

Article:

Social work in municipalities – contested changes with implications for the profession?

by

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Abstract

The point of departure of this article is contemporary changes in the relationship between national and local decision making in the Norwegian political system. The last decades' centralization tendencies seem to be challenged by a "new" emphasis on local discretion, and the article discusses how this will affect social work in municipalities. The changes are contested and controversial and allude to questions such as how much discretion should be given to local decision makers in the name of local democracy, and how much difference should be accepted in the name of diversity? The article argues that professional social work must be context-specific, meaning that in a wide sense local knowledge is a prerequisite for good social work. Devolution and local political and professional discretion are necessary in many cases, but not sufficient in themselves as conditions for success. Professional social workers will encounter a lot of difficult dilemmas arising from issues related to the equality/liberty debate and the diversity/difference/equality debate in social work discourses. In order to approach these dilemmas, more of a focus on local deliberation and place shaping, in combination with a social work focus on democratic professionalism, is necessary. If this is done successfully, devolution and a recapturing of local discretion and decision-making power will empower clients as well as professionals. Thus, current changes in the relationship between different levels of decision making will enlarge the possibilities for professional social work in the municipalities.

Keywords

contextual social work, devolution, professional discretion, social work dilemmas, democratic professionalism

Introduction

In the spring of 2012, the Norwegian Government presented a White Paper to Parliament that discussed the relationship between the central and local levels of political decision making (Meld. St. 12(2011-2012)). The issue has been a controversial one for many years, and according to research on local decision making, it is one that has been shrinking. The government emphasized that local

democracy requires that locally elected politicians have discretion in making decisions, and intimated that the trend towards centralization in public policy and administration might have gone too far, and Parliament acknowledged this understanding in the recommendation from the Standing Committee (Innst. 270S (2011-2012)). Thus, recent policy documents may imply a change in policy with respect to the scope of the discretion for local policy- and decision making.

Trends toward centralization, as well as the suggested “new” emphasis on local discretion, are both contested and controversial. For social workers, issues related to how changes in local discretion are impacting on central social work values and professionalism in social work practice are of special importance. How much discretion should be given to local decision makers in the name of local democracy? How much difference should be accepted in the name of diversity? The aim of the article is to discuss implications of changes in the relationship between central and local levels of decision making, in addition to administrative practices for professional social work at the local level. The article starts with a short introduction to contemporary discourses related to the controversial relationship between the central and local levels of decision making and how it might affect professional social work as well as the users of welfare services.

Background

Since local self-government was first introduced in the Nordic countries, a substantial emphasis has been put on democratic and instrumental types of arguments. Both the democratic line of argument (grounded in values of freedom and participation) and the instrumental line of argument (grounded in values of efficiency and effectiveness) conclude with a certain amount of discretion to local decision makers and professionals. These types of arguments allude to welfare issues as well (Sellers & Lidstrom, 2007; Burau & Kröger, 2004), even though most cash benefits (pensions) are delivered to citizens through central government agencies. All the Nordic countries are unitary states characterized by a universalist, egalitarian and public system of services highly typical of a social democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005; Pierson, 2006). Thus, a feature of the Nordic welfare model is both universalism and local autonomy. The state’s engagement and

involvement in welfare services at the local level is substantial, and approximately three-fourths of local governments' expenses are related to welfare issues (education and kindergartens included). Because of this, some scholars are actually arguing that the concept of "welfare commune" is a more appropriate concept to use instead of the more common "welfare state" in relation to welfare services in society (Grønlie, 1987).

