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Networking in gendered regional development

Introduction

The present Swedish regionalization process creates a lack of institutionalisation called the “regional mess” (Stegmann McCallion 2008:587). According to a state investigation, Sweden has a “fragmented growth- and development policy as well as a weak and unclear regional organisation of society” (SOU 2007:10:18). Old and new structures are intertwined and the question emerges if this situation may create a space for women regarding regional development (Hedfeldt & Hedlund 2009). A multi-level governance perspective (Hedlund & Montin 2009) shows how agents on different levels from EU to local municipalities seem to share the same policy regarding gender and regional development: to increase and strengthen women entrepreneurs.

The formal alliance between women from different spheres seems to be weak regarding the EU structural fund partnerships (Hedfeldt & Hedlund 2009). If there are more developed networks on local and regional level remains to be investigated. Are there informal gendered networks on different levels which may create a path to gate-keepers or gate-openers for women to gain access to economic resources aimed for innovation and entrepreneurship within the policy area regional development?

This paper should be read as a “work in progress” paper where we present half-way of empirical results from a study of four different counties in Sweden. We mainly refer to the counties of Jämtland and Jönköping and partly to the counties of Halland and Västernorrland. The selection of counties is further presented in the method section. The aim of this paper is to apply a multi-level governance perspective in a study of what kind of gendered networking exists regarding the
policy objective to strengthen women in entrepreneurship. Our data indicate that women entrepreneurs do participate in some structural funds projects and are involved through networking. On what terms do they participate? And when are they excluded? We study the networking between local and regional elected officials, business representatives, entrepreneurs, public servants and CGO’s, HNGO’s and NGO’s regarding different projects for funding to support or strengthen women as entrepreneurs. The methods used are document studies, a survey to members in structural fund partnerships and interviews.

In the first section of the paper we give a brief background on the Swedish state of affairs regarding regional development policy and the regionalization process using a multi-level governance approach. We then present our theoretical framework where our ambition is to apply a multiscientific approach using network theory from both human geography and political science (Hanson 2000; Bang & Esmark 2009). Thirdly we describe in more detail the methods used in the investigation followed by the empirical results. The final concluding discussion raises the question of how to combine informal and formal networking as a useful strategy to improve a gender inclusive innovation policy in regional development.

**The multi-level governance of women’s entrepreneurship among EU, the Swedish state and “old” and “new” regions.**

The national strategy of regional competition, entrepreneurship and employment 2007-2011 (N 7037) aim to integrate several policies on different levels regarding regional development, employment and EU’s cohesion. EU’s Structural Funds being one of the most important instruments in the implementation of the overall goal in cohesion policy of the Lisbon Strategy stresses gender equality as one of the horizontal goals in steering documents. In the Swedish case most of 1,33 billion Euro is allocated to the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to finance measures within the objective "Regional Competitiveness and Employment” during the period 2007-2013. According to the idea of collaboration between different spheres the structural fund policy in Sweden suffers from a failure. A lack of institutionalisation is the refusal from the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and The Swedish Federation of Business Owners to participate as representatives of the labour market together with the unions.\(^1\) The refusal of the

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\(^1\) Telephone interview 2009-05-28.
two Commercial non-governmental organizations (CNGO:s) to participate in the partnerships create a hindrance for women entrepreneurs to be represented in the formal negotiations and decisions in EU structural fund partnerships boards (Hedfeldt & Hedlund 2009).

The EU and national aim of improvement of women’s entrepreneurship is integrated in a discourse of economic growth and regional development. The governance of women’s entrepreneurship includes a complex map of state institutions, NGO:s, structural fund partnerships, new regional partnerships and municipalities. Women’s entrepreneurship seem to become the main strategy of gender equality in regional development.

