

NEW PATHS TO GOOD LOCAL DEMOCRACY - SUMMARY

The report analyzes the characteristics of Norwegian municipalities with varying scores on local democracy indexes. The analysis is based on data from two surveys directed at citizens and elected representatives, respectively. An additional source of data is drawn from interviews in three selected municipalities. The report focuses on five dimensions of local democracy; *reliability, accountability, closeness, effectiveness* and *role satisfaction* (for elected officials).

The analysis concurs in the main with previous studies. The individual traits and characteristics of the survey respondents (gender, age, etc.) account for most of the variation in the assessments of the local democracy. There is, however, a marked difference between citizens and elected representatives on some of the specific issues that make up the democracy dimensions/indexes. This is an important finding in the sense that efforts to increase local democracy quality must consider the possibility of this difference – which will be subject to varying local contexts.

In terms of the variables that the municipalities themselves can influence and make alterations to – i.e. how they organize themselves politically and managerially – a main finding is that there is generally a weak link between such variables and local democracy scores. Nevertheless, some relationships have significance. Citizens in municipalities that emphasizes participation-related initiatives scores somewhat higher on the accountability and closeness dimensions of local democracy. While this is hardly surprising, it is perhaps more of a surprise that elected officials in municipalities with *formalized and institutionalized* arenas for popular participation tend to score lower on their democracy assessments – specifically in terms of effectiveness and accountability. Possible explanations for this might be that this institutionalization has its roots in efforts to mitigate lacking popular involvement, or it might point to participatory institutions as a perceived transaction cost in the local elites' decision-making process.

Likewise, there is a weak link between local democracy assessments and the way the municipalities organize their service provision. However, citizens' local democracy scores are higher in municipalities with a generally higher degree of administrative autonomy; specifically in terms of the effectiveness and reliability dimensions. The same applies to municipalities characterized by a high degree of political delegation of authority from the local assembly to subordinated political committees.

In terms of the elected representatives' role perceptions, the qualitative data points to the advent of social media as a new variable compared to previous studies. This is probably something that needs to be addressed within the frames of the local democracy discourse – namely how social media can be utilized to strengthen democratic interaction between

citizens and local elites, and which pitfalls to avoid. The report also points to the elected representatives' role perceptions and satisfaction as being local context sensitive. Municipality size is an important variable in this respect; the smaller municipalities give better opportunities for local politicians who prioritize citizen contact and issue specificity, while larger municipalities generally caters for a more professional role with a focus on overarching strategic perspectives.

In terms of recommendations, the report points to *agenda-setting* as the main strategic approach to developing local democracies; a continual focus seems especially pertinent in an era of municipal reforms. However, the report argues that the following points should be afforded particular attention:

1. *Knowledge based initiatives.* Successful initiatives to develop local democracies needs to be based on factual knowledge, nor general assumptions. The possibility for a gap between citizens' and elites' democracy perceptions should be addressed.
2. *Local context focus.* Democracy building initiatives must be adapted to local contexts, local problems and local needs. This does not preclude learning from others, but adaptations are more than likely needed.
3. *Information and transparency.* Previous studies have pointed to transparency as vital to local democratic governance. This still applies. The width of the municipalities efforts to strengthen local democracy should have a broad approach, bettering the flow of information between the municipality (as an organization) and its citizens, between citizens and elites, between elected representatives and the managerial leadership, and between elected representatives in various formal positions.
4. *Focus on younger people and recruitment.* A generally lower score on the local democracy indexes among young people (and males) signifies a need for a particular attention towards these groups. The same tendency is seen among the younger and less experienced elected representatives. Coupled with a general recruitment challenge, this points to an issue that also should be on the agenda for local political parties.