Is tiny really so beautiful? Is small really so ugly?
Local democracy in Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland.


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First draft!
1 Introduction

The geographical structure of people’s settlement in the three West Nordic countries is in itself a considerable challenge for the provision of municipal services. It can be argued, therefore, that this is a challenge for the democracy on the local level. Municipal structure varies in the three West Nordic countries and has gone through changes in the past decades. Geographically the three countries are quite different although the similarities are more obvious when we look at the economic structure – fishing and fish processing are the mainstay of the economy. It can be argued that local communities in the West Nordic countries are facing a certain type of dilemma. On the one hand, decisions at local level need to be based on sound knowledge of local circumstances and conditions and taken in harmony with the local people, if they are to be sensible, successful and legitimate decisions. On the other hand, very small or “too” small local decision-making units often have problems mobilizing and providing the expertise needed to make rational decisions. This problem, or question, of the optimal size of a municipality – or should we rather say optimal smallness – is a relevant and emerging question in, for example, the larger Nordic countries The difference between the West Nordic and the East Nordic situation in this sense is that the countries and the municipalities in the west are historically much more smaller in population.

In 2012, the research project West Nordic municipal structure. Challenges to local democracy, efficient service provision and adaptive capacity was granted money from the Arctic Co-operation Programme 2012-2014. The overall aim of the project was to collect knowledge on the local level in the three West Nordic countries; the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland by mapping the situation and development in the municipal sectors, focusing primarily on four aspects: first; the municipal structure, second; the democratic aspect – that is, which consequences the structural development has had for local democracy – to identify the main challenges to democracy, caused by the structural developments. Third; to map the service production capacity and effectiveness of the municipalities, and fourth; to try to map the municipalities’ capacity to manage the development processes which often accompany municipal amalgamations. An overall research question was: What consequences have developments in municipal structure in the three countries had for democracy, local self-government and autonomy, as well as the ability to manage the processes accompanying amalgamations? In September 2014 a report containing this analysis was submitted (Eythórsson, Gløersen and Karlsson 2014).

In a second phase of the project, the project team tried to develop and deepen the insight into these matters by undertaking a survey among all elected local politicians and chief administrators (mayors) in all of the municipalities in the three countries. In the survey there were asked questions aimed at deepening our understanding of the problems and challenges facing the municipal level in the three countries, with a special focus on the findings of the earlier mentioned overview report from 2014. The survey contained among others some questions
focused on local democracy as such as well as its development after amalgamations that have been taking place since year 2000 or so.

In this paper I try to use that data from this survey to answer following questions:

a. Have municipal amalgamations had any impact on local democracy in the sense of different power and status of the municipalities that took part in the amalgamations?

b. Is there a connection between size and democracy when we are looking at municipalities in a small scale size as is the case in the West Nordic countries? Is there a difference between small and tiny in this sense?

I even take a look at what are the main developments in the municipal structure in the three West Nordic countries. Also, I try to recognize which are the similarities and differences between the three West Nordic countries when we look at local democracy.

2 Municipal amalgamations and the impact on democracy

When taking territory into consideration; that is, territory within municipal boundaries, there are, different views on democratic aspects such as equality between parts of the municipality or neighbourhoods. The main idea is that citizens in more peripheral, with less population and/or more sparsely populated parts of the municipality are at a disadvantage for influencing decisions, making contact with the elected officials and, in general, find it more difficult to access the administration, compared with those living in, or close to, the central area of service and administration.

This general assumption is often linked to municipal amalgamations where municipalities merge into one, despite different population structures, varying degrees of peripherality and different preconditions for acting as centres for administration and service. In these cases there are winners and losers. The largest units usually attain a central role while the smaller ones and those more distant from the centre have to live with the fact that they are peripheral with a view to administration and services. Both Swedish and Icelandic studies have shown the fear or scepticism of people and politicians in prospective peripheries facing amalgamations with this upcoming situation (Brantgärde 1974, Eythórsson 1998). The expected power position of people’s current municipality within the proposed new one has clearly shown to be the strongest explanatory factor for attitudes towards amalgamations, both in the Swedish and the Icelandic case. Those residing in the expected administrative and service centre of a new municipality are likely to be much more positive than those residing in the municipalities that are not going to occupy that role. People in the administrative and service peripheries are clearly less interested in amalgamating with the big brother who is expected to consolidate power and use that to its own advantage. This resistance is strongest in the bigger peripheries, often municipalities who have
had their own administrative structure, which has not always been the case in many of the small rural municipalities in Iceland. In that way, the big ‘losers’ have more to lose and thus manifest more resistance in many cases. This means that the correlation between municipal size and attitudes to amalgamations is not always linear: the relationship is more complicated since the possibilities of being the centre have more to do with proportional rather than absolute size.

