



Socrates
Grundtvig



Desk study 1

The structure of the local democracy in Denmark

Version 1.

Steffen Hartje

Chapter 1

The new local government reform

“Democracy will be strengthened as more political decisions are made locally. Efforts should be made to expand democracy so that the citizens can be more actively involved in the decisions. The municipalities of the future should find new ways to involve citizens and users in local decisions.”

(Excerpt from the Agreement on a Structural Reform made by the government and the Danish People’s Party)¹

From an international point of view the Danish local government system is characterized of a high degree of decentralization from the state to the municipalities. In year 2000, local authority expenses amounted 44% of the total public expenditure, but only a small part of these amount has been sent to boards in the local area from the municipalities. There has been a high grade of decentralization from the state to the municipalities, but there is still a low grade of decentralization from the municipalities to the local societies.

“Democracy will be strengthened as more political decisions are made locally. Efforts should be made to expand democracy so that the citizens can be more actively involved in the decisions. The municipalities of the future should find new ways to involve citizens and users in local decisions.”²

On the first of January 2007 a new reform of local government was implemented in Denmark. The reform has reduced 271 municipalities to 98, has replaced 12 counties with 5 regions and will reduce the number of district council members from 4597 to approximately 2520.

The reform will have an impact on the local democracy because it will centralize the power in bigger and stronger municipalities, and the distance between the politicians in the municipals and the citizens in the local community will increased.

A minimum size for the new municipalities was set at 20.000 inhabitants. Municipals with lesser inhabitants should therefore merge into new, larger municipalities. Alternative they could enter into a binding partnership with municipalilites on the mainland to be able to meet the requirements regarding size.

After the reform there will be fewer politicians due to the merging of the municipalities, and the district council will have more tasks and thus more responsibility. It is also an intention in the reform to make a clearer distribution of responsibility from the national to the municipality level.

The government claim, that the local democracy will not be affected in a negative way by the reform, and that the local democracy in a municipality with 30.000 citizens is as good as in a municipality with 5.000 citizens. They are referring to researchers, who have asked citizens in small and bigger municipalities about their opinion about the local democracy. The research shows, that the citizens in the larger

¹ The Ministry for Interior and Health’s homepage

² The Ministry for Interior and Health: ”The local government reform – In brief” page 40

municipalities and the citizens in the small municipalities were equally satisfied with the local democracy. But the research was not reliable, because it doesn't take into account, that most of the citizens in the larger municipalities have not lived in small municipalities, and therefore don't have the opportunity to compare the two different forms for local democracy.

To respond to the criticism of the reform's negative impact on local democracy the minister of the Interior and Health, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, appointed a Think Tank on democracy in 2005 with representation from some of the associations in the civil society.

In August the same year, the Think Tank submitted a number of recommendations. In one of these recommendations the politicians in the municipalities were encouraged to formulate visions and rules for local democracy in cooperation with the citizens, to involve the citizens in important political decisions and to employ a coordinator to establish the framework and ensure follow-up on citizen participation.

But it is a question about these recommendations are enough to absorb the negative impact of the new government reform on the local democracy.

A description of different local committees/boards in the local areas

3

“If the decisions are made in advance and the point of views of the opponent never becomes present, then the negotiation is just empty words and parliamentary rubbish, as the hard critics of democracy used to say. But if the mind is kept open and the respect for the views of other people is maintained, and interest for the common is kept alive, results will be made which would be impossible if one part alone dictates, no matter if it's a absolute monarch, a privileged overclass or a modern political party strong enough to have dictatorial ideas. A voting procedure does not insure the correct result, and even decisions made by the majority can in a Democratic society be openly discussed and criticized. In an authoritarian state the opposition keep their silence when a decision is made.” [Hal Koch, 1960: 21] [Our translation]

In Denmark there is a long tradition for that the citizens practise the participative democracy in the local societies.

After the Second World War has ended, the theologian Hal Koch made a great impact on the way that the Danes were thinking and practice democracy. He wrote a little book called “What is Democracy” in which he emphasised, that democracy is a way of life, and that the essence of democracy is conversation, dialog and discussion with the aim to reach a consensus about the common good.

