **to create a vision of sustainability and smart shrinkage in Paltamo based on the opportunities and challenges present to promote a better quality of life**. The questions that we seek to address build upon one another and follow this aim:

1. How do people feel about living in Paltamo?
2. What can be done to improve the quality of life in Paltamo?
3. How is (or could) sustainability be applied to Paltamo's smart shrinking/development strategy?

Please note that all research and writing for this report had to be completed within a seven-day span. We recognize that certain aspects of the community were likely missed but hope that the findings of this study are still insightful.

2. Study area: Paltamo municipality

Paltamo is one of eight municipalities in the Kainuu region located in Eastern Finland along the Russian border. The Kainuu region has approximately 70,000 inhabitants and spans an area of 22,687 km² (Kainuun Liitto, 2024). The municipality of Paltamo is situated in the western part of Kainuu (Fig. 1), covering an area of 1,139.74 km², of which 220.94 km² is freshwater bodies (Maanmittauslaitos, 2025). Two of the most prominent lakes in Paltamo include Kivesjärvi Lake in the north and Oulujärvi Lake in the south-southwest. Most of the municipality is covered by the coniferous forests.

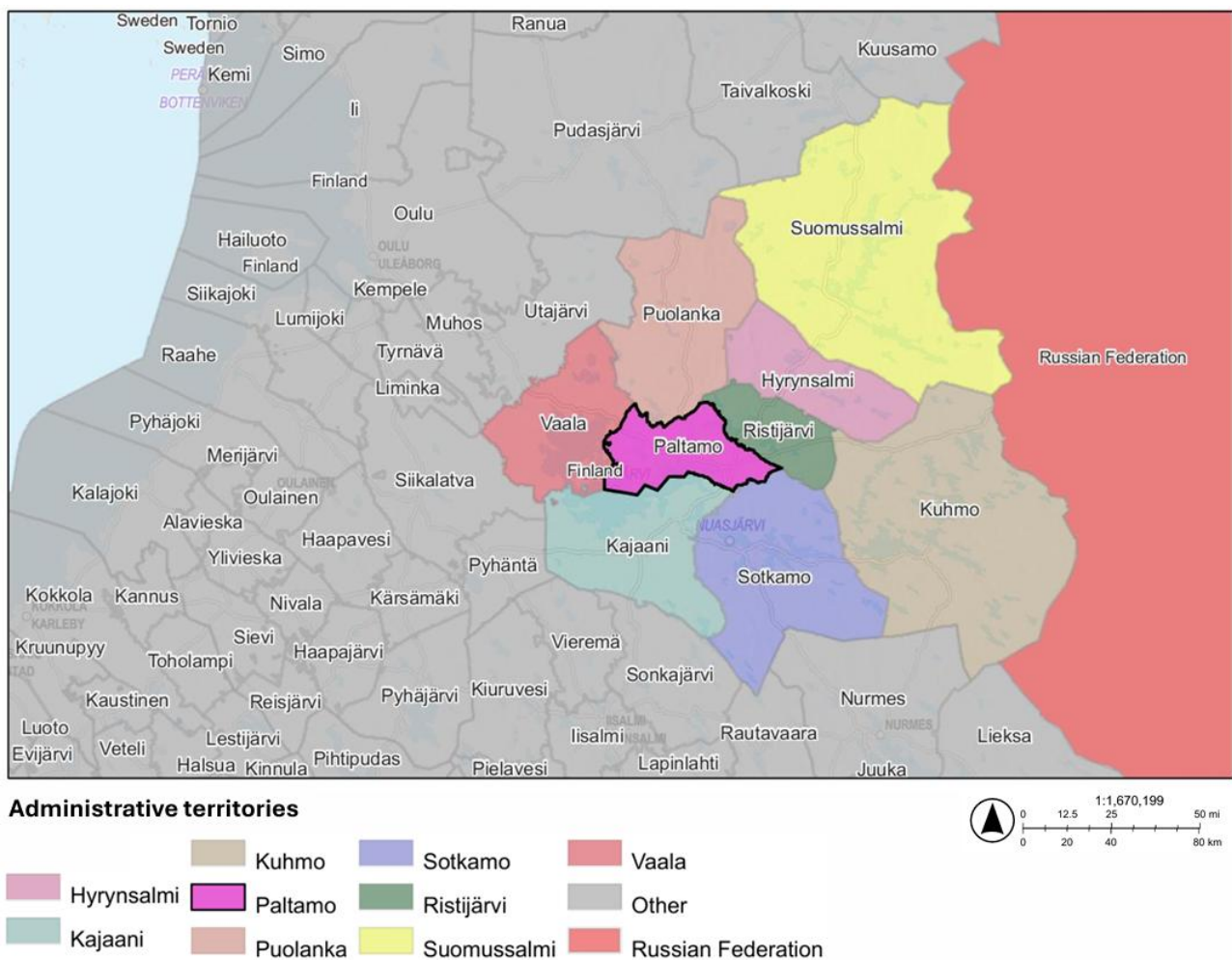


Fig. 1. Administrative division of Kainuu region (created by authors using Kuntarajat layer in ArcGIS Online)

Paltamo is located at the prominent crossroads – national roads 5 and 6 (from Helsinki to Sodankylä) run through Kainuu south-north, and national roads 22 (from Oulu to Kajaani) and 28 (from Kajaani to Kokkola) run east-west (Fig. 2).

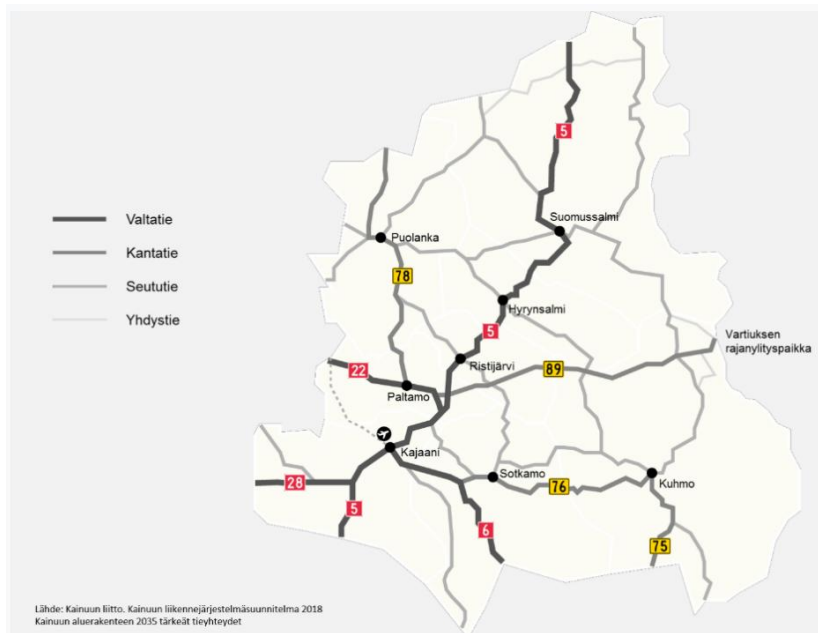


Fig. 2. Road network in Kainuu (Source: Municipality of Paltamo, 2025)

(Valtatie – highway; kantatie – main road; seututie – regional road; yhdystie - gateway)

The railway network (Fig. 3) runs through Paltamo and there are two train stations. The public bus passes through Paltamo twice in the morning and twice in the evening.



