

Citizen Education, Municipal Development and Local Democracy in Norway



(Photo: the Namsdals Newspaper)

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This article was written as the Norwegian Contribution to a study and resourcebook with the title: **“Learning for local democracy”** - an initiative of the Central and Eastern European Citizens Network (CEE CN), a group of local initiatives in 18 countries, that works to promote citizen participation in Central and Eastern Europe and provide opportunities for grassroots initiatives to learn and exchange experiences and ideas. Members of the network have long called for a more systematic mapping of local participation in Europe, in order to build intellectual and experiential resources for network members, local activists and interested citizens, and to provide an advocacy tool for better communicating the need for local citizen participation vis-à-vis decision-makers and publics. For this reason, planning for such a study and resource book began in earnest in 2011, facilitated by seed funding from the International Visegrad Fund and the EU Commission’s Grundtvig and Lifelong Learning Programs. Partnering with CEE CN in this effort is CEBSD the European Community Development Network as well as a group of independent experts.

For more information: www.ceecn.net and www.eucdn.net

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Cover photo: The Norwegian municipality of Overhalla brought together citizens of all ages for a collective visioning workshop about an energy and climate friendly community. Many of the ideas were incorporated into the resulting plan and followed up. This gives citizens a real sense of ownership of the future.

The worst terrorist action since World War II struck Norway on 22 July 2011 and gave this author a deeply tragic impetus for writing about local democracy and active civil society. Even though the act of an individual, the explosions in Oslo and the shooting of innocent young people taking part in a summer camp of the Labour Party on the island of Utoya, was an attack on the heart of Norwegian democracy and values. It confirms the importance of strengthening efforts towards openness, participation, dialogue, inclusivity and international understanding – a key task of civic education. In response, a good part of the population of Norway took part in spontaneous flower marches – a resounding statement of popular will not to answer hatred with hatred, but to stand up for the fundamental values of an open, active, democratic and caring society. With backing from all political parties, Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg made the following statement: “Our response is more democracy, more openness and more humanity”.¹

This chapter reviews active and practical citizen education for living local democracy in the Norwegian context. It discusses Norway within the framework of what is commonly referred to as the Nordic social model and the implications of the Nordic tradition of citizen awareness and education. One special tradition for creating community solidarity is ‘*dugnad*’, a form of collective work on common tasks. This and the overall importance of the voluntary sector in creating an active and values based local democracy are discussed. The chapter also presents the main institutional and legal frameworks for citizen participation, and some of the national programmes that have in recent years supported it. We provide a picture of the Norwegian administrative system, of civil society institutions, and of how local authorities and municipalities work with civil society in their recognised task as ‘community developers’. Thereafter we present a selection of typical issues that have been raised by local community initiatives and organisations.

The values of democracy and civil society participation are deeply rooted in Nordic societies.² The ‘Nordic model’ has long been a trademark and focus of interest for those with social-democratic leanings, far beyond Scandinavia. More recently it has kindled interest even among economists. Not least, this is because all the Nordic countries regularly rank highest in terms of economic performance and competitiveness.

This said the exact substance of Nordic model is less clear. All are welfare states with strong social security systems, reflecting a consensus on the need for income redistribution. But this is not unique to Scandinavia. Bismarck introduced pensions to the German Empire fifty years before Norway; the first well developed welfare state was introduced by New Zealand; and the term welfare state originated with the post-World War II government of Clement Attlee in Great Britain. In the early 1990s, the Ideas Bank received a visit from one of Mikhail

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¹ Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg in his remembrance address at Oslo Cathedral, 24 July 2011 ([full text of the speech](#)).

² This section is based on Hille, J., [The Nordic model – is it able to sustain?](#) (Oslo: Ideas Bank Foundation, 2006).

Gorbachev's advisors. Gorbachev was the then General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In the half an hour he had to spend at the Ideas Bank he wanted the recipe for the Nordic model, apparently hoping to introduce it back home. With typical Russian determination he wanted to know which attributes all the Nordic countries, in contrast to all others, had in common. Various suggestions were made, but failed the test of commonality; one was not applicable in Finland, another for Denmark, another could equally be found in Canada. Rightly or wrongly, the common denominator that could be found between all the Nordic countries was the strong degree of local democracy. It was also difficult to name other countries where municipalities played such an important role in the political system and where local democracy is so firmly anchored. Our Soviet guest may not have been too satisfied, since our answer suggested it might be difficult to achieve local democracy by decree from Moscow!

The journal *Monday Morning* of October 2005 was asked by the Nordic Council of Ministers to describe what the Nordic countries have in common and what has made the region the 'global winner' it is perceived as. Through selected interviews eight main points emerged:³ *Equality* means that people in the Nordic countries take care of each other. This is not seen as conflicting with freedom, but rather as a condition for it. One result is the fairly good degree of gender equality in Scandinavia. This extent of equality in society has led to a high degree of *trust*, both between individuals and between individuals and authorities, and confirmed time and again by surveys. *Flat hierarchies* are important in that the distance between ordinary people and those in power, both political and commercial, is short. *Social inclusion* is central, and participation is both legally enshrined and expected from members of society. Adding to this are *flexibility* and *respect for nature, aesthetics* as Nordic societies appreciate simplicity and harmony, and not least what sociologists have long come to call the *Protestant work ethic*.

The report also states that these eight characteristics stimulate competitiveness. In egalitarian societies the consequences of failure are bearable, so people dare to take risks and innovate. Where there is trust, transaction costs are low. Where there is a short distance to those with economic power, employees will show initiative and take responsibility rather than just waiting for orders, and so on. In societies lacking these attributes, conflicts between competitiveness and generous welfare provision are more common.⁴ The study also emphasises the high level of education in the Nordic countries and the equality with which it is accessed, delivered and used. There are few geniuses or elite schools, but also few unqualified workers.

Few Scandinavian words are used in other European languages since Viking times, but two exceptions have social significance. One is *Ombudsman*, a social institution with the task of

³ See the English summary of Lindholm, M.R., Prehn, A., and Højgaard Jønson, A., [The Nordic region as a Global Winner Region. Tracing the Nordic Competitiveness model](#) (Copenhagen: Mandag morgen, 2005).

