



Who has the last laugh? –

About the entrepreneurial politician as an unconventional problem solver.

Draft paper written for the International Conference on Peripherality issues in Rena, Norway

9-10th of Oct 2008

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Keywords: political entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial politician, regionalisation, unconventional solutions, attitudes, transnational region building, cultural heritage, border issues

Abstract

Politicians as well as entrepreneurs are surrounded by random preconceived notions, some that when you look closely turn out to be incorrect and others that turn out to be rather close to the real picture. In the rather widely debated issue of contempt towards politicians the traditional politician has been described as a person who says one thing but does another. The entrepreneur on the other hand is described by many as curious, creative, independent, devoted, optimistic and visionary.

This paper will put *the entrepreneurial politician* in focus and study if and how the political evolution is affected when the politicians act more according to the stereotype of an entrepreneur than that of a politician. It will put the entrepreneurial political into context.

The empirical material will be constituted by the study of a number of municipal politicians active in two municipalities in Norway (Lierne and Røyrvik) and parts of two municipalities in Sweden (Frostviken and Hotagen). These study objects were chosen due to the fact that there is an ongoing project in the region in question where the four entities together are involved in a cross-national attempt to solve rather traditional peripherality issues. What separates these politicians from other politicians in demographically and economically challenged municipalities is how they have made an attempt to think “outside of the box”. They have used a different rhetoric and an unconventional way of thinking about problem solving. These politicians are visionaries, dreamers and *acteurs* who have decided to take the measures necessary to stop the downward spiral of development in their home regions.

In the cases that will be examined it has also been possible to find actors that directly or indirectly have opposed the work in progress or have regarded it with scepticism and/or indifference. But who will have the last laugh? Will it be the *entrepreneurial politician* who sees his home district rise above its difficulties or will it be the sceptical spectator?

Introduction

Changes in the welfare state and the demography in the Scandinavian countries during the last couple of decades have created a situation where a decreasing number of people have to provide for an increasing amount of people (DS 2008:36; Stephens, 1996, SOU 2003:123). It would probably be fair to say that some of the challenges originating from these changes have had a deeper impact on scarcely populated areas than on densely populated ones.

The Swedish Board of Scarcely populated areas (Glesbygdsverket, 2008:7) concludes in their report “Landsbygden i de regionala programmen” (approx. The country side in the regional programs) that the biggest challenges in the scarcely populated areas of Sweden are: the globalisation, demography, climate/environment, difficulties in recruitment of labour, the increased provisional load for the working part of the population, competence and infrastructure. To try and make this information more specific it will now be illustrated with stories from the geographical context of this study. However, the story is in no way unique and can be found in many scarcely populated areas.

The younger parts of the population move away from the scarcely populated areas into the cities, for various reasons such as a larger variety of job opportunities, better public services, higher education, the urban way of life or perhaps in search of a life partner. Families with children move away because they fear that education will be inadequate within a couple of years, or they fear that further closings of *byskolor* (translation: village schools) will create a situation that will require them to send their children off to schools so far away that they will have to spend their weeks at a dormitory only to come home over weekends, and all of this as early as 5-6th grade, i.e. at the age of 11-12 years. In taking these precautions they also contribute to the downward spiral that is only a small part of what we today have come to know as peripherality issues (some of them mentioned above). Left in the scarcely populated areas are those who are no longer in child-bearing ages and those who have already retired and tax bases can no longer take the pressure of the demographic changes and public services become more and more inaccessible for the population and more and more unaffordable for the government. Yet more people move away, and slowly but surely one work-place after another closes down because of the lack of labour. Yes, it is a somewhat depressing scenario I have just pointed out for you. I am not alone. Newspapers, research, TV and many more keep telling us that the countryside is dying. On national debates you will hear people from the cities saying they will not pay taxes to provide for those who live in scarcely populated areas.

However, in order to provide you with a different side of the story I will start by quoting the mayoress of Krokrom: “People in this region provide for themselves” (2008-09-19).

