

Devolution in the Swedish Rural Development Programme

- the case of the county of Västerbotten

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Delivery of Axis III

In Sweden, there is one national Rural Development Programme (RDP) and one national overarching strategy to guide its implementation. However, in pursuit of increased efficiency, and in the wake of a national and European trend towards carrying out development initiatives at regional level, the role of the County Administrative Boards in the design of the current Swedish RDP was extended. As a result, regional implementation strategies have been designed at county level, and partnerships consisting of representatives from the public, private and voluntary sectors have been assigned a strategic role in carrying out parts of the RDP in their regions.

The influence of regional actors is mainly felt in Axes I and III, while (broadly speaking) that the almost 70% of the RDP budget allocated to agri-environmental support through Axis II is little affected by the devolution. The regional implementation strategies are to be used as a basis for planning, selection and decision-making in relation to support for measures in Axes I and III, to support for regional priorities under Axis II, and in the work of LEADER (Axis IV).

This case study focuses on how the change in RDP design has affected its delivery. Do regional and national actors perceive that the implementation changes have created an RDP better adapted to regional specificities? Do these actors think that stakeholders at county level can steer external inputs, imposed by the programme, to enhance the possibilities for rural development?



The Role of the Programme and its Third Axis

In Sweden, the RDP plays a role not only in the performance of rural areas and the coordination of development initiatives regionally, but also in forming the rural governance and institutional arrangements at a regional level.

The county of Västerbotten is largely rural, has a harsh climate and is experiencing depopulation and ageing; the need for rural development support is clear. However, in comparison with other development programmes carried out in the region, such as the EU Structural funds and national funds, the RDP is small. The large number of administrative actors involved and development initiatives carried out, as well as the repeated changes made in these makes spreading information about the possibilities of the funds, and where to apply for support, difficult. In addition, some actors have become tired of applying for, and running, projects supported by public funding because of the time consuming processes and administrative work required. Both these issues seem to have lowered public interest in the programme. In particular, the comparatively small and new Axis III intervention seems to have become a victim of this.

Axis III is considered to have a chance of developing rural areas in Västerbotten mainly if it is coordinated with other initiatives. Hence, the RDP needs to find its position within the development initiatives already carried out in the region. Today its role is to "fit in" rather than to steer the strategic development work.

Institutional learning challenges

- New institutional arrangements for more place-based rural policy delivery
- Place-based rural policy coordination that succeeds in interlinking to specific contexts
- Integration of rural policy with regional policy, and *vice versa*
- Competence of actors involved in programme implementation

