The Invention and Institutionalization of Local Volunteer Centres. A Comparative Analysis of Norway and Denmark.

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Introduction
In Europe, volunteer centres are a new invention in the local welfare architecture, and in Denmark and Norway we have seen a remarkable growth in the number of local volunteer centres during the past twenty years. They aim to mobilize volunteers by either improving the visibility and accessibility of existing local voluntary associations, or by inventing activities that can attract new (types of) volunteers. They also aim to improve the quality of services provided by local voluntary organizations and strengthen the cooperation between public and private providers of welfare. Volunteer centres have been described as part of a new “third party model” (Haski-Levenhal et al. 2009) in which it is no longer the exclusive responsibility of voluntary organizations to recruit volunteers and encourage volunteering, but increasingly also a matter for governments, corporations and educational institutes.

In the Nordic countries, volunteer centres represent one of several efforts by governments to enhance and facilitate volunteering and support a greater role for voluntary and non-profit organizations in meeting welfare service demands. The background of this interest should be found in the years between 1980 and 1990 which brought a shift even in the deeply rooted Nordic social democratic antagonism towards voluntary and private organized welfare activities. At least two reasons seem to lie behind. First, important ideological impulses came with the new liberalism of Thatcher and Reagan, arguing a need for a broader spectre of welfare activities than those provided by the state. A second, less visible, motive was the growing acknowledgement of mutual dependence between public and private welfare resources. Not even the oil-financed welfare budgets in Norway could stand the pressure from the never-ending stream of public welfare demands. Professions and politicians seemed to reach a consensus that the resources of civil society should be re-activated. The question was
how this could be done without giving in to philanthropic and liberal ideologies that would fundamentally challenge the governmental responsibilities for people’s welfare. After 50 years of belief in the all-embracing responsibilities of the state, a re-introduction of civic responsibilities was no easy undertaking.

The ambition to boost civil resources, furthermore, was challenged by the history and the composition of the voluntary sector in the Nordic countries. First, voluntary sectors in Nordic countries are based on a very strong membership model; historically voluntary organizations have enjoyed a monopoly when it comes to recruiting volunteers. For instance, a large survey in 2005 revealed that 80 per cent of the Danes that volunteered did this for an organization they were a member of (Henriksen et al. 2008). Similar figures account for the Norwegian case. As such, no traditions have, till now, opened for other actors to engage in recruitment and encouragement of volunteering. Second, the voluntary sector only plays a small and supplementary role as institutionalized service providers within the welfare fields. Although volunteering, in comparative perspective, is extensive in the Nordic countries, more than half of all volunteers and volunteering hours are found within sport and recreation (Sivesind and Selle 2009). Third, because of the organizational model, most local voluntary associations rely solely on unpaid volunteers and have very scarce administrative capacities. This makes it difficult for many of them to engage in public-private partnerships and meet the increasing demands for accountability and professional solutions. As membership-driven units, they are also less affected by public demands for their activities.

Against this double background of the Nordic welfare state and civil society ‘regime’, we trace the history of the volunteer centres in Denmark and Norway from their beginning in the late 1980ties to the present, and we compare their development during their 20 years of existence. We describe both similarities and differences, but put special emphasis on explaining variations between the two nations. Within international third sector research, Nordic countries are most often classified as one type; a category rooming voluntary associations that share structural traits (Salamon and Anheier 1998). On a generalized level, this may be true. But there also exist considerable differences between the ways civil associations are organized and function within Scandinavian countries. We argue that the history of the volunteer centres provide an opportunity to investigate some of these differences and their causes in more detail. Established in the same period, volunteer centres probably represented responses to the same set of challenges in both countries. We know,
however, that there are considerable differences in the roles they play and the functions they perform. By putting the volunteer centres in historical and comparative perspective we try to account for the different paths they took.

We use data collected in Denmark and Norway as part of national evaluation programs for which the authors have been responsible. A national evaluation of Danish volunteer centres was carried out from 2005 to 2009 following the implementation of a national investment plan for more and better volunteer centres. The evaluation used questionnaires distributed to all volunteer centres at the beginning and at the end of the period in combination with qualitative case studies (Henriksen & Marthedal 2006; Henriksen 2008a; 2008b; 2009). In Norway volunteer centres were continually evaluated for a period of ten years; from their start in 1991 to 2000 (Lorentzen et.al 1995; Lorentzen and Røkeberg 1998). Later, the hybrid character of many volunteer centres and the issue of *ownership forms* have been investigated (Kloster et.al (2003); Dugstad and Lorentzen 2008; Lorentzen 2010).

