

The Regional Development Policy and Planning Process in Norway

The Case of Tromsø and Troms County



Robert van Adrichem
Student Number 000002997

NORS 499/POLS 415

October 31, 2001

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Regional development is a challenge for northern regions. Often saddled with a dependence on natural resource extraction, northern regions are grappling with what it means to be successful in the 21st century, with its new focus on innovation. In this regard, northern regions share many similar characteristics and challenges. Many northern regions have suffered the consequences of out-migration as residents move to larger cities, in search of more opportunities and services. They are usually large, sparsely populated regions, with limited opportunities for agriculture. Their residents typically have achieved lower levels of education, suffer poorer health status, and are more likely to be unemployed (1). Often, the considerable distances between the North and the southern centres of political influence contribute to a sense of isolation among northerners.

The case of northern Norway challenges the traditional north/south, rural/urban, core/periphery, or heartland/hinterland stereotypes. The regional centre, Tromsø, nearly 300 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle, is a city that has been one of Norway's fastest growing communities. The local university has the world's northernmost medical school and is a centre for innovation, the community is aiming to be the cultural centre of the Barents region, and thousands of young people can be seen talking and laughing on patios and in cafes throughout the city centre. What is Tromsø's secret? Can the lessons learned in northern Norway be applied to other northern regions?

This paper argues that, in the Nordic countries, deliberate national policies and programs have been developed with the clear aim of encouraging regional development, especially in the northern parts of those countries. Norway has a particularly strong regional policy tradition; arguably, it has been more successful than either Finland or Sweden in encouraging relatively even population distribution throughout the whole country (2). There are roughly as many people in northern Norway as in the national capital, Oslo. By comparison, no province in Canada can claim to have as many residents in its northern region as in its biggest city. The paper further argues that Norway's success can be attributed to two main factors: 1.) a conscious and planned regional development planning process involving the national government, regions (counties), and

municipalities, and 2.) a national commitment to an egalitarian welfare state.

In addition to secondary source materials, this paper is based on primary research conducted in Norway in August, 2001. Interviews were conducted with key decision-makers and scholars in Oslo and Tromsø, including the Norwegian State Secretary for Regional Development, the Chairman of the Troms County Council, the Mayor of Tromsø, a professor of Regional Studies at the University of Tromsø, and the Associate Dean of the University's medical school.

After a brief description of northern Norway, this paper outlines the historical context of regional planning in Norway; the current process for regional development; and the limitations and future challenges and opportunities of regional development planning, especially in relation to taxation, innovation, industrial expansion in areas such as fish farming, and the challenges of population growth and centralization. A particular focus will be placed on the impact of regional development planning in northern Norway. Specific examples will often be cited from the County of Troms and the city of Tromsø.

What is Northern Norway?

It is important in this analysis of northern regional development to first outline the characteristics of the region in question. The northern part of Norway is comprised of three counties: Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark. Totalling 113,000 square kilometres, the area is 30% of Norway's land mass or roughly the same size as Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands combined (3). Although large by European standards, Norway has an extremely low population density of thirteen inhabitants per square kilometre (the European average is 146 people per square kilometre) and the population density in the North is even lower than the national average (4).

Population density is only one reality. As is apparent from the map, the majority of northern Norway lies above the Arctic Circle and there are considerable distances between northern communities and the political centres of power. Oslo, for example, is 1440 kilometres away from Tromsø. Traditionally, the economy of northern Norway has been dependent on mineral extraction, some forestry, ship-building, power generation, and fishing. This reliance on primary industries has contributed to economic boom and bust cycles, and to periodic out-migration (5).



Geographically, mountains and fjords define Norway. If straightened out, the Norwegian coastline would stretch from the North to the South Poles. Together with the jagged coastline, the mountainous topography historically made it difficult to establish linkages with other regions or to establish large-scale operations. Isolation led to differences in language dialects. The North is also the traditional homeland of Scandinavia’s aboriginal people, the Saami. All of these geographic, social, and economic factors have contributed to the formation of stronger regional identities in Norway than in any other Nordic country (6).

