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Exploring Regionalisation and Functional Legitimacy: Partnership-based Regional Policy Governance in the Danish Regions

Paper for panel on *Regionalisation and Federalisation: Democratic Implications*
at the 3rd International conference on *Democracy as Idea and Practice*
University of Oslo, 12-13 January 2012

DRAFT VERSION – NOT TO BE QUOTED

Introduction

In Denmark a major reform of local government came into force on 1 January 2007, reducing the number of local and regional authorities by about two-thirds. The activities of the intermediate tier of government was reduced significantly, with healthcare now being the near-exclusive activity, and as the new regions did not have powers of taxation, it is easy to construe the reform as a centralisation of the Danish system of governance (Thomsen & Nielsen, 2008; Bukve, 2008). It is, however, interesting to note that in one policy area the role of the regional level would actually seemed to have increased, albeit in a rather curious and indirect manner. The new regions were given statutory responsibility for economic development through partnership bodies, regional growth fora (RGFs), focusing on specific areas of economic activity largely in line with the growth-oriented Lisbon agenda. Business development was in other words no longer an optional add-on to health care, but at the same time responsibility for them was placed at arm's length in new partnership bodies where elected members of the Regional Council were heavily outnumbered by representatives from local government, the private sector and knowledge institutions (Halkier, 2008), so that its political usefulness for regional government would seem to be limited due to the arm's-length nature of the new partnership bodies.

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The aim of this paper is to explore the political and institutional cross-pressures created by the new set-up in terms of legitimacy for key actors, focussing on the regional level in particular. It is concluded that two reasons in particular seem to explain why the new institutional setup revolving around arm's-length partnership principles rather than democratic electoral principles has relatively quickly become widely accepted in Denmark: from the perspective of *political positioning* vis-à-vis other tiers of government, economic development became a way to associate the new regions with 'good news' concerning the community at large, and in terms of *political governance* this was made possible by the long-standing importance of functional legitimacy in this particular area of public policy.

The paper falls in three parts. First a conceptual framework for the study of inter-organisational relations in a multi-level governance environment is sketched out. Then the development of the governance of Danish regional policy is outlined, focusing on differences and similarities between previous and current set-ups. Finally, the changing inter-organisational relations is discussed, focusing on the role of different types of legitimacy.

Analytical framework

The analysis of the changing governance of regional policy in Denmark takes its point of departure in an institutionalist approach to the study of politics and policy (Halkier, 2006). Here three levels of analysis were identified – the organisational, relational, and multi-organisational – which, taken together, can be used as a starting point for analysing the characteristics and development of policy-making organisations in their wider organisational environment. Given the emphasis on the current paper on issues of legitimacy and overall patterns of interactions between organisations rather than the detailed interactions between individual organisations, in this paper the focus will be on the organisational and multi-organisational levels of analysis, as illustrated by Table 1.

**Table 1 An Institutional Approach to Politics and Policy
– Analytical dimensions**

<i>Level of analysis</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Sub-dimensions</i>
Organisational	Resources	Authority Finance Organisation Information
	Assumptional orders	Topographical Temporal Operational

	Strategies	Functional Positional
Multi-organisational	Coordination rules	Market Hierarchy Network
	Discursive terrain	Specific nodal points