In the first part of the paper we describe the history of the volunteer centres in the two countries, focusing on the shifting policies and governmental initiatives that over time have shaped and structured the centres in a ‘friendly struggle’ with local actors and needs. We end this part by pointing out a number of significant dimensions on which the volunteer centres in the two countries converge and diverge.

The second part of the paper focus on three critical factors that one would assume could be instrumental in understanding why the volunteer centres in the two countries display important variation: Ownership, activities, and funding.

We conclude by analysing how the dynamic interplay between state, local government and voluntary sector – despite sharing important structural features and pursuing the same aims – frames and structures (cf. Goss 2010) the identities, tasks and roles played by the volunteer centres in the two countries in different ways.

**History**
In this section we give a brief overview of the origin of the volunteer centres in Denmark and Norway. In Denmark the first three volunteer centres were started in 1989, supported and funded by a development programme (‘SUM-programmet’) initiated by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The aims were defined rather loosely and broadly as giving more citizens the opportunity to volunteer and to support local volunteering and voluntary organizations. From the beginning the volunteer centres focused their attention mainly on the area of social policy. Especially relevant at that time was the idea of volunteer work as an alternative to ordinary labour market jobs. Denmark had, at that time, a comparatively high unemployment rate of 9.5 per cent (Statistics Denmark), and the volunteer centres were seen as a possible device which could connect people in need of a meaningful activity with voluntary organizations in need of volunteers.

This idea, however, quickly proved more difficult to implement than expected. Consequently, the volunteer centres took on new initiatives and, at the beginning of the 1990s, focused more attention on sustaining and developing local networks and self help groups and organizations. This was also supported by funds from the Ministry of Social Affairs (‘PUF-puljen’). The volunteer centres at that time primarily concentrated their work on prevention of isolation and loneliness of marginalized groups by starting projects and initiatives to strengthen social networks, neighbourhood contacts and self help programmes.

In 1994/95, the Ministry of Social Affairs once again initiated a new direction for the volunteer centres. This time the ministry funded seven so called ‘model projects’ which should develop a closer cooperation between local governments and voluntary organizations. The agenda changed in the direction of volunteer centres as local organizations which should make volunteering opportunities more visible and improve the problem solution capacity of voluntary social service organizations. By the turn of the century, this trend was followed by the enactment of a new ‘Social Service Act’ in which it was made compulsory for local governments to cooperate and financially support local voluntary social organizations. Several municipalities did this by supporting a local volunteer centre. The “Social Service Act” was formed by Danish politicians. Consequently, differences between Denmark and Norway regarding the centres cannot be traced back to their different membership status in the European Union (EU). --- put I en note I stedet. (synes bør stå i teksten)
Finally, in 2005, a majority in Parliament decided to boost the development of local volunteer centres by entering an agreement of a three year development fund of 47 million DK, again administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs (‘SATS-puljen’). This fund had two main goals: To enhance the quality of existing volunteer centres and to start new centres in geographic areas where none existed. Behind this agreement there was a political awareness that the idea of local volunteer centres could be important for, first, improving the infrastructure of the local voluntary sector, that is, structures and institutions which foster more dense networks and strategic alliances between local organizations and associations as well as between public and voluntary sector, and, second, improving the problem solution capacity of the local voluntary social organizations.

At the same time, the national investment plan also indicated that up till then the local volunteer centres had not been able to live up to political expectations. Two types of critique were forwarded: first, the volunteer centres did not recruit enough volunteers for the voluntary organizations; second, while some volunteer centres performed very well others did not. In other words, there were substantial differences in standard and quality.

The aspiration of the development fund, thus, was to standardize and homogenize the volunteer centres and raise their general standard. To obtain this, the Ministry in their call for applications set up six core functions for what was termed ‘a fully equipped volunteer centre’1 (Ministry of Social Affairs 2005) which were used as evaluation criteria when the centres applied for funding. It is worth noticing that these core functions were the result of a process originally initiated by the national umbrella organization for the volunteer centres, FriSe, who in a paper earlier the same year described a number of ‘best practice’ guidelines for volunteer centres (FriSe 2005).