EU’s”soft steering” and the OMC method investigated by Farinós (2007) and Zirra & Buchkremer (2007) aims to integrate a gender perspective in the national and regional policy (Hudson & Rönnblom 2007). Referring to Prins’ (2003) analysis of how to avoid governance failure it is obvious that a gender inclusive authoritative top-down steering does exist in the EU and national regulating procedures of the OMC process. As state feminism has kept its institutions (Bergqvist et al 2007) gender mainstreaming as a principle is integrated in the governments steering of the regional structural fund programmes and its partnerships. The composition of the representatives in the partnership boards and their supervision committees is strictly regulated, gender equal and in accordance with Swedish political culture (SFS 2007:459; dnr N 2007/3312/RT Näringsdepartementet)2. The implementation of gender mainstreaming in the programmes however differs in the Swedish regions and has improved differently compared to earlier periods (Forsberg XXX). The gender mainstream policy may thus create a gate-opening function for women entrepreneurs networks in some regions. Institutions supporting such networks are the gender experts at the County Administrative Board and the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Tillväxtverket). These authorities, as well as local and regional politicians, do not have any top-down steering role however in the structural fund partnerships where consensus and common goals should be the main principle (Rydstedt 2006).

The masculine oriented innovation discourse and its narrow definition of economic growth which favours male dominated business creates a more complex picture (Blake & Hansson 2005;

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2 The boards show some variations depending on size and regional structure. 8-10 persons represent the municipalities, 3-4 persons represent the labour market (business and unions), one person civil society and 2-3 persons state administration on regional level.
Lindberg 2008a, 2008b). Another picture emerges looking at the indirect Europeanization which seems to occur as the rhetoric of "Europe of the regions" is used by domestic actors to provide resources which can cause a redistribution of power in the national context (Stegmann McCallion 2008 p 588). A process started when the EU membership, a push for reforms from below intertwined with decentralisation of Swedish regional policy occurred at the same period. Stegman McCallions identified nine key actors in the regionalization process, men from different levels in administration and politics, who seem to represent “male networks” which according to other studies create gender excluding processes in regional development and innovation policy (Bull 2001; Westerberg 2008; Lindberg 2008) These networks are active in the “regional mess” (Stegmann McCallion 2008 p 587) which is reported by Olauzon (2006) to include 40 different central state actors and 38 different regional “maps”. On local and national level the political and administrative organisation is obvious (Stegmann McCallion 2008). The regional/meso administrative level is however still incoherent. It seems like the organisation of the EU structural funds in some cases gave a ”tool box” on how to create a geographically more limited new regional partnership (NRP). The four counties investigated in the study belong in the two northern cases to the large structural fund partnership Middle Northland and in the southern case to Smaland and the Islands and West-Sweden. From a political and an administrative point of view these partnerships differs when it comes to how they relate to their regional surroundings. In Middle Northland there is no NRP, regional development policy in the two counties Jämtland and Västernorrland is in reality taken care of by the “old” state institutions, the County Administrative Board. The southern counties Jönköping and Halland however have created NRP:s. In these cases they are steered by a council of non-directly appointed representatives. The NRP:s can be seen as a solution where the central state is withdrawing its previous attempt to redistribute power to the regional level (Hedlund & Hedfeldt 2009; Stegmann McCallion 2008). We will in this paper investigate if a NRP may be door-opener to a gender inclusive networking in relation to the structural fund partnerships.

Describing the two counties Jämtland (in the north) and Jönköping (in the south) more closely we can summarize: Jämtland is a sparsely inhabited county, forestry and ski tourism are dominating branches, migration from the region a problem. Jönköping is a diverse county geographically divided in the highlands and the lowlands, a lot of small enterprises in technical
branches. According to The Swedish Federation of Business Owners (2008) there was a more gender equal participation in entrepreneurship in Jämtland.

**Gendered networking – a geographical and political perspective**

In this part of our paper, we deal with networks from a gender theoretical perspective in human geography and political science. The gendered networks that we aim to study are not primarily networks between entrepreneurs, but rather networks between entrepreneurs and other agents in regional development, in particular agents involved in structural fund financed projects and/or structural fund partnerships (such as officials, politicians and NGOs). Thereby, the questions that we pose concern both gender inclusive networks and sphere inclusive networks.

In human geography networks are often considered important for entrepreneurship. As Nijkamp (2003:401) puts it: “It seems as though the modern entrepreneurial ’hero’ is largely a ‘network hero’”. He also stresses that it should be acknowledged that networking requires investment in social communication, informal bonds, training and education. In short, networks are important since they “facilitate the efficient movement of resources (knowledge, financial capital) to entrepreneurs and of information about entrepreneurs to a wider community” (Hanson & Blake 2009:141). Furthermore, “they help to create, convey and sustain expectations and norms (Aldrich et al 1986) within a region” (Hanson & Blake 2009:141).