The main principle behind the comprehensive responsibilities attached to local government and professional executives is the so-called subsidiary principle, meaning that matters ought to be handled by the lowest-level and least centralized competent authority. These local decision makers are dependent on professional competence to ensure quality in welfare service and benefits. Particularly after World War II, the municipalities' responsibility to implement public policy seems to have increased (Fimreite et al., 2002), and the main justification for local government seems to be its ability to ensure an efficient delivery of services on behalf of the central government. Accordingly, conventional wisdom is that municipalities in Norway should have a great degree of local autonomy in political decision making (see for instance a lot of policy documents (Footnote 2)). This is also the case with respect to other Nordic countries: "Nordic welfare systems are characterized by local authorities that have a strong status and a significant role in the production of welfare" (Kröger, 2011, p.149; Sellers & Lidstrøm, 2007). Transparency, accountability, relevance and adequacy in the service deliverance of welfare policies are supposed to be better when local decision makers and professionals have a substantial influence on policy formation and implementation.

This article will take as its point of departure the substantial responsibility given to politicians and professionals working at the local level in the Norwegian welfare system (as is the case in most other Nordic countries). However, as I will show in the next paragraph, research seems to conclude that the degree of local discretion has been shrinking in many respects, including the policy areas in which social workers are working.

Decreasing local discretion

Local government autonomy will vary within legal, economic, and organizational limits decided by central authorities, and we usually refer to these limits when asserting that local autonomy is confined. Local self-government concerns this *vertical dimension* of the concept of autonomy. Two variables affect the degree of vertical autonomy at the local level: 1) the scope of duties ascribed to local authorities, and 2) the degree of discretion to manage their duties without interference from central authorities. Historically, the degree of autonomy has fluctuated with respect to both variables, and research concludes that today the state-municipality relationship is characterized by a formal responsibility devolved upon municipalities in a wide range of policy fields, but concurrently that central government intervenes significantly to ensure that the policy outcome is in accordance with national values and preferences.ⁱ

A kind of administrative decentralization (municipalities have the responsibility for implementing the policies) and political centralization (central government reduces the local discretion) seem to be parallel processes, which appears to be the case within the welfare sector in particular. According to Fimreite et al.:

The central institutions' confidence in municipal actors' ability to implement national policies within the main welfare sectors is reduced. As a response, central government is tightening its control over local government by introducing measures like management by objectives, standardisation, more detailed reporting systems, and individual rights legislation. Thus, the room for diversity and variation on the local level regarding, for instance, service production is much narrower now than it has traditionally been. (Fimreite et al., 2007, p. 165)

The overall "conclusion seems to be that the central government has increased its control over local authorities, leaving fewer discretionary options to local decision makers" (Jakobsen, 2009, p. 223). The political power is centralized, while the responsibility to undertake the duties is still at the local level, with the same trend apparent in other Nordic countries (Bergmark & Minas, 2007). Local government has become "an instrument for more ambitious state policies aiming at equalizing

welfare” (Østerrud & Selle, 2006, p. 4), even though there are researchers who still emphasize the considerable discretion enjoyed by local service providers and decision makers (Sellers & Lidstrom, 2007). However, these trends towards a more centralized decision making are contested, and a lot of interesting questions arise – both politically and professionally.

Contested changes?

Many policy documents are produced that elaborate on the relationship between the central- and local level of decision making.ⁱⁱ The current Norwegian government is a coalition of the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party. The Minister for Local Government and Regional Development (belonging to the Centre Party) has frequently emphasized the importance of letting local government have real discretion in decision-making processes. The Minister argues that with respect to welfare rights and a more centrally initiated bureaucracy, judicialization processes have reduced the scope of action for locally elected decision makers.ⁱⁱⁱ Even though the political parties have slightly different opinions about how much discretion local government should have (Hansen, Hovik, & Clausen, 2000), most parties seem to agree that to ensure a vital and flourishing local democracy local discretion is necessary.^{iv} When the Norwegian Parliament considered and debated the White Paper from the government, there seemed to be an overwhelming agreement that the centralization policy has gone too far (Innst. 270S (2011-2012)).