Reworked on the basis of Halkier 2006 Table 3.1

Looking first at the organisational level of analysis, three dimensions are crucial for understanding the position of individual organisations vis-à-vis its surroundings: the resources at its disposal, the assumptions it holds about itself and the environment in which it operates, and the strategies pursued. From an institutionalist perspective commanding resources is intimately linked to the capacity of an organisation to influence other actors (Windhoff-Héritier, 1987). Public organisations are generally characterised by having the authority to perform certain tasks in a particular geographical setting, derived either directly through interactions with citizens through democratic elections or indirectly through the institution of separate organisations that can be held accountable via e.g. network relations. They therefore face two basic strategic challenges, namely to perform particular functions and maintain their position vis-à-vis other actors with similar functions (Rhodes, 1988; Bogason, 1992; Sørensen & Thorfing, 2005). Both these tasks involve strategic deployment of resources – authority, finance, organisation and information (Hood & Margetts, 2007) – and any organisation embodies explicit or implicit assumptions about the external world that are likely to influence its relations with other organisations (Andersen, 2003) in terms of space, time and agency. All three assumptional orders combine cognitive and normative aspects: while they involve perceptions of social realities within the external world – by defining collectivities, designating roles, and distinguishing between now and before – they also ascribe values in that they designate good and bad, friends and foes, and desirable directions of change.

Because individual interactions between organisations do not take place in a vacuum but are embedded in broader organisational and institutional settings, it is also necessary to consider the multi-organisational dimensions of inter-organisational relations. Two dimensions are regarded as important, namely the way in which social activities are coordinated, and the discursive terrain in which interaction takes place. The coordination rules which govern a particular set of interactions – mainly through the institutions of market, hierarchy, or network as modes of social coordination – are significant because they indicate whether one organisation will be able to exert either formal authority or to bring other forms of influence to bear on other actors (Thorelli, 1986; Waarden, 1992). In the context of policy-making organisations this ties in with the way in which these are

positioned in relation to the discursive terrain, i.e. the informal and often conflicting and explicitly contested social institutions constituted by prevailing topographical, temporal, and operational assumptions (Andersen, 2003; Schmidt, 2008), specific to a particular form of public policy or maybe part of a more extensive political ideology concerning e.g. the territorial unity of the state or the relationship between public and private actors.

Regional Policy Governance before the 2007 Local Government Reform

Since the 1970s the governance of policies for regional economic development in Denmark has evolved through a series of phases, essentially driven by political considerations at the national level which saw regional policies beginning as a centralised activity, then moving towards a synchronised-decentralised phase in the 1990s, before being reconfigured into the current coordinated-decentralised form (see Halkier, 2008). In order to understand current issues of regionalization and legitimacy, this section will outline the early phases, while the ensuing section provides a more detailed account of the origins and characteristics of the current governance set-up for regional economic development policy in Denmark.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Danish regional policy was a text-book case of traditional top-down regional policy, instigated and implemented by central government. Direct subsidies to individual firms – finance on condition of investment in designated problem regions – were the mainstay of regional policy, aiming to boost economic activity by making it easier for existing or incoming firms to invest in areas of high unemployment. The administration of the grant schemes was firmly centralised and did not involve input from other tiers of government, except for minor financial contributions from local authorities towards infrastructure projects and a partial reimbursement of government expenditure from the European level (Bogason, 1982; Gaardmand, 1988; Halkier, 2001). Danish regional policy was in other words based on the assumptions that interregional inequality in unemployment was undesirable, and that such inequalities could be alleviated by increasing private sector investment in peripheral localities through public interventions coordinated through a hierarchical mode of governance.

Around 1990 three changes took place that combined to transform regional policy in Denmark. At the national level all regional subsidy schemes were terminated by the end of 1990, probably due to a significant decrease in the traditional polarisation in terms of unemployment between core and periphery (Illeris, 1989; Huggins, 1996; Maskell, 1998), and the availability of alternative - European - sources of funding for regional development (Halkier, 2001). Apart from

regulating and providing part of the co-funding for Structural Funds programmes, the most important task of central government now was to ensure access to business and technological services also in disadvantaged regions, and this was complemented by a series of attempts to entice local and regional actors to coordinate what was seen from Copenhagen as a confusing mushrooming of economic development activities through joint inter-municipal and interregional projects (Erhvervsministeriet, 1995; Halkier, 2000; Regeringen, 2003). In other words: a clear-cut change at the national level from the traditional government role of instigator and implementer to a network-oriented governance role of regulating and coordinating the activities of other public actors.