In parallel with the development fund, a municipal reform, taking effect in 2007, reduced the number of municipalities from 275 to 98. Following this administrative reorganization, a process took place where smaller volunteer centres merged, while bigger ones typically had

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1 ‘Core functions’ were described as follows: (1) Connecting people to volunteering opportunities, by e.g. maintaining a job bank or matching volunteers with voluntary organization jobs; (2) Supporting local social innovation and development, by e.g. helping new projects and organizations with funding applications, loan of premises, and office facilities; (3) Support and consultancy to existing associations and organizations, such as courses for volunteers and managers of voluntary organizations; (4) Creating networks among citizens and associations; (5) Information and support to citizens and users, by e.g. offering advice and advocacy; (6) Organizing self help groups (Ministry of Social Affairs 2005).
their geographic district substantially enlarged. The consequence was a concentration of resources in bigger centres and a more even geographic distribution of centres throughout the country. The municipal reform, thus, served as a stream of opportunity to reorganize the field of volunteer centres, and the development fund served as a stream of resources which made the reorganization possible. As of today 50 volunteer centres operate in Denmark. After the expiration of the development fund, government in 2010 decided to permanently support volunteer centres, provided that the financial responsibility is split evenly between central and local government. Virtually all Danish volunteer centres are organized as independent non-profit units with local voluntary associations as members, but they rely heavily on public financial support.

In Norway the idea of volunteer centres was launched in 1999 when the Norwegian Parliament decided to grant NOK 90 million to a three year pilot program with volunteer centres (Lorentzen and Røkeberg 1998:7). The government would pay the costs of an administrative leader, housing, and operating expenses for a period of three years. The content of this organizational frame should be filled from below with new and innovative activities. Voluntary organizations, municipalities, congregations, and individuals were all allowed to apply for public grants. By using a ‘bottom-up’ process, local initiatives were allowed to shape activities according to local culture, norms and practices.

As the Centres were established, they represented a vague idea; a loose organizational concept which should serve as a catalyst for the release of hitherto unused voluntary capacities (Lorentzen, Andersen and Brekke 1995:20). However, the organizational concept was not advocated by any user groups, and no particular problems or political challenges were behind it. The volunteer centres were the result of a general political intention to find and support more willing and capable volunteers, particularly within the field of social policy. According to a white paper from the central government, centres should function as ‘...a coordinating link between voluntary associations and activities, and between the public and voluntary sector’. The centres should also ‘... promote voluntary engagement and function as a partner between community initiatives and local authorities’ (St.meld nr. 39 (2006/2007), s. 204).
The program was launched as an “experiment in testing practical models”\(^2\). The idea was that the government through a diversity of pilot centres could gather experiences on best ways of mobilizing volunteers. However, the public funds were earmarked \textit{new activity} – they should not go to ordinary activity in voluntary associations or compensate for existing public or voluntary services. Volunteer centres should function as an agency and a meeting point where volunteers, associations, local authorities, and people in need of help could meet. Both the announcement text and the guidelines made clear that the volunteer centres should focus on \textit{caring activities}. In this way the Volunteer Centres were placed inside the domain of The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, but still outside public responsibility. Voluntary organizations, municipalities, congregations, and individuals were allowed to apply for public grants. The idea was that local initiatives should shape activities according to local culture, norms, and practices.

Between 1991 and 2005, government made few (if any) attempts to homogenize the activities or the profiles of the centres. In this period, their number steadily increased. In 2006, government for the first time presented a more detailed plan for the role and function of the centres (St.meld nr. 39 (2006/2007)) Here, the centres were described as \textit{Community centres} (‘nærmiljøsentraler’), that is, their main role should be to coordinate and mediate resources and initiatives between citizens, voluntary organizations, and local authorities. Volunteer centres should not primarily establish and arrange their own activities, but support new as well as existing activities and projects, in order to stimulate participation and voluntary work in the local community.

The increasing number of centres was, on the national level, administered by a hybrid unit labelled ‘\textit{Frivillighetens samarbeidsorgan}’ (FRISAM). From here, governmental grants were distributed and local activities were monitored. As an umbrella organization, this unit included most of the large philanthropic and “social” voluntary organizations in Norway. The administrative functions were, however, organized as a governmental unit within the Ministry of Social Affairs. FRISAM turned out to be a hybrid; a national umbrella organization with national associations as members, but with a clerical staff organized as a state department unit, and as such responsible to the Minister. In 2004, FRISAM was terminated and

‘Frivillighet Norge’ (FRINOR) emerged, also this is a national umbrella unit, but freed from all public, administrative responsibilities (St. meld. nr. 39 (2006-2007)).

In 2004, the national responsibility for the funding of centres was moved from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Culture. This administrative reform was followed by attempts to decouple the activities of the centres from labels and concepts related to the “social” field, like for instance charity, client, marginal, help, isolation, and deprived. By attributing the community label, community centres should signalize functions as civic units for cultural, leisure, health and “social” engagement. But the Ministry of Culture which introduced the community label did not provide specific descriptions of its content, and existing centres could rename themselves without making significant changes in their activity profiles.

