

CHAPTER 13

Local government access to central- level decisions: The case of Norway

Jacob Aars

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss some of the channels available to the municipal sector for access to central government decision-making fora. What potential do the municipalities have to influence national policy for local government? The chapter discusses several potential access channels: a) the local government interest group, Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), b) the political parties, c) political career path, i.e., Members of Parliament with a background from local government, d) sector links between levels of government, and e) local/regional government represented by the role of County Governor. The chapter demonstrates that the municipalities have numerous potential access channels. Yet, the channels vary with respect to how effectively they link local authorities to central government decision arenas. The conclusion is that the portrayal of the municipalities as impotent victims (of an over-eagerness for local government by the state) needs to be coloured by studies that provide detailed analyses on how the municipalities utilise their potential access channels.

Keywords: local government, central-local relations, access, multilevel governance.

INTRODUCTION

Local government has been an important topic throughout Dag Ingvar Jacobsen's authorship. Not only has he written extensively about various aspects of local politics and administration, in most of his studies, he has applied an organisational perspective. As one of only a few, he has studied politico-administrative relations at the local level (Jacobsen 1996, 2006). Moreover, he has taken interest in interorganisational aspects of local government, studying network organising (Zyzak and Jacobsen 2020) as well as intermunicipal cooperation (Jacobsen 2014, Jacobsen and Kiland 2017). In the following chapter, I have taken inspiration from the interorganisational approach of Jacobsen. However, instead of horizontal relations, this chapter deals with organisational linkages between different tiers of government.

Numerous articles have been written and many claims have been made about the central level's steering of local government, thus how the central level impacts the local level. But far less has been written and said about the potential for local authorities to influence decisions at the national level. It is claimed that governmental legislative activism has curtailed the scope of local government discretion; that by assigning legal rights to individuals, local government is

no longer a political forum. The economic steering of local government also appears to restrict leeway for the municipalities. The municipalities must abide by limits as to how much they can tax their citizens. Moreover, the governmental funds transferred to the municipalities are often insufficient – according to the municipalities – to cover the expenses of fulfilling their governmental duties. On the other hand, this debate has to a large extent neglected the *municipalities' access to central government decision-making fora*. In a unitary state the distribution of power between central and local government is bound to be skewed in favour of the central level. Yet, the picture will be incomplete if only central-level impulses are taken into the account. The local level's capacity for affecting central-level policy decisions is also important. It is therefore crucial to raise the issue of what options the municipalities have to influence their own terms and conditions via the various channels for access to central government decision-making arenas. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss some of the *access channels* available to local government in relation to central government decision-making fora. As there is currently a limited literature on this topic, the most important objectives for this chapter are: a) to provide information on the status of the knowledge we have about the municipalities' potential to influence national policy for local government, and b) to identify some of the key questions that we need to address in order to obtain a fuller understanding of central-local relations.

Norway will serve as our case. The Norwegian local government system is characterised by a high degree of integration between central and local level (Kjellberg 1988). Norway is a unitary state where local government is delegated authority from the state. In 2016 the Parliament (the Storting) voted in favour of introducing certain limited constitutional provisions to safeguard local autonomy, but protection is still rather weak. Local government is responsible for several functions of national importance, especially related to welfare functions. In a highly integrated system like the Norwegian one, both downstream and upstream processes will affect the character of central-local relations. Integration implies a relation between two or more parts and thus presupposes two-way communication. A great deal has been said about top-down steering. Less is known about how and to what degree the local level exerts influence on the central level.

In the first section of the chapter, I will describe certain aspects of the Norwegian decentralised welfare state. I will especially direct attention to the inherent mutuality in the integration model. In the main section of the chapter, I discuss various forms of access and our existing knowledge about the different access channels. More specifically, the chapter discusses potential access channels via: a) the local government interest organisation, Norwegian

Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), b) the political parties, c) political career path, i.e., Members of Parliament with a local government background, d) sector links between levels of government and e) local state linkages, especially represented by the role of County Governor.