Regarding to Koch the democracy is basically about the relations between people (relations in the family, relations in the neighbourhood, relations between social groups and relations between nations.

It is therefore it is so important that the citizens learn to understand and practice democracy. The democracy must be a part of the daily life.

One of the best places to learn to practice democracy is in the voluntary organisations in the civic society, because there is no interfering from the state or the market in this part of the society.

When citizens have learn to practise democracy, they must also have the opportunity to be involved in the political decisions making. Therefore is it necessary to organise a frame for the mutual dialog between the active citizens in the local society and the politicians in the district council.

In the last three decades we have seen different attempt to organise these dialog. In the following chapter I have tried to describe some of the most important boards in the local societies.

³ Hal Koch: What is Democracy p. 21

Local board (Lokalråd)

A local board is elected by the citizens in the local area and have sometimes got a minor formal competence from the district council.

There are two types of local boards:

A type which is established of the citizens in the local area, and a type that is established of the district council in the municipality.

Tasks for the local boards

The local boards works primarily with minor problems in the local area. For example problems with traffic, the environment, neighbours etcetera. But if there is more important political decision they don't like for instance closing of a local school, they will also deal with these problems.

Many of the local boards also make culture activities (e.g. town celebrations, games for the kids, smaller festivals).

Organizational structure

Most of the local boards are organized as an association with a board of representatives from the associations and institutions in the local area

Competence

Most of the local boards, which have been established of the district council, have got a minor formal competence. (E.g. they got the right to be heard and to make and answer, when the district council are working with cases in relation to their local area

Economy

Some of the local boards get a small amount from the district council to administration and communication.

No one are employed. The board depend on voluntary work

Numbers

You can find local boards all over the country.

You often find between 40-70 local boards in a municipality.

Village boards (Landsbyråd)

The intention with the village board

Many of the small villages in Denmark have got serious problems to deal with.

One of the main problems is, that young people from the small villages had to move to bigger cities, if they want an education, and most of them don't return to the country life after, they have been educated. The result of this development is, that the villages become more and more depopulated, and loose money because there is fewer to pay taxes to the municipality.

It is very important to do something to stop this negative development. The small villages must be revitalized, so they again can attract young people.

Other tasks for the village board:

- To work for at better cooperation between the villages and the municipality
- Take initiative to new village projects
- Strengthening the network between the small villages
- Strengthening the network to the municipality
- Get influence on the politic for the countryside.
- To keep the village environment
- To help with the integrations process
- Construction of playgrounds and nature paths

Who have establish the board?

In the same way as the local boards there are also two types of village board: One which are established of the citizens in the local area and one type which is established of the district council

Organizational structure

Each village elect a representative to the village board

Numbers

You find them in most of the land districts.

Economy

Membership fee and sometime a small grant from the district council

level of activity

There is a big difference in the level of activity from board to board.

Town District Boards (Bydelsudvalg)

The intention with the town district board

The town district board is a part of the formal politician system in a municipality. The board has been elected the same way as the district council as a part of the representative democracy.

Organizational structure

The members of the town district board are elected i the local area. Sometimes there are also members who have been selected of the district council.

Who take the initiative to establish a town district board?

It is the district council that shall take the initiative to establish a town district board.

Competence

Compared with the village board and the local board the town district board can have more formal competence, because it is under the control of the district council.

Economy

The district council pays all the expenses.

A council officer will work as a secretary for the board

level of activity

The town district board doesn't depend on voluntary work, and can therefore work more continuously than a local and a village board.

It is a minus with the town district boards that it is not established of the citizens in the local area, and it can be rather expensive for the municipality to run.

Numbers

There are only a few in Denmark.

Development Board (Udviklingsråd)

The intention with the Development Boards

The development board is a new kind of boards.

They are established as a consequence of the new reform of local government.

The intentions with the board, is to deal with the negative effect of the reform for the local democracy.

It is the district council that can recommend establishing of a system of development heads in the municipality, but it is up to the citizens in the local areas to decide, if they want to have it or not.

Tasks

The development board shall collect good ideas from the citizens in the local communities, about how the local areas and the municipality can be developed.