Fig. 3. Railway network, (Source: Municipality of Paltamo, 2025)

Kainuu's centre, Kajaani, is located approx. 40 km south from Paltamo. The closest airport is in Kajaani where there are daily flights from Kajaani to Helsinki. Distances and travel times to surrounding cities are listed in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Neighbourhood towns with distance and travel time (Data: Municipality of Paltamo, 2025)

Municipality	Distance	Travel time
Kajaani	38 km	32 min
Sotkamo	53 km	45 min
Puolanka	61 km	45 min
Suomussalmi	93 km	70 min
Oulu	146 km	110 min
Kuopio	207 km	150 min
Kuusamo	230 km	260 min

The municipality of Paltamo has 2990 inhabitants (Statistics Finland, 2025). For the last several decades, Paltamo has been experiencing population shrinkage – for example, from 2003 to 2024, the population has shrunk from 4220 to 2990 (-29% decline) and is constantly ageing. Further statistics illustrate the point:

- According to 2025 data, children aged 0-14 years make up 11.3% of the total population, while individuals of working age (15-64 years) account for 51.3% (Fig. 4).
- The retired population comprises 37.4% of all residents.
- The unemployment rate in the municipality is 10% (Kainuu's is 12.2%) (Kainuun Liitto, 2024).
- The workforce is consequently affected, for instance, from 1987 to 2023, labour force has declined from 1933 to 1054 people (Statistics Finland, 2023).
- 544 people commute to other municipalities while 510 work in the municipality (Statistics Finland, 2025). There are 210 companies and approximately 840 job positions.

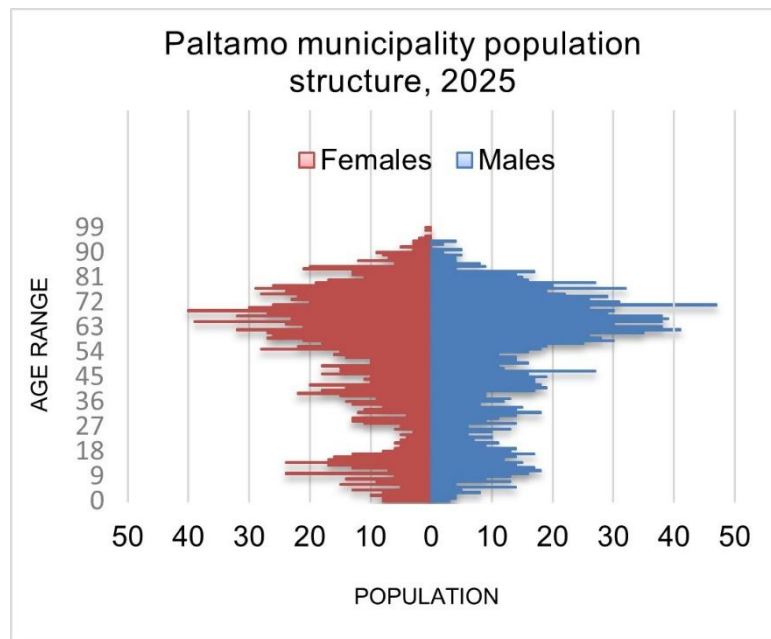


Fig. 4. Population pyramid (Source: Statistics Finland, 2025)

The main industries are bioeconomy (including forest sector, energy production, tourism), mining, technology, and the municipality is a major employer (Table 1). This context suggests that the employment situation is relatively stable and is shown by the fact that Paltamo, like the overall Kainuu region, does not have a large community of foreign immigrants. Only 1.7% of the population is considered to have a foreign background (Statistics Finland, 2025); however, this figure does not account for seasonal foreign workers or students from Kainuun Opisto Oy (the Adult Education Centre). Most foreign residents were born in Ukraine or Asia (including the Middle East). While the current economic context is relatively good, to mitigate negative effects of population decline such as reduced services and the potential merging of Paltamo with other municipalities, it is important to seek new investments that can contribute to economic diversification and the labour market.

Table 2. The main employers in Paltamo municipality

Employer	Field of activity
Paltamo municipality	Administration, education, culture
Kainuu wellbeing services county	Social, healthcare and rescue services
VR-Yhtymä Oyj	Rail transport
Pyykkönen Yhtiöt Oy	Engineering and construction
Eurojopi Oy	Home maintenance services
Kainuun Opisto Oy	Adult education
Kainuun Sora Oy	Engineering and construction
Kiehimä yhtiöt oy	Social services
Pal-Metalli Oy	Metal components

The population of Paltamo increases during the summer months as tourists or second-home owners arrive (multi-locality), and the municipality comes alive with a variety of events, some of which are organized by the local government. For example, Norssi Carnival takes place at Eino Leino Park in May. This event marks the beginning of summer for Paltamo residents.

The sport opportunities that are open to residents in Paltamo are depicted in the map below (Fig. 5) which shows where sports facilities are located (marked with dots on map). The municipality offers different activities including fitness stairs, golf, disc golf, geocaching, fishing, a dog park, gym, sports halls and fields, playgrounds, canoeing, campfire sites, cycling, and orienteering. There are 6 beaches on the lake and around 2000 cottages. In winter there are opportunities to use ski and snowmobile trails.

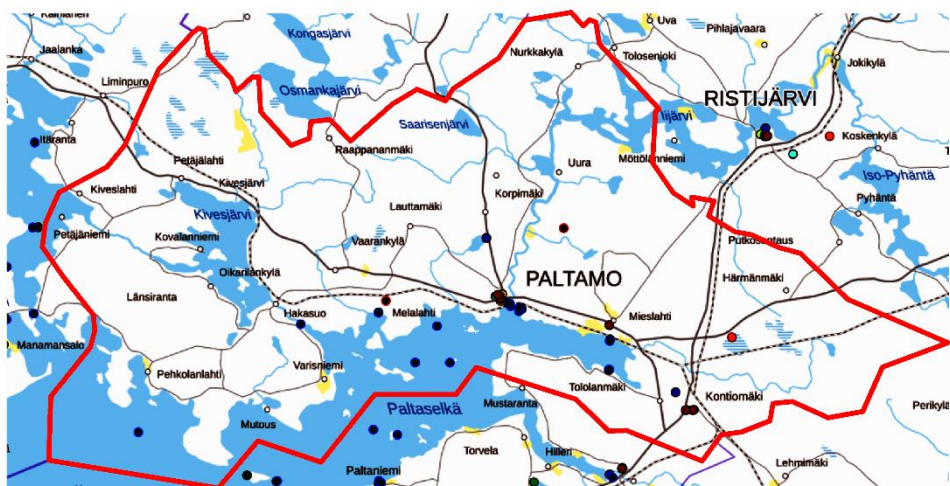


Fig. 5. Sports facilities map (Source: Municipality of Paltamo, 2025)

The municipality of Paltamo has media presence on its webpage, phone application and social media accounts that include Facebook and Instagram. With this, the municipality can target different groups and provide information about Paltamo and advertise events. The web page offers general knowledge about Paltamo as a municipality, with information on its services and leisure opportunities, of which are targeted more to people outside of Paltamo. The other platforms are more local and focused on the community. Communication from the municipality is predominately in Finnish, aside from certain web pages that are translated to English, but they are not yet as cohesive as the original web pages.

Paltamo has occasional visibility in Finnish national media. The largest news group in Finland (Yle) has mostly written articles regarding Paltamo's nature and services over the past several years (e.g. Heikkonen, 2024; Rönty, 2025). The image of Paltamo created by this coverage largely corresponds to the strengths that the municipality itself has highlighted. However, the emphasis is different as the municipality emphasizes the potential of the future while news articles reflect the challenges of the present.

Paltamo municipality has also adopted a strategic development plan for the years 2022-2030, which outlines the long-term goals and priorities for the municipality. This document is guided by four core values: resident-oriented decision making, courage to embrace opportunities and innovation, responsibility toward future generations through sustainable development, and strong community spirit. By 2030, Paltamo envisions itself as an attractive and safe place to live, and a pioneer in the bioeconomy, circular economy, and sharing economy. Strategic focus areas include ensuring high-quality municipal services, fostering economic vitality, and developing a modern, forward looking local administration.

Sustainability is integrated into the strategy with actions targeting energy efficiency, renewable energy use, sustainable construction, recycling, environmentally responsible procurement, and the protection of natural resources such as forests and groundwater (Paltamon kunta S.a.).

3. Terminology

Sustainability – this concept is understood by several definitions, but it generally pertains to the balance of economic, societal, and environmental factors. In our instance, we use the following definition:

“A dynamic equilibrium in the process of interaction between a population and the carrying capacity of its environment such that the population develops to express its full potential without producing irreversible adverse effects on the carrying capacity of the environment upon which it depends” (Ben-Eli, 2018).

This definition places emphasis on how crucial the environment is, not only as an aspect of sustainability, but as the foundation for both the economic and societal parts to flourish in unison (Dawe & Ryan, 2003). In our context of rural, depopulating localities, we are interested in how these attributes of sustainability balance alongside the idea of smart shrinkage (that is, how to preserve the sustainable integrity of a community despite depopulation) which also includes maintaining a high quality of life for residents (Makkonen & Inkinen, 2023).

Smart shrinkage – an umbrella term for planning policies aimed at adapting to depopulation (Makkonen & Inkinen, 2023). This concept emerged within planning literature in the early 2000s based on the belief that shrinking regions need planning alternatives that do not rely on growth, but rather on ensuring the well-being of the current population (Hollander, 2011). Most of the literature on smart shrinkage discusses it in relation to urban areas yet the solutions for urban areas do not match rural ones (Makkonen & Inkinen, 2023). For address the negative consequences of depopulation in rural areas the importance of social well-being, active community participation, inter-municipal/regional cooperation, and environmental sustainability have been noted (Cedergren et al., 2025), echoing a holistic approach to sustainability. In our study, we comply with this definition of smart shrinkage and view it as framework for sustainable development in Paltamo municipality.

Quality of life – has several definitions spanning two different lines of thought: one is concerned with how good a person feels in their life, while the other is referred to as ‘health related quality of life’ in specific medical conditions/contexts (Fallowfield, 2009; Chmielewska, 2022). For our purpose, the focus is on the prior (although these two niches are somewhat inseparable) as we wish to know how people feel about their local

circumstances. This applies to a person's feelings of satisfaction, security, or fulfilment that they have for how they respond to challenges, their relationships, recreational opportunities, work, education, etc. (Chmielewska, 2022). There are numerous schemes to determine a definitive *quality of life* measure (Lorente et al., 2020), but for this study, we use the term to denote a general sense of life satisfaction that people have with where they live.

Depopulated rural area - the most common definition is that of a place experiencing chronic population decline (Jonhson et al., 2019), or numerically speaking, when population loss is greater than the population gain. However, there are many ways to view the concept of depopulation depending on the focus of the research. At times we address remote rural areas or fragile communities, where alternatively the scope can be more towards sub-populated regions or geographical isolation (Viñas, 2019). This phenomenon of depopulation is related to urbanisation, and is visible by metrics of population change, natural increase, and net migration (Jonhson et al., 2019). What happens in depopulating areas is linked to a negative migration balance (where more people who out-migrate compared to people who in-migrate), and to the negative natural loss (more people who die compared to people who are born) in an area (Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska, 2019). Problems, especially economic, due to the centralization of the economy in cities, the limited availability of non-agricultural jobs (forestry, and farming), and high unemployment, were driving factors of emptying the countryside (Živanović, 2022). One effect interconnected to depopulation is the outflow process from rural areas to urbanized centres (Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska, 2019). This outmigration usually happens when people are in their study and/or working age, causing, by leaving, a faster aging population. For our research, we refer to this definition to describe the situation of the study locality.

4. Data and methods

Here we go deeper into the data gathered during the field work and the methods/approaches we used to investigate. To get as comprehensive picture of the quality of life in Paltamo as possible we decided to approach data collection using several methods. The importance of using a diversity of methods is highlighted by the fact that quality of life is concerned with subjective observations, which is why material collected from only one source using one method would not reflect reality. Our approach includes both qualitative and quantitative data.

Our data is divided into primary data and secondary data. Primary data includes a survey, interviews and observations; where the secondary data includes insights into Paltamo's general characteristics, geography, demography and economy from public organizations.

4.1. Interviews

As we wanted to focus on the views and experiences of locals, we reached out to them for interviews. Interviews offer a flexible environment that enables dialogue between the interviewee and interviewer (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). In support of our focus, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a pre-planned interview frame (see appendix 3), but we encouraged the interviewees to have open discussions depending on their areas of experience or interests.

We conducted 16 interviews which were a mixture of 'official' interviews and more informal meetings/encounters. Most of the interviews were conducted in the central area of Paltamo, but four were done in near villages within the municipality. Most of our interviews were spontaneous encounters in streets and stores of Paltamo. Three of the interviews were organized by one of the people we interviewed. Interviewee age and genders were estimated. Different age groups are represented, but most interviewees were over 45 years old, and more women were interviewed than men. The interviews were conducted on 14.5.2025-17.5.2025. Notes were taken from the interviews based on what we saw as relevant to our research. In practice, we separated into two groups of three, so that interviews would not be overwhelming to the interviewees. Some of the interviews were conducted in English and others in Finnish that were then translated to English.

4.2. Survey

Surveys are an efficient method for gaining insight into a population. Not only can surveys capture how attitudes vary across demographic groups (such as gender or age), but they can also generalize findings across a wider population (Dillman et al., 2014). In the context of this study, our survey was valuable as it provides a broad understanding of opinions regarding Paltamo's inhabitants than individual interviews could offer.

The aim of the survey was to explore the satisfaction felt by Paltamo's residents on various social, environmental and economic aspects of their everyday lives. The survey was created using the Microsoft Forms platform and shared via a private Facebook group dedicated to the Paltamo community. It was provided in both English and Finnish.

The survey consists of two parts. The first part focuses on collecting basic demographic information from respondents, including their age group and gender. The second part consisted of Likert-scale questions assessing satisfaction with aspects of daily life, using the scale: not satisfied – satisfied – very satisfied. The exact structure is shown in table 3.

Table 3. The structure of our survey based on question style and topic

Basic demographic information
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Age group• Gender
Likert-scale questions on satisfaction with daily life
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public transport• Community activities• Education opportunities• Leisure and education opportunities• Public infrastructure• Services and shops• Job market• Parks, Greenspaces, Trails• Forested land• Waterbodies
Open-ended question to allow for comments

The survey was open from 15 May to 21 May 2025 and received 45 responses. The demographic profile of the respondents (Fig. 6) is diverse. The survey included participants

from all age groups – young adults, middle-aged individuals, and seniors. However, the gender distribution is uneven, with women making up the majority.

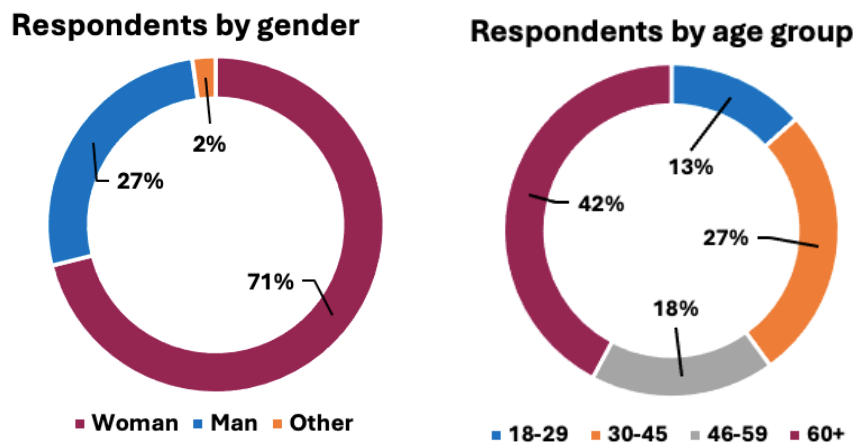


Fig. 6. Demographic characteristics of respondents

It is important to note that surveys are only reliable when the number of respondents is sufficiently large to allow for generalization to the entire population. Since Paltamo has significantly more residents than were represented in this survey, the results cannot provide a precise and comprehensive overview but does offer an insight into general trends.

4.3. Observations

Observation is one of the most basic methods used in social sciences (INTRA, 2017; Kumar et al., 2023). It involves watching a phenomenon and recording it, whether with a picture, video, records, or sketches. This methodology is usually connected to other data collection methods and can provide extra information to explain the results. As Paltamo was unfamiliar to us, it was important that we got more familiar with it.

Based on our informal observations, we made field visits around town, meeting and attending events for four days (Cisielka et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2023). We tried to adapt to the context, minimizing our impact on the events. We considered three different dimensions of space, objects, and social interactions:

Space - How is the town organised (the position of infrastructures like roads, green areas, and public buildings, etc)? Is there a zoning design, if yes, have these areas a purpose (tourism and/or sports area, industrial area, etc)?

Objects – What can we see that is tangible? How these physical objects are used (signs, panels, machineries, etc)? Are these things private or public? What is the appearance of these objects?

Social Interactions – Where do we see people, and where do they gather? What do people do? How do they behave?

Our observation process lasted four days, from when we first arrived to Paltamo to when we left. We took pictures to capture what we thought could have been relevant for our data collection and for future reference.

4.4. Content analysis

Content analysis is a way to analyze qualitative material as it is used to create an illustration of the phenomenon and its meanings. Although it is often criticized for incompleteness (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), we carefully interpreted the data and produced concrete conclusions and proposals. We processed our interviews and the survey's open-ended questions with this method. The purpose of the content analysis was to create an image of which themes were mentioned, in which context, and how they were mentioned (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

For interviews, the analysis was completed by putting all interview data (that is, our personal notes) into one document, and examining the data to identify themes of conversation. The themes were then attached to words as codes to allow for further interpretation. In the survey, the open-ended question was approached in the same way.

4.4.1. Inductive Coding

The inductive coding method was utilized in the qualitative data analysis process (Bihu, 2024). The inductive qualitative coding (IQC) does not include any predetermined set of codes, as they are developed while analysing and reviewing the data (Bihu, 2024). Seeing as the amount of data gathered was manageable, we analysed it manually without the help of coding software. Our results were split into two parts according to survey coding and interviews coding. We created tables that identify:

- Participants' answers and/or bullet points;
- Codes;
- Current themes.

After having translated the Finnish answers to English with the help of *Google Translate* software, we insert the text for analysis. We conducted an intense reading of the different texts (14 answers from the open question in the survey, and 16 answers from the interviews) and highlighted important/prominent words. From this, we identified keywords and themes via group discussion.

4.5. Cartographic method

Mapping is a valuable method for representing spatial information, as it allows for the visualization of complex relationships between geographical features and supports clearer interpretation and communication of data (Mihalache & Mihăilescu, 2014). In this study, maps were used to provide spatial context by visualizing the administrative boundaries of Paltamo, its infrastructure elements, and its position within the broader Kainuu region.

Maps were created using the ArcGIS Online platform, utilizing the available basemap and styling options, as well as layers from the Living Atlas containing administrative territories and boundaries.

5. Research ethics

All data gathered during the research process will be kept private and not disseminated for any other purpose. Furthermore, to protect the identified of those interviewed, all personal data will be anonymized.

Informed consent protocol

All participants were informed on the purpose of the research and could ask further questions. During the compilation of the survey, the participants consented to the collection and processing of their data for research purposes. People were free to fill out the survey or not, without any obligation. During the meetings and the interviews, we always brought a printed informed consent protocol in Finnish that could have shown upon request. Our research did not include any registration, recording, or participants' pictures to guarantee their privacy and our commitment to transparency.

Dissemination of project findings

This research protocol and findings are available on the GeoNordBalt website in PDF format to be downloaded. The final report will be sent to Paltamo municipality and interested individuals therein.

Research's carbon footprint

Considering the size of the municipality, we had to drive to our destinations and meeting points. Emissions are mostly associated with this fieldwork travel to and from our accommodation. Printing and high-performance computing use were minimized to further reduce the environmental impact of the research. Future studies could include online or collective meetings to avoid unnecessary travel.

AI declaration and team planning

We self-declare that we did not use Artificial Intelligence to generate text or to conduct research. The workload was fairly divided between group members and everyone contributed equally.

6. Results and analysis

As Paltamo is a large municipality it accommodates a variety of different neighbourhoods with varying circumstances. Consequently, views on the quality of life and perceptions about the present and future vary depending on who you ask. Next, we are going to go through results from survey and interviews. Then we identify three different thematic categories of opinion. With these, we considered our observations that we collected while in Paltamo.

After reviewing the responses collected through the survey (Fig. 7), a general outlook was obtained on how Paltamo residents perceive their quality of life. While the level of satisfaction varies across categories, certain trends are observed. Respondents expressed higher satisfaction with environmental elements – such as forested land, water bodies, and green spaces – reflecting a very strong appreciation for the local nature. In contrast, categories related to infrastructure and services – particularly the job market and public transport - received more critical responses, highlighting potential areas for improvement. These findings indicate a moderate to high level of satisfaction in several aspects of everyday life, particularly those related to nature and recreation, while some socioeconomic aspects are perceived more negatively.

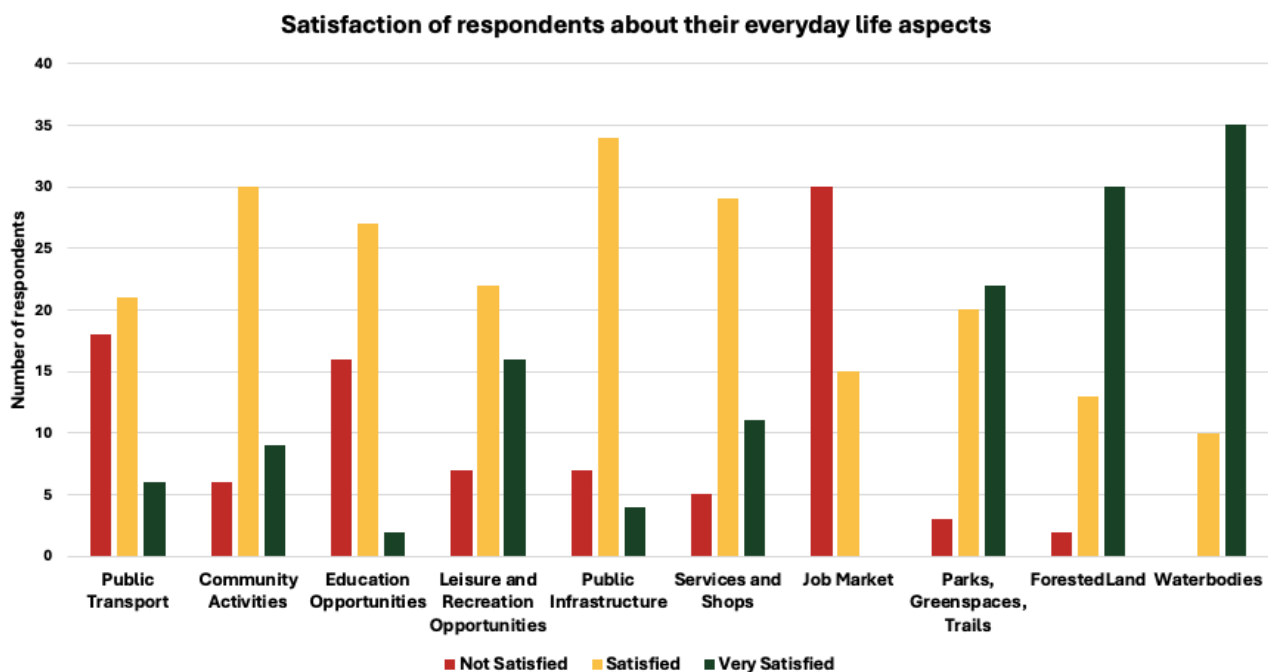


Fig. 7. Respondent satisfaction with aspects of everyday life in Paltamo

By analysing the results obtained from the 16 interviews and 45 survey answers, our inductive coding method helped to identify key topics (Table 4) that were to be discussed. Each theme was included different perspectives and received both positive and negative evaluations in our research.

Table 4. Key topics occurred in surveys and interviews

MAIN THEMES SURVEY	MAIN THEMES INTERVIEWS
Opportunities and services	Migration and mobility
Employment and economy	Sense of community
Nature and outdoor activities	Rural livelihood
Infrastructure and public spaces	Sustainability
Local governance	Education and learning
Development concerns	Public infrastructure and services
	Entrepreneurship and economic life
	Belonging and identity
	Nature appreciation
	Active lifestyle
	Human-pet bond

One of the most frequently mentioned aspects was migration and mobility. People moving to and from Paltamo was a recurring topic. Many participants highlighted the emigration of young people to larger cities for job opportunities or education. Immigration is happening too, particularly among those who are seeking peaceful family life and quiet surroundings. Several immigrants from other countries noted positive integration and acceptance into local community.

The topic of community was discussed mostly on the positive side. While many interviewees appreciated community cohesion, friendliness, and how ‘everyone knows each other,’ few interviewees mentioned any weakening of social ties or a lack of community-building events.

Several participants reflected on the realities of rural life in Paltamo. This includes an appreciation for calmness but also challenges such as a lack of jobs and seasonal changes of population and events. Rural life was described as calm in winter and more alive in the summer.

Interviewees understood sustainability in different ways. Many of them spoke about eco-friendly practices in their daily life. For example, walking or cycling instead of driving

car, recycling waste, gardening, and sharing resources. Sustainability was well understood to be about finding a compromise between economic growth and environment protection.

Education appeared to be the main way to integrate immigrants in Paltamo's community. However, the young generation is keen to emigrate to larger cities for education or jobs.

The availability and decline of public services were a recurring theme in interviews. Interviewees highlighted the importance of public services. Some stated that they are satisfied, while others desire more public services and recreation opportunities aside from nature.

Small businesses play a significant role in rural economies. Local entrepreneurs discussed the challenges of running small business in Paltamo due to seasonality and rising popularity of e-markets. Online commerce and social media were seen as possible tools to survive.

The feeling of belonging is closely connected with the personal history of interviewees. Some residents talked about how strongly they identified with the area, but others pointed out a loss of connection among young people.

Every participant mentioned nature as a primary value of living in Paltamo. In the interviewee's opinion, nature was the primary thing that attracts people. Nature and infrastructure allowed accessible physical activity even in winter. Human-pet bond appeared in few interviews, often linked to active lifestyle.

Concerns on development occurred in many interviews and survey answers. Several participants pointed out an alleged lack of long-term vision and strategy to counter depopulation. Others pointed out necessity of investments in green energy.

6.1. 'It's happening everywhere'. Harsh reality in Paltamo

The realities of depopulation were evident in Paltamo. The entire municipality is relatively quiet as is surrounded by forests and very few buildings along the road. The center of town is the only urban concentration there is. It is compact and reasonably quiet in traffic. When observing the central area, one cannot help but run into old dormant buildings among those still in use. Currently, there are two grocery stores, an elementary school, secondary

school, high school, library, museum, train station, health care center and sports hall. Outside of central Paltamo, there is a train station and elementary school in Kontiomäki.

Some of the answers in the survey support settling or surrendering to the realities of the current moment. When asked about public transportation, a slight majority, 46.7 %, answered that they are satisfied; though, 40 % answered that they are not satisfied. Some respondents supported their answer by explaining the lack of public transportation and the consequential requirement of owning a car. This sentiment combined with interviews where the necessity of owning a car was mentioned, especially in rural areas, makes the point that you either adjust to Paltamo or move away.

Many people do choose to move away with several respondents mentioning the lack of educational opportunities in the area. 35.6 % of survey respondents think that the available options are not enough, but 60 % are satisfied with them. Those views are further explained in the interviews where there is talk of young people having to move away because of limited studying opportunities. In this way, Paltamo seems to serve people who do not need/want higher education, meaning that those who work in the trades and elderly people tend to remain.

Paltamo appears to be a challenging place for working-aged people to live. The survey shows a clear majority (66.7%) are not satisfied with job opportunities in Paltamo. The remaining respondents (33.3%) think the local job market is at a satisfactory level, but no one found the situation to be ideal. The same challenge is mentioned many times in our interviews. Interviewees mention how it is not possible to stay in Paltamo because of the lack of job opportunities.

These phenomenon's serve as a fundamental premise for the downward trend of Paltamo's economy in recent years. With this, there is a recognized need to find solutions on how to offer adequate (and legally required) services. Paltamo municipality has searched for solutions, including the centralization and merging of services. In the survey, 64.4% of respondents were satisfied with municipal services. Although, with our interviews, some interviewees mentioned how the centralization of services is visible in everyday life, like with having to own a car if living outside of the center area or the loss of village shops outside of Paltamo's center. This raises further questions about the future like: What happens after everything has been centralized? Is the natural progression of governance in the area municipality mergers, or can the direction be changed?

The decrease in Paltamo's population can be seen throughout the municipality so many locals are not very optimistic about the future. Based on our interviews, it seems that those people located near the town center see the future of Paltamo through realism based on the current situation. It seems that many have accepted the fate that Paltamo will continue aging, shrinking, and sliding into economic decline. In this way, it would follow the same pattern as other similar municipalities.

6.2. 'We need industry'. Optimism in Paltamo.

Over the past decade, the Kainuu region has experienced a resurgence of interest and positive attention. Once considered one of the most economically disadvantaged areas in Finland, Kainuu is becoming a thriving hub for tourism, technology, bioeconomy, and sustainable mining. Despite these advancements, the population in the region continues to decline, particularly in areas outside of Kajaani, which serves as the regional center and economic hub. Paltamo municipality, being one of these areas, is committed to aligning with Kainuu's green and innovative vision for the future and wishes to attract significant investments in bioeconomy and renewable energy.

According to the municipal representative, Paltamo plans to develop multiple industrial enterprises and renewable energy projects in the next ten years. One of the largest planned investments in the municipality, exceeding one billion euros, is the KaiCell Fibers pulp mill. A biomethanol mill is also planned for the same industrial site which is adjacent to the town of Paltamo. Regarding renewable energy, two solar power plants are in development with the first expected to begin operations next to Paltamo's railway station this summer. Several wind farms are planned, which will amount to a total of 60 to 80 wind turbines. One wind farm, consisting of 19 wind turbines, is expected to begin operations by 2030 in the northern part of the municipality. In addition, the tourism sector is present and has the potential for expansion, given the area's vast recreational opportunities. However, industrial development is prioritized, as Paltamo cannot compete with other municipalities in the Kainuu region.

While the substantial investments may appear somewhat opportunistic given the small workforce and similar attempts in other shrinking municipalities, such as the Nurmes biopark in North Karelia, Paltamo does not perceive this as a concern. According to the municipal representative, people can commute from Kajaani to work in Paltamo. At the same time, renewable energy production will contribute to Kainuu's tech sector (e.g. data centers)

or other activities, and it will bring revenue to the entire region, even if it does not require a large workforce. Paltamo municipality seeks to be and present an image of flexibility and openness to economic opportunities.

This optimism can be attributed to Paltamo's goal of remaining an independent municipality and continuing to provide the required public services to its residents. Survey results and interviews indicate that the community is generally satisfied with the public services available. Some interviewees view development projects as crucial for Paltamo. In the survey, the majority of respondents view the current job market negatively, indicating that new economic/industrial projects are welcome. However, despite this optimism the municipality still faces barriers to implementing many of these projects. For example, the start of operations for the pulp mill remains uncertain due to geopolitical circumstances, which have created market instability, despite all necessary permits and assessments being completed, meaning that other projects might be threatened too.

Still, Paltamo can be seen as a municipality that aligns with smart shrinking goals and one that still has relatively good prospects. All planned investments align with the economic activities of the Kainuu region and are based on local resources. The municipality not only collaborates at the regional level but also engages in inter-municipal cooperation. For example, Paltamo and other rural municipalities 'share' municipal specialists to save finances and limited human resources. Additionally, the municipality is working to transform land plots with abandoned buildings into new development projects for businesses. Paltamo will likely benefit from its location as well, being close to Kajaani, having the railway, and abundant recreational resources. This already benefits the municipality, as some newcomers choose Paltamo due to its proximity to Kajaani, lower housing prices or free early childhood education.

6.3. 'Home is here'. Life goes on in Paltamo

Certain individuals feel that Paltamo has all that they need. Even with the recognition that there needs to be some level of industrial development, and a lingering uncertainty about whether the region will remain populated as it is in the future, many people in the municipality (especially outside of central Paltamo) are entirely content. This is reflected by a high quality of life with several individuals expressing that Paltamo is a good place for raising a family, has good access to essential services (and Kajaani is well under an hour

away for further needs), and that accessibility to nature-based recreation opportunities are prominent local assets.

One area that we identified to show this sentiment was the small peripheral village of Mieslahti, a few minutes southeast of central Paltamo. Mieslahti has undoubtedly changed and experienced certain aspects of depopulation over the last ~ 50 years including losing its primary school, local public transport, and shops but remains despite this. We got the impression that the people living there, even if they are not originally from the municipality, take pride in their surroundings and nourishing their cultural connection to place and land. The village association maintains the village's lakefront infrastructure and hosts cultural events such as the 'night walk' (*Posti-Kallen vaellus*) and plays throughout the year to engage older residents. An adult education centre, the *Kainuun Opisto*, has been present in the community since 1911 and remains as the 'lighthouse' of the village, now primarily teaching immigrants Finnish and English, along with hosting recreational classes for older village members, and public events. Although now on a smaller scale, a small agricultural community still exists here exemplifying the possibility through sensible choices, like sharing expensive machinery and diversifying income sources as seen at the local strawberry farm (*Elorinteen Mansikka*).

