

UiO : **Centre for Development and the Environment**  
University of Oslo

# **Pro or anti-urban: is Norway an international exception?**

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**CIENS Frokostseminar 1.mars 2017**



# UrbaKnow, RCN/Miljøforsk-project:

*“Blurred Borders: Urbanization, Knowledge-Policy and Cross-Disciplinary Interaction for Sustainable Cities”*

(CIENS: TØI, NIBR, UiO/SUM)

# Hypothesis I

- Norway has changed from being anti-urban to pro-urban in the course of a generation.
- As far as policy-makers is concerned, this is justified by the argument that cities are good for the environment.

## Hypothesis II

- In the past, Norwegian urban policy has not been much influenced by international ideas concerning the positive aspects of cities
- The recent change-around in policy can be attributed more to a shift in popular sentiment regarding the city than 'scientific' argument.

# Anti-urban Norway

- The evidence

- **Grendstad et al (2006)** discuss Norwegians' "anti-urban sentiment" based on their view of nature and "emphasis put on the prominence of local areas"

**Ramsøy:** Norway is “a culture with a deep-seated anti-urban ideology”.

“There is reason to believe that the slower pace of urbanization in Norway represents an instance of the role of popular values, perhaps shared by decision-makers as well, holding a significant type of social change in check”. (Ramsøy, 1987: 101)

- «I Norge liker vi ikke byer. .. Byen, og særlig storbyen, har vært betraktet som et slags nødvendig onde, påført oss av industrisamfunnet og den kapitalistiske samfunnsorden. Idealsamfunnet er lite, oversiktlig, nært og varmt. Lokalsamfunn, naboskap og nærmiljø er honnør- ord, som gir positive assosiasjoner og utløser offentlige bevilgninger» (**Schiefloe, 2002: 4**)

## **This attitude is reflected in policy:**

- “Norsk regionalpolitikk har hatt et visst innslag av antiurbanisme...” (Selstad et al. 2004: 183)

- “The anti-urban ideology among urban planners is to a high extent based on assumptions about rural life as being healthy and life in large cities to be unwholesome in a somatic and moral sense”. (**Petter Næss** 2014)

## But things are changing

- “Traditionally, Norwegian planning has been marked by a strong anti-urban perspective. Today, however, it is more politically and professionally acceptable to regard the urban ideal as something worth striving for. ... The positive view of city life is related to historic changes in how people lead their lives.”  
(**Nystad**, 2004: 24)

# The justification changed over time:

- In the 1950s and 60s “it was assumed that there was an untapped potential of population and natural resources in rural areas”
- But “Since 1972 one has sought to defend regional policy on the grounds that it was required by considerations of distributional equity.”

**T.R. Rasmussen:** «Langtidslinjer i norsk distriktspolitikk og tiltaksarbeid». 1995

## Rasmussen (cont.)

In Government White Paper No. 29 (1988-89),  
Policy for regional development:

“Regarding urbanisation the argument for district policy this time is based on a negative assessment of central places, with the help of a preparatory research project on ‘the cost of centralisation’ (Orderud 1988)”.

## Rasmussen (cont.)

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“Regarding urbanisation the argument for district policy this time is based on a negative assessment of central places, with the help of a preparatory research project on ‘the cost of centralisation’ (Orderud 1988)”.

- “Only a few years later, in White Paper Nr. 33 (1992-93), ‘City and Countryside Hand in Hand’, the tone has begun to change, to the idea that ‘Maybe urbanisation has some advantages after all that are worth preserving.’” (ibid)

# Pro-rural or anti-urban?

- Is Norway special?

## 19<sup>th</sup> century England

- Attitudes – and policies - were shaped by reports such as those of the *Commissions on the Poor Law* (1842), *the Health of Towns* (1843) and *the Housing of the Working Classes* (1884) from which “the close association between health and environment seemed clear beyond doubt”  
Martin, A.E (1967: 1).

- The nineteenth century experience of Britain is often taken as the origins of town planning: policies both to improve conditions in cities and to seek to slow their growth. But such attitudes can be traced much further back in time
- Thebes, 1385 BC
- London, 1600 AD

- Since the 1970s, there emerged, among policy-makers and researchers internationally, a more positive attitude to urban expansion.
- This was based primarily on an economic argument: cities as engines of growth, with high productivity and innovation.

- “The city has been historically the principal centre of change and growth in industry and commerce. ... The city has also been, and is, the mainspring of regional development . ... A second, and possibly more important way in which the city has been acknowledged as a centre of change is in its role as a catalyst intellectually, socially and politically.” (Dwyer, viii: 1972)

- But this economic argument seems to have been largely ignored in Norway:
- Just as, earlier, international research on ‘congestion costs’ seems to have had little impact.

# Environmental arguments have also changed in recent decades

- Cities were (and in some countries still are) widely seen as a problem - for example with regard to pollution, or flooding, or use of agricultural land;
- But with concern for climate change, cities can appear as a solution, by reducing travel ('the compact city').

- “The compact city ideal can be traced back to the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development publication of ‘Our Common Future’ in 1987. (Falleth and Saglie, 2013: 269)

- Is this 'scientific' argument really the basis for the change in urban policy in Norway?

