

CAN EDUCATION BE A STRATEGY FOR DEVELOPING RURAL AREAS?

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Introduction

This presentation is placed in a Norwegian context, focusing especially on development of rural areas in the Northern part of Norway. Our base is The Northern Feminist University, a small institution offering knowledge, education and competence about gender, women and women's lives in the North. The Northern Feminist University is located in Steigen, a small municipality in the Northern Periphery. This municipality experience, as many other small communities in the periphery, decline in population and birth rates and therefore a need for economic and political transformation because of changes in e.g. production, work force and education pattern. Production of knowledge is professionalized, commercialized and centralized, and all in all, the northern periphery lack possibility to define the solutions for development themselves.

The main objective of this presentation

- To introduce another perspective and strategy for developing rural areas from the position of a periphery community.
- To raise questions and start a discussion about education as a strategy for rural development.
- To stress the importance of being gender sensitive in developing strategies for rural development, especially focusing on women's need and wishes.

Concepts and approaches

First a very brief presentation of the perspectives or concepts used in this presentation

- *Situated knowledge*. In this presentation we understand this concept as knowledge defined from our own context and from our position as rural citizens.
- Perspectives of rural development in times of *modernity*. Modernity is characterized by rapid changes, urbanization, globalisation, transformation of culture, and time-space compression (Massey 1991). Further, in the Western world, modernity is characterized by welfare, materialism, equality, knowledge and information (and democracy). The implications of modernity for individuals could be: Increased mobility or space barriers broken, the meaning of communications, media and marked going beyond boundaries (ibid.). Individuality and individual freedom of choice is increasing; *reflexivity* has been a defining characteristic of all human action in a modern world (Giddens 1990, Limstrand 1996).
- *The understanding of gender*. The development of different strategies and affirmative actions used in rural development are connected to three different theoretical approaches to gender (Pettersen 1999):
 1. *The perspective of equal opportunities*: In this theoretical approach, women and men are seen as principal equal, as human beings. Differences and differential treatment between women and men is seen as discriminatory, and important to get rid of. If women get the same legal rights as men, existing obliquity between the sexes will gradually disappear. Gender equality is a question of human rights, and this idea creates the basis for official gender policy in Norway. If you give women and men the same legal rights and opportunities, we will achieve gender equality in our society. Strategies for change are connected to equalize women to men by giving them the same rights and opportunities. Gender is a variable or an indicator¹.
 2. *A women's perspective*: Point of departure for this approach is the idea that women and men are different. They represent different values, attitudes and ways of

¹ Gender Equality Act of Norway: is built on this basic idea, but differential treatment of men and women may be allowed if the treatment promotes gender equality. The Act has a gender-neutral principal rule – difference in treatment of men and women is illegal. But the objects clause shows that the law is especially made to deal with unequal treatment of women it also important to stress that it is not a question of giving preferential treatment to certain groups, but to make affirmative action in favour of women is *a measure to improve existing obliquity between the sexes*. Use of affirmative action in favour of women has been chosen as a strategy because it was recognized that it is not possible to achieve gender equality merely by prohibiting discriminatory treatment.

thinking. Women's difference from men is seen as a critical potential for change². Ex. The concept of women and men's different rationalities (Skjøsberg 1995), studies of gendered division of work, studies of men's dominance and women's subordination in private relations and society's institutions. Highlighting women's experience and values should create equity and equality between women and men based on women's own premises.

3. *A gender perspective*: Focusing on a differential understanding of women and men. Men and women are neither principally similar nor different from each other. Women are different, not to be considered a homogenous group. The understanding of being a woman or a man is changing continuously. Gender as a concept is not definite, and the content is changing. We need to break down and redefine gender categories and look for the understanding and definition of gender (gender identities) connected to different contexts.

A gender perspective introduces an opportunity to develop a tool for understanding gender as an integrated part of processes and structures earlier considered gender neutral (Widerberg 1992). Gender is negotiations, negotiations between women and men, women and gendered attitudes and identities, women and gendered structures etc. The main objective is to empower women and give them real flexibility and opportunities of option. Gendered division of work, gendered structures and strong gendered attitudes and identities need to be analyzed, redefined and changed.

