

# A balancing act

Norway has fared remarkably well in creating autonomy at local government level – but the system is now facing a growing range of challenges. **DAVID SCHMIDT** shares some insights from a recent study tour hosted by Idasa. The delegation included civic association executives, academics, town planners and councillors.

**H**ow autonomous should local government be from the central state? This question is close to the heart of our political debate. That it is both complex and difficult to resolve became ever more apparent to me during our visit to Norway.

Take the case of the recent local government restructuring in the Hamar area.

Hamar, 100 km north of Oslo, is a town of some 16 000 people. Its current concerns are reflected in the massive speed skating arena being built as a major venue for the 1994 Winter Olympics. So are its origins. It is designed like a giant upturned Viking ship.

Hamar, like Norway as a whole, has moved very far from these warlike beginnings. It is a society characterised by harmony, and consensus at all levels.

Consensus is the oil of the entire political system, it underlies social relations. The police force patrol unarmed. In the police district of Hamar, incorporating 26 000 people, there have been no murders during the last four years. For us from South Africa, where life has become so cheap, this was a truly amazing statistic.

The prevailing harmony and consensus was recently disturbed in Hamar by a controversy surrounding the legislated merger of local municipalities.

Norway's history of strong local democracy dates back to 1837. It is rooted in a tradition of a strong independent peasantry which over generations was able to maintain its political rights and effectively defend local interests against the centre.

Since World War 2, the role of local government has expanded considerably to include significant social welfare and health functions. This has meant that the centre has come to play more of a role. Local government has in fact become a primary instrument of the Norwegian welfare state.

As this role has expanded, central govern-



*Deliberations in the Hamar council chamber: Free State academic Koos Bekker (left) with representatives from the Socialist Left, Town and Country and Labour parties.*

ment has tried to rationalise local government to ensure more effectiveness and cost efficiency.

In line with this trend, it was proposed that the municipalities of Hamar, Vang and Loten be merged. In the urban centre, Hamar, the municipal council voted 49-1 in favour of the merging. Hamar needed land outside its boundaries in order to expand. It also provided services to the surrounding areas although residents in these areas did not pay taxes to it.

The non-urban areas were vociferous in their opposition. Vang, Loten and Ringsaker held referendums in which "no" votes of between 95 and 99 percent were recorded. Their councils voted unanimously against merger.



*Hamar, past and present: Max Mamase, publicity secretary of Sanco and Idasa regional co-director in the Eastern Cape.*

The situation has been very similar in other areas of Norway – the urban centre strongly in favour of merging, the smaller surrounding communities against.

The scale of resistance in the Hamar-Vang area however had little impact on the Storting, the national parliament. It decided that Vang and Ringsaker would be included in Hamar. The merger was duly implemented.

The outcome might seem to imply that Norway has a very centralised system of government within which local government might have many functions but little autonomy and power.

**T**he nature of local autonomy is however more complex than that. If anything, the "Norwegian system" is one in which both centre and periphery may be seen as strong at the same time. Hagen and Naustdalslid describe it as "a dialectical synthesis of centralisation and decentralisation".

They point to an interplay of tensions between centre and periphery that almost always end in a "draw" with no clear winner or loser. With every shift in the balance, the party that has "tilted down" has adapted in such a way as to regain the balance.

The forced merger thus has had its consequences. In the elections earlier this year for the new council, a local grassroots grouping called By-Og Bygdelista (Town and Country) that had opposed the merger won 12 percent of the vote and the Labour Party lost its absolute majority in Hamar for the first time in generations.

"I'm here as proof that local democracy works in Norway. This is so even if it may appear rather contradictory in that the centre

**N**orway leads the way among advanced countries on women's rights and progress, particularly with regard to employment opportunities, equal pay for equal work and participation in political institutions. This achievement is the product of a long and intense struggle by women in Norway to assert their rights and those of their children.

It also is the product of the Equal Status Council, established in 1972 to promote equality between men and women in all sectors; the family, work, education and the broader community. In pursuit of these objectives, the council mediates between government, women's organisations and the broader public. Its seven members, plus an administrative component, represent the major political parties, the Norwegian Federation of Trade Unions and the Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry. The objective is to secure the consensus of all the key stakeholders of political and economic power in Norway.

