



Territorial Social Innovation in the Nordic Countries and Scotland



Free State Lucky Næroset

In Næroset municipality, the residents proclaimed a Free State Lucky Næroset in 1999 with the main aim of saving the school that was under a threat of closure. Humour, fantasy, craziness and courage have been the main tools used to mobilize the local population and encourage joint action. The main goal was achieved in 2008 and the organization ceased its activities.

Preconditions, Inspiration, Nurture

Næroset is a village located in Hedmark County in Norway, with a population of about 1,100 residents. The story of Næroset is reminiscent of many other local development initiatives when looking at how it all started. The idea for the local development movement was born when the municipal authorities announced the decision to close down the local school in 1999. The approach taken by the local community to address the above-mentioned challenge has been far from traditional.

Implementation

Instead of showing frustration and being negative about the decision of the local authorities, the residents proclaimed a Free State of Lucky Næroset (*Fristaten Lucky Næroset*) in 1999 with humor, fantasy, craziness and courage chosen as a motto and core values for development.

The residents formed their own government, which was made up of 8–12 members, including the Prime Minister, Minister of Health, Fantasy Minister, Adolescence Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nature Minister, Finance Minister, Youth Minister, World Minister, etc. The government members were elected from the local community. Formally, the organization was registered as an association.

The overarching mission of Lucky Næroset has been to work toward keeping the local Fagernes school open. The vision for Næroset 2005 was also developed: the target was to have at least 1,234 proud inhabitants in the village by 2005. The population growth from about 1,170 persons in 1999 would also imply an increased number of students at the local school. A further purpose of the initiative was to encourage positive thinking in the local community and create better living conditions for people living in Fagernes school district.

The initiator of the Free State of Lucky Næroset, Hans Christian Medlien, has been the main actor behind the development of the idea and the implementation of the initiative. The idea was inspired by a Swedish movie, 'Fucking Åmål', which portrays frustration and depression among young people living in the Swedish countryside. The idea was to pursue a positive development in Næroset, which explains the selection of 'lucky' in the name of the initiative.

The association has been involved in the development and implementation of various initiatives in Næroset throughout the years. Lucky Næroset is particularly well known for launching the Norwegian Christmas Tree Museum, the Underground Airport initiative and building an Olsens Plass picnic area entirely by volunteers. Among other activities carried out by Lucky Næroset are joint public cultural and sports events, local artists' exhibitions, building a skateboard ramp and creating a machine that transmits positive energy to people with a negative mindset. All of the activities have been implemented with a touch of humor, fantasy, craziness and courage.

The Lucky Næroset government; in cooperation with U8—a private company owned by the initiator, Hans Christian Medlien—arranged a two-day national rural development and innovation conference (InnoBygd) that was hosted in Næroset in 2006.

In 2008, the decision was taken by the municipality that the school would stay open. A new school building was built in Næroset, and was inaugurated on Norway's Constitution Day,

on May 17, 2016. After the municipal decision to keep the school open in 2008, the Free State of Lucky Næroset ceased its activities, because its main goal had been achieved.

Resources

The association relied to a large extent on volunteer work, so that human capital has been the key resource used.

The fantasy and creativity of the association members have also been among the central resources for the development of Lucky Næroset. The association did not have any business development plans or formal documentation procedure in order not to limit creativity.

In terms of financing the activities, the initial startup capital came from the local residents' contributions. The local residents had a possibility to invest in the 'idea' and buy state bonds for NOK 100 per unit. About 130 certificates were sold. Additional funds have been raised from selling some services and products, including CDs with sounds of nature. The association has also received some support from the local businesses.

The largest share of funding, however, came from the initiator's own private company, U8–De utenkte tankers tårn, which invested about 10–15% of the revenues from lectures given by Lucky Næroset representatives in the association. The Lucky Næroset ambassadors have been frequently invited to give lectures and public speeches at various events, such as meetings with other rural communities, businesses and public sector actors. During the most active years the revenues rose to NOK 150–200,000.