An evaluation study in Iceland by Eythórsson and Jóhannesson (2002) in 37 municipalities which were amalgamated into 7 in the 1990s showed clear democratic deficits for the smaller and peripheral and gives support to the results from the former Icelandic and Swedish studies. There was considerably more discontent with democratic aspects and administrative structures among people and local leaders in the parts or neighbourhoods of municipalities that had now become the smaller and more peripheral neighbourhoods of a new amalgamated municipality. All the municipalities surveyed showed that people outside ‘central places’ defined as the proportionally biggest municipality, that became the center of administration and services after the amalgamation - felt that they were now more distant from their political representatives than before and thereby their opportunities to influence and lobby decisions were much more limited. Furthermore, the majority of the people living in the periphery believed that political power was now concentrated in these ‘central places’ (See in Eythórsson 2009 and Eythórsson 2011).

In 2006, just before the great municipal reform in Denmark, Danish political scientists published the anthology *Kommunalreformens konsekvenser* (Blom-Hansen, Elklit and Serritzlew eds., 2006). The results show a clear negative correlation between the size of a municipality and several indicators of democracy, such as trust, voting participation and attending political meetings (Juul-Madsen and Skou 2006). In another study presented in this book Nørgaard-Petersen and Christensen did not find any correlation between municipal size and representation – that is, in bigger municipalities, voters in various social groups used their potential for participating in the democratic process (Nørgaard-Petersen and Christensen 2006). Lassen and Serritzlew (2011) conducted research on the correlation between jurisdiction size and local democracy. Using the Danish structural reform as a case they looked for evidence on internal political efficacy. By internal political efficacy they mean that citizens believe they are competent to understand and contribute to political decision making and by external political efficacy they mean that citizens feel government authorities are responsive to their demands so that participation is something worth struggling for. Among their findings was that in terms of population larger municipal units were necessary for economies of scale but at the same time larger size incurred cost with regard to the quality of democratic order (Lassen and Serritzlew, 2011).

These examples of research on democracy and the impact of structural reforms show that structural territorial reforming by enlarging municipal units is, at the same time, a question of the

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1 The authors of this chapter use three indicators for municipal size: population, area and urbanization degree. The discussion of size here is restricted to population numbers.
balance between economies of scale and local democracy. These studies have mostly shown us that too much emphasis on seeking economies of scale can have negative consequences for the local democracy. This is in line with what was argued already in 1973 by Dahl and Tufte, that correlation between size and democracy exists.

However, looking at the research examples from Denmark we have to realize that here the question was about much larger municipal units than in the case of the West Nordic countries – this even though we are talking about the new Greenland municipalities.

3 Municipal structure in the West Nordic countries - A short overview

3.1 The Faroe Islands

Already in the mid-twentieth century there were 49 municipalities in the Faroe Islands, an autonomous territory of 18 islands with a population of less than 50,000. This structure of numerous small municipalities, with more than half of them having a population of less than 1000, stayed the same all the way into the beginning of the 21st century. The Faroese municipal geography during this period is summarized by Hovgaard et.al. (2004) as following:\(^2\)

- A capital area with almost 40% of the population
- Constantly improving conditions for commuting to the capital of Tórshavn have connected over 85% of the nation by road
- A rather peripheral island of Sandøy in the south with 1300 inhabitants and four municipalities
- The even more peripheral Island of Suðuroy, 2:15 hours ferry trip from Torshavn. On Suðuroy there are 7 municipalities with a total population of 4700
- Geographically remote small islands (municipalities) with low population and difficult communications

Despite massive resistance against law-enforced reform, voluntary amalgamations in the beginning of the 21st century reduced the number of municipalities from 49 in 2000 to 35 in 2005. Early in 2008 a new government came to power and the coalition paper contained clear statements on the municipal structure. “Regional development initiatives and changes in the municipal structure shall ensure fair and balanced opportunities for all areas of the Faroe Islands.” Furthermore, the coalition paper contained statements on deadlines by which municipalities should have grouped into suitable entities that were able to take over more tasks from the state government – and this would ensure even standards of services in the whole country (Aalbu et. al. 2008).

\(^2\) Hovgaard et.al. 2004, p. 18-20
Prime Minister Jóannes Eidesgaard, said in his opening speech to the parliament (Løgtinget) in July 2008, where he said that the government had decided to reduce the number of municipalities to 7 during the mandate period. (Aalbu et. al. 2008). The government coalition broke up already in the autumn 2008 and these intentions have not yet become reality as other less interested parties have been in power since then.

The amalgamation issue was more or less put off in 2012 with a nationwide referendum on the people’s will to amalgamate, with the potential result that the number of municipalities might have gone down from 30 to 7. With only 33 percent voter turnout, this proposal did not receive majority support in any of the 30 municipalities.