The countryside is not just misery and problems. It is also breath-taking nature, the possibility of finding a spot to contemplate in complete silence or indulge in fishing or small-game and big-game hunting. And these areas are also full of people who constantly have had to find new ways to make a living, making the journey from a dream and an idea to a success business or enterprise.

In August 2008 I partook in a seminar about female enterprise in scarcely populated areas and many motivational speakers had been invited to share their stories with the participants. Although being a seminar on female enterprise one of the speakers was John Helge Inderdal, CEO and founder of the Lierne Bakery. The listeners were told the success story of a man that started his business from scratch outside a small village, Sørli, in the municipality of Lierne. In less than two decades it went from being a small hotel bakery to being the number one deliverer of the Norwegian traditional delicacy *lefse*, and employs over a hundred people from both sides of the border.

But there are not only business entrepreneurs in the region. There are also political entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs that found the issues of being a border region together combined with the traditional issues of being a region in the periphery a tough nut to crack, but instead of just watching the number of inhabitants decrease, decided to find a way to crack the nut. The ideas that came about were those of turning the disadvantages into advantages, to see the border region as a possibility instead of a hindrance. It will be a long process, but they seem determined to succeed, to create a transnational region with the instruments needed to stabilize the number of inhabitants within the first three years and to increase it in the next three years, to create a region where co-operation in a large field of areas will be made possible by eliminating the problems that the border creates.

It is a story about real men and women who saw a problem and decided to fix it. The work in progress is the story about them. What drove them, how they did it and what came out of it? Told by *them*, but presented by, and seen through the eyes of a political scientist. It will present a new way to see the entrepreneurial politician as a part of the bigger picture in a multi-layered process of regionalisation and transnational problem-solving. The future holds the answer as to what the results will be, but it constitutes a great opportunity to follow the process.

Purpose

This paper is not so much a presentation of any results as it is a presentation of one region's ideas on how to attempt to solve their peripherality issues and the sources of the possible solutions. Therefore this paper will not present a purpose as such nor will it present any conclusions. Instead, it will give you a brief introduction of a work in progress and what can be expected of it. However, the purpose of the upcoming study will be to put the political entrepreneur into context. In this particular case the political entrepreneurs were the initiators of a process towards a transnational regionalisation in order to solve peripherality issues in a border region. It might seem unjust to put the individual at the centre of attention when it is in fact a large process involving many levels of decision-making and governance. However, it has been done that way in order to create the same kind of spirit in this paper that permeates the project: the bottom-up perspective, the solving of problems based on initiatives and ideas of people on a grass-root level. It is a unique opportunity to study the region building process in a border area with political entrepreneurs that strive towards regional development and many possible questions can be asked and create a foundation for fruitful research. At this stage the problem hasn't been clearly defined and I welcome ideas and opinions regarding the research possibilities and how to move forward. Thus, the regionalisation, the transnational problem-solving and the political entrepreneur will all be presented, but in chronological order. First things first as they say.

Method

The project has just terminated the pre-project phase and the application has been handed in to the Interreg¹. The decision about the application for the Main Project: Midt-Skandinavisk Regionsprosjekt GIM (Mid-Scandinavian Region Project), will be made in December of 2008, meaning that this is very much an on-going process. Due to the nature of the project in question, that is, a project that is still in progress, it will be necessary for a researcher to have a versatile approach and let the empirical field decide what measures are next to be taken in order to get closer to the solution of the research problem.

It is my intention to let this study be empirically driven and let the process lead the way, of course with the helping hand of the writings and advice from scholars within the area, as well as the informants and/or other people who in some way may be helpful. A possible approach

¹ Interreg Sweden-Norway is an EU program within the goal "Territorial Co-operation". "Territorial Co-Operation" aims to strengthen co-operation over borders within the EU and bordering states. For more information visit the Interreg homepage. The link is found in the list of references.