Despite that networks often are considered important for entrepreneurship, Geographers Susan Hanson and Megan Blake (2009) conclude in an overview that far too little is known about entrepreneurial networks and gender and the spatial aspects of gendered networks. They encourage future research about entrepreneurial networks and gender to ask questions beyond “who networks with who”, and to instead “look carefully at how networks are embedded in larger cultural discourses and structures and at how networks actually work within these structures” (Hanson & Blake 2009:146). With this paper we hope to contribute to increased knowledge on gendered networking, in this case by focusing on gendered networking embedded in regional entrepreneurial and political structures.

The study of gender inclusive networks and sphere inclusive networks concerning entrepreneurship and local development is also encouraged by Hanson (2009) where she writes:
“If entrepreneurship is to have a transformational impact on opportunities for women and gender relations in place, it must do so through altering power relations not only in people’s interactions within their personal networks but also in their interactions with institutions. Organizations and institutions (like banks, fraternal organizations, and local economic development boards) often structure opportunities differently for different groups of citizens in a place, and this different treatment is based on a stereotyped categorical understanding of gender” (Hanson 2009:252, with reference to Blake 2006, our emphasis).

Furthermore, the study of sphere inclusive networks is also motivated by entrepreneurship being a collective endeavor that both depends on geographically proximate and distant resources. Hanson here mentions not only agents from the private sphere (such as family members, relatives and friends) and the work sphere (employees), but also from the public sphere such as governmental and nongovernmental organizations and from private-sector institutions such as agencies promoting women’s entrepreneurship and banks (Hanson 2009:255).

Networks in politics is nothing new even though the recent interest in the concept of governance seem to suggest that the political system has changed dramatically (Sorensen & Torfing 2007). An often quoted phrase is “from government to governance” where hierarchal and authoritative governing is described as being substituted by new ways of doing politics (Hedlund & Montin 2009). The anglosaxian dominance in governance literature is, according to Hysing (2010) and Pierre (2009) not capturing what is specific in the Swedish case. The State has not withdrawn even if the steering is done in new ways through selfregulation, soft steering and private-public partnerships. Hysing, quoting Treib et al (2007) suggests that it is only on the level of specific policy areas that the alleged novelty and importance can be assessed. In Swedish politics the policy area of economic growth has due to a gender segregation of political power positions been a male area. In gender research the theorizing of the uploading and the downloading of the state (Banaszak et al 2003) can be used for analyzing new political networks and windows of opportunity as well as a depolitization and remote set of state agencies (Outshorn & Kantola 2007). In this paper we will focus on the idea of private-public partnership as a tool for networking within the structural fund organization and the regionalization process as a windows of opportunity for women in politics, the womens movement and women in entreprenurship.
For the geographers Hanson and Blake, who ascribe social identity in entrepreneurial networks, networks, gender and place are strongly related. For one, since networks are about “social interaction and the positioning of individuals, they are also always about gender” (Hanson & Blake 2009:137). Furthermore, entrepreneurial networks are related to place in that they are “embedded in place-based social, economic, cultural, and political structures that shape entrepreneurs’ identities and affect access to resources” (Hanson & Blake 2009:136-137).

Paying attention to social identity (for example gender), according to Hanson and Blake (2009:145) leads to knowledge about networks and entrepreneurship in a broader context in that it traces “the connections between and among individuals, networks, and the larger social, political, cultural, and economic structures of place” (Blake & Hanson 2009:145). Even political networks should be included in this broader context as they are related to territorial political structures such as municipalities, counties and regions. Even the identities of the local and regional politicians are shaped by place-based structures and hence the role of gender in politics may differ in different places.