THE DECENTRALISED WELFARE STATE MODEL AND THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In 1837, the “Formannskapslovene” or Norwegian laws governing local government were adopted by the Storting. These laws have been described as a “local government constitution” and were of major importance for the realisation of the principles upon which the national constitution was based. Several Norwegian historians, including J. E. Sars and Arne Bergsgård have written that the “Formannskapslovene” provided local foundations for the Constitution of Norway. The legislation gave rise to local participation and commitment. As such, the new municipal institution was decisive in allowing the citizens to exercise their political rights. In those early years after the local government laws were adopted, the municipalities had a limited number of tasks. Over time, local government has become more important for the realisation of the welfare state and, consequently, also the realisation of the citizens’ social rights. Historically, many welfare services were initiated by local authorities. Tore Grønlie’s concept “welfare municipality” encapsulated the pioneering role played by the municipalities (Grønlie 2004). Later, the central government utilised local government to realise national welfare policy objectives. With the decentralisation of the welfare state after the Second World War, welfare services became available on a different scale than if these services had been provided by the state (Hansen 2014: 257). With the municipalities being assigned a key role in realising the welfare state objectives, closer links were formed between central and local government. Nonetheless, the underlying reason for utilising the municipalities was to exploit the fact that the local citizens possessed the knowledge of local conditions. The gains achieved from decentralising the welfare state would be lost if local government discretion were to be excessively restricted. In other words, despite the universalistic ambitions for the welfare state, a decentralised welfare model required a relationship between central and local government that was based on a certain level of mutuality. The Norwegian welfare state therefore features a high level of integration between central and local levels (Kjellberg 1988).

Much of what has been written about the relationship between central and local government in Norway has focused on the asymmetry of the relationship, and the fact that the scope for local governance has been restricted, partly

as a result of the transfer of substantial welfare tasks to the municipalities. Fimreite and Flo argued that the Government governs the municipalities by under-financing statutory tasks. They referred to this municipal model as “the effectuating municipality” (Flo and Fimreite, 2002). In other words, they maintained that the role of the municipalities is restricted to executive tasks so that the municipalities are merely executive bodies for central government policy, with no option for independent influence over the contents of such policy. The authors of the final publication for the state-funded “Power and Democracy” study (Østerud, Engelstad and Selle 2003) focused heavily on the increased scope of individual rights. Such legalisation, it was claimed, affected the relationship between the public bodies and the individual, in that new regulations laid the foundations for individualised legal claims. However, this process of assigning rights also affected the relationship between government tiers, since centrally adopted legislation restricted the scope for local political priorities. The “Power and Democracy” study’s analysis of local autonomy was pessimistic on the part of the municipalities. The local politicians were “... left with responsibility but no power.” (Østerud et al. 2003: 159).

There is little doubt that the transfer of nationally important welfare tasks to the municipalities has resulted in restrictions in local autonomy. Comprehensive central steering is perhaps the price the municipalities have had to pay in the process of becoming instrumental in realising the welfare state. Yet, a number of reports have added some nuances to the image of the municipalities as mere executive bodies for state policy within the field of welfare. The Commission on Local Democracy in Norway (NOU 2005: 6) does not fully embrace the bleak conclusions made by the “Power and Democracy” study on behalf of local autonomy. In a comprehensive international comparison of the position of the municipalities within the national governance systems, Sellers and Lidström (2007) found that Norwegian and Nordic municipalities can be defined as having a wide range of tasks (particularly within welfare) combined with a relatively high level of autonomy. Two more recent comparative reports also provided a more blended representation of local autonomy in Norway (Baldersheim et al. 2019, Ladner et al. 2019). In general, the Nordic countries receive high scores on the autonomy indices. Compared to the neighbouring countries, Norway enjoys limited fiscal autonomy but has strengthened legal autonomy after the inclusion of local self-government in the constitution in 2016.

ACCESS

Page and Goldsmith (1987) characterised relationships between state and local government along three dimensions. Firstly, this relationship varies in terms of *autonomy*, i.e., the extent to which the municipalities have the discretion to prioritise independently. Secondly, the central-local relationship varies with regard to *functions*, i.e., the portfolio of tasks assigned to local government. Thirdly, the central-local relationship may vary in terms of the municipalities' *access* to central government decision-making fora. Access is the main topic for this chapter.

According to Page (1991), access constitutes a political dimension since it entails the potential to exercise influence over decisions at central government level. In this chapter, it is important to clarify that access involves *admission* to decision-making fora, not necessarily influence over the decisions made there. At the same time, influence presupposes access. In this chapter, however, the focus is on the potential to exercise influence, not to what extent the municipalities are able to exploit such potential.

