6.3 Coping strategies in the North: A model for community restructuring applied to Northern Norway

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Introduction

This chapter is about "coping" and "coping strategies" as concepts to analyse and to prescribe how people living in remote rural communities can respond to challenges caused by processes of social and environmental transformation. First, the rural setting in Norway is described in terms of first moving into, and then out of, industrialization. Then, UNESCO's research programme *Management of Social Transformations (MOST)* is presented, with the introduction of the "coping" concept. Following this, the elaboration of the coping strategy concept is outlined and discussed, also in relation to how rural communities and municipalities have fared during the last decades.

In Norway, like in many other western countries, regional policies have for more than half a century addressed the situation of the rural periphery. From the 1950s and until the end of the 1970s, these policies were ambiguously carried out in the Norwegian context, motivated on the one hand by the aims of policies aimed at mobilizing a sufficiently large work force for an expanding manufacturing industry – the "growth centre" strategy - and, on the other hand by measures to supply the rural population with welfare, educational institutions, and to support small-scale local employment opportunities.

In this way, industrial investments reached the countryside, often subsidized as part of governmental regional policy programmes. Primary sectors like farming and fisheries, it was thought could also be reorganized on an industrial basis. At the micro level, this development was thought to relieve households from productive responsibilities and to turn them into reproductive units – like in the urban centres (Brox 2006).
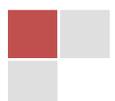
This industrial order can be understood on the basis of linear reasoning, envisaging stages in the development from traditional to modern society. Conceptions of the future equalled progress in all aspects of human living conditions – from nutrition to income, access to services, and cultural experiences. The idea was that rationalized high-volume production reduced costs and made all types of products available to everyone, and on the basis of this, and under social democratic political regimes, more welfare to everyone. This grand idea was a successful and a kind of "the end of history" model in the Western hemisphere. But the model started to show signs of stress in the 1970s, and the industry-based welfare model of and for society broke down in the western world, broadly speaking, in the 1980s (Reich 1991).

Shifting the focus from an era of industrialization to a more multi-faceted and neo-liberal reality, we must, however, not replace the story of industrialization by an alternative grand narrative that in the same way as the industrial one tries to conjure a new standard model of society and its development. There has been a tendency to replace the idea of the rural population being recipients or clients of welfare benefits and industrial jobs, to a situation in which "recipient" is replaced by an idea of being a "victim" in a situation in which regimes of competitively oriented neo-liberalism have replaced redistributive policies of social democracy. Linked to this is a narrative in which mobility ("flows") has replaced the focus on processes related to distinct places (Castells 1996).

Social science research has been lagging behind in this informational technology-driven period, with the scientific community being divided into at least three positions, the ones that tried to keep its focus on the social-democratic values in research, the ones that delved into analyses based on the neo-liberal order, and a growing community of post-modernists, characterized by their reluctance to create new, grand societal narratives.

A Northern research initiative: Circumpolar Coping Processes

At the start of the 1990s, the UNESCO launched a global research agenda named MOST – the Management of Social Transformations – trying to mobilize social science researchers to cooperate internationally to address the post-cold war and post-industrial and global situation by interdisciplinary approaches. Immanuel Wallerstein was one the initiators of this endeavour, and he brought the ideas from the Gulbenkian Foundation publication "Open the Social
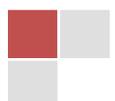
Sciences" into UNESCO's agenda for promoting social science. The idea in *Open the Social Sciences* was a historical reflection upon the close relation between societal circumstances and disciplinary developments and division of labour within the social sciences. Following this reasoning, the global restructuring of the early 1990s – with the breakdown of the world communist order – should according to Wallerstein lead to also a reorganization of how social science was conducted – both internally in academia, and in UNESCO's visions, with practical implications for improved democratic governance. In the academic world, as well as in the national research funding agencies, this initiative was hard to sell. Not only was the UNESCO a weak organizer of international research, compared for example to the EU research system, but the established academic order, based on disciplinary divides within the universities, proved hard to change. Inter-disciplinary activities were still not in vogue, and without substantial funding prospects attached to it, social researchers seemed to shun UNESCO involvement.