⁴ Wilkinson, R. G., and Pickett, K., *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

ensuring fairness that has been adopted in many countries. The second is '*Folkehoegskole*', translated as *Volkshochschule* or institution of civic formation (popular education) – literally, people's high school, created to enhance the education level of ordinary people. Democracy and civil society empowerment have been cornerstones of the People's High School since their inception in the 19th century. The 'founding father' of the People's High School, Danish priest N.F.S.Grundtvig, saw communication between equals as a basic principle of civil society: '... Not teaching people what to think, but awakening them to reflect and qualifying them to be active participants in democracy'.⁵

In the Nordic tradition, public awareness raising and civic education are conducted by the the People's High Schools and by a variety of associations for adult education, study circles, local NGO's and other voluntary groups. These continue to play an important role in educating new generations of citizens and in developing awareness and skills for democracy. They combine theory, practice and value-orientations. They have their own statutes and goals, including that of fostering active citizenship as a basis for both democracy and sustainable development.

A further particularity is the ancient '*dugnad*' tradition that goes back to the 11th century farming society. The concept includes various forms of exchange and work where everyone comes together and works on tasks of common interest – often accompanied by social gatherings or festivities. The Norwegian word '*dugnad*' has a double meaning. It refers to both a *well performed deed*, and a *duty*. Perhaps the closest English language equivalent is that of 'barn raising' – a rural tradition in the United States (especially among the Amish) in which the whole community is actively involved in some capacity in the building of a barn or other building, usually within one day. A leading researcher on volunteerism and civil society, Haakon Lorentzen, wrote that "... the connection between '*dugnad*' and *well performed deed* shows how the '*dugnad*' idea was founded not only on practical needs but also in morality".⁶ The manifestations of *dugnad* are many, including new forms that are decisive for the development of social solidarity as a way of living and influenced for example by contemporary social media in which voluntary networks and activities are organised.

In contemporary Norway, '*dugnad*' is still key to the formation of a sense of community and to democracy as a way of life. The three case studies included in this chapter demonstrate this. However, civil society's efforts, typified by a multiplicity of groups and organisations,

⁵ Læssøe, J., "Folkeoplysning om bæredygtig udvikling – en historie om afradikalisering og bagvedliggende uklarheder" [Civic formation on sustainable development – a history of de-radicalisation and the uncloudiness behind], in: Holm, J. (ed.), *Økologisk modernisering på dansk – brud og bevægelser i dansk miljøpolitik* [Ecological modernisation – breaches and motions in the Danish environment policy] (Copenhagen: Frydenlund, 2007).

⁶ Lorentzen, H., and Dugstad, L., *Den norske dugnaden. Historie, kultur og fellesskap* [The Norwegian 'dugnad'. History, culture and community] (Oslo: Norwegian Academic Press, 2011), p. 21.

are also under threat in the modern welfare state. Drawing on Habermas, Lorentzen discusses the tendency towards a “colonisation of the civil society”,⁷ where the borders between state, market and civil society blur or break down. For when the welfare state appears to no longer be able to meet all needs, and as neo-liberal market economics gains in influence, there is a tendency to pass responsibility to the voluntary sector. At the same time, increased budget support to the voluntary sector can increase its dependence and reduce its autonomy.

In Norway, more than in other Nordic countries (Sweden for example), closer ties between the state and the voluntary sector have steadily weakened their role as a system-critical counterweight to public power. Humanitarian and cultural organisations now provide services to municipalities and are hence obliged to conform to professional standards and rules which, according to Lorentzen, “... give less room for idealistic, amateur contributions”.⁸ There are umbrella organisations which distribute state funding locally, and this means that the small local organisations begin to function almost as if in a market-type management structure. In his article titled “Free us from the amateurs” Lorentzen further notes that “... the role of civil society cannot be reduced to that of a provider of services for the state. Civil solidarity means a lot for democracy. It is through participation in organisations, debate and dialogue with others that political interest and activism is maintained. Civil society groups are also important for our sense of belonging, both for a community, our neighbours, those who are different, and those who are less fortunate. Social solidarity can simply not flourish unless there is civil society praxis”.⁹

Against this background, important questions emerge as to how healthy local democracy in Norway really is and more broadly, if the country’s democracy is undergoing demise or renewal. The Norwegian political system embodies representative democracy at both the national and local levels, meaning that the people give their elected representatives the right to make decisions on their behalf, and elections take place in the 19 county parliaments and in the 430 municipalities: “... The value of directly elected politicians lies in their being accountable at the next election. To achieve legitimacy over time, it is essential that the people participate in democracy”.¹⁰ Voting rights are constitutionally guaranteed for all Norwegian citizens who are 18 years of age or turn 18 during a given election year. All non-Norwegians who have resided in the country for at least three years can also vote in local elections. Both parliamentary and local elections take place every four years, with the local elections taking place in each second year between the parliamentary ones. Voter participation was 76.4% during the 2009 parliamentary election and 61.2% during the last

⁷ Fjeldstad, O., “Kan sivilsamfunnet overleve de rødgrønne?” [Will the civil society survive the red-green government?], in: The Ideas Bank, *Mulighetsrommet, Aarbok 2006 Stiftelsen Idébanken* [The room of possibilities, Ideas Bank year book 2006] (Oslo: Ideas Bank, 2007), p. 77.

⁸ Interview with Haakon Lorentzen in 2005 based on his article “[Free us from the amateurs](#)”, *Samtiden* no 2/2004, pp. 77-78.

⁹ Op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁰ Parliamentary proposition no. 33, 2007-08 “[Fit sterkt lokaldemokrati](#)” [A strong local democracy], p. 6.

local elections. However, participation in elections is on the decline: the figures in 1985 and 1983 were 84% and 72.1% respectively.¹¹

The right to participation is also enshrined in other political processes, such as the right of workers to have their say in relation to health, environment and safety issues in the work place, and for citizen participation in all planning processes. Municipalities have a particular obligation to ensure active participation by groups such as children, young people (too young to vote) and others who are unable to participate directly, such as disabled people, people suffering from mental illnesses, drug addicts, and illiterates. Laws relating to municipalities, education, social services, child care and other fields also prescribe various forms of participation both for individuals and representative organs such as school boards, boards for the handicapped, pensioners, health service users, and so on.

