Institutional Reforms – New Challenges and Opportunities in the Interaction between Municipalities and Voluntary Associations

Malene Thøgersen, Klaus Levinsen

University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark

Today, all municipalities in Denmark collaborate with voluntary associations in a more or less formalised way. A number of legal provisions order or recommend collaboration between the two parties, and the municipalities provide a significant financial support to the associations. Moreover, associations are increasingly involved in carrying out welfare tasks, and there is a growing interdependence between the voluntary and the public sector at the local level (Anheier 2005: 130). Because of this mutual relationship, it is likely that institutional reforms will have an impact on voluntary associations and their interaction with the municipalities.

In Denmark a municipal reform was implemented on the 1st of January 2007. Due to this reform, the number of municipalities was reduced from 271 to 98 and a range of new tasks were assigned to the municipalities. The reform has resulted in a lot of changes in the political and administrative system and gives a unique opportunity to examine how institutional change affects the relations between municipalities and voluntary associations. More specifically, the aim of this paper is to examine the consequences of the municipal reform with respect to the following research questions:

In which ways does the municipal reform influence the interaction between local politicians and voluntary associations? What are the new challenges and opportunities in the relationship between the two parties?

The theoretical basis for the study will be new institutionalism and theories of organizational adaptation (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell 1983, Scott 2001, Deephouse & Suchman 2008). The main focus will be on different theoretical aspects of the role of legitimacy. The assumption is that the municipal reform will induce new standards for legitimacy in the relationship between municipalities and voluntary associations, and that this will be evident in the perceptions of the consequences of the reform.

The empirical basis for the paper will be two surveys which will be conducted in the autumn of 2009. One survey among all local politicians focusing on the politicians’ attitudes towards the role of the voluntary associations, as well as their assessment of how the municipal reform affects the interaction between municipalities and associations. The other survey will focus on the same questions but from the point of view of the voluntary associations. The two surveys make it possible to compare the attitudes of local politicians and voluntary associations regarding the new challenges and opportunities resulting from the municipal reform.

The aim of the paper is to describe and explain how local politicians as well as voluntary associations perceive the consequences of the reform regarding the interactions between the two parties. The paper will seek to answer questions such as the following: Has the interaction become more formalized? Are the associations increasingly involved in the carrying out of welfare tasks? Is there any change in the patterns of contact between politicians and associations? Finally, the paper will discuss the possible consequences of these changes.