**Legitimacy in networks: a question about gender**

For Hanson and Blake (2009) the question of trust and legitimacy is also related to networks and gender in that it is influenced by gender and in that it contributes to the value of a network. Legitimacy increases the access to resources and the ability to mobilized resources (Hanson & Blake 2009:144). Gender, since it marks difference and inequality between men and women, is linked to power and legitimacy. Blake (2006) calls this gendered legitimacy. Subordinance of women (as well as entrepreneurship being male gendered) means that women entrepreneurs in interaction situations are considered to have less legitimacy. This will have an excluding mechanism, as being considered a less legitimate part of a network you will not be valued and consequently, membership will not be of much value to you. Hanson and Blake (2009:139) write that “network agents use legitimacy as a filter for information”. A lack of legitimacy also seems to be self-reinforcing:

“… once women have been denied the initial perception of legitimacy, it is more difficult for them to have opportunities to act as trustworthy agents within a particular business community” (Hanson & Blake 2009:139).
Legitimacy is also related to social identity and generalized trust through a shared identity. Examples given by Hanson & Blake (2009) are men being granted legitimacy because they are men and membership in for example Rotary, which traditionally has been closed for women. The “room for manouvre” (Prins 2003) for women in creating trust and being considered legitimate agents in networks in the perspective of gendered networks seems more limited than for men. In politics the legitimacy is closely related to position and certain power positions give access to specific networks. The socialization into power positions does not necessarily create a shared identity among men and women in politics (Hedlund 1997; 1998).

The importance of informal networks, which can be related to legitimacy and possibly also generalized trust through shared social identity, can be interpreted from a gender perspective. Hanson and Blake (2009:137) write that feminists have shown that many effects of networks are serendipitous and results of everyday interactions rather than “instrumentally through purposive, directed contact with selected network members”.

Concerning access to resources and in this case a loan from a bank, Blake (2006:188) establishes that legitimacy is a precondition and is both determined by formal rules and norms and by local social relations and personal biases.

**Changing networks, networks of change?**

Since networks are dynamic, what then are the possibilities for networks to change to more gender inclusive networks and to create change in regions? Interpreting Hanson and Blake (2009) there are both challenges and possibilities. At least on a theoretical level, there seem to be ways of creating gender inclusive networks. Hanson and Blake (2009) write:

> “One way for networks to change is for women to become more closely integrated into, rather than being excluded from, interactions within a business community. Such case will necessarily entail more trust and legitimacy being granted to women than is now the case. […] the inclusion of women will change the structures of and practices within those networks and lead to altered institutions […] and thereby altered places. This type of change would also obviously increase women’s access to network resources such as tacit knowledge and material resources.” (Hanson & Blake 2009:145).
Once networks change to being more gender inclusive, there is the possibility of the networks actually making a difference. Hanson and Blake (2009:145) refer to Sydow and Straber (2002) who not that “because of their recursive interactions with institutions, when networks change, institutions change”. Furthermore, Hanson and Blake write that gender inclusive networks can change a regions work culture.

**Networking and decision making in practical life – a question of inclusion and exclusion**

The governments national programmes based on the Lisbon strategy made an emphasis on male dominated branches which was implemented in the Structural fund programmes in the four regions. The process behind the writings did not correspond to the ideal OMC. Even if open meetings did occur in the rapid process, in fact a small elite of state civil servants were, according to the interviews, involved in the writing of the programmes. The gender aspect was dealt with differently with Mellersta Norrland showing more awareness and knowledge in the operative programme. The new strategy of creating geographically big structural fund regions with several counties involved during the period 2008-2013 made it difficult to create innovative partnerships. Networking among the formal representatives was mainly directed towards their own county and local settings. The municipal politicians did not seem to play a prominent role in the creation of structural fund projects. Several women holding top positions in local politics had access to informal networks involving women in business and entrepreneurs but they had no experience of strategic alliances to initiate structural fund projects. Different gatherings as breakfast meetings and lunches created networks between women in politics and entrepreneurship but they were not strategic in this area. The male gatherings, especially Rotary, was pointed out as a strong and sphere bridging network of great strategic importance of women being civil servants. Several women with a feminist perspective had been encouraged to become members but refused to take part in this kind of networking. Their reason for not entering Rotary was socially based and not a strategic judgement.

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The establishment of a project application is an extremely complicated procedure involving a lot of negotiations, contacts and networking as several funders are involved. According to civil servants being interviewed the process from idea to final application was often a task for innovative civil servants. The politically elected women holding top positions in their county or municipality, some being a member of the structural fund partnership board, found that their role was mainly to be responsible for co-financing and to defend their territorial interests. In the memories from the partnership meetings we find that they in minor suggestions try to make some influence, for example to defend the idea of smaller structural fund projects.

