

Local Volunteer Centres in Denmark

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History

The first three Danish volunteer centres were started in 1989, supported and funded by a development programme ('SUM-programmet') initiated by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The aims were defined rather loosely and broadly as giving more citizens the opportunity to volunteer and to support local volunteering and voluntary organizations. From the beginning the volunteer centres focused their attention mainly on the area of social policy. Especially relevant at that time was the idea of volunteer work as an alternative to ordinary labour market jobs. Denmark had, at that time, a comparatively high unemployment rate of 9.5 per cent (Statistics Denmark), and the volunteer centres were seen as a possible device which could connect people in need of a meaningful activity with voluntary organizations in need of volunteers.

This elegant idea quickly proved more difficult to implement than expected. Consequently, the volunteer centres took on new initiatives and, at the beginning of the 1990s, focused more attention on sustaining and developing local networks and self help groups and organizations. This was also supported by funds from the Ministry of Social Affairs ('PUF-puljen'). The volunteer centres became more 'activity oriented' focusing on prevention of isolation and loneliness by starting projects and initiatives to strengthen social networks, neighbourhood contacts and self help initiatives. Volunteer centres also supported marginalized groups by helping them getting organized to advocate interests.

In the mid 1990s the Ministry of Social Affairs once again initiated a new direction for the volunteer centres. This time the ministry funded seven so called 'model projects' which should develop a closer cooperation between local governments and voluntary organizations. The agenda

changed in the direction of volunteer centres as local organizations which should make volunteering opportunities more visible and improve the problem solution capacity of voluntary social service organizations.

By the turn of the century this trend was followed by the enactment of a new 'Social Service Act' in which it was made compulsory for local governments to cooperate and financially support local voluntary social organizations. Several local governments did this by supporting a local volunteer centre.

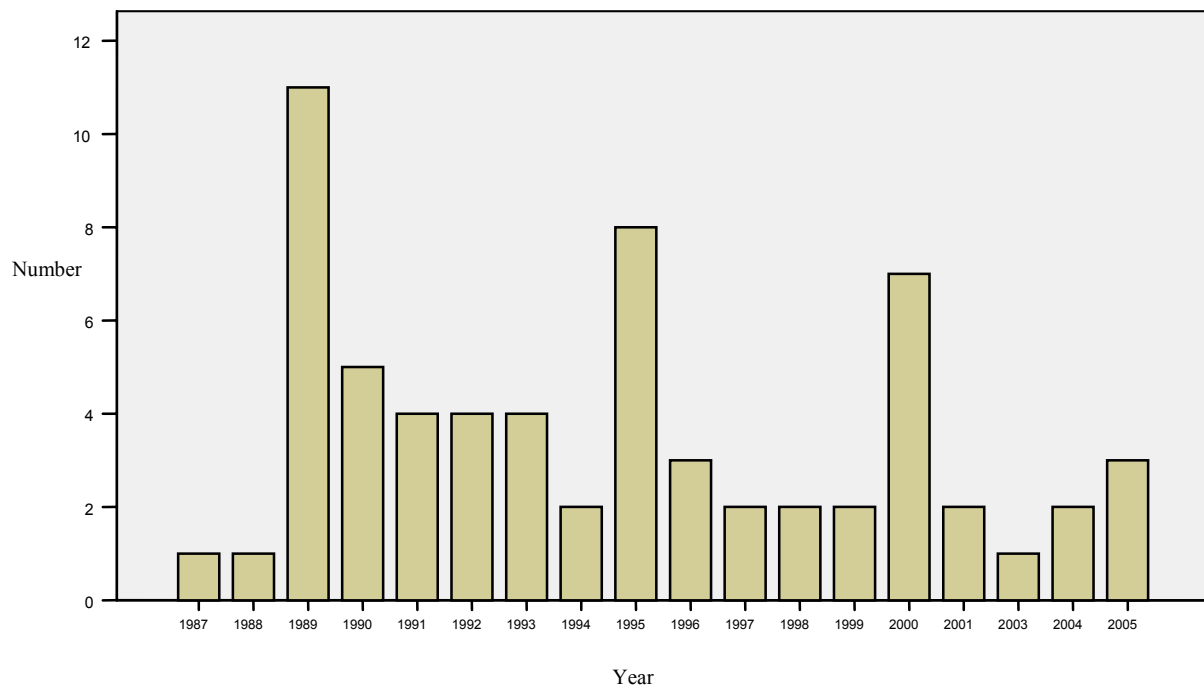
Finally, in 2005, a majority in Parliament decided to boost the development of local volunteer centres by entering an agreement of a three year development fund of 47 mill Danish crones, again administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs ('SATS-puljen'). This fund has two main goals: To enhance the quality of existing volunteer centres and to start new centres in geographic areas where none existed. Obviously, behind this agreement there is a political awareness that the idea of local volunteer centres could be important for, first, improving the infrastructure of the local voluntary sector, that is, those structures and institutions which foster more dense networks and strategic alliances between local organizations and associations as well as between public and voluntary sector, and, second, improving the problem solution capacity of the local voluntary social organizations. At the same time the national investment plan indicates that so far the local volunteer centres have not been able to live up to political expectations.