In Norway, however, the MOST idea, after one unsuccessful attempt at mobilizing the research community, staged by the Norwegian Research Council, was picked up by the research director at the University of Tromsø, who persuaded researchers from NORUT (the institution for applied science in Tromsø), the Norwegian Fisheries College, and from the Department of Planning and Community Studies to organize an international conference in order to set up a research agenda for a "Management of social transformations" programme in the Circumpolar area. On the basis of discussion in this conference, a research programme was developed, called the Circumpolar Coping Processes Project (CCPP), to be coordinated by Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt of Roskilde University and Nils Aarsæther, University of Tromsø. A one-person secretariat was established in Tromsø by 1996 to coordinate research in a network that comprised participants from all the Nordic countries, Canada, and Russia (Bærenholdt 2007: xii-xiii).

Why "Coping"

The word "coping" was actually given to the network by the UNESCO, as it appeared in the specification of elements that made up the MOST platform. Much activity has been devoted to the development of this broad concept, which can be placed between on the one hand, mastering and management, and on the other hand, adaptive behaviour. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the verb 'cope' as to "contend evenly, grapple successfully". Coping then has
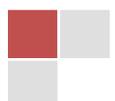
to do with overcoming problems in a struggle, and thus acting in a more ad-hoc than in a planning mode. The organization, community, or actor which is engaged in a struggle can be imagined as one coming out of the struggle successfully, after a fight against all odds, so to speak. Now, how can this concept be related to the situation in the Nordic or Circumpolar periphery in the last decade of the 20th Century?

It is in fact fairly easy to imagine a situation common to many periphery communities in the last decade of the 20th Century, one in which people experience both private sector and welfare policies setbacks. The idea is that external conditions impact on the local community in such a way that normal living standards are being threatened. But, internal crises or developments may also occur, like de-scaling of educational and medical services due to a diminishing population, and in particular, a decrease in the number of schoolchildren. Further, local manufacturing businesses and even shops have shut down, and within primary occupations, farming, herding, and fishing practices are terminated as there is no next generation present to take over from parents. In many periphery communities, elderly people make up the largest segment of the population and, concomitantly, population numbers are gradually declining. Added to these bleak prospects, natural resource depletion, climate change, wild animals attacking sheep and reindeer, etc., may have had a negative impact on a community's productive potential. But in our understanding of the "coping" situation, it is more in the form of a shock and less due to long-lasting downward movements. The classical situation in which coping is activated, is when a cornerstone industry or institution shuts down.

It is obvious that the regional political strategies of the 20th century, focusing on welfare development and support for industrial investments cannot function as adequate responses to the new problems. For one thing, welfare provisions often had to do with serving the educational needs of families with more children than in today's families. In most national states, the funding of welfare institutions has become more problematic, and private service offers, now usual in the larger cities, are definitely not a solution in small rural places. In the economic sphere, subsidizing manufacturing industries is out of the question (EU and WTO regulations), and the need for channelling industries out of the crowded city centres is long gone.
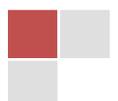
A community that is also drained of talents by the educational system can hardly rely on an equal distribution of entrepreneurial spirits either, and the handicaps produced by small numbers and long physical distances persist, irrespective of distance-reducing ICT applications. But even in the most remote communities (actually with very few exceptions, at least in Norway), local people are striving against all odds to keep their communities alive. Based on observations from many coastal communities in the Atlantic area all hit by the crisis in the fishery sector due to depletion of cod stocks in the late 1980s, researchers participating in the MOST – CCPP network worked out a model of "coping strategies", originally based on three elements, but then extended to a four-elements model.

