

### UNDERSTANDING IMPLEMENTATION OF A STRATEGIC TOOL IN PLANNING LAW – NATIONAL DIVