

Kauko Mikkonen

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KAUKO MIKKONEN, emeritus professor of regional studies at the University of Vaasa, was a specialist in quantitative geography who was best known for his research into city systems. He had been invited to membership of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 2003.

Mikkonen is best known for his work on developing and applying central place theory for describing the systems formed by human communities, and carried out a number of significant studies on this theme together with Mauri Palomäki, including an optimized simulation of the network of urban centres in Finland, published in 1971.

In his doctoral thesis of 1975, Mikkonen analysed the central place system of the former province of Vaasa and its functional regional structure, and employed a skilfully devised statistical modelling method to predict future developments in this network. He approached central place theory as a part of the broader content of the regional structure, the other elements in which were traffic routes and densities, the distribution of the population and the inhabitants' everyday business densities. Mikkonen carried out his research into families' business visits

to central places in western Finland over a total span of some four decades, enabling him to discern changes in these patterns.

Central place theory has played a major role in the history of Finnish regional studies, and Kauko Mikkonen was a prominent authority and innovator with respect to this tradition. His greatest strength lay in statistical and mathematical modelling. Considerable use has been made of central place research, especially in the process of constructing the Nordic welfare state during the period from the 1960s to the 1980s. Localities were classified into national, regional, urban, local and village centres according to the abundance and diversity of the services that they provided, and efforts were made to identify gaps in these services that should be filled in future plans. A network of centres of this kind formed the framework for regional planning in Finland for almost 20 years.

In addition to central place theory, Kauko Mikkonen also applied statistical and mathematical methods to the study of numerous other problems, e.g. explanation of the development of the Finnish transport network, examination of the regional diffusion of innovations, evaluation of the social impact of universities and

the description of trends in regional economic development and competitiveness.

Kauko Mikkonen occupied a number of prestigious posts in the University of Vaasa, including those of vice-rector in 1996–2003 and dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences in 2004–2005. He was an inspired and diligent administrator with a sharp eye for development opportunities, and did much over a period of more than 20 years to promote research in Vaasa as an editor and as chairman of the publications committee.

Another important aspect of Mikkonen's impressive scientific career was his prominent role in public discussions, and his expert opinion was asked for on innumerable issues, always as a researcher and never as a consultant.

Kauko Mikkonen was precise, objective and fair in his opinions and his younger colleagues would always feel comfortable working with him. Among his many interests outside the university, he sang tenor in Vaasa's Pohjan Miehet male-voice choir, was an active Rotary Club member and occupied a significant position on the governing board of the Central Ostrobothnian Cooperative Society. First and foremost in everything Kauko Mikkonen did, however, was his family, his wife Leena and their two sons. It was from the warmth of his family that he set out to put the world to rights and it was to the warmth of his family that he returned. This was the source of his happiness and the focal point of his life.

*Obituary by Seija Virkkala
and Hannu Katajamäki*