Today the number of municipalities remains at 30 - the radical intentions of 2008 government were never realised as the people of Faroe Islands refused. And people seem to think that this amalgamation wave of the first decade of the 20th century has come to an end. “The referendum stopped everything” and “The reform is dead” were the answers the authors of this report received from interviews with people from the federation of municipalities in the Faroe Islands. However, if we look at what has happened since year 2000 we see a reduction of municipalities by almost 40% - so the change is noticeable even though the municipal structure characteristics remain the same: Fewer very small and more rather small municipalities.

3.2 Greenland

When the home rule system was established in 1979 the 18 municipalities in Greenland acquired a more central role in the domestic welfare system taking care of social services, culture, education, housing, planning, fire brigades, water and electricity (Dahl, 1986; Bærenholdt, 2007). In 2007 the Greenland Parliament directed the Greenland Home Rule to implement a new municipal structure for Greenland. This decision led to radical structural change when 18 municipalities were amalgamated to only 4. New municipal councils were elected in spring 2008 and established from May 2008. The change was formally implemented 1st January 2009. The rationale behind this development was set by the Structural Committee (Strukturudvalget). The main purposes were:

1. To make all municipalities large enough to be able to take over more tasks from the Home Rule.
2. To ensure that the citizens in the municipalities received better and safer services.
3. To gain effectiveness and economies of scale in the municipal service provision.3

The number of municipalities was reduced in 2009 from 18 to the following 4 municipalities:

Table 1. Municipalities in Greenland 2015 and their population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Øst – Vest (Sermersooq)</td>
<td>22317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nord (Qaasuitsup)</td>
<td>17168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midt (Qeggata)</td>
<td>9397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syd (Kujalleq)</td>
<td>6970</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the largest municipality of over 20,000 inhabitants and the smallest of little less than 8000 the structure changed dramatically.

In their report Administrative Reform – Arguments and Values, Aalbu, Böhme and Uhlin map and analyze the municipal structures, structural reforms and the arguments and values behind them, in all eight Nordic countries. They conclude that no clear public opposition to the reform process in Greenland emerged. Further, they conclude that the in the debate around the reform, the main focus was on efficiency, accessibility and quality in local administration. Thus they think the main emphasis in the Greenland case has been on effectiveness and improved services, just as in the cases of Sweden and Denmark.

3.3 Iceland

The main development pattern is that the number of municipalities in Iceland increased slowly until the middle of the 20th century, and then began to decrease, especially after 1990. The main reason for the increasing number of municipalities until the 1950s (229 at its peak) was the industrialization of fishing, leading people to move from the countryside to the coast in order to work where there were better hopes of earning a decent income. This meant that new fishing villages emerged, and new municipalities were established.4

A slow decrease was in the number of municipalities after the mid-twentieth century (204 in 1990) is mainly explained by two forces – a number of rural municipalities ceased to exist due to total depopulation; and some municipal amalgamations. The rapid changes since after 1990 were indirectly facilitated by two referenda on municipal amalgamations - one in 1993 and the second in 2005 - and their implications. The number was down in 124 in 1998 and is at present 74.

In November 1993, referenda were held in 185 municipalities out of 196. Had all the submitted proposals been accepted, they would have meant a drastic reduction in the number of municipalities, down to 43. However, every proposal except one was voted down in these referenda. Only 67 out of the 185 municipalities involved voted for amalgamations. This only caused an immediate reduction of municipalities by 3, but nevertheless the ball had been set rolling and an amalgamation trend never known before had started. By the time of the local government elections in spring 1994, several voluntary amalgamations among those that had voted ‘yes’ in the November 1993 referenda had already reduced the number of municipalities to

171. By the next elections in 1998, the number was reduced further to 124 and was as low as 105 in the local government elections in 2002. Thus, a process was initiated in 1993 which had led to a reduction of municipalities by as much as 47 percent in only 9 years.

In 2003, the Icelandic Ministry of Social Affairs launched a reform project on the strengthening of the municipal level, in cooperation with the Federation of Municipalities. The main objectives were to strengthen municipalities so they would be better able to provide their current level of services and eventually some additional ones. Bringing about such a change would make it possible to move certain public services from the state to the local level. This required both a revised division of tasks between state and local level, as well as a revision of local government finances. The cornerstone of the project, however, was to strengthen the local level by amalgamating smaller municipalities. Even though the number of municipalities had been reduced by almost 50 percent since 1993 the project commission argued that this had not changed the characteristics of the municipal structure. Still there were far too many small municipalities lacking the capacity to take over more responsibilities from the state.

A referendum took place in 66 municipalities out of 97 in spring and autumn 2005. In these 66 municipalities, residents voted on a total of 17 merger proposals; so a ‘yes’ to all proposals would have meant a reduction of 49 in the number of municipalities. Referenda were held in April and October on 17 different amalgamation proposals. The 17 different proposals were voted down in 42 municipalities and accepted in only 25. This however led to immediate reduction of municipalities by 8.