This view seems to be emphatically emphasized by The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), which is the employers' association and interest organization for municipalities, counties and local public enterprises in Norway. KS is using every opportunity to assert that in order to ensure democratic and efficiency values in decision making, discretion to local governments is a prerequisite. They argue that when prioritizations in municipalities become a responsibility for central authorities and not locally elected representatives, vital democracy is weakened without improving the quality of the services.^v

On the other hand, there are voices which are very skeptical to giving more discretion to local decision makers, as many municipalities have problems with their economy

and are struggling to reduce their expenses or increase their revenues (Hansen, 2001). Expensive welfare services could be vulnerable to cost reductions, while poor and powerless groups possibly have more problems in competing successfully in the decision-making process over scarce resources. This is why more and more benefits and services have been rendered as a matter of the rights to people in need over the last decades. To help ensure that the rights are accomplished, national authorities have introduced and implemented a growth in individual rights legislation. This judicialization process has so far been intended, and the scope of action for local government has accordingly been reduced.

If this rights-based policy should be altered, some advocates of the professions, as well as client groups, are afraid that it will not benefit the poorest groups in the local community. They are concerned that reduced possibilities for the national authorities to interfere in local priorities and policies will not benefit weak groups in society. They are looking on national authorities as a guarantee that national equality values are ensured all over the country.

An elucidating example of this apprehension is the written submission given by The Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers, which is a professional association and trade union for professional social workers in Norway. They argue very strongly that governmental inspection should be strengthened with respect to how local government follows statutory rights and ensures quality in welfare services and benefits. They are in favour of improving the regulatory inspections in all statutory fields within the welfare state,^{vi} and seem to be afraid that more local power will jeopardize the possibility for empowerment of weak groups in the municipality. Moreover, they are also concerned about how priority conflicts are resolved in local municipalities.

To illuminate the point, the following hypothetical case may be useful: Most local governments experience that available resources are not sufficient to cover and finance all local needs, thus a strong prioritization is needed. In municipality **A**, the local council has decided to improve the services for old people, and accordingly, scarce resources are allocated to this policy field at the expense of others, while in

municipality **B** the council has decided to give priority to improving the quality of local roads. The implication of these local democratic decision-making processes is that the elderly in municipality A enjoy good welfare services, though their road maintenance is bad. Inhabitants living in municipality B have good roads, while traditional welfare services are not well provided. The outcome is in accordance with local freedom values (democratically decided), but violates national values of equality with respect to service deliverance. Hence, the freedom values would probably be very controversial if the value of freedom is used in a way that impacts welfare differences between municipalities and/or between the inhabitants within a locality. The equality value will be violated as a consequence of using the freedom value, and the crucial question will be: Where should we draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable differences in welfare services, and when are values of equality more important than values of freedom?

Implications for the profession?

It is a challenge for the social work profession if local priorities imply large differences between municipalities and the recipients of benefits and services within each municipality. Therefore, the controversies and tensions originating from the conflicting demands of loyalty to local democratic decisions and local institutional environments, with their specific understandings, values and culture on the one hand and internalized principles according to universal human right principles and social justice values that the social workers have acquired from their social work education on the other, are challenging and demanding and need profound reflection by the social worker (Hugman et al., 2010; Midgley, 2001).

Professional discourses among social workers reveal that these issues are both complex and contested, as the allocation of welfare services and benefits according to values of local freedom in political decision making may sometimes challenge the values of rights-based equality. The main issue seems to be how to accommodate the values of national equality in service deliverance if and when the local understanding of fairness and equitability challenge these values. Many questions are involved in the issue (Lyngstad, 2012; Healy, 2007), and they are important to ask, but difficult to answer. Within a more general democracy discourse, they relate

to equality versus freedom in public policy making, as well as “democracy at what level”, because both outcomes are the result of democratic processes but at different decision-making levels. While within a social work discourse, they relate to a major debate about the “universal” (human rights values) versus the “particular” (recognizing diversity) in the social work profession (Webb, 2009; Sohlberg, 2009; Healy, 2007; Haug, 2005), in addition to the degree of discretion in social work practice (Evans & Harris, 2004; Evans, 2010; Lipsky, 1980). There is a close relationship between these two discourses, with the first focusing on the potential conflict between freedom values and equality values. Is it acceptable for a democracy that a majority of the people violates the equality values of the minority? Can inequality among citizens with regard to welfare services be acceptable if it is decided by a majority vote? The second focuses a potential conflict between two important social work values, namely equality and diversity. To what degree should the profession accept inequality among citizens if this outcome is in accordance with traditions and cultural values?

