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Notat 9/2003
ISSN 0805-8075

Høgskulen i Volda Møreforsking Volda

2003

Forfattar: Jørgen Amdam
Utgjevar: Høgskulen i Volda og Møreforskning Volda
ISSN 0805-8075
Sats: Jørgen Amdam
Trykk: Høgskulen i Volda
Opplag: 20
Distribusjon: Haugen Bok, 6100 Volda.
Tlf.: 70 07 45 00 Faks: 70 07 45 50
e-post: ekspress@haugenbok.no

Gnist Møre, pb. 278, 6101 Volda
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The significance of commune structure for regional development

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Paper to ISMR 17. 2- 8 August. 2003. Wales.

Abstract

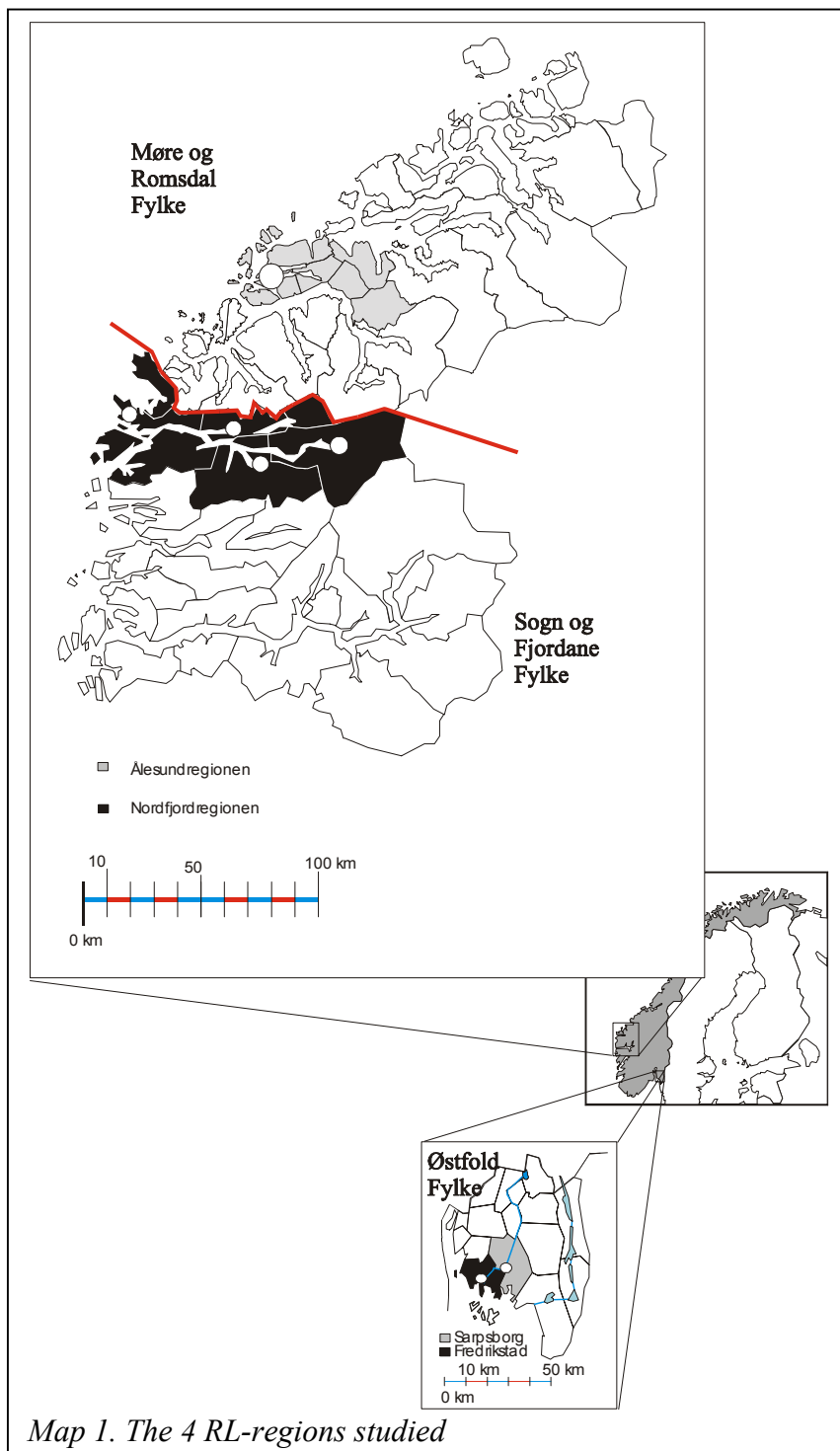
The geographical structure of an area will have a great influence on which tasks it is expedient for communes to co-operate on and similarly what consequences that may result from an amalgamation of communes. The focus here is local and regional development and the role of the communes as local planners in co-operation with other actors locally, regionally and nationally. What have the consequences been for development work in amalgamated communes? Can communes in regions with a different geographical structure learn anything from amalgamated “urban regions”? How does the regional co-operation function, is it an alternative to the merging of communes in the context of local development? These are some of the questions we asked ourselves in our work of looking at the connection between commune structure and local development.

In order to be in a position to say something about the consequences of changes in commune structure for local development in an area, it is necessary, in addition to taking material and economic considerations, to also study the interests of the different actors, the relations between them, the social capital in the area and not least how the ability to mobilise for development is influenced. There are also great differences between different regions in Norway when it comes to the challenges facing them and the consequences, for example between “close-lying urban regions” and “sparsely populated rural regions”. In this study we can demonstrate positive consequences for regional development in regions like Sarpsborg and Fredrikstad and we believe that under certain circumstances it will be possible to achieve similar positive consequences in other such “urban regions”. We are in far greater doubt about whether it is possible to achieve similar effects in regions with many and small centres and a far lower degree of integration in housing, working and service conditions, especially if there is already a lack of trust and co-operation.

