

Working for development in the High North: Mayoral strategies and leadership styles

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ABSTRACT

How do experienced mayors in northern Norway approach issues of local growth and development? What are their strategies and leadership styles and to what extent do they differ in their attempts to strengthen the economic viability of their municipality? The question is pertinent, for two reasons: First, issues of development and growth tend to be fairly open-ended with few standard solutions, with ample room for tailoring strategies and policies to local problems and challenges. Second, because the problems and challenges facing these mayors tend to differ, one would also expect their strategies to vary. Having examined the mayors' strategies in some detail, we found that they did not. Is there a logic of appropriateness at work here, confining the gamut of available (and acceptable) policy tools, a standard repertoire of strategies that constitutes a panacea for coping with problems of growth and development?

Keywords: *Mayors, developmental policies, logic of appropriateness, northern Norway*

1. INTRODUCTION

Research on local political leadership has documented the role of mayors as important policy entrepreneurs and agents of local development (Goldsmith and Larsen 2004; Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2009; Bäck et al. 2006). This raises the question of the possible consequences of mayoral turnover for the policy agendas and priorities of local government (Wolman, Strate, and Melchior 1996). We approach this issue from the opposite angle by looking into the possible implications of leadership continuity rather than turnover, probing into the leadership styles, policy agendas, and political priorities of close to “tenured” mayors of three municipalities in the northern or Arctic corner of Norway. These mayors are leaders of communities located in what is frequently referred to as the “High North” (Skagestad 2010), where issues pertaining to identity, demography, economic growth, and business development have spurred cross-border cooperation and institutional innovation (Hasanat 2010; Hønneland 1998). The larger context, then, is a region facing challenges of demography, growth, and development, where programmes and strategies have been designed and steps taken in order to rectify problems that, historically at least, have been typical of geographically remote areas (Arctic Human Development Report 2004; Barents Regional Council 2013). Rectifying these problems, however, also requires leadership and initiatives at the local level, where the challenges are most acutely felt (Røiseland et al. 2009). On this local level, in communities and municipalities, such challenges may vary in both scope and character from one municipality to the next. How are these policies and strategies tailored to local needs, then? This is the perspective in our attempt to explain what we consider an interesting puzzle revealed in a recent study of local political leadership (see Mikalsen and Bjørnå 2015): why do experienced political leaders facing different problems adopt similar strategies with regard to growth and development? Taking the differences between “our” northern municipalities into account, as well as the tendency of issues pertaining to development and growth to be fairly open-ended with few standard solutions, we started from the assumption that “our” mayors would take different approaches to developmental policy and political leadership. As demonstrated by what follows, this turned out not to be the case. While the problems and challenges facing these municipalities were different both in character and in magnitude, there were few, if any, differences in the mayors’ approach to addressing them. What then are the basic characteristics of their (common) approach, and how can the commonality of strategies in the face of different circumstances be explained? Is it the outcome of leadership experience, where one learns what works and what does not? Does it reflect a standard and limited repertoire of strategies that has proved instrumental in coping with problems of growth and development in the

past, or is it a product of norms and expectations constituting what amounts to a logic of appropriateness, confining the gamut of policy tools available (and acceptable)?

2. INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE AND EMPIRICAL SETTING

Norwegian municipalities are important providers of public services and play a crucial role in implementing the welfare state (Bennett 1993; Goldsmith 1990; Leemans 1970; Lidström 2003). This has led observers to speak of the welfare *municipality* rather than the welfare *state* (Kjellberg 1988; Nagel 1991). As such, Norwegian municipalities have broad responsibilities, irrespective of size, which – one would assume – requires strong leadership. They run primary schools, kindergartens, and homes for the elderly and disabled, provide social and technical services, decide certain environmental issues, organize planning processes, and maintain local infrastructure. Most of these responsibilities are decreed by law. Municipalities employ about a fifth of the work force, and their aggregate running costs amount to 18% of mainland Norway's gross domestic product (Statistics Norway 2013).