We close this section by pointing at some key dimensions on which the volunteer centres in the two countries either seem to follow the same path or deviate.

During the years from the launch (1989 in Denmark and 1991 in Norway), we observe a steady growth in the number of centres. Denmark started out with a small number which have increased to about 50 (equivalent to one in every second municipality) in 2011, whereas Norway started out with 90 units in 1991, a number that increased to 335 by the end of 2009. In 2009, centres existed in 276 of altogether 430 municipalities, or in 64 per cent.

This variation reflects two differences. First, whereas Denmark started out with limited development state funds, Norway launched an ambitious program from the beginning. Second, despite the fact that the population size is about 5 million in both countries, there are huge geographic differences. Denmark covers a small area and is densely populated, while in Norway the population is scattered over a very large area. This simple fact means that Denmark has a significant smaller number of municipalities (98 as of today) compared to Norway (430 as of today). Consequently, the number of volunteer centres is higher in Norway, while at the same time the size of the population they serve is much smaller. The average population of a Danish municipality is 55,000 and two thirds of the volunteer centres in 2008 served a region with more than 50,000 inhabitants (Henriksen 2009). The average population of a municipality in Norway is approximately 11,000 inhabitants which roughly
suggest that a Danish centre on average serves at least five times as many inhabitants as a Norwegian one.

Besides the steady growth, it is a common feature that central funding has been the main driver and an essential precondition in both countries. Hence, volunteer centres primarily have emerged as results of governmental ambitions to re-activate and re-mobilize civic and voluntary resources within what we broadly will label the field of social policy. As such, volunteer centres have been set up as an innovative, but loose organizational concept, designed to encourage volunteering and develop the quality of voluntary organized welfare activities. One could say that from the beginning the centres have targeted both the supply side, that is the recruitment of volunteers, and the demand side, that is the voluntary organizations and their ability to attract and cultivate volunteers as well as their capacity to cooperate with other public and/or private agencies and improve services. At the same time, the societal needs to be met by the centres were, rather diffusely, related to the “social” sphere, and the perception of “challenges” or “problems” that dominate among analysts, politicians and professions here.

However, in both countries governments lacked specific ideas of how such an activation of volunteers and civic engagement could be advanced. The initial ambitions, therefore, were launched and stimulated by setting up state financed experimental programs that could function as local laboratories from which experience and know-how could be drawn. Rather than top-down implementation the development have been characterized by a bottom up process in which local actors have had considerable discretionary power to frame and structure the volunteer centres according to local needs, norms, and practices. In the formative period this had the effect that volunteer centres in both countries were struggling to define their common, national organizational identity. They were, in the famous words of March and Olsen (1984: 740), “solutions looking for problems”.

On a more substantial level we observe two important differences. First, while Norwegian centres were formed as and remained activity-providing hybrids, located between local authorities and civic structures and with a relatively high degree of in-house social care activities; Danish centres over time changed their organizational identity to become more of a catalyst and mediator within the local associational life as well as between municipalities and organizations. Norwegian centres to some extent compete with existing, local associations,
whereas Danish centres to a higher degree serve local coordinating functions. The infrastructural Danish model corresponds rather closely to how centres function in other central-European countries (like the UK and Germany), while the Norwegian model till now has only been observed in Finland (Howlett 2008; Hilger 2008, Skov Henriksen 2008; van den Boos 2008).

Second, we also observe different state policies: In Norway, central government in general has refrained from attempts to create task or organizational uniformity among the centres, though some effort was made around 2006 to influence the centres to become more ‘community’ oriented, but this has had negligible effects. In Denmark, central government has much more actively, especially from 2005 and onwards, made attempts to shape and define what should be the core functions and role of local volunteer centres.

In the following section we go deeper into the most important differences focusing on ownership, activities, funding, and governance integration.

Ownership and membership

We start by looking at organizational ownership in the two countries. *Ownership* is here related to legal control of the organizational unit in which the centres are embedded, and the power to govern and control activities. This dimension is important because one could expect that organizational identity and perceptions of what constitutes core functions and legitimate tasks will be shaped and framed by the constituency and stake holders behind the volunteer centres.

Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of ownership forms identified in the countries. Four types of ownership can be identified.

*Table 1: Ownership forms, Denmark (2008), Norway (2006) Per cent (totals)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ownership Form</th>
<th>Denmark 2008</th>
<th>Norway 2006</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Voluntary association*</td>
<td>72 (33)</td>
<td>22 (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Independent**</td>
<td>17 (8)</td>
<td>33 (89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Congregation or</td>
<td></td>
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religious organization. | 5 (15)  
-Municipal ownership | 7 (3) 37 (101)  
-Other/not defined | 4 (2) 4 (10)  

**Totals:** 100 (46) 101 (274)

*"Associational ownership" means that the volunteer centre is organized as an association which is governed by the individual and/or collective members of the association.