District policy and education

To begin with, we will look closer into the Norwegian District Policy for education and discuss it in addition to modernity and gender. Our point of departure was introduced in the beginning of this presentation; we live in a small community, working at an institution occupied with competence raising and education for and about women.

"Even if access to jobs is still the greatest influence of where people choose to live, these choices are more than before driven by the sum of services offered, spare time options, accommodations and jobs. A lot of businesses in more rural areas have problems in

² An important critic of this perspective is that the assumption that women and men represent different values, attitudes and way of thinking could easily lead to essentialism in how we view women and men. Gender becomes determined.

recruiting competent workers, while there at the same time is a lack of jobs for highly educated people." The Norwegian Government's White Paper 34 (2000-2001), my translation

The basic idea of Norwegian district policy is to maintain a scattered population pattern. Traditionally, rural areas are characterized by long distance to decision-making areas (e.g. the capital and bigger city's), sparse population, dependency of primary production like fisheries and agriculture, lack of work places for higher educated people, lack of competence, and also socially different from urban areas (Almås 1995). Periphery communities are loosing track in development, because activities like business, education, services and health-care to a higher and higher extent are located around and in bigger cities and regional centers.

A case point is the increase of people in the center keeping higher education and high-income jobs in comparison with rural areas (Sørli 2000). This development increases the social, cultural and political marginalization of the Norwegian periphery, and center get to define the terms of the debate (*discursive power*). By and large, strategies for rural development have traditionally been associated with (low-level) blue-collar work and work that does not demand higher level of education.

But modernity has introduced better telecommunications and infrastructure, geographical stretching out of social relations and of media. On the whole, this has changed the conditions also for the rural areas. People are closer connected independent of distance and locations. Also, dependency of primary resources is reduced in rural areas. In this situation, it is important that the government define a special policy and strategy for developing rural areas outside city-regions (periphery communities), a policy sensitive to the needs of a *modern* population settled in these communities. To achieve such development the process of rural and regional development have to change towards being more inclusive and participatory (from below). In a modern society, the implications of all policy and actions (mainstream policy) should be analyzed to understand and highlight the consequences for the rural population.

Turning to district policy and gender, there are three points we would like to make that describe the structural situation. Firstly, there is a difference between women and men's *educational level*. Secondly, women and men's *choice of education* and working life is highly divided due to gender. On the whole, female are employed in the public sector, in work of a

caring nature and teaching. In private sector women keep jobs in the commodity trade. Thirdly, more than half of the female work force *work part time* (55 % in 2000, Vikan 2000). This picture is even more definite in rural area. This structural picture creates and sustains barriers for women's development, in addition to the fact that women are still mainly responsible for domestic work.

Strategies for women and rural development can be understood in the light of the three perspectives presented in the introduction. In the 80ies and early 90ies *women's perspective* dominated ideas for planning and development. The strategy was use of affirmative actions for women to give women the same opportunities as men. Focus was mainly on entrepreneurial training and job-creation, not formal competence rising. Lotherington's critic of this strategy is that women was used to fulfill a predefined development, and were not given real influence in defining the content of the policy and the development (2002). From late 90-ies, the ideal of mainstreaming and integration has dominated the picture. Strategies today is based on a gender perspective, and reflect to a certain extent the present situation of the need for more formal competence raising, decentralized education and flexible models. But these mainstreaming models maintain the imbalance in development between center and periphery, because this strategy has been difficult to implement in rural areas. Rural development policy keeps on being an in-spite-of-strategy to reduce the consequences of the mainstreaming strategy.

In order to sum up these points, the modern society creates new conditions for

- Periphery – and the (power) relations between center and periphery
- For women living in the periphery
- For education and education patterns
- For women's choice of education and work

Education as a strategy

The next issue we would like to focus on is education as a strategy. To begin with, we will discuss some of the development patterns and *attitudes towards education and competence rising* in rural areas. We will discuss this in the light of modernity and changes in conditions for rural areas. Furthermore we will discuss briefly competence-raising in connection to primary production. Finally we will use The Northern Feminist University and a few other

education models developed in a Health project carried out at NFU as best practice models to illustrate another way of thinking for rural development and education.