Norwegian local government has been categorized as a council-manager type with a council and an executive committee, both chaired by the mayor, and a municipal bureaucracy headed by an appointed and powerful chief executive (Mouritzen and Svara 2002). Norwegian mayors are formally elected by the council, or rather, by its executive committee for a four-year term. There are no term limits. The *formal* powers of Norwegian mayors are limited to chairing the meetings of the council and the executive committee and to deciding their agendas. They are also authorized to act as the municipality's legal representative and to sign official documents on its behalf (Sletnes 2015). The mayors face few institutional constraints and have, as a consequence and in practice, come to play a more powerful role than their legal mandate provides for. As the leading representative of the local community, the mayors are almost invariably expected to get involved in matters well beyond their formal powers rather than limiting themselves to the role of council "president" (Baldersheim 1992; Willumsen 2012). Goldsmith and Larsen (2004), for example, suggest that Norwegian mayors also have a role to play as territorial representatives, not just symbolically but in managing or negotiating a complex environment.

The negatively delimited domain of local government opens up for municipal engagement in community development (Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2009). This allows mayors to take on the role of policy entrepreneurs promoting economic growth, attracting prospective investors, and lobbying central government. In fact, the mayors' political

standing depends very much on their ability and willingness to play politics in this sense, governing by interacting effectively with legitimate stakeholders and prospective supporters (Berg and Rao, 2005; Leach and Wilson, 2000). One would thus assume that experienced mayors have had ample time to develop and consolidate their leadership style, contemplating agendas and strategies, and proving their worth as agents of change (Mikalsen and Bjørnå 2015).

The three municipalities (and mayors) compared in this article were identified in a more comprehensive study of a larger group of mayors who had held office for a prolonged period (four election periods or more). They are located in what is usually characterized as the geographical periphery, one in each of Norway's three northernmost counties. Historically, northern Norway used to be considered a "backward" region dependent on government support for growth and development, anchored in comprehensive plans for preserving the country's decentralized settlement structure. A fine-grained structure of fairly small municipalities and small and medium-sized industrial enterprises have been important institutional underpinnings of this policy aim (Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2009). However, municipalities in the region do not necessarily face the same challenges. Some are experiencing population decrease, others have stable populations, while a few experience population growth. Economic conditions vary as do the size of the municipalities and the mayors' political affiliation. Taking such variations into account one would expect municipal policies and mayoral strategies to differ, especially those pertaining to growth and development, as the emphasis on political entrepreneurship will vary with the need to match problem structure and municipal policy. But is this really the case; do the development strategies of municipalities necessarily reflect local problem structures (context) or are these a reflection of the norms and expectations associated with local political leadership? Is there a logic of appropriateness involved here, a shared culture based on certain values and informal norms as to what makes a good and efficient mayor?

We start with a brief, theoretically informed discussion of how institutional structures, rules, and practices may affect agenda-setting and leadership strategies, arguing that certain institutional features of Norwegian local government and the mayors' limited formal powers provide both incentives and opportunities to expand this leadership role by adopting an entrepreneurial approach to politics and the setting of policy priorities. We then explain the study methodology before describing in greater detail the mayoral strategies pursued in our three cases. This is followed by making sense of our findings and some concluding remarks about the mayors' vital position as political entrepre-

neurs. The negatively delimited mandate of local government helps the mayors seize the opportunities for expanding the municipal realm and adopt agendas that go well beyond the formal powers of the office.

3. FORMAL POWERS AND INSTITUTIONAL INCENTIVES: MAYORS AS POLICY-ENTREPRENEURS

Given the strong position of the chief executive within council-manager systems, it has been suggested that mayors – considering their few *formal* powers – may not be able to bring about policy changes on their own (Wolman, Strate, and Melchior 1996). However, political institutions like those of local government, are not only control and command systems but driven, in part, by traditions, informal networks, and social norms that affect power relationships as well as the course and outcomes of decision-making processes. Informal relationships, unquestioned beliefs, and institutionalized practices may well be seen as akin to a corporate culture defining what is appropriate behaviour in particular situations (cf. March and Olsen 1989). Formal rules are bent or interpreted to match context, and power restrictions are exceeded in order to meet stakeholder expectations, creating a logic of appropriateness that may empower leaders whose formal authority is limited.