No serious or extensive attempts to reform the municipal sector have been implemented in Iceland since 2005. Besides, interest in further amalgamation reforms seems to have declined. Surveys among all elected local politicians in 2006, 2011 and 2015 show this. Interest and belief in amalgamations as a measure to strengthen the municipal level is significantly less than before. There is, as earlier, no majority support for law enforcement with regard to amalgamations. Instead, local politicians seem to see increased inter-municipal cooperation as the way to go further and take over more responsibilities from the state government (Eythórsson & Arnarson, 2012).

But in spite of all attempts to change, the main characteristic of the Icelandic system remains in the year 2013. More than half of the municipalities in the country have less than 1000 inhabitants and 1/3 has less than 500 – a trait which has been considered as the main problem through the decades; too many too small municipalities with limited capacity to provide modern services. A reduction from 196 municipalities to 74 in twenty years has only managed to change the main pattern to a limited extent. As already mentioned, local leaders and state politicians seem to have begun to believe that the most realistic way to strengthen the municipal level so that it can continue taking over significant tasks from the state is by developing more cooperation projects. A form of surrender to voluntary amalgamations appears to have taken place.
3.4 The West Nordic municipal structure in sum

When attempting to sum up and compare the municipal structure in these three countries, the most striking fact is the dramatic development in Greenland, where the structure of local administration was changed after 2007 by amalgamating 18 municipalities to 4. In this respect, the Greenland structure differs significantly from that of the Faroe Islands and Iceland. Now, Greenland has few and large communes, both measured in population and areal – at least in West Nordic terms. Even though bigger steps towards reforming the municipal structure have been taken in Iceland than in Faroe Islands, the characteristics are in principle the same. In both cases there are proportionally numerous very small municipalities with limited capacity to take over more welfare tasks and thereby provide modern services. In Iceland, however, there seems to be a will to strengthen the local level by other means than amalgamating.

The following figure illustrates the municipal structure in the three countries at present:

![Figure 1. Municipalities in the West Nordic countries in different size categories 2012.](image)

It is clear that the share of very small municipalities; that is, with a population of less than 1000, is similar in Iceland and the Faroe Islands, 55-60 percent. At the same time municipalities of such limited size do not exist in Greenland anymore.

The following table provides an overview of some facts about the number of municipalities and their populations in the three West Nordic countries.
Table 2. Municipalities and their population in the West Nordic countries in 2015.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Faroe Islands</th>
<th>Greenland</th>
<th>Iceland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total population</strong></td>
<td>48,704</td>
<td>55,852</td>
<td>329,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of municipalities</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average population</strong></td>
<td>1,623</td>
<td>13,963</td>
<td>4,447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Median population</strong></td>
<td>628</td>
<td>13,282</td>
<td>880</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are, for example, significant differences between the three countries in the average size of municipalities. While Greenland has about 14,000, Iceland has almost 4,500 and the Faroe Islands just over 1,600. However, the average for Iceland is strongly affected by the size of Reykjavík with its 122,000 inhabitants. Therefore the median scores give a better picture (Faroes 628) and (Iceland 880).

4 On the situation and development of local democracy in the three countries

4.1 Local democracy in the Faroe Islands

The coalition paper published by the 2008 government in the Faroe Islands contained clear policy statements on enlargements of the municipalities in order to increase their service capacity and ensure even service standards in the whole country. This was emphasized by Prime Minister Eidesgaard in Parliament in summer 2008 where he announced that the goal was to reduce the number of municipalities to seven. He underlined the democratic aspect in his opening speech to Parliament on the 29th of July 2008:\(^5\)

> An important part of democracy lies in decisions being made as close to the citizens as possible, and this is one reason why more and more functions are being transferred to the municipalities.

These arguments of attracting young people to the more peripheral regions by transferring challenging tasks to the municipalities from the state were central in his speech. By this, Eidesgaard was in fact saying that the municipalities were too many and too small and had too limited tasks. In other words, local democracy, even though formally present, lacked content to be effective. This kind of argumentation has, for example, been presented in this context by Dahl and Tufte (1973) as well as by Harald Baldersheim (1987) who stated that it could of course be claimed that municipal amalgamations, which reduced the number of municipalities and thereby the number of local politicians, appeared to be a centralization of power. But such arrangements

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\(^5\) Aalbu et. al. 2008 p. 34.
could actually prove to be a way to decentralize power, since an increased capacity for service provision also made local units capable of taking over more tasks from state level.

The emphasis in local democracy in the Faroe Islands was, according to this, clearly to make the units bigger and through that give the democracy some content. At the same time further amalgamations can increase the distance between the people and the politicians and even the distance to the administration, for some of them at least.