would be that of a modified form of Action Research, which is well suited for ongoing-processes. Modified Action Research because Action Research indirectly implies that the researcher actively contributes to the outcome of the situation where he/she is involved (Gummesson, 2003), which is something I will strive to avoid. However the methodological approach holds great benefits in the amount of data collectable and in the possibility to understand the data from a combined outsider/insider perspective (Björkman and Sundgren, 2005). At this early stage in the research process I have not yet had the time to fully investigate the endless options among research methods available and the Action Research will surely come to be complemented by other approaches, Narrative Method being one. The narrative method makes it possible *and* requires that the researcher takes on different roles and shifts between being *a listener* to a story being told, *the translator* of what is being said and puts it into writing, *the reader* of texts written by him/her or other people and as *the author* of a text. Throughout the entire research process the researcher will however always be an *active interpreter* (Johansson, 2005). The method creates the opportunity to present your research results as a story, without losing valuable nuances.

Putting an emphasis on letting the research be empirically driven also implies the use of an inductive approach. The study is thus aiming towards generating theory as opposed to verifying theory. More concretely, the empirical investigations will be made through interviews, the reading of literature and documents and observations. It is of importance to be present and observe to create an understanding of the processes and the context. This methodological approach will make it possible to capture and get close to the uniqueness of the research area and the narrative method creates an accessible possibility for people in general and for scholars to create learning about political entrepreneurship and regional development.

So far, all participants have agreed to appear with their names and the names of the geographical places without any changes or coding. I have however, offered them the opportunity to read quotes before I use them.

Political Entrepreneurship (un)defined

In the process of trying to create a better understanding of the term *political entrepreneurship* it has become clear to me that although many scholars use the term it is rarely explicitly defined, and when defined the definition is never the same as any previous one. However, it seems that the definition given of what constitutes an entrepreneurial politician is largely

depending on what definition one gives of the entrepreneur in general. In the material studied it has been possible to identify such names as Kirzner and Schumpeter. Anyone familiar with the research area of entrepreneurship would know that Kirzner and Schumpeter hold distinct views on what an entrepreneur is and what the entrepreneur does. As Schneider and Teske (1992) present Kirzner, the entrepreneur is someone that seizes opportunities in the market to move towards equilibrium whereas they present Schumpeter's entrepreneur as likely to emerge when the market is approaching equilibrium in order to create creative destruction. I have yet not gotten more closely acquainted with the original sources, but it is my intention to do so. However using one or the other (Kirzner or Schumpeter) to define a political entrepreneur will give many different results and the difference between a political entrepreneur and a private sector entrepreneur will also vary.

The definition made by Schneider and Teske (1992) is that a political entrepreneur is *an individual who changes the direction and flow of politics*. Schneider and Teske continue by saying that political entrepreneurs can be elected politicians, leaders or creators of interest groups or high-level unelected leaders. Holcombe (2002) refrains from defining the political entrepreneur per se but defines political entrepreneurship as "something that occurs when an individual observes and acts on a political profit opportunity" (2002:1). Thus the political entrepreneur should be an individual acting on that political profit opportunity. Finally, Sheingate (2003) defines the political entrepreneur as follows: "entrepreneurs are individuals whose creative acts have transformative effects on politics, policies or institutions" (2003:1). Although the definitions do not create images that are extremely far apart, the discussion on what an entrepreneurial politician *does* vary. Sheingate and Schneider & Teske discuss the political entrepreneur as being someone bringing about a change for the better of the public whereas Holcombe presents the possibility of the political entrepreneur striving to increase his or her own benefits at the expense of the public. The view point of this study will be that of the entrepreneurial politician as one trying to create *unselfish* change, without going deeper into the discussion of definition of words like *positive change* and *unselfish* this early in the research process. After all, the idea is to create a wider understanding of the political entrepreneur.