State feminism in the county administrative boards play an important role to create networks by doing different projects, being responsible for some of the writings in the structural fund programmes and the distribution of specific state grants to women entrepreneurs.

Comparing the two regions the establishment of a “new” regional partnership in Jönköping did not seem to affect the content of structural fund project applications or inclusion of women and a gender perspective. The civil servants in the new regional partnership described it as holding an extremely masculine culture and as a gender exclusive networking. This was confirmed by women in local politics who were very outspoken and critical to the idea of partnerships and networks. The women politicians were not involved in discussion project ideas. Several structural fund projects did start during 2009 where Jönköping was involved and according to interviews the project ideas, writings and networking were mainly a task done by civil servants and the local and regional politicians seemed to play a reactive role in approving ideas and decide the size of local contribution to the project. The networking from the politicians seemed to be limited in this area. In Jämtland we do not yet have data from interviews with the politicians. There the County Administrative Board has a prominent role in regional development policy as the county has not yet created any NRP, the municipalities have not been able to agree on this. Looking the other way around one project manager in Jämtland says that she has contact with members of the structural fund partnership. She has contacts with one local councilor and with politicians from another municipality where she used to work. Furthermore, she has contact with the chairperson of the structural fund partnership who is the county governor whom she knows from previous employments. She says that her contacts have facilitated a dialogue concerning both how the structural fund partnerships are working and how
her project and organization are working.

We have investigated how women entrepreneurs are involved in structural fund projects, and in that way can gain access to structural fund resources, mainly by interviewing and contacting officials who are managing projects. In addition, we have also contacted representatives for business associations and some entrepreneurs, who to our knowledge stand out in some way in the two regions, directly. Furthermore, we have also carried out interviews with representatives for Resource Centers.

One of our conclusions from contacts with officials managing structural fund projects is that entrepreneurs, not only women entrepreneurs, are included in some ways but not in others. Officials managing structural fund projects tend to speak of contacts and cooperation with other agents in the regional setting, often labeling their contacts as being trade and industry. However, further probing questions concerning cooperation within the project sometimes leads to the conclusion that actual entrepreneurs are not involved as equal partners. Trade and industry refers instead to officials at local or regional level working with trade and industry. This does not necessarily mean that entrepreneurs are excluded; however it is an implication of entrepreneurs being involved as objects rather than acting as subjects. “Trade and industry” does not always mean entrepreneurs or the business sector, but rather other officials. Especially, we suspect this to be the case in projects aiming specifically at entrepreneurship (having in mind that a number of projects have the objective that more women should start and/or develop their own business). Entrepreneurs who are involved as subjects, in our definition as agents who can represent their own interest or the interests of an entrepreneurial collective, are not found in projects concerning entrepreneurship primarily but in other fields such as infrastructure or tourism (which of course can be linked to entrepreneurship).

Who are the entrepreneurs involved as subjects? How have they been chosen? What regional networks have led to their involvement? Are the networks gendered? We will deal with these questions in the next section.

**Creating sphere bridging networks - including agents from different spheres**

Networks connecting different spheres (business, politics, the public sector, NGOs, and universities) are of importance in relation to the European Regional Development Fund on a
project level. One example is projects inspired by Triple Helix (Etzkowich & Klofsten 2005) where agents from business, the public sector and universities some together. In other projects we have found networks being created between other spheres than the Triple Helix agents, not on a formal, operational level but rather on target group level. An example is the project Arena Miljölänet in Västernorrland. The project is manage on a regional level by the county administrative board in Västernorrland, Quantitative objectives such as contacting 200 women entrepreneurs has been reached more than well, with 800 women entrepreneurs being contacted. The women project manager personally want to encourage younger women to become involved in environmental industry (clean tech?), saying that it is a growing line of industry and an industry where it is possible to make money. Concerning women in politics, she says that they “should definitely get involved in environmental and business issues”.

Another example is a project run by the county administrative board in Västernorrland in cooperation with the NGO Hushållningssällskapet. The project supports entrepreneurs within small scale local food production, considered by the county administrative board to be a vital part of the tourism industry. Many of these entrepreneurs are women, which means that the project has supported women entrepreneurs through supporting an industry. The primary objective has been to support local food production, not to support women entrepreneurs (regardless of line of industry).