Attitude towards education and competence

Traditionally settlement in the rural areas has been located as a consequence of appearance of natural resources. In coastal areas like ours, exploitation of fish-resources and small-scale farming has formed the basis of settlement. Exploitation of natural resources and – to a certain extent – subsistence economy, has not demanded high competence, in the meaning of *formal* competence. In later generations an increasing number of youth also from rural areas has taken higher education. Lack of demand of skilled labour in these areas has lead to a situation of exporting youth out of the region. The groups of youth that choose not to take higher education remain in the local community, while those leaving for education never comes back. This has created a conception of “*educating oneself out of the rural areas*”- or *education as a threat to rural areas*. In this perspective, knowledge and education has become at threat towards the periphery. As long as this perspective is allowed to rule the floor, the periphery will continue to export youth, who in fact should be the main key in developing this area.

In addition to this, professions in resource-based business have to a larger extent become *male professions*. This was not the situation in the subsistence economy. Today, jobs the local community can offer young women are mainly in health care services and public administration. But many young women have other educational plans and wishes for their lives. In sum the concept of educating oneself out of the rural areas is even truer for young women.

All things considered, if the rural areas are to be sustainable societies, the economic, social and political situation in the rural areas has a great need of readjustment and development. *Readjustment is in itself competence-demanding*. We would like to mention briefly questions concerning competence rising in traditional based business (primary based production), but our main focus is at potential new sectors.

Traditional economy / primary based industry and activities

There is a need for documenting and up-valuing the competence that has been developed in the resource based economy through generations. It has e.g. for marketing products become necessary to be able to document both the producing-process and the competence of the

labour. In the fishing industry and in fish farming, for instance, many established workers take education and get this theoretical based education combined with their informal experience documented into formal competence. This implies a great value for the employees as well as for the firm.

Another strategy that can be used to increase the formation of values in rural areas is further processing of the raw material. If we do not succeed in this, the population will decrease because of decrease in employment. Development in technology leads to a reduction in number of employees needed just to deliver the raw material. To succeed in this strategy (developing the marine sector), competence rising is essential, because further processing and technology development demands skilled labour.

New sectors – developing competence based industry

In connection with the existing economy, there is need for research in order to develop new products and new producing processes. Very small parts of research and development work take place in the rural areas. By locating research into the areas where the values actually are produced, we see a potential of a very fruitful interaction between research and production. Such interactions can influence which fields research focus on as well as the result of this research. And, to a larger degree, this will secure that the result of research reaches out and is utilized in the periphery too.

From a rural point of view, we experience that a lot of research about our society is carried out from the established academia in the central cities far away. As we see it, it is essential that more of this knowledge production should take place in the periphery; creating closer interaction with the people, businesses and lives we are living today. In social studies and sciences, the researcher's context should not be underestimated. The academia and the big cities are not necessarily the best context for every topic of social studies. We experience, especially connected to local-community research and rural research from social scientists, a danger of the researcher being lost in old conceptions and ideas of the periphery as it was ten or twenty years ago, when perhaps they lived there or left it. Here we can also draw a parallel to the political sphere, and the important interaction between politics and knowledge production: *Knowledge is strongly connected to the power of defining the agenda.* Those who have the formal competence and who develop knowledge are also those who set the agenda. In this perspective it is essential for the periphery to take part in knowledge production. If

rural societies keep on looking at knowledge, education and knowledge production as a threat, the implication is the development of a vicious circle of dependency of central areas and increasing lack of power to set the agenda (discursive power).

A case point is development of telecommunication and infrastructure, making distance no longer a big obstacle for locating competence-business in the rural areas. Better communication and modernization of rural areas is of crucial importance for developing education in rural area

We would like to conclude our comments by stating that developing competence-based business can be a successful strategy for the rural areas, and turn briefly to a concrete example, the establishment and activity of the Northern Feminist University.

The establishment of the Northern Feminist University, an educational strategy in the development of rural areas

The Northern Feminist University is a ten-year-old private foundation; situated in the real periphery, up in the north of Norway, just between Bodø and Narvik. It is not a traditional university, but a center of knowledge, specially focusing on gathering and collecting knowledge of women, by women, for women, upgrading this knowledge, developing it, documenting it and disseminating it to those environments we feel this knowledge concerns, it may be researchers, grass-root women, politicians, planners etc. It is our intention to be a meeting-place between formal and informal, theoretical and practical knowledge, between women from all levels of education and society.