For Norwegian mayors, the combination of limited formal powers and the negatively defined domain of local government may in fact be an asset: there are few things they are *obliged* to do but many things they *can* do. Donald Searing's distinction between *position roles* and *preference roles* is pertinent here (Searing, 1991; 1994). *Position roles* require the performance of many specific duties and responsibilities, and are clearly defined and institutionally constrained. *Preference roles*, on the other hand, are associated with positions less constrained by formal rules or lack of formal powers and with few specific duties and responsibilities. These are, in other words, roles more easily shaped by the preferences and personal capabilities of the incumbent as well as by the expectations of constituents and other stakeholders.

The preferential character of the role of mayor, then, enables the incumbent to fill it in ways that match the local context as well as the norms and expectations of appropriate (mayoral) behaviour held by council members, constituents, and stakeholders. In addition, the negatively delimited mandate of local government means that municipalities are free to adopt policies and implement projects in order to generate community development and strengthen the local economy, which allows mayors to act as policy

entrepreneurs by expanding the municipal agenda. This boosts their role well beyond the formal powers of the office (Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2010). Given the amount of discretion offered by the preference role of Norwegian mayors – and the different challenges facing municipalities in generating growth and development – one would expect their priorities and strategies to differ.

On the other hand one would expect that a choice of similar strategies in the face of different challenges may boil down to experienced mayors having acquired a sense of what constitutes appropriate and effective conduct in this particular (and typically preference) role; a sense of what is expected of them by their constituents, and which strategies work when community development and growth are at the core of municipal politics. We are, after all, dealing with seasoned political operators who have had plenty of time to accumulate experience, to contemplate what works, and to acquire a keen sense of what is expected of them. There may, in other words, be a logic of appropriateness at work that channels attention and affects agendas and priorities. Similarities in agendas, strategies, and priorities may thus reflect a common understanding of what it takes to fill the office in ways that exploit the possibilities for (strategic) action associated with the preference character of the role itself and the negative delimitation of municipal functions.

4. METHODS

The three municipalities vary in size, with populations of 10,000; 2000; and 1000, respectively. Demographic trends also differ: the first (and the largest) is growing, the second has a fairly stable population, while the third (and smallest) is experiencing a downward trend. The state of their economies and budgets also varies; one has benefitted from the establishment of a major off-shore enterprise – with income and property taxes lining the municipal coffers – but is burdened with debt. The second has experienced a slightly downward spiral financially, while the third is breaking even. Their mayors represent different political parties but share a “tenured” career in that they have all been in office for four election periods or more. Their chief executive officers also count as veterans, having held their posts for a considerable period of time. Political and administrative continuity, in other words, are common characteristics of the three municipalities. Applying a “most different” case design (George and Bennett 2005), we have conducted a comparative, longitudinal case study of the municipalities that differ on relevant and important background variables, except one – mayoral experience – but display a roughly similar score on the dependent variable, in our case leadership strategies, priorities, and policies.

Our account is based on in-depth interviews conducted during 2013 with the politicians and administrators in the three municipalities: mayors, members of the opposition, and chief executive officers. The mayors are political veterans, having been in office for four election periods. They are between 50 and 60 years old. By interviewing their chief executives, members of the mayor's party, and representatives of the opposition, we hope to enrich our narrative by tapping into *their* views and perceptions of the mayor as leader. We conducted five interviews in each municipality, each lasting an hour or more. The empirical fieldwork was complemented by additional interviews; some by telephone, updating our information on the mayors' role as entrepreneurs and agents of local development as well as on recent economic and demographic trends in the municipalities. Information gathered from interviews was validated through document studies and corroborated against information in media reports and official statistics.

Further information was obtained by examining statements by council leaders in minutes of council meetings, as well as through reports and web pages pertaining to development policies, and the efforts and visions underpinning these. Statistics Norway provided data on population, migration, service provision, and municipal finances. This form of methodological triangulation was adopted in order to verify information obtained in the interviews. There is of course a serious limitation to such studies, as cases are complex and it is difficult to identify exactly which independent variables explain a common outcome, such as political priorities and leadership styles.