The question is also a core issue in discourses about civil, political and social rights related to citizenship in society (Marshall, 1964; Taylor-Gooby, 1991; Dwyer 2000), and profoundly affects the difficult balance between local discretion and national prerogatives in political decision making. As indicated above, the current national government seems to intimate that there is a need for reestablishing more discretion for local government and to reduce national bureaucracy and interference in local decision making. However, for the social work profession, this “new” policy may be both a possibility and a challenge that will be discussed in the next paragraph.

Discussion

The premise for this article has been that centralization tendencies (Fimreite et al., 2002, 2007; Østerrud & Selle, 2006; Tranvik & Selle, 2007) have de-emphasized the traditionally important values related to democratic and instrumental arguments for local self-government. Nevertheless, national interference in local policies and politics over the last few decades seems to give rise to a counteraction aimed at a recapturing of local decision-making power. This is not only a national trend, as on a global level devolution and decentralized decision making seem to be very common

(Rodríguez-Pose & Gill, 2003) and are very often motivated by “calls for democratization and, to a notable extent, by the supposed economic benefits of the decentralization of authority and resources” (Yu, 2013, p. 194). In a newly published article, Yu is highly critical of this development and by use of data from the Philippines he argues that there is a “need to critically examine the ideological and practical implications of devolution initiatives in countries where these have occurred” (Yu, 2013, p. 205).

Accordingly, the impact on social work practices and the social work profession of devolution and local discretion need more attention. How will this trend affect social work at the local level? Will a recapturing of local self-determination imply more power to agencies and managers lacking an understanding of social work values and knowledge of “street-level” problems? If that should be the case, more decentralized decision-making will not benefit people in need of help, although such a conclusion is a bit premature. I will argue that this policy change is demanding, but at the same time may imply better opportunities for professional social work at the local level.

To approach a discussion about the implication of the decentralization tendencies on professional social work, we need to understand why this decentralization trend is occurring, and at least two positions are possible to posit. The *first* position relates decentralization to a paradigmatic neo-liberal influence that has resulted in less political control and a reduced discretion for professionals. New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991) is characterized by privatization, marketization and managerialism (Christensen & Lægreid, 2001), as well as decentralization and devolution (Pollit, 2007), which are the main features and principles underlying this development. Thus, decentralization is regarded as a part of NPM tendencies. According to Healy, “social welfare professions, such as social workers and welfare workers, have been highly exposed to the corrosive effects of New Public Management (NPM) on professional identity and influence” (Healy, 2009, p. 401). NPM increases the discretion of welfare managers and requires strong leadership in order to keep budgets and increase competitiveness, thereby improving results. Many scholars in social work (see for instance Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004; Ferguson, Lavalette, & Mooney, 2002) have criticized this development, and some argue that

NPM has had “major impacts on the deskilling, disciplining and narrowing of social services work” (Baines, 2004, p. 5). Hence, an important consequence of the NPM influence has been a de-professionalization of the profession. With a reference to Freidson (2001), Nothdurfter and Lorenz (2010) assert that:

Consequently, professional skills and knowledge have been increasingly devaluated, disintegrated and decontextualised with demands that they be measurable and evaluated by external criteria. Professional autonomy and control have been lessened and the professionals have been more and more distanced from policy and decision making processes. (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010)

Accordingly, a main concern in contemporary discourses in professional social work has been to understand deprofessionalization and decontextualization in light of neo-liberal new public management tendencies. In this understanding, devolution seems to be regarded as a threat to professional social work.