Throughout Scandinavia, and Europe more broadly, there has been concern over falling levels of voter participation in elections and in political parties, in which there are fewer active members and more and more tasks are fulfilled by a few 'experts'. Surveys further point to falling membership in civil society organisations.¹² Various public commissions and research programmes have evaluated the state of democracy as well as the efforts to strengthen it.¹³ State funds have been allocated to try out ways of increasing the citizens' participation between the elections. Most of these have been implemented under the auspices of the Ministry of Local and Regional Affairs and/or the Ministry of Environment, in cooperation with the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities.¹⁴

Norway has ratified the Council of Europe's Charter on Innovation and Good Governance. In 2009 Norway also signed the added protocol on the right to participation in local affairs, stating that "... Norway hereby recognises the principle of civic participation and supports the many 'new' EU member states who desire a shared legal instrument for the development of democracy".¹⁵ As one of 20 pilot countries to have tested a tool for developing democracy, Norway has the basis for a democracy database allowing local communities and their inhabitants to compare themselves with other communities.¹⁶

¹¹ Saglie, J. (ed.), *Det nære demokrati – lokalvalg og lokal deltakelse* [The close democracy – local elections and local participation] (Oslo: Abstrakt, 2009), p. 144.

¹² [Makt og demokrati. Sluttrapport fra Makt- og demokratiutredningen](#) [Power and democracy. The final report from the Norwegian public study on power and democracy], Official Norwegian Report no. 19/2003; [Det lokale folkestyret i endring? Om deltaking og engasjement i lokalpolitikken](#) [Local democracy in change? On participation and commitment in local politics], Official Norwegian Report no. 7/2006.

¹³ "[Eit sterkt lokaldemokrati](#)", op. cit.

¹⁴ Examples include the Local Agenda 21 programme supported by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities that aimed at building partnerships between local governments, civil society and the local private sector (see [detail](#)), and the "Frontrunner communities program" implemented by the Ideas Bank in 2001-2004 to revitalise local democracy was one of three ambitious goals (see [detail](#)).

¹⁵ Translation by the author (see [original](#)); within this framework, see also the [Norway Action Plan for implementing the Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance at Local Level](#).

¹⁶ A [detailed report](#) is available in Norwegian.

comprehensive survey was carried out in 2010 based on the EU charter, in which good governance was traced as being characterised by reliability, responsibility, effectiveness and short distance to those in power. The results indicate that most people are satisfied with local services, whilst underlining that good local democracy is more than services; it is also a question of citizens' ability to influence local politics, and here there is a clear need for improvement in the Norwegian context. Increased and more open dialogue between local politicians and the people is needed. Some of those interviewed consider that special interest groups prevail over "the silent majority" and that participation is of little use.¹⁷

Recent years have seen a major reassessment of the role of municipalities in community development. In particular, this has involved the function of local planning. Local plans comprise a spatial and a social dimension. This goes well beyond the traditional sphere of the municipality as a provider of services, and entails partnerships and collaboration with other agents such as local civil society organisations as well as local commerce.¹⁸ Several recent national programmes have initiated new approaches to the theme of local community development. In the recently completed five year programme entitled 'Liveable Communities', the environment ministry and the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities worked "... to renew awareness and strengthen skills towards environmental and social development in the municipalities".¹⁹ More than 200 municipalities participated in networks devoted to various themes in the field of sustainable community development. A core objective was "... to develop proactive policies, in close collaboration with citizens, voluntary organisations, business, regional and national authorities".²⁰ Two of the municipalities we present in the case studies included in this chapter, Oevre Eiker and Trondheim, participated in this programme.

In the field of civil society, Norway has a wide variety of recreational organisations, sports clubs, teetotal associations, church congregations, charities, ideal foundations, cooperatives, trade unions, patients' organisations, environmental groups, local associations and so on. An umbrella forum, called 'Voluntariness Norway'²¹, was set up in 2005 with the goal of strengthening dialogue with the authorities including developing the bases for volunteer work and the formulation of future policies. The forum also aims to build skills and improve management within the volunteer sector. There are over 250 member organisations, representing over 50,000 associations. The forum is very active in European networks such

¹⁷ Survey conducted by Oslo University with interviews of 22,600 citizens and 2,136 local politicians in 82 municipalities (as quoted in *Aftenposten*, 16 February 2011).

¹⁸ Ringholm, T., Aarsæther, N., Nygaard, V., and Selle, P., *Kommunen som samfunnsutvikler. En undersøkelse av norske kommuners arbeid med samfunnsutvikling* [The municipality as a community developer. A survey on the work of Norwegian municipalities on local community development], NORUT report no. 8 (Tromsø: Northern Research Institute, 2009).

¹⁹ See *Livskraftig. Fagrapport fra programmet Livskraftige kommuner – kommunenettverk for miljø- og samfunnsutvikling* [Livable. Professional report from the program Livable Communities – network of municipalities for sustainable community development], p. 6.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ For more information, refer to the website of Frivillighet Norge.

as the European Network of National Civil Society Associations (ENNA) and World Alliance for Citizens' Participation (CIVICUS).

The range of issues these organisations are involved in locally is equally broad. It includes everything from the preservation of old buildings to traffic issues and urban planning, as discussed in the case study about Svartlamon. There is also work directed at prevention, such as the 'Night Ravens' – these are volunteers who patrol the community especially at weekends to keep an eye out for violence or vandalism. The football club Vaalerenga in Oslo initiated an anti-racism campaign under the banner of 'Rainbow Football', which then spread to other clubs. An organisation of children who spent time in care has fought to be recognised as a consultative body and has written its own proposal, recently delivered to the government, for a new law on improved child care regulations and services. There are also many local protests against centralisation and the closing of local services such as schools and hospitals. Other movements address environmental issues such as the treatment of the wolf population, the location of windmills and nature reserves. Much local volunteer activity is also related to concerns over rural depopulation. Village youth organisations and family associations have been central in the struggle to maintain active, sustainable local communities.