They shall moreover work for, that the new municipality can get a strong cohesion and give identity to the citizens.

The network of boards also comprise a formalised frame for the dialog between the district council and the local areas, and can in the future be a part of a new network steering system between the representative democracy and the local democracy.

Organizational structure

Like the local boards most of the development board are organized as an association with a board of representatives from the associations, other types of boards and institutions in the local area. But there are only 10-12 boards in the municipality because it is not possible for the district council to be in a permanent dialog with e.g. 50-70 boards.

Each development board send a representative to a united development board. The united development board shall take step to insure the dialog between the development boards.

Size

Most of the boards cover a school district area.

Competence

In municipality of Varde, which is the first place, where the model with development boards is practised so far, the board don't have a formal competence yet. But it will be necessary to give them a formal competence, if they in the future shall be a part of a network steering system with the district council.

Economy

They got a small grant from the district council

Numbers

So far there are only development boards in the municipality of Varde in Jutland.

The local democracies influence of the decision-making process in the municipalities.

The conclusion on the above mentioned description is, that the locally based democracy in Denmark still only has a limited influence on the political decision processes in the municipalities.

The local decision-making bodies only have a minor formal power, and they had to seek influence on the local politics through lobbying and dialogue with the local politicians and the local authority employees.

But you can see a clear tendency to an increasing interest from the politicians to involve the citizens in important political.

The local government reform makes it necessary to strengthen the organization of the local democracy.

What type of cases is typical for the local democracy to deal with?

The conclusion on which types of activities the boards in the local areas are working with is the following activities: The dialog with the district council, district plans, traffic, culture, sports and recreation, lobbying and information service.

Chapter 3

Who is active in the local democracy?

A new population study⁴ shows there is a rather large part of the Danes who undertake voluntary work⁵. 35 per cent of the population responds they have undertaken voluntary work within last 12 months.

Over the past 15 years the number of people, who undertake voluntary work, are increasing. Back in 1990 only 26 per cent of the population undertook voluntary work.

The study does not go into details with the profile of volunteers in the field of locally based democracy, but shows the profile of volunteers who are actively involved in housing associations and local community, for example community groups, residents' associations, homeowner's associations, community centre and sports and recreation. So in this way the study does include persons who are actively involved in local democracy.

The study shows there are slightly more men than women who undertake voluntary work: 38 per cent of men and 32 per cent of women. Men are more active in sports and recreation and local communities whereas women are in the majority in the social field.

The highest percentage of volunteers is the age group 30 to 49 years (41 per cent) and the lowest percentage is among people over 76 years (15 per cent) and young people between 16 to 25 years (28 per cent).

Tabel 3.6

Andele af de frivillige, der har udført arbejdet for forskellige foreninger, institutioner eller andet, særskilt efter, om de er medlemmer eller ikke. 2004. Procent.

| | Har arbejdet frivilligt | | | Alle, der har arbejdet frivilligt |
|---|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | Udelukkende som medlem | Både-og ikke-medlem | Udelukkende ikke-medlem | |
| En frivillig forening / organisation | 75 | 80 | 43 | 68 |
| En selvejende institution (herunder religiøse org.) | 17 | 31 | 14 | 18 |
| En offentlig institution | 9 | 41 | 30 | 16 |
| Folketirken | 2 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| En erhvervsvirksomhed | 3 | 15 | 8 | 5 |
| Andet | 3 | 9 | 6 | 4 |
| Antal | 765 | 100 | 236 | 1.101 |

Kilde: Koch-Nielsen et al., 2005, tabel 3.4.

There is a distinct connection between education and voluntary work. The more education people have, the more they involve in voluntary work. People without vocational qualifications do much less voluntary work (25 per cent) than highly educated people (45 per cent).

It is worth noting that the percentage of people in the rural districts (37 per cent), who do voluntary work, are higher than in capital areas and suburbs (31 per cent), but residential area and local community do not fit in this picture. In the field of

⁴ The Danish National Institute of Social Research: The non-profit sector in Denmark.

