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Green Domination In Norwegian Letsystems: Catalyst For Growth Or Constraint On Development?

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Introduction

Background

Prior research, and popular experience, indicate that LETSystems are, in many instances, dominated by "greens". This is a group of people with a long tradition of altruistic, radical, ideological engagement. This "green" ideology is similar to the ideological foundation of LETS, and throughout this paper I presuppose that a high degree of ideological commitment equates with a "green" consciousness. I argue that despite this, and in order to achieve its ambitious goals of widespread economic empowerment, holistic community- building, and contributing to a more sustainable use of natural resources, it is crucial that LETS move out of this alternative domain and into the mainstream population.

Given that LETS is generally dominated by greens, a lot of people who do not belong to the "green" movement might be inhibited from joining and so be excluded from LETS. These might be social groups whose political preferences diverge from "green" ideology, or people who are mainly driven by self-interest and economic concerns. Such exclusion might also occur either where greens establish rules which other social groups may not feel comfortable with, or due to "green" intolerance towards people with different political preferences and motivations.

Thus LETS risks being seen as a project established exclusively for those with a "special interest", a perception which could deprive LETS of the scope and widespread appeal upon which broad success is dependent. This paper argues that establishing whether or not LETS achieves these assumed objectives, necessitates first uncovering whether "greens" (or any other social group) dominate the system.

Hence this paper is concerned with attempting to outline what social group(s) dominate the Norwegian LETSystems. Norway had about 10 LETSystems in April 1996; the four largest were selected for a survey to ascertain the political and demographic character of their membership.

In the (Norwegian) summer/autumn of 1995, postal questionnaires were sent to 260 Norwegian LETS members, belonging to LETSystems in s (98 members), Nesodden (78 members), Kristiansand (42 members) and Troms (42 members). 165 questionnaires were returned. This is a response rate of 63.5%.

In order to identify whether specific social groups dominated the membership, I have tried to reveal the following traits: gender, age, marital status, children, employment, whether the respondent is a social welfare recipient, satisfaction with personal income, voluntary work undertaken, living conditions, and political preferences. I also try to uncover and analyse respondents' attitudes to LETS, why they became members, and what prospects they feel the system holds for them on specific and general levels. The survey is thus concerned with discovering the major characteristics of these LETSystems memberships, using primarily quantitative techniques.

Other Studies

LETS is an almost totally new field of research. Hence little research has been conducted into the socio-political character of LETS' memberships. The existing background material I will present here uses a widespread range of parameters, utilising both qualitative and quantitative data. Langseth (1993:64) finds that 45% of the members in Waimate-LETS (New Zealand) joined for ideological reasons, while 15% of his respondents answered that they had joined the system for economic reasons. In a mini-survey from BYTS-LETS system in Stockholm, Sweden, Dana Hofford (econ-lets) found that 37 respondents had joined for ideological reasons, whilst 15 claimed to have joined for economic reasons. Both these surveys indicate a high proportion of "ideologically aware greens".

Colin Williams has conducted surveys in the UK (1996d), Australia (1997) and New Zealand (1996b). In the Australian and New Zealand surveys he asked LETS coordinators to relate what type of people they thought dominated their LETS system. In Australia, 38.3% of Williams' (1997) respondents claimed that greens were dominating, while in 31.9% of the systems, "low-income people" were felt to be the main group. In New Zealand (Williams, 1996b), 49.6% of respondents stated a domination by the greens, while 38.7% claimed those on low income were dominant. In the UK Williams (1996d) investigated this more directly, and found that on average, LETS coordinators described 72% of their members as greens. [\[ENDNOTE 11\]](#). All these findings confirm the domination of LETS by greens.

A high proportion of greens, however, does not necessarily indicate that LETS is full of people who just participate for ideological reasons without seeing the economic benefits of the system. In a study of Totnes LETS, Williams (1996c) found that the most common motivation for joining was economic (35.5%), while 30.6% claimed to have joined for ideological reasons. In a recent study from Manchester (1996a), Williams found that 81.5% of these LETS-members claimed to be motivated by the economic benefits of the system. Williams also found that these people were low income, unemployed people who had a hard time managing from day to day. These people stated that LETS was helping them improve their standard of living.