Many organisations work to improve the status and dignity of persons who for various reasons struggle with regard to housing, employment, education, narcotics or psychological problems. An example is the socio-political 'Welfare Alliance', which unites a range of organisations and groups who work for the disadvantaged. The Alliance is affiliated to the European Antipoverty Network (EAPN) and has been a key player in national politics as regards poverty. The Health and Social authorities have been frequently approached by groups working with poverty and social exclusion, and the Alliance succeeded in lobbying for the establishment in 2003 of a publicly funded centre for such organisations. Named 'Battery' and run by the charity *Kirkens Bymisjon* (The Church City Mission) on the basis of a government mandate, this is now a nationwide resource centre with offices in Oslo, Kristiansand, Bergen, Trondheim and Bodo.²² It assists groups and organisations to become more effective in their work with poverty and exclusion. A central goal is "... to strengthen democracy by stimulating dialogue between those in the margins of society, far from the political processes and authorities".²³ The centre's services are free, and promote "... help towards self-help".²⁴ Included are meeting places, courses, and advice on setting up organisations. 'Battery' also has an annual meeting with the Minister of Labour.

The Ideas Bank Foundation documents and promotes examples of best practice from all over Scandinavia; examples that show democracy and sustainability in practice in local

²² For more information, see the website of [Kirkens Bymisjon](#).

²³ Klemsdal L., and Svare, H., [Batterieffekten. Metoder for selvhjelp i organisasjoner](#) [The Battery effect. Methods for selfhelp in organizations] (Oslo: Kirkens Bymisjon, 2008), p. 14.

²⁴ From the [mission statement](#) of *Kirkens Bymisjon*.

communities. For 20 years, it has provided advice and knowledge both locally and to national programmes where dialogue between authorities, business and civil society has been central. This has included the national Local Agenda 21 initiatives as well as, more recently, the national 'Liveable Communities' programme referred to above. All of this work is founded on global democracy processes. The 1992 Earth Summit, or United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, declared that participation is a precondition for sustainable development. It also acknowledged clearly that many of the solutions needed can only be achieved through shared efforts in civil society, cooperation across sectors and dialogue between an active civil society and the authorities.

The three case studies included in this chapter, Sagene, Oevre Eiker and Svartlamon, have been chosen from among any number of examples of good practice because all three have a fairly long history, and hence experience to be learned from. These are not once-off initiatives – it is possible to observe in these cases deliberate development over time, although not without resistance and conflicts. These experiences also demonstrate a willingness to learn from the process. The three examples also complement each other in various ways – geographically (urban and rural), and in their main approach ('top down' and 'bottom up'). Two of the examples involved very broad discussion across all sectors, one initiated by the right wing and one by social democrats. The third illustrates how grassroots self-help can approach the administrative system.

Case Study 1: Sagene – Democracy Not Only for the Initiated

The urban district of Sagene in Oslo provides an innovative example of cooperation between local authority and civil society. It demonstrates how action spanning across sectors and interest groups leads to creative thinking. With the local community centre as one of several activity hubs, the municipality together with local interest groups has shown the importance of public arenas that foster both wellbeing and dialogue.

Sagene community centre is the hub for Local Agenda 21 activities; the district has been particularly active in LA-21. One main aim of the democracy work has been to reach and involve those groups who are seldom heard. The work has been methodical, using various techniques and approaches that have a preventive effect and foster inclusive participation. Sagene also illustrated the difficulty of maintaining creative community-building efforts and services in times of major budget cuts when these types of non-mandatory activities are often the first to be cut. The following will focus in particular on the way the community centre has functioned as an arena for democratic planning, exemplified by an art project and the development of the nearby public square, Arne Gjestis Plass.

Sagene is one of Oslo's 15 urban districts. Each is governed by an elected District Council. The councils are responsible in particular for kindergartens, health services, social and child

care services, environment and local parks. Comprising 33,000 inhabitants within an area of just over three square kilometres, Sagene is one of the most densely populated districts in Norway. It is changing rapidly, with population influx as well as fairly high population mobility. It also has the highest proportion of municipally owned housing in Oslo. This typifies former industrial worker areas that are transforming into modern, multicultural urban environments.

The community centre was opened in 1979, but received a new lease of life in 2001 when the district decided to make it the hub for LA-21 and for new, local democratic processes to supplement the representative democracy institutions. The district council wished to explore new roles and more active civic participation. This political goal was partly fostered by the fact that Sagene for various reasons has many poor people, often living side by side with new, high cost housing.

The process was initially part of a ten year project, largely financed by Oslo and the state in a citywide programme for improvement of the old inner city areas. The main objectives were: improved housing conditions, a better environment for growing up, good public spaces and security, support for drug addicts, those needing psychiatric care and the homeless, environmental quality, public transport and strengthening of local volunteer activities.²⁵

To achieve these goals, the employees at the community centre had to abandon the traditional sectoral approach and think outside the box about their roles as service providers and enablers. Today, there is a section for sustainable development comprising four persons; 40 percent of this work is dedicated to running the centre so as to reach all segments of the local population, and 60 percent to maintaining and developing local parks and outdoor spaces so that they can be accessible to all and used for outdoor activities all year round. It is the stated policy of this section to develop multi-professional projects and networks and methods to reach the most marginalised groups in the social housing. The section also has the task of developing methods for integrating culture, environment and local democracy; a sustainable community is seen as one that builds health.