As this short history of the field of Danish volunteer centres suggests, we are dealing with a very diverse and heterogeneous set of organizations which has been shaped by a complex interplay between national funding possibilities and local, primarily private, initiatives. No national coordination plan has existed, and local entrepreneurs have been able to pursue diverse aims and strategies in what is best characterised as a bottom up process. Three general ideas can be said to have shaped the emergence of the field. First the idea of promoting volunteering and connecting people with opportunities to volunteer. Second the idea of building the capacity for local volunteering by coordinating local initiatives and providing training and consultancy for volunteers and their organizations. Third the idea of preventing isolation and strengthening social networks and local contacts by initiating self help and other social care activities, some of which resembled leisure activities.

In 2005/06 a national survey of organizations within the field of volunteer centres and self help organizations was conducted (Henriksen & Marthedal 2006). Self help organisations were considered part of the population for two reasons: 1) only one national umbrella organization (FriSe) exists for these two types of organisations; 2) by and large they have developed in tandem - some times in the form of a self help organization taking up initiatives to mobilize and strengthen volunteering, but most often in the form of a volunteer centre integrating self help groups into the organization. Data were gathered by internet questionnaire. 77 organizations were tracked of which 68 answered the questionnaire. Non response organizations mostly consisted of smaller self help organizations. Data, therefore, covers close to all volunteer centres.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the number of volunteer centres and self help organizations established from 1987 to 2005.

Figur 1: Number of volunteer centres and self help organizations by year of establishment.



N = 64
Source: Aalborg University, 2006

The figure gives a clear illustration of the interplay between national funding possibilities and local initiatives. Each peak of the figure corresponds to a new funding opportunity which has increased the number of organizations.

According to the official name of the organization, 16 of the surveyed organizations were classified as a 'genuine self help organization', that is, organizations which solely work to promote and organize self help, while the rest were classified as volunteer centres. 13 of the 16 self help organizations were established between 1987 and 1992. Thus, self help organisations took on a leading role from the mid 1980s, while the volunteer centres did not have any significant impact before the beginning and mid 1990s.

Today the total number of volunteer centres is 55; excluding genuine self help organizations of which there are about 20. With the same population, Norway has at least twice as many volunteer centres (Lorentzen 2005; 2007), but Denmark is much smaller and more densely populated.

With the implementation of a new municipal reform in 2007, which reduced the number of local municipalities from 275 to 98, there is now a volunteer centre in roughly every second of the new municipalities. A better fit between volunteer centres and this new administrative and political structure was another important goal behind the three year development fund decided in 2005. The municipal reform, thus, served as a stream of opportunity to reorganize the field of volunteer centres, and the development fund served as a stream of resources which made the reorganization possible. The result has been a concentration of resources in bigger centres and a more even geographic distribution of centres throughout the country.

Organization

As alluded to above, most of the Danish volunteer centres have been formed by private entrepreneurs or organizations. Table 1 provides an overview of who took the initiative to form the organization.

Tabel 1: Number and share of volunteer centres and self help organizations according to who took the initiative to establish the organization

Actor(s)	Number of organizations	Share. Per cent
1) Private person or group of private persons ALONE	35	51 %
2) Voluntary association or group of voluntary associations ALONE	9	13 %
3) Private person or group of private persons AND voluntary association or group of voluntary associations together	3	4 %
4) Local government ALONE	5	7 %
5) Local government IN COOPERATION with voluntary associations, private persons or other	12	18 %
6) Other	3	4 %
7) Don't know	1	1 %
Total	68	100 %

N = 68

Source: Aalborg University, 2006

In contrast to e.g. Norway where a substantial proportion of volunteer centres have been established (and even owned and run) by local government (Lorentzen 2005), this is not the case in Denmark. Nearly 70 per cent of all organizations have been formed by a private actor or a combination of private actors (category 1, 2, and 3). Local municipalities alone (category 4) holds a very low share, while more organizations have been formed in cooperation between municipalities and private actors (category 5).