Although we were limited by how much time we had in the area, these observations from Mieslahti, to a certain extent, can apply to the rest of Paltamo municipality as a general theme of optimism. As such, this contentment for living in the area is not necessarily tied to a specific location within the municipality.

7. Discussion

Our research shows that while Paltamo municipality faces many challenges, it also possesses advantages that could be turned into opportunities for sustainable development. A diverse group of stakeholders from the municipality highlight that a scarce job market, especially for educated individuals, is the main driver for Paltamo's depopulation. However, locals generally express satisfaction with life in Paltamo by highlighting the local nature and landscapes, peace and ease, safety, strong community ties, and the availability of essential services.

These findings suggest that specific actions can be taken to ensure sustainable development in line with the smart shrinking framework while maintaining a high quality of life in Paltamo.

Paltamo municipality should recognize and promote social cohesion. Given that Paltamo has a small and close-knit community with many family-owned businesses and individuals who have either remained or returned due to family ties, fostering this sense of community is essential. This aligns with the smart shrinkage policy, which emphasizes the importance of community-based solutions (Cedergren et al., 2025). This involves bottom-up, environmentally friendly initiatives within the municipality and by fostering entrepreneurship in Paltamo. In terms of community matters, the phenomenon of multi-locality is prevalent in Paltamo municipality. This term refers to individuals who reside in two or more locations (Greinke & Lange, 2021), and it becomes particularly noticeable during the summer months. Temporal residents should be encouraged to participate more in Paltamo's community life.

Much of the municipality's area is rural. Like in most parts of the world, as the 20th century progressed, there has been a consistent movement away from rural localities/villages that comes with the corresponding loss of community and engagement with the land. It is generally harder to survive by farming or through other resource-based activities as these efforts have largely been consolidated or corporatized, and despite these 'more efficient' activities having similar ends, the loss of rural culture is apparent (Kuhmonen & Kuhmonen, 2015). This and other forces have left the rural landscape scattered with unused land and dormant houses which are inherent to our concerned problem of depopulation in rural localities. Although this is not expected to be the primary economic force of Paltamo, we believe there is a significant opportunity to revitalize these rural spaces

as means of providing education, economic innovation, and fostering community to maintain the rural/natural spaces that all survey respondents and interviewees are fond of. There seems to be some level of interest in this type of life by the public and the relatively low housing and land prices in the municipality could help this type of development. We have even been able to see this under Paltamo's current social and economic conditions, but we wonder what is possible with a greater degree of municipal support. Efforts toward a more sustainable rural locality include not only the agricultural, but also opportunities for environmental education (or those pertaining to appropriate trades, traditional crafts or art), outdoor recreation, fostering community, and a high quality of life and sustainable livelihoods. In the face of climate change and the biodiversity crisis, the preservation and stewardship of the local environment is sensible given the existing care that residents of Paltamo already feel for their natural landscapes. We feel that this vision can coexist with the municipalities' goal for sustainable economic growth as a means of revitalizing the rural in unison with Paltamo's push for central industries, but with less risks susceptible to geopolitical factors.

Still, while community-based solutions are important, total economic viability are also crucial as it affects daily livelihoods. Locals have a strong desire for more diverse job market and economic growth and most residents support the municipality's initiatives to attract investments for large-scale projects such as the KaiCell Fibers pulp mill, biomethanol factory, solar energy arrays and wind farms. These projects align with Kainuu's regional green transition vision which focuses on bioeconomy/tech sectors, with Paltamo seeing itself as an integral part of those efforts. All developments must be evaluated through the lenses of fairness, mobility, cooperation, and sustainability. For instance, newly established companies can repurpose abandoned or deteriorating buildings to positively contribute to the municipality's built environment by providing space for offices or housing for future workers. Revenue generated from these future establishments, can return to the municipal budget and be allocated to the provision of important public services which could be found in Paltamo today, and nature preservation efforts. To attract potential future workers, the municipality should collaborate with other municipalities and governmental institutions. This cooperation should include providing retraining opportunities for Paltamo and other Kainuu residents, and by offering Finnish language courses for foreign workers.

7.1. Research Limitations

Research limitations are systematic biases that can alter the results of the study (Price et al., 2013). For this reason, we acknowledge the limitations of our fieldwork and study design.

Limited amount of time and seasonality of the location - The amount of time we had for field work was limited to five days, including travel to and from the destination. We were not able to do all our planned activities nor visit certain locations because in these five days, two were the weekend so schools and other places were closed. Additional time in the municipality would allow us to arrange more meetings and organise more trips to gather a more data.

Limited internet access – During field work, we did not have access to Wi-Fi at the accommodation. During some meetings, they offered us to connect to the Wi-Fi of the institutions, to categorize data and update our work. A stable internet connection at the accommodation would have simplified the job by minimizing unnecessary travels to certain locations.

Language barriers – Despite a working knowledge of the English language inside the group, there were sometimes problems in understanding or explaining specific concepts and words that might have been useful for the research. Moreover, if we did not have a Finnish speaker during the interviews, it was difficult to converse with some individuals because they did not speak English. This happened when the group divided to cover multiple events happening during the same time but in different locations.

Limited knowledge about the study site – There were not any introductory lectures or studies about the culture, history, and geography of our locality. However, we did some personal research before our arrival and discovered new information during our stay.

Sampling bias: small sample size – With the aging population and the rural locality of the place, we expected to receive little feedback from the local inhabitants. Despite our expectations, we managed to get valuable information; however, if we had extended our stay, we would have had the chance to meet more people and to get more answers on the online survey, giving greater reliability to the results of the project.

8. Recommendations

Based on the material we collected and analysed in relation to the literature we created some policies and recommendations, based on the OECD Principles on Rural Policy, which would serve the community, the municipality as well as the various aspects of sustainability.

- Prioritize training and education for residents and newcomers to prepare them for new job positions in the bioeconomy and renewable energy sectors:
 - For example, by creating projects where workers have specific training for the job offered by all the neighbour municipalities.
 - Sponsoring courses accessible to students and adults who want to learn more about green industry to provide them with an insight on the industry.
 - More cooperation with educational institutions in regard to the study of Finnish language courses for foreigners.
- Develop flexible mobility solutions:
 - Providing a mobile service system regarding goods delivery and health services in peripheral areas to give people the possibility to have essential services.
 - In order to minimize the impact of solo drives to commute to work from one town to another, provide more flexible bus schedules and bus stops or a shared way of transportation.
- Continue the collaboration between municipalities and work sectors:
 - Specialization in municipal job positions.
 - Cooperation in order to attract big investments.
 - Creating an interconnected network and creating shared policies to valorise the small villages.
 - In regard of the primary sector, and the expensive price of the machineries, the municipality could lend for cheaper price the machinery and infrastructure in a bigger scale according to orders and needs.
- Collaboration between municipality and Kainuun Opisto or other educational institutions:
 - Following the example of the Opisto's garden, the municipality should share areas where people, who do not have the possibility to have their own garden, can go and feel free to grow their fruits, vegetables, plant and flowers.