History of Regional Policy Development

Regional development first gained acceptance as a field of politics in the 1950s. The aftermath of World War II left northern Norway in shambles, a result of the Nazis’ “scorched earth” policy. Many survivors were moved to safety in the southern part of Norway and the country had an urgent need to develop a plan for re-building the North. In his book on Nordic Regional Development, Jan Monnesland argues that the political strategy of the time was to ignore the

North altogether. In the 1950s, many people believed the future would lie more with industrialization than with fishing so, he says, there was a plan to develop Norway's southern heartland and keep the transplanted northerners there to help in the process (8). But, when two-thirds of the northerners returned to the North, "despite being forbidden to do so by the authorities" (9), the government had no choice but to channel resources into northern development.

The need for an urgent plan for the North placed the responsibility for development with the National Government and coincided with the Government's strong movement towards establishing an egalitarian welfare state. In Scandinavia, the "welfare state" means far more than simply the process of handing out welfare cheques to the unemployed. It refers to a centrally coordinated policy of public investment throughout the country built on income redistribution and aimed at providing a comprehensive array of social services for all citizens, no matter where they live (10). In many ways, regional policy can be seen as a direct outcome of the Norwegian commitment to the welfare state. It is interesting to note that the Scandinavians were implementing a model of spending their way out of recession before the theory was further developed in the mid-1930s by British economist Maynard Keynes (11). Even though the idea for a Norwegian welfare state was hatched during a worldwide Depression, most of its development occurred during the economically prosperous period following World War II as a key ingredient to social democracy and equalization throughout the country. Evidence of the program in northern Norway could first be seen in the construction of infrastructure (roads, bridges, etc) and through subsidies for industrial development. In 1961, the national government solidified its role in regional development when it created the Regional Development Fund (RDF). The RDF provided the government with valuable instruments to influence regional development by funding various initiatives: feasibility studies, relocation grants, training, transportation subsidies, etc, with the highest subsidies available for the northernmost regions (12). The main objectives of the program have been to "counter the disadvantages of the natural conditions, give the regional population a

standard of living as close to the rest of the country as possible, and to retain the existing settlement patterns of Norway” (13). It is important to recognize that regional policies consisted of goals, measures, and incentives that were created, administered, and allocated by the central authorities. In the 1960s, clear overlap had developed between the development of the welfare state and the aims of regional development. In fact, “the merging of the goals for the national economy with those of regional policy is an essential factor which helps to explain the status of regional policy in recent times” (14).

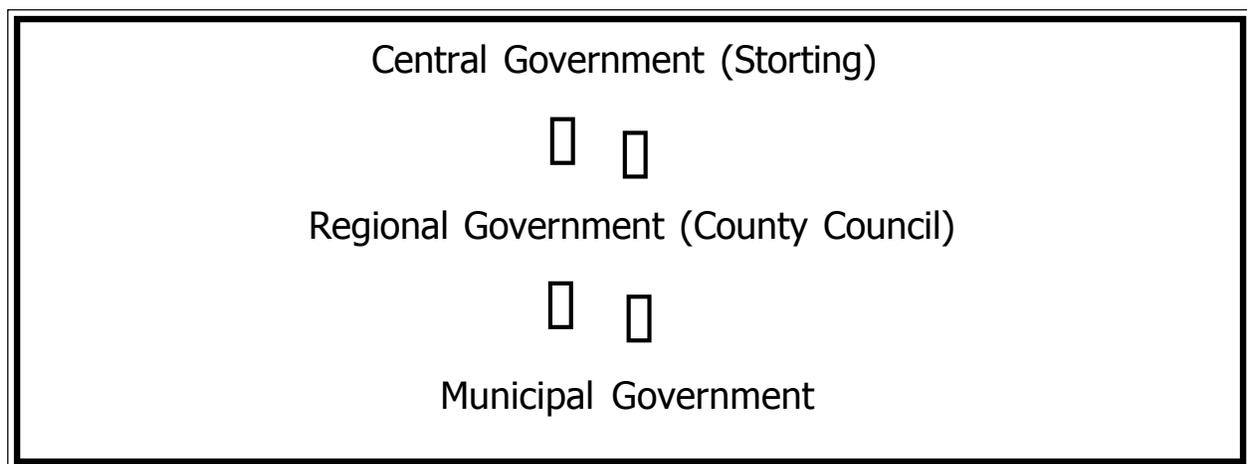
(University of Tromsø professor) Peter Arbo, notes a shift that occurred between the 1960s and the 1980s. During those two decades, he argues, the regional policy focus broadened. Following on the earlier objective of establishing the welfare state and providing equalization among regions, a greater role was seen for innovation in enhancing industrial development (15). Consequences of this shift included a greater focus on funding advanced research and a larger voice for regional authorities.