Today, only a small minority of volunteer centres are owned and run by local government. Even in those cases where local authorities have taken (or been part of) the initiative, a self governing institution or a voluntary association has been formed to run the volunteer centre. About 95 per cent of all organizations control their own budget and close to 90 per cent are run by an independent board which is elected at an annual general meeting. Only in about 20 per cent of the cases local governments hold a seat in the board. Most seats in the board are controlled by users and members of the volunteer centre and local organizations and associations. About 2/3 of the organizations are organized as a membership based association. These figures leave us with the impression that the

majority of Danish volunteer centres should be characterized as relatively independent and autonomous organizations. At the level of discourse this is supported by various reports and white papers from government underlining the importance of an autonomous voluntary sector, as well as by the Ministry of Social Affairs who in the call for applications for the three year development fund recommended volunteer centres to be organized as a membership based association. Likewise, the national umbrella organization for volunteer centres and self help organizations (FriSe) stressed independence, political and religious neutrality, and impartiality as core values in a paper on 'best practice' (FriSe 2005).

Financing

Relative autonomy exists though the volunteer centres are heavily dependent upon public financial support. Contrary to most of the Danish voluntary sector which also in its revenue structure is independent of government (see Henriksen et al. 2008), local volunteer centres get most of their funding from two sources: local government and the state (in case, funds administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs).

As table 2 illustrates, about 90 per cent of all organizations get funds from local government and about 75 per cent are supported by the state.

Table 2: Absolute number and share of volunteer centres and self help organizations, that had funding from one or more of the sources mentioned. Average income from given sources in Danish crones. One Euro is equivalent to 7.5 Danish crones. Financial year, 2005.

Source of income	Number of organizations	Share. Per cent.	Average income in Danish crones.
Local government	56	89 %	259.034 (N = 50)
State (e.g. development funds)	48	76 %	251.414 (N = 47)
Membership fees	29	46 %	6.746 (N = 26)
Regional authorities	28	44 %	35.742 (N = 27)
Charities	19	30 %	21.950 (N = 20)
Other	14	22 %	401.705 (N = 12)
Sales of services and goods	12	19 %	94.089 (N = 8)
Interest	12	19 %	1.810 (N = 11)
Donations and collections	11	18 %	12.247 (N = 10)
Hire of premises	6	10 %	8.085 (N = 4)
National gambling foundation ('Tips- og lottomidler')	6	10 %	131.500 (N = 4)
Private business	4	6 %	7.500 (N = 2)
Support from national (umbrella) organization	3	5 %	5.000 (N = 1)
Sponsorship	3	5 %	3.000 (N = 1)
European Union	0	0 %	0
Inheritance and legacy	0	0 %	0

N = 63

Source: Aalborg University, 2006

These two sources are also by far the most important as measured by the share of total income. About 40 per cent of total income comes from local government and about 36 per cent comes from the state. All other sources, in aggregate, account for only about 25 per cent. Despite relative independence in terms of budget and activity control, Danish volunteer centres are extremely

vulnerable because the dominant source of income is public sector support while private sector support and self generated income (fees and sales) are marginal. This revenue structure constitutes one of the biggest challenges for the Danish volunteer centres.

Core functions and tasks

Together with its member organizations, the national umbrella organization FriSe, in 2005 initiated a process which resulted in a paper describing 'best practice' guidelines for volunteer centres (FriSe 2005). This paper also formed basis for what the Ministry of Social Affairs later in their call for applications for the three year development fund termed 'fully equipped volunteer centres' (Ministry of Social Affairs 2005). One can, therefore, consider this paper as expressing a consensus view on the core values and functions of volunteer centres and the appropriate methods to pursue these functions and consequent tasks.

The core functions, and consequent tasks, were the following six:

- 1) Connecting people to volunteering opportunities, by e.g.
 - a. Maintaining a job bank
 - b. Campaigning and promoting volunteering opportunities
 - c. Matching volunteers with voluntary organization jobs
 - d. Introducing volunteering to potential volunteers (e.g. by offering introductory courses)
- 2) Supporting local social innovation and development, by e.g.
 - a. Supporting and helping new projects and organizations with funding applications
 - b. Loan of premises and office facilities
 - c. Creating networks among new initiatives
 - d. Consultancy to organization leaders
- 3) Support and consultancy to existing associations and organizations, by e.g.
 - a. Loan of premises and office facilities to existing (smaller) organizations
 - b. Courses for volunteers and managers of voluntary organizations
 - c. Consultancy to managers of organizations
 - d. Maintaining a local guide of organizations and associations

- 4) Creating networks among citizens and associations, by e.g.
 - a. Fostering local network and contacts; e.g. between organizations that work with the same target group
 - b. Supporting networks between citizens
 - c. Serving as a local umbrella organization for local associations (e.g. advocating their interests towards public authorities)
- 5) Information and support to citizens and users, by e.g.
 - a. Offering advice and advocacy
 - b. Referring to human service organizations
 - c. Newsletters
 - d. Maintaining a list of local cultural and social activities
- 6) Organizing self help groups, by e.g.
 - a. Coordinating and initiating self help groups
 - b. Announcing self help groups
 - c. Offering courses to people who assist self help groups to get started
 - d. Distributing people to self help groups

The list is not final and it is very often difficult to separate the tasks and to assign each one to a single function. In reality they overlap and often boundaries are blurred.