5. THE CASES: DEVELOPMENT AS A MAYORAL IMPERATIVE

The following section describes the municipal context, the leadership styles, and policies pursued by the three mayors and the ways in which they relate to the local community and to the broader political environment beyond the municipal realm.

5.1. Hammerfest municipality

Hammerfest is a mid-sized municipality, with around 10,000 inhabitants. Historically, fisheries have been the backbone of the local economy; a large, technologically advanced processing plant and its fleet of trawlers have been the major employer since the 1950s. The municipality lost some 1500 jobs during the 1990s, which was accompanied by a substantial out-migration, especially of young people unable to find work locally. In the words of the mayor: "Had you come here during the early 1990s, you would have seen a run-down town." The economic turning point came with the discovery (in 1984) of rich reserves of

natural gas some 140 km off the coast, crowned by the decision of Parliament in 2002 that the gas should be landed and processed locally before being shipped to international markets. The outcome has been an economic boom with an influx of people employed by the gas processing plant and a substantial strengthening of municipal finances, albeit accompanied by a higher rate of municipal borrowing. The latter has caused some concern, especially among the opposition in the council. Such concerns notwithstanding, the formerly “run-down” city centre has been renovated, with a new cultural and arts centre as a highly visible manifestation of a town (and municipality) in transition. The topography poses some problems, however, as there are few areas where the town can expand to provide for more housing and better infrastructure.

Given the solid majority his party commands – currently holding 19 out of the 29 council seats – the Hammerfest mayor is clearly a powerful figure, and one would perhaps expect that most issues are decided before they reach the executive committee or the council. This is not necessarily the case, however, as both the mayor and his party have changed their positions, even on salient issues, as a consequence of inputs from the opposition. According to the mayor, there is also considerable headroom within the party, and council members do not always have to toe the party line on issues where they beg to differ. The mayor’s role as consensus-builder is also recognized, albeit reluctantly, by the opposition: the representative we interviewed admitted that the mayor is indeed a unifying force.

His leadership style, then, is perceived as consultative and consensus-oriented with an emphasis on reaching out to the opposition on issues deemed important to the local community. The mayor characterizes himself as a good listener, but “when a decision is made, I enforce it emphatically”. On this point he has the solid and competent support of the municipal administration, as he enjoys an excellent working relationship with his CEO.

The context and framework for the exercise of political leadership is thus a municipality where managing growth currently seems to be a major challenge. An enviable position, most would say, strengthened by the mayor’s abilities as lobbyist and “foreign minister”. The latter has proved important, for growth – before it can be managed – must be initiated. On this point the mayor has clearly benefitted from an extensive network built during several stints in national politics as state secretary (junior minister) and deputy MP. He is also a member of the national

council of his party. He has, in his own words, acquired “some knowledge of how things work at higher levels of politics”. This stood him in good stead in getting the government’s ear and influence the Parliament’s decision in 2002 to build the gas processing plant in his own municipality. According to his CEO, the mayor is an active and efficient lobbyist, with a strong and enduring interest in industrial growth – and is “extremely adept at the political”. A more general, slightly intangible, spin-off from his time in national politics is an extensive network both nationally and regionally: “If you want to see somebody (important), that’s no problem.” According to a politician from the opposition, the mayor does a good job in representing the municipality to the outside world. He is frequently in the media and has – again in his own words – “created networks that has enabled me to pursue a broader policy agenda”. The CEO says that the mayor often succeeds in talking directly to government ministers, the prime minister included. He could even have been a government minister himself, had his wife allowed. Surprisingly, though, he has never seriously contemplated a career in national politics.

