

Norwegian Experiences of Strategic Environmental Assessment in Regional Development Programmes

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Introduction

It is now some 4 years since the initiative to develop Regional Development Programmes (or, in Norwegian: *regionale utviklingsprogrammer* – RUPs) was taken by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, but as we shall see, environmental concerns have not yet become an important element in these plans. In this short presentation, I shall start by giving a brief account of the RUPs in Norway, followed by some comments on the incorporation of environmental concerns into the RUPs in particular, and in regional policy in general. Then, in conclusion, I offer some reflections on why environmental concerns have not been more central in the RUPs, and what can be done to give them a more central position.

I might also mention that even finding people to talk about Norwegian Experiences of Strategic Environmental Assessment in Regional Development Programmes, for the obvious reason that this is not well developed in Norway.

Regional policy in Norway

In Norway, regional policy is generally defined as the sum of efforts of the central Government, the county administrations (*Fylkeskommuner*) and the municipalities to promote desired social development in all parts of the country. This effort is, for instance, directed towards the use and exploitation of land areas and natural resources. Among the main aims of regional *policy* is to maintain the current settlement structure in the regions and to ensure equal living conditions in all parts of the country. It is a precondition that the national and regional development shall be sustainable.

The Government has defined sustainable development as development, which satisfies the needs of today's generation while at the same time not impeding the possibilities of future generation to satisfy their needs (cf. *Brundtlandkommisjonen*). Similarly, it is emphasized that regional *planning* shall contribute to the development of sustainable regions in all parts of the country and to a good physical and cultural environment. Thus (and I shall return to this in greater detail later) environmental concerns do form some sort of background for regional policy in Norway.

Regional Development Programmes in Norway

In 1995 the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development initiated the development of regional development programmes in Norway. The RUPs are one-year programmes intended to improve the linkage between planning activities, policy incentives and tools, and co-ordination of resources within employment and regional policy.

The RUPs evolved partly as a result of Norwegian preparatory work for EU Structural Funds. In 1994, when Norway was applying for EU membership, the Structural Funds had 5 Objectives, or targeted areas, but while Norway was negotiating with the European Union about membership, a sixth Objective was identified, namely to promote development in sparsely populated areas. Work on Objective 6 brought increasing attention to the importance of working regionally, and this was a strong factor for the development of the RUPs. At the same time the Government wanted regional development to be based to a lesser extent on national legislation and directives and more on regional programmes.

This is reflected in the RUPs, where it has been emphasized that the responsibility for and work with the RUPs shall be delegated and decentralized. Regional solutions should be based on regionally defined challenges and preconditions and contribute to regional development and increased possibilities for regional action. Problems and solutions must be identified, defined, decided upon and followed up at the regional level. Hence, the RUPs are meant to give the county level freedom to link governmental economic incentives and instruments to their own development strategies in county plans and strategic business plans. The RUPs are to transform these strategies into practical initiatives and solutions through yearly proposals from the *Fylkeskommuner* on how they wish to use governmental tools controlled by the counties.

The RUPs are developed by the *Fylkeskommuner* in cooperation with the Norwegian Industrial and Regional Development Fund (about which, more later), the regional authorities within five target areas (again, more later), and regional business actors. Then they are approved by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, in co-operation with other ministries (not MD), while the responsibility for implementation and follow up of the plans lies within the County Municipalities.

In 1998 the Government emphasized applying regional strategies and incentives to five different policy areas:

- Regional policy
- Economic policy
- Agricultural policy
- Fishery policy
- Labour policy

As these five prioritized areas show, the focus has been and to a large extent is, on economic and employment issues. Environmental issues have not been prioritized. Nor has strategic environmental assessment (SEA) been used to incorporate environmental concerns into RUPs. This does not, however, mean that environmental concerns are not included in regional planning, or that SEA has not played a role in assessing environmental issues.

The inclusion of environmental issues in regional planning in Norway

There are several ways in which environmental concerns are integrated into regional policy in Norway today:

1) Firstly, there is no doubt that, for several years, environmental considerations have been an important issue in Norwegian regional policy and the importance of including environmental issues has been emphasized in several documents. Two notable examples are a proposition to the Norwegian parliament about regional Planning and Area Use (St. meld. nr 29 (1996-97)) and a circular (T-2/98 B) from the Government about National Aims and Interests in County and Municipality planning. In both these documents it is emphasized that the aim of sustainable development is to guide all regional planning. This means, for instance:

- Maintaining biological diversity
- Reducing production and emission of climate-changing gases
- Reducing waste produced and increasing the recycling of waste
- Exploiting farming and fisheries resources in a sustainable manner
- Contributing to a healthy lifestyle and environment for children and youth by ensuring quality in housing areas.

In 1999 the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development has emphasized that the activities and tools included in the RUPs must be in accordance with these guidelines.

2) Secondly, we have the County Plans, which are renewed every fourth year. Norwegian county planning is legislated through the Planning and Building Act, which states that each county is to draw up a plan defining the aims and guidelines for development in the county, and a programme of action for how governmental and county activities shall be followed up. The plan also sets guidelines for the use of land areas and natural resources.