4.2 Local democracy in Greenland

In a report to the Greenland Structural Committee (Strukturudvalget) in 2005 the Danish political scientist Ulrik Kjær pointed out what the consequences of the reform would be for local democracy in Greenland. He raised a warning flag as to the form of geographical representation in the new extensive municipalities, not at least due to the many instances of very difficult communications between regions, villages and towns. In such a situation small and isolated places would suffer democratic deficits as peripheries in more than one sense. Kjær argued that it was very important, from a democratic point of view and with consideration to welfare services in the new municipalities, that smaller neighbourhoods should not lose all power within the new enlarged municipality (Kjær, 2005). Binderkrantz and Jacobsen (2007) also raised similar questions about the democratic aspect. According to them, increased costs, due to more travel between neighbourhoods in the new municipalities was to be met with a law on the use of videoconferences between isolated villages and neighbourhoods.

In the Annual Report 2011 of The Greenland Federation of Municipalities (KANUKOKA), local democracy is discussed in a separate chapter. It is stated that local democracy was not discussed broadly before the great amalgamations in 2009 – warnings from the scientists did clearly not get through. But in the report it is further stated that 3 years after the reform it is time to go deeper into that discussion. In the beginning of 2009 each of the four new municipalities was to establish a “geographical mandate” for every one of the former 18 municipalities. However, this was only to apply for the first four year mandate period. The annual report refers to hearings on experiences of this, conducted by the Ministry of the Interior. The hearing showed clearly that the mandate had had different practical significance in the four municipalities and that it seems that the municipalities had understood the term “geographical mandate” very differently.

In a meeting of representatives held by the Greenland Federation of Municipalities (KANUKOKA) in June 2013 representatives from the municipalities formally expressed their evaluation of the impact of the 2009 structural reform, and there were some critical voices on both democracy and services: For example Kelly Berthelsen from Kommune Kujalleq:

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And from the representative Asii Chemnitz Narup from Kommuneqarfik Sermersooq:


These two examples taken from the resume of this meeting in June 2013 clearly show that there are problems with the representation of the small villages all over Greenland in their new democratic order.

4.3 Local democracy in Iceland

The earlier mentioned evaluation study of seven amalgamations undertaken in Iceland in 1994 and 1998, where 37 municipalities were involved, showed evident signs of democratic deficits for the smaller and peripheral municipalities. Surveys among the citizens clearly indicated that people outside the central service and administration locations felt that they were now more distant from their politicians than before and thereby their opportunities to influence and lobby decisions were much more limited. Furthermore, the majority of the people living in the peripheral parts believed that political power was now concentrated in these ‘central places’ (Eythórsson & Jóhannesson, 2002). No other evaluation study has been done since and the results remain. There are some examples of discontent in former municipalities and attempts have been
made to accomplish splits or breakouts. This has, for example, been done several times in Sweden since the municipal structural reform in the 1970s and seven such requests were accepted by the Swedish government between 1974 and 1985 (Erlingsson 2005). In the Icelandic case such attempts have always been rejected. The democratic consequences of amalgamations have not been high on the political agenda and can hardly be seen as an emerging problem. (Eythórsson & Jóhannesson, 2002; Eythórsson, 2009).

4.4 West Nordic local democracy in sum

As we have seen, current municipal structure in these three countries is less similar than it used to be. After the great reform in Greenland the municipalities are not only largest in areal but also in population in the West Nordic comparative perspective. In a table above it is shown, however, that the Faroese and Icelandic municipal structures are quite similar compared with the situation in Greenland. The most emerging question about local democracy in Greenland is the geographical representation of small villages and neighbourhoods after the great reform. The concern, just before the amalgamations came into practice, was how these smaller and often very isolated neighbourhoods could be democratically included in the new municipalities and have something to say or decide about their matters. In the Faroe Islands the big issue seems to be mostly connected to the content of local democracy, since the numerous small municipalities have limited tasks. This is, however, not the standpoint of the smaller municipalities which run their own federation and claim that they are doing well as they are. But recently, the two municipal federations were merged into one, so the possibilities for the smaller municipalities to act as such are perhaps at risk. In the Icelandic case much of the discussion in the latest years on democracy on the municipal level is about direct citizen democracy versus the more traditional representative democracy and increased citizen participation in decision making between elections seems to be a key word nowadays. This concern was clearly emphasized in the Local Government Act of 2011. The connection between size and democracy seems to have vanished from the agenda with the latest attempt to reform the structure in 2005.

5 The local leader’s perceptions of local democracy

5.1 A West Nordic net-survey

The questionnaire sent out to the local politicians and administrators in the three countries was a net-survey conducted through a subscription to SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com).