Social development and commune structure – does geography mean anything?

Imagine two different regions in Norway. One is in eastern Norway, it has a centre where most of the people work, it is a built-up area with 50 - 70,000 inhabitants over an area of 300 – 400 km². Today the region is one single commune after an amalgamation of communes in the early 1990s. The region lies so close to Oslo that some people commute there to work. Sarpsborg and Fredrikstad, which we have studied, are two such regions. The other region is in the north-west of southern Norway or in northern Norway. Improvements in communications have meant that a region with e.g. 7 communes and a population of about 33,000 over an area of roughly 4000 km² has started to work more closely together because the job markets to some extent overlap each other and they face many common challenges in relation to business and industry, communications, youth environment etc. At the same time the region has no obvious centre, as in Nordfjord, which we have studied, where there are several small commune centres that “are in competition with each other”.

In Norway we can, according to Juvkvam (2002), group communes into 161 residential and labour market regions (RL-regions). 65 of these have such a difficult geography that they are just single communes. Similarly the metropolitan regions are special with large populations etc. Even so there are about 80 residential and labour market regions in Norway that face challenges of the same type as those we indicated above. Changes in economic structure, communications, demands and expectations among the inhabitants, competition with other regions at home and abroad etc have meant that in order to develop a robust region, as many as possible must co-operate. What one must expect is that the communes are active participants in such local development, but no doubt there are differences



Map 1. The 4 RL-regions studied

between situations in which e.g. 7 communes share or just one commune alone has political and administrative responsibility for the region.

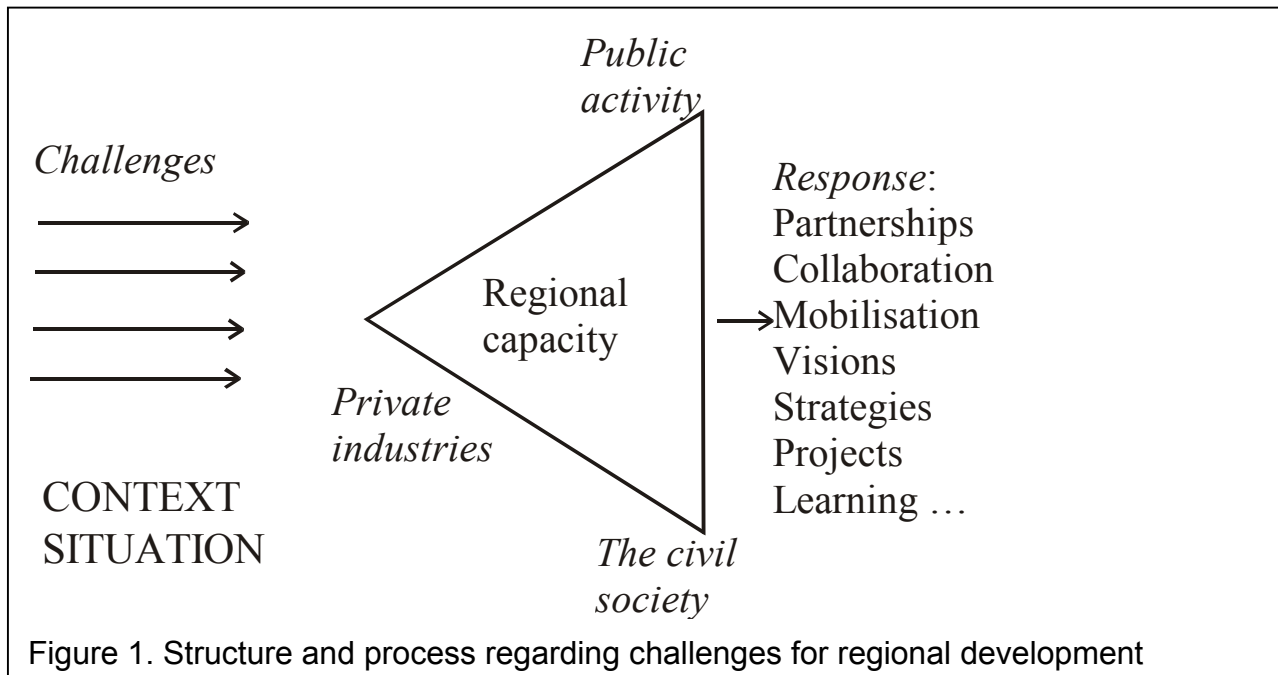
From built-up Fredrikstad to long and narrow Nordfjord

In this study we have looked more closely at the circumstances in 4 areas (see map 1) and interviewed a total of about 50 informants. Sarpborg and Fredrikstad are “concentrated areas” with short distances internally, where most of the inhabitants can reach the centre in 20 minutes from their homes. But they also have considerable problems with traffic jams in to the central districts and a lack of bridges over the river Glomma. In the Ålesund area and in Nordfjord the topographical challenges are far greater with fjords and mountains that divide / delimit the regions. The focus is to a great extent directed towards the development of communication systems, with few roads of high standard etc. At the same time there are great differences between the challenges facing Ålesund with a large and dominating centre with considerable in-commuting from the surrounding district, and the

polycentric small-centre structure in Nordfjord, which results in a different focus.

It would be desirable to be able to use the information we have gathered to make clear-cut statements to the effect that the merging of communes in area X will lead to the following consequences for the work of local development. One has to be careful about doing this. It is difficult to generalise from four to 80 areas, because the regional variations are too great for that. A fundamental purpose of this study is therefore not to point out which consequences will result from a certain change in commune structure, but rather to point to circumstances that must be studied more closely in the individual areas in the case of changes in commune structure. If we can indicate consequences in certain circumstances in the four areas we have studied, it is more than likely that such circumstances are also important in other areas, so that they must be looked at in more detail in separate studies. The actual findings we

have made on the basis of, among other things, interviews with key actors in the four areas in question must therefore be seen as examples of consequences.



