



THE LOCAL COMMUNITY MOVEMENT: THE CASE OF NORWAY

Harald Koht, Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Science

Summary

Norwegian neighborhood associations represent a grass roots movement of citizens concerned with their local community. Besides self-help and social activities, local clubs cooperate closely with the municipality in providing amenities such as playgrounds, community buildings, recreation areas and other facilities.

Introduction

The modern version of the Norwegian neighborhood association arrived with the expansion of urban areas at the end of the nineteenth century. Inhabitants of newly formed suburbs felt that their environments suffered from the lack of amenities usually found in the inner cities, such as paved streets and refuse collection. The local clubs combined self-help initiatives with the role of pressure groups at the municipal level. The actual problems facing neighborhoods may have changed since the 19th century, but the driving forces behind the formation of the local clubs remain the same, the need for joint action in resolving issues of common interest. In addition, the clubs contribute to the social capital of its members by their social and cultural activities. The final decades of the twentieth century saw a rapid rise in the number of neighbor associations. By 2007, the last year with an available figure, there were 7 900 local clubs all over the country. A national organization was first formed in 1974. About 2 000 independent clubs are now members of VFO, the Norwegian Neighborhood Federation.

What are the activities of neighborhood clubs?

The most recent survey among neighborhood clubs in 2016 shows that each club on average organize 4.2 activities that require members to give a practical hand in rubbish removal, maintenance work, or even construction in order to provide play

2 grounds, greenery, community buildings, and access streets. This is voluntary work, so the actual participation level may vary considerably. Most clubs also organize social events relating to national festivities, such as the Christmas holiday season and Midsummer Eve. The clubs are also picking up new trends, such as Halloween, imported from abroad. On average each club has 122 individual members (2015), though the variation is large from just a few members to several thousand.

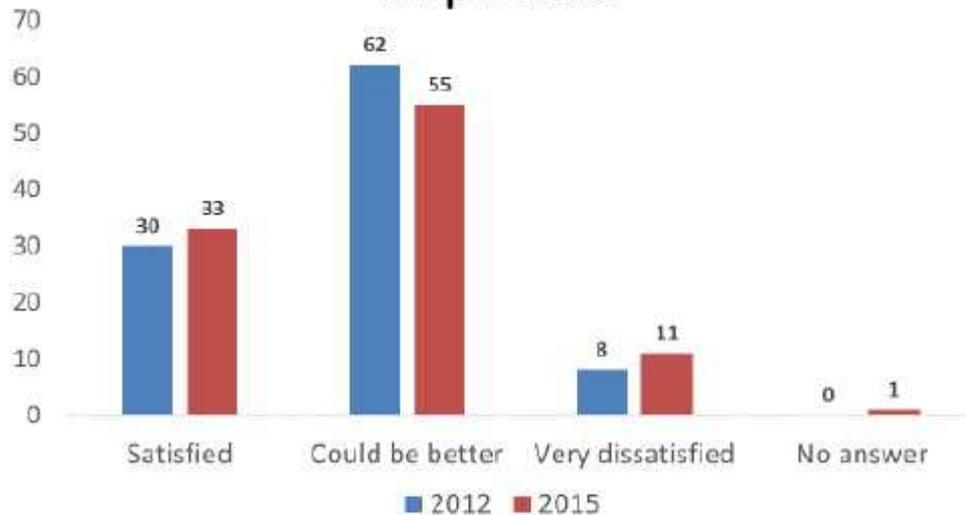
Facilities operated by neighborhood associations

The neighborhood club to a large extent operates playgrounds, community houses, roads, sports facilities, and even piers and beaches. Playgrounds for children are typically administered in cooperation with the municipality. The municipality often owns the property and provides some economic support, while the local club owns the equipment and does the maintenance work. Similarly, the club may own its own house for meetings and social events, but in many cases the building belongs to the municipality.

Environmental and social issues

Neighborhood associations are concerned with a broad range of environmental issues. However, problems regarding road traffic are the most prevalent. In 2015, 60 per cent of the local clubs expressed their dissatisfaction with current traffic levels that contribute to accidents and pollution in the neighborhood.

Figure 1. Satisfaction with traffic issues: Most say the situation could be improved



3 April 2016

Oslo seminar for CECA, Romania

3 Fewer are concerned with human security problems, such as crime, violence, vandalism, narcotics, and social harassment. Only 12 per cent of the clubs say that their neighborhoods are plagued by such problems. Norway is still a relatively safe country in human development terms.

The relationship to the municipality

The overlapping services of the neighborhood club and the municipality require close cooperation and contact between the two. According to public administration law the municipality is also required to consult with the neighbor clubs on a wide range of issues of concern to citizens in general, but especially urban planning issues. The municipality largely follows the letter of the law in using written and oral hearings to gather the views of the local clubs and other citizen groups. However, in recent years the municipalities have developed a wide range of informal means of contact such as conferences, focus groups, and interviews to communicate with citizens, including neighborhood clubs. Most clubs are satisfied with this relationship, while 20 per cent say that relations with the municipality are poor. A major source of complaint is the frequent failure of the local authorities to reply when approached by the clubs. Among the local clubs, 24 per cent share this concern. On the other hand, about 30 per cent of the clubs receive some economic support from the municipality, and increasingly they enjoy the return of paid value added tax from the national government.

Oslo, 30 June 2016. Revised 6 November 2017.

The author: Harald Koht is professor of political science at Oslo and Akershus University College. He has a Ph.D. in public administration from American University, Washington DC. He is a former president of the Norwegian Neighborhood Federation. This article was first submitted for publication by Academic Thoughts Review, volume 3, 2016.