The Current Regional Development Structure

The principal objective of regional development policy is to maintain demographic distribution patterns and to ensure robust and sustainable development in all parts of the country (16)

The National Government continues to play a lead role in regional development, although the process now includes the participation of two other political levels: the county and municipalities. Currently, in addition to setting out the priorities for regional development, the central government is responsible for higher education, the armed forces, national road networks, the police force, etc. Counties are responsible for trades training, child welfare, museums, county roads and transport, and various social services. Municipalities have wide responsibilities ranging from municipal, roads, water, sewage, and community planning to primary and secondary schools, public libraries,

and caring for the elderly and disabled (17). Funding to carry out the responsibilities of counties and municipalities is provided by the central government. The central government is further empowered in that the national Parliament (Storting) determines the division of functions between the central government, the counties, and municipalities. But the Storting is organized in such a way as to enhance its role in regional development. For example, seats in the House are grouped by county, rather than by political party affiliation (18). In addition, a tradition of minority governments in Norway has forced parties to co-operate in the formulation of public policy. This provides all representatives with the opportunity to be involved in policy formulation, thereby giving the North a broader voice in the process.



As depicted in the diagram, the regional planning process in Norway involves all three political levels. The central government is clearly at the top of the process because it sets broad national priorities for regional development, approves regional development plans, and funds the initiatives contained within the plans. The county is presently at the centre of the relationship, a position it has held since the mid-1970s.

Since 1671, Norway has been divided into counties and there are currently 19 regions in the country (19). Counties have two main functions: as a bureaucratic arm of the national government

ensuring centrally funded programs are implemented in the regions, and as a regionally elected body responsible for regional economic development and planning. The election of county councils first occurred in 1975, at about the same time they received the responsibility for regional development planning (20). Although still guided by national priorities, the devolution of regional planning to the elected county councils was a response to the desire for a grassroots regional development process, one that would foster innovation over industrial investment and income redistribution.

According to the Chairman of the Troms County Council, “Parliament has recently dealt with regional and district policies in Norway, and has emphasized that the County Councils, which are subject to elected management, shall be the prime regional development participants. Planning undertaken by the County Councils shall coordinate the State, the county, and the main features of the municipalities’ physical, economic, social, and cultural activities. Through regional trade, industry, and development in the regions, increased national wealth can be generated” (21). Through its responsibility for coordinating the participants in the regional planning process, the county determines the organizations that have a seat at the table. In Troms County, these organizations include the Saami Parliament, trade and industry organizations, and municipalities. The process is also open to public feedback and comment (22). The County Plan defines the objectives and development strategies, and is a governing document for county activities and state funding. The Plan is further processed by the central government and is adopted by Royal Resolution.