Coping strategy model

The coping strategy model was first presented in the introductory chapter of the volume *Coping Strategies in the North* (Bærenholdt and Aarsæther 1998). It comprises three elements that the authors hypothesise must be present if a periphery community or place is to sustain its population in the context of the 21st Century's economic and political realities.

1. *Innovative responses to globalization*. This means that a coping strategy is an endeavour that relates to the process of economic and social integration within the globalization trend. This does not necessarily mean that a strategy or project carried out on behalf of the rural community entails an attempt to compete in a global market of services and commodities. But, it is a reminder that any locally-based innovation today must take the presence of the global into account. For example, protectionist practices by national governments are unlikely to survive in most business areas, and strategies that presuppose such protection will in most cases fail. The strategy must be innovative, not necessarily in a strict sense, but it must contain elements that are novel, at least in the community, or it must represent a new way of conducting or marketing traditional practices. Within the public sector, however, publicly funded innovations would qualify, like state-funded monitoring stations for climate changes. Innovative responses also mean the ability to take advantage of ICT developments – and in this respect it is a good question to ask if establishing a call-centre in the rural periphery would qualify.
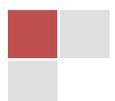
2. *Collective action: Coping strategies are collective endeavours*. While acknowledging that many innovative strategies are private business-based, we hold that for a periphery community, cooperation and social inclusion in this respect is almost indispensable. This in fact has to do with one of the final comparative advantages that small communities can provide, i.e. the powers of social capital that facilitate innovative cooperation at the level of the group or community (Putnam 2000). Collective action may develop out of informal networks in the community, linking households and firms, and with connections to network partners outside of the community as well. It may depend on and capitalize on organized networks in the form of overlapping membership in voluntary organizations. And not least, it may build on the power of decentralized local government institutions, from Nordic-type strong municipalities that can articulate needs on the basis of popular vote in local democratic elections, to weaker territorial institutions like village councils*.*

3. *Identity formation – from traditional to hybrid identity.* Coping strategies must make sense to (most) people locally. Together with the advantage of social capital, rural communities often are inhabited with people that have their community membership as a strong identity element. Now, often identity built on community living is backward-looking, and built on histories and narratives conveying images of a heroic past. This of course could "sell" in projects where a hidden past is opened and, for example, made part of a tourism venture with a focus on roots and historical events that took place in the community. But in itself such a move transcends a thorough and puristic orientation to the past, and shows how to combine elements of the past with new elements, in the form of products and experiences that attract new people to the place, such as by the use of advanced ICT presentations and communication. Often we speak of *hybrid identities*, and this is exactly what we aim at here – not the reconstruction of some historical role, but weaving the past into an identity that is also based on quite novel elements. Especially for younger people, this hybrid type of identity formation may be productive to mobilize people to participate in collective action to secure a community's survival.

4. *Welfare state, nation state underpinnings.* In the monograph *Coping with Distances: Producing North Atlantic Societies* Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt devotes the last chapters to
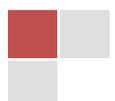
discuss and analyse the role of the nation and the state in the development and maintenance of Nordic periphery places. One aspect of this is the question of what welfare arrangement do to people. Do redistributive arrangements grounded in national solidarity make people not less, but perhaps more innovative? Local entrepreneurship may be stimulated by the very fact that there is a safety-net if one fails, for instance in a risk-involving innovative endeavour. The nation-building function is expressed also by the construction of regional strongholds in the rural periphery (Bærenholdt 2007: 258). It would from this reasoning be wrong to think that communities in the periphery may be better off by doing the job themselves, without the interference of national control or by national redistributive arrangements. There is no evidence supporting the position that local people's innovative and cooperative capacities are set free when welfare arrangements diminish, or that public support schemes can be replaced by autonomy, grounded in strong place identity. The state will in most cases, at least in Norway, serve as a buffer to absorb negative impacts of the forces of globalization, especially if neo-liberal insistence on profitable activities only, is too strong for almost any community. One may like or not the nation-building processes that have contributed to the maintenance of rural communities, but they are decisive pillars, and more than that, these redistributive mechanisms can in themselves also foster innovative coping strategies.

