

Beliefs in Culture as an Instrument for Regional Development: the case of Stavanger, European Capital of Culture 2008

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The Norwegian production of petroleum has peaked and in a not too distant future, the Norwegian 'oil capital' Stavanger has to meet the challenge of a declining petroleum industry. The bid for the status as European Capital of Culture in 2008 was one of the initiatives taken by local authorities in order to make the Stavanger region more attractive for new businesses and highly skilled employees. The bid reflected a belief in culture is as an important instrument for regional development. This article throw light on the question of how widespread the belief in culture was among the citizens as well as leading politicians, civil servants and business managers in the Stavanger region prior to the year as European Capital of Culture. ¹

From Norwegian 'oil capital' to European Capital of Culture

In 2008 the Stavanger region is European Capital of Culture together with Liverpool. Norway is a major exporter of oil and gas and Stavanger is frequently referred to as the 'oil capital' of Norway due to the fact that the two petroleum related government agencies, the Petroleum Directorate and the Petroleum Safety Authority, are located in the city together with the headquarters of the national oil company StatoilHydro and the manager of the direct financial interests of the State, Petoro. Furthermore, the Norwegian (and in some cases European) headquarters of numerous international oil companies like BP, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, Shell and Total, and international oilfield services companies like Baker Hughes, Halliburton, Schlumberger and others are located in the region.

Stavanger is the fourth largest city in Norway and the centre of Rogaland County. The Capital of Culture organisation – *Stavanger2008* – is an inter-municipal enterprise owned by the neighbouring cities of Stavanger and Sandnes together with Rogaland County. 120,000 of the 4.8 million inhabitants in Norway live in the city of Stavanger. If we include Sandnes and two other municipalities bordering on Stavanger we get 216,000 people. The county of Rogaland has 413,000 inhabitants (www.ssb.no).

No doubt, the Stavanger region has prospered on the Norwegian petroleum industry. Oil exploration started in the mid 1960s and oil was discovered at a point in time when the traditional shipping and canning industries in Stavanger faced severe problems. The

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region was in need of new industries and local politicians managed to convince international oil companies to settle down in the city (Egeland 1984). Due to the petroleum industry Stavanger has developed from one of the poorer Norwegian cities to one of the richest (cf. Rosenlund 2000).

The challenge and the answer

However, at the beginning of the millennium the Norwegian production of oil peaked and it has been significantly reduced since then (almost thirty percent, from 181 million Sm³ in 2001 to 128 million Sm³ in 2007). Increased production of gas has not compensated for this and the prognoses for the future show that the production of oil and gas will decrease even though the recovery of discovered resources is expected to be improved and new resources are expected to be found (NPD 2008).

In other words, once again in a not too distant future the Stavanger region is facing the challenge of finding new means of living. The immediate threat has been delayed by high oil prices and large investments, but in the longer run Stavanger has to find replacements for the petroleum industry. The region needs to make itself more attractive to new businesses and highly skilled professionals and workers.

Local and regional politicians do take the long-term challenge seriously. An important part of the answer to the challenge given by local authorities is *culture*. The bid for the status as European Capital of Culture in 2008 was one element in the local government strategy for regional development. Other elements include a new Viking football stadium which was opened in 2004, the establishment of the fifth Norwegian university in 2005, the building of a new concert hall to be completed by the end of 2011, and support for cultural events like international jazz and chamber music festivals, a so-called '*Gladmat*' or 'happy food' festival, Beach Volley World Tour and Tall Ships Races. At the moment the local government of Stavanger is developing a new 'Strategic Plan for Arts and Culture' for the 2009 – 2014 period.

The vision for Stavanger as Capital of Culture is expressed through the concept 'Open Port' (www.stavanger2008.no). This can be understood both in the English sense as 'an open harbour' and in the Norwegian meaning of 'an open gate', or as stated on the website of Stavanger2008: 'Open Port – openness towards the world – is about challenging the region and its people to be even more open and inclusive towards each other, art, ideas and opportunities'. The following Open Port values have been set for the Capital of Culture: tolerance and freedom of speech, hospitality and accessibility, cultural heritage and development, innovation and quality, environment and aesthetics.

