

# Lessons learned from the seminars on Nordic rural development 2009-2010



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Nordic working group 1b: Future rural areas

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# The seminars

As part of the work of the Nordic working group on rural development (appointed by the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers), a series of seminars were held during 2009 and 2010. All in all four seminars were organised – one each in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. The seminars focused on service provision, governance and business development in rural areas. Public and private actors as well as researchers involved in rural development at the national, regional and local levels were invited from all four countries.

Within the context of Nordic cooperation, in 2008 the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Regional Policy (EK-R) tasked four taskforces with developing proposals for specific initiatives and projects in three different action areas. This was to be achieved in dialogue with EK-R. One of these taskforces (also called working groups) is concerned with the development of Nordic rural areas. Members of this working group include officials from the Nordic countries and representatives from Nordregio (a Nordic research centre for regional development set up by the Nordic Council of Ministers). Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have chosen to have active members. This working group is tasked with facilitating the exchange of experiences and developing knowledge about the role of rural policy in regional development in the Nordic countries. Its brief is also to seek to improve the conditions for future cooperation among the Nordic countries with regard to development and growth in rural areas. In this light the four seminars were arranged.

- Nordic rural areas – potentials and challenges, Service provision in the rural areas, Steinkjer, Norway, May 2009
- Service provision in Nordic rural districts, Tällberg, Sweden, November 2009
- Governance and local capacity in Nordic rural development, Tuusula, Finland, March 2010
- Business development in Nordic rural areas, Skarrildhus, Denmark, November 2010

## **This paper**

This publication functions as a condensed documentation of the presentations and discussions held at the seminars. It is also designed to reflect upon the lessons learned in the process of holding Nordic seminars within the working group.

It begins by presenting an overview of the process involved in generating and running the seminars. This is followed by a discussion of the content of the seminars starting with an overview of Nordic rural development policies and then turning to each of the three themes; governance, service provision, and business development. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the findings delivered by the working group.

The paper highlights the challenges faced by Nordic rural areas and touches upon solutions found to these issues in various places. The paper also then reflects upon the need for future Nordic cooperation in this area.

## The working process

Since the working group is made up of people from four different countries working in different kinds of institutions and at different levels the initial challenge faced was to define common interests and ambitions. This initial phase resulted in the creation of a long list of issues of interest. Over time the list has been refined and shortened and has subsequently been used successfully to guide the work of the group. Service supply was one of the major themes appearing in all countries hence this was the first issue to be examined more closely. The best method for doing this was found to be a seminar. From this initial burst of activity the group went on to gather knowledge on both the administration and design of seminars and the issues discussed. This information was then used to fuel conversation within the group and resulted in the planning of a new seminar around topics highlighted during this initial period of activity. This approach has been consistently adopted while in addition, where necessary, decisions were made to deal with specific issues in the form of individual reports in addition to the seminars.