Following the 1988 reform of the Structural Funds, regional policies initiated at the European level became an important form of spatial economic policy in Denmark in its own right. Under the new rules Denmark was allocated spatially selective programmes, and eventually the level of expenditure on European regional programmes in Denmark ended up surpassing that of the then abandoned national programmes by a significant margin (Halkier, 2001). The introduction of the partnership principle in the European programmes has often been heralded as a measure that advanced the role of regional actors in the policy process (Keating and Loughlin, 1997), and in Denmark the formulation of specific development programmes has been undertaken by regional government in consultation with local government and private sector 'social partners', while in the implementation phase substantive assessment and prioritisation of projects has been firmly located at the regional level where regional government played a pivotal role. In contrast to this, the role of the national level in the planning stages was primarily concerned with negotiating area designations with the Commission, and ensuring that strategic priorities are in accordance with basic principles of national policy, especially reduction of the role of direct financial subsidies to individual firms, and later to control the legality of individual projects in relation to national and European regulations (Halkier, 2001). All in all clearly a relatively decentralised policy-network which targeted less well-off areas through measures that varied according to the perceived needs of individual regions but operated in a synchronised manner by drawing on a common repertoire of policy instruments authorised by national government.

At the same time the regional level became more active in economic development from the mid-1980s onwards for a variety of reasons: the termination of central government schemes had created a policy void, and the decentralised management of Structural Funds programmes set a positive example for sub-national economic activism and provided a way of becoming involved in

tasks that, unlike health care, could produce success stories for the intermediate tier of government (Bogason, 1982; Jørgensen and Lind, 1988; Erhvervsministeriet, 1995; Halkier, 2001). From the early 1990s all regional and the majority of local governments were to a greater or lesser extent engaged in activities aiming to stimulate economic activity through more or less specialised advisory services supplemented by various forms of technological and organisational infrastructure (Erhvervsministeriet, 1995; Damborg and Halkier, 1998). Although the mushrooming of development bodies occasionally gave rise to inter-organisational rivalry and became subject to central government coordination attempts (Halkier and Damborg, 2000; Halkier and Flockhart, 2002), the outcome could be described as a loosely coupled decentralised network in which regional government remained the single most important actor, also because it, in the areas designated for Structural Funds support, in a very real sense was ‘the keeper of the purse’.

All in all Danish regional policy in and beyond the 1990s was in other words characterised by a coexistence of three partly overlapping policy networks, all of them pursuing the same aims – strengthening the competitiveness of indigenous firms – through a variety of means, with advisory services and organisational infrastructure gaining in importance. In terms of governance it is, however, interesting to note that while the regional level clearly emerged as the dominant planner and implementer of regional development policy, the national level still retained its central role by regulating both European and regionally-based policies. A combination of decentralised and synchronised policy networks, in other words, with the growth of the former partly being based on the presence of the latter. This would seem to suggest a rather ambiguous situation with regard to the assumptions underlying Danish regional policy: development activities at the subnational level were systematically couched in terms of the need to strengthen the competitiveness of private firms in the face of increasing international competition, but at the same time large-scale measures were only instituted in peripheral regions through co-funding from EU Structural Funds programmes so that interregional equality remained a rationale of public policy, albeit in a less overt manner.

Local Government Reform and the Reshaping of Regional Policy Governance

The recent reform of local government transformed the governance of spatial economic policy in Denmark, and this section first examines briefly why radical change came on the political agenda and then outlines key features of the solution eventually adopted.