“Our fundamental working approach is what the Dalai Lama calls ‘a policy of kindness’ and a focus on collective values,” says section leader Susan M. Guerra, or I am because we are. “Our methodological foundation is that of ‘community development,’ which I have worked with for many years both in Texas and in Oslo. It’s not easy to translate the word ‘community’ since it has several shades of meaning, including the local society as a whole, togetherness, shared interests, and groupings that lie outside the main body of society or the institutional establishment. We aim to create a ‘living tissue’ that connects all these

²⁵ For an evaluation of the programme, see Holm, A., [Nærmiljøetsatsing og levekår. Evaluering – Handlingsprogram Oslo indre øst](#) [Local environment and living condition. Evaluation – Program of Development for Oslo’s East-Central Districts], NIBR report no. 12/2006 (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, 2006).

different aspects of 'community.' We attempt an anthropological approach by making ourselves available, by listening and by being analytical. I have many person-to-person conversations; I move around in the district meeting people where they are, talking about how their living conditions are, what issues they feel are important, and what they might like to contribute with. We want to bring forth their narratives. These have been documented in several ways including photo exhibitions and storytelling evenings. It's all about doing simple things in ways that are close to them. When the centre became the hub for LA-21, what we did both figuratively and literally was to open doors, draw back curtains and build a stage for dialogue", says Guerra.²⁶

One of the very first events was a Future Scenario Workshop²⁷ where the majority of participants were individual citizens and representatives of various local groupings, and an "Open House" event with the local politicians. Since then various dialogue methods have been applied, including face-to-face conversations and public meetings employing creative approaches including café dialogues and art projects.

Guerra relates enthusiastically how the plan for developing the local area started: "We generated interest for a public meeting by distributing a 'future newspaper' based on the results of the workshop. It described in words and pictures what the area around the centre could look like in future, before inviting everyone to the meeting. Then talk really started! People thought it was a real newspaper. 150 turned up at the meeting and participated actively including in follow-up. Many of their ideas were adopted, including development of the nearby square and the Wall Art project."²⁸

"The parks and town squares are peoples gardens" was the idea behind the development of local open spaces as meeting places and democratic arenas. Based on inputs from the public meetings, concrete plans were developed for the public space and park in front of the community centre. The State Housing Bank provided part funding. These funds were administered by the LA-21 Forum²⁹, on which the council is also represented, but the council was deliberately not given a leading role. "We must dare to take a hands-off approach", said the then council leader Tone Tellevik Dahl. "The aim was to provide resources and administrative support for local initiative to flourish as decision maker and participant in

²⁶ Paaby, K., "Demokrati ikke bare for de innvidde" [Democracy – not only for the initiated], in: Ideas Bank Year Book 2006 (Oslo: Ideas Bank, 2006), p. 88.

²⁷ The Future Scenario Workshop is a method aimed at generating practical, collective ideas about the future. Participants can be thought of as "social architects", shaping their future through concrete images and plans of action. The method was originally developed by futures researcher and journalist Robert Jungk in the 1960s; see Jungk, R., and Müllert N., *Future workshops: How to create desirable futures* (London: Institute for Social Inventions, 1987); Paaby, K., "The future scenario workshop – learning for democracy", in: The Ideas Bank, [*Signals. Local action – success stories in sustainability*](#) (Oslo: Ideas Bank, 2011), pp. 72-76.

²⁸ Paaby 2006, p. 89.

²⁹ Following the Local Agenda 21, many cities in Norway created such arenas co-operation between the politicians and elected officials, public administration, citizens and civil society, and the private sector.

complex, sectorised and time-consuming processes of change”.³⁰ The park, which had been bare and often vandalised, and which many felt to be unsafe, has been transformed into a lively meeting place where there is seating, skating, table tennis, an occasional market, exchange markets and many other activities as well as attractive plantations.

One important partner, the organisation Change the World, provided a creative input in the form of perma-culture sculptures. Inspired by a visit to an eco-village, they led a team of young people in constructing pyramids, spirals and horseshoe shaped plant beds with a variety of vegetables, flowers, medicinal plants, herbs and berry bushes. Recycled materials including car tyres, construction waste and organic waste were used. These innovative and ecological concepts helped to show how barren urban areas can be transformed into more attractive, sociable and productive spaces.

The work attracted a lot of attention and many interesting conversations between the young people, passers-by and inquisitive residents. Many wanted to copy the idea, others offered to water and maintain the plants, even more when they were told that they could collect flowers and herbs themselves. “It’s a kind of hands-on civil education activity that has inspired us and has been applied elsewhere since”, says Guerra.³¹

Whilst developing the community centre, Guerra and her co-workers have been particularly attentive to issues of communication. “We are continually seeking new ways to communicate: can we find forms of expression that can express the commonality of interests amongst all the varied opinions and views of the users of the community centre? This led to the idea of the Wall Art project – a signal that “You can come in!” The idea was inspired by the mural artists in Mexico City in the 1930’s, who used public spaces to give a voice to population groups who had not previously been heard.

The LA-21 forum invited some of the nearby housing associations to six workshops over the course of a year. After showing them the work of the Mexican *muralistas*, they were asked: “What makes a good and safe neighbourhood?” “What does Sagene mean to you?” “What is art?” Participants then produced sketches expressing how they felt about the neighbourhood, their experiences and their wishes for the future. Participants represented many different ages and backgrounds. At times it was a challenge to avoid individuals trying to control the process; one person left because he felt he was an “expert” on art who should be listened to by the others!

After the first three workshops participants became impatient to realise their project, so a local architect and an artist were found who volunteered to lead the process of expressing

³⁰ From the input by Tone Tellevik Dahl on “Democratic improvement. From local practice to implementation in the national policy”, Ideas Bank seminar “Refurbishing Democracy”, 27 October 2005.

³¹ Interview with Susan Guerra, Sagene Community Centre in Oslo, 25 August 2011.

all the ideas that the workshops had produced. They produced 12 suggestions as to how the wall could be painted. This led to discussions and a process of elimination, in a consensus building process and thence to the final result as it is today.

An environmental element was included through re-use of old cups and ceramics from a local tile supplier. The LA-21 forum wished to engage as many people as possible in the project and arranged an open workshop at the annual Sagene Environment Day, where 100 white tiles were painted with individual contributions. The event attracted quite a crowd with enthusiastic suggestions from all sides.