In Iceland there are at present 504 elected representatives, in Greenland 305 (including neighbourhood councils - bygderåd) and in the Faroe Islands there are 208 elected delegates. Only those with accessible e-mail addresses could be included in the population in this research. In no case we were able to find the e-mails of all elected local politicians; In Iceland we found
454/504 politicians and additionally 41 top administrator. In the Faroe Islands we found 200/206 politicians and, in addition, 14 top administrators. In Greenland we had the toughest problems. Nevertheless, we found the e-mails of 103/305 elected representatives either in municipalities or in the sub municipal units (Bygderåd), as well as 34 administrators. This gave us a population of 495 in Iceland, 214 in the Faroe Islands and 137 in Greenland.

The questionnaire was sent out 21st April 2015 and closed 2nd June. The final response rate varied from something that could be expected in Iceland and Faroe Islands down to a very low rate in Greenland. In Iceland the response rate was 54.0%, in Faroe Islands 52.9% and in Greenland we only received 38 answers which gave a rate of 29.2%. Greenland is problematic in this sense. Even though responses from 38 people can give us some valuable information, any generalization on the basis of such few answers is difficult. Therefore, we had to try to make the best possible use of answers to open-ended questions – especially from Greenland. Our results in the Greenland case have to be seen in this light and should perhaps rather be regarded as indications.

5.2 Democracy and the influence of territories

In our survey we asked the question (as a statement): *Small and peripheral neighbourhoods in the municipality have less influence*. This was done in order to get the local leaders attitudes towards what in earlier research in Iceland and Sweden was evident and to what extent the attitudes existed in the two other West Nordic countries, since this had not been studies there. In this case we do not only show an analysis by municipal size but also by the leaders’ perceived status of a former municipality after amalgamation – whether it was perceived as a central area or a periphery.

The Faroese case does not show strong support among the local leaders for this statement. What is anticipated is the lowest score among leaders from centrally placed municipalities (3.63) and the highest score among those from the peripheries (4.82) on our 1 – 7 scale where 4 is the mid value. Scores in size groups are more confusing. In smaller units, the leaders give the statement less support than in larger ones, which is against what earlier has been found in other countries! But we have to bear in mind how tight the scores are only ranging from 3.63 to 4.82, just a small part of the scale.

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7 The response rate was similar in Iceland and the Faroes. In a survey among elected local politicians in Iceland in the autumn 2011 the response rate was 56.6% (Eythórsson and Arnarson 2012) and in a survey sent to mayors and administrative leaders in Iceland, the Faroes and Åland in 2004 the response rate was 61.2% in Iceland and 44.8% in the Faroe Islands (Hovgaard, Eythórsson and Fellman 2004).
Faroese local leaders do not give much support to the statement that people in smaller and peripheral parts of municipalities are less influential. We see clear sign of Centre – Periphery dimension in the sense that leaders believe that the peripheral parts have less influence. In there is any correlation between this and municipal size it is more of that the ones in the smaller feel less loss of influence. Here we do not see any real difference between tiny and small.

More variations show up in Iceland, but support for the statement is clearly weaker than in the Faroes; only 3.10 in general compared with 4.01. However, leaders in peripheries in Iceland (as in the Faroes) demonstrate the strongest support (4.17) much more than their colleagues in the centres (3.32). Variations by municipal size are very small, with the exception that leaders in the 9 largest units strongly disagree with the statement (2.36) while others show scores just above 3. This loss of influence in the smaller and peripheral municipalities does not seem to be emerging in Iceland, presently after a decade since most of the amalgamations in the country already had taken place. Even here we find Centre – Periphery differences but when looking at size it has only to do with the 8 very biggest ones versus all the others. That tells us that there are differences here between tiny and small.
As we have seen and said earlier, analysing the limited data collected from Greenland has to be done with caution, since the response rates and number of responses do not allow much of conclusions to be drawn. We can instead try to look at some of the results as indicating possible trends; the qualitative data collected in the questionnaire can also contribute to such an approach. The scores in the figure below tell us that in some categories the statement of small and peripheral communities having less influence on decisions, receives support. By contrast with the other two, this seems to vary by size. In the smaller sub-units (less than 2500) and in the municipalities (5000+) the statement has less support. This might tell us that leaders in the smaller sub-municipal units (bygder) perceive lack of influence compared with the larger units. We even see differences when comparing central places and peripheries, since leaders in the peripheries (5.57) seem to have much less influence than in the central places (3.60).
A person in a very small sub-municipal unit who received our survey, wrote the following answer, in support of the statement:

*Before the great amalgamation we had a common meeting in the “bygdebestyrelse” (sub-municipal board) together with the mayor (kommunaldirektøren) once a year, where we got information on what had been done or changed for the better in the services to the citizens. All this has now totally disappeared after the amalgamation in 2009. Since then the “bygdebestyrelse” no longer has any tasks or responsibilities. Other sub-units (bygder) that need more support for development than we do are now prioritized.*

Thus, the quantitative analysis receives support in a letter sent to us. We can argue that there is some truth in the results provided. It would appear that the small and peripheral communities in Greenland are undermined, while this can hardly be said in the Faroese case and not at all in the Icelandic case. This is according to information from local leaders.