Before and after local government reform in Denmark, the main tasks of the intermediate tier of government in terms of expenditure, personnel, and political attention were and are related to

health care, and as the centre-right government announced an extensive revision of the division of labour within the public sector in 2002, it would have been difficult to predict that after the reform, the second-most important activity of the new regions would become a statutory requirement to pursue regional development through a partnership-based institutional setup. How did this thorough make-over of Danish regional policy come onto the agenda as an integrated part of local government reform? Unsurprisingly, many of the arguments presented for the solution adopted resemble well-rehearsed arguments for the virtues of bottom-up regional policy (see e.g. Cooke and Morgan, 1993; Halkier and Danson, 1997): regionalisation of economic development activities will make it possible to devise solutions that reflect the specific needs of individual regions, and including social partners and other tiers of government in the process will mobilise specific knowledges from e.g. private sector actors (Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet, 2004; Regeringen, 2004; Økonomi- og Erhvervsministeriet, 2005). A quest for policy effectiveness and efficiency does, however, not exhaust the drivers that led to the emergence of business development as a regional task organised along partnership lines: business development was only considered briefly by the technocratic Commission on Administrative Structure established to analyse the need and options for local government reform on the grounds that it was not a statutory task of subnational government (Strukturkommissionen, 2004), and thus the subsequent inclusion of regional policy in the party-political process is likely to have been based on other types of political reasoning. It is interesting to note that the policymakers interviewed generally agree that the elevation of regional policy to a statutory task at the regional level was greatly facilitated by party-political considerations within the governing coalition (Krarup, Lodberg, and Thomsen, personal interviews): the basic aim of government negotiators was to make the new regions as slim as possible (health plus something more), and here business development fitted the bill as a minor policy area that was likely to appeal to the centre-left opposition parties. Similarly the centrality of the partnership principle and its translation into a blueprint for regional growth fora were absent in the technocratic preparations for reform and only emerged in the ensuing government proposal which formed the starting point for party-political negotiations (Regeringen, 2004). In terms of administrative rationalisation creating a joint organisational platform that could integrate both European policy programmes and mushrooming subnational activities certainly made sense (Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet, 2004), but more pragmatic, political reasoning are also quoted as having played a role. Apart from securing the presence of relevant competences in the decision-making process as a supplement to the mainly health-oriented members of the new Regional

Councils (Jønsson, personal interview), a partnership approach would also have the political advantage of by limiting the role of the new elected Regional Councils by bringing on board other actors with vested interest in this policy area such as local authorities and private sector representatives, thereby increasing the wider legitimacy of regional business development policies, as well as making the activity more ideologically palatable for the centre-right governing coalition by giving private actors a prominent role in the new set-up.

The new institutional set-up was established through the 2005 Business Development Act (Økonomi- og Erhvervsministeriet, 2005) which gave the new regions statutory responsibility for economic development through partnership bodies, Regional Growth Fora (RGFs). The new institutional set-up integrated local, regional, national and European economic development activities, and thus increased regional-level coordination of the public governance of economic development activities. The composition of these bodies is defined by the Act, and their membership consist of persons proposed by the new Regional Councils, local government, the private sector, social partners (including trade unions) and knowledge institutions within the regions. The main roles of the new fora are to monitor regional development, elaborate strategies to facilitate growth, and recommend projects and activities for funding to the elected Regional Councils. The Business Development Act institutes a form of dual-key control where both the elected council and the partnership fora can veto each other's ideas, and the complexity of the setup is furthermore increased by the fact that neither the regions nor the RGFs have powers of taxation but operate on the basis of block grants from the national level, a statutory financial contribution from local authorities in the region, and European funding allocated by central government. Moreover, neither the regions nor the RGFs are allowed to implement policies but must act through separate legal entities, e.g. bodies set up with or jointly by local authorities. Finally, the Business Development Act also defines the aims and methods of regional policy within the new setup. In terms of overall strategies, the focus is clearly on indigenous economic growth in general and the four 'growth drivers' identified by the OECD – innovation, ICT, entrepreneurship, human resources – in particular, but at the same time the regional level is also required to give particular consideration to localities designated by central government as peripheral on the basis of a composite socio-economic index. The instruments used by the regional level in pursuance of these goals do not include direct financial grants to individual firms but must be to the benefit of an 'open group' of firms within the region.