However, there is a possibility to see the devolution trend from another perspective: Must devolution and more “power” and discretion to local actors in political and administrative decision-making necessarily imply a deprofessionalization of the social work profession? In fact, some will argue that “the deeply contextual nature of social work differentiates it from other professions. Our professional practice foundations – our knowledge, purpose and skills bases – are substantially constructed in, and through, the environment in which we work” (Healy, 2005, p. 4). Thus, to have a knowledge and understanding of local conditions (social problems, welfare policies, local values and attitudes, culture and traditions, decision-making processes, etc.) is very useful and sometimes a requirement if we want to address the problems and design social work methods in an adequate way (Lyngstad, 2012). Accordingly, I will question whether decentralized decision making necessarily has a negative effect on social work, such as for instance Yu (2013) seems to indicate. On the contrary, because most social work must be contextual, it is hard to see how social work can be professional without taking into account local circumstances in the work. Consequently, it is possible to argue that professional social work in a decentralized decision-making context – politically as well as professionally – is necessary. This

second position is thereby asserting that without a decentralized decision-making system, it will be difficult to accomplish professional discretion because discretion requires contextual knowledge. According to this point of view, devolution and local decision making will very often be a *necessary condition* for good professional social work. The question is: Will it be a *sufficient condition*?

Hence, this second position – which favours the decentralization trend – has some preconditions. First of all, you need a deliberative milieu within the municipality and a professional appreciation of the legitimacy of local decision making, though not all municipalities satisfy these requirements. A willingness to listen and establish a dialogue and facilitate involvement from all affected interests is necessary. The decision makers – politicians and professionals – need to have sufficient access to all the relevant information. The political-administrative leadership must recognize the importance of adequate information, and they must also facilitate the flow of information. Professional social workers have an important role to play in facilitating necessary client information and promoting social work values, as well as exerting an influence on the decision-making process.

Much critique of welfare bureaucrats and professionals is related to their inclination to paternalism and authoritarian practices toward clients and welfare recipients. It is therefore important to work with all stakeholders (clients as well as politicians and bureaucrats) in a collaborative way, “enabling them to deliberate and make decisions on issues that affect them” (Ayres, 2008, p. 95). Of course, this applies to many professions, but is of special importance for professions working with clients who need to be empowered. Concepts such as civic professionalism (Sullivan, 2004) and democratic professionalism (Dzur, 2004) are interesting, and the concept *democratic professionalism* in particular is important because it strongly emphasizes that professionals need to involve many participants in a democratic dialogue in order to empower clients and solve problems. The concept “holds a great potential not just for more effective forms of practice, but also for shaping the development of social policies from below” (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010), which is most likely of special importance at the local level because most problems occur at this level. A participatory and democratic dialogue is built on “street level” knowledge, and

information is necessary to create a well-functioning social policy (Lipsky, 1980; Evans, 2010). Therefore:

Bringing in street level knowledge as the result of a dialectic and democratic dialogue between those who implement social policy strategies and the respective targets groups of service users could become a promising strategy to overcome a reductionist, managerial and instrumental 'what works' agenda and to develop more effective, more accurate and probably more just social policies. (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010)

Even so, this is not easy. In many municipalities, the main problem will probably be to achieve the acceptance of a redistributive policy (Peterson, 1981) because this type of policy will challenge the traditional way of thinking as well as powerful local interests groups. It requires insight into local power relations and political and administrative decision-making processes. Many scholars in social work will argue that there are core- and universal values in social work,^{vii} such as democracy, social justice, human rights and dignity, equality, and commitment and responsiveness, which should *not* be questioned and an object for discussion and negotiation when politicians and professionals shall decide upon how scarce economic resources in the municipality will be (re)distributed (Ife, 2001; Ife, 1997; Hokenstad et al., 1992). In this process, a democratic dialogue and democratic professionalism is needed, and must be highly attended by the social workers participating in the local decision-making process. In the end, the challenge for social workers will be to decide when difference and diversity become unacceptable and discriminating practices, in addition to being a violation of these core social work principles and values.

