

Tore Hafting

The Parties of Working Life,
Innovation, and Regional Development

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Summary: The working paper deals with the parties of working life and their role in innovation. The level of innovation is low in Norway compared to the average of OECD-countries. Substantial oil revenues, small companies and structure of ownership explain this. Innovation implies the creation of new products, services and forms of organisation by combining existing knowledge in a new way. The Agreement on Co-operation and Development between the parties is the framework for having innovations transferred from the research community to private business. High union density, the tradition of action research, the Agreement and the involvement of the parties in large-scale, development programmes play a crucial role for diffusing innovations. The Agreement is unique to Norway and is a deviant case compared to other industrialised countries. For further research, a sketch for comparing alternative institutional arrangements for diffusing innovations is presented and discussed.			



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Sammendrag:

Arbeidsnotatet handler om partene i arbeidslivet og deres rolle i innovasjon. Satsningen på innovasjon i Norge er lav sammenliknet med gjennomsnittet i OECD-landene. Store oljeinntekter, små industri-selskap og eierstrukturen forklarer dette. Innovasjon er å skape nye produkter, tjenester og former for organisasjon ved å kombinere kunnskap vi har på en ny måte.

Avtalen om Samarbeid og Utvikling mellom partene er rammen for å overføre innovasjon fra forskersamfunnet til det private næringsliv. Høy organiseringsgrad, tradisjoner med aksjonsforskning, Avtalen og partenes engasjement i omfattende FOU-programmer spiller en viktig rolle for at innovasjoner blir spedt. Avtalen er enestående for Norge og er et avvikende eksempel sammenliknet med andre industrialiserte land.

En skisse til mer forskning om alternative institusjonelle ordninger for å spre innovasjon blir presentert og diskutert i notatet.

PREFACE

The working paper is a revised version of a conference paper which I presented at The IVth International Regional and Local Development of Work and Labour Congress: «Transnational Co-operation on Social Regulation» in February 2004 at The University of Durban, Westville, in South Africa.

The paper presentation was held at Workshop 4: «The Role of Co-operation Schemes in the Development of Regional Employment and better work places».

I am grateful for valuable comments on the paper from other paper givers and participants at the workshop.

The present working paper is written in relation to the national R&D programme Value Creation 2010 (VC2010) in Norway. The Hedmark University College, the Department of Business Administration, Social Sciences and Computer Science, was accepted to join the main programme by The Research Council from the 1st of August, 2002. The aim of VC2010 is to enhance innovation in the private business sector. The participation of employees in the enterprise is an important measure to achieve that. The parties of working life have a common interest in extending and enhancing the quality of places of work by going for regional innovation programmes.

Rena, Norway, November 9, 2004.

Tore Hafting (sign)

CONTENTS

- Preface 11
- 1. Introduction 13
- 2. Innovation and affluence 16
- 3. The parties of working life and innovation..... 19
- 4. Innovation, parties and regional partnerships 22
- 5. Examples of partnerships 24
- 6. Discussion 26
- 7. Conclusions 27
- References 27

1. INTRODUCTION

Trade unions and their counterparts have traditionally worked with the negotiation of wages, pensions and related material benefits (Dølvik and Stokke 1998; Dølvik 1994). The relationships between the parties of working life are frequently described as hostile and irreconcilable.

In the present paper the attention is paid to the agreement of the parties on Co-operation and Development at the central and regional level in Norway (Gustavsen 2001a). The parties are playing a central role at the national and regional level in Enterprise Development 2000 (ED2000) (Gustavsen, et al. 2001; Levin 2002) and Value Creation 2010 (VC2010) (Programme memo 2001).

My interest in writing on the parties of working life and their role in innovation stems from that I am working as a researcher on VC2010. The parties and the State are playing a key role in the programme and these principles of organisation date back almost forty years ago. The present paper will focus on crucial antecedents and 'The State of the Art' explaining why the parties have a prominent position in innovation in Norway compared to other industrialised countries.

ED2000 and VC2010 are large-scale, national, R &D programmes funded by three ministries and managed by The Research Council of Norway. VC2010 is scheduled to run to the year of 2010. There are eleven research groups and related networks of firms serving their region all over the country. The main purpose of the programme is to enhance innovation in the private business sector. The parties are working together with researchers and public agencies forming regional partnerships.