⁵ By voluntary work we understood activities that are voluntary, i.e. undertaken freely, in a voluntary non-profit organisation, are unpaid, are for the benefit of other people than the volunteer and his or her family. Page 68

residential area and local community there are more volunteers (9 per cent) when compared to the rural districts (5 per cent).

The study also shows that families with children do more voluntary work (32 per cent) than families without children (32 per cent).

It is paradoxical that the group of people, who work most, also spend most time in volunteering. Among the group of people who work more than 40 hours in a week there is 48 percent who works voluntary. In comparison there is only 28 per cent among the unemployed who do voluntary work. But in contrast volunteers who do not have a job use more time in voluntary work.

Tabel 3.8

Andelen af forskellige grupper i befolkningen, der har arbejdet frivilligt inden for det sidste år. Procent. De frivilliges tid brugt på frivilligt arbejde sidste måned. Gennemsnit. Sandsynligheden for at arbejde frivilligt. Odds ratio-estimer fra logistisk regression, 2004.

| | Andel frivillige sidste år, Procent | Antal | Frivilliges tid på frivilligt arbejde, Gns. | Logistisk regression, Parameterestimer | Odds ratioestimer | P |
|------------------------------------|--|-------|--|---|-------------------|-----|
| Konstant | | | | -2,6088 | | ** |
| Alle | 35 | 3.134 | 17 | | | |
| Mænd | 38 | 1.502 | 18 | 0,2162 | 1,241 | ** |
| Kvinder | 32 | 1.632 | 16 | reference | | |
| 16-29 år | 32 | 622 | 20 | 0,4701 | 1,6 | *** |
| 30-49 år | 41 | 1.240 | 15 | 0,6414 | 1,899 | *** |
| 50-65 år | 35 | 805 | 19 | 0,3976 | 1,488 | ** |
| 66- år | 23 | 467 | 18 | reference | | |
| Under uddannelse | 34 | 453 | 20 | 0,4304 | 1,538 | *** |
| Ingen erhvervsuddannelse | 25 | 704 | 20 | reference | | |
| Faglig uddannelse o.l. | 36 | 980 | 13 | 0,3323 | 1,394 | *** |
| Kort videregående uddannelse | 36 | 266 | 19 | 0,3608 | 1,435 | ** |
| Mellemlang videregående uddannelse | 42 | 492 | 16 | 0,4942 | 1,639 | *** |
| Lang videregående uddannelse | 45 | 286 | 20 | 0,4866 | 1,627 | *** |
| Hovedstaden med forstæder | 31 | 704 | 17 | reference | | |
| Provinsbyer med forstæder | 35 | 1.448 | 16 | 0,2539 | 1,289 | ** |
| Bymæssige bebyggelser | 37 | 582 | 22 | 0,3579 | 1,43 | *** |
| Landdistrikter | 37 | 445 | 14 | 0,3541 | 1,439 | *** |
| Har børn under 18 år | 42 | 974 | 16 | 0,2048 | 1,227 | ** |
| Har ikke børn under 18 år | 32 | 2.160 | 18 | reference | | |
| Ikke i arbejde | 28 | 1.266 | 21 | reference | | |
| Arbejder 1-40 timer om ugen | 37 | 1.429 | 15 | 0,1613 | 1,175 | |
| Arbejder over 40 timer om ugen | 48 | 439 | 17 | 0,4969 | 1,644 | *** |
| I kirke hver måned | 53 | 262 | 26 | 1,1494 | 3,156 | *** |
| I kirke en gang imellem | 45 | 389 | 17 | 0,6216 | 1,862 | *** |
| Kun til højtidene/(næsten) aldrig | 31 | 2.466 | 15 | reference | | |
| Megat interesseret i politik | 46 | 520 | 22 | 0,8533 | 2,347 | *** |
| Ret interesseret i politik | 37 | 1.397 | 17 | 0,5025 | 1,653 | *** |
| Næsten ikke interesseret i politik | 30 | 912 | 13 | 0,3033 | 1,354 | * |
| Slet ikke interesseret i politik | 22 | 293 | 16 | reference | | |

Anm.: χ^2 uafhængighedstest: ***: $p < 0,01$; **: $p < 0,05$; *: $p < 0,1$.

