

Abstract

NIVI-report 2013:4 *The Norwegian counties and their role as regional development agents. How do the municipalities and representatives from the state administration judge the counties performance?*

Problem Outlook

In the year 2010 assignments that were of importance to regional development, were delegated to the counties from the State. The intention of this reform was to strengthen the self-government at regional level, and meet the requirements of regional task solution. The most important new county obligations were the responsibility for most of the roads in Norway and duties with regard to regional development and planning. Based on experience gained after over three years since the reform was carried into effect, the evaluation points out two main questions:

First, how do the municipalities and the State estimate the counties performance as regional development agents? Secondly, do the guide-lines from the State give room for maneuver and frame conditions for the counties that are in agreement with the purpose of the reform in the year 2010?

The evaluation is founded on interviews with informants from the state and the municipalities, analyses of documents and questionnaires comprising the municipalities in Norway.

The judgments of the Municipalities

The municipalities give middle scores judging the development work of the counties comprising the counties contribution to:

- sector coordinating initiatives,
- importance as professional advisers for the municipalities
- and to what extent the counties gave success in adopting the task solutions for local and regional requirements.

The analyses of the open answers in the inquiry, shows a considerable majority of critical evaluations. It shows that the counties are inaccessible and have too little insight into the requirements of the municipalities and that they are unduly project oriented.

How the informers from the State evaluate the achievements?

Also the informers from the state give mediocre judgment of the counties. The informers ask for the counties to utilize the potential and the room for maneuver better, and that the counties risk carrying through regional priorities regardless of being popular in the municipalities. Many informers from the State also point to their experience of a sectorised county. At the same time the informants emphasizes that frame conditions for the counties to carry on development work, is demanding. The State requires the counties to give attention to behave according to sectorised administration on behalf of the state, and the fact that the political signals from the State can stand forth as little coordinated.

Commission letters from the state to the counties

Analysis of execution/steering documents from the state directed to the counties has been made. This search shows that many ministries are guiding the development work of the counties considerably. The guide-lines shows which matters shall have high place among competing claims. The ministries are defining categories to be investigated and are giving guide-lines to the organization of the work. Within more sectors the administration from the state is limiting the regions political room for making their own priorities.

NIVIs Conclusions and Recommendations

Conflicting Signals from the State and the Municipalities

The county has a demanding role on a level between the State and the municipalities. From the States point of view it is expected that the county gives guide-lines that have an impact on the municipalities' room for maneuver. The municipalities ask for cooperation and increased local influence. The municipals do not appeal for a county with authority to administer them. Concerning the counties it can be demanding to find room for regional solutions that are balancing partly incompatible motives and interests from the State and the municipalities at the same time. Even if the challenge surely enough will pursue the counties as an intermediate level, Nivi all the same points to room for improvements in frame conditions as well as county working terms.

Change in State practice

NIVI will emphasize the following facts which can improve the conditions for the counties as regional development agents:

- The ministries guide-lines to the counties should be suppressed somewhat. In this way the counties will have greater room to maintain their role for development.
- To simplify the commission (mandate) for the counties, the state can collect the yearly guide-lines and monitor signals in one document.
- To strengthen prediction for the counties, the steering letters from the State can embrace several years.
- The state can reduce the number of national initiated preferences and initiatives which are expected to be followed up.
- The counties and the regional state administration can further develop formal cooperation routines to ensure mutual regional collaboration.

The County with a Potential of Improvement in Regard to the Municipalities

The municipalities are the most important cooperation partner for the county. The enquiries however, show that the counties have a potential for improvement. The municipalities ask for a closer and more structural collaboration with the counties and a stronger involvement in policy development and problem solution. To a certain extent it would imply more formal cooperation arenas with the municipalities; partly it would imply that greater influence is handed on to the municipalities with regard to the county functions.

According to the evaluation, the county ought to take the municipalities challenges seriously. A stronger consolidated cooperation with the municipalities can give more energy to the counties in their roles as supervisors, sector administrators and policy harmonizers because the roles imply knowledge and involvement from the local level.