The topic of the paper is the parties of working life and their role in innovation. The research questions focus on:

- the framework of co-operation and development between the parties
- how development programmes are organised at the regional level
- alternatives to the involvement of the parties in innovation

The purpose of the paper is to describe and discuss the role of the parties in innovation. It is asserted that the involvement of the parties of working life is unique to Norway and decisive for having innovations diffused. The argument is based on the conditions that:

- the general union density is high
- a strong tradition of action research in working life
- the Agreement on Co-operation and Development between the parties, derived from the «The Norwegian Model» of industrial relations
- deployment of large-scale, national development programmes

In many industrialised countries the union density is much lower compared to Norway, for example in the US, Great Britain and Australia. The influence and power of trade unions vary between countries and regions. Implications of diffusing innovations are discussed in the paper when the conditions are different. Alternative social institutions replace the role of the parties at the central level and in regional partnerships having implications for how innovations are diffused.

2. INNOVATION AND AFFLUENCE

Norway is lagging behind on major areas of industry in terms of technological and economic development (Moen 2002). The industrial structure is based on producing raw materials as fish, wood, hydro-power and oil. The production systems have a low input of knowledge and are not sufficiently large-scale and specialised. The structure is less diversified compared to the majority of OECD countries. The economy is highly dependent of oil relative to other sectors of industry by the fact that the export value makes out between one half and two thirds of the total value. The majority of enterprises have not adapted to new principles of economic organisation during the 1990-ies challenged by the globalisation of markets.

An important reason for lack of adaptation is the revenues from the off-shore industry. The situation corresponds to the saying 'sat cats do not catch mice'. The strategy of industrial policy is 'affluence-driven' and the likely consequences are the decline of industry. The economic incentives are weak for creating new products, services and principles of organisation. The riches will not be reinvested into advanced technology and profitable business, the competitive advantage will erode and the public bureaucracy will remain in power. The major part of the oil revenues have been invested during the 1990-ies abroad fearing that the economy would be 'overheated'. The industrial policy has been unfavourable, reactive and lacking the necessary integration between policies of finance, research and development (R&D), business and regions.

The level of innovation is low in Norway compared to the average of OECD countries that is related to the industrial structure based on raw materials. Politicians, public officials and researchers are pointing to the problem of the gulf of value creation (Programme memo 2001). The revenues of oil and gas will gradually diminish to the year of 2040 and

advanced areas of business have to be developed. If the country is to sustain a high level of welfare in the future, the industrial structure has to become more diversified by increasing the investments in research and development (R&D). There are examples of research-based industrial development from the 1990ies, as fish-farming and electronics, but as a trend, they are rather the exception than the rule (Moen 2002).

The majority of firms are Small and Medium Enterprises (SME's) representing a major obstacle for increasing the level of innovation. The amount of larger enterprises (more than 500 employees) is small and there are few trans-national corporations own by Norwegians. Exceptions from the rule are Hydro, Elkem, Statoil and Norske Skog. The latter is the second largest producer of the world of paper used in newspapers. The proportion of the labour force working in firms with 1 to 4 employees was 80 per cent in 1995. Small companies have not the financial strength and required competence to invest in R&D as larger corporations do. A small company can make up for the disadvantage by co-operating with other companies in a network with similar size and resources. In addition, the State has recently introduced a tax-reduction scheme for companies which have invested in R&D. The scheme has been a success and will be prolonged.

The structure of ownership has inhibited the investment of venture capital channelled through the stock exchange. Private enterprises own by families are less visible to shareholders, financial institutions and customers than companies on the stock exchange. The State is a major stock owner compared to other OECD countries and the proportion of foreign ownership is low. Critics point to that the State is lacking the competence for doing business and the responsibility for running the company profitable is unclear. Other critics assert that the State is passing laws which the same State is supposed to follow.

In international comparative studies, Norway is scoring high on education and research. The density of people with higher education is above the average.

The majority of the candidates from universities are employed by the State which historically has been the provider of candidates. In private business, however, the average level of education is low. Managers argue that the qualifications of university candidates are not sufficiently specific for business. Knowledge and education has had a low status up today among people. Those who are talented, competent and inventive will violate the norms of egalitarianism of the group. The talented person is considered being a 'deviator' who does not conform to established norms. These norms are also reflected in the business community by the fact that private investments in R&D are low. The private proportion is 50 % out of the total investments.