Compared to earlier stages in the development of regional policy in Denmark, the new institutional set-up differed in several respects. In terms of the underlying assumptions, the quest for increased competitiveness has now become the overarching principle, albeit still modified by the insistence on preferential treatment for a number of geographically decreasing peripheral areas. But with the extension of RGFs to the entire country, the promotion of national competitiveness through mobilisation of regional resources had clearly become the key concern, and hence it is perhaps not surprising that the organisational vehicles for this, the RGFs, were also instituted through national legislation rather than being left for subnational tiers of government to develop, and thus the overall pattern of governance within Danish regional policy would appear to have become one of coordinated decentralisation in which all regions, each in their different way, are expected to contribute to the greater national good in an age of global economic competition.

Legitimacy, Regionalisation and Arm's-length Governance in Danish Regional Policy

The Danish 2007 reform of subnational governance removed the tax-raising powers of the intermediate government tier, reduced its functions and even placed its second-most important area of activity in terms of staffing and funding, regional policy, in an arm's-length position outside direct control of regionally elected politicians. Especially in peripheral regions with a long-standing track-record in economic development activities, this shift 'from government to governance' could easily be construed as an unnecessary complication of the ability of regional government to initiate and implement development policies and, indeed, a disruption of existing partnership arrangements. It was therefore hardly surprising that Orla Hav, chair of the North Jutland Regional Council and formerly mayor of North Jutland County, was venting his scepticism in public [quote] and, conversely, that private sector representatives were reportedly less than happy with the overly bureaucratic and political workings of what was supposed to be a creative and strategic partnership arrangement (Mandag Morgen, 2007). In short, what looked like a textbook attempt to follow the recommendations of a growing body of regional development literature on learning regions, innovation, and partnership, started to look politically precarious from the word go, with the RGFs containing conflicting types of legitimacies: democratic legitimacy stemming from having been elected by the voters of the region, territorial legitimacy derived from having been elected to mayor of a local government within the region, and functional legitimacy stemming from a track record of being able to 'get things done' as private sector managers.

It is, however, interesting to note that four years later the not-so-new RGFs are generally seen in a much more positive light. *Danish Regions*, the interest organisation for the five regions in Denmark, is clearly keen to emphasise the quantity and quality of regional development activities for which they claim responsibility (see e.g. Danske Regioner, 2008; 2009; 2010a; 2011). Their counterparts in *Local Government Denmark* have stepped up their efforts to support the effective involvement of local government representatives in the new partnership arrangements (see e.g. Kommunernes Landsforening, 2009), and an extensive series interviews with RGF members (reported in Larsen, 2011) has demonstrated that also private sector representatives have come to appreciate the possibilities of creating joint development initiatives beyond the reach of individual firms. In a relatively short span of years, the issue of conflicting legitimacies appear to have, if not disappeared altogether, then at least been significantly reduced.

The remainder of the paper undertakes a preliminary discussion of four possible reasons for this turnaround: the first two are related to the strategic usefulness of regional policy activities as a means of political positioning, and the second two related to the ability to claim that the ‘RGFs work’ in the sense that they fulfil the original expectations about their function by making a difference in terms of developing and implementing regional development strategies.

The usefulness of the RGFs as vehicles of political positioning works in two dimensions. From a *horizontal* perspective the reduction of the number of intermediate-tier governance units from thirteen to five meant that all the new regions incorporated localities from more than one intermediate-level predecessor unit, and although only a few of these – Funen, Bornholm, South Jutland (Nord Schleswig) and possibly North Jutland – would count as identity regions in the sense of being points of popular identification, they all contained territorially-based policy networks which had existed for decades and were now broken up and reshaped geographically through local government reform. The usefulness of the RGFs in terms of horizontal positioning stems from the fact that regional policy, especially with the statutory focus on general framework conditions rather than support for individual firms, could create a platform for activities that could be construed as being either for the benefit of the entire region or at least having an uncertain spatial impact. This contrasts greatly with health care, the main responsibility of the regions, which has a high-profile spatial dimension, especially in times of structural change driven by modernisation and/or financial restraint when new large hospitals are being planned and old smaller ones scheduled for closure. All in all the attractions of regional development as a potentially unifying policy area for the new regions will have been considerable.