As indicated earlier, the regional planning process undertaken by the County is guided by national priorities. Every four years, the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development develops a broad vision that centres on the creation of sustainable and profitable employment in all parts of the country. The Ministry’s Department of Regional Development is also responsible for coordinating with other government operations that have a bearing on

economic conditions and quality of life in regions with regard to labour, fisheries, education, research, etc (23).

The funding of regional development objectives is a key role for the central government. Because the counties do not directly tax county citizens, the majority of funding is derived from national sources. The State Industrial and Regional Development Fund provides the capital for a majority of regional development programs, particularly around the development of local fisheries, trade, and industry. Another organization, the Industrial Estate Corporation, fosters the development of business and technology parks and assists innovative new companies with start-up funds. In addition to these two nationally funded programs, the National Government provides grants in lieu of employment taxation to assist companies that locate in targeted regions. In 2001, this program alone is estimated to be worth 13 billion Norwegian Kroners (more than \$2 billion) (24). A number of initiatives aimed at human resources have also been established in Troms and Finnmark. These are in the form of income tax relief, the forgiveness of educational loans, and a higher rate for child welfare payments. The aim is to make it more attractive for young families to establish themselves in the North, while also securing skilled labour for the public and private sectors (25).

In summary, the National Government establishes the overall priorities for regional development but the detailed county plans are created in the region, with participation from municipalities and key organizations. These plans in turn guide state investment in the county.

Current Priorities, Opportunities, and Challenges

Since the Storting establishes the broad vision for regional development planning, the tone created in Oslo has effects in all of Norway's nineteen counties. The nation's most recent goals and strategies for rural and regional policy were presented in the spring of 2000 and cover a four-year period. In an effort to maintain the population settlement pattern and a standard of living that is

relatively equal around the country, the Storting sees the establishment of more *robust communities* as essential (26). The development of these *robust* communities recognizes the multitude of factors that encourage residency in a given community or region. As acknowledged by State Secretary Sverre Bugge, people demand more than simply a house and a job (27). The concept of establishing robust communities includes providing equal and stable welfare provision, a competitive and profitable business sector, good access to skills, and varied housing and services (28). The objective is to combat overcrowding in the major cities by helping provide desired services and features in the smaller communities that are currently suffering from out-migration.

The development of more *robust* northern communities is also essential to the realization of Norway's long-term economic vision. Offshore oil and gas exploration is currently a significant contributor to Norway's balance sheet. In fact, revenue generated by the petroleum industry is currently providing the national government with a surplus equal to 40% of the nation's operating budget (29). The industry is currently concentrated off of Norway's central coast, and is likely to move northward. While 80% of known reserves in the North Sea have already been tapped, the corresponding figure for the coastal area off northern Norway is only 17% (30). Nevertheless, the National Government is planning for the day when this non-renewable source of revenue runs dry. Within 20 years, the government expects the fishery, especially fish farming, to be as big an industry as the petroleum industry is now. In fact, over the next two decades, the government expects exports from the fishery to double six times (31), becoming Norway's most important industry in the process. Much of the fish farming activity will occur in northern coastal areas.

Neither of the industries outlined above have much to do with Oslo, yet the revenues they either currently or are forecasted to generate are critical to the Norwegian economy as a whole. It is here that an intersection occurs between regional development and the growth of the national economy. The establishment of *robust* communities in the North is essential if the full potential of the petroleum and marine industries is to be realized. Fish farming, for example, simply can't

happen in the harbours of big cities; it must occur near small coastal communities. It also takes skilled people, so small communities must be able to provide the services that will help them to recruit and retain the people who will provide the know-how to continue expanding the industry.

For Troms County, the national vision provides additional opportunity. More than half of the county's population lives on coastal islands and many communities outside of Tromsø are fishing communities that are heavily export oriented. Even with resource wealth, the County sees *competence* as its most valuable commodity. In fact, the term is in the subtitle to the County Plan. Competence is key to fishery development, where research is essential to the success of fish farming. But in a broader context, Troms sees competence as a central part of what it means to be robust in the 21st Century, and the University is key to that vision. According to the State Secretary for Regional Development, only three communities in the North have been able to sustain healthy levels of growth over the past decade (32). These communities are Bodo, Tromsø, and Alta and they are each the main educational centre for their region.