The region described – the region (un)defined

The project – Midt-Skandinavisk Regionprosjekt GIM includes two Norwegian municipalities and parts of two Swedish municipalities. The Norwegian municipalities are those of Røyrvik

and Lierne in the County of Nord-Trøndelag and on the Swedish side Frostviken, which is the northern part of the municipality of Strömsund and Hotagen, the northwestern part of the municipality of Krokom, both located in the county of Jämtland (see appendix 1 for map of the area). It is a scarcely populated region with some 3450 inhabitants in an area of 11 000 square kilometres. The region holds a cultural heritage with strong traditions of communications over the border. In the words of Blom (1964:24):

Förhållandena var så, att det ansågs naturligt med förbindelserna västerut. Människorna på ömse sidor om Kölen har genomgående varit vänner och fränder. Man gick giljarstig i gränsbygden, fick den utkorade med till sitt och det blev släktskap åt båda hållen.

Så länge tullfrihet rådde, tänkte människorna inte mycket på var gränsen gick. Böcker och tidningar stavades visserligen inte lika på norska sidan som på den svenska, men det bygdemål som talades var i mycket lika. Så var det länge²

What Blom describes is the time around the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century and the area is Frostviken-Lierne. It is in fact true that the area had a common tongue: *limål*, until well into the 20th century. In an interview with the Pre-Project leader I asked if it was possible to say that this region-building is based on a cultural heritage. He responded: - We are re-creating a cultural heritage. He then picked up the map of the area and showed me that Lierne/Røyrvik for a long time had seven eastward roads connecting them with Sweden but only three westward roads connecting them with the rest of Norway (2008-04-14). Based on this it was more common to interact eastwards than westwards. Family ties on both sides of the border are common. Many have one Norwegian parent and one Swedish. In the graduating class of 1996 in Gäddede on the Swedish side three out of nine had at least one Norwegian parent.

Moving on from describing the region I will very briefly present just a couple of definitions of the term region, beginning with the work of Gren (2002) where he discusses the possible shapes of regions. First, the *functional* region which is constituted by a geographical unit which is gathered around a common interest with

² Approximate translation: The relations were such that communications westwards[from Sweden towards Norway] were considered natural. People on both sides of Kölen [a ridge] have been friends throughout the times. In the area around the border suitors went looking for spouses on the other side and took their chosen ones back with them and people on both sides became related to each other. As long as there were no obligations to pay duties people did not think much about where the border was. It is true that books and magazines were not spelled the same way on the Norwegian side and the Swedish side, but the dialect that was spoken was very similar. It was like that for a long time

some sort of secretariat or legally binding intra-regional contracts. The second is the *administrative* region which is often defined by some form of decentralisation process and the third being the *cultural* region, a region that holds a strong cultural identity. Whereas for instance a more political definition of the term region is found in the statute of the AER (Assembly of European Regions) as follows: “The term "Region" covers in principle local authorities immediately below the level of central government, with a political power of representation as embodied by an elected regional Assembly” (Statute of the Assembly of European Regions, Article 2:2). The increasing importance of the regional level in the globalisation is discussed widely and often in relation to the term identity or the phenomena of multi-level-governance (see for instance Keating, 2004 and 2007; Loughlin, 2007). All this proving that the matter of regions and regionalisation is highly relevant from a political science point-of-view.

It could become relevant to make a comparative study of the regionalisation process in for instance the Euregio-region since it holds some resemblance to the GIM-region, not in size, but the nature of its *relative* marginalisation (infrastructure etc) in comparison with the rest of the respective countries (Östhol, 1996). Just like the GIM-region it can be viewed as peripheral in some meaning and is also the result of a bottom-up initiative (DS 1993:86)

The Project so far – a brief summary

The four entities Lierne, Røyrvik, Frostviken and Hotagen will hereafter be referred to as *the communities*. The leaders of the communities had in fact been meeting for a number of years. However it was not until a number of ideas occurred at the same time as a new structural fund period began as things really started to happen. The idea was briefed for the first time in June 2007 and things started rolling immediately. A large (in GIM measures measured) Possibility Conference was held in Gäddede on the 27th of August 2007 and a Pre-project was initiated. The pre-project was to evaluate the possibilities in the region and to investigate the wishes of the citizens. To make a long process short the work concerning the collection of the views of the citizens was performed as follows (see figure 1):

