

ATTRACTIVE NORDIC TOWNS

STRATEGIES TOWARDS
A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



Attractive Nordic towns

The Nordic Council of Ministers is the official body for Nordic intergovernmental cooperation. The Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, which is held for a period of one year, rotates between the five Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland). The country holding the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers draws up a programme to guide Nordic co-operation during the year. Matters are prepared and followed up by the various committees of senior officials, which consist of civil servants from the member countries according to Nordic Cooperation (2019). The project “Attractive towns: Green redevelopment and competitiveness in Nordic urban regions. Towns that provide a good life for all” was launched in 2017 during Norway’s presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. The presidency project is one of several initiatives promoting Nordic competitiveness, green redevelopment, transition to a low-emission society, integration, and environments that promote public health. It is led by the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Care Services and the Ministry of Climate and Environment.

During the Norwegian presidency, small and medium-sized Nordic towns were invited to apply to participate in a Nordic project network. Eighteen small and medium-sized Nordic towns that applied were chosen to participate; Sønderborg, Middelfart and Viborg (Denmark), Pori, Salo and Vasa (Finland), Akranes, Hornafjörður, Mosfellsbær and Fljotsdalshérað (Iceland), Hamar, Narvik, Levanger, Steinkjer and Vedal (Norway), Växjö, Lund and Ystad (Sweden).

This report¹ is a guide to those who aim at building attractive small and medium-sized Nordic towns. It is not a “how to” handbook. For the urban planners or politicians who are aiming at making their town more attractive, it gives inspiration on the road to achieving that goal. The report firstly explains the background, underlying framework and the challenges facing the small and medium-sized Nordic towns. Secondly, it describes five suggested strategies to consider towards creating attractive and sustainable towns in the Nordic region.

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¹ *Attractive Nordic towns – Strategies Towards a Sustainable Future* provides an overview of the results from; “A common Nordic strategy for attractive and inclusive urban environments” (subproject 4), “Mapping, development and use of methods to measure urban qualities and sustainability” (subproject 1) and “Contribution to handling complex decision-making challenges in urban regions” (subproject 3). The report is based on work done during the previous stages of this project, a review of literature, empirical knowledge and a dialogue with the towns and ministries involved, several approaches have been described.

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Picture 1: Idea platform. Photo: City of Pori, Finland

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a guide to those who aim at building attractive small and medium-sized Nordic towns. It is not a “how to” handbook. For the urban planners or politicians who are aiming at making their town more attractive, it gives inspiration on the road to achieving that goal. Towns in the Nordic countries have very different geographical settings, they are characterised by a wide variety of socio-economic conditions, and they represent different types of small and medium-sized towns. So, which strategies to choose depends on the local context. The choice of actions and the stakeholders involved can vary from town to town. One size does not fit all but to be successful some common approaches need to be considered in all towns.

First and foremost, to reach the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), a **holistic approach** is vital. To successfully make towns more attractive, efforts are needed across administrative boundaries and simultaneously on different territorial scales. This means that different stakeholders need to be mobilised and the town cannot only concentrate on managing issues under its own control. Towns also need to lead others in the quest for sustainability and attractivity. Local government departments need to get out of their traditional “comfort zone” and work closely together towards joint goals.

Second, **empowering the local society** is vital, since change affects their lives. There is a long tradition of citizen participation in Nordic urban planning. In fact, it is required by planning legislation. Here, it is important to realise that “empowerment” and “citizen participation” are not necessarily the same. Consulting inhabitants is not automatically the same as empowering them.

At the core of the concept of empowerment is the idea of power. The possibility of empowerment depends on two things. First, empowerment requires that power can change. If power cannot change, if it is inherent in positions or people, then empowerment is not possible, nor is empowerment conceivable in any meaningful way.

In other words, if power can change, then empowerment is possible. Second, the concept of empowerment depends upon the idea that power can expand.²

As illustrated in figure 1, empowering means delegating certain authorities to the citizens. Empowerment can also take place on an individual level and research shows that it can be an important health promoting factor.³

Third, creating sustainable and attractive towns means **change**. In change management theory, one of the strongest resistance factors could be described as “fear of change” or “going back to the old”. To achieve real change, it is vital to have a strong political vision combined with brave leadership. To avoid “going back to the old” it is important to ensure that an organisational memory is established (“Why are we doing this?”).

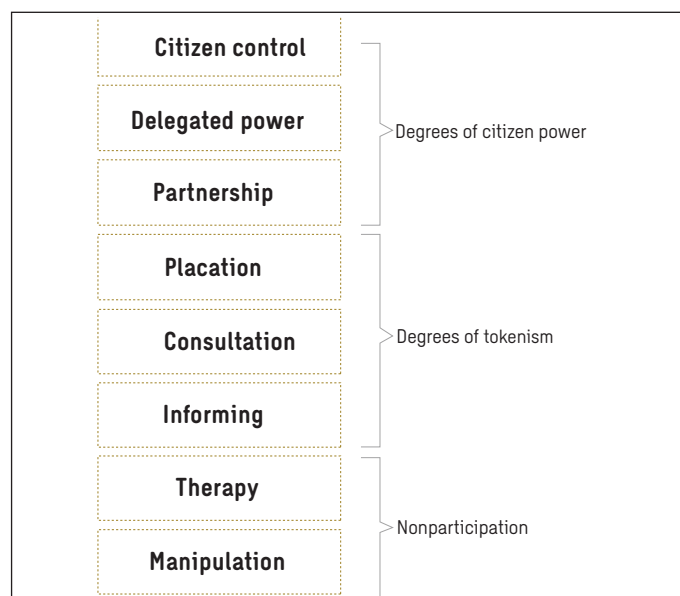


Figure 1: Eight rungs on the ladder of citizen participation

² Staples, L.H. (1990) *Powerful Ideas About Empowerment*, Administration in Social Work, 14:2, 29-42, MSW. DOI: 10.1300/J147v14n02_03

³ Arnstein, Sherry R., (1969) *A Ladder Of Citizen Participation*, Journal of the American Planning Association, 35: 4, 216-224, DOI: 10.1080/01944366908977225