Not all volunteer centres have all functions in their portfolio, but most of them have most of the functions and tasks. In the 2005/06 survey we asked the organizations to indicate which of the tasks in the following table 3 they had in their portfolio.

Table 3: Number and proportion of volunteer centres and self help organizations with a given task in their portfolio.

Task	Number of organizations with a given task	Proportion of organizations with a given task. Per cent
Campaigning and promoting volunteering	53	78 %
Connecting people to volunteering opportunities	47	69 %
Support and consultancy to new social initiatives	46	68 %
Courses for volunteers and managers of voluntary organizations	44	65 %
Support and consultancy to existing associations and organizations	42	62 %
Organizing and running self help groups	41	60 %
Social care activities run by VC, e.g. advice, advocacy, visiting friends	38	56 %
In house activities run by other agencies than VC	30	44 %
Other	29	43 %
Coordinating initiatives in relation to local voluntary sector, e.g. by initiating a council of local voluntary organizations	27	40 %
In house hobby and leisure activities, e.g. excursions, popular lectures	21	31 %

N = 68

Source: Aalborg University, 2006

It might be a surprise that not all volunteer centres perform all core functions. Most of this variance is explained by the self help organizations that are in the sample. However, it also reflects the diversity that characterizes the field and probably also some degree of specialization. Some volunteer centres are primarily activity oriented and direct their attention to starting and running social and cultural projects ‘in house’. Others direct more attention to the promotion and support of volunteering and voluntary organizations in the community. There is little doubt that the process following the implementation of the three year development programme in 2005 has led to a gradual homogenization within the field – more volunteer centres work according to best practice guidelines, and public sector funding is increasingly being given on the condition that the centres perform according to these functions. In other words, best practice guidelines are increasingly being used as performance indicators, and state and local government have increasingly become concerned about the idea of volunteer centres as local vehicles for improving the infrastructure of the voluntary social sector and building capacity for effective local volunteering. Increasingly volunteer centres are becoming intermediate and hybrid bodies between local government, citizens,

and voluntary organizations whose role is to support and encourage (more and more qualified) voluntary action.

Capacity and equipment to fulfil core functions

A central question, thus, is whether volunteer centres have the sufficient capacity to fulfil the core functions and tasks. This is difficult to judge – not least if one relies on the organizations' own judgement. No organization would ever claim that they have sufficient means and resources!

Based on the 2005/06 survey most volunteer centres have one or two full time employees to run the organization, some times in combination with one or two half time employed. Thus, volunteer centres are not big organizations with many employees. They are mostly small organizations where managers and coordinators have to perform many tasks at the same time.

In the 2005/06 survey we also asked how many persons who had volunteered for the centre during the last three months. On average the centres reported that 26 volunteers regularly had worked for them. This mean, however, masks great variation. Most of the centres (37 per cent) reported to have had 10 or less volunteers, about 30 percent reported between 11 and 25 volunteers, about 20 per cent reported between 26 and 50 volunteers, and about 15 per cent more than 50. Still, the volunteers constitute a substantial contribution of human resources.

Some volunteer centres also get indirect support from local government, for instance to design websites or audit annual accounts. However, many centres complain that it is difficult to get local governments to commit themselves to fully cooperate with them and invest sufficient time and money. This situation, though, may be changing after the 2007 municipal reform. Many municipalities are now engaged in formulating 'volunteering policies' in dialogue with the local voluntary sector. This might be a sign of increasing willingness to express not only symbolic but also actual support for the volunteer centres.

All organizations are members of the national umbrella organization for self help organizations and volunteer centres (FriSe). FriSe represents the volunteer centres in negotiations with statutory bodies, and supports each individual organization with consultancy. Besides, FriSe arranges annual

meetings and seminars and develops 'tools' (e.g. concerning fund raising methods) that the centres can implement. This has proved very important for enhancing the quality of the volunteer centres' work.

The most serious constraint, however, is perhaps the short time horizons that volunteer centres in most cases face. Budgets are negotiated every year and volunteer centres constantly need to focus on (and struggle for) new funding possibilities and applications. This brings considerable uncertainty, possible redirections in mission and tasks, and, not least, the risk that managers and coordinators will leave the volunteer centre in favour of a permanent position elsewhere.

However, provided that state and local government at the end of the three year development programme in 2008/09 decide in favour of volunteer centres as core institutions to build local capacity and infrastructure, this will probably bring more certainty and regular funding.

The tale of the Danish volunteer centres is a story of a constant struggle for organizational identity and public legitimacy. Today there are still questions about the value of local volunteer centres, but the professionalization and homogenization of the centres have - hand in hand with a broader discourse that stresses the importance of civil society actors, and increasing problems for the public sector to meet citizens' diverse welfare needs - made it more likely that there will be a future place for the volunteer centres.

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