However, it should be noted that in professional social work discourses, there is a debate regarding how appropriate universal standards of principles, ethics and values are in approaching all types of problems (Sewpaul, 2005; Gray & Fook, 2004; Healy, 2007). It may be the contexts are just so different, the conflicts of interest so complex and the values so controversial that universal standards are almost impossible to apply? Accordingly, the challenge seems to be "how to balance between universal demands and local contexts; how to be universalist without being imperialist" (Trygged, 2010, p. 650). Nevertheless, most scholars seem to agree that

human rights are universal, but to implement and adjust them to local circumstances, contextual knowledge and local cooperation is necessary. Therefore, “community development needs a human rights frame-work if it is to be successful, and human rights need a community development framework if they are to be realized” (Ife & Fiske, 2006, p. 307).

How is it possible to succeed with this dualism in the way social work within municipalities is functioning? In order to analyse changes in function, roles and duties for local governments, a relatively new concept – *place shaping* – has attained much interest among both politicians and political scientists (Grant, Dollery, & Crace, 2009; Van de Walle, 2010; Lyons, 2007). Some argue that “place shaping” should be the central role and purpose of local government (Lyons, 2007). Lyons defines the concept as “the creative use of powers and influence to promote general well-being of a community and its citizens” (Lyons, 2007, p. 174). The concept originates from Lyons’ inquiry into local government (Lyons, 2007), which was a comprehensive investigation and discussion about the future of local government in Great Britain. As a concept and a strategy, place shaping has many similarities with the more common and economics-oriented “local development” focus and development of local growth machines (Logan & Molotch, 1987), but which is more concerned about civic engagement in local identity building. Place shaping is considered to be a new strategic role for local government in which civic virtue, building and shaping a local identity and focusing on economic growth in partnerships with local actors in the public, private and voluntary sectors are key elements. The involvement of citizens, deliberation and a learning approach by decision makers are regarded as necessary means if place shaping is to be successful.

How will this affect professional social work at the local level? The answer depends on how much discretion professionals and politicians at the local level achieve. If the recapturing of local power succeeds, as seems to be the aim of contemporary policy documents, the thinking behind the *place shaping* concept is very interesting. In many of the documents from the Lyons report, they emphasize concepts such as social well-being, social cohesion and social capital, in which shared norms, cooperative relationships, trust and mutual responsibility are key elements.^{viii}

Professional social workers are very familiar with these types of concepts, and the concepts are regarded as being very important in social work practices.

The challenge will be to involve clients and recipients in a collaborative and participatory way in accordance with *democratic professionalism* for the benefit of underprivileged groups in the municipality. Local power structures and conflicts of interests must be approached by a cooperative deliberation and willingness to engage in a dialogue between different stakeholders. With their values and principles and “street-level” knowledge, professional social workers are of course indispensable participants in such dialogue and deliberation. All of the involved participants have a responsibility to create a constructive climate that can help facilitate the necessary decisions. Problems arise if in spite of all democratic professionalism and professional competence, the outcome of local decisions results in great differences and violations of the core principles of social work. How much difference should the social worker accept in the name of local self-determination?

If we agree that all “good” social work must be context-specific, meaning that social work practices are shaped by their institutional practice, building on locally specific historical, social-political, economic and cultural realities, there will still be a need to draw a line between acceptable and unacceptable social work practices. If we accept too much difference in the name of diversity and too much inequality in service deliverance in the name of local self-governance, we will probably violate profound professional social work values. It will be challenging for social workers on the local level to know when and how national authorities (including the professional association) should be involved in local decisions and priorities. How often and to what degree can social workers at the local level ask for national interference (for example, to determine the level of welfare benefits) in local conflicts over resource priorities without losing local legitimacy? To what degree will appealing to national decision makers affect the principle of local self-determination and local discretion (politically and professionally)?