The creation of universities in the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, and Finland recognizes the role universities play in regional development and diversification. In northern Norway, the University of Tromsø was created out of a regional development plan that focused on the importance of training specialists (nurses, medical doctors, school teachers, etc) who would continue to work in the North after graduation.

“Producing graduates is by many considered to be the true purpose of a university, and it was the expected correlation between place of birth, place of study, and region of employment, especially in the case of medical students, which had been of such political significance in the campaign to



A University of Tromsø medical student

establish a North-Norwegian university. Now one can conclude that this line of reasoning has been proven correct” (33). Information provided by the Associate Dean of the University of Tromso Medical School further indicates the success of training students in the North: “We have studies to show that if the student is from the South, then 30-40% of them stay in the North after they graduate. If they are from the North, then over 80% of them stay in the North” (34). Clearly, providing educational opportunities for northern residents is key to providing the human resources essential for developing and maintaining *robust* communities.

While the National Government sets the broad vision for regional development, county governments have gradually assumed more authority for identifying the local priorities, which then guide funding allocations from national programs. This growing role for regional governments more or less coincided with the growing realization of the need to diversify local economies towards information and knowledge-based industries. The term knowledge economy has been used to describe “...the process by which a typical industrialized or primary production economy is transformed into an information-dominated, post-industrial economy” (35). The process can be a difficult one, partly because the main resource – innovation – is invisible to the naked eye and difficult to quantify. Achieving a knowledge economy is more complex than setting up primary industries; simply put, forestry can generally exist where there are trees and fishing can exist where there are fish. Knowledge industries develop where there are educated people, at least in part. A key ingredient involves providing educated people with opportunities to develop new ideas, and this is now central to many regional development plans. In Tromso, the Industrial Estate Corporation (outlined earlier) provided funding for a science and technology park located adjacent to the University campus.



Tromso Science Park

As indicated previously with information from Peter Arbo, there was shift in the 1980s towards greater emphasis on the research and innovation that would enable greater industrial development. The goal of the strategy was to provide fertile ground for developing a knowledge economy throughout all of Norway, but there have been gaps to overcome. A 1988 study found that computer usage in Norway was lowest in the northern region. In fact, the number of northerners using computers at their jobs was less than half the rate of the big cities (36). As a nation, Norway has some catching up to do. The number of “innovative enterprises” is lower in Norway than the OECD average, and much lower than other Nordic countries. For example, “...the Swedish enterprise is twice as innovative as the Norwegian enterprise. In Finland, the public expenditure in research and development is twice as high as in Norway. Without any doubt, in Norway, we do not invest enough in innovation...” (37).

Historically, regional development in Norway favoured investment in traditional industries that have ill-prepared the North to participate in the knowledge economy. In an article on regional innovation policies, Rachel Parker acknowledges that state intervention can encourage regions to rapidly adapt to economic change or conquer new export markets. In the case of Norway, she argues, the state can be criticized for propping up “ailing industries” that have no long-term future for the sake of maintaining employment opportunities in the periphery (38). Regional Policy scholar Richard Malinowski agrees. He argues that the state focus on traditional industries such as natural resource extraction and ship-building in the 1950s and 1960s led to problems in the 1980s when plants closed and residents moved to larger communities (39). In the Norwegian Government’s 2000-2001 Report on Rural and Regional Policy, it is predicted that half of the communities in Norway will experience a drop in population. The situation is especially dire in the North, where nine of the ten communities with the worst standard of living in Norway are located (40). The Storting has recognized the problem and is committing additional resources. The current Rural and Regional Policy report aims to provide broadband network connectivity to all schools, public libraries, hospitals, and government offices by the end of 2002, and to all Norwegian

households two years later (41). Network connectivity is the infrastructure of today, but a broadband link is only as good as the extent to which people use it to improve their quality of life.