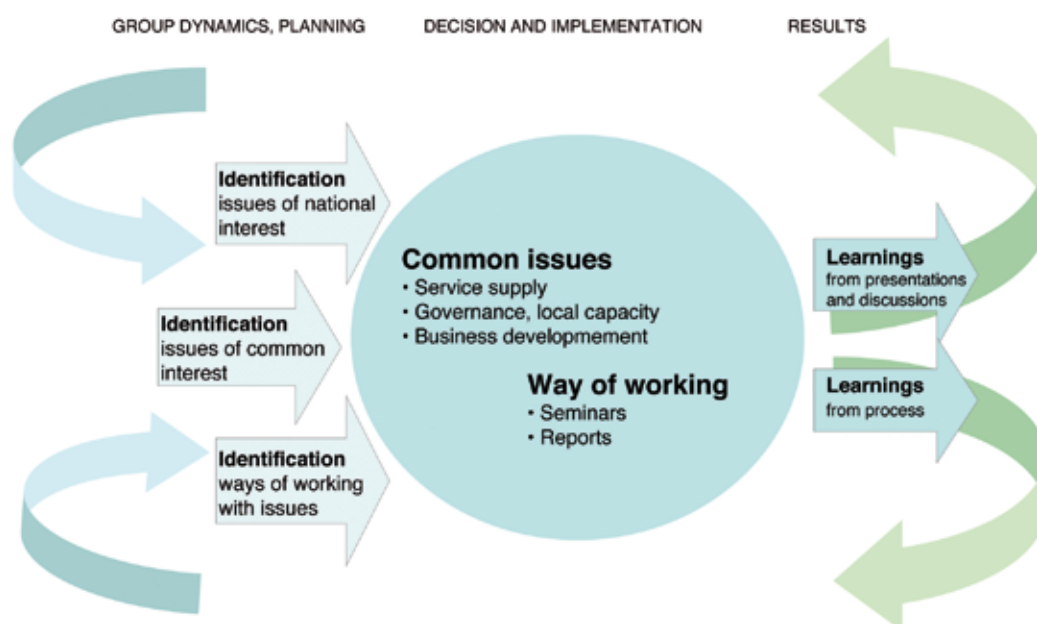


Figure 1 Workflow within the Nordic working group on rural development

## Reflections on the working process

- Define common interest and ambitions
- Strive towards the creation of a circular workflow, let findings and news feed into the process
- Allow for common reflections upon the seminar within the working group
- Arrange a seminar in each of the targeted countries - participants from countries other than those where the seminar is held are more difficult to attract
- Encourage reflections and discussions among seminar participants - smaller groups, well defined questions to discuss and appointed discussion leaders promotes this

# Similarities and differences in Nordic rural policies

Rural development has not traditionally been addressed as a policy field in its own right in Denmark, Finland, Norway or Sweden. Half a century ago politics in the Nordic countries was dominated by a concentration on building the welfare state and the development of rural areas was felt to be effectively addressed in the context of strong regional policies, combined with policies supporting the primary sector. Over the years however the focus began to shift from national redistribution and welfare service provision towards a greater focus on competitiveness. Simultaneously, cross sectoral and 'bottom up' development have gained attention in rural development discussions.

Despite the existence of significant geographical differences a shared perception across the Nordic countries of the emerging challenges in terms of rural development has developed. On the one hand a number of megatrends such as globalisation and global climate change are identified as major challenges and on the other more specific challenges connected to the centralisation of the population and the economy are highlighted.

Though many similarities can be found in terms of policy aims and the methods differences nevertheless remain between the four countries' respective approaches. National definitions of rural areas and the various solutions to the challenges highlighted above can differ markedly as do the potentials of the rural areas in focus.

In Denmark, Finland and Sweden contemporary rural development is shaped by national and EU rural and regional development strategies while in Norway, rural development is approached in both a regional policy covering certain issues of rural development (Distrikts og regionalpolitikk) and in the more sectoral agricultural policy.

In all four countries the argument for sustaining rural areas is mainly implicit. In Norway the line

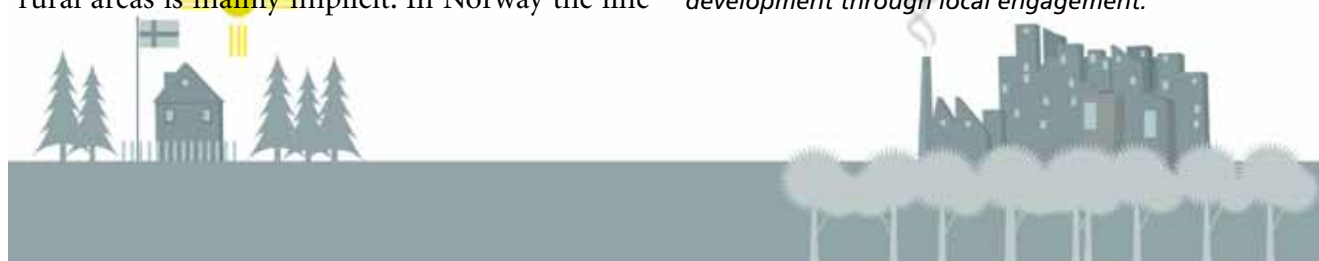
of argument is most explicit, there it is argued that the individual's basic choice of where to live and work is deemed to be of value, as is the notion of having population located near the nation's dispersed natural resources. In Finland the cohesion question provides a basis for the measures undertaken. In all countries the importance of making use of the human and natural resources available in rural areas, which could contribute to strengthening the growth and competitiveness of the entire country are stressed though. Various formulations in respect of addressing the economic and environmental demands associated with living in rural areas, including the provision of realistic possibilities for living and working, are visible in the national objectives and priorities of each country.