Another important point to clarify involves who has access. The municipalities are the focus point in this chapter. The chapter is, in other words, a study of access for the municipalities. This can, however, be more or less direct. An individual municipality may seek influence by independently contacting elected or non-elected representatives of the central level. However, access is often more indirect. The municipalities, for example, are represented at the central level by their interest group, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS). With KS however, access is still relatively direct since KS is the formal representative of the municipalities. Another access channel is the local political background of the Members of Parliament (Hansen and Hovik 2001, Hansen, Hovik and Klausen 2000, Aars 2014). The assumption in this case has often been that MPs with a background from municipal councils may act as spokespersons for the interests of the municipalities in their role as MP. If this is correct, it may afford the municipalities an indirect and informal access to the Storting. The MPs do not formally represent the municipalities, and to the extent that such career-related associations can provide access for the municipalities, then such access is indirect. In this chapter, the aim is to discuss access channels that are more or less direct. There is, however, reason to believe that the most direct access channels will also afford the greatest potential to exercise influence over the decisions made.

ACCESS CHANNELS

Below, five different channels for local government access to central government decision-making fora are discussed:

1. The corporative channel, with a particular focus on the so-called “consultation scheme” for dialogue between the state and local government sector, represented by KS.
2. The party channel, with a special spotlight on the parties’ national congresses as a forum for contact between local and national political elites.
3. The career channel, with a particular view to the importance of the local government background of Members of Parliament.
4. The sector channel, with a specific emphasis on sector-specific contacts between local government and central government agencies.
5. The local state channel, with a particular focus on the County Governor as the link between state and municipality.

The discussion of the individual access channels concentrates on how linkage is established as well as to what extent influence can be exerted through these different channels. Of particular interest is the question of whether local government access is direct or indirect.

THE CORPORATIVE CHANNEL

KS (the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities) is the interest organisation for the municipalities and county authority. The organisation plays an important role from an access perspective since it is the formal representative of the municipalities in relation to the state. All 356 municipalities in Norway as well as the 11 county councils are members of KS.

KS operates through several means to influence the framework conditions for the municipal sector, but one particularly important area for exchange of experience and influence is called the *consultation scheme*. This scheme was formalised in 2001 (Borge 2009, Indseth, Klausen, Møller, Smith and Zeiner 2012) after a trial period of around one year. The scheme bears some resemblance to the Danish negotiation system but is less binding and more consultative. Normally, four consultation meetings are held every year. These meetings are normally attended by the cabinet minister in the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation together with Parliamentary Secretaries and top-level bureaucrats. KS is normally represented at these meetings by the board leader and manager. Municipal economy and the central government’s system for financing the municipalities have been at the top of the agenda during the consultation meetings.

The consultation scheme can be interpreted as a development towards a more negotiations-based relationship between state and municipality (Indseth et al. 2012). As such, the scheme has features in common with the partnership model on which both the NAV (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration) reform (Andreassen and Aars 2015) and the coordination reform within the health sector (“samhandlingsreformen”) (Hanssen, Helgesen and Holmen 2014) are based. Negotiations-based solutions suggest transparency, mutuality and equality. The image of how the scheme works in practice is more ambiguous. The meetings feature transparency and dialogue, but KS appears to be the active party (Indseth et al. 2012: 114). KS puts forwards requirements and views, while the state provides information and takes input from KS “under consideration” (Indseth et al. 2012: 114).

One inherent problem with the consultation scheme is that the role played by KS may be put under pressure. On the one hand, the scheme, as we have seen, provides an arena for advancing interests and is, as such, a valuable access channel for the municipalities. The consultation meetings provide important information to the municipalities at an early stage in, for example, central government reform processes. As such, the meetings also afford an opportunity to promote views and communicate experience at a phase of the central government policy development process during which local government previously had poorer access. On the other hand, KS may face a potential problem if future developments with the scheme come to represent more commitment. The question is to what extent KS can enter into commitments on behalf of its members and, if so, will the organisation be seen as a spokesperson for its members or as an extended arm of central government?