The official goals for Stavanger2008 include a broad and enduring cultural lift, especially for children and the young, quality, innovation and diversity in the arts, enduring networks in the fields of arts and culture, cultural curiosity and tolerance, regional identity and pride, further development of industry and commerce, and construction of cultural and physical infra-structure.

The intrinsic value of culture, cultural objectives and values like openness and tolerance may seem to be emphasised more clearly by Stavanger2008 than by other capitals of

culture. This is reflected in the scientific evaluation of Stavanger as Capital of Culture which is funded by the Stavanger2008 organization and carried out by IRIS and the University of Stavanger. The main part of the research project focuses on the citizens' participation and evaluation, and the potential effects on the interest in culture and attitudes towards 'Open Port' related values. Additional studies include the assessments made by cultural institutions and organizers of events, and the media coverage. Other capitals of culture and their evaluations seem to focus more on the economic aspects of the year as Capital of Culture and its contribution to urban regeneration (cf. Palmer 2004).

Expected impacts of Stavanger2008: the citizens' views

Nevertheless, the assumption that culture will contribute to regional development was an important motivation for Stavanger too, at first for the bid and then for the sponsors. According to the application to the EU, 'Capital of Culture status brings with it ... an attractive region for skilled professionals and the establishment of business enterprise' (Stavanger2008, 2004, 55). A representative of Sparebank 1 SR-bank, one of the major sponsors of Stavanger2008, stated that: 'This is an investment for us. Culture creates growth. ... This is a great opportunity for the region, and we, as the region's bank, see it as natural to participate as an important contributor. ... Cultural life creates business growth. The more and the better cultural experiences a region can offer, the more attractive the region is for new establishments. ... Cultural life has to flourish if the region is going to succeed as a business magnet'. The statement was given in the monthly magazine *Rosenkilden*, which is published by the Stavanger Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Pahr-Iversen 2007, 46, my translation). The Chamber has been an eager advocate for Stavanger as Capital of Culture.

The question we raise in this article is: How *widespread* is this belief in culture as an instrument for regional development in the Stavanger region?

Data from two comprehensive surveys carried out during the autumn 2007 may give at least part of the answer to this question. The first is a *citizen survey* which included telephone interviews with 2303 inhabitants in the Stavanger region and Rogaland County. 1301 of the respondents filled in an additional postal questionnaire. The second is a *leader survey* which included telephone interviews with 684 leading politicians, civil servants and business managers in the Stavanger region. 318 of these leaders filled in an additional electronic questionnaire.²

² The survey among the citizens was carried out as part of the research project on the impact of Stavanger's year as Capital of Culture. It was completed before the program for Stavanger2008 was launched in October 2007 in order to establish a baseline for evaluation. A follow-up survey in order to map experiences and possible changes in attitudes will be carried out in 2009. The leader survey, which was carried out in October – December 2007, is part of a research project on leaders' values and attitudes towards innovation and business development in the Stavanger region and two other regions in South-Western Norway. It should be noted that the definitions of the 'Stavanger region' in the two surveys are somewhat different. However, the major trends to be shown in this article should not be affected by this.

The importance of the petroleum industry may be further illustrated by some data from the citizen survey. In 2007, every fourth respondent in Stavanger, Sandnes and two neighbouring municipalities were working in oil companies or companies that deliver more than fifty percent of their goods and services to the petroleum industry. More than one of ten respondents had experience from offshore work in the petroleum industry.

The survey shows that, a few months before the start, 68 percent of the citizens in Stavanger and Rogaland said that the Capital of Culture would only affect them to a minor extent (52 percent) or not all (16 percent). 31 percent expected the year as Capital of Culture to affect them to a great (7 percent) or some (24 percent) extent. In spite of this, as much as 73 percent of the citizens meant that it was right to bid for the Capital of Culture status. Only 14 percent said the bid was wrong. In other words, a large majority of the citizens found it right to bid for Capital of Culture status even though many of them thought that it was of minor interest to them personally. The explanation of this somewhat paradoxical view is found in the expected impacts on the region.

We asked the respondents to comment on some statements about possible effects of Stavanger as Capital of Culture. The results are presented in Figure 1.