In Troms County, the University can produce educated citizens who can use this new infrastructure to enhance economic development, access health care services, and provide new educational opportunities. Focusing on competence, innovation, and research is providing Tromsø with the capacity to develop what it feels it needs to enhance its *robustness*.

As space becomes less important, place becomes more important. The development of the knowledge economy provides opportunities for people to potentially conduct their business anywhere. If individuals are no longer tied to a certain **space** (a forestry worker having to work where there are trees, for example), why do they choose to live and work in a particular **place**? They will choose to live in *robust* communities, where there is a range of lifestyle opportunities, housing, employment, services, access to skilled employees, and a vibrant culture. It's true: it is more than simply having a house and having a job. The Mayor of Tromsø has a vision to make the City a cultural centre for the whole region (42). When asked to envision the Tromsø of the future, Herman Kristoffersen sees the City as a centre of influence and culture for the entire northern world. Interestingly, in the economy of today, cultural enhancement may do as much to attract and keep residents as tax breaks and government incentives.

Challenges

Troms County has a challenge to balance the growth and potential of Tromsø with the viability of many of the county's smaller communities. Through the 1990s, Troms County witnessed an overall population growth rate of 3.4%, but much of that can be attributed to the City of Tromsø's 17.1% growth rate (43). County Mayor Ronald Rindestu says that, "...of the County's 25 municipalities, only five experienced growth in the past ten years, and none of the other four saw anything like

the growth rate in Tromso. The remaining 20 municipalities experienced a decline” (44). Assisting the County’s 24 other communities will be challenge, but is vital if the growth of the fish farming industry is to be realized.

Tromso itself has become a victim of its own success. The funding provided by the National government to county and municipal governments is based, in part, on population. Funding provided today is based on population statistics gathered two years ago. Because Tromso is growing so rapidly, it is constantly receiving less money than is needed to provide services to its residents. Mayor Kristoffersen estimates that the city is not receiving its share of the taxes paid by as many as two thousand people, representing a shortfall of approximately 30 million NOK (45), roughly equivalent to about \$5 million Canadian, or 1.6% of Tromso’s operating budget of nearly 1.9 billion NOK (46). Compounding the problem is Tromso’s large student population. The city estimates that close to 10% of its population are students who are registered as residents of other towns or cities. These 5-6,000 people still need to access various municipal services – housing, health care, libraries, etc – while they are attending university and college in Tromso. It is important to note that Tromso’s loss is another community’s gain. Communities that are experiencing a decline in population essentially get to keep the taxes paid by its former residents for two years (47). In this way, Norwegian policy favours disadvantaged communities/regions.

Conclusion

The future of regional development policy in Norway may be subject to many influences, some of which are difficult to predict.

What role will the European Union and other supranational organizations play? Norway is currently not a member of the EU, in part because residents of the northern region insist they are receiving more funding from Oslo than they would from Brussels. Nevertheless, as the EU and the

General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade, for example, gain worldwide political clout, heavily subsidized regions such as northern Norway potentially have a lot to lose. The past half-century of public investment has succeeded in expanding the public sector and creating jobs. Yet many small, northern communities continue to see a decline in population.

What role will the North play with respect to the petroleum industry and the growth of fish farming? As Troms County points out, there are many coastal communities that are entirely dependent on the export of goods out of the country. If the petroleum industry continues to shift to the North and if fish farming grows to a level predicted by the national government, will those communities feel they're getting their fair share of funding from the National Government? Will the funding be enough to enable them to become *robust* communities?