The commune as a political actor and local developer

The study is also limited to local development work whose aim is to develop society as a whole at the local and regional level. Local development requires an active interplay between various actors and domains such as the civil community, private business and industry, public sector administration and production and political activity (Amdam & Amdam 2000, Bennett & McCoshan 1993), see figure 1. In our context the focus is on how the commune as a political actor influences the total development of society and how this work can be affected by changes in commune structure. The core of local development is a certain territory and those processes of change that take place within this territory and between it and the world at large in the form of an ongoing process of tackling old and new challenges (Friedmann & Weaver 1979, Storper 1997, Stöhr 1990).

Regional development involves in the highest degree regional processes that must be lead and stimulated locally. National policies and provisions can only be “lubricants” and stimulants in such processes – or function as “triggers of crisis and eye-openers”, often then in the role of “the enemy”. This also means that the most important thing is to develop the regional “capacity” or ability to meet challenges – something that can only be achieved by stimulating co-operation in the whole of the community (Porter 1990, Storper 1997). International research shows, according to conclusions drawn by among others Jan-Evert Nilsson (1998), Storper (1997), Putnam (1993), that there are great variations between regions that, viewed “objectively”, ought to be similar. In addition to “objective” criteria such as natural resources, geographical location, transport etc, social and cultural conditions are also important. Communities that are open and egalitarian in which there is a high degree of dialogue and trust between all groups of actors show in general a far more positive development than communities with a high level of conflicts, with class differences, power élites, the fear of making oneself conspicuous (“jantelov”) etc. The most dynamic economic communities are in fact characterised by a very great openness – where in fact sharing new inventions etc with competitors is actually seen as a “guarantee arrangement” (Nilsson 1998), insofar as they can then think of something even better which they in turn can share with us – an attitude that naturally requires mutual trust and dialogue between the actors. “Talk and Trust” says Storper (1997) are the most important “instruments” in economic development.

The ability to meet and exploit new challenges, respond to them, will partly be linked to the commune(s) themselves, but especially the interplay or lack of it between all key actors with power over the development within and outside the territory (Friedmann 1992, Healey 1999). The actual

changes will be linked partly to concrete issues; what is on the agenda and is dealt with (e.g. land use, localisation of activities etc), partly to co-operative processes and relations. In this context the focus must be partly on the various actors and their roles in the development work and partly on the processes in the work for change – especially on how different development factors can be influenced (Healey et al 1999). Such factors must be compared with structural factors of the type we have identified in our study. One extreme is regions with a dominant centre (“town”) and considerably smaller surrounding communes that it may be expedient to “incorporate” into the town. The opposite is regions with several smaller, but more equal centres and communes, where changes in communications for various reasons have meant that the housing and labour markets overlap each other or coincide.

In the report that forms the basis for this article (Amdam et al 2003) we have studied theories and earlier research on what local and regional development work actually consists of and how changes in commune structure can influence this work. This can be divided into three main groups:

1. Material circumstances related to change in the commune structure, in particular factors linked to acreage, business and industry and the civilian community and the life of its organisations. This is partly linked to results we have observed from the amalgamation of communes, partly linked to changes in challenges that arise on the basis of changes in commune structure (Bukve 1991, 1999, Sanda 2000, 2002).
2. Changes in relations and institutional (social) capital as a result of changes in commune structure; in particular in know-how and expertise, relations and networks between actors and the ability to mobilise actors. This is especially linked to the ability to meet challenges (Healey et al 1999).
3. Procedural and communicative conditions for regional development and planning as a process, i.e. the ability to plan and produce results (Amdam & Amdam 2000, Amdam & Veggeland 1998).

We have found that geography is very significant and that it is important to study the social and cultural circumstances in a region in addition to its nature and economy. What then are the consequences we can point to in our four areas and how should these be taken into consideration when discussing changes in commune structure? This is the theme of the remainder of the article, whose structure is based on the three points above.

Material circumstances related to change in the commune structure

Different land use challenges result in different regional agendas

The regional challenges in land use planning and environmental conservation vary a great deal from central areas like Sarpsborg and Fredrikstad to the Ålesund region and in particular the Nordfjord region. While the merging of communes has clearly led to great benefits in the close-knit built-up regions in the south in the form of better area planning, better functioning centres and reduced land use, it is facilitating economic development and improved internal and external communications that is the main focus in the north-west of southern Norway. This is probably due in part to differences in area structure and size, but also to the fact that e.g. Ålesund generally has been in a position to solve its land use challenges within its own borders. On the other hand, there is considerable potential for conflicts between the centre and the periphery, in particular in the case of communications and the localisation of public service functions.

In Nordfjord, with its many small and not particularly expansive centres, there are few land use, infrastructure and environmental challenges that they have in common and there are considerable conflicts of interest between the communes. On the other hand, the localisation of and changes involving public sector activity, such as upper secondary schools and hospitals, the choice of routes for new roads and other changes in the structure of communications – all these can alter “the balance” between the centres and the communes, and may well then become the source of conflicts. Today attempts to solve such conflicts of interest are made through regional co-operation (attempts to speak with one voice outwardly) and in the administrative body of the county (county council). With the merging of communes, a new joint arena for decision-making will be established in the form of a

commune council, but the conflicts will still be present and may disturb the peace and reduce the efficiency of the larger commune. This applies to a great extent to issues that a possible “greater commune” will hardly have any control over itself, such as the building of national highways, the localisation of national harbours, conflicts between national nature and environmental conservation interests and sea-farming / aquaculture, tourism and other activities.