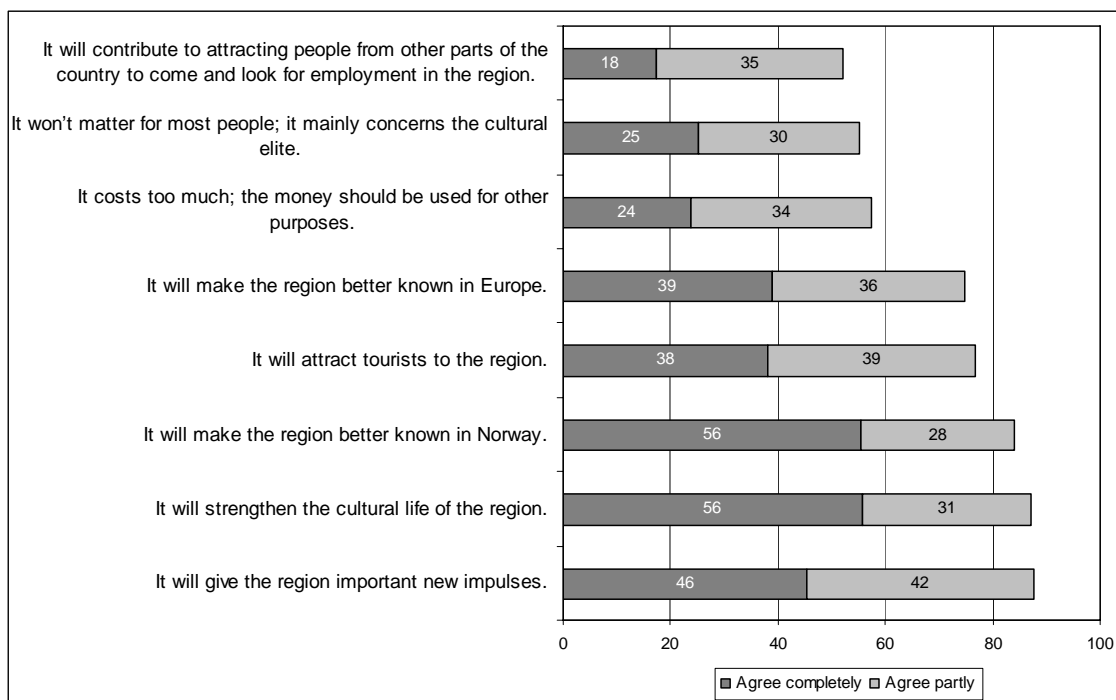


Figure 1. I will now present some statements concerning the Stavanger region as Capital of Culture in 2008. Do you agree or disagree completely or partly with each of these statements? Citizen survey, percent agree

Admittedly, 55 percent agreed completely (25 percent) or partly (30 percent) with a statement saying that ‘the Capital of Culture won’t matter for most people, it mainly concerns the cultural elite’. 57 percent agreed completely (24 percent) or partly (34

percent) that ‘the costs are too high and the money should be used for other purposes’, thus adding to the paradox.

However, a vast majority of the citizens, 87 percent, agreed that the year as Capital of Culture ‘will strengthen cultural life’, and 88 percent of the citizens agreed that it will ‘give the region important new impulses’. Furthermore, large majorities of the citizens agreed completely or partly that the Capital of Culture year ‘will make the region better known’ in Norway (84 percent) and in Europe (75 percent), and that ‘it will attract tourists to the region’ (77 percent). Finally, a smaller majority, 52 percent, believed that the year as Capital of Culture ‘will contribute to attracting people from other parts of the country to come and look for employment in the region’.

The importance of culture in general: the citizens’ and leaders’ views

The respondents in the leader survey were not asked to assess the impact of Stavanger as European Capital of Culture. They were, however, asked to express their interest in culture and to give their opinions on the importance of increased support for culture in general. The same questions about cultural interest and support for culture were raised in the citizen survey and thus we may compare the views of leaders and citizens.

The highest cultural interest was expressed by leading civil servants and politicians. 96 percent of the civil servants said that they were highly (37 percent) or fairly (59 percent) interested in culture. 88 percent of the politicians were highly (35 percent) or fairly (53 percent) interested in culture. 72 percent of the managers of private enterprises and 68 percent of the citizens said that they were interested in culture (15 and 19 percent very interested and 57 and 49 percent fairly interested respectively).

