

The Times they are a-changin' - A new European narrative on the adaptability of small places

This seminar, part of the European Week of Regions and Cities 2025 ("Close to you" event), contributed to the thematic area "The Right to Stay: Unlocking the Potential of Every Territory."

The seminar was a collaboration between Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development of Norway, Innlandet County Council, and University of Inland Norway.

The seminar focused on:

- Demographic development in small places
- The importance of change agency
- Connecting small regions to larger ones.

Each of these themes requires effective responses to contemporary and future challenges and territorially sensitive approaches at European, national, and regional levels.

Demographic Changes – Recognition and Transformation

The discussion noted the 'stigma' population decline can attach to small places and the fact that this can dominate the narrative. The focus on attracting people to/stay is important, and, related to this, the engagement of youth and groups including the private and voluntary sectors in planning processes is important. However, it was also noted that there are different paths of development for rural municipalities and population growth should not be the only marker of 'success'. It is important to look beyond population growth and consider other aspects of development such as quality of life and well-being, where small places have so much to offer. For future planning, the opportunities available through co-creation and wider engagement were noted, but also the need to address concrete problems and deliver concrete solutions that people will 'see', which requires well framed planning processes.

Adaptability of Small Places – The Importance of Being Agile

Agency – the ability of individuals and communities to shape their own future was the focus. The 'opportunity spaces' for change are region specific, time specific and actor specific.

Drawing on two Swedish examples the opportunity for 'small places' to initiate change in local conditions and to start new industry paths was illustrated. These examples illustrated the role in driving change of:

- Innovative entrepreneurship
- Institutional entrepreneurship
- Place-based leadership

The key points of importance mentioned in the discussions were

- engaged administrations,
- keeping processes and procedures simple and accessible,
- allowing ownership of ideas,
- strong collaboration and trust and
- entrepreneurial spirit leadership and
- flexibility adapt long-term perspectives,
- think broadly about development, and
- the importance of the 'in between' players, like local authorities, to help make connections and facilitate strategic partnerships.

How Small Places Can Connect to Larger Systems

The presentation highlighted the convergence in patent rates across European regions, suggesting that less innovative regions are 'catching up'. In contrast to the dominant theories on innovation which emphasises agglomeration economies and core regions, research on innovation in peripheral regions highlights that

- knowledge spillovers do not require (permanent) geographical proximity
- other 'dimensions' of proximity are more important
- temporary proximity may be sufficient
- firms in peripheral regions need to connect through dedicated knowledge pipelines
- there are benefits to peripheral location: Secrecy, uniqueness, quietness, multiplex interactions, etc.

In the following discussion these points were noted:

- Value in European programmes and projects to facilitate temporary proximity was stressed, but also the opportunity to meet at trade fairs.
- Particularly for smaller places the effort needed to engage in innovation networks will rely more on intentional engagement and investment, rather than relying on spillover from established innovation networks.
- Where knowledge-intensive firms from smaller places were involved in such networks and collaboration they were found to perform better than equivalents in big cities.
- It recognised though that getting involved collaborative projects can be a skill in itself and demands capacity, trust and keeping the links simple.

Conclusion

Across all the sessions the focus was on 'what can be done', positive steps, value in small places and opportunities in change was important, especially at a time where discourses are strongly dominated by a focus on barriers, challenges and crises.