We can establish the fact that changes in commune structure have an influence on the way an area uses its natural and land resources. These are factors that the communes have great influence over by virtue of the planning and building laws etc. All in all, the amalgamation of communes would appear to result in positive consequences for the planning of natural and land use resources in centre-oriented and built-up areas like Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg (Bukve 1999, Sanda 2002). Typical for this is better control over the localisation of indoor shopping centres, housing estates, centre functions, challenges linked to commuting to work etc. In more “loosely-knit” structures such as the Ålesund region, our informants focus more on the localisation of functions and lines of communication in a regional and national context, and less on the planning of natural and land resources internally in the region and in the areas close to the centre. In a polycentric region like Nordfjord with a scattered population, most of the land use challenges are an internal matter for the commune. Here it is challenges related to lines of communication, environmental protection issues between the region and national interests etc that are more in focus.

Partnership – the commune as a professional actor in industrial and economic development

The establishment of greater communes in Sarpsborg and Fredrikstad has, in to the opinion of our informants, lead to a change in focus from challenges facing close-at-hand operations and local community developments in the small communes, towards an emphasis on the overall challenges and the efforts to further the development of the greater commune. Informants both from business & industry and in the communes point out that it has become easier to co-operate, perhaps especially in the case of the commune and major companies. Some informants raise doubts as to whether the greater communes have such a strong focus on the small enterprises. At the same time, the point is also made that it has been possible to “sort out” internal localisation issues, such as a too scattered localisation of indoor shopping centres etc, and that this has in turn lead to more active and lively town centres, even though this may also be seen as representing a centralisation of important functions.

In both the Ålesund region and the Nordfjord region it is made very apparent that regional co-operation has not tackled its strategic and tactical function in relation to business and industry and the development of the region. Only when there are very clear common interests and obvious benefits for everyone involved, has it been possible to “pull together” and then often only insofar as to avoid localisation conflicts. This has been the case in spite of the fact that both regions have a production-oriented business and industry facing large common challenges that ought to result in closer co-operation.

Commune structure is important for economic development, but at the same time there is no guarantee that changes in commune structure will lead to definite consequences for business and industry. The communes do not enjoy the same “power” over business and industry as they do over land use. The consequences are to a far greater extent dependent on the way in which the commune(s) co-operate(s) with business and industry. Positive effects of an amalgamation of communes will depend on how conflicts of interest are handled in the new greater commune. Can the politicians manage to work together with business and industry and the municipal administration to develop joint overall visions and strategies that can result in a co-ordinated development? For example: if the commercial interests continue to dominate in “greater Ålesund commune” in the way they do in today’s Ålesund, this will create great antagonism in relation to the more production-oriented areas in the remainder of the region. Unless it is possible to develop joint visions and strategies with regard to a reasonable and “fair” sharing of responsibilities etc between the four centres in Nordfjord, the internal conflicts will simply “paralyse” an eventual greater commune and lead to a far worse situation than can be achieved through voluntary co-operation more on a case-to-case basis.

The way an amalgamation happens will probably also be decisive. If a merger is voluntary (or the result of gentle force), one must assume that trust has been established and that joint visions and

strategies have been developed, so that a mandate for action exists, as we have seen in Sarpsborg. With a forced amalgamation, in e.g. Nordfjord, the internal conflicts we have witnessed in Fredrikstad may seem minor compared with those that would then be likely to arise. Then it may well be an advantage that there are fewer communes that are co-operating; as we have seen, it can be easier for Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg to co-operate on concrete issues than to establish co-operation between a large number of communes that ought to have common interests in economic matters.

The development of society – attractive residential communities

In Sarpsborg we saw that even though there was opposition to amalgamation, the majority was mentally prepared for the fact that a merger was going to happen regardless. Co-operation was already highly developed and there were many joint arenas in which to meet. In particular this applied to large workplaces that the area shared, such as Borregård, but also to the fact that the surrounding communes were “non-paying passengers” at publicly organised activities such as cinema, concerts etc. Important private arenas like cafés and restaurants, discotheques etc in the centre of Sarpsborg were the obvious meeting-places and distances were short.

In Fredrikstad it was especially the inhabitants in the former Onsøy commune who made their point with strong opposition both before and after the amalgamation. We have not had an opportunity to study this in more detail, but there may be reason to believe that this is a community with its own well-developed meeting-places that make the area less socially dependent on Fredrikstad town centre. Onsøy also has a different industrial and economic structure than the rest of the commune.

In the Ålesund region, the Moa area, along with the old town centre (the Art Nouveau town), would appear to be becoming more and more important with regard to jobs, but especially in providing social arenas for the surrounding communes. In particular we see – as in Sarpsborg and Fredrikstad – that young people meet “in town”, where there are cinemas, cafés, restaurants, discotheques etc, but also schools and service workplaces. One can also observe that many young families set up home “strategically” close to the communication centre Moa because it is easier to reach many types of work and experiences – as well as being close to family and friends. Such factors contribute towards “breaking down barriers” and towards developing a joint community, as in Sarpsborg, where our informants pointed to the fact that the distinction between “town” and “country” has today been replaced by the common expression “commune”. The same features can also be seen in Fredrikstad, and in the Ålesund region where informants point to the need for developing just such a common identity.

Being a “Nordfjording” is an old form of identity linked to the fjord system as a common artery for communication, but is this identity stronger than the “village-” or “commune identity” today? The challenge here is the fact that it is only Nordfjordeid that is situated such that it is within reasonable commuting distance of the other parts of the region. Most of the major public sector activities are located here, such as the hospital, while e.g. the upper secondary school is spread among the four almost equally large centres in the area. There are also few joint organisations that unite Nordfjord to one common civil community, the one exception in fact being the Opera in Eid, which attracts musicians and other actors from the whole of Nordfjord and from Ørsta / Volda. Even so, this area is in a completely different situation than the other three “centre-oriented” regions when it comes to the civil community. For example, there is little “non-paying passenger activity” between the four centres, all four offer roughly the same (narrow) range of cinema, cafés, restaurants etc, so that Ålesund and Bergen are “the towns” that offer the more advanced “experiences”.

