

# Summary

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## **Sub-municipal democratic bodies in the Nordic countries**

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In this report, we present a review on studies of sub-municipal democratic bodies in the Nordic countries. Sub-municipal democratic bodies denote bodies covering a geographical area smaller than the municipality, and serving as a platform for participation and involvement of the population in this area. Various forms of sub-municipal bodies have been tested in the Nordic countries, and they vary with respect to the way they are established, their composition, their functions, powers and funding. Most of the bodies are advisory with no independent decision-making authority. Some, however, dispose municipal resources and have far-reaching decision-making powers.

Most of the sub-municipal bodies in the Nordic countries are established by the municipality, but there are also examples of bodies that have come about through local initiatives. In some cases such self-established bodies later become part of a municipal democracy structure.

Especially in Denmark, the establishment of sub-municipal democratic bodies has been linked to changes in municipal structure. In order to encourage municipal mergers, new large municipalities have subdivided themselves into a number of neighborhoods or areas, each with its elected or appointed sub-municipal body. When drawing the borders of these new areas is left to the population, the borders will often follow old municipal borders. This has proved to galvanize old identity patterns and prevent integration in new large municipalities. It may still be important to the local population in a merged municipality to preserve old community identities. Sense of belonging is also important in creating engagement and participation. In other words, the effect of letting sub-municipal bodies follow old municipal borders is ambiguous.

Another common reason for establishing sub-municipal democratic bodies is to encourage communication between local politicians and the local population. Such communication is facilitated if there is a formal link between what goes on in the sub-municipal body and what goes on in the municipal council. The chance of succeeding increases significantly if the municipality appoints a person to mediate between the municipality and the sub-municipal body. Another success factor is to have fixed meeting dates where local politicians and the sub-municipal body meet.

Sub-municipal bodies also often aim at encouraging participation around issues affecting the local community. However, the bodies are unequally successful in recruiting people to participate. In some cases, the bodies are dominated by specific organizations and their agenda. This can be avoided by establishing procedures to ensure broad recruitment. Experiences from Norwegian municipalities show that having a sub-municipal level provides greater awareness of the need for citizen participation among local politicians and municipal staff. This may lead to a more systematic involvement in all sorts of municipal policy processes.

The sub-municipal bodies that are perceived as well functioning by those who participate have some common characteristics. First, the participants experience that the bodies' work has a real impact on municipal politics and policy development. Secondly, it seems to be important that the expectations and roles of all parties are clarified - both sub-municipal bodies, politicians and local citizens need to know exactly what are the different bodies' authorities and roles. Finally, it is important to establish a formal link between local politics and what is happening in the sub-municipal body. The best way to achieve this seems to be to employ a person who mediates between the body and the municipality.

Many sub-municipal bodies are used as consultative partners of the municipality, and politicians in all the Nordic countries have found that these bodies, when they work well, improve decision-making. Representatives are recruited from the local community, they know the needs and wants of the population, which solutions to specific problems that are possible to realize and which are not in the specific local context, and what local resources one can draw on. Asking locals for advice also give political solutions greater legitimacy, which can facilitate the implementation of measures. Sub-municipal bodies seem thus to contribute positively to democracy at the local level.