In terms of implementing the policies Finland stands out as adopting the most cross-sectoral and coherent approach. Some years ago Finland introduced a distinction between its broad and narrow rural development policy. Even though this is not explicitly stated in the various national documents all four countries are now practising these two kinds of policies in parallel.

Instruments for the coordination of different kinds of sectoral policies aiming at rural development can be found at both the regional and national levels. At the local level the involvement of communities is prominent in the implementation and coordination of national policy as well as of EU-policy. In addition, village associations and LAGs<sup>1</sup> play more or less formal roles in shaping local, regional, national and EU rural development policies.

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<sup>1</sup>Local Action Group; initiated to carry out and design parts of the EU Rural Development Programmes by using the Leader method which is a bottom up approach to rural development offering a way of working with rural development through local engagement.





# Lessons learned

## **Governance and local capacity**

### *Map governance structures*

In order to design better rural development policies and to make better use of the established support system, it is important to map the existing governance structures. This enables development actors to get an understanding of the overall support system, their own role, and the work of other actors and levels. It further enhances comparisons and possibilities to learn from measures and initiatives in other Nordic countries by facilitating an understanding of the context within which the respective initiative is developed.

### *Strengthen the local level*

One of the keys to enhanced rural development is a strengthened local level and the empowerment of local capacities.

### *Bring different sectors and levels together*

The increased importance given to the inclusion of actors from different sectors and with different roles; public, private and voluntary as well as from all geographical levels is positive. A move away from sectoral policies towards a more cross-cutting and territorial focus is required.



## Service

### *Develop the relations between levels*

To enable for, and maintain, service provision in rural areas, the relations between administrative levels need to be further developed.

### *Highlight multitasking*

Multitasking is one way of meeting the reductions in both private and public service supply. Local shops can be seen as an example of this; they are important not only as service suppliers but also as meeting points. A successful initiative supporting rural shops is the Norwegian Merkur.

### *Increase chances to learn from others*

Set up a Nordic network to cooperate around the development and preservation of local and regional services. There are a number of good examples of solutions that can be used as sources of inspiration in the other Nordic countries - the Norwegian examples of extensive local commitment where local communities support local activities/shops financially, the district medical centres as well as the concept of mobile petrol stations were highlighted in the seminars. There is also a need for comparative studies on service provision and supplementary functions.

## Business development

### *Improve coordination between support systems and entrepreneurs*

There is a need for greater coordination and transparency between different public business support systems. Further there is a need for coordination of public and private actors, not the least in regards to the entrepreneurs and business development.

### *Local civil servants are important link*

Civil servants are positioned between the policies, programmes and businesses and are important links between the system and its outcomes. Networking and research centres offer other ways of enabling entrepreneurs to find their way into the support system.

### *Support systems need to grasp opportunities*

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# Concluding remarks

## Common needs and challenges

### *Increased coordination needed*

The working group concludes that despite declining political support for national redistribution and welfare state provision and the increasing focus on competitiveness the specific challenges facing rural areas have not been forgotten in the political debate. The topic is kept alive at all geographical levels, albeit at variable levels of strength. To make use of the variety of resources available actors at different levels need to possess a greater amount of knowledge about each other as well as information on each other's roles, tools and measures.

### *Nordic rural areas share many challenges*

Many of the challenges highlighted are the same across all four countries and between the various levels in each. The effects of the underlying trends creating the challenges invariably however bring about different results at the various geographical and administrative levels.