New cultural opportunities through a merging of communes

So what can the greater commune do that cannot be achieved through co-operation? With a focus on the three centre-oriented areas, we will point to the following:

- Investment in bigger initiatives. A typical example here is the “Olav-days” event in Sarpsborg which our informants all agreed would not have been possible in its present form, had it not been for the merger.
- Better economic fundament for cultural activities such a cinema, theatre, civic centre and concert hall etc Prior to the amalgamation the surrounding communes were mainly “non-paying passengers”. This has now provided the opportunity for greater activity because the

greater commune “tolerates” more than the former “city commune”, which to a large extent had the sole responsibility previously.

- Investment in youth. Most of our informants made the point that young people “don’t recognise the limits” in the same way as “the elderly” and that it is very important to have a uniform youth policy and planning within a region. In the greater commune this can be achieved both with regard to experiences and leisure activities, various types of preventive measures, but also in education, in collaboration with among others the county education authorities and regional university colleges.

Challenges facing greater communes

On the other hand the greater commune can lose track of its focus on the “nearby (local) initiatives” that the small communes have, which is a distinct disadvantage for the development of the local community, for example:

- People experience it as more difficult to find their way around in the local administration, especially those who do not contact it frequently (“those who knew the answers to everything are gone, we’re left with just specialists”)
- The indirect contact with clubs and organisations dominates the picture in the greater commune through e.g. the joint committee, while in the small communes there used to be more direct contact
- A lack of debating of local political issues compared with the situation in the small communes: “In the old days we discussed local politics when we met at the shop on the corner, now we just talk about sport”
- A lack of political representation from local communities in the greater commune

Consequences for co-operation and partnership

Processes of co-operation between private business and industry, public enterprise and the civilian community are closely linked to encouraging the ability of the regional community to develop itself and exploit its institutional (social) capital. Healey et al (1999) divides institutional capital into knowledge resources, relational resources and the ability to mobilise, all of which must be taken into consideration in addition to the physical (natural resources, land area, infrastructure etc) and economic capital. If a local or regional community’s ability to meet challenges is to be strengthened, it is vital that the institutional capital is strengthened (Putnam 1993).

The regional community’s building up of capacity resources depends on learning and the use of a broad store of knowledge and expertise, continual reflection and the development of capacity-oriented frameworks of reference, the broad involvement of actors and a continual introduction and invention of new ideas along with a renewal of established ones (Amdam 2000). The relational resources are linked to partnerships, networks and co-operation between actors and can among other things be developed by the strengthening of relationships and channels between actors, the development of clear nodes that as many as possible of the actors have access to and support, the linking of networks by establishing joint arenas and processes etc. Even so, in order to capture, develop and exploit such resources, the regional community must have the ability to mobilise in relation to challenges. To do this, society needs agents of change (entrepreneurs), arenas, access to methods of mobilisation and not least a common understanding of and support for visions, possibilities and room for action (Amdam 1996 a, b).

Commune size and capacity in local development

Our general impression is that in the field of local development, the two amalgamated communes feel that they have managed to establish a considerable specialisation and an increase in capacity / know-how in their own organisation, and that this is due to the merging of the communes. It has become easier to recruit specialists and they are now able to make their own more advanced professional assessments. This in turn has meant that they are now less dependent on others’ capacity (that e.g. of the county authorities) and that they to a greater extent can function as partners in the dialogue with the county and state authorities.

But such an internal increase in the level of capacity is not automatically accessible for business and industry or for voluntary organisations, households etc. Informants have provided examples of how the merger has led to a larger hierarchy and that it is more difficult to find out who is the right person to deal with in a particular issue. What then can easily develop is considerable differences between “regulars” and “first-timers”, where the former “get to know the system” and can make use of it, whilst the threshold for first-time users is much higher than in small commune structure (Stöhr 1990, Healey 1997).

We believe that the merging of the communes has resulted in a better climate for co-operation with major enterprises and more relevant and specialised competence / capacity in the communes. This is well suited and easily accessible to the major concerns such as Borregård and industrial associations like NHO (Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry). We possess less information about the consequences for “the many small enterprises”, but the indications we have are that it has not become any easier for these. Among other things this is because it is more difficult to exploit personal and local relationships (e.g. politicians and civil servants) in order to obtain relevant information about circumstances and in order to make contact with “the right person”.

We also have a distinct impression that the biggest increase in the level of capacity / know-how has taken place within the communal production sector, for example associated with contract law, purchasing etc. An effective capacity-based organisation for community development will require active co-operation between politicians and the civic administration, between the various public service units and especially between the commune and private organisations in the community. There is no guarantee that a merging of communes will automatically lead to such an organisation and development, the new greater commune must “want to make this to happen” through its own deliberate actions. Even though Sarpsborg and Fredrikstad believe that there has been an improvement, this does not mean that the same thing will happen in other amalgamated communes.

If one looks at the two co-operating regions, this type of capacity building is an internal matter for the communes. There is a certain amount of focus on such challenges in the regional co-operation, but apart from some collaboration between industrial consultants, IT-co-operation (as in Nordfjord etc) and concrete projects, there is little co-operative activity aimed at developing internal know-how. Even though most people admit the need for more deliberate and capacity-based regional planning and development, it is difficult to implement in an effective way through regional co-operation, among other things because this so easily results in competition between the communes. Another factor is that the level of competence in the communes is low. When there are hard times economically, jobs related to e.g. planning and development are cut – even though the need is great, and thus there is little basis for co-operation. In spite of the fact that it might be a good idea to co-operate on establishing a “joint planning department” etc in such a situation, it seems easier to hire such services from firms of consultants, because then one can have greater control over the content of the planning and avoid co-operating with competing communes. Capacity building thus becomes an internal matter for the commune and often one that is given low priority.