In general, the relationship KS has with its members is not without tensions. Hanssen, Saglie and Smith (2012: 320) demonstrated in a study of local government party leaders and group leaders in the municipal councils that 37% of those asked considered KS to be very successful or relatively successful as a spokesperson for the municipalities in relation to central government authorities. A lower percentage felt that KS is a good support for the members in conflicts of interest with the state or a good mediator in conflicts of interest between municipalities and the state. However, the most striking aspect of Hanssen et al.’s findings is the relatively high level of indifference and lack of knowledge about how their interest organisation works. Close to half of those asked had no notion of how KS performs as a mediator vis-a-vis the state. If we add the 20% who replied “either/or”, two thirds of the members have little knowledge or are indifferent.

In summary, the corporative channel is an important access channel, not least because KS formally represents the municipalities in meetings with the

state. The consultation scheme provides local government with an insight into central government decision-making processes at an earlier stage than before the consultation scheme was launched. At the same time, the relationship between KS and its members is not without issue. Potential tension may arise in relation to the consultation scheme, where KS risks being perceived as having excessively close links with the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation or other ministries.

THE PARTY CHANNEL

Several former contributions to municipal research drew attention to the role played by the political parties as a link between the tiers of government in Norwegian politics (Hjellum 1967, Kjellberg 1965, Rokkan and Valen 1962). Since these initial studies of local government party politics were published, the nationalization of local party systems has seen an increase (Aars and Christensen 2013). In local elections, the majority of Storting parties run lists between 70% and 100% of municipalities. Allern and Saglie (2012: 237f) pointed out that there is also a significant degree of vertical integration within Norwegian parties. The party members are members of a national party but are also linked to local parties. The local parties are linked to the national party organisations via their county branches. Nomination for national elections is based on counties as districts, i.e., counties are constituencies.ⁱ In other words, there is abundant evidence to suggest that the parties potentially provide access channels for the municipalities.

Since counties constitute the electoral districts in parliamentary elections, the link between MPs and constituencies is at county level. However, local party branches often strive to have their local candidates nominated (Heidar and Karlsen 2018: 72). Moreover, while in parliament, MPs are eager to stay well-informed about matters “back home” (Fenno 1978). The constituency link is primarily directed towards the party organisation, but MPs also meet with mayors and councillors when visiting their constituencies (Heidar and Karlsen 2018: 76).

The national party conferences appear to be a particularly important arena for inter-level communications. According to Heidar and Saglie (2002: 239), these conferences have retained their function as political workshops (programmes and recruitment) for the parties. The majority of national congress delegates are elected by the county parties. Yet, local party branches are entitled to comment on draft versions. Nonetheless, the party channel has been subject to little research as an access channel for local authorities. Apparently, the last time data was collected regarding the party delegates’ local government affil-

iations was in the late 1980s. At that time, Heidar (1988: 91) demonstrated, in his study of Norwegian party elites, that 41% of the national congress delegates held elected posts in local councils, while 18% were county councillors. In other words, approximately 60% held public offices within the municipal sector. It is not known whether these figures have changed over the past three decades. Nonetheless, there is no evidence to suggest dramatic changes.

Local government access through national party conferences has certain significant limitations. As opposed to KS, the national congress delegates do not formally represent their municipalities; they represent their individual local parties. Neither are they formally held accountable to local government when they return from the national congress. Furthermore, the locally elected delegates do not interact directly with the relevant state bodies in their capacity as delegates. Some parties are in government while others aspire to be. Actual access to central government decision-making fora will thus vary. Nonetheless, no national congress delegates formally act as representatives for the Storting or government. The national party conferences are instead a party-internal arena, and the collective issues for the delegates are national issues. Audun Skare (1996) pointed out that, in essence, party politics are national politics. Hence, even if they have held local government office, many congress delegates probably relate primarily to the national issues that matter to the party at this level. The national congress is an opportunity for the party to promote national policy issues. Consequently, many proposals may in reality entail limitations to local governmental discretion with the earmarking of funds for specific initiatives or the requirements for assignment of individual rights for welfare services as examples. Consequently, there is a chance that local government politicians, in their capacity as national congress delegates, may help promote proposals that in fact could restrict future local government discretion.

To sum up, the party channel is a potentially important access channel, but few studies have paid attention to the extent to which the parties actually provide the *municipalities* with access to central government decision-making fora. This channel represents, at best, an indirect means of access for local government. In principle, the national party conferences are most likely arenas for internal party debates. We lack knowledge of the specific voting behaviour of local government politicians and other activities in their capacity as national congress delegates, but it is quite likely that the national party conferences, also for local councillors, are opportunities to formulate policy for the party at national level.