The leader of the Pre-Project met with *byalag* (approx. village councils) and local trade and industry associations. At each gathering they were given the opportunity to list possible and desired areas for co-operation. At the end of every meeting they were all put together and at

the next meeting with the next group of citizens they were given the opportunity to present new ideas as well as rank the ideas of the previous groups as “immediate priority, priority for later on, not a priority”. At the end of the process the results were presented to the GIM-board who based on these priorities could start to make a Project Plan that had a true bottom-up perspective. The Project Plan was reported back to the respective municipal councils. The Municipal Councils made decisions about the amount of money they were willing to invest in the Project and the application was completed with the numbers of all the co-investors. Apart from the municipalities (and hopefully the Interreg) investments were made by some external financiers (public and private).

The entrepreneurial politicians → GIM-board → The Citizens → GIM-board → The entrepreneurial politicians.

Figure 1: The process of making priorities in the project.

The project, if performed according to the plan and the application handed in to the Interreg, is an investment in the region of 23 million SEK (2.33 million EUR with the exchange rate of 2008-10-01) and it will focus on increasing the economic growth by taking measures towards removing borders hindrances, in favour of the development of businesses and entrepreneurship and research and education and in favour of the development of infrastructure. It will also focus on increasing the attractiveness of the area by taking measures towards the development of the countryside, the improvement of general health, the improvement of cultural and creative activities and in improving a sustainable economising with the natural resources (Project Application). This will be done by performing a number of part projects (see a full list in appendix 2). The project is extensive and is an investment of almost 7000 SEK (approx 700 EUR) per inhabitant.

The first set of interviews with the entrepreneurial politicians

The first set of proper interviews made with some of the politicians (mayors and deputy mayors) and with municipal commissioners aimed to identify the source of the initiative and the hopes and expectations now that the main project application has been handed in.

It became clear after just a couple of interviews that the point in time when it all came to begin was around May of 2007 when some representatives from a couple of the municipalities had made a study visit to Brussels and it also became clear that the first step, with the idea of creating a transnational region, was actually taken by one specific person. This is yet to be

verified with further interviewing of more people. However, it seems quite possible to pinpoint a number of entrepreneurial politicians in this project. They all seem pretty convinced that this is actually *the* project and that it will be able to turn the demographical tendencies around. When asked what will happen if this project does not happen one of the interviewees said: - If we don't do this, we'll do something else! I.e. whatever the outcome they will not give up. The issues must be solved.

I was also struck by the closeness between the municipal administrations and the people and I was given a very much alive picture of the meaning of living, working and co-existing in scarcely populated areas. I was received that particular Wednesday morning by the municipal commissioner and the deputy mayor of the Norwegian municipality Røyrvik. We took a seat in the office where I was to perform the interview and after the regular greetings I said: - This municipality has 499 inhabitants if I remember correctly? The two of them responded immediately, and simultaneously: - 504! And we are grateful for every new inhabitant we get! At the end of the meeting when the dictating machine was already switched off and I was gathering my things to leave, the municipal commissioner received a text message and declared proudly: - Røyrvik might be getting its 505th inhabitant today. They're at the hospital!³

I was struck by the genuinely proud way in which it was said. To these people every single inhabitant really does matter and possibly could that genuine interest be part of the driving force behind the initiative the region has now taken. I am fairly convinced that the openness on behalf of the interviewees and people involved in the project will facilitate the collection of empirical material and also provide a transparent environment for research, which is positive for the validity of the research.

Possible academic progress to be derived from the upcoming study

The possible gains from this research and from this project in general are manifold. Whether or not the project will be a success (success in this context being the fulfilment of the goals presented in the final report of the pre-project and the project application) does not necessarily affect the amount of information to be retrieved from it. Should it be successful, again starting from the bottom-up perspective it may provide valuable results in the attempt of putting the entrepreneurial politician into a real context.

³ When I called the interviewee to verify that I could quote him he also told me that since the interview, they had gotten yet another inhabitant. The number of inhabitants in the municipality of Røyrvik thus is now 506.