The coping strategy model then – is it an analytical model that can be argued and defended as a consistent social science construct? Or is it a descriptive representation of what goes on today in periphery rural communities within welfare states? Or is it just a normative prescription for how to work out change for the better, highlighting elements that are actually far from the observed reality, even among successful places and communities?

To start with the consistency question, the coping strategy model presupposes actors to be collectively oriented – and at the same time to possess individualistic characteristics of the business entrepreneurship mode. But this tension can be solved by introducing "societal entrepreneurship", which in principle may be performed also by business actors to the extent that creating jobs and sponsoring local cultural events is part of the business venture. Another argument against the model is that many young people leave small places in the periphery, and they obviously do not conform to the ethos of contributing to make
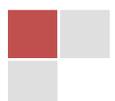
your home place a better community. On the other side, the presupposition of collectively oriented actors may hold for the ones who remain in the community or the ones who enter the community as in-migrants. Thus, consistency can be hypothesized in this respect, namely by restricting the research field to what goes on in the rural periphery – within a welfare state setting. Much evidence seems to corroborate this proposition – it is a common observation that people in rural areas connect more, are more densely organized, and contribute more to charitable purposes. But the model's internal consistency does not mean that we find coping strategies in every periphery community. It is possible to imagine successful communities (demographically) that have experienced e.g. munificent state or private sector interventions, based on considerations or analyses done by actors external to the community.

Empirical section: Four successful cases in Northern Norway

The second question is whether or not this model of action actually fits with the observed reality in rural communities. Here, we chose communities that have fared better than others – these are places/municipalities in the periphery that have more or less maintained their population numbers over a long time period. The question of the coping model's fit with reality can be answered then, by looking at the few places in Northern Norway that have kept stable population numbers – places that are in addition small, and located outside of daily commuting reach from urban centres. In the two northernmost counties of Norway, Troms and Finnmark, we find just four municipalities of this type. These are presented in Table 1 below, showing demographic development over the last 24 years (1990 – 2013).

Table 1. Population change 1990-2013 in Bardu, Storfjord, Kautokeino, Karasjok

Municipality, county	Dominant sector 1990	Population 1990	Population 2013	Change 1990-2013
Bardu, Troms	Defense	3890	3933	+43
Storfjord, Troms	No particular	1836	1942	+106
Kautokeino, Finnmark	Reindeer husbandry	2953	2923	-30
Karasjok, Finnmark	Reindeer husbandry	2652	2721	+69

Source: Statistics Norway www.ssb.no/folkendr/hist/tabeller
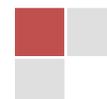
While all other municipalities with less than 5000 inhabitants in Northern Norway have suffered population decrease, these four units have managed to stabilize their demographic development, in fact, three of them have a larger population by 2013 compared to 1990! But does that mean that these municipalities have been arenas of coping strategies?

1. Have they innovatively linked to developments in the new global economy?
2. Have they progressed by inclusion and networking?
3. Are hybrid-type identities developed?
4. What we know, is that they are all benefiting from the Norwegian welfare state and regional development policies. But as numerous examples from other municipalities show, ordinary public sector arrangements, including pensions, disability, and unemployment transfers are by no means sufficient to keep up population numbers in rural communities.

In short, the four municipalities here can be divided into two groups (Table 2). Kautokeino and Karasjok are the strongest Sami municipalities in the region, and by 1990 the construction of Sami central institutions benefited these two municipalities. The Sami Parliament was located in Karasjok, while the Sami Theatre, the Sami University College, and other institutions were located in Kautokeino. These two municipalities were the "natural" choice for these localizations and by central government-funded new institutions they have offered employment for well educated (Sami) people. The nation-building processes related to the establishment of the Sami Parliament and College were not worked out locally, but the foundations for nation-building were laid by massive protest against the Norwegian central government in a struggle against hydro-electric development in a reindeer- grazing area. Rather by default, the creation of Sami national institutions benefited the two municipalities. It is also an open question to what extent people in these two municipalities have staged inclusive networking processes, but there are signs that the Sami traditional identity has developed into a more hybrid type, especially among young people (Stordal 1996).