The NFU was established in the context of the situation in the -80ies

- The level of education of women was still lower than that of men, and lowest in the rural districts
- We had the same problem as we have today with centralization – higher education was offered in the urban centers only, research was carried through at the universities and colleges in the urban areas, even if it concerned rural topics and problems
- Young people were leaving the rural areas, specially the women, going to town to get an education and get work, leaving the older people and specially the men in the rural districts

- The women's choice of education was very traditional, mostly within health and care related professions, teaching, service and lower administrative work. The attitude of women towards the combination of education, working life and care tasks was that taking care of the children and the family was a priority before education and working life
- The attitude towards education in the rural area was based on the belief that education took you away from the rural area, and that the rural area had no need for higher education and competence
- Few women were leaders on a higher level neither in the private nor in the public sector

In the rural areas in the end of the -80ies the state and the government felt very sorry for these womenless men and womenless local communities, and decided to try through affirmative actions to make the women stay or move back, as if women was a kind of infrastructure to invest in for the benefit of men or the district policy. At this stage women were regarded as being the problem, as they were not there to care for the men. These affirmative actions developed from the women's perspective, women being different than men and therefore a useful contribution to the community. In this way the image turned from women being a problem to women being a resource for these districts. Now the paradigm turns again, as the young well-educated women are looking for jobs and where to settle in their lives, it is the rural districts that should now regard and visualize themselves as resources for the women.

Our county, Nordland, was very keen on these affirmative actions, and started a lot of women's projects. They lasted for some years, then the projects were finished and the project leaders gone, and all the experience, knowledge and competence were just floating in the air and were difficult to utilize for new projects or in "real life". So the county needed an institution to take care of all this knowledge and to disseminate it. The county was also aware of the education gap between men and women, the women's commitment to family and care task, and the barriers for women in the rural areas to attend higher education. So the county needed a feminist university to work on these issues. Steigen, our municipality was bankrupt at that time, screaming for more money from the state. But the state said no. Instead we were offered a project on how to manage on our own. Through that project we found out we had 3 resources to build our self-management on: *youth*, *identity* and *women*. Through the ideologist of the feminist university, Berit Ås, we were informed about the newly started Feminist

University in the south, and became convinced that we needed a feminist university in the north, and that we wanted to establish one in Steigen. You're crazy, people said. But even though they did not understand the idea, the political and the administrative leaders of the municipality supported us and worked for us towards the county administration. So the county and the municipality together believed in establishing the university out in the real periphery, and together with some other founders gave us the money, and we could start in 1991, so we have now celebrated our 10 years' anniversary.

We are not a big institution, we are only 12 people working there, and only 5 of us work on gender issues. We are partly funded by the government from the state budget, partly from projects, studies and courses, and partly from our guesthouse where our course participants stay, and which works an ordinary guesthouse when there are no or few students. We do project work, documentations, tasks for ministries, counties, municipalities, part time studies on all levels, courses and training. We have no examination rights; we always cooperate with a high school, college or university concerning formal studies. These are open for men and women, and we have had several male students on our part time studies, but none on our gender perspective studies. Our main focus is democracy and social planning in a gender perspective. We are networking with women's projects and organizations nationally, in the Barents Region, in Europe, in Africa, and soon also hopefully in the semi polar area and in India.

Combined classes

The fact that there is a decrease in population in the rural areas has as a consequence a smaller allocation of economical resources to the municipalities, and therefore fewer offers of service, including education. The schools cannot afford to establish classes in auxiliary work, care work, ambulance staff or others with very few students, the average costs of the students will be too high. Likewise the municipalities have no need for a full class of students in every profession, because they cannot offer all these students a job. But the municipality need a few people from all the different professions and competences, so we suggest a combined class that includes several related professional educations in one, giving the students common tutoring on the topics that are common for all the professions, tutoring for smaller groups that have topics in common and separate tutoring for those topics that can not be combined. So these combined classes are sitting in different municipalities, getting their common tutoring

through videoconferences from the same mother school. A greater part of the education is carried through as self-study, or as practice at working places with a counsellor.