A final factor explaining the low level of private investments in R&D is how industrial research is funded and organised. There is a considerable large number (about 100) of small independent research institutes organised along industries. They have little contact with each other and the universities. They can not serve together as an agent for large-scale and long-term research projects. The funding of research activities is based on assignment contracts which are usually short-term. Business managers have considered investments in R&D as a cost and short-term, by paying attention to making existing systems of production more efficient. They usually do not see the usefulness of R&D in a long-term perspective by the options of economic growth and competitiveness. In the innovation system the co-operation between business and institutions of R&D is weak.

The study by Moen (2002) is directed towards the misfit between political-administrative and economic institutions and the new challenge of technological and economic globalisation. The co-ordination and control of industrial policy in Norway are weak. Business and public officials are reasoning within their sector as finance, research and development, business and regions. The relationships are fragmented between economic interest organisations and ministries dealing with industrial policy. The fragmentation of industrial policy is explained by the strong tradition of autonomy in business and public administration: The free-holding farmer and the exclusive control of policies held by public officials.

3. THE PARTIES OF WORKING LIFE AND INNOVATION

The yardstick in the cited report for comparing innovation and industrial performance is large corporations having succeeded in doing business on global markets. There are few suggestions in the report how knowledge-based research is transferred to the practitioners in the enterprise, enabling them to carry out innovations. The parties are briefly mentioned in R&D related to the problems of co-ordination and control of industrial policy.

In the context of the parties of working life, innovation implies new combinations of existing knowledge carried out chiefly in established companies (Gustavsen et al. 2001). Creating new products and services, entail organising new activities within and between companies. The majority of enterprises are small and the individual company has not generally the sufficient resources to innovate alone. They have to form networks with other companies facing similar conditions.

Within the private business sector the two major interest organisations are The Norwegian Confederation of Labour (LO) representing employees, and The Confederation of Industry and Trade (NHO), representing employers. Through-out the years these confederations and the State have contributed substantially to the «Norwegian model» of industrial relations (Munkeby 2000). It is based on strong trade unions and close ties to Social Democratic parties. The State is actively regulating the economy and the trade unions have pushed the State carrying out the welfare policy. Examples are policies of wage, based on solidarity, an active labour market and expansion of the public sector. From the 1990-ies, however, the «Norwegian model» has been changed more towards the principles of market liberalism.

Elements which are unchanged in the model are the union density (40 % in private sector and 90 % in public) and numerous agreements between the parties. The Agreement on Co-operation and Development provides a framework for transferring knowledge from researchers to enterprises of private business (Gustavsen 2001a). The parties have established a separate organisation (HF) for that purpose and the agreement (Part B, Amendment 1, on enterprise development) is an amendment to the Basic Agreement from 1935.

The division of labour between practitioners and researchers is that the former is responsible for the content while the latter is working with the development processes of projects (Gustavsen 2001b; Gustavsen 1998; Gustavsen 1992). The task of the researcher is to communicate new and relevant knowledge to workers and management. In the initial stage of the project the focus is on the presented problems of the parties in the enterprise. The researchers have to learn the language of 'the insiders' and apply relevant theories later on that fit the present context of the company. The researcher is not an expert and has to refrain from giving lectures. The roles of the practitioners and researchers are defined as mutually complementary. If the relationships are defined and practiced in that way, it is likely that the practitioners will be committed and involved and the project will be completed as scheduled.

The design of large-scale, national development programmes as Enterprise Development 2000 and Value Creation 2010 has been based on the principles of participative action research (Gustavsen et al. 1998; Greenwood and Levin 1998; Gustavsen 2002; Pålshaugen 2002). The meaning and practice of this strand of action research, however, have varied among the researchers on the projects in the regions. Theoretical and methodological pluralism have been encouraged because they will foster learning between researchers. By increasing the flow of theories, methods and practices the researchers could do better research within the same and between projects of the region.

Action research has played an important role in working life since the beginning of the 1960-ies (Emery and Thorsrud 1976; Herbst 1976;

Gustavsen 1998). Trade unions and employers were involved in experiments for improving efficiency, work organisation and work environment. Researchers doing the experiments faced, however, that the diffusion of new knowledge and experience was inhibited. Today the diffusion of innovation is facilitated through the organisation of large-scale, national development programmes. A substantial amount of researchers and companies are working simultaneously on projects in networks. Secondly, the intention is that more actors will gradually be involved in the enterprises, networks and development coalitions of the region.