Whether this is applicable to South Africa can be debated because it is rooted in a social contract political framework – a decision-making process based on mediating the different interests of labour, business and the state. In other words, significant policies have to be negotiated by all social actors to minimise conflict and ensure success.

In 1977 the council's efforts resulted in a Department of Family Affairs and Equal Status, located in the Ministry of Family and Consumer Affairs, which sought to coordinate and assess the government's

## Women take their rightful place

**Can Pretoria emulate Oslo in legislating for equality between the sexes? EDGAR PIETERSE gives his views.**

equalisation policies. In the same year the ministry instructed municipalities to establish Municipal Equal Status Committees to advance the objectives of the Equal Status Act at local level. They enjoy the support, advice and guidance of the Equal Status Council and have had a reasonable influence where they have been implemented.

These mechanisms and institutions were further entrenched by the Equal Status Act of 1979. The introduction of the Act declares: "This Act shall promote equal status between the sexes and aims to improve the situation of women. The public authorities shall facilitate equality of status between the sexes in all sectors of society. Women and men shall be given equal opportunities for education, employment, cultural and professional advancement...Discrimination between men and women is not permitted." The law also set up two institutions – an Equal Status Ombudsman and an Equal Status Appeal Board – to enforce the Act.

Norwegian law also introduced a quota system to facilitate opportunities for women to develop into positions of influence and power. A minimum of 40 percent of either gender must be represented in

structures and committees across the board – political, religious, educational and economic.

The leftwing parties – Liberal, Left Socialist and the Labour Party – have a minimum of 40 percent of women at all levels within the party. In 1986 this principle was applied at cabinet level; today eight out of 18 ministers are women, including the current prime minister.

Affirmative action is practised by government, education and business sectors as a critical strategy to enable women to develop appropriate skills. Underscoring the Norwegian commitment to changing attitudes on the role of women is a national process of rewriting textbooks in all disciplines to rid them of sexist references and making changes where appropriate in teacher training.

The Norwegian women have a long history of struggle that goes back at least a century. The current culture, measures and institutions did not fall from the sky. Nor has the struggle against sexism ended. Norwegians point out that it has been a hard and bitter struggle to accomplish current achievements and a long and hard struggle awaits them to ensure full equality.

We in South Africa could learn a few lessons from Norway about advancing the power and rights of women. At the end of the day we will not be able to reconstruct our country on the foundation of good intentions; we need workable and democratic institutions and practices that will thrive in a culture of equality, work and learning.

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overrode the local in this instance," said a representative of the Town and Country grouping.

"The truth is that Norway is about the most decentralised system I know of. Our system has managed to keep the periphery alive in an almost unique way."

Local democracy in Norway faces a growing range of challenges. There is great concern in some quarters that if and when Norway joins the EEC the costly special provisions in respect of the periphery will fall away and a much more centralised system will evolve.

There is also an undercurrent of criticism about the professionalisation of local government. Politics is becoming the job of experts and there is a widespread feeling that lay people have lost their say.

The model democracy that is Norway has

been possible because of its small homogeneous population and an ever-rising affluence. This latter pillar is under threat. The economy is struggling. There is growing unemployment. The oil revenues that have underpinned economic growth in recent times are finite. This resource crunch is going to profoundly challenge the national consensus in future.

Amongst the ideas that have relevance to our current situation are:

- **The Free Communes Experiment** which allows certain municipalities to explore democratic and administrative mechanisms not permitted by legislation as pilot projects for the local government system as a whole.

- **The local government funding system** which ensures equity across the country and has played a decisive role in maintaining a strong periphery. The grant for each municipi-

pality is calculated by means of a formula where the idea is that every municipality has to provide a certain volume of services at an estimated average cost depending on the number and composition of the population.

"South Africa and Norway find themselves at opposite ends of the democratic process. You are struggling to create democracy for the first time. We are struggling to prevent our model democracy from distorting," we were told by the Town and Country representative. There is a truth in this. Perhaps the greatest lesson is that, for democracy, there is never room for complacency. It is not an end state that is achieved by a country at some point in its history but something that has always to be striven for.

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