Small city regions: development, resilience and sustainability (SMACREG)

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Norway is among the European countries with the largest population share living in smaller cities (SC) and their functional regions (SCR)1 (Onsager et al. 2021). These have been crucial to the high value creation based on Norway's rich natural resources, and to the development of specialised export industries. They have played an important role in the nation's well-distributed welfare services, the high quality of life and well-balanced socio-economic development across the country. However, there has been considerable variation in the development paths, decline and (re-) growth among the SCRs, with increasing divergence between regions.

In the future, SCRs will face major challenges, such as demographic aging and need for restructuring and renewal of industries and services (NoU 2020:15, NoU 2020:12). However, digitalisation, the green shift and smart growth provide new possibilities for SCRs. The pandemic has added to the outlook by bringing SCRs to the fore of people's search for quality of life, with less commuting and a slower pace in everyday life. The SCRs has also recently come higher up on the policy agenda (KMD 'Small city strategy' 2021).

This competence and collaboration project will identify the steering instruments of urban and regional policies, and explore how they can become strong governing tools for SCRs in enhancing resilience and achieving sustainability goals. To do so, we will provide knowledge about the socio-demographic and economic path development of SCRs, including new trends and future challenges. This constitutes both a research gap and a knowledge need among Norwegian municipalities and counties. Through close cooperation, the research institutes NIBR and Nordland Research Institute and the county councils of Agder, Innlandet, Møre/Romsdal and Nordland will produce new knowledge that can strengthen the policy frameworks and capabilities for resilient and sustainable development of SCRs in Norway. Research and development partners from Switzerland, Poland, England, Finland and Denmark will bring international perspectives to the project's approaches, analyses and dissemination. By identifying critical factors in SCRs' institutional capabilities to enhance green shifts, attractiveness, resilience and sustainability, the project will mediate important lessons learned and help to improve national and county policy frameworks for integrated approaches, policies, and instruments that enhance the resilience and sustainability of SCRs.

The project takes its point of departure in the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the aim of making human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable – viewing cities as potential drivers of sustainability (Parnell 2016, 529–30). The interwoven character of urban life in small cities requires an integrated approach that can encourage combined measures of city centre renewal, education, economic development, social inclusion and environmental protection. It also requires establishing solid partnerships within civil society, the local economy and government. Implementing integrated urban and regional sustainability policies has often been a bottleneck, with complex and interrelated challenges. To cope with this complexity, the policy, planning, and implementation processes must be enhanced by supporting the actors and tools involved. Clearly, then, developing resilient and sustainable SCRs requires institutional capability-building and place-based leadership. A further challenge is that Norway's approx. 60–70 SCR consist of 211 municipalities, generally small entities that often lack resources and competencies to build sufficient capabilities on their own. The need for closer cooperation and leadership between the city municipalities and hinterland municipalities is crucial, as is support and guidance from county administrations, and national learning networks.