**Including entrepreneurs in projects**

Entrepreneurs involved in projects on a managerial or steering level are to our knowledge so far quite rare. However, we have found some examples where entrepreneurs take part in steering groups of projects. Our ambition in this section is to analyze how entrepreneurs are recruited to the projects and what network mechanisms exist.

One official at a municipal office in Västernorrland who manages a project concerning infrastructure in the archipelago says concerning the composition of the project steering group, where two representatives of thirteen are women entrepreneurs (none of the representatives are male entrepreneurs, 6 of the representatives are women, 7 are men):

“They are hand-picked. One of them was quite obvious to recruit, since she is the largest entrepreneur in the archipelago and owner of a fairly large hotel in the
archipelago. [...] She is a key person. It was very important to have them involved, since a large part of the development revolves around the island. [...] More generally, we thought about personal qualities. There are many entrepreneurs within tourism who probably would be interested and who are good, but we wanted someone with an interest in public affairs and development issues and good knowledge and contact with the industry and with colleagues. So we got a person who runs a restaurant and a youth hostel on the mainland involved.”

The steering group was formed after the project had been granted funding (which we will discuss further on); however the municipal officer states that a dialogue with agents from different spheres (entrepreneurs and associations) preceded the application.

In one project in Jämtland, the steering group is composed of 10-12 people, out of which three are local representatives for the Swedish Federation of Business Owners. In this case the entrepreneurs have not been hand-picked, but are rather representatives for local entrepreneurial collectives. In the municipality there are three villages and since the ambition was to reach the whole municipality geographically, the chairpersons for each local federation where chosen. Being involved in local and regional development and different kinds of projects and how this has come about, one women entrepreneur in Jämtland explains it by being someone people know about. The answer to the question of why she thinks that she, and not someone else, has been asked to be part of a project is obvious to her. She expresses it in terms of “I am like a monkey around here!”, meaning that she stands out and is active, not only locally and regionally, but also partly nationally.

One male entrepreneur in Jämtland has according to the project manager been recruited to the steering group using his personal network. Interviewing the entrepreneur himself, he is very open with the fact that the arena that he and the project manager have in common is Round Table, a society for men under the age of 40.

The entrepreneurs involved in steering groups are not always fully aware of how the project is financed, whether it is in part by the European Regional Development Fund, or in another way. What motives them to take part and what is important are the objectives of the project and in particular what is actually being accomplished.
In general, the few entrepreneurs which we have interviewed so far have a fairly positive approach to their involvement, even though it can be time consuming. The networking can be viewed as an investment for themselves as entrepreneurs, but they can also be have more altruistic motivations such as a positive development in general locally or regionally, which their business only can benefit from in a wider sense.

Relating to the question of including entrepreneurs in steering groups and in that way creating a room for maneuver and possibility to represent the interest of entrepreneurs, is the question of what room of maneuver steering groups in themselves actually have. Since steering groups often are composed after a project has been granted funding, they are tied to their application. In one project the project manager says that steering group has asked in what way they actually can contribute and their room for maneuver. Even though their room for maneuver is limited, the project manager says that more limited adjustments can be made, and that discussing the future with the steering group is important. In conclusion, this sphere bridging network is considered important as a strategic network for future development.

Sphere bridging networks where entrepreneurs and the public sector come together thus seem to be beneficial. However, the bridging between spheres can also be challenging when different cultures collide. An example comes from a project manager at the county administrative board in Västernorrland who manages a project which intersects the official sphere (at both municipal level and regional lever) and the entrepreneurial sphere. Her experience it that agents from different spheres to a large extent have different views on the objective of the projects and activities within it:

“The entrepreneurs says “go, go, go!” while the officials contemplate and ask for dialogues and strategic thinking. […] The entrepreneurs can ask “why isn’t more happening?”. And at the same time, the representatives from the public sector might think for example that the steering group is not working, that we need to do certain things over and think about gender mainstreaming and representation from several angles.”
Furthermore, she says that what differentiates the entrepreneurs from the officials, who act on the commission of the politicians, is that for the entrepreneurs administrative geographical boundaries do not exist.