Even though the regional planning process is centered in the county and reflects the needs and goals of the county, the National Government controls the rate of development by allocating funding. In this way, the national government has been able to develop the whole Norwegian economy while reducing the presence of "hot spots" that are potentially prone to suffer from booms and busts (48). This was especially important, of course, in the period following World War II, when much of northern Norway was destroyed. In more recent times, central government funding has supported a high level of development throughout the whole country, a result of the Social Democratic tradition of equalization. According to Troms County, the biggest fear today is one of centralization, and it is being seen at two levels. First, Troms County feels that it is being pushed out of the political process. Although counties occupy a unique place in the regional planning process, they are caught between the priorities established at the national level and the local opportunities developed at the municipal level. Norwegian scholar Oddbjorn Bukve argues that county leaders have failed to formulate strong visions for regional development, and are losing political legitimacy (49). Electoral statistics support allegations of a crisis of legitimacy for regional governments. Participation in county elections has declined since the 1970s, with just

over 50% of residents casting ballots in 1997, lower than the turn-out for the national and municipal elections (50). The national government has contributed to county unease with its new focus on developing robust *communities*, although it does acknowledge the need for greater *regional* involvement.

Centralization is also occurring within the County itself. The City of Tromsø is clearly the service, educational, and government centre for the entire county. Inevitably, it would seem, the City is destined to grow larger at the expense of the smaller communities in the County. The regional development planning process is key to achieving a balance. If counties are squeezed out of the political process, the competition between municipalities will be exacerbated.

The regional development planning process is integral to the development of economically stable communities throughout all of Norway. Many services, such as large hospitals and universities, simply cannot be available in every community. Nevertheless, the regional planning process can identify particular strengths and opportunities within regions to ensure that the same, or higher, levels of service can be provided while encouraging the development of more robust, northern communities.

Footnotes

1. Nord and Weller, p. 9.
2. Bugge, interview, August 17, 2001.
3. Arbo, interview, August 18, 2001.
4. Monnesland, p. 13.
5. Nord and Weller, p. 8.
6. Monnesland, p. 15.
7. Ibid., p. 17.
8. Ibid., p. 17.
9. Ibid., p. 20.
10. Arter, p. 173-191.
11. Ibid., p. 175.
12. Malinowski, p. 79-81.
13. Ibid., p. 71.
14. Monnesland, p. 19.
15. Arbo, interview, August 18, 2001.
16. Brochure produced by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, outlining its own activities and structure.
17. Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development brochure outlining the functions of the different political levels in Norway.
18. Damgaard, p. 77.
19. Aurdal, et al. p. 267.
20. Bukve, p. 201.
21. Rindestu, interview, August 20, 2001.
22. Ibid.
23. Brochure produced by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, outlining its own activities and structure.
24. Bugge, interview, August 17, 2001.
25. Rindestu, interview, August 20, 2001.
26. Report #34 to the Storting on Rural and Regional Policy.
27. Bugge, interview, August 17, 2001.

28. Report #34 to the Storting on Rural and Regional Policy.
29. Bugge, interview, August 17, 2001.
30. Green Arctic Norway, p. 14.
31. Bugge, interview, August 17, 2001.
32. Bugge, interview, August 17, 2001.
33. Fulsas, p. 29.
34. Fonnebo, interview, February 16, 2001.
35. Tykkylainen, p. 12.
36. Buflod, pp. 120-122.
37. Tron speech at opening of Trondheim science park.conference, 2000.
38. Parker, p. 145.
39. Malinowski, p. 76.
40. Report #34 to the Storting on Rural and Regional Policy.
41. Report #34 to the Storting on Rural and Regional Policy.
42. Kristoffersen, interview, August 20, 2001.
43. Rindestu, interview, August 20, 2001.
44. Rindestu, interview, August 20, 2001.
45. Kristoffersen, interview, August 20, 2001.
46. Based on the 1998 budget, as outlined on the website *Facts and Figures about Tromsø*.
47. Kristoffersen, interview, August 20, 2001.
48. Monnesland, p. 19.
49. Bukve, p. 219.
50. Statistics Norway website on electoral participation.

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