THE CAREER CHANNEL

The political system can be interlinked since the careers of individuals intersect levels of governance. Political career paths thus represent potential links and channels for access between government bodies at both lower and higher tiers. However, it is not necessarily a simple matter to assess the effects of transitions from one level to another. Does the person making the transition become an advocate for his or her former political community or a representative for the current community? Would this person then constitute an access channel or an instrument for central government?

Different research traditions have taken different normative approaches when assessing the significance of political careers that intersect levels of government. Within research of central-local relations, the starting point tends to be that local political background among central politicians represents an access channel for the local authorities. The higher the number of parliamentarians with a local political background, the better local authorities' interests will be represented at central government level. The issue of inter-level integration has been a major focus point in studies of the European Union (Checkel 2005; Egeberg 1999; 2004; Trondal 2004). The focal issue for these studies is the extent to which and under which conditions European institutions are able to re-direct actors' attention and identities from a national to a supranational level. One could argue that the EU studies investigate integration from the top downwards, whereas the state-local government studies ask to what degree inter-level integration is bottom-up, in that former local politicians act as spokespersons for the municipalities in their role as parliamentarians, thus providing the municipality with access to the national assembly.

Below is a brief descriptive overview of local government background for Norwegian Members of Parliament over the past 60 years. This is displayed in Figure 13.1.

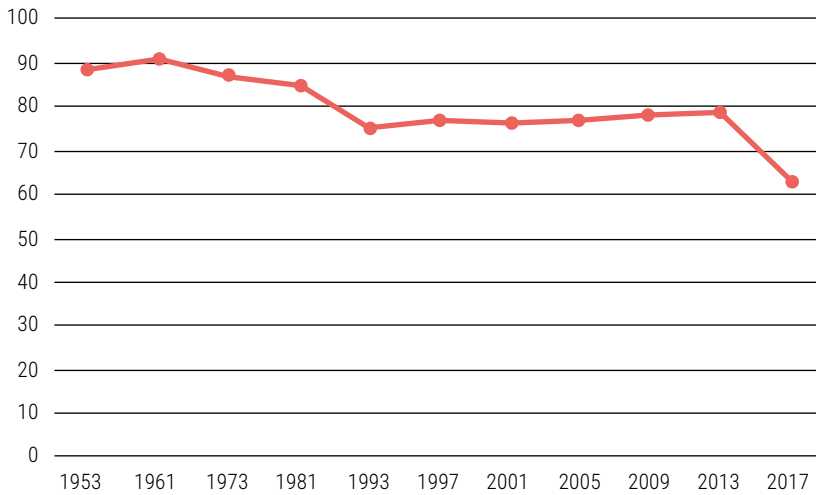


FIGURE 13.1: Norwegian MPs with previous experience as local councillors. Percentages 1953–2017. Source: Hansen and Hovik (2001: 272), supplemented with data from Norwegian Centre for Research Data

Hansen and Hovik (2001) studied the local government background of MPs up to 1993. This period showed a relatively evident reduction in the ratio of national politicians with local political experience. The peak was in 1961, when more than nine out of ten Storting representatives had served as a local councillor. After the 1993 election, the level stabilised and has even seen a slight increase before the very latest election, in 2017. The 2017 election represented a clear disruption of an otherwise stable picture. Yet, apart from this, the figures do not show clear signs of a reduction in the number of national politicians with a local political background.

Hansen and Hovik, however, identified several more specific trends among the Norwegian parliamentarians. Firstly, they registered that the average time of service on municipal councils had seen a significant reduction during the period from 1953 to 1993. Secondly, the share of MPs with a background as mayor has fallen substantially over the 40-year period observed. It therefore appears evident that the Storting now has a smaller share of MPs originating from a former local government elite. Arguably, local government socialisation among MPs has grown weaker over time as the national politicians have not held positions with the same level of exposure in local government as before. As a result, identification with the municipality may have grown weaker.