**"Independent ownership" means that the volunteer centre is run as a non-profit foundation or cooperative (DK: 'selvejende institution'; N: 'stiftelse', 'andelslag/BA').

Table 1 shows an important difference between the two countries: Denmark has a much smaller share of centres that are owned and run by local government; only 7 per cent compared to 37 per cent in Norway. Still, the major part of the centres in both countries are organized and run as either a voluntary association or they have an independent ownership form. In Denmark this means that about 95 per cent of all volunteer centres control their own budget and close to 90 per cent are run by an independent board which is elected at an annual general meeting by the members. Members can be either individuals or local associations. In 2008 four out of five Danish volunteer centres had local associations as members. On average the volunteer centres had about 50 local associations in their membership (Henriksen 2009).

Also Norwegian centres, even those owned by the municipality, have their own boards, but no members or democratic influence.

The figures above leave the impression that a larger share of Danish volunteer centres, as compared to the Norwegian ones, should be characterized as formally relatively independent and autonomous civil organizations. At the level of discourse, this is supported by various reports and white papers from Danish government underlining the importance of an autonomous voluntary sector, as well as by the Ministry of Social Affairs (2005) who in their call for applications for the three year development fund recommended volunteer centres to be organized as a membership based association or a ‘self-governing institution’. Likewise, the national umbrella organization for volunteer centres and self help organizations (FriSe) stressed independence, political and religious neutrality, and impartiality as core values in their paper on ‘best practice’ (FriSe 2005). In Norway, the relatively high amount of centres owned by local authorities has raised doubt whether municipalities are about to emerge as competitors to voluntary associations. Since unpaid labour is regarded as a scarce resource, one may ask if hospitals, kindergartens and volunteer centres intend to compete with local associations for this manpower (Lorentzen 2010)?
Still, we cannot take for granted that formal ownership makes a real difference for task and activity portfolio. It is also possible that central as well as and local government can exert considerable influence on the centres without enjoying access to formal governing bodies. So a basic question is: How important is the distinction between “public” and “civic” forms of ownership at the local level? To which degree does ownership form secure membership, or “grass root” influence, and to which degree does “independence” lead to activity profiles that are different from those of publicly owned centres?

Because of the small number of centres owned by local government in Denmark, we were unable to analyse whether ownership form showed any significant correlation with organizational activities or performance. This was possible, however, to trace in the Norwegian data, and interestingly the result was that ownership form did not seem to have any significant impact on the activity profiles of the centres (Lorentzen 2010b). One plausible explanation comes from the literature of the new institutionalism. Here, the idea of niches is introduced, referring to “fields” or “segments” of public policy where actors representing different types of ownership compete for resources. One hypothesis here is that ”....conditions within organization's niches are better predictors of priorities and tactics than legal form” (Galaskiewicz and Bielefeld 2001). According to this statement, the regulating framework of the niche to which the centres belong can clarify why ownership form is less important if we want to explain differences in activity profiles.

Following this, we suggest that the differences in ownership form we have traced between the two countries are products of historical and institutional forces. While Danish governments have underlined and actively supported volunteer centres to be organized as independent organizations, and in addition have been supported in this effort by the national umbrella organization for the centres, the Norwegian government explicitly stressed that ownership could take many different forms and that no particular form should enjoy privilege over others. Furthermore, the Norwegian centres did not establish any national umbrella unit to negotiate their collective interests towards the state. Thus, there have been different ‘logics of appropriateness’ in the two countries when it comes to ownership, and there have also been variations in power structure when it comes to negotiating interests. We hypothesize that choice of ownership forms reflect different political attitudes towards the civic field in Denmark and Norway, whereas ownership form does not necessarily explain variations in activities and task portfolios. Denmark has a liberal component in its political culture (in
principle separating state and civil society) which is less visible in Norwegian political history. In the next section we go deeper into some of the differences in the activity profiles of the volunteer centres in the two countries.

**Activities**

Setting up activities performed by Danish and Norwegian voluntary centres in one table turned out to be a difficult task. While activities at a first glance seemed to be rather similar, a closer look revealed substantial variations. Below we elaborate on the most important differences.