### *Both good and challenging examples are useful*

The need to share knowledge and experiences to help disseminate more broadly the findings of other actors across the Nordic countries was repeatedly stressed during the seminars. Some further reflections on the content of the exchange of experiences and studies on rural areas were also provided. Many of the participants regarded the focus on the promotion of 'good examples' as useful in connection with the desire to highlight the similarities and differences in the definition of the challenges faced. At the same time it was argued that they helped to generate inspiration and understanding in respect of the identification of potential solutions. Some asked for more good examples to be disseminated. The potential to learn from more 'challenging' projects and from less successful examples, as well as the need to identify bottlenecks and problems, was also highlighted.

## Central themes

### *Attractiveness*

The notion of 'attractiveness' emerged as a central theme in all of the seminars, both in the presentations and during the discussions afterwards. Creating an attractive place is in turn a response to the perceived impacts of the major challenges faced, namely, globalisation, climate change and the centralisation of the economy, the population and of services.

Globalisation increases the importance of attractiveness by making the level of competition between places greater. However it also facilitates the spreading of information and the ability to promote a place which, in a way, gives small places the ability to compete effectively. With regard to climate change some rural places use climate friendliness as a way of promoting themselves. Numerous examples of places using their climate strategies in their work towards becoming more attractive were provided in the context of the seminars. In the end, attracting both businesses and people, and in turn preventing further centralisation, is seen as an important goal here. Developing/maintaining services is used as a tool to prevent the further centralisation of economic activities and people, in some places it is also used to attract new citizens and businesses.

### *Place-based, diversified development*

Throughout the seminar discussions concepts such as 'place-based' and 'diversified' reoccurred continuously. The focus here is on enabling each place to develop its own solutions based on its own assets and abilities. Unique answers to the challenges of rural areas are to be created at the local level in cooperation with regional, national and EU actors and measures.

### *Projects*

Further, a common understanding among participants was that the rural development debate of today circles around the implementation of projects. Thus development is to be based on the results of projects designed to be supported for a limited number of years. Long-term measures are still implemented but the focus has increasingly come to be on short-term projects.



## Conclusions of the working group

### *Difficult to distinguish effects of initiatives*

Even though the presentations at the seminars have highlighted numerous examples of good ideas and initiatives, while also being inspiring, it is still difficult to talk about the effects of the initiatives. This is partly due to the timing of the individual seminars, for some it was too early in the process to talk about long-term effects. This could however also be in part due to the fact that the focus among funders, initiators, implementers and evaluators is on the current not the future situation.