Growth and development thus top the mayor’s agenda, currently demonstrated by his attempts to stop the relocation of a large fisheries plant. Historically, fisheries have been a major employer in the municipality, and issues of fisheries policy are very close to his heart. He sees the fisheries as an important contributor to further growth and development, and has put up a fight against the relocation of “Hammerfest industries”, the plant in which the municipality holds 40% of the shares. A private Norwegian fisheries magnate holds the rest (60%). The mayor is deputy leader of the board and has frequently aired his opposition against the major stakeholder’s proposal to downscale and eventually relocate the company. This proposal generated vociferous opposition within the entire region during 2014 and 2015, spurring the mayor to deliver a formal complaint to the Ministry of Industry and Fisheries. He argued that the majority owner was overstepping his mandate – against the letter of the law and the contents of local agreements. The government rejected his claim in August 2014. The council, led by the mayor, is considering a civil lawsuit against the majority owner (*iFinnmark* newspaper, 24 March 2015).

Another issue close to the mayor is public health, which has been a priority throughout most of his political career, and one in which he has great credibility. He is currently engaged in a debate on the future hospital structure in the region, taking on a far larger and more fast-growing city in the region on the issue of the location of important hospital functions. The town hospital is old and in disrepair. It desperately needs upgrad-

ing, but this may not happen if the competitor wins the hospital battle. The contender insists that the regional healthcare plan should “adjust to today’s realities” and relocate important functions to their city (*Altaposten* newspaper, 3 March 2015). While braced for battle, the mayor moves very carefully in this regional competition. “This is not an issue that I debate and confront explicitly in the media”, he says, making it perfectly clear that while he is working hard to keep a well-equipped hospital in his municipality, he sees no need to escalate the conflict.

The mayor has a strong position in the region, speaking as he often does on behalf of neighbouring municipalities both in the media and vis-à-vis central government. “I want to help the neighbouring municipalities; one has to take the regional view when working for development”, he says. He works closely with the local industrial association, and has been on a large number of boards in organizations within sectors such as health, sports, and higher education. Nowadays, however, he has less access to arenas of national decision-making as his party is no longer in government.

5.2. Salangen municipality

Salangen is a small coastal municipality with a population of around 2000 and with agriculture and fish plants as the backbone of the local economy. Salangen also hosts a facility for young refugees, which is run by the municipality and provides a certain amount of income. Municipal finances are shaky, and borrowing has been necessary in order to provide the services required. The municipality is debt-ridden as a consequence. A major challenge is keeping population numbers stable, which requires employment opportunities and development. Also, Salangen is located in a region with a poor record of industrial development. “We are however not severely challenged. The population numbers are fairly stable, but we must attract more people with resources”, the mayor argues.

The mayor is part of what is perceived as a local political dynasty, following in the footsteps of his father as council representative and member of its executive before becoming mayor. His wife holds the position of deputy mayor. He is relatively young (under 50) and has been in office for nearly 16 years. His party has a strong local following, receiving 45% of the popular vote at the last election. The mayor himself is often described as “a strategist with diplomatic skills”, as a member of the opposition put it, and as one who chairs council meetings in ways that facilitate cooperation and consensus. He has a keen sense of what works, and is very adept at mustering support among the opposition.

Growth and development looms large on the mayor's agenda. He is at least periodically an active lobbyist on behalf of local businesses, especially aquaculture, which is considered a growth industry. He has been instrumental in preserving local schools and in establishing the centre for young refugees. In his own words: "We integrate young refugees through the school and through sports, and we do think others may learn from us." Occasional visits from other municipalities and by government officials indicate that this may indeed be the case. The municipality has even won prizes and is often referred to as a model of successful integration of young refugees. At some point a special office to encourage in-migration was established in an attempt to attract new inhabitants, especially young families. For a period they even collaborated with a Dutch company in recruiting families from the Netherlands!

A more comprehensive and ambitious strategy for local development is embodied in the formation of a dedicated unit for this purpose. This is organized as a limited company and as a joint venture between the municipality and local businesses, where the former holds 60% and the latter 40% of the shares. The company is currently at the centre of the municipality's developmental efforts and the hub for inter-municipal cooperation in the region, with a mission of supporting and advising local businesses and encouraging new initiatives and prospective entrepreneurs. At the time of the interview, the mayor was chairman of the board which, beside himself, counted representatives from the local business community. Cooperating with – and coordinating – the tourist industry is an important part of the mayor's strategy, and inter-municipal collaboration has been organized to strengthen tourism in the region.