Danish, as well as Norwegian centres reported that recruitment of volunteers, by e.g. maintaining a job bank or matching volunteers with voluntary organization jobs, was an important and time-consuming task. But we notice one important difference. In Denmark, the centres recruited volunteers mainly for their member organizations, while Norwegian centres mainly recruited volunteers for their own activities. While Danish recruitment activities intended to strengthen local associations, Norwegian centres, with some exceptions, recruited volunteers for their own purposes and activities.

The first evaluation report showed that the Norwegian centres succeeded in recruiting volunteers from groups that usually fall outside the voluntary associations. While only 14 per cent of pensioners and individuals receiving social security reported membership in humanitarian and social associations in 1990, 45 per cent of volunteers working for the centres belonged to these categories (Lorentzen et.al. 1995:50). The numbers indicate that the Norwegian centres, at least in the first phase, did not represent a serious recruitment challenge to the “ordinary” associations and that the centres succeeded in involving socially disadvantaged groups in volunteering.

More than 90 per cent of the Danish centres reported that they performed coordinating activities, such as (1) supporting local social innovation and development, by e.g. helping new projects and organizations with funding applications, loan of premises, and office facilities; (2) support and consultancy to existing associations and organizations, e.g. courses for volunteers and managers of voluntary organizations; and (3) creating networks among citizens and associations. Activities like these can be labelled *infra-structural services* designed to
support member organizations, and the bulk of the Danish VC’s spend a considerable amount of time performing these functions (Henriksen 2009).

In comparison, a case study of Norwegian centres from 2008 found that some infra-structural activities took place in 2 - 4 of 14 Norwegian centres. Research did not, however, find any Norwegian centres that provided courses for volunteers from any other units than their own, or assisted local associations with loans or other facilities. This indicates that a much smaller share, roughly 20 per cent, of the Norwegian centres give priority to activities that aim at supporting local voluntary associations.

At one point we can observe an overlap of activities. Roughly 75 per cent of the Danish centres provided ‘in-house’ care and consulting and advisory services to individuals, though only about 40 per cent said that this was among the five most time-consuming tasks (Henriksen 2009). In Norwegian centres, 20 per cent of total activities fell within these categories (2003). In other words, individual service provision constitutes a common denominator for Norwegian and Danish centres. However, it seems that Norwegian centres put more weight on this kind of activities. This is supported by the observation that straightforward social care for elderly, disabled and marginalized individuals, performed by volunteers recruited for this purpose by the volunteer centre, forms the bulk of activities at the Norwegian centres, while this was generally not the case in Denmark. Leisure activities, excursions for elderly and disabled, organizing self-help groups and individual care aggregated to around two thirds of all activities registered by the Norwegian centres (Kloster, Lidén og Lorentzen 2001). Two thirds of Danish centres also organized self-help groups, but leisure activities and excursions was only found among a smaller proportion of the centres and did not enjoy a top priority among any of them (Henriksen 2009).

While the activities provided and the functions performed by Danish and Norwegian centres may look more or less similar, we observe fundamental differences in their priorities. As pointed out above, Danish centres have been transformed to support their member associations and function more or less as an infrastructural service provider for local associations within the field of social and welfare policy. Within the Norwegian centres, we can observe some infra-structural functions as well, but most often their activities do not include or aim at local associations. Instead they aim at mobilizing new segments of the population and developing new activities for people in need of support.
In both countries, volunteer centres have added a layer of complexity (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2009: 140) to the local field of volunteering, but they have done so in different ways. By supporting networks among local associations and by providing support and consultancy to existing as well as new voluntary organizations and initiatives, Danish centres in many cases have strengthened and improved internal cooperation among local associations and facilitated contact between public and private organizations. By building and developing new and extra activities aiming at groups and people in need of help and support, Norwegian centres have, on the one hand, succeeded in mobilizing volunteers from groups that most often fall outside the membership of “ordinary” civic associations. On the other hand, the centres at times appear as competitors rather than service providing units for local associations.

This, rather brief, presentation of activity profiles confirm our assumption: While Norwegian centres have been established as a new and partly competing actor on the local, civic scene, Danish centres, though not originally established as such, have evolved into infra-structural actors, with the intent of supporting (and not competing with) existing associations. In this effort it may be decisive that Danish centres in most cases have established a constituency of local associations which are members of the volunteer centres and which have an interest in the services provided by the centres.

**Funding**

In both countries, the volunteer centres originated from top-down initiatives; from public authorities, with the intention of stimulating local, civic activities. These initiatives were followed by public grants. To which degree have the funding of the centres changed since the start? And to which degree can funding explain differences in structure and activities between the two countries?