The parties of working life are playing an important role in innovation at the central level in the private business sector. The use of researchers in enterprise development is an integrated part of The Agreement on Co-operation and Development. The parties are providing financial support and legitimacy to development programmes at the work place. The Agreement is closely related to the «Norwegian model» of industrial relations based on trust, co-operation and enterprise development between the parties. These action research programmes are tripartite by the fact that the State has rendered financial support channelled through the ministries.

4. INNOVATION, PARTIES, AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

I have cited to the study by Moen (2000) who stressed that actors from ministries involved, private business and research defined the problems within the confines of their industrial sectors which lead to fragmenting industrial policy. She argues that Finland has succeeded much better in doing innovations on global markets compared to Norway. The explanation of the difference is stronger co-ordination and control of industrial policy. In relative terms, the trade unions are weaker in Finland and the business owners stronger.

Rather than launching measures for making co-ordination and control stronger, another implication of fragmentation is delegating industrial policy to regional actors (Gustavsen 2001c). The political trend is based on the realisation that the national state is less capable of integrating industrial policy because of the complexity of the problems. The Structural Fund of the European Union is an example of the same realisation. Sometimes the boundaries of the region will transcend national boundaries of economic activity.

The meaning of region is different in Scandinavia compared to those on the European Continent (Ennals and Gustavsen 1998; Gustavsen 2001c). In the former case they are usually smaller concerning population and density of industry. In the Inland region, comprising the counties of Hedmark and Oppland, there are about 350 000 people and the density of industry is one of the lowest in Norway (Hafting 2002). The industrial structure is to a small extent diversified: Agriculture and forestry, and related industries, are the dominating industries of the region. The majority of regions are sparsely populated and physical distance represents a challenge, despite the age of modern tele-communications. The level of innovation in the Inland

region is one of the lowest in Norway, and the conditions of innovation in industry are considerably different from those, for example, in Emilia-Romagna in Italy and Silicon Valley in California. These differences imply different strategies of industrial policy and innovation at the regional level. The majority of enterprises are small and the individual company has not generally the sufficient resources to innovate alone. They have to form networks with other companies facing similar conditions. Secondly, the role of state agencies at the regional level will be given higher priority for providing resources, administrative support and strategies of innovation.

The parties of working life have two roles in innovation at the regional level:

- representing their interest in regional partnerships
- serving as resources of development at the enterprise level

The Norwegian Confederation of Labour (LO) has a regional office in each county. The regional officer is representing the Confederation in a variety of bodies at the regional level, for example, in The Board of Innovation Norway.

On the employer side, there is a similar way of organisation. The Confederation of Industry and Trade (NHO) has a regional office, usually comprising a county. The national member associations have their local branches related to the regional office.

One type of development coalition is the regional partnership which the purpose is to discuss political, economic and social aspects of innovation (Gustavsen et al. 1998; Gustavsen et al. 2001; Levin 2002). The partners have their own projects running and the partnership has to co-ordinate, integrate and control these projects. Regional partnerships are representative bodies comprising two or more counties. The representatives are from the County administration, the regional office of Innovation Norway, the parties and researchers from regional institutions. If there are on-going development programmes present in the region, they are usually represented in the partnership.

The parties serve as resources of development in the individual enterprise and in networks, for example the business manager and the shop-floor steward. The condition is as a rule that the owner is a member of the NHO and the workers are a member of the LO. Workers and managers have experience and competence which is essential for utilising in enterprise development. The Agreement on Co-operation and Development implies on the one side that the owner of the enterprise is entitled to make the business more productive, efficient and competitive. On the other side, the workers are entitled to participate actively in projects aiming at enhancing the value creation of the company. They have further the right to have their jobs secured and harvesting a proportion of the yield of the profit.

Regional partnerships are established on the basis of specific characteristics of the region in question, for example, the business structure. The number of business networks, researchers and representatives from public agencies may vary considerably among partnerships. The challenges of a partnership facing a business-weak region are of a quite different kind compared to the opposite situation.

5. EXAMPLES OF PARTNERSHIPS

Enterprise 2000 (ED2000) was a national, development programme running from 1994 to the year of 2000. The main purpose of the programme was:

- 1) to start organisation development in and between enterprises facing the challenges of a global economy and
- 2) promote employee participation and co-operation between the parties of working life (Gustavsen et al. 2001; Gustavsen et al. 1998).

