

## Taking stock of regional governance in the Nordic countries

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## Introduction

A series of reforms and experiments have recently taken place at the regional level of governance in the Nordic countries. Few studies have been made of the implications of these changes for the role and function of regional levels of governance vis a vis other levels of governance as well as for the ability of regional politicians and administrators to exercise regional governance. This special issue presents a collection of articles that contributes to a stock taking of the formal and informal changes in the institutional set up of regional governance in the Nordic countries and the implications of these changes for the governance practices of regional governments in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark.

One of the characteristics of the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a general strengthening of the regional level of government in many European countries. During this period, the trend commonly referred to as New Regionalism led to a strengthening of the powers and legitimacy of existing regional governments as well as to the establishment of new supra- and sub-national levels of regional governance. At the turn of the century, the heydays of the New Regionalism were over, however, and the intentions behind structural reforms became ambiguous.

The focus of attention in this special issue is these recent reforms and experiments and their impact on the role and position of regional levels of governance. As a key feature of these reforms, the number of Danish regions has been

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reduced to five, and their task is more or less exclusively the running of hospitals. Norway has kept their 19 counties but they have few tasks e.g. the coordination of regional development initiatives. In Sweden, responsibility for health care has remained the dominant regional function but the reforms have resulted in a complex mix of regional governments with different tasks and competencies. In the case of Finland the model based on inter-municipal cooperation is still operative, but the Finnish government has initiated experiments with formalized and directly elected regional bodies.

Hence, there seem to be no common direction of change in contemporary Nordic regional reform. This is arguably surprising given the similarities of the Nordic countries. It is particularly surprising among the three Scandinavian countries, which in the past had a very similar system of regional governance with directly elected councils responsible for significant welfare services such as secondary education and hospitals.

The comparison between the Nordic countries raises a number of research questions worth exploring. One can possibly argue that the present institutional diversity calls for new theoretical perspectives or new combinations of existing theories in order to grasp the developments in each and one of the Nordic countries. It is also worth discussing how the Nordic countries compare to the general development in the field of regional governance – are we, for example, witnessing a Nordic exceptionalism in regional reform compared to the rest of Europe?

With institutional change follows new frameworks for political and bureaucratic actors. Consequences of regional reform are not given, and following from a belief in transnational learning, valuable lessons about regional governance can be transferred between the Nordic countries. This intention made the backdrop for a workshop on “Regional politics in the Nordic countries – Development, Tendencies and Future” at the Nordic Political Science Conference held in Gothenburg 12-15 august 2014. This special issue contains a selection of the papers presented in this workshop. Empirically the selection of articles covers the four largest of the eight Nordic countries.

Taken together the articles in this issue provide insight in how regional reforms may be understood and explained. They also provide new knowledge on specific forms of governance and experiments in Nordic regions, and they analyze and discuss how and to what extent problems of economic, social and environmental sustainability are pursued through interactive governance and social innovation. The issue also explore the condition for political leadership at the regional level.

In the first article *Torfing, Lidström and Røiseland* maps how the sub-national regional levels of governance in Denmark, Norway and Sweden have changed from a high degree of institutional convergence to a pattern of institutional divergence. These changes, it is argued, are poorly explained by the more or less rational explanations of change found in main strands of the new institutionalism. The authors argue that political and institutional conditions together with spillover effects form a better explanation of the increasingly divergent patterns of regional governance in Scandinavia.

The second article, written by *Haveri, Airaksinen and Jäntti*, discusses the Finnish case. Finland has a long tradition of inter-municipal cooperation rather than directly elected political institutions at the regional level. However, a few attempts have been made in order to introduce more hierarchical governance models instead of relying on a network mode depending on voluntary collaboration. The article presents and analyzes one such effort – the Kainuu experiment, where important local government tasks were rescaled to the regional level. The analysis is based on data from a long-running evaluation study, and shows how the experiment had consequences for political decision-making, power structures, institutions and citizens.

Most regions in the Nordic countries have some important policy task in the area of environmental, economic and social sustainability. These areas are characterized by uncertainty and risk of political conflict, and dealing with these tasks often require construction of network arenas where public and private actors can join forces. The article by *Hofstad and Torfing* analyzes the efforts of Norwegian regions to enhance collaborative innovation through the formation of interactive governance arenas. It sets focus on how different forms of interactive governance enhance collaborative innovation for economic, social and environmental sustainability.

In the fourth article, *Johansson, Niklasson and Persson* study the regional level from below. Should the creation of new regional governance structures be mainly a top-down process ensuring central state control, or should it rather be a bottom-up process focussing on giving municipalities an active role in the regional governance arrangements? These questions are explored based on an empirical study of a failed process of creating a new large region in Southern Sweden during 2013 and 2014.

In article five, *Higdem* analyses regional partnerships in Norway. These partnerships, which comprise a mix of local and regional government actors, work for regional development. However, their linkages to formal local or regional institutions are weak. Local as well as regional political leaders have a potential interest in influencing these partnerships. The article analyses these processes based in the concept of meta-governance. The analysis shows that even when politicians are ‘hands on’ in the partnerships, insufficient anchorage back to the democratically elected bodies still presents a challenge.

The closing article, by *Sørensen, Lidström and Hanssen*, explores the conditions for political leadership in the Scandinavian regions. Regional governance in Denmark, Sweden and Norway is increasingly pluricentric, involving politicians elected at different levels that compete for political leadership. The authors argue that the political leadership capacity of elected politicians at regional levels of governance depends on their ability to construct a community of regional followers and to mobilize the support and resources of strong and influential regional stakeholders. Taking departure in an analysis of recent institutional reforms in the three Scandinavian countries and a literature review of the role played by politicians in regional governance in the wake of these reforms, the

article diagnoses the present conditions for politicians elected at regional levels of government to exercise regional political leadership.

## **Note**

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