- Try to make it easy for students to stay in Paltamo, by offering internships to local businesses and organize events for them to get a feeling of the community.
- Promote micro entrepreneurship in local community:
 - Creation of business consultation centre with collaborative workspaces in abandoned facilities.
 - Aim to benefit from multilocality by promoting and creating remote working possibilities. Business consultation centre could be used for it.
- Prioritize environmental preservation as a key value in local development:
 - If promoting tourism, prefer eco-tourism and invest in mapping paths and trails, adding signs on the way where people can read some information in different languages about the nature that entourages them, or by scanning a QR code that provide them some insight on the geographic area they are at and about the flora and fauna that surround them.
 - As industrial development is planned, it is important to ensure that nature is not negatively impacted by incorporating environmental assessments in development strategies, prioritizing low impact solutions. Additionally, tax revenue generated from industry should be used to conserve the unique landscapes that define the area.
 - Organized communal activities in nature. It could be hikes, picnics, skiing and many others.
- Develop local branding and marketing to promote Paltamo's identity and attract visitors:
 - Investing in building a strong, authentic image that highlights Paltamo's natural beauty, cultural heritage, and local strengths by creating locally branded and made products and souvenirs, promoting visual media with effective marketing such as the creation of a logo of the municipality.
- Revitalize rural areas of the municipality:
 - Provide support to those interested in sustainable agriculture or entrepreneurs who interested in the reinhabiting dormant country houses or land.
 - Locate rural 'areas of focus' where communities can be renewed for environmental/agricultural endeavours where they can be more easily

- supported by one another (such as through sharing resources or machinery) or by the municipality (like being serviced by a bus stop to central Paltamo).
- Utilize educational opportunities to attract relevant professionals or interested peoples to the area.
 - Share good practises between different stakeholders (e.g. WhatsApp group for the villages).
 - Organize more events for the whole municipality.
 - Provide support, highlight, or provide a platform for the sale of local agricultural, craft, or forest-based products.
 - Connect rural education opportunities (environmental, agricultural, sustainability, craft, etc.) with similar schools or organizations around and outside of Finland to enable collaboration.
 - Support arts and culture opportunities in rural localities.

9. Conclusion

In this study we travelled to Paltamo to investigate the experience of residents living there, their quality of life, what can be improved, and sustainable solutions for the future. Our material consisted of interviews, survey and observations. In addition, we used map presentations and statistical data as illustrative material.

Overall, locals value nature and the community. For most, the existing services in Paltamo are satisfactory. Most improvement can be found in public transport, study opportunities and the labour market. Because of these shortcomings, many who thrive in the Paltamo area tend to be older people.

Improving the quality of life in the Paltamo region is largely linked to the above-mentioned challenges. It is important to take care of the well-being of the community, and this serves the social sustainability in the municipality too.

Locals implement environmental sustainability through everyday decisions. It might not be articulated in terms of sustainability, but it is done in part of life and through the appreciation of nature. This can be moving by bike, controlling invasive species, walking, gardening, picking up trash from nature, recycling, etc.

Based on the conducted research, there are different views about the future. It seems that Paltamo municipality's goal is to be economically sound by creating a sustainable, industry-focused future so the municipality can continue to offer its required services. The outlook for the future is optimistic from their point of view. Locals recognise the need for industry but are more cautious about the future based largely on the uncertainty of these industrial plans. Locals value nature and hope that the industry plans would not take too much away from nature inherently and their recreational activities. In addition to the municipality's sustainable industrialization, there can hopefully be a co-existence with rural lifestyles that brings work, education and economic innovation to rural areas and fosters community.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Survey Questions

1. I consent to the collection and processing of my data for the before mentioned research purposes / Suostun tietojeni keräämiseen ja käsittelyyn edellä mainitussa tutkimustarkoituksessa

☐ Yes / Kyllä

2. What is your age? / Minkä ikäinen olet?

☐ 18 – 29

☐ 30 – 45

☐ 46 – 59

☐ 60+

3. Gender? / Sukupuoli?

☐ Woman / Nainen

☐ Man / Mies

☐ Other / Muu

☐ I prefer not to answer / En halua vastata

4. How satisfied are you with these aspects of everyday life in Paltamo? / Kuinka tyytyväinen olet näihin seuraaviin asioihin koskien arkea Paltamossa?

	Not Satisfied / Tyytymätö n	Satisfied / Tyytyväin en	Very satisfied / Erittäin tyytyväinen
Public Transport / Julkinen liikenne			

Community Activities / Yhteisölliset tapahtumat			
Education Opportunities / Opiskelumahdollisuudet			
Leisure and Recreation Opportunities / Vapaa- aika ja virkistysmahdollisuudet			
Public infrastructure / Julkinen infrastruktuuri			
Services and Shops / Palvelut ja kaupat			
Job Market / Työmarkkinat			
Parks, Greenspaces, Trails / Puistot, viheralueet, luontopolut			
Water bodies (Kiehimä River, Oululake etc.) / Vesialueet (Kiehimäjoki, Oulujärvi jne.)			

5. Feel free to add any further comments / Voit halutessasi täydentää monivalinnan kysymyksiä tai jättää muuta palautetta

Appendix 2: Interview Questions for Municipality Administration

1. Are there any EU-funded projects currently ongoing? Have there been any in the past?
2. Do you have a strategy or plan in place to stop or reverse population and economic decline?
3. How does the municipality ensure that the strategy is working? Are there any measurable results?
4. What are the main economic activities in Paltamo?
5. Are there any challenges in running a business here?
6. Are there any local products or services that could be further developed?
7. How important is environmental protection for the municipality?
8. Are there enough community activities and spaces available for them?
9. How does the local community communicate and engage with the municipal administration?
10. What do you see as the biggest challenges facing your area today?
11. In your opinion, what could attract more tourists to this area?

Appendix 3: Interview Questions for Locals

1. Are you a local? / Do you live in Paltamo / Are you working here?
2. What's the life in Paltamo / Do you like living here? / What do you like or dislike? / What would you like to be different in Paltamo?
3. What do you think about sustainability?
4. Are there any positive sides (having a sustainable job market; housing; decreasing impacts on the local environment; etc.)?
5. Do you think that your lifestyle is sustainable? What things do you do that make it sustainable?
6. How do you heat your house, go to work, move around? / Do you interact with the community? / Does the time of the year affect that? / Is there borrowing culture in Paltamo?
7. What would be some little things that you or Paltamo municipality could change so that your life in Paltamo would be more sustainable?
8. What do you like to do for recreation, in your free time? / Are there enough activities for you/things to do?
9. Is there something what would you like to add?