Do co-operation and relationships work better in amalgamated communes?

Public co-operation

In both the amalgamated communes the tendency was unequivocal. A greater commune was a more interesting partner for both the county authorities and public sector units. In relation to co-operation across borders, the size was also decisive. This can be seen as both positive and negative. Positive in the sense that the necessary resources can be channelled into long-term projects, economies of scale can be achieved and the communes have the opportunity to work on a more long-term basis. The reverse of the coin is that the other communes in the county of Østfold experience both a relative and a real passivity in relation to co-operation with Sarpsborg and Fredrikstad. As a result of joint challenges linked to communications, culture, housing and economic development in the lower Glomma region, the greater communes have discovered common interests in more and more fields. This has in turn lent more force to the trend.

In the inter-communal co-operation, the fact is stressed that the regional councils carry more weight with the County Governor and the county authorities. In both places the experience is that it is difficult to reach agreement about individual issues, it is emphasised that it is the co-operation on non-

controversial issues that has been most successful. But it is also important to point out that we find distinct signs that co-operation over a period of time leads to greater understanding between the parties involved. It is plausible that this can lay the foundation for co-operation on more “touchy” issues in the future, on the basis of the logic that “successful co-operation creates trust that paves the way for new forms of co-operation” (Granovetter 1992).

The number of communes involved in the co-operation is also a vital factor. The principle of “too many cooks spoil the broth” would seem to apply here. We find tendencies towards this situation in both the Nordfjord and Ålesund regions. In Nordfjord the inter-communal co-operation between two, three or four communes has proved itself to be more difficult to handle, while our material indicates that an increase in the number of members in the ÅRDC-project (Ålesund Regional Development Corporation) has both reduced the weight the body carries externally and at the same time restricted its potential internally. A lack of formal authority on the part of the regional councils is also a vital factor. Since the power of decision-making lies with the communes, it is difficult to make the regional councils an effective actor when it comes to agreeing on somewhat “touchy subjects”. The laws concerning the administration of Norwegian communes also place considerable hurdles in the way of devolution. This has been mentioned in every single interview. In the debate on the greater commune versus inter-communal co-operation, one can claim that the present regulatory regime makes it impossible to achieve the same benefits of co-operation as can be achieved through amalgamation.

Business and industry

The data material from the amalgamated communes provides a clear indication of a trend in which the relations with business and industry have changed in the amalgamated communes Sarpsborg and Fredrikstad. The most important change is that the communes have become a more suitable size with a view to establishing a better overall housing, labour and industrial policy. Land use planning is mentioned as definitively the most important advantage of becoming bigger.

Neither the Nordfjord Council nor the ÅRDC are considered to be natural partners for business and industry. This is due to a large degree to the fact that these bodies lack both decision-making powers and the necessary means. When the informants were challenged on the idea of delegating decision-making powers to inter-communal bodies, the idea met with great scepticism in most places. In Nordfjord, where various forms of co-operation have been in place over a considerable period of time, more binding forms of co-operation are being discussed at the present time. All the informants there have pointed to the fact that the earlier co-operation has built up trust. This has in many ways contributed to paving the way for broader co-operation. We find similar, but less pronounced tendencies in the Ålesund region. The development can best be described by saying that they co-operate only when “win-win” situations exist. Such co-operation requires a lesser degree of trust, since one can “assume” the other party will co-operate, as it is in their own interest. But successful co-operation of this type develops trust based on an understanding of the other party’s needs and aims. This in turn provides room for more comprehensive co-operation.

The civil community

In both Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg the point was made that the communes’ relations with the civil community had changed. From several quarters it was emphasised that this had resulted in a lesser degree of local involvement and participation. In the municipal administration in both places it was pointed out that this is actually more the result of a general trend in society than the result of the merging of the communes. The interview material from both communes also reveals another trend, namely that the involvement and participation now applies to other fields, especially in relation to major events that it would scarcely have been possible to organise without the amalgamation. Another important trend in both the Østfold-communes is that the way of life of voluntary organisations has changed in accordance with the changes in the commune structure, with the establishment of a joint council etc to “represent” the commune. There is very little, if anything at all, in the data material to indicate that the regional co-operation has resulted in similar consequences for the Ålesund and Nordfjord regions.

Are amalgamated communes better at mobilising for local development?

With the development and improvement of the social capital, it is not enough to introduce more know-how and to establish more relationships (both strong ones that are norm-bearers and weak ones that are

the bearers of know-how). In order to achieve the desired development, this know-how and these relationships must be put to use. Our study would seem to indicate that both commune mergers and regional co-operation lead to capacity building when it comes to know-how and relationship resources, but that mergers make it easier to put this capacity to use than is the case with regional co-operation – it is easier to mobilise – to initiate the desired processes of development (Amdam et al 2003).

In the amalgamated communes we have shown that they have strategies for nature and land use planning, for economic development and to a large extent also for building the “regional” civil community – developing a common regional identity. As can be expected, there may be disagreement about these things and also about concrete solutions. There is, however, one clear difference compared to the co-operating communes, because the most marked feature of these is that they lack joint strategies, in particular for regional development, but in fact also in many respects for co-operating on municipal production etc. In both the Ålesund and the Nordfjord regions, attempts have been made at co-operating on regional development and there has been some success in individual issues, especially related to communications, environmental conservation etc., where there are obvious common interests. But what it is not possible to achieve is to develop overall strategies for e.g. youth policy, transport, economic development, capacity building in the community etc. It is also difficult to establish joint strategies in issues where there is a conflict of interests. It is typical that when e.g. Nordfjord attempts to concretise the co-operation with the support of the County Governor, it is in the fields of municipal production and administration, in particular when it comes to services that are rare or require the use of specialists.