### 5.3 Democracy and accessibility of administration and politicians

Accessibility to municipal administration is part of the democracy, influence and power issues we have been discussing. In an earlier mentioned evaluation study by Eythórsson and Jóhannesson (2002), where seven amalgamations in Iceland in the 1990s were evaluated, clear signs were found, both among the general population and elected officials in the smaller and peripheral parts of the new municipalities, of experiencing increased distance from the administration – in other
words reduced accessibility. We have to note that in this study, we build results on answers from local politicians and administrators – not from citizens. Whether this makes a difference for the results or not is not easy to say, but our results imply that this is hardly the case, at least not in the Faroe Islands and Iceland. One of the statements presented was: “People have good accessibility to the administration”.

In the Faroe Islands this seems to be highly accepted by the local leaders – that is, they generally think the accessibility is good. The mean scores are high in all categories (5.30 – 5.97 on our 1 – 7 scale) except in the capital (the only municipality with more than 5000) where the result is “neither or” (4.00). In this sense size seems to matter. Any central-peripheral dimension also seems to be absent.

![Figure 5. “People have good accessibility to the administration”. Faroes. (N=100).](image)

In Iceland, satisfaction or believe in the good accessibility among local leaders is even stronger (figure 6). The scores are mostly around 6 on the 1-7 scale, which has to be considered high, with a slight exception in the case of the largest 9 where the score was 5.63; the local leaders in Iceland are believe that the citizens have good access to the administration.
As seen before, the results from Greenland differ from the other two. Here the statement on the good access enjoys much less support and there are some variations between groups. The main tendency is that leaders in smaller units grade the accessibility lower and the difference between centre and periphery is big – the leaders in the periphery grade much lower (3,46 vs. 5,00). How to evaluate these results, with the few answers, low response rate and, last but not least the huge confidence gap, is however difficult to determine. But a trend seems to be evident.
Our open answers and letters from respondents fill in on this. A letter from the sub-municipal bureaucrat we cited above also dealt with this matter, expressing severe criticism with regard to access to administration after the amalgamations in 2009:

The administration of the big municipality in X has now taken over all administrative tasks. The services to the citizens have been significantly reduced, with a long time waiting for an answer and in some cases the administration has not even answered. Services and those responsible for them have become invisible or have disappeared. All administration and tasks of the sub-municipal council have been transferred to the town. At the same time they have reduced personnel in the sub units and the result is less quality in the administration. Many people from different sub-units have complained about this situation but this has neither been responded to nor led to any changes. It is as if the person responsible has become the enemy of the village.

Another respondent who mailed to us wrote:

The amalgamation of municipality X, leading to very spread neighbourhoods and villages has not been good for the people compared with the situation before. The head administrative office has difficulties in understanding the issues brought up and has problems adapting to this new situation.
While the survey results show varying attitudes, both negative and positive, towards accessibility to administration, the letters we received from the small sub municipal unit is highly critical. We can at least presume that the views on this are mixed among the Greenland local leaders and negative as a whole.

The latter of our questions analysed here on perceptions of local democracy deals with closeness between citizens and politicians. Traditional theories on size and democracy tell us that these two are connected and we should expect closer ties in smaller units (Dahl and Tufte 1973). The evaluation study by Eythórsson and Jóhannesson in Iceland in 2002 found that citizens in smaller and more peripheral municipalities, after recent amalgamations, felt the distance between them and their representatives had increased. This supports the famous general theory of Dahl and Tufte. So, in the survey, we brought up the statement “There are tight and close ties between the people and the local politicians”.

The results from the Faroe Islands show a correlation between perceived closeness and size of municipality. Even though the differences in scores between size groups are not strikingly large, figure 8 below shows differences: Closeness decreases with increasing size, that is when it exceeds 5000. It also seems to be a little less in the periphery than in the centres. However, despite some differences, in general there seem to be rather close ties in the Faroes – according to the politicians and bureaucrats.

![Figure 8. “There are tight and close ties between the people and the local politicians”. Faroes. (N=100).](image-url)
Looking at the results from Iceland we see some clear evidence of closeness between the elected and the electorate. However, this is not as size dependent as indicated in the Faroes. The deviants are the nine largest municipalities which differ slightly from the rest in not being as strongly aware of these ties. Very little differences show up between centre and periphery.