Rural doctors as lecturers

The other example is from a health service project where the NFU is the project leader. One of the aims of the project is to develop health professions and health care work in the rural areas into more challenging and interesting work, making it at the same time more effective and of high quality. The rural areas is in constant need of doctors, nurses and other health professions, mostly because the professional environment is very limited, people working there feel lonely and in need of a network to discuss their everyday challenges. At the same time these professionals develop an extended competence because they are far away from the specialized institutions and have to deal with far more problems on the spot than health care workers in the cities. One of the strategies in the project is to engage the rural doctors as lecturers for the medical students at the university, both to upgrade the doctors' rural competence but also to give the students a more realistic picture of the interesting and challenging work in the rural areas, as well as a preparation for their work in those areas.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate that our main objective at the NFU is to develop strategies for change. This has always been the main focus of research about gender and women. Development of knowledge has been closely connected to development of policies and strategies for change. The aim of researchers in this topic has been to produce knowledge to empower women, and also to empower the Northern Periphery and redefine the discursive power of the center. First, we need a holistic, situated perspective. To be able to change the system and the structures, and to develop rural areas, we need to analyze the situation from the rural areas. This is not the situation in the political climate and state rural policy today. Rural policy has become an in-spite-of strategy to reduce to consequences of the development. It is important to be aware of the changed conditions modernity have also for rural area. The rural societies must visualize their need for educating and competent people. There is a need for competence rising, both in traditional production and potential new sectors. Situated knowledge is a presumption to be able to reconsider the power of definition (discursive power), definition of social, cultural and political development of the periphery.

A case point is development of telecommunication and infrastructure, making distance no longer a big obstacle for locating competence-business in the rural areas. Better

communication and modernization of rural areas is of crucial importance for developing education in rural area, but we must not forget the importance of creating space and options for multiplicity. New conditions and modernity introduce the necessity to define alternative development, a development which creates space for multiplicity within the periphery communities and give the inhabitants the opportunities to live a modern life. The picture today shows quite a few young and highly educated people that look towards the periphery searching for a place to settle and develop what they see as "a good life" The upcoming generation seeks for a multiplicity in job opportunity, cultural life and an acceptance of different attitudes. If they choose to settle in a small community, they still demand to be citizen of the world. This is a great challenge to a local community, which traditionally has had the image of conformity, in the meaning that most of the citizens have had the same background and has worked in similar businesses. From our point of view it is necessary in order to find a strategy for developing modern and including societies in the periphery.

Looking into our own local community, we might say that attitude and gender roles are still more traditional. Gender roles and presumptions towards women are more connected to a traditional way of looking at women, mainly responsible for care tasks, and not expected to keep decision-making positions in the society. These gender identities implicate and define to a certain extent women's choice of work and carriers.

Norwegian state policy for regional development highlights the fact that a gender perspective is a condition for development of sturdy societies (St.meld. 34). We need gender knowledge and analysis to develop a strategy for rural development, meaning gender disaggregated data and gender analysis of plans, decision-making bodies and gender distribution in general. Gender difference implicates the importance of being gender sensitive when we develop strategies for education and rural development. E.g. because public sector employs most women, the regional division of work places within this sector is of crucial importance for women's choice of place to live. Higher educated women might to a higher extent than men choose to settle in rural areas than men with higher education, because many women are educated and work in public sector.

The educational level of Norway is rising. Women are a big part of the higher educated workforce. To attract women, and to get competence to rural areas it is important to change the attitude and thinking about education, competence and rural areas.

One solution might be decentralized education models that meet women's needs – women who are single parents and need to work beside a need for education to empower their situation. But from a rural point of view, we must focus on resource based industry, and the male dominance developing in this sector. These are work places that need to be placed in rural areas, and they are in a rural context, high-income work places (specially fish farming). Focusing on gender distribution within these areas is important, trying to make space both for women and men. We need to analyze the situation of women in the perspective of women's negotiation of gender identity towards different levels defining their lives and opportunities. Women's needs must be taken into consideration. This is a question of democracy, of justice, and women's skills and competence must be considered a resource. A strategy for development need to highlight the understanding of the populations' different preferences and needs according to gender and age. But we also need to focus especially on state policy, both for rural development and the concern and treatment of women's issues, legal rights and the machinery for promoting these questions on different levels.

As a final conclusion we might say that the establishment of NFU has been a successful strategy to highlight the need for educated people in the periphery. NFU has contributed in the development of good models for a sustainable development in the rural areas based on competence raising and education.

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