It will be possible to follow the ideas of a number of people from the beginning and see the actual impact of the actions of individuals on the development of an entire area. Should the individuals turn out to be important in the process it might shed a new light on the importance of entrepreneurial initiatives on a political level. Should they turn out to be less important then that too provides valuable insight to the study of the political entrepreneur, yet a different one.

Taking it to the next level it might create a new way of understanding regionalisation, given the methodological nature. Often research means recreating a phenomena in order to understand it whereas performing research on a work in progress gives you the possibility of seeing it all happen. You have access to all actors on the arena and you can establish direct communication with all parts of the process. Also, it creates a unique chance to perform truly empirically driven research and to prove how Action Research and Narrative Method can be applied in Political Science.

The project, being an ambitious one in its nature, may also serve as a predecessor in the regionalisation processes of other border regions where only one of the countries involved is a member of the European Union. Regionalisation issues have been widely debated within the European Union but so far it has largely been about border regions within the EU. The initiative with the creation of possibilities for EGCCs (European cross-border cooperation groupings is just one example. However fruitful the EGCC initiative, it left the border regions at the external borders of the EU without officially sanctioned solutions for co-operation (EU Homepage, EGCC section, 2008-10-02). It has also been discussed within this specific project that they wish to establish a co-operation within the frames of the EGCC although Norway is not a member of the EU. The argument in favour of this possibility has been that it however is a member of the EEA (European Economic Area, sometimes referred to as European Economic Space) (conversation with Deputy Mayor of Strömsund 2008-04-04)and that it should be possible to achieve the same economic benefits as a regular member of the EU since the signing of the agreement regarding the EEA included Norway (and Iceland) as part of the EU's internal market. The signing of the agreement also made possible the co-operation with other EU countries within a number of areas such as environment, trade competition, education etc (The Swedish Government Homepage, EU Section, 2008-10-02). While Norway holds benefits that other non-member might not hold given their membership of the EEA, this process may still serve as an example for regions at the external borders of the EU given its exclusion from the possibility to form a EGCC.

Summary

In this paper the study field of my upcoming research has been presented along with a brief discussion of methodology and the advantages of researching on a work in progress and a loose definition of a research question. The methodological approach will be empirically driven and aim to create theory within a regionalisation process in a border area where entrepreneurial politicians strive to create regional development.

You have also been introduced to the region in question, GIM, what the initiatives have been and how they have worked so far. You have been given the opportunity to take part of the main goals of the project “Midt-Skandinavisk Regionprosjekt GIM” and what areas are to be prioritised within it namely taking actions to increase economic growth within a number of areas as well as improving the region as an attractive place to live. Finally you were given a small discussion of what academic progress could be derived from the upcoming study, the main ones being the ability to put the political entrepreneur into context, create understanding on how you can come about solving issues in border areas as well as peripheral regions and more specifically how this is done at the external border areas of the EU. It can also prove valuable in showing how Action Research and Narrative method can be applied in Political Science.

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Project Board Meeting, Røyrvik 2008-06-27