As far as the ability to mobilise for regional development is concerned, we believe we have demonstrated marked differences between “amalgamated regional communes” with their basis in Sarpsborg and Fredrikstad, and regional co-operation projects. The capacity or ability to mobilise in the face of challenges is far greater in the communes than in the regional co-operation projects, or to put it another way – the crises and challenges must be far greater to give cause for any reaction on the part of the regional co-operation projects than is the case in the amalgamated communes.

True enough, there is no guarantee that a merger of communes in Nordfjord or in the Ålesund region will lead automatically to a greater ability to mobilise in relation to regional challenges. If one cannot manage to establish a common understanding and visions, but rather start a struggle between various local visions internally within the greater commune, it will also be very difficult for the greater commune to unite forces in the way that a mobilisation requires.

Even so, it is our belief that one important effect of the establishment of a regional commune is that a joint political arena is established and a joint administration that has the entire region as its sphere of activity and which for that reason will focus more on regional challenges, visions and strategies than a loose-knit co-operation project can manage to do. But it ought perhaps to be possible to achieve the same thing, if only co-operating communes were willing to invest sufficient political and administrative resources in a co-operation project that can “set the agenda” and function as a “node in co-operation relationships” and that can also have at its disposal economic means that will make the body an interesting partner for co-operation.

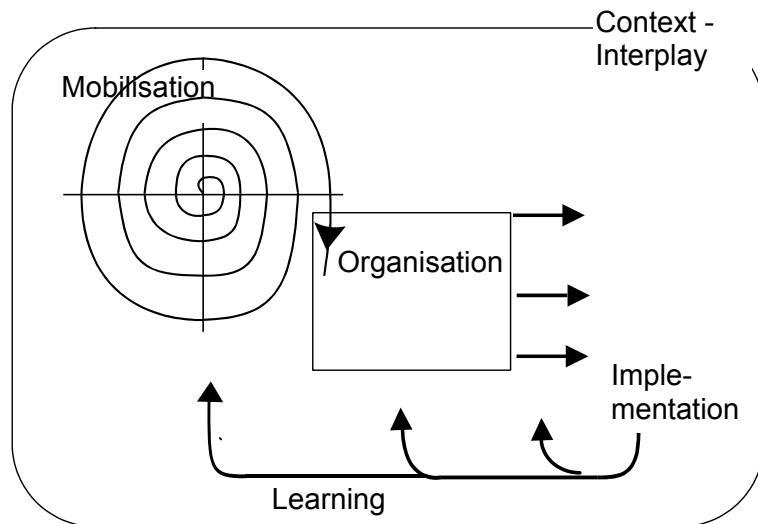


Figure 2. Model for communicative regional planning (Amdam and Amdam 2000)

Process and planning in amalgamated and co-operating communes

What can the consequences be of changes in commune structure with regard to the ability to plan and implement initiatives that can strengthen a housing and labour market region? Here we have looked more closely at consequences of a merger of communes in homogenous, centre-oriented and built-up areas of the type we find in Sarpsborg and in a polycentric area with a scattered population like Nordfjord, which we believe can serve as extremes, with the exception of metropolitan regions and single-commune regions. We have also attempted to illustrate extremes when it comes to consequences. Our point of departure is a model for communicative regional planning and development, see Amdam & Amdam (2000) and figure 2.

Mobilisation

The mobilisation variable refers to the activation and gathering of people in order to promote joint collective and individual actions. We believe that a merger of the centre-oriented area will establish joint political and administrative arenas that make it possible to develop common knowledge and understanding of the regional challenges, to develop joint visions and strategies for action. On the basis of mass “joint activity” it is possible to develop a common identity, to invest in large-scale joint initiatives in the fields of culture, clubs and organisations, as well as to a certain extent take care of local interests. In the polycentric area, amalgamation will facilitate the establishment of common political and administrative structures, but the local conflicts will be built-in and might well create difficulties in establishing a common knowledge and understanding of challenges: local visions “defeat” a joint regional vision. A lack of “joint activity” in the whole area will make it difficult to develop a common identity and invest in large-scale joint initiatives without triggering demands for “the same thing” from other centres.

Organisation

In the centre-oriented regions a merger will result in a simplification of the “internal” structures and relationships and make it easier to establish co-operation and partnerships with a view to developing strategies and action between the commune, business and industry and voluntary organisations – especially the large ones. The commune will be able to recruit specialists with the relevant advanced know-how and expertise for such work and politicians who can focus on external as well as internal challenges. Regional “overall thinking” in organising the competition with other regions is possible. In polycentric regions, amalgamation will simplify the political and administrative arenas and will make it easier to co-operate, in particular with major enterprises and organisations for which there is widespread support for co-operation. On the other hand, conflicting internal interests and visions will possibly make it difficult to develop special organisational expertise in the field of regional planning and development. The most important foundation for the recruitment of politicians may well be the

fight for their local community within the greater commune, instead of fighting for their region in competition with other regions.

Implementation

The implementation variable refers to whether the public sector development apparatus, in co-operation with others, has the capacity, the competence and the means to implement initiatives that can influence the development in the region. Focus on joint visions and strategies and the recognition of the regional competitive situation can result in priority being given to effective public sector regional development in centre-oriented regions. Developing the entire regional community – business and industry, the civil community as well as public sector activity – can be possible, which in turn makes it possible to give priority to youth initiatives, know-how building etc, rather than municipal production. In polycentric areas, conflicting interests, arguments about localisation etc can mean that the greater commune invests such large resources in municipal production – especially in providing decentralised “specialised services” – that limited resources are available to be devoted to “overall” regional development work. Local development organisations (partnerships) may compete for such limited resources and joint initiatives become restricted to whatever there is broad agreement on (Glosvik & Amdam 1997).

