

“Mountain areas in Norway as attractive rural communities or urban recreational playgrounds: the challenges to a mountain policy”

Summary of results – reported to Norwegian Research Council ultimo October 2014

There is an increased emphasis on using mountain areas as a resource for regional development (employment and settlement). Simultaneously there has been an increase in areas that are protected, and a general strengthening of the protection of the environment in all mountain areas by the new Nature Diversity Act from 2009. Our research shows that Norway does not have a policy and management system that is able to handle the conflict that arises between development and protection, nor to benefit from the possibilities that might arise within this field. Mountain municipalities are facing a difficult situation, and are depending on developing their mountain resources for local development. Many local actors do however perceive that their room for manoeuvre is strongly hindered by the environmental policy, and that there is inconsistency between the political ambitions on development and on protection. The authorities are more concerned about the interpretation and assessment of laws and rules rather than focusing on finding solutions that safeguard both development and protection or contribute to reduce negative effects either for development or environment.

In recent years there have been approved policies at national level with the intention of giving more power to local and regional actors over land-use and on development of mountain areas. One could expect that such policies would result in less conflict between local actors and national environmental authorities. The conflicts do however still persist and local actors still experience a strong centralised power. In the protected areas there is however a broad agreement, or accept, to continue the relatively restrictive policy regarding new activities, building etc. It is relatively few conflicts regarding protected areas, but those who come up are often deadlocked and have consequences far beyond their real importance. It is in the buffer-zones and other mountain areas we find most activities and where local actors want to develop business, and thus also where most conflicts arise. Our analysis indicates that there are multiple reasons why the level of conflicts is still so high: 1) political intentions on use and protection of mountain areas have not been given sufficient political weight or followed-up with sufficient changes in operational rules for land use, 2) the power of local authorities has not been significantly strengthened, as politically intended, Paradoxically, although in line with the general development in Norway, new and stricter enforcement of diverse sectoral regulations have strengthened the powers of national governments within environmental management, 3) political measures to increase local power (first of all the new National Park Boards) has in reality very little influence on power

relations, and 4) mountain areas have become increasingly important as a resource for local development. This last issue have become a significant additional factor in understanding why conflicts between the local and national level still persists.

In many parts of the mountain areas tourism (included second homes) and recreation is seen as one of the few, and often as the only, industry that can contribute to counteract the negative population development. In our case-municipalities we see that in some places tourism has a real potential for development. This is particular in places that are within the “recreational hinterland” of larger cities, and therefore have a potential for second home developments, and places that are located along important routes. Other places the ambitions related to tourism are more based on an uncertain “hope” that it might develop, and on a lack of other alternatives. In general national and local initiatives within tourism in mountain areas do lack sufficient knowledge about markets and about the regional impacts of tourism.

If we wish to achieve political ambitions on use and protection of mountain areas, there is a need to find better political models for a more sustainable development of mountain areas in Norway. On a general level the understanding of power and conflicts concerning use and protection must change, where we to a larger degree understand conflicts as legitimate and normally not possible to solve through authoritative consensus and use of power. Focus should rather be given to discuss how handle power and conflicts, and how one by using broad socio-ecological knowledge can reach better solutions. On the practical level management of mountain areas must be more integrated, especially regarding land-use planning (protected areas and other mountain areas) and decision-making powers. Regarding the latter the institution with power over land-use must have a broad responsibility for the sustainable development of mountain areas, including local development and environment.

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