About 50 researchers and 100 enterprises were involved related to seven modules throughout the country. The modules consisted as a rule of researchers and representatives of the parties. The module concept of ED2000 was a forerunner of regional partnerships which was fully introduced in VC2010. More actors from regional, state institutions have been involved in the programme.

VC2010 has been built upon the experiences of ED2000 and further developed and is scheduled to run to the year of 2010. The role of the regional partnerships has been given higher priority and new actors have been involved in the programme, for example the County administration and Innovation Norway, formerly SND. The goal of VC2010 is to contribute to enhanced value creation in the private business sector (Programme memo 2001). This is done by encouraging enterprises together with researchers to work on organisation development and innovation. Innovation will comprise of both the change and creation of new products, production processes and new forms of organisation and co-operation. There are eleven regional partnerships scattered all over Norway and the annual budget of the programme of 2003 is 3 750 000 Euro (the equivalent of 4 280 000 US dollars).

The traditions of labour-management co-operation are long in Norway and linked to research and development. These conditions are unique to Norway because that there are few, if any, parallel national programmes abroad aiming at regional economic growth where the parties of working life are strongly involved.

6. DISCUSSION

In the present paper I have focussed on the role of the parties of working life in innovation. The assertion is that their role is unique compared to other industrial countries within the OECD area. Norway is a deviant case which is worth exploring and discussing in detail by comparing with other industrial countries. The Agreement on Co-operation and Development and a high union density in general are important factors for having innovation diffused. It is obviously a risk asserting that a deviant case is in fact deviant without comparing with other industrial nations or regions, which I have not done in the present presentation. I will finally indicate some comparisons for further research.

There are of course other social institutions than the parties of working life which successfully can co-ordinate and control innovation policies. Finland is an example where the Ministry of Industry is playing a key role (Moen 2002). Business owners (originally forest owners), the research community and the ministries involved have played a key role for innovations of products and services on global markets. A showcase is Nokia, the trans-national producer of mobile telephones. The explanation of the success is the strong co-ordination and control of industrial policy. Compared with Norway, the trade unions are weaker in relative terms in Finland and the business owners stronger.

Sweden represents a case which illustrate that high union density is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for involvement of the parties in innovation at the national level. There have been deployed large-scale, national, development programmes as LOM (Leadership, Organisation and Participation) (Gustavsen 1992); and The Work Life Fund (Gustavsen et al. 1996), but today the parties do not play a similar role as in Norway. After the slump in the beginning of the 1990-ies, The National Employer

Association rejected to spend money on innovation programmes together with the Confederation of Labour.

In industrial countries with a low union density as the US, Great Britain and Australia, the «Norwegian model» of industrial relations will for sure face problems. These models can not be «exported», but researchers and practitioners abroad can pick up elements that are of practical use. The majority of employees and owners are not a member of a confederation and innovation will be diffused to a limited number of enterprises (Gustavsen 1992). The large use of private consultant firms assisting companies becoming more innovative can not replace the role of the parties of working life. In the former case, reports, memos and other written documents from the development process are not publicly available. The business management has bought a service and the «experience» is the private property of the company. The use of private business consultants implies that innovation is limited to the confines of the company or the corporation.

A similar way of reasoning can be applied at the regional level (Gustavsen et al. 2001). In Norway and abroad there are regions with high and low union density. Gnosjö in Sweden is a region with a remarkable business success, but the role of the parties is very limited. The region is dominated by SMEs and the employers and workers are not usually a member of the confederations of the parties.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The present paper deals with the role of the parties of working life in diffusing innovations. There are four interrelated elements explaining this fact, which is unique to Norway. The average union density is high in general (60 per cent), the strong tradition of action research in working life, The Agreement on Co-operation and Development between the parties, and the deployment of large-scale, national R&D programmes. Asserting 'Norway is a deviant case' in this respect has to be developed and qualified more by comparing to other industrialised nations and regions. The analysis should be consistent in terms of defining the yardstick of comparison. A yardstick infused by hubris as 'we are doing it in the best way' will be discarded. A more humble approach is to question what we can learn from people abroad organising innovation in a different way from we do.

My provisional conclusion is that the yardstick of comparison is the role of social institutions in diffusing innovations, of which the parties of working life play an important role in Norway.

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