The mayor has thus been instrumental in changing and promoting the organization of local development work by replacing the previous arrangement with a municipal administrative official in charge of development strategies with a more businesslike organization – and consolidating his own position in the process. That the council has been more or less sidelined has attracted some attention. According to a council member, "...this leaves us with no influence on development strategies; the mayor is the only one in charge".

The mayor cultivates a high media profile, partly in order to publicize the good work being done by the municipality. He has been a member of the county council, and is currently on leave from his mayoral office to fill the role of "minister" for transport

and the environment in the county government. The mayor is a keen and able networker, chairing an association of neighbouring municipalities in the region as well as working closely with individuals and firms within the business community. Before becoming part of the county government machinery himself, he lobbied hard to save the municipal secondary schools threatened by closure. In this, he was part of a group that eventually brought down the county government, paving the way for a change in his own political career. Having been a member of the national (executive) board of his party, a representative on the board of the Association of Norwegian Municipalities (KS), part of a network that includes people in central government as well as members of parliament, the mayor is in a unique position to keep himself informed about relevant issues at an early stage, and perhaps put his stamp – however small – on policy decisions pertaining to the welfare of his region and local community.

5.3 Tjeldsund municipality

Tjeldsund, the smallest municipality in our sample, has a population of around 1000. The municipality does not have a “natural” centre but consists of four, maybe five villages or communities. The topography is a challenge, as the municipality is divided between an island (where the city hall is located) and the mainland. Serving as a link between them is only a small boat (that takes passengers but no cargo). The municipality’s borders were set when boats were the main means of transportation. Today, going by car from one end of the municipality to the other means driving through three municipalities and two counties (Nordland and Troms). According to the CEO, municipal finances are in reasonably good shape; the municipality is a risk-averse polity known for its ability to balance its books. However, population numbers have decreased quite dramatically since the mid-1980s, which poses a major challenge. There are two main industries in the municipality: a naval base and an institution for the training of firefighters. Farming and fishing are also important sources of employment as is the municipality itself with its 150 employees or so. Although the mayor has spent considerable time and energy to encourage more investment in farming, local farmers are leaving the industry, selling their land when the children are reluctant to take over.

The mayor is relatively young, around 50, with a background in the private sector, where he ran his own business. He is chairman of the local branch of the Conservative Party, whose electoral support has grown over the three periods he has been in office. He does not, however, command a majority in the council and has to cooperate with other parties, typically the Labour Party. He entered the council in politically turbulent times, taking over as mayor when the then office holder gave up and left office on his

own accord. He managed to set things right and is known for sticking to formalities, keeping his hands firmly on the steering wheel. According to a representative of the opposition, he “is a likable person and a good ‘broker’. He always makes sure that he has majority for the decisions he promotes in council meetings.” There is not, we were told, much opposition to his policies; the council decisions tend to be unanimous. While full of ideas, the mayor is not always able to follow up on his plans or implement his ideas. That said, he certainly comes across as a hardworking and very engaged politician, and an able spokesman for his community, not least in the media.

The Tjeldsund mayor’s developmental strategies are basically – at least in part – defensive. Keeping the two government-funded institutions in the municipality is a priority, and efforts to that effect have taken much of his time and energy. The naval base and the firefighters’ college are, after all, backbones of the local economy, given their importance as sources of employment. Threats to move the firefighters’ college elsewhere have been real, and there has been an almost constant battle over the years to retain it in Tjeldsund, as well as securing that a new bachelor-level programme be located in the municipality. “I have spent an enormous amount of time and effort to keep these institutions in the municipality”, the mayor says, and he will certainly continue to do so, if necessary. On this, he has always had the backing of the council. The recent – and good – news is that his lobbying efforts have paid off: the new and expanded programme will be located in the municipality.