The Sagene Mural: A public testimony of community and participation (Photo: Sagene CC)

Because the early phases of the project had external financing, it was a challenge to identify a sustainable model for ongoing upkeep and operation given tight local budgets. There were efforts several times to wind down the projects. Local political processes and keen user involvement have, however, led the local council to maintain its support. This has in turn fostered awareness of the importance of local democratic development based on integrated thinking and connections between different sectors of activity.

A form of co-ownership has now been set up, with interesting economic models enabling cooperation between public services, commerce and civil society organisations. The social capital becomes an important resource. Interest in the community centre is rising steadily, as witnessed by increasing numbers of users, visitors and volunteer hours.

Susan Guerra concludes: “This has been a process of identity building. We have generated local leadership, good alliances, and support to local initiatives from the people. Not least, the Wall Art project is a publicly supported display of participation and local narrative. The challenge has been to be aware of our role, which is not to control or be the experts but to enable, assist and use our professional skills in a constructive way. We have seen how qualitative processes need time. And new challenges keep arising where we wish to increase local learning and democracy. We are also planning a course on democracy now; on how the political system functions and how citizens can influence it. This is something each new generation really has to learn anew. Hence it is important to have concrete, practical and enjoyable results to point to as well”.³²

Case Study 2: Value-based Development with Citizens in Oevre Eiker

A socially active municipality for over 15 years, Oevre Eiker has shown both the will and the skill to implement planning and development together with its inhabitants. Applying various methods of dialogue, a variety of forums for interaction and partnership has developed. Equally, municipal recruitment policy has focused on all employees having an active role for social development. Many have been trained in participatory methods. Processes have also focused on a self-critical attitude – “many things we should be doing much better”.³³ Here we describe a recent project aimed at increasing the participation of young people in a development plan for the town centre.

In view of the recent tragic events in Norway it seems useful to highlight the manifesto of values developed by the municipality together with local associations and formally approved in 2000, ‘Building Oevre Eiker Together’, in which the municipality committed itself to participation, on the basis that “values are what connect us and foster active participation”. In addition to the town plan, these words have been put into action by, amongst others, the following projects. The *Citizen Academy* is a yearly event where the municipality meets the population and discusses key issues such as what motivates local participation, new partnerships and how to increase community participation amongst local minority groups. Creative workshops have combined discussion with informative and inspiring talks. Concrete proposals have been followed up.

The *Flower Parliament* is a joint event involving the municipality, the chamber of commerce and volunteers. The pedestrian main street is converted into a beautiful space in which all have participated. As spring approaches, funds and tasks are allocated for planting and decoration. A spinoff effect has been that young trainees now produce plants and flowers for sale to the event. The *Grandparents Conference* is an event organised in the municipal

³² Ibid.

³³ See [Unqdom i sentrum. Unqdom som aktive deltakere i byutviklingen. Metoder og erfaringer fra Hokksund](#) [Youth in the center. Youth as participants in the development of the city center. Methods and experiences from Hokksund].

kindergartens every second year where the older generation are invited to contribute their skills and life experience. Activities include guiding, maintenance, reading and adult support.

Oevre Eiker municipality with its 17,000 inhabitants covers 456km² and is situated in the Drammen river valley about 60km from Oslo. Half the population live in the main town, Hokksund. In addition to agriculture and forestry, major industries include a paper mill, tourist enterprises, a glass museum and a farm specialising in local organic produce. Many people commute to Kongsberg, Drammen or Oslo, and there is frequent public transport. In recent years the population has been increasing by around 3 percent per annum.

The municipality's web site lists no less than 207 associations and groups. Central to long term development are the six neighbourhood associations and that of Hokksund town. These were established following a political declaration in 2004, titled "Developing our dream of the good life". They are the organ of public interest groups and participate in municipal affairs: they are consulted in planning processes, forward their own proposals, arrange public meetings, organize various voluntary initiatives, and are formal partners in activities such as the setting up of public forums, nature conservation, maintenance of public spaces and other matters relating to quality of life. They have similar statutes, and boards of seven members elected locally at annual meetings. Each association is provided with a small budget and it is their task to promote the ideas and concerns of the public through participatory processes. Each association has a personal contact on the municipal Planning Committee in order to ensure daily contact. This also ensures that all voluntary initiatives are well integrated.

Oevre Eiker has participated in many of the national programmes aimed at sustainable development and local democracy; some of these have been noted above. This has also brought in state funding for some of the activities. Local sources say that two key events in 1994 led to the strong focus on participation. On the one hand, the municipality had already started restructuring, based on a visioning process aimed at demonstrating long term thinking and the aim of "passing our community to the next generation in a better state than it is today".

The other event was the emergence of a local neo-Nazi group. A rock festival arranged by this group attracted a larger group of radical squatters, who are strongly anti-racist and anti-Nazi, and a street battle broke out in Hokksund. The municipality found itself in the headlines, dubbed as "Nazi Oevre Eiker". Immediate reaction from the public led to a huge protest march with over 2000 people under the banner "Oevre Eiker shows its Face". This led to a civic movement with the same title, and a manifesto of values was drawn up together with local organizations and groups. The key intention was to ensure inclusiveness and solidarity in Oevre Eiker. The municipal authorities joined in, and passed a vote stating that the manifesto "... shall be obligatory for all municipal services and development plans.

Each politician and employee shall strive to achieve the values and goals stated in the manifesto". This led in turn to a series of initiatives aimed especially at young people, which continue to this day.

"Our conviction is that it is essential to go and talk to people, meet them where they are, talk to them face to face. Setting up a Facebook page on the municipal web site isn't going to save the world!" Those words are from an enthusiastic municipal planner, Anders Stenshorne.³⁴ Work on development of the town centre included a project to increase the role of the youth in shaping the future. With support from the State Housing Bank surveys, in-depth interviews and a workshop "Hokksund 2030" were conducted. Top of the wish list was more outdoor, informal meeting places. The young people complained that "every time there is an empty site, waiting for development, it is turned into a parking place. Why can't we make temporary meeting places?"³⁵



Concentration and cooperation about the future (Photo: "Stiv kuling as")

After participation processes, quick follow up is critical. The municipality acted immediately, setting up a "container park" on an empty site this summer. It was to be open daily, and the local library was setting up some of its activities there; other ideas included simple catering run by youth themselves, internet access and a sand volleyball court. Quick planning, cross-sectoral cooperation and volunteer help soon made it a reality, and the process was documented on a DVD by students from a nearby high school: "How to make a meeting

³⁴ Telephone interview with Anders Stenshorne, 15 April 2011.