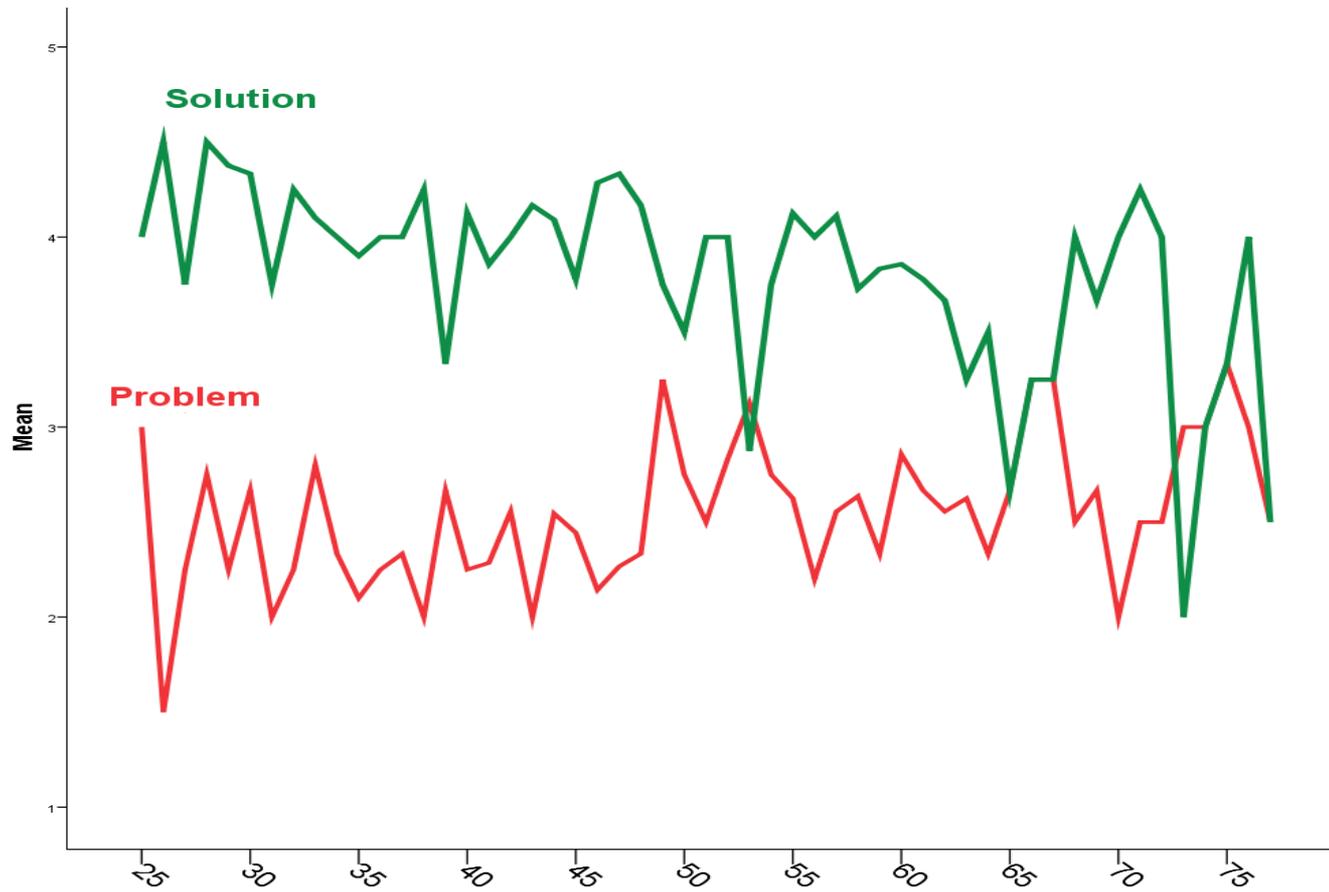
# The Urbaknow project

- A major survey was undertaken as part of the project, among urban specialists in Norway.
- Respondents were asked about urbanization as a problem and as a solution.

- Regarding the problems associated with urbanisation, responses were wide ranging: including:
  - social,
  - economic,
  - environmental and health issues.

- But among the positive aspects ('løsninger') one was predominant: the issue of reduced car usage, reduced air pollution and climate gases.
- This is a rationale for seeing the city as positive in planning terms
- And for a policy of 'densification'

- There was relatively limited variation in responses between different categories, for example by sector, by discipline, by gender.
- What was statistically significant was **age**: younger professionals saw urbanisation more as a solution and less as a problem.



## Norway's new 'urbanists'

- «Kan det være kjennetegnet på en urbanist: en som har flyttet til storby og som mener at det fysiske nærmiljøet er blitt bedre?»

NIBR-rapport: 2012:22, p. 125

# Conclusion

- In the course of a generation, the city has come to be seen as a positive phenomenon in Norway
- Planners are now presenting Oslo in very positive terms

The argument, by policy-makers, is couched in terms of evidence relating to environmental considerations (mainly climate)

But the main reason is not science but a change of attitude thanks to the new generation of «urbanists»

Thank you