Learning

Joint learning processes bring forward knowledge about events and actions that can provide new understanding and new attitudes, regional processes that give strengthened powers. A common identity, joint arenas and processes can lead to well-functioning joint learning and recognition processes that can conquer conflicts of interest in centre-oriented regions. Broad learning and mobilisation processes are possible on the basis of broad public debate about the challenges in the past and in the future. Efforts are voluntarily “co-ordinated”, based on recognition through common learning of the fact that this produces results. In the polycentric region, fragmented interests and antagonism can mean that there are many competing learning arenas that concentrate on competition from within instead of from outside. Instead of developing trust and joint action, mistrust and competing actions can be stimulated.

Interplay with the outside world

The interplay with the macro-forces in society at large and the micro-forces in the local and regional communities. Active regional co-operation in the centre-oriented region in relation to joint visions and strategies means that the region can face the “macro-challenges” in a systematic way, so that unfavourable trends are toned down and the favourable ones are strengthened, thus being better equipped in the competition between regions. In the polycentric commune, regional fragmentation can mean that it is not possible to meet the “macro-challenges” in a systematic and united way. Different groups in the region are “lured by” different trends and make alliances with competitive forces in the macro-society in such a way that they “all end up on the losing side”.

This study has shown that one of the biggest challenges facing regional planning is all the fragmented actors, some public, others private with all their own particular interests. As demonstrated by Vigar et al (2000), active joint governance requires the development of a political fellowship in a region with interested parties who share common values and ideas, and who have joint arenas for policy development. In the study by Vigar et al (2000) of regional planning and governance in four English regions, the extent of co-operation and partnership between private and public actors was to such a high degree decisive for the result of the planning and governance that there is a danger of marginalising the public planning process. What we have seen is that there are clear differences in the regional planning and governance efforts, dependent on whether there is one or more communes in the region, and that regional co-operation without the necessary powers and economic means will not be able to compensate for this. A fragmented commune structure would seem to contribute to further fragmentation of the regional governance efforts, but may be an advantage for the local social development process.

There is no guarantee that an amalgamated nodal commune can actually manage to exploit the possibilities for planning and development work. In addition a fellowship is required of private and public interested parties with a joint focus on developing the entire region as a community (Stöhr

1999, Healey 1997). This demands a deliberate prioritising and investment in such efforts, in the face of competition from challenges in the fields of administration and production.

One pre-requisite, especially for regional governance on one's own terms, is the development of common attitudes, common understanding, joint strategies etc – that one works together instead of against one another (Vigar et al 2000). And such relationships and co-operation can only be developed locally and regionally, actors from outside can simply help to “lubricate” such processes, they cannot be replaced by “resolutions” or “orders” – that will simply lead to active opposition and “sabotage”. On the other hand, external actors can have an uniting function as a “common enemy” (Stöhr 1990).

Conclusion

In our investigation we have shown that changes in commune structure clearly influence a housing and labour market region's ability to practise local and regional governance and that it is important to study these circumstances in more detail in the various areas. We have also demonstrated that geography is very important, along with cultural and social conditions. In this context one can distinguish between two “extremes” and the differences in consequences between them can be summarised as in table 1 below.

The centre-oriented and built-up area. Characteristic for this area is that it has a distinct centre that the inhabitants in the area operate in with regard to work and services and which to a large degree influences their choice of place to live, commuting patterns etc. The district covers such a small area that those who live on the “outskirts” of the area can commute daily to other “outskirts”. This provides a considerable challenge in the organisation of the community internally with regard to land use, jobs, service, transport etc. Through an amalgamation the new “greater commune” ends up with a population well over the “average commune”, e.g. 50,000 as in Sarpsborg, which is a good example of one such area. To some extent also Fredrikstad, and even Ålesund with its surrounding communes, have something of the same character. The merging of communes in such areas can give regional governance a new initiative and strengthen the area's competitiveness in relation to other regions at home and abroad. But this requires that the amalgamated commune is able to focus on the challenges facing the regional community, recognise the need for an effort, develop joint visions and strategies, give priority to means and actions and continually learn both from their own experiences and those of others. Simply merging communes is no guarantee that this will happen, but seems to a large degree to improve the chances, compared with regional co-operation projects. Furthermore, broad agreement that an amalgamation was necessary in order to be in a position to compete better outwardly would also appear to a clear advantage.

The polycentric area with a sparse and scattered population. The Nordfjord region is a typical example of this. The area has four equally large centres and several small ones. It is possible to reach the vast majority of the area by commuting daily to and from “the central place”, but not between the other places. If one adds together all the communes in Nordfjord, the population will not be more than about 33,000. The amalgamation of communes in polycentric BAS-regions, where many of the actors are opponents of a merger, will rarely lead to any improvement in regional development until joint visions, strategies etc have been established. This especially problematic if the region lacks joint arenas and processes that can lead to central actors acting together and talking and developing mutual trust over a period of time. Probably a distinct “recognition of a crisis” is necessary, or strong external pressure, in order to “force” actors to co-operate. On the other hand, regional co-operation is not likely to be more effective than the merging of communes as long as the actors do not commit themselves more than is the case today.

Are then these decisive arguments that make it possible to say that communes in housing and labour market regions ought to be amalgamated, if necessary by force? We cannot offer such advice. In the first place, the study is limited to development work / governance, the other responsibilities of the commune such as welfare production and administration have not been assessed. Secondly, there are great differences in the consequences for regional development, depending on whether the merger is “forced” or “voluntary”. Force can lead to confusion instead of improvement in certain cases. We are therefore not strong believers in “instrumental” top-down changes in municipal structure as a tool in regional governance and certainly not in order to achieve quick results. If an amalgamation of

communes is to lead to a rapid strengthening of the power of the region, there must in advance have been established a broad pattern of co-operation and trust between all the key actors in business and industry, the civil community and the public administrative sector, coupled with a fundamental understanding of the fact that a merger really is necessary in order to build a better society.

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