There is an interesting link between the county plans and the RUPs. Approved county plans form the basis for the work with RUPs, and when the Government approves county plans it takes into consideration how national aims and interests are incorporated in regional plans and solutions. As noted earlier, such aims and interests include the aim of sustainable development, which is to guide all regional planning. There is now a proposal that every county, which gets a county plan approved according to these quality criteria must submit a yearly RUP for approval by the Ministry.

3) Thirdly, there are some examples of SEA being applied to plans and programmes in Norway. One example is SEA in an area plan for Ådalsfjella in Ringerike municipality. Ådalsfjella is an area of 300 km², and the plan included alternatives for development, industry, leisure-time pursuits and natural and environmental interests. The Plan and Development Office of Ringerike Municipality integrated principles for evaluating environmental impacts into the plan.

4) Next, we should mention the regulations in the Planning and Building Act about Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). According to the Act, every developer of major projects must conduct an EIA of the project. In the process of setting the assessment programme, the Ministry of Environment is consulted and an effort is made to ensure that all relevant issues are covered by the EIA. Although these regulations are focused on specific projects, they can, to a certain extent, help to incorporate environmental concerns in communities and counties. The EIAs may help identify environmental consequences of

projects that may have substantial consequences for a region. Examples of projects that require and EIA are truck roads, airports, and railroads.

5) The work of the Norwegian Industrial and Regional Development Fund, SND, is to promote innovation, business development and turnaround operations in Norway. It is involved in more than 15,000 Norwegian companies. When assessing project proposals, SND emphasizes that the project must be established and managed according to the laws of the country in which it is based, and meet current environmental demands and international ethical standards.

6) The Administrative Order on the Assessment of Impacts in Governmental Decision-Making (*Utrekningsinstruksen*) applies to the preparation of green papers, regulations and legal and budgetary proposals and white papers to the Norwegian parliament, the *Storting*. The Order requires that the responsible ministry shall assess the possible major environmental impacts of their proposals, and consult the Ministry of the Environment in the process. The Administrative Order is currently being revised. The focus of the guidelines is primarily the assessments of financial and administrative effects, but environmental effects are also to be assessed when significant, and the Ministry of Environment is to be consulted in the process.

7) Finally, we would like to mention the work of the EFTA financial mechanism. The purpose of this mechanism is, as you may know, to support regional development projects in Ireland, Portugal, certain parts of Spain, and Greece. Norway is co-financing this mechanism. When a project is evaluated for financial support, environmental concerns are among those included in the evaluation. Hence, the EFTA financial mechanism contributes to the inclusion of environmental concerns in the regions where the projects are located.

In summary, therefore, one can say that although there is no SEA in the Norwegian RUPs, quite a lot of environmental concerns are incorporated in regional planning and other activities that influence regional development. This does not mean that there is no room for improvement. Therefore, I would like to conclude by making some proposals for environmental issues to be included in Norwegian regional policy.

Possibilities for improvement

There are several possibilities for improving the inclusion of environmental concerns in regional planning in Norway. Let me emphasize, however, that these are my personal reflections, and not necessarily the views of the Ministry of Environment.

Firstly, two possible reasons why environmental issues not have been included in the RUPs:

- Since Norway did not become a member of the EU, the focus on environmental issues in regional planning appears to have faded. While membership was under discussion there seems to have been a stronger focus.
- Secondly, since environmental issues not are emphasized, then (logically) those persons working with these issues in the County Municipality Administrations and

their cooperation partners are not included in the work with the RUPs. This, of course, makes it even more difficult to get environmental concerns included.

What then, can be done to increase the incorporation of environmental concerns in the RUPs?

1. Include environmental concerns in RUPs

The first, and in the long term probably the most efficient, way to include environmental concerns in the RUPs is to give these concerns the same status as the five presently in focus. If environmental concerns were added to this list, then the regional development programmes would have to be subject to some form of EIA.

2. Strengthen the relationship between RUPs and county planning

I have mentioned the proposed link between the RUPs and county planning. If this system were implemented, it would certainly increase the focus on environmental concerns in the RUPs.

3. EIA of plans regulated by the Planning and Building Act

The Norwegian planning and building act is currently under revision, and the task is scheduled to last for another 3½ years. One of the issues that the revision will address is that all planning activities according to the Act be subjected to an EIA. This would clearly lead to an increased emphasis on environmental issues in most planning activities in Norway.

4. Develop "Environmental Plans"

A final possibility, which we can consider as an "extension" of the inclusion of environmental issues in the RUPs, would be to require all counties to develop an environmental plan identifying the main environmental concerns and aims in the county, and means to address those concerns and reach the aims. Hence, instead of including environmental concerns in some other plan, this would make the environment the focus of a plan of its own. Such plans could, however, be a risk of fragmentation by isolating environmental concerns from other concerns and therefore require careful consideration.

So, *as a conclusion*, it is clear that Norway has a lot to learn about the use of EIA and RUPs, and the input from this seminar is important for us in deciding how to proceed with this topic in Norway.

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