Kilde: Frivillighedsundersøgelsen.

The study paints a picture of high-educated families with children, with full-time jobs and long working hours, in the age group 30-49 years, as being the most active group in the volunteering.

The percentage of people from a non-western native country, who do voluntary work, is significantly below average (20 per cent). Partly because this group largely spend their free time together with the family and relatives. The main challenge will be to involve the ethnic groups and the unemployed in voluntary work and democracy development.

Other aspects of the local democracy in Denmark.

The strong and the weak sides of the local democracy

The strong side of the local democracy in Denmark is the huge participation of volunteers actively involved in democracy work. But it is a problem that it is mainly the highest socio-economic groups who participate whereas the lower socio-economic groups lack representation and influence. This participation gap is the weak side.

Potentials for the active involvement of citizens in the local democracy

There is an increasing discontent with the erosion of the Danish welfare model caused by a tight fiscal policy though there is a record high external surplus on the national budget.

The discontent with the cuts in public spending like e.g. day-care facilities and old-age care caused public protests in many municipalities in 2006. The protests will probably intensify as the local government reform is put into force.

The threat of school closures, library closures etc. in consequence of the efficiency measures, which are part of the reform, can intensify the work in the local democracy.

The barriers for the active involvement of citizens in the local democracy

The barriers for development of the Danish local democracy are mainly the uneven recruitment of new volunteers. It is especially the high educated and well-off people who are the driving force behind the activities for local democracy.

The tendency to individualization in the society can also be a problem. The collective organisation in the country has weakened over the last two decades. The clearest indication of this is the declining membership in political parties, but there has also been a shift towards more individualized form for activism. It is up to oneself to decide where, when and how to become active. When people participate in collective action they more and more often do it without taking personal to other participants.

It is also more difficult to get new members to the boards in the civic society (sports clubs etc.). Many people don't want to take a responsibility for a longer period in a board. They still want to make voluntary work but only for a shorter period. Activism is therefore not so stable as before, it is increasingly situational and changing. "To some extent, the trend points away for collective issues towards issues that effect the individual and his or her family. The struggle no longer concerns the working class or women's rights, but rather conditions in our children's schools, new construction that ruins the view, or the closing of a local hospital. It is less about politics and more about user influence and influence on the job, and it is less about hoe decisions are made and more about how they are implemented. And one cannot simply replace the other. There is a difference between having influence on school legislation and on the conditions in 4th grade at your child's school. This does not necessary mean that activity is narrowly and egotistically motivated, but the impact is more limited than was previously the case."⁶

⁶ Power and Democracy at the Dawn of the 21st Century

The connection between the local and the national democracy

In Denmark there is a high grade of decentralisation from the state to the municipalities, so there is not a direct connection from the local democracy to the Danish Parliament. The connection goes from the boards in the local area to the district council and from the district council to the parliament.

Education/learning in citizenship

Teaching citizenship is not a specific aim in the Danish education system or an action area from the Ministry of Education. It is the generally accepted view that training in citizenship take place in the public school (the Danish Folkeskole) and through participating in the activities of the local associations. But it has never been studied if that is in fact the case. So there is indeed a need for giving the action a higher priority.

Literature

The Ministry of Interior and Health: **The local government reform - in brief.** 2006

Lise Togeby, Jørn Goul Andersen, Peter Munk Christiansen, Torben Beck Jørgensen, Signild Vallgåda: **Power and Democracy in Denmark.** University of Aarhus 2003

The Ministry of Interior and Health: **Tænketanken om nærdemokrati** 2006

Ea With Nedergaard, Heidi Bjerg Gregersen, Tanya Løvgreen, Thomas Kilde Krath: **The municipality of Ringsted – a Case Study about the Local Democracy.** The University of Roskilde 2005.

Hans Peter Hansen, Laura Tolnot Clausen: **The Democratic Transformation of Nature Conservation and Public Planning.** University of Roskilde 2004

Palle Qvist: **Democratic Learning.** Workpaper, Aalborg University 2005

Strukturkommissionens betænkning: **Hovedbetænkningen** 2004