It is, however, also clear that the regions have tried to use their role in regional policy to position themselves *vertically* vis-à-vis central government. As the longevity of the new regions has been a recurring theme in national political discourse, especially among politicians from the centre-right coalition that instigated local government reform in the first place, the need of the regions to demonstrate their usefulness to an overtly sceptical national audience was obvious from the very beginning of their existence. In an interesting reversal of roles, central government, did, however rediscover the regions – and in particular the RGFs – in the search for collaborators in the implementation of the overarching *Globalisation Strategy* of the centre-right coalition (Regeringen, 2006). This was translated into the so-called partnership agreements between central government and each of the six regional growth fora. These documents, the first versions of which were signed in early summer 2007, covering the period 2007-09, entail both a general political commitment to shared goals and specific undertakings that the two sides will attempt to progress. The official purpose of the political commitments is to secure compatibility between the national globalisation strategy and regional strategies for economic development, but from a regional perspective they would also seem to serve the more low-key implication of creating a degree of commitment to regional development activities by departments of central government other than the Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs – and, of course, to help build the role of the regions as partners in key national policy strategies outside their primary domain of health care.

These horizontal and vertical political positioning strategies would, however, find it difficult to work if the regions and the RGFs were not able to make credible claims about their ability to perform their regional development tasks with a reasonable degree of success. From a *process perspective* the initial clashes between different organisational cultures have now been largely turned into what Larsen calls ‘mutual fruitful irritation’ (Larsen, 2011), with the meeting of different, private and public, perspectives generating new opportunities for economic development programmes and projects. That this has been achieved in a relatively short period probably also reflects the fact that although the RGFs as partnership bodies are new, private sector and local government representatives have since the 1990s played important roles as board members of regional bodies developing and implementing economic development activities, and thus well before the 2007 local government reform a kind of ‘functional legitimacy’ – policies and organisations are judged on their actions rather than their electoral credentials – has been widespread in regional policy networks in Denmark (Halkier & Flockhart, 2002), also compared to the discourses prevailing in e.g. other Scandinavian countries (Östhol & Svensson, 2002).

This takes us to the final aspect, namely the ability of the regions to claim that their economic development activities actually make a difference. This is greatly aided by the demand of national regulation that the RGFs can only institute ‘framework measures’ that benefit groups of firms, because this makes it difficult to undertake impact evaluations, especially in a short-term perspective. Inevitably this shifts the immediate criteria for success towards policy output rather than policy outcomes, and here the RGFs are clearly living up to expectations in the sense that they have been able to establish and maintain a momentum in their activities that allow them to spend the funds allocated to them from the European, national and local levels (Danske Regioner, 2010b).

All in all the 2007 Danish local government reform with its uneven pattern of centralisation and arm’s-length decentralization has not created a situation where dissatisfied regional actors have largely abandoned regional policy as an area of political concern because of their inability to directly control activities. Instead regional development has increasingly been embraced as a source of ‘good news’ that can be used in the strategic positioning process of ‘region building’, both internally vis-à-vis citizens and local government, and in relation to the national level. Moreover, this has been made possible by the specific characteristics of regional development as an area of public policy, i.e. a pre-existing dominance of ‘functional legitimacy’ among key public and private actors in combination with fairly long-term development projects that shift the focus in direction of tangible output measures (“we spend, therefore we are useful”). The case of Danish regional policy after the local government reform would therefore seem to underline the importance of supplementing institutional studies of redistribution of power and authority with analyses of the strategies and interactions with a multi-tier governance system in specific policy areas.

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