However, the mayor has little time for celebration. Government plans for restructuring the military organization in the northern region may also affect the naval base. The challenges posed by the increased presence of Russia in the Arctic requires structural changes currently being pondered in the Ministry of Defence. Any restructuring will have local effects if it implies reconsidering the present location of the smaller naval bases along the coast. Tjeldsund would perhaps be an obvious and sensible choice, as much of the necessary infrastructure is already in place. There are, however, alternative locations in other municipalities nearby, and there are fears – especially among representatives of the opposition – that this may lead to a competitive struggle for new employment opportunities in the region. The mayor is more optimistic and has worked out what he thinks is a sensible strategy: He has been in contact with his “neighbours”, enquiring about their ideas and what they see as their comparative advantages. “We need to work together on this, stand shoulder to shoulder and coordinate our inputs to the new defence plan. Political cannibalism is a well-known phenomenon in northern Norway, and here we have to work together.”

Overall, the mayor comes across as a master networker and as an eager (and probably quite an effective) lobbyist. He does not hold any prominent positions at other levels of government or in his party, but he seems to know “everyone”. He communicates frequently with other mayors in the region, interacts with politicians at the county level, and does not hesitate to get in touch with members of parliament. He is also a frequent (and fearless) visitor to government offices in Oslo, lobbying on behalf of both his municipality and the region. By his own account he sometimes just finds a plausible excuse to get in touch, and readily picks up the phone when a new person joins the political-administrative apparatus. “I just need to know them”, he says, aware that someone has to do the footwork.

6. DISCUSSION

The differences between the three municipalities essentially boil down to this: While one (the largest) has experienced a substantial growth in population thanks to its recent status as the gas capital of the north, the other two are struggling to combat depopulation. For two of them, topography poses a bottleneck for further growth either by limiting the supply of suitable areas for new businesses or by convoluted traffic routes that complicate travel and communication. Two have problems balancing their budgets, while the smallest one has budgetary control. The cornerstones of their economies vary and have clearly changed since the millennium. They all rely less on the fisheries than they used to, but apart from this, they have taken different routes with regard to growth and development. The larger one has benefitted from the discovery of vast offshore hydrocarbon resources and from the resultant investments. The medium-sized municipality has based its economy on a combination of agriculture and public sector employment in secondary education and a government-sponsored project of receiving and integrating young refugees, whereas the smallest relies increasingly on the employment opportunities offered by the naval base and the firefighters’ college. Both institutions have been threatened – the former by new defence initiatives, the latter by the decision to elevate its educational programme to BA level and the discussions about its (future) location. Both institutions are still located in the municipality, partly as a result of the mayor’s efforts.

In spite of these differences, the three mayors seem to rely on much the same strategies. As demonstrated in a previous study (Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2010), mayors in struggling municipalities tend to emphasize their role as political/policy entrepreneurs, engaging with the local business community as well as government institutions at the regional

and national level. Their restricted formal mandate, heavily tilted towards presiding and ceremonial functions (Mouritzen and Svava 2002), does not prevent them from choosing a far more expansive approach to their role, often in response to stakeholder expectations of strong leadership. They all come across as dedicated policy brokers (Sabatier (1988), skilful negotiators and consensus-builders tuned to keeping conflict levels to a minimum. All three are keen lobbyists, their lobbying efforts strengthened by their ability to build networks at both the national and regional level. They are also efficient communicators who know how to play the media. They are, in other words, what Kingdon (1995) and Polsby (1984) have labelled policy entrepreneurs.

The mayor of Hammerfest, for example, lobbied strongly for the exploitation of off-shore gas recourses in the region, and succeeded in his efforts to have these landed, processed, and shipped from a small island a couple of stone throws away from the city. He now works to save a local fish-processing plant, combining the promotion of high-tech projects with attempts at preserving and strengthening a traditional and regionally important industry within a company structure. There are limits, however, to his regional orientation, because he is currently fighting to defend local institutions, the city hospital in particular, against attempts to move its basic functions to another part of the region. Well aware that this is a zero-sum game that could turn ugly, he weighs his words and arguments carefully in order not to split the region and weaken its collective voice in other matters.