Several employees working at U8 have also been engaged in Lucky Næroset activities, which made it possible to perform some Lucky Næroset-related tasks during conventional working hours.

The Network / Cooperation

The members of the local community have been the key actors in the network. Cooperation has also been established with the private and public sector actors through the outreach and communication measures that Lucky Næroset ambassadors have been involved in (e.g., presentations at various events and on various occasions).

Enablers and Barriers

The success of Lucky Næroset is attributed to the presence of engaged and committed individuals. A large amount of work and effort was put into developing the initiative, which required a fairly large team with different competencies working together.

The specific approach of Lucky Næroset based on humor, happiness, craziness and courage has been among the enabling factors in itself. According to the initiator, fantasy and humor are the world's best instruments.

Some of the actors behind Lucky Næroset were also employed at the U8 company. They were able to dedicate some of their working hours to the association, which has been an important enabling factor.

The media have played an important supporting role. Through the media, the story of Lucky Næroset has spread across Norway and beyond. In 2003, a documentary was made about the initiative by the national TV2 channel. An article about Lucky Næroset also appeared in France's largest newspaper, Le Figaro.

In 2003, a delegation of 15 people from Næroset traveled to Malaysia to set up a sign that shows the distance to Lucky Næroset (9,910 km, with the text: Tapak untuk dijual / Sites for sale). During the trip, the members of the delegation had a meeting with the Minister of Culture and the Prime Minister of Malaysia. The footage from the trip has also become a part of the documentary filmed by TV2.

Regarding barriers, there has been limited support from, and cooperation with, the local politicians, which was viewed as an obstacle to development. The initiative was not taken seriously by the municipal authorities.

The initiator also mentioned that it had been hoped to achieve progress sooner. In reality, it took nearly 10 years to achieve the goal. The considerable time and dedication needed to start up and ground the initiative in the local community is therefore seen as a hindering factor.

Social Innovation Effects

Outcomes, Impact and 'Scaling'

An innovative approach to rural development based on humor, fantasy, craziness and courage has brought national and international recognition to Lucky Næroset. It has also cultivated optimism and belief in a positive future among the local residents.

The initiative is believed to have had an impact on population growth, despite the fact that the goal regarding the population increase to 1,234 residents by 2005 has not been achieved.

The new places of interest created as a result of Lucky Næroset activities, such as the Norwegian Christmas Tree Museum and the Underground Airport initiative have contributed to the tourism growth.

The initiative has also contributed to the creation of new jobs in the municipality. In 2005, 11 people's main income was a direct result of the Lucky Næroset initiative. Seven of them were employed in the U8 company and four in Lucky Food (Lucky Mat) café and catering

Lucky Næroset is highlighted as being among the best practical examples of positive thinking and community-driven rural development initiatives in Norway.

Lucky Næroset activities have reached far outside Norway. In 2004, the building of a school in Sierra Leone was started, and named 'Lucky School'. It was completed in 2005 using private funding from the local actors in Næroset in cooperation with the local authorities. In 2013, there were 230 students at the school. Besides the great importance of the project for Sierra Leone, the initiative has been a major driver and inspiration for Lucky Næroset activities, and among its most important achievements.

Lessons Learned

The main lesson learned from Lucky Næroset is that humor and fantasy are among the most important tools that can be used in pursuing innovation and positive rural development. Humor and fantasy can be the enabling elements in strengthening cooperation among community members, enhancing creativity and creating positive conditions for sparking innovation and new ways of thinking in the rural context.

The approach and thinking applied to rural development in Lucky Næroset can also be applied to different sectors and other areas of life, and can also provide inspiration at the individual level.

Like in other community-driven initiatives, the presence of committed individuals willing to dedicate their time and resources to community development initiatives has been of major importance in the case of Lucky Næroset.

References

Hans Christian Medlien, phone interview, June 17, 2016.

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