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Participation in planning and plan-making in Norway

Abstract:

Comprehensive municipal land use and community strategic planning have been a part of local political and administrative responsibilities in Norway since 1965. Still a lot of municipalities have challenges regarding planning processes, planning decisions and implementation and some planning are in reality symbol production (plan-making) to fulfil internal and external demands. Participation from inhabitants is often symbolic especially regarding strategic planning.

In this paper I will use Volda municipality as an example together with results from national research to analyse local planning in Norway based on complexity theories. The objectives are to discuss how the real influence of inhabitants can be increased and how strategic local planning can be a political instrument regarding local development.

The Norwegian municipality is an important part of the welfare state responsible for the production of direct public services like schools, kindergartens, care of old and disabled people, social care, child care, health care, local infrastructure etc. as well as local planning and development. To do this production the municipal sector employs approximately 15 % of the total labour force in Norway.

The municipal is the most important political organisation regarding local wellbeing and development, but is also under a lot of conflicting pressure from:

- National- and regional territorial demands regarding local and regional development, land use, environment protection, universal design, service provision etc. Due to a very fragmented state the municipality have to coordinate conflicting demands and regulations and often have to set up negotiations between different state authorities.
- Local needs regarding welfare production that can be in conflict with national standards and the economic support from the state.
- Initiatives from local action groups, local organisations etc. in the civil society regarding items like localisation and management of municipal production and activities, as well as handling of initiatives regarding regional and national responsibilities.
- Maybe due to strong national government regarding municipal responsibilities participation in local elections have decreased and is now near to under 50 %.

The paper is concerned primarily with linkages and with formulating public policy, and producing plans that are operable across different scales. In focusing on scales of responsibility, I will contrast national and regional priorities with the initiatives from action groups, and from local organisations and communities which seek to strengthen civil society and localise municipal functions, providing a counter-balance to regional and national directive. In light of the inherent complexities of planning and delivery systems, I will

spotlight the role of community actors and civil society in working with the local, regional and national state to resolve critical challenges and ensure more tailored service outcomes.

Norway's west coast communities have traditionally been dependent on agriculture and other primary industries, including fishing. This generated a land or resource based culture reflected in a degree of homogeneity in local communities: differences between communities were bigger than differences within them (Gammelsæter et al 2004). But this situation has changed in recent years, with economic shifts bringing greater heterogeneity in the social make-up, signalled by new commuting patterns, the search for employment across a greater range of sectors, and patterns of movement, social-contact and sociability that appear more suburban than traditionally rural. There is greater outward complexity in communities, manifest in different occupations, interests, networks, social relations and leisure pursuits.

These more complex communities present conventional planning with a critical challenge: that challenge is one of connectivity and ensuring that a greater diversity of aspiration and need is acknowledged by public policy and planning, and that communities become co-producers of programmes, projects and other interventions that are alive to the reality of social complexity. One way to begin thinking about this challenge is to view Volda's communities as components within a 'complex adaptive system' (Innes and Booher, 2010), which provides a means of 'reading' the scale links and relationships in a locality, and also a way of thinking through how planning might itself negotiate this complexity.

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