³⁵ Ibid.

place in 24 hours". At the opening celebration all members of the Local Council were present.

"We started by listing the good reasons for doing this, rather than all the reasons for not doing it", says Stenshorne. One main objection was financial – some people complained about the loss of parking space. Others feared noise and trouble from the young people. The project was made as cheaply as possible through recycled materials, training slots, volunteer inputs and reallocation of existing funds. "Aided by the outreach worker, the police and the childcare services, there is always an adult contact. The business community and others support the idea too. It has been a great success and we hope to do something similar next year", he concludes.³⁶

Case Study 3: Svartlamon – The Neighbourhood That Refused to Die

The experience of the Svartlamon neighbourhood in Trondheim is one of democratic development, which started as a tough conflict led by the residents to preserve the area. Plans for new housing or industry were strongly resisted, and the road from demonstrations and occupation of properties to lobbying, dialogue and preservation has been long, over 20 years. Svartlamon became one of Norway's first urban ecology pilot projects. Today it is a neighbourhood organized on "principles of sustainable development, with ecological solutions, a democratic structure and transparent financial management, with a low standard and cheap rents".³⁷

The fight to preserve Svartlamon and develop it in this way shows how determined local energies can influence the big players. From being a defensive, closed micro-society, Svartlamon has become a significant actor in the development of Trondheim city. There is now a formalised collaboration between the residents' association and the municipality; it is no longer conceivable to eject the residents and this cooperation, often driven by conflict, has created a values debate in Trondheim about how good local democracy should function. The story of Svartlamon combines interesting elements of advocacy, service, self-help and local development.

Trondheim is the third largest municipality in Norway and a city experiencing rapid growth. Amongst the city's 174,000 residents there are 30,000 students, and 8.4 percent of the population are immigrants. The city has participated in various national programmes including the aforementioned "Liveable Communities". The Svartlamon neighbourhood covers 3 hectares, situated between the railway and the eastern part of Trondheim harbour. It included 19 municipally owned rental apartment buildings, mostly old and dilapidated

³⁶ From a presentation by Anders Stenshorne on citizens' involvement projects in Oevre Eiker on 30 August 2011.

³⁷ See the presentation of the neighborhood on the dedicated website svartlamon.org.

worker housing from around 1890, as well as premises belonging to an automobile dealer. There was a controversial debate during the 1990's as to whether the area should be redeveloped with new housing or industry. The debate culminated in 1996-98 with a decision to demolish many of the buildings and sell the land to the automobile dealer. The conflict brought residents together in opposition to the plan, with additional support from many personalities and interest groups in the city.

Harald Nissen, who lived in the area for 23 years, was one of the leaders of the Svartlamon movement, and has been one of the central spokesmen for the cause. He relates how the movement began as a revolt amongst young, often unemployed people in 1987, including setting up an autonomous Youth Centre called "Uffa" in what was initially a building illegally occupied. "It was the No-future-generation", he says. "We said: 'Things here are going to hell but we'll try anyway'."³⁸ More people from the Uffa crowd moved into the area, as did young artist, musicians and political activists. They demanded that the old timber buildings be preserved. They wanted a place where they could live an alternative lifestyle, with a strong social and ecological perspective. Keywords were affordable housing, workplaces, solidarity, social inclusion, reduced consumption and sustainable lifestyle. In 2003 Nissen and others stated the following: "Building million dollar apartments on the sunny side just serves to underline that there's a need for us too. We also have the right to Trondheim. We want a more varied city, and if you can't live with us, then the city has lost".³⁹

After a period of conflict, a more constructive though difficult process of dialogue with the municipality began. The activists were granted an initial sum of NOK 100,000 per building for essential maintenance and upgrading as they themselves thought fit. Then, however, the auto dealer applied for permission to demolish some houses and expand the business, and expulsion orders were sent to residents. In the meantime, some of the residents had already been developing ideas and proposals for an ecological, alternative development of Svartlamon. More negotiations with the municipality led to the formation of the residents' association in 1991. It is a democratic body, holding monthly meetings where all participate equally in important decisions.

An area plan was finally approved by the city in 2001, designating Svartlamon as a pilot project area: "an alternative neighbourhood with room for ideas and experimentation in relation to housing solutions, social cooperation, participation, energy and ecology, public services, arts culture and business".⁴⁰ In the same year, management of the housing stock was transferred to the Svartlamon Housing Foundation, which is run jointly by residents and the municipality. The municipality holds a nominal majority but in practice it lies with the

³⁸ From a presentation given by Harald Nissen at the Nordic seminar "Exchange of experiences: The success criteria for the development of sustainable local communities", 4 January 2011.

³⁹ "[Sol over Svartlamoen](#)", *Adresseavisen*, 3 May 2001.

⁴⁰ See the resident survey 2009 by the social community group at Svartlamon: *Bomiljø, engasjement og mobilitet på Svartlamon* [The residential environment, commitment and mobility at Svartlamon], p. 5.

residents since the leader is a resident nominated by the municipality. All main decisions are taken at monthly meetings. As of today the Foundation also has three employees.

Since then many works have been carried out, in accordance with the goals of the area plan. Residents, organised in task groups, have done the work, including a noise barrier along the adjoining railway line; a noise protection bank planted with fruit trees; vegetable gardens and a small dam for frogs; as well as much of the neglected repair work on the buildings and replacement of the old single pane windows. In 2005, the Residents Association approved a comprehensive Environmental Plan as well as an Energy Plan including solar and bio-energy, and three years later, a dam for waste water recycling was built.