Some of the citizens’ and leaders’ opinions regarding the importance of increased support for cultural life are shown in Figure 2. As we can see, there is a widespread opinion, especially among leading politicians and civil servants, that increased support for cultural life is important for several reasons. 90 percent of both the politicians and the civil servants said that support for culture is very or fairly important for ‘improving the region’s ability to attract new businesses’. Support for cultural life is also seen as important for the region’s ‘ability to attract new workers and/or students’ by 90 percent of the leading politicians and 78 percent of the leading civil servants. Furthermore, support for culture is believed to be important for ‘the development of creativity and innovation in professional life’. This view is held by 83 percent of the political leaders and 78 percent of the civil servants.

The belief in culture is a little less widespread among the business leaders and citizens of the region. However, 72 percent of the citizens and 68 percent of the business leaders agreed on the importance of culture with regard to creativity and innovation. The corresponding figures regarding the attraction of workers and students were 79 and 83 percent respectively. Finally, 73 percent of the citizens and 70 percent of the business leaders said that increased support for culture is important for the attraction of new businesses.

No doubt, vast majorities of the citizens as well as leading politicians, civil servants and business managers in the Stavanger region believe in culture as an instrument to promote regional development. The strongest beliefs in culture are found among the local politicians and civil servants. It remains to be seen whether they are right or wrong – and whether the Stavanger region’s year as European Capital of Culture has an effect on these beliefs.

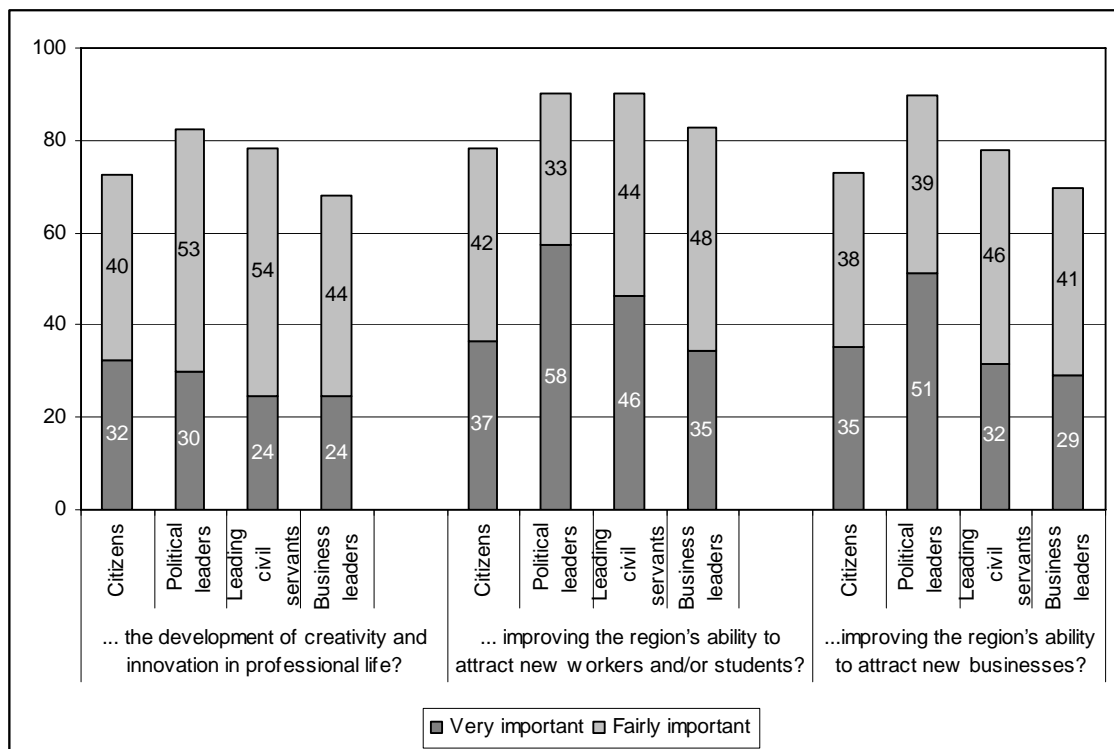


Figure 2. How important would you say that increased support for cultural life is for...? Citizen and leader surveys, percent

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