The mayor of Salangen has pursued regional investments in secondary schools and in housing for young refugees, and has supported attempts at increasing local tourism and strengthening business development. In the latter case he has contributed actively to the establishment of a joint venture with the business community, which epitomizes the municipal strategy for growth and development. The mayor of Tjeldsund, on his part, has seized the opportunities provided by large public investments in schools. He thus comes across as one that sees development opportunities in government reforms, initiating new strategies and building coalitions to draw new investments to the municipality.


All three have a comprehensive network which, in part, is a spin-off from party connections and from their having served at higher levels of Norwegian politics (regional and national). The mayor of Tjeldsund, for example, has negotiated development packages with neighbouring municipalities, which makes it easier to obtain political support and government funding. The mayor of Salangen is highly visible at the county level, work-

ing his regional network in order to influence the county council and his own political party in his successful efforts to, inter alia, prevent the closing of a local secondary school. An experienced player in national politics, the mayor of Hammerfest certainly knows which buttons to press. His “upward” connections are plentiful – to parliament, government departments, and his own party apparatus at the national level – and he knows how to utilize them. Common to all three is that their agendas, working modes, and strategies extend well beyond the formal requirements of the office. Combining the role of efficient political executive with that of a dedicated “head of state”, these mayors have adopted a leadership style befitting their twin mandate of “prime minister” and “president”, made possible by their preference role and the negative delimitation of municipal self-governance. While context and challenges vary, the strategies and leadership styles of our mayors differ very little. This is remarkable given the freedom and discretion that they enjoy – at least in principle – in what is fundamentally a preference role. However, this does not seem to matter when it comes to development strategies and growth policies. The explanation for these fairly similar strategies, we suggest, leaning on the most different case design (George and Bennett 2005), is that these mayors are experienced in their office and have learned or acquired a sort of entrepreneurial logic of appropriateness. There is of course a serious limitation to such studies, as cases are complex and it is difficult to eliminate independent variables that explain a common outcome such as politics and leadership styles. An alternative explanation, however, is that the menu of relevant and useful strategies on offer is limited, with few “courses” to choose from. Given these limitations, there may be a possible relation between leadership experience and the choice of developmental policies.

7. CONCLUSION

Norwegian mayors have few formal powers, which may lead one to believe that they will be victims of path dependencies and adopt an incremental and cautious approach to growth and development, acting as guardians of traditional industries. However, both our cases and others (Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2009) show that there is room for a more expansive, entrepreneurial approach, due to the political space provided by the negative delimitation of municipal powers as well as the knowledge base and legitimacy provided by their leadership experience. Our three mayors are seasoned political operators with an eye for (new) opportunities and a willingness to adopt a more dynamic, expansive, and entrepreneurial leadership style than their formal role calls for. They take bold initiatives, playing the role of visionary and strategic policymakers, building and exploiting personal and political networks to see their initiatives materialized.

One is tempted to ask whether it is the close to “tenured” position of experienced mayors that gives them the self-confidence to go beyond the remit of their formal role in setting their agendas and policy strategies. Applying a “most different” case study approach, comparing three experienced mayors’ strategies as leaders of different municipalities in the northern periphery, we found that their priorities, policies, and leadership styles differed little, if at all. Whether these similarities are due to leadership qualities acquired through long-term careers as a result of experience cannot be determined in full by a study such as the one reported here. To do so, we would need comparable data on the strategies and priorities of mayors with shorter careers and include a broader set of variables. What our study demonstrates is that mayors – in spite of the discretion offered by their ill-defined role and the negative delimitation of local government power and functions – opt for largely similar strategies in dealing with different challenges. This is puzzling, given that issues pertaining to development and growth tend to be rather open-ended with few standard solutions, with room for tailoring strategies and policies to local problems and challenges. What this may indicate is that the policy tools at the mayors’ disposal are limited, and that there are certain fundamental norms and expectations – a logic of appropriateness – associated with the office that reduces the preferential element of this particular leadership role. In other words, while the preference character of the office allows for expansive, entrepreneurial strategies, the menu of such strategies may well be limited, constrained by considerations of what works and is considered politically appropriate.



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