Storfjord is a very interesting case, because the municipality did not enter into the industrial age, but by negotiating with higher public levels gained direct compensation for complying to hydro-electric developments, and has used the money and their bargaining competence to create employment opportunities both for small scale businesses and for women especially
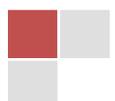
(the localization of a public laundry serving the regional public institutions). Storfjord has a culture of village, religious, political, and ethnic strife – with little overlapping networking, and the processes of identity formation seem to be highly segmented within the community (Aure 2001). By a road construction project in the 1970s, the E6 was led through the municipality, and a junction connects the E6 with a trunk road to Northern Finland.

Bardu is similar to Storfjord by having secured substantial municipal incomes from hydro-electric developments, but has also profited from employment related to military training camps and from a centre of telecommunications (shut down by 2010). Now, the military tends to down-scale, and the telecom firm has moved to the neighbouring municipality. Therefore, the leaders of the municipality have used much energy to lobby central authorities for new investments in the military camp, to improve infrastructure for the telecom company (financing new premises) to make them stay (unsuccessfully), and in addition the municipality has lobbied for, and later subsidized, a psychiatric semi-public centre offering also substantial employment opportunities for highly educated people (Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2009). The internal networking seems to function well in this community, while the identity is very much a traditional one, they are descendants of in-migrating people from a valley in Southern Norway, and adhere to traditional practices (fishing, hunting, outdoor life, cottages).

Table 2. Coping strategy factors in four municipalities

Municipality, county	Links to globalized economy?	Inclusive networking	Identity formation	State funding
Bardu, Troms	Weak	Yes strong	Traditional	Hydroelectric compensation
Storfjord, Troms	No	No	Segmented	Hydroelectric compensation
Kautokeino, Finnmark	No	?	Traditional	Sami nation-building
Karasjok, Finnmark	No	?	Traditional	Sami nation-building

Concluding remarks

From a coping strategy perspective, the four cases studied display far more nation state interventions than innovative linking to global processes, inclusive networking, and hybrid
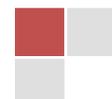
identity formation. None of the places demonstrating demographic success thus can be regarded as places characterized by the factors that make up "coping strategies". The role of the state in local development seems to be a far more salient factor for explaining the success stories. In the case of Karasjok and Kautokeino, there is the developmental linearity of "late-coming" nation-building that explains demographic stability. Positions are created, competent advisors, teachers, actors, and media people are recruited to the new Sami institutions. One may of course wonder why two "capitals" were created for the Sami "nation" instead of having just one, and local leadership moves may have been important for this split-capital outcome that clearly has benefited both municipalities.

In both Storfjord and Bardu, local leadership strategies have been indispensable. In both cases, the municipal elected leaders have directed their attention to low-risk areas (public laundry, SMB support scheme, military camp, and psychiatry) rather than venturing into risky commercial development. But as for networking and political culture, people stand united in Bardu, while interior tensions and strife are constant elements in Storfjord's inter-village and political life.

This leaves us with multi-level politics and local leadership explanations for rural consolidation, rather than explanations that resonate with the coping strategy model. There is money accumulated at the central government level, and entrepreneurial strategies can succeed for local leaders directing their energies towards soft spots in central government agencies and departments – by demonstrating the need for ethnic recognition, and for the maintenance of decentralized psychiatry, laundry services, and defence. Thus they do not need to venture into the commercial sphere to launch new initiatives, but can be sufficiently furnished with employment opportunities in a broad public sphere.

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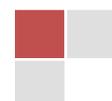
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