But these results from Manchester do not contradict Williams' earlier findings indicating that LETS is dominated by greens. This is because the unemployed Williams found in this study, proved to be from what he calls "the disenfranchised middle-class": people with high levels of education, broad experience, and an awareness of social and environmental issues, who have been forced into unemployment. In this way the 'exclusion' problem persists in LETS, since it is only a small fraction of the unemployed population who participate (*ibid*).

A Dutch survey (Offe and Heinze 1992:133-34) finds that LETS prospers amongst highly educated populations in rich neighbourhoods. Traditional manual work was greatly under-represented in these Dutch LETS systems. Qualitative research highlights the problem of green domination more clearly. Ross Dobson, who worked with LETS development in Canada, claims that it is the poor who are the hardest to convince about LETS (Dobson 1993:84):

"Those who need rescue most from our money system are the poor. They are also the hardest to speak to about the system, because they are, if anything, more focused on getting money than anyone else in our society".

The view of LETS as a project mainly for ideologically-conscious "greens" is confirmed by Gill Seyfang (1994:46):

"It was felt that there was a distinct type of person likely to be involved with LETS, and that the system had a strong 'alternative' or 'green' character (...) It was generally accepted as inevitable that LETS would always be (and be seen as) part of the 'alternative scene' rather than a mainstream economic strategy".

One of Seyfang's respondents also noted that this bias was detrimental in terms of attracting different types of people, particularly the young, the unemployed and pensioners, "who could perhaps benefit considerably from the system" (1994:46.). Sidonie Seron (1995: 4.3.2) reads a "green" bias from what is offered in LETS:

"Most LETS members belong to alternative circles and are seen as originals. The media also conveys this image (...) This impression is also reinforced by what is on offer in directories: people offering vegan cookery or aromatherapy clearly outnumber those offering legal advice or computer programming".

Michael Linton (pers.comm.) claims that LETS in the beginning is often dominated by greens, but that this bias declines structurally as the system grows. Williams (1996b) supports this assumption, and adds that new LETS systems tend to have a broader membership than the older ones. Williams calls on studies from a selection of British

LETSsystems (1996d) where those founded prior to 1991 estimated that 95% of their members were greens, while for the youngest (founded in 1995) this was only 51%. This might indicate that the LETS movement has learned the need to develop a broader scope in more recent times. It is also important to note that the proportion of LETS members who are unemployed is almost always higher than in the general population [\[ENDNOTE 2\]](#).

Results

In attempting to uncover the characteristics of Norwegian LETS members I first present the following demographic features of the survey respondents: gender, age, marital status, number of children and education. Secondly, I review the traits which indicate more directly whether a particular social group dominates the body of members. Useful identifiers here include employment, social welfare status, whether voluntary work is undertaken, income-level satisfaction, living conditions and political preferences. Finally, I analyse responses to a series of attitude statements to assess respondents' strength of opinion on a number of statements.

1. Gender (n=165)		
Women	70.9%	
Men	29.1%	
2. Age (n=164)		
21-30 years (born after 1965)	21.3%	
31-40 years (born 1955-64)	44.5%	
41-50 years (born 1945-54)	18.7%	
51-60 years (born 1935-44)	9.0%	
61-70 years (born 1925-34)	6.0%	
3. Marital status (n=163)		
	LETS members	Nationwide, age 20-79 (SSB 1995:table 64)
Married or co-habitant	64.4%	72.4%
Single	35.6%	27.6%
4. Do you have children? (n=165)		
	LETS members	Nationwide, 16+ years (SSB 1995: table 33+35)
Yes, under 18 years	64.2%	29.2%
Yes, over 18 years	14.5%	
No	21.2%	
5. Education (n=149)		
	LETS members	Nationwide, 16+ years (SSB 1995:table 126)
Compulsory education only	1.3%	38.6%
High-school education	16.8%	43.4%
University education, lower degree	36.9%	
University education, higher degree	45.0%	18.0%

6. Employment (n=161)		
	LETS members	Nationwide:16-74 years (SSB 1995:table 175)
Employed (full or part-time)	65.8%	64.9%
Unemployed	9.9%	3.7%
Students	18.0%	
Pensioners/disabled	6.2%	31.4%

7. Are you employed on a regular basis? (n=105)

Yes	75.2%
No	24.8%

8. Do you receive any kinds of social [state welfare] benefits? (n=161)

Yes	27.3%
No	72.7%

9. Is it a strain to get by on your current income? (n=163)

Yes	16.6%
Partly	36.8%
No	46.6%

10. Are you, or have you ever been, actively engaged in any form of voluntary organisation apart from paid work? (n=165)

Yes	89.7%
No	10.3 %

11. Have you ever been part of these organisation's leadership, and, among other things, planned activities for others to join? (n=157)