In *Norway*, centres were from the start and in the initial 3-years period funded by government grants alone. Later, costs were shared between central government and local sources, most often grants from local authorities. In 2011, central government provides NOK 290,000 to existing centres, while new ones in addition receive NOK 145,000. Additional costs are
provided by local sources. A precondition for state grants is that 40 per cent of total costs are covered by local sources.

For small, local associations, it will normally be difficult to raise a sufficient amount of money to establish a new centre. For local authorities, government grants represent a “subsidy”, and an incentive to establish a new centre. The result is that local funding, in almost all cases, are provided by local authorities, and centres thus become more or less 100 per cent funded by public sources in Norway. Which, again, weaken the centres’ responsibilities towards the “grass roots”.

The situation in Denmark very much resembles the Norwegian. The first Danish centres were 100 per cent financed by central development funds. Later on the municipalities started co-financing the centres. From 2000 and onwards volunteer centres typically received from 25 to 50 per cent of their total income from the amount of money that local governments, according to the Social Service Act, has a legal responsibility to provide to local voluntary social action. The government development fund for the volunteer centres, which was enacted in 2005, was a major financial boost for the volunteer centres. On average total income rose from about 600,000 DK in 2005 to 1,000,000 in 2008 for each volunteer centre. However, the composition of the income did not change. In 2008 about 47 per cent of total income came from central funds and about 41 per cent came from local government. The rest of the income came from other sources such as membership fees, private foundations, and sales.

As of 2010 a new permanent financial model was decided by the Danish government. According to this, a central fund provides a basic amount to all existing volunteer centres (and from 2012 in addition 5 – 6 new centres every year) provided that they meet five basic criteria. The first is that the local municipality must provide a co-financing of no less than 350,000 DK. The second and third are that the volunteer centre should be organized as an independent association or self-governing institution, and it should have at least 20 local associations as members. This means, in effect, that volunteer centres can no longer be run by local government. The fourth and fifth criteria are that the volunteer centre should be able to document at least one activity which serves the local associations, and at least one activity that promotes local volunteering (Ministry of Social Affairs 2010). In this way the financial model has institutionalized the organizational model and the task portfolio which has been developing since 2005.
One can say that this model has solved the problem of financial uncertainty which many volunteer centres faced before 2010. The prize, however, has been stricter performance criteria and possibly also more strings attached to the role and the task they play in the local welfare architecture. Like in Norway, Danish volunteer centres are totally dependent upon public money.

**Discussion/conclusion**

With this paper, we wished to go deeper into the idea and realization of volunteer centres that emerged in Norway and Denmark in the late 1980s. What were the political intentions behind the establishment of these innovative structures, and where did the initiative emerge from? The centres also provided an opportunity to investigate similarities and differences in public policies towards civil society in Denmark and Norway; countries that belong to the Nordic family and the so-called Nordic welfare model. Established in the same period, volunteer centres probably represented responses to the same set of challenges in both countries. How were these challenges perceived? What functions were the centres intended to fulfil? To which degree have they developed in different directions? And what are the factors that, eventually, can explain these differences?

In both countries volunteer centres reflect a general trend which attributes value to volunteering. In Denmark, as well as in Norway, the intentions of establishing volunteer centres were to recruit more and mobilize new types of volunteers, especially within the “social” field. Though the civil sector is given innovative functions in academic literature, we have seen in both countries, that the centres were funded and initiated from central government, not from the grass roots. The Norwegian approach was pragmatic: Individuals as well as congregations, associations, and municipalities were permitted to apply for grants. In Denmark, centres were defined as more or less a matter for actors within the voluntary sector. As a result, the Norwegian case displayed a mixture of different ownership forms: voluntary associations, foundations and cooperatives, in addition to congregational and municipal ownership. No centres had members of their own, with very few exceptions. Danish centres, on the other hand, were dominated by “voluntary” ownership forms in which local (individual and associational) members were allowed to exert democratic influence. The question is,
however, to which extent these significant differences in ownership forms have affected the activity profile of the centres?

Our investigation of activities and task portfolios in the two countries reveal that Danish centres use more of their time and capacity to support local associations and promote local volunteering opportunities in general compared to the Norwegian centres. Danish centres are more oriented towards infra-structural tasks and functions, while Norwegian centres are more oriented towards serving disabled and elderly people and running (or assisting) self-help groups. Consequently, Norwegian centres also spend more time recruiting volunteers for their own purposes and activities than the Danish centres. However, we do not think that this variation in the priorities of tasks and activities should be explained by the differences we have found with regard to the preferred legal form. Our argument is that if this was the case, we should find internal variation within the same country according to legal form. Since this is not the case, we argue that the variation in activity profiles and roles most plausibly have other causes than legal form.