The answers are not obvious, as the questions need democratic attention and professional reflection. To some degree, public debate related to specific and

relevant issues at the local level, involving management, politicians and professional social workers, and which focuses on political as well as social rights for citizens, may help clarify some of the issues and highlight the dilemmas. However, it would be of great interest for the social work profession to have more comparative data about the professional values and understandings embodied in social workers' conceptions of the contextual problems, and how they might impact on the allocation of welfare benefits and services, professional social work practices and local decision making in general.

Summary

This article is based on contemporary developments in Norway with respect to the relationship between national and local levels of political and professional decision making,^{ix} with the primary focus being on how changes will affect professional social work at the local level. As shown in this article, the development is two-sided. On the one side – which has been verified in research – there has been a development towards more centralized decision making during the last few decades, especially in the field of welfare policies. On the other side – and according to the latest policy documents – local government may recapture its decision-making power. In both cases, the development will certainly affect the environment for professional social work at the local level.

I have argued that professional social work must be context-specific, meaning that local knowledge in a wide sense is a prerequisite for good social work. Devolution and local political and professional discretion are in many cases necessary, though not a sufficient condition for success. Professional social workers will encounter a lot of difficult dilemmas arising from issues related to the equality/liberty debate and the diversity/difference/equality debate in social work discourses. In order to approach these dilemmas, more of a focus on local deliberation and place shaping, in combination with a social work focus on democratic professionalism, is necessary. If this is done successfully, devolution and a recapturing of local discretion and decision-making power will empower both clients and professionals. Thus, current changes in the relationship between various levels of decision making will enlarge the possibilities for professional social work in the municipalities.

My approach has been theoretical, and we need more empirical data to conclude in a more substantial way, as well as a comparative study focusing on the framework for local discretion and the dilemmas related to contested and antagonistic values in social work practices.

The issues and questions discussed in this article will certainly reveal different attitudes and reflections among social workers in different countries. Important social work concepts such as contextual social work, empowerment, diversity, self-respect, professional discretion, solidarity, equality, justice, human rights, etc. could be illuminated in different circumstances, and interesting comparative differences and similarities with respect to different conceptualizations will be exposed.

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ⁱ The last example of this (March 2013) is a controversial proposal to use more central governmental supervision and inspection of kindergartens, which is a responsibility for local governments to run.

ⁱⁱ See for instance Difi 2010:4, NOU 2000:22, NOU 2004:17, NOU 2005:6, NOU 2006:7, St. meld. nr. 31 (2000-2001), St. meld. nr. 33 (2007-2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/krd/aktuelt/taler_artikler/ministerer/ministerens-taler-og-artikler-/2010/forholdet-stat-kommune.html?id=628459, downloaded on March 19, 2013.

^{iv} This is clearly stated when representatives of the political parties are campaigning before local elections, and of course when policy documents are debated in the Parliament.

^v See for instance <http://www.ks.no/tema/Samfunn-og-demokrati/Demokrati/Statlig-styring/> downloaded on June 5, 2012.

^{vi} The organization's policy with respect to central supervision and inspection can be found at the following website:

<http://www.fo.no/soek/category14.html?categoryID=14&articlesearchstring=statlig+tilsyn> downloaded on March 19, 2013

^{vii} These values need to be applied and respected in all problem situations, and are therefore approved by the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work in October 2004. See http://www.iasw-aiets.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=28&Itemid=49 downloaded on March 19, 2013.

^{viii} The values very much resemble some communitarian principles (see for instance Tam, 1998; Etzioni 1995).

^{ix} Even though there are differences between the Scandinavian countries, the main structure between the central and local level of decision making with respect to welfare policies is the same.