



Area Committee Model in Rovaniemi

The city of Rovaniemi, Finland, has established area committees in its most remote areas as a way to improve close-range democracy. The committees are responsible for service provision in their areas and the aim is to base services to a greater extent on the needs of the inhabitants in the rural areas. The point of departure is that as the population is aging and the distances are long, local knowledge needs to be used to create solutions that suit the preconditions.

Preconditions, Inspiration, Nurture

The area committee model is a well-known example of close-range democracy in rural areas in Finland. What is special about the model is that it not only involves consultation with local inhabitants, but transfers decision-making and implementation power to a lower level and closer to the inhabitants of rural areas. The area committees are responsible for the provision of certain public services (comprehensive education, culture, sports, youth services, health-care information, day care, home care and local development) and the budgeting of the services they are responsible for (Pihlaja & Sandberg, 2012).

The underlying idea is that there is a need for knowledge of the local preconditions and local needs if good solutions are to be found to the challenges of service provision in rural areas with aging populations and remote locations. The aim has combined the knowledge of the inhabitants of the rural areas with the expertise of the municipal officials (Pihlaja & Sandberg, 2012).

The first area committee was established in the Yläkeminjoki area as early as 1993, but it was first extended to all the other rural areas of Rovaniemi in 2013. The first committee was established as part of a pilot whose aim was to openly look for new models for municipal service provision by means of co-planning.

The committees consist of one representative from each village in a given area, and the representatives are chosen for a period of four years. In practice, the committees purchase services from service producers which in most cases has meant purchasing the services from the city of Rovaniemi. Some services have, however, also been purchased by small local enterprises (e.g. home care) which may contribute to local economy and employment.

In addition to the responsibility for services, the area committees are responsible for local development. The municipality allocates an annual budget to the committees, which is used for activities such as cultural events, village association events, maintaining ski tracks and paying rents. The activities are based on development strategies drafted in cooperation with the inhabitants.

Implementation

Resources

The area committees' budgets come directly from the city of Rovaniemi and the committees are formally part of the municipal authorities. When the first area committee was established and the model was tested for the first time in Yläkeminjoki in 1993, one important resource was the already-established cooperation between the villages in the area. As the area committees cover several villages, it is important that the villages are able to cooperate.

Active local inhabitants willing to participate in the committees are also an important resource. The committees cannot function without active local community members who are willing to take on responsibilities.

The Network / Cooperation

The municipal authorities constitute the main cooperation partner of the area committees. The area committees purchase services from different sectors within the municipal authorities, but also cooperate with the municipal central authority with regard to planning. They thus function as an important link between the villages and the central municipal authority (Pihlaja & Sandberg, 2012). The committees also play a central role in strengthening urban–rural interaction in governance as they help the rural villages to have their voices heard by the central authority, located in the central part of the municipality. According to an evaluation there is, however, a need to improve dialogue between the city council and city government and the area committees (Vakkala, Leinonen & Aarrevaara, 2016).

Enablers and Barriers

In order to establish area committees, the municipal leadership, the authorities, decision-makers and inhabitants need to have an open and positive attitude toward trying out new modes of working. There also needs to be sufficient human resources within the municipal authorities: preferably a person who coordinates all area committees to ensure they work in a similar manner (Pihlaja & Sandberg, 2012).

There have been some challenges affecting the model that almost led to disbanding the first area committee because of—among other things—criticism claiming that the inhabitants of areas with committees were privileged compared to the inhabitants of areas without them.

However, a local conference in 2011 changed the opinion of the municipal authorities because this event brought together associations, inhabitants and policy- and decision-makers to discuss the development of the villages of Rovaniemi. The consensus was that the model functioned well and instead of discontinuing it, it should also be tested in other areas.

One challenge has been to clarify the roles of the committees in relation to the municipal authorities, e.g., who decides on what. These unclear situations and the fact that some inhabitants feel that the area committees do not have actual influence have had negative effects on the commitment of local inhabitants in the work of the committees and their attitudes toward them (Vakkala, Leinonen & Aarrevaara, 2016).

Social Innovation Effects

Outcomes, Impact and ‘Scaling’

Based on the positive experiences from the first area committee, the approach was scaled up to other rural parts of Rovaniemi in 2013. According to an evaluation, the area committees have resulted in many good development measures and created opportunities for local involvement and influence. Over the years, local innovations have also been created within the committees, such as the home service coupon system. By means of this system, the area committee of Yläkeminjoki offers economic support to inhabitants with disabilities and the elderly, who can use the coupons to purchase help: for example, cleaning or grocery shopping. The main challenges are related to the unclear relations and responsibilities between the central municipal authority and the committees (Vakkala, Leinonen & Aarrevaara, 2016).

Lessons Learned

The area committees are a way to bring decision-making closer to the inhabitants; in this case particularly in rural areas and on aspects including ensuring that the services and the local villages are developed in a manner that is based on local knowledge and needs.

According to evaluations, the experiences from this method are positive, but there are still challenges remaining when it comes to ensuring a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities between the committees and the central municipal authority. It is found important that the area committees are made into an integral part of the overall municipal development work. According to an evaluation, in order to reach the goals of the area committees it is important to take a long-term approach to projects, and to promote the creation of broad networks (Vakkala, Leinonen & Aarrevaara, 2016).

References:

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