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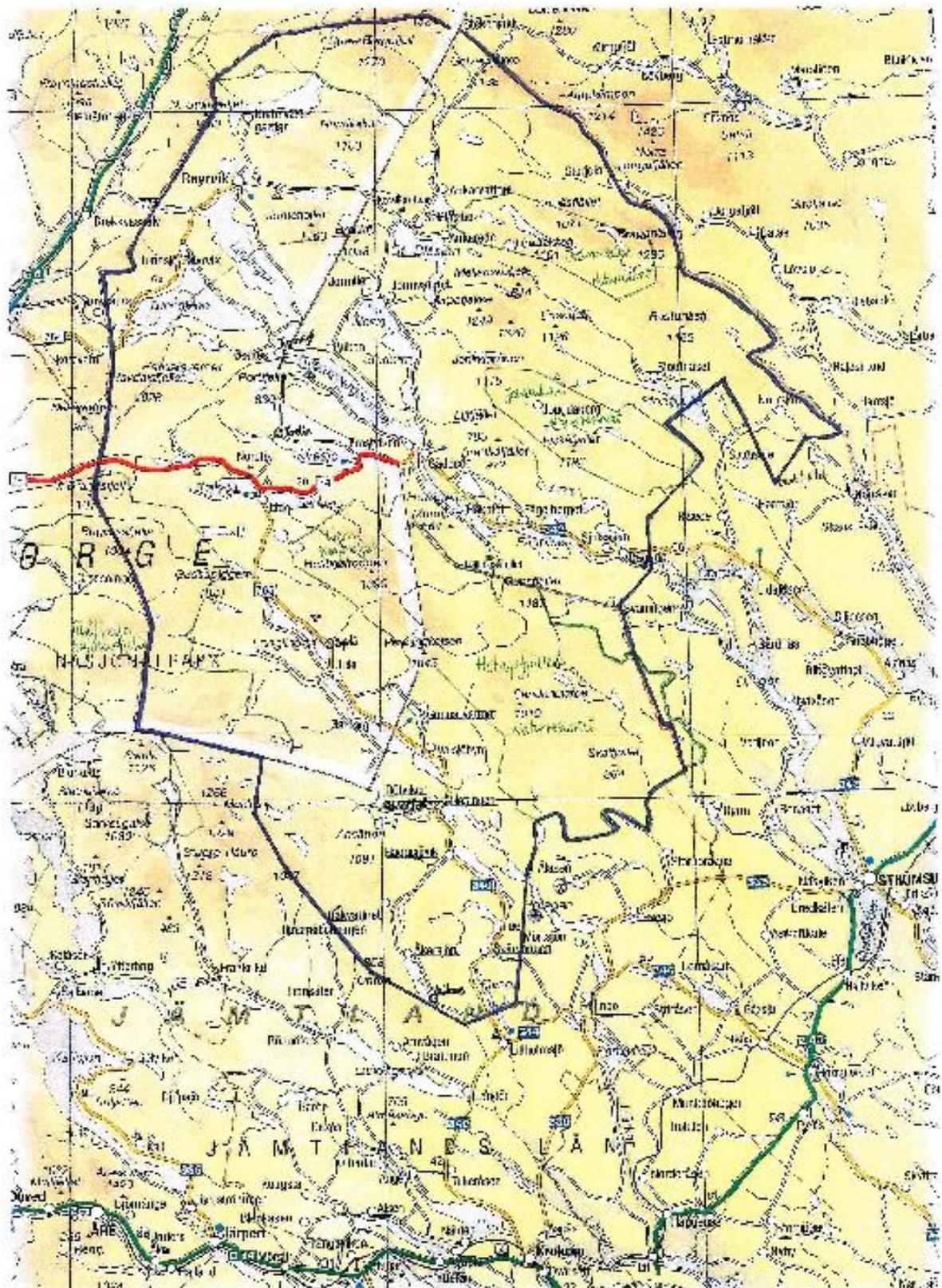
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Appendix 1 - Map over the GIM region



Appendix 2 – Main priorities in the project (according to Final Report)

NB! All of these part projects have at least two specific goals within them, some have up ten. They have not been listed here but can very well be displayed to you should you be interested.

- Mapping of the necessities in the area and the number of border-crossing labourers.
- Trade & Industry and Labour.
- Measures specifically designed to aid the Sami enterprises.
- Tourism and Travelling project, developing co-operation between all tourism enterprises in the region.
- School Project, making possible the co-studying between Norwegian and Swedish Students in some subjects.
- Church Project
- Police Project, try to become a pilot region in the attempt of trying out a mutual Police Force.
- Doctor/Health/Healthcare project, investigate the possibility of using personnel on both sides of the border.
- Cultural Project, establish a theatre network in the region.
- Youth Project, having an annual youth conference where young people in the region can meet the politicians to discuss the development of the region.
- The administration of natural and environmental resources.
- Information project. NB There is already a weekly distributed material on what is going on on both sides of the border that goes out to all households in the region. This was achieved within the pre-project.
- Infrastructure, improvements of roads. Building of a sport centre etc.
- Fees, Customs and VAT, work towards a harmonisation within the area.