

by Eva Bakkeslett

STEIGEN

— a step in the right direction

Steigen is a typical municipal district embraced by the mountains of Lofoten. About 30 percent of its employment is directly related to the primary industries of fishing, sea farming and agriculture.

During the past few years, Steigen has experienced the abandonment of small farms and a shortage of new hires in the fisheries. In agriculture, farmers are struggling with annual losses of livestock due to predators. In contrast, Steigen enjoys a blossoming cultural life and a highly active organisational life, resulting in much of the voluntary effort put into cultural and sports activities. Its nature is grandiose and varied, featuring kilometre-long sandy beaches and a unique skerry coastline, abundant in plant and animal life and with virgin wilderness areas displaying mountains and waterfalls. Therefore, the conditions for a "good life" are excellent. Some time ago, a poll determined that a stunning 93% of Steigen's population were very pleased to live there.

The list of reasons included family roots, safe conditions within which to raise children and closeness to nature.



Despite these facts, Steigen, like so many other rural municipalities, is struggling to maintain its population. The gap between the generations is steadily increasing, and valuable traditional knowledge may soon be lost. As a direct result of lacking knowledge about, and diminishing dependency upon natural resources, the environment runs the risk of being damaged. The young people find working in the primary industries less attractive, which leads to difficulties in finding something to do in their home community. According to Cecilie Høj Anvik of the Nordland Research Institute, maintaining communities is still so much more than just creating new employment opportunities – it is just as much a struggle over culture and values. The youth of today have many choices regarding education, and they cannot readily be forced to establish themselves in Steigen. What can be done, however, is to provide the children and youth with a tie to their home community by creating good experiences in their childhood related to positive conditions within which to grow up, a clean environment, cultural activities and a positive self-image.

Turnaround needed

Five years ago, Steigen was selected to be one of seven municipalities participating in the project "Sustainable Local Communities". The Ministry of the Environment initiated the project, setting in motion processes at the local level that would contribute to a sustainable development. The first lesson learned was that the efforts had to be related to the condition of the district. Most current environmental protection and LA21 work has an urban starting point, and the issues and concepts are difficult and hard to understand for most people elsewhere. Therefore, it became essential to give LA21 a local content in order to show that this was more than just ordinary traditional environmental protection.

People who thrive in and are proud of their home community and natural environment would also hold ambitions of preserving them for future generations. By focusing on knowledge

and attitudes related to the use of natural resources, environmental work is made equal to "sustainable traditions" and creates involvement and pride among the population. In order for this philosophy to take root, a close and productive collaboration between private organisations, schools, nurseries, resource points of contact, businesses, and municipal administrations was initiated at an early stage. These became important supporters for and anchor points of the various projects and are now continuing this work. This approach proved fruitful. People who had been negative or indifferent to the Sustainable Local Communities Project began to see that "environmental efforts" were indeed their concern.

Local involvement becomes global environmental work

The projects reproduced like rabbits and only a few can be mentioned here. Courses in juice extraction were arranged and a "generation café" was founded, which served traditional food based on local ingredients. Municipal employees signed up for environmental classes and school children organised a recycle exhibition. A walking trail was created and people were taken on mushroom identification excursions. In co-operation with the School of Music and Arts, the tree "Indiserad Geed" became a kind of child's jungle gym, symbolising the local community and its resources: a potato field for the troll Rapsunei, hens in the yard, carrots ready for harvest and herring struggling in the fishnet. The idea was to help the children become aware of the resources found in their local environment.

Local shops were encouraged to sell locally produced food and out of this arose the student business enterprise "Healthy Herring" at Leines School. Today, the students produce enough to supply the entire municipality with delicious herring products, sold in collected, recycled glasses with herring caught in the Vestfjorden. A publication was initiated as a

part of getting youth to return to Steigen. It was formatted like a "letter from home" - a news glimpse from their home community with an overview of available positions, job prospects for those considering setting up their own business and other things of interest to a former Steigen citizen. This newsletter was sent out to all registered "emigrants", and resulted in many calls from people who wanted to return to their home community. Some of these people have made their dreams come true.

Stop whining, start shining

Breaking new land is hard work, and it is not always easy to get people to understand that this work is important. Changes and restructuring take time, and choosing new paths requires courage and creativity. Baggage from the past does come with us into the future. Steigen adopted the slogan, originally introduced by the mayor of Røst during his "positivity campaign": "Stop Whining, Start Shining!" Positive thinking and visions for the future are magical ingredients of any successful project. "sustainable local communities" in Steigen

being no exception. The active use of media was chosen as a conscious strategy, which undoubtedly helped strengthen the status of the project in the local environment. This choice also ensured the spreading of information to other municipalities. Regular updates in newspapers and on local radio created pride and expectations. Knowledge of tradition slowly started to come alive, at the same time as calls began to flow into the municipality from people who had heard about the project. A gradual change in attitude could be felt among the local population, municipal leadership and the outside world. Hopefully this project has contributed to getting the processes started, and that Steigen can be an example serving as inspiration to other rural municipalities who struggle with similar "environmental problems".

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FACTS ON THE STEIGEN MUNICIPALITY

Steigen Municipality in Ytre Salten is situated between Sagfjorden and Folda. The municipality comprises 1,012 square kilometres, and is characterised by fjords cutting into the landscape and mountains with altitudes up to 1,361 metres. The eight kilometre-long Steigen tunnel, one of the longest in Norway, is Steigen's connection with the surrounding world. Its three thousand inhabitants are scattered around the municipality with most having settled along the coast. Important sources of income are agriculture, of which domestic animals for milk production, forestry, fisheries, sea farming and fry production play an important role. Business activity is based on these primary industries. Leinesfjord is the municipality's administrative centre. Steigen municipality recently adopted a "plan of action for sustainable development" which is to serve as a tool to follow up and further develop the objectives of a more sustainable local community.