Also, we do not think that the observed differences in scale can explain the absence of infra-structural functions among volunteer centres in Norway, though this may be part of the explanation. In Denmark, a volunteer centre on average serves five times as many inhabitants as in Norway. Scattered communities, municipalities with down to 3-400 inhabitants, and long travel distances are conditions that make it difficult to establish infra-structural units in Norway. It seems plausible that a precondition for centres with infra-structural service functions towards ordinary, voluntary associations is a population density that allows face-to-face interaction without too large time and transportation costs. In Norway, only cities of a certain size have a population density and a sufficient number of voluntary organizations to justify centres with infra-structural tasks. But not even in the bigger cities has the idea of such centres been discussed. Therefore, we draw the conclusion that although Norway is a country with a scattered population and small communities, this cannot be the only reason for the general absence of centres with infra-structural functions.

Instead we draw the attention to differences in central regulation and steering, and differences in interest constellation in the two countries.
First, there seems to be crucial differences with regard to how active central government in the two countries has pursued homogenizing policies. In both countries volunteer centres were from the beginning left with very little guidance from central government. To a large extent they were, at least in the formative period, ‘solutions looking for problems’. Consequently, they were also left to define their own role amidst the interests of central government, local authorities, and local voluntary organizations. Gradually, central governments in the two countries attempted to adjust and correct the course of the centres. In Denmark, the infrastructural role of the centres was articulated around 2005, whereas the Norwegian authorities around the same time attempted to introduce the idea of community centres (nærmiljøsentral). Thus, two different strategies can be observed: 1) To improve the functions of existing social and welfare associations and their work (Denmark) and 2) to reduce barriers and enhance collaboration between the “social”, civic field and other fields (like sports, leisure and culture) and thereby recruiting more volunteers and integrating their work into all parts of the community (Norway).

However, not only do we see differences in strategy in the two countries, we also observe differences with regard to how actively those strategies have been pursued. Danish government has, especially since 2005, actively tried to frame and shape the role and identity of the volunteer centres by tying funding closely to activity profile, legal form, and performance criteria. Danish policies, thus, can be characterized as a soft form of coercive isomorphism. In comparison Norwegian policies have been less regulative. Central funding is not tied to any performance criteria and government in general has refrained form any attempts to exert power over local volunteer centres. Instead it seems that local needs, norms and practices are given priority. In combination with permitting a high share of municipality-owned centres, and by overlooking civic norms of democratic structures, Norwegian government may have helped create a new type of service and activity oriented hybrid organization which possibly at times may be at a collision course with ordinary local associations. Central regulation is thus much more visible in the Danish case, while in Norway local needs and priorities are given much more leeway.

Second, we observe some important differences in the constellation of interests around the volunteer centres in the two countries. In Denmark, after 2005, there seems to have evolved an overlap of central and local interests in the volunteer centres which may have been instrumental in legitimizing the role and position of these new organizations in the local
welfare architecture. In general central and local government have been interested in advocating volunteer centres as a local device which should enhance the willingness, capability, and availability of individuals to volunteer as well as the ability of volunteer organizations to recruit and maintain volunteers (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2009:141, 142). This (local and central) governmental interest in building capacity and improving infrastructure has been promoted and negotiated by the national umbrella organization for the volunteer centres which have played a very active role in the re-framing of the volunteer centres after 2005. Finally, the preferred legal form in Denmark in which local associations are members of the volunteer centres means that local associational life has an interest in the services provided by the centres and maybe even experiences a kind of ownership (Gusfield) to them. In contrast, the Norwegian centres lack a national, coordination unit, which can mediate viewpoints and interests of the local centres towards central authorities. Here, the umbrella unit for all voluntary associations *(Frivillighet Norge)* refuses to incorporate volunteer centres, mainly because of their high proportion of municipality-owned units. We assume that the absence of a coordinating unit in Norway has weakened the centres’ opportunities for political dialogue, which may be one of the reasons why the constellation of interests in Norway seems to be more blurred.

One possible consequence of this different constellation of interest in the two countries has been a kind of normative isomorphism in Denmark which has led to a higher degree of homogenization with regard to activity profile and task portfolio compared to Norway.

The Danish situation, thus, contains a paradox. On the one hand the centres have a legal form which ties them to the local social and welfare associations and they seem to have a close contact and collaboration with such associations. Danish centres, thus, may have a closer link with local grass roots. On the other hand, they operate much more in accordance with government wishes and policies which, in effect, may comprise their independence.

**References (incomplete)**


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