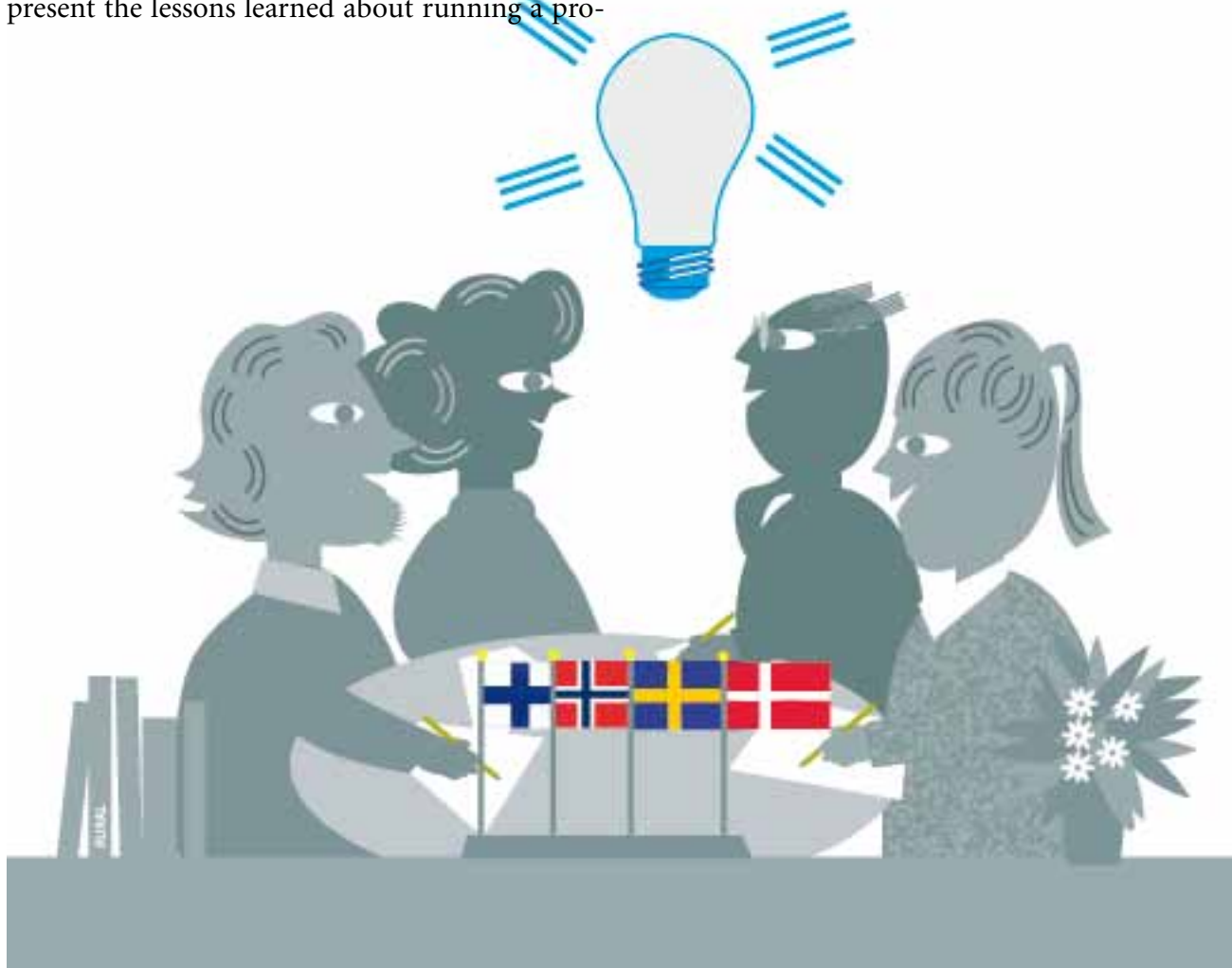
### *Focus is on the process*

The seminar discussions were thus mainly on administrative issues and the process of developing, organising and implementing an initiative. This was a topic within which experiences could easily be exchanged and lessons learned. Accordingly, at present the lessons learned about running a pro-

ject can be seen as one of the most important effects of the project-based development work. This strengthens rural society by contributing to the development of local capacities.

### *Different places, similar solutions*

The seminars further showed that many locally devised solutions are actually rather similar in nature, even though the debate is, to a large extent, focused on place-specific assets. To reach a common development strategy with a common aim and means, based on these assets, an increasing number of different kinds of actors are becoming involved; civil society, academia and the private as well as the public sector. Despite this, many of the strategies presented at the seminars have striking similarities. As such, in the ongoing work on making Nordic rural areas attractive many rural places seem to have adopted similar strategies.



## The future

### *Attention to long-term effects*

Finally, these reflections can also be connected to the ongoing European debate on the nature and shape of post 2013 EU cohesion policy. In many ways this debate follows the same logic as many of the seminar discussions; place-based development is highlighted as the way forward, and as a way of improving the effects of the policy. What the working group has seen is that, at present, it may be so that many of the local development strategies are rather similar in nature. On the other hand the debate also addresses the issue of efficiency with the ability to measure effects and impacts being underlined. This requires the focus to be widened to also include long-term impacts in the world of development projects.

### *Further development of knowledge*

The seminars provided the possibility for actors at all levels from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden to learn from each other. The exchange of experiences is also one of the main tasks of the working group. The birth, development and implementation of many new ideas for rural development were presented and discussed. The working group is also tasked with the promotion and development of new knowledge. In order to further pursue this task inspiration for additional studies could, potentially, conclude study of; the long-term effect of different kinds of rural development initiatives, the factors leading to successful/less successful results, the development of new knowledge in respect of, for example, which level or what actors are most suitable for carrying out different kinds of development measures. □



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