![Figure 9. “There are tight and close ties between the people and the local politicians”. Iceland. (N=242).](image-url)

The survey results from Greenland do not show such strong perception of closeness between citizens and politicians – and once and again Greenland differs from the other two. What we can single out here is what appears to be a difference between the smallest (1,000 and less) and the larger ones – the ties seem to be closer in the smaller context. The centre – periphery difference is very clear here with a mean score of 4.31 in the periphery and 5.44 in the centres.
These three figures above do more or less support theories about the connection between closeness, accessibility and municipal population size. In smaller units the ties are closer – however the differences are not great in Faroe Islands and especially in Iceland. In these two some signs of differences between centre and periphery are however seen. Let’s keep in mind that this is what politicians and administrators believe. We have not asked citizens in this study. Greenland is deviates significantly on all measured points in this study, both on differences by size and between centre and periphery. The overall scores for Greenland are also lower than in the other two countries which indicates much lower content with these aspects of local democracy.

6 Conclusion
In a fairly well known article from 1982 *Is Small Really So Beautiful? Is Big Really So Ugly? Size, Effectiveness, and Democracy in Local Government*, Kenneth Newton discusses the fact that arguments about the optimum size for units of local government often overlook the fact that small units have some considerable drawbacks while large ones have some advantages. In this paper I have kind of loaned Newton’s title since this study has been about the differences in democracy in countries with, on an internationally small scale – so small scale that I choose to call it tiny versus small.

We have seen in the analyses above that territorial democratic deficits measured through the question on if smaller and peripheral neighbourhoods have less influence, are evident in all three
countries. The differences by size are not as big as by whether the respondent is from a centre or peripheral part in his/her municipality. In all three countries the centre – periphery dimension is apparent, however most so in Greenland. The size dimension is not as evident; not at all in the Faroe Islands and slightly in Iceland. But in Greenland very clear. When we look at the other two dimensions, ‘Access to administration’ and ‘Ties between politicians and citizens’ we don’t see any clear patterns except that the difference between centre and periphery in Greenland seems to be existing. Differences by municipal size are not very evident in any of the countries, ranging from none to slight differences. To sum this up differences between centre and periphery are significant in all three countries when looking at the perceptions of territorial democratic deficits. This is less so if we look at municipal size, however with the differences strong in Greenland. Table 3 below shows a summary of this.

Table 3. Summary of the local leaders perceptions of three aspects of local democracy in the West Nordic countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipal size differences</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Territorial democratic deficits</th>
<th>Access to administration</th>
<th>Ties between politicians and citizens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>NO</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faroe Islands</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenland</td>
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<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre-Periphery differences</td>
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<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faroe Islands</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenland</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a recent study written for the government of Greenland “Kommunalt demokrati i Grønland” the author Ulrik Kjær shows that the discontent with the local democracy among citizens is high (56% ‘not’ or ‘not at all’ pleased). Further this was even more evident in the peripheral municipalities (‘ikke hovedstads-kommune’). So what we find here does seem to be the perception of the citizens as well as the politicians (Kjær 2015).

It is clear that local democracy seems to be far more concern in Greenland than in the other two. Icelandic local leaders seem to be more or less content with the situation of access and ties while there seems to be some question about influence by territory? The same is for Faroe Islands. Is this difference between countries because the winds after amalgamations have calmed down in Iceland since they all happened so long ago and even so in Faroe Islands? Is the discontent in Greenland due to how recently their amalgamation reform took place? Or is it maybe because the reform was too big in scale? Have they gone too far in their reforming by using the Danish model? Does this mean that the effects of municipal amalgamations take time to show – wounds to cure? Has time cured the wounds in Iceland and the Faroe Islands and not in Greenland? In the sense of consequences of amalgamations the discontent and feel of being set
aside and being without influence seem to fade out with time. Maybe it takes 10 years or more. But of course how comprehensive and long stretching the reform is can also have had an impact.

Another matter is about the differences between the perceptions by size. We see in both Iceland and Faroe Islands some breaking point at the population size of 5000 – that’s where local democracy seems to get lower scores than in the smaller. In the territorial sense it gets lower in Iceland but not in Faroe Islands. In that sense we could say that we have some signs of tiny being more beautiful than small.

Finally some words about the differences between the countries. We have seen above that the Greenlanders are deviating in the sense that for them local democracy is by far more important than in the other two countries. In a question from our survey where we asked the leaders which were for them the most important four themes we asked about in the survey. Figure 11 shows up this by country and it underlines clearly and supports our results above. The Greenlanders are by far more concerned about local democracy than their colleagues in the other countries. At the same time service and service quality score much lower in Greenland than in the other two.

![Figure 11. The most important themes in the West Nordic survey 2015 according to the local leaders in the three countries.](image)

Without going in detail into the figure, these results give a good support to our findings above, that local democracy was by far most concern in Greenland. This is important since we had problems with the response rate in Greenland. This tells us that the little we got from there was most likely a realistic picture of the present situation.
7 References


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