**Power and networks: including the powerful and excluding the ones with low legitimacy**

Creating steering groups and using networks in projects is not only a matter of different spheres meeting, but also about winning legitimacy for the project. Thus, making the connections with powerful agents is important which also makes legitimacy a gender issue. One example is when a project manager for a project within a male gendered industry in Jönköping says about their gender unequal reference group: "*We have chosen representatives from trade and industry with authority and power and that is men*".

An example which in this case is interesting since it deliberately challenges making connections to men in powerful positions is a project in Västernorrland. The official at the county administrative board who manages the project, which has several subprojects on local level, says about gender and power:

> Women are competent and women do lots of things that are good. But still men are the ones in powerful position it seems. It gives me the shivers to say, but that is the way it is. We have tried to show this and to recruit women to the steering groups.

She continues saying that on a regional level (which holds all the subprojects together) the representation of men and women is quite good. She explains this by the local councilor and county council commissioners, many of whom are women, being among the representatives. This indicates of course not only that women are part of the steering group, but also that women with power positions in the region are part of it.

**Women Resource Centres: building strategic networks and being included to a certain extent**

As Danilda, Lindberg and Torstensson (2009) writes, Women Resource Centers can be agents in what she labels Quattro Helix. In their theory Resource Centers, representing an NGO can constitute the fourth agent in Triple Helix (in addition to the business sector, the public sector and universities), creating Quattro Helix. For Resource Centers the issue of lack of legitimacy,
which is a hindrance to being part of sphere bridging networks, has been highlighted in evaluations and research (Scholten 2003, Nutek 2004, Tillväxtverket 2009).

Our interviews with project managers and representative for Resource Centers indicate that Resource Centers are not entirely excluded from networks and projects managed by other agents. They are included to a certain extent, for example by being a partner around certain activities in projects. However, they are excluded from participating when initiating projects and setting the agenda. At the same time Resource Centers cannot be considered a passive agent in regional development; they initiate their own projects and create networks strategic to their own agenda.

The general picture that project managers with relations to Resource Centers give of their networking is that they have just contacts. The knowledge about Resource Centers facing resistance is known among some project managers, which however does not necessarily constitute a hindrance for their cooperation. In a few projects cooperation with Resource Centers is described. Sometimes project managers are partners in projects run by Resource Centers, but rarely are Resource Centers an operative part of projects managed by the officials. Cooperation with Resource Centers concerning activities seems in one project to be both a result of the projects managers contacts with the Resource Centre and of a geographically large county. The project manager says:

“Working in a whole county is quite hard considering the distance. I have used one person who is active in a Local Resource Centre for setting up activities in her part of the county. […] She has been situated in one part of the county and also she has great contact with different types of women led businesses in that geographical area. It has been great for me to be able inform women in that area about the project. I have tried to find ways of cooperating with Local Resource Centers.”

A representative for the regional resource centre in Västernorrland says that important partners are for example the managing director of the chamber of commerce, the Swedish Federation of Business Owners and the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. About networking she says: “We need each other, but we need them more”. Applying for funding from the Regional Development Fund is a complicated process which is facilitated by strategic relations, both with the structural funds and with officials in trade and industry. On the project level, agents from the public sector
are important since they can open up access to EU-funding. The inclusion of Resource Centre to a certain extent indicates an unequal power relationship, but this is nuanced when the representative also states that:

“You need to have partners and you need trust and if you don’t have trust, you need to leave your partners since they’re not ready to be part of projects”.

Conclusions

In our empirical data we find that there exist several different kinds of networks and networking. The social dimension of networking seems to be more important than we had expected. Thus the local setting and geographical proximity to other agents is vital. This contrasts to the organization of the large structural fund regions which includes several counties. When social networking is combined with operational or strategic networking and is successful, it includes both pleasure and usefulness. The social dimension was however in some cases a hindrance, when some women did not like each other. This makes networking as a strategy fragile.

The European Regional Development Fund seems to have led to a number of projects where sphere bridging networks exist. Our empirical studies indicate that the sphere bridging exists on different levels, sometimes on target group level and sometimes on operational level. The idea of private – public partnerships is an ideal; however creating bridges between spheres in projects is also sometimes a challenge when different interest and cultures collide.

Literature