Yes	78.3%
No	21.7%

12. In what kinds of organizations have you been engaged with, actively or passively? (multiple responses given)

Campaign/pressure group	42.4%
Representative body	18.5%
Sport	14.9%
Political party	13.2%
Music/band	11.1%

13. What type of living accomodation do you have? (n=163)

Single house	46.6%
Houses put together	23.3%
Apartment building	7.4%

City-street building	3.1%
House for two families	6.7%
House for four families	6.7%
Other	6.7%

14. What political party would you vote for in the event of an election for the National Assembly tomorrow? (n=142)

		LETS members	1993 Election (SSB1995:table3)
Fremskrittspartiet (Frp)	(right-wing populists)	1.4%	6.3%
Hyre (H)	(conservatives)	2.1%	17.0%
Kristelig folkeparti (KrF)	(christian-democrats)	1.4%	7.9%
Venstre (V)	(liberals with green profile)	15.5%	3.6%
Senterpartiet (Sp)	(farmers)	5.6%	16.7%
Arbeiderpartiet (A)	(social-democrats)	11.3%	36.9%
Sosialistisk Venstreparti (SV)	(socialist red-greens)	35.2%	7.9%
De Grnne	(environmentalists "the greens")	12.7%	0.1%
Rd Valgallianse (RV)	(marxist-leninists)	13.4%	1.1%
Others		1.4%	2.4%

Attitude Analysis

The survey included 12 statements which elicited responses on a scale of 1 (don't agree, not important) to 10 (agree, important). These statements were divided into two sections. The first posed statements which attempted to find out why the respondent joined LETS, and the second related to more general attitudes about LETS [\[ENDNOTE 3\]](#).

Motives for joining

In analysing the responses related to joining, I have chosen to split the motives into two main categories: Short-term altruistic (ideological) motives and short-term self-centred motives [\[ENDNOTE 4\]](#). The motives are 'short term' because 'long term altruism' can be similar to 'long term enlightened self-interest'.

To explore the short-term altruistic motives, I averaged the responses to the statements:

- I liked the idea, and
- LETS helps me contribute to a more environmentally friendly world.

To explore the short-term self-centred motives, I averaged the responses to the statements:

- LETS can help me save money
- LETS can help me to get more contact with my neighbours
- LETS has a lot to offer, and gives easy access to this, and
- LETS employs me, it gives me work..

Results indicate that the respondents put major emphasis on the short-term altruistic motives. These motives scored an average of 8.1 on the 1 to 10 scale. The short-term self-centred motives were rated an average of 4.9 on the same scale. This indicates that the members primarily joined LETS for altruistic (ideological) reasons.

General attitudes

In analysing the responses I have split the claims into three categories.

1. Claims that positively emphasise LETS as a strategy for economic empowerment. This included an averaging of the responses to the statements

- LETS can help me save money
- LETS has a lot to offer, and gives easy access to this
- LETS employs me, it gives me work
- LETS is the start of a more just money system that can spread to the entire world
- LETS helps people afford more, and
- LETS helps people to get work

These statements elicited a joint average of 5.3.

2. Claims that positively emphasise LETS as a strategy for building community. Here, I used an average of the responses to the statements:

- LETS can help me to have more contact with my neighbours, and
- LETS helps people in the community to get to know each other

These statements scored 6.4 on average.

3. Claims that positively emphasise LETS as a strategy for a more environmentally sustainable world. Here, I used an average of responses to the statements:

- LETS helps me contribute to a more environmentally friendly world, and
- A widespread use of LETS contributes to a more environmentally sustainable society

These claims were rated 7.9 on average.

These indicate that respondents' prime reason for using LETS was related to environmental concerns, followed by a belief in the system's power to build community, and lastly its perceived ability to provide economic empowerment. These results reflect an emphasis upon short-term altruistic (ideological) motives. From this, it seems reasonable to conclude that environmentalism and ecological consciousness (or "green" ideology) is a prime motivation for a majority of people joining LETS in Norway and constitutes a dominant attitude within LETS at this point in time.