In comparison with other European countries, Norway emerges as the country with the highest level of integration between national political and

local political careers (Best and Cotta 2000). In the 1970s, Eliassen and Pedersen (1978: 299) observed that Norwegian MPs more often than their Danish counterparts, had acquired local political experience before entering parliament. As Hansen and Hovik demonstrated, a certain decline can be observed towards the end of the time series, and Norway no longer tops the list of MPs with local political experience.

What can we conclude, though, about the significance of these multi-level careers? Existing studies reveal that there is reason to doubt the hypothesis that a high share of national politicians with a local government background provide the municipalities with a voice at the Storting and thus access to the Storting. MPs with experience from local politics tend to have less confidence in Norwegian local authorities' willingness and capacity to prioritise between important welfare assignments (Aars 2014). Representatives originating from municipal councils are significantly more sceptical of the municipalities than representatives without such a background.

To recapitulate, even though MPs may have local political experience, they do not necessarily act as representatives for local government. The assumption that MPs with local government background will act as ambassadors for the municipalities' interests relies on a premise that socialisation from local government policy overrides the individual's identity as a national politician. It has been demonstrated that local political background may indeed result in a more critical approach to local authorities. This may be attributed to the fact that national politicians currently have a shorter term of service and fewer central posts in the municipalities than before. Notwithstanding, this finding implies that potential access provided by multi-level careers is at best uncertain.

THE SECTOR CHANNEL

When local authorities historically were assigned to take care of national welfare tasks, special legislation was introduced within most of the different service areas. These designated laws govern the assignments the municipalities are ordered by the state to perform, such as education and care for the elderly. The laws were accompanied by requirements to establish bodies by special statute within the areas covered by the special laws (Fimreite 2003: 338). Examples of such bodies were the Local Education Authority and the Local Health and Social Care Authority. The municipal special bodies had counterparts in the different administrative sector units. The local administrative units mainly corresponded to the state-level units. This not only implied that municipal activities were sectorised, but that this sectorisation in the municipalities principally corresponded to sectors within central government administration.

Anne Lise Fimreite argued that this so-called “mirror image organisation” has played an important role in the state-municipality relation as a supplement to governing through legislation and economy:

“One aspect of the ‘mirror image administration’ was that it allowed informal governing, or what we can refer to as tutorial steering, by means of sector affiliations in the relation between state and local government. This took place via consultation, guidelines, submissions etc.” (Fimreite 2003: 339).

According to Fimreite, this system of parallel organisation across government tiers provided the foundations for state the state’s steering of municipal activities. However, the forms of steering were relatively moderate. At the same time, the schemes involving consultation, guidelines and hearings imply a certain extent of reciprocity. In other words, the parallel organisation was not merely a system facilitating steering of the municipalities, it also paved the way for the municipalities to communicate their views to the central government sector authorities. This was notably significant as professional occupational groups became increasingly important in the delivery of municipal services (Ramsdal, Michelsen and Aarseth 2002). Sectorisation thus represented a potential access channel for the municipalities.

However, the Local Government Act introduced in 1992 meant a significant impairment of the system of mirror image organisation. The 1992 act liberated the municipalities in terms of organisation (Larsen and Offerdal 2000). Prior to 1992, municipal organisation was bound by the organisation stipulated in the designated laws. After 1992, the municipalities were free to organise as they saw fit. The close ties between sectors gradually came undone (Fimreite, Tranvik, Selle and Flo 2007). This also resulted in a weakening of the sectors as a potential access channel.

In summary, to the extent that local authorities have had access to central government decision-making fora via the sector channel, these fora have been sector-specific. The potential for access is also uncertain. The sector links may have been more important as a tool for central steering than as an access channel for local authorities. After 1992, the parallel organisation has clearly grown weaker, and it is an open question whether the importance of links between professional groups at different levels have diminished.

THE LOCAL STATE CHANNEL

The local and regional state apparatus is far-reaching and entails many types of contacts between state and municipal authorities. The most important channel for contact between state and municipality at local/regional level is the *County Governor*. According to the instructions issued by the Ministry of Local

Government and Modernisation, the County Governor has three functions. Firstly, the County Governors represent the King and the government in the county. This implies that the County Governor "... shall make sure the Storting's and government's decisions, objectives and guidelines are followed locally." The County Governor should also make sure that the municipalities and county councils comply with legislation and regulations. Secondly, the County Governor shall "... help coordinate, simplify and improve the efficiency of state activities in the county." Thirdly, the County Governor provides guidance for the municipalities and county councils. The County Governors should provide help and assistance but also "... contribute to ensuring that the general public administration in the county provides the municipalities and county authority with the necessary guidance and assistance with the social assignments they are tasked to perform." In addition to the three above-mentioned functions, the County Governor serves as the appeals body for decisions made in the local council. Finally, it is the task of the County Governor to keep central government authorities informed of issues that are important to the local and county authorities.