The inhabitants at Svarlamon at “dugnad” (Photo: Bjørn Lønnum Andreassen)

There is a Free Shop where people can deposit articles they would otherwise have discarded. With increasing popularity, it is now open two days every week. Across the street lies Café Ramp which serves ecological and fair trade food. In the summer of 2010, the Svartlamon Cooperative shop opened, run by 30 volunteers and open seven days a week. It is organized as a workers’ cooperative where members have both rights and duties. Administrative tasks are shared amongst the members and operations are decided at members’ meetings. As far as possible all produce is ecological or fair trade, and prices are low since the work is free.

Most of the buildings are municipally owned, but in 2005 residents themselves took responsibility for two new buildings with accommodation for more than 30 people. These were constructed ecologically using massive timber. Since none of the local architects showed interest in fulfilling their ambitions, the residents contacted the architecture school

– and the impossible became possible. An innovative and ecological five storey timber building was constructed at a low cost, much less than half the price of upmarket flats in Trondheim, and it has since won several international prizes – apart from launching the careers of two young architects (Brendeland and Kristoffersen) that were hardly out of architecture school.

There have been exciting social and cultural initiatives too. In 2006 the premises of the car dealer were taken over by the Svartlamon Culture and Commerce Foundation. The buildings comprising around 3,000 square metres have been refurbished using ecological materials and function today as a multi-purpose community centre, including an art and cultural kindergarten established in cooperation with the municipality. This is organized more in keeping with the visions of the residents, where ecology, participation, recycling and art should play a central role. It was planned during a series of workshops with the children and inspired by the Reggio Emilia educational approach. Another part of the premises, the ReMida Centre for Creative Recycling comprises space rented to sustainable businesses. The former workshop hall has been converted into a concert venue seating 600, which has, since 2009, staged a wide variety of events including theatre, dance, rock concerts, art exhibitions and literature seminars.

After 23 years at Svartlamon, Harald Nissen considers that the greatest achievement is that it is still a pilot area and an experiment in alternative ways of living. “One must first test out new ideas at a small scale to see if they could work at a large scale”, he says. “That requires some idealists who are willing to make the effort, as well as a long time scale”. His own commitment – from squatter to elected politician – is an interesting illustration of the process of democratic awareness building which a project like Svartlamon fosters. “For the past seven years I have been on the city council, representing the Greens, participating in formulating city budgets. An interesting and enriching experience!”⁴¹

In 2009, a residents survey was carried out under the title “Living environment, commitment and mobility”. As the area has undergone a generational shift, the objective was to investigate how the current residents experience life in Svartlamon, their reasons for moving there, to what degree they feel committed and identify with the area, and what they see as future goals.⁴²

Svartlamon was born of conflict, a social experiment that began as a “wall of resistance”. The struggle for preservation of the area has been won but is there anything new to fight for, a new common platform? This was one of the main questions. The conclusion suggests that the good quality of life there has been a decisive factor. Most people answer that they moved there because of the degree of autonomy and self-determination – the political and

⁴¹ From a presentation given by Harald Nissen at the Nordic seminar “Exchange of experiences: The success criteria for the development of sustainable local communities”, 4 January 2011.

⁴² See the resident survey 2009 by the social community group at Svartlamon: *Bomiljø, engasjement og mobilitet på Svartlamon* [The residential environment, commitment and mobilitet at Svartlamon], p. 5.

ideological context. Sociability, neighbourliness and sense of identity were no less important, as “the kids have lots of uncles and aunts all around them. When they go outside, we know someone will watch over them”.⁴³

Yet the survey also revealed challenges. They relate particularly to the varied population and how the ideological project should be pursued. Svartlamon is based on an idea of tolerance and inclusivity; this can be both a strength and a weakness. Some remarked that “there are some weirdoes here, but that is also positive”; others that “there’s a bit too much focus on partying and some dope issues”. Some residents have problems and little energy to give to the community, which poses a problem for a community that is based on a large degree of cooperation and voluntary efforts. On the other hand, uniquely, a community such as Svartlamon protects and supports people who are “on the margins of society” in a way the official social safety nets usually do not. In addition to its experimental value, Svartlamon can also be seen as having an important welfare function.

Conclusions

In an annex to the Local Democracy Commission’s report, Professor Audun Offerdal posits four fundamental considerations for democracy: “The first basis for a democratic form of governance is that people can indeed govern – that they can shape the society they live in. It is not blind forces that govern. Neither gods nor demons, neither fate nor coincidences decide. People can shape, and reshape, societies... Secondly, and perhaps as self-evident but worth repeating: democracy is about a shared community of people. It is about *us* and *ours*, not about *me* and *mine*... Thirdly, and some people have trouble with this, the normative basis for a democratic system is that everyone is competent to participate in governing. No-one is incompetent to have an opinion about how the community should be governed. There are no experts in democracy who can tell the others what the problems are and which solutions are right... Fourthly, in continuation of the last point, politics is an important conflict solver in democratic systems. Politics is democracy’s way of solving problems, or at least of living with them”.⁴⁴

This quote highlights the importance of awareness building and civic education as part of the continual project that is democracy. This is relevant for most of the activities connected to the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development.⁴⁵ Not least, permanent efforts are necessary to develop processes and methods that can cater for all those who do not have the right to participate, such as marginalised and disenfranchised social groups.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁴ See the [2006 Report on Local Democracy in Norway](#) (in Norwegian) and its [English-language summary](#).

⁴⁵ This is spelled out in more detail in the official presentations of the [UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development](#).

The Ideas Bank has been instrumental in launching a campaign in Scandinavia called “Balanseakten” to advance such efforts and strengthen the connections between education and local political work.⁴⁶ A similar position has also been adopted by those many Nordic organisations that pursue civic information as inspired by Grundtvig and his belief in everyone’s competence and participation. It is in no small part this commitment on the part of the voluntary sector that created the basis for the Nordic model of society. It is imperative to constantly renew this basis, so that it takes on forms that are adapted to the challenges of tomorrow.



Two “Balacing Act” statues in front of Sagene Community Centre (Photo: The Ideas Bank)

⁴⁶ For more detail, see the official website of [“The Balancing Act”](#).

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