The Typical Norwegian LETS Member

From the demographic and attitudinal results we could describe the typical Norwegian LETS member as being a woman between the ages of 21 and 40, who is very well educated and has full time employment. She receives no state welfare benefits and is quite satisfied with her financial situation. She is, to a large extent, engaged in idealistically based voluntary work. Politically, she belongs to green/radical/left-wing factions (defined as the SV, De Grnne, and RV parties which attracted 61.3% of LETS members votes, compared to a total of 9.1% in the national election). She joined LETS mostly for altruistic (ideological) reasons, and she puts major emphasis on the environmental aspects in her general attitudes towards LETS.

Conclusion

The members in the four Norwegian LETS systems proved not to be representative of the general population. What can be the reason for this? As I see it, an important factor in the creation of this demographic bias is the underlying ideology being transmitted from the initiators of the different LETS systems. By emphasizing this ideology unconsciously through the informal marketing of the systems, people who share this line of thought are attracted to the system, while others are excluded. All of the LETS systems in this survey relied on informal marketing (recruiting members by word of mouth, for example). None of the LETS systems had any deliberate strategy to ensure they had a representative body of members. Nor had they reflected on this as a problem. In Kristiansand and Troms this tendency was most clearly visible. Here, the LETS systems had originated from "Framtiden i Vre Hender", which is an

organisation that generally stands for holistic global consciousness and sustainability. This organisation was also used to recruit new members for the LETSystems.

When LETSystems are dominated by members who are primarily ideologically motivated, they risk ending up in a vicious cycle which perpetuates the ideological/political bias, and structurally excludes everyone else. But, is this really only a short term problem? Michael Linton (pers.comm.) assumes that the "green" dominance will disappear as LETSystems grow. This way LETS is structurally capable of developing a broad and representative body of members. In addition, Williams (1996d) claims that new LETSystems tend to be more representative of the general population than the older and more ideologically-based ones.

In the introduction to this paper I claimed that a broad and representative body of members is a precondition for a general achievement of the LETS' aims. The survey results presented show that Norwegian LETS members are not representative of wider society. But how do we avoid this dominance? Two strategies can be discerned.

The first is to adopt a laissez-faire approach, which assumes that the biased membership of LETS poses no threat to the movement, because it will all level out as LETS grows. In this view, LETS development should not be concerned with membership demographics, because a widespread appeal will evolve with time. High ideological motivation and the development of a green culture within LETS will then be seen as a necessary catalyst in the early stages. The major advantage with such a strategy is that it is relatively easy to motivate "greens" to join LETS, resulting in a fairly easy build-up of systems. The major disadvantage is that it risks making LETS into a 'niche' project.

A second, alternative strategy would be to deliberately build up a membership which reflects the demographics of the broader community from the beginning. This could be done, for instance, by putting emphasis on the economic benefits of the system, and under-communicating the ideological aspects. The major advantage of this approach is that it increases the chances of a broad selection of members joining from the beginning by de-mystifying the system and presenting it as a common-sense, everyday project. The major disadvantage is that it is hard to argue for the economic benefits of a non-existent system. This could be a difficult way to launch a system.

Which of these strategies is the most effective is hard to say. It will, to a large extent, depend upon individuals, social contexts, the supply and demand present, growth-strategies, and what impressions of LETS these factors generate among different groups of people. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that a major objective among all LETSystems must be to secure a broad and representative body of members. And this aim may actually be dependent on a "green" domination as catalyst for growth. But with such a strategy it is important to remember that a persistent ideological profile of this type might result in LETS ending up as a marginal project.

Endnotes

ENDNOTE 1: Williams does not in any of these papers state how he has reached these conclusions. Nor does he define or discuss the categories "greens", "low-income people", "unemployed", etc. To what extent do these categories overlap? In a later survey (1996a), however, he finds that a large proportion of the LETS members belong to the "disenfranchised middle class", a category that can be interpreted as encompassing both the "greens" and the "unemployed". [Back to text](#)

ENDNOTE 2: In the UK, Williams (1996d) found 27.5% of LETS members were unemployed. In New Zealand (1996b), the figure was 38.7% and in Australia, 31.9% of the members lived on a "low income". In Manchester, UK, Williams (1996a) found 43% of the members were out of work. [Back to text](#)

ENDNOTE 3: Categories hold differing numbers of statements, due to the discovery of these analysis techniques after the questionnaire had been written. [Back to text](#)

ENDNOTE 4: The category statements all correlate internally, using Pearson's R coefficient at a significance level of 0.1 (Gran 1996:109-110). [Back to text](#)

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