Even though the office of County Governor is primarily an instrument for steering and control of the municipalities, there is a strong tradition whereby the County Governors communicate information on local conditions to central decision-making authorities. The County Governor thus represents a potentially significant access channel for the municipalities. Terje Edvardsen's (1979) study of the decision-making process prior to the construction of a shrimp processing facility on the island of Utsira is one example of how a County Governor can actively operate to promote the interests of a municipality. In this case, the County Governor was perceived as a "spokesperson for the periphery" (Edvardsen 1979: 167).

One main topic in Yngve Flo's (2014) book on County Governors is the fine balance between acting as a representative of the state and communicating municipal interests. It has not been uncommon for the County Governor to act as spokesperson for the views of local authorities, as indicated in the following quotation:

The office of County Governor was the closest ally for local authorities and an important link between the national and the local democracy. (Flo 2014: 616).

This function was also recognised by representatives of the central administration in Hansen et al. (2009) in their report on the office of County Governor. Their interviewees emphasized that the County Governors are:

... very good spokespersons for the municipalities in the county they represent. (Informant, central administration). (Hansen, Indset, Sletnes and Tjerbo 2009: 133)

The County Governor can act as representative for both the state and the municipality (Flo 2014). This dual function is essential. The most important task for the county governor is to act as representative of the state at the local and regional levels. However, the comprehensive contact with local authorities provides the County Governors with in-depth knowledge of the situation locally. This knowledge is often communicated to the Ministry and other central government agencies. As such, the office of County Governor represents an important intermediary and an access channel from local to central level of administration.

In summary, it could be argued that the office of County Governor provides local authorities with an important access channel. The municipalities' access is, however, indirect as the County Governor is the *link* between the municipalities and the decision-makers. Nonetheless, it could also be argued that the municipalities are directly represented since the County Governors are formally obliged to communicate information on the municipalities' situation. Although the office of County Governor is obliged to act on behalf of a governing and controlling state, the County Governor remains an important spokesperson and thus a significant access channel for the municipalities.

CONCLUSION

The integrated state-municipality model implies close links between state and local authorities, not least within the field of welfare. However, integration between the central and local levels has too often been interpreted as synonymous with central steering. The integration model does in fact presuppose two sides. This does not necessarily imply equality for both sides, since this is unrealistic in a unitary state such as Norway. However, integration must entail a certain degree of mutuality so as not to be a purely hierarchical relation. It is therefore also a crucial task to study the opportunities available to the presumptively weakest party in the relationship to gain access to decision-making arenas that involve them.

The chapter demonstrates that local authorities in fact have numerous potential access channels. The portrayal of the local government as impotent victims of over-eager steering by the state should at least be coloured by studies that provide detailed information on how the municipalities utilise their potential access channels.

Nonetheless, in Norway as in other countries, local self-government implies variation. Defining the municipal sector's interests is no simple task, as continuously experienced by the local authorities' own interest group, KS. The discussion of the different access channels has revealed that the potential representatives for the municipalities do not always conduct themselves as ambassadors for the municipalities. Local councillors may in their capacity of party delegates vote at party national congresses in favour of proposals that help restrict local autonomy. MPs with experience from the municipalities may turn out to be local government's harshest critics.

Research into the state-municipality relation requires more thorough studies of access at the municipal level to central government decisions. Additional research is required to provide more precise information about how the different access channels work, i.e., to what extent local authorities are able to influence the local government policy agenda at the central level and to what extent they succeed in having their interests heard. New studies of access for local government will be of major significance in supplementing the comprehensive research on central-local relations.

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NOTES

ⁱ After the regional amalgamation reform, 19 county councils were reduced to 11. Still, the previous 19 counties serve as electoral districts in Storting elections.

ⁱⁱ Ref. the Norwegian Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs (2012). The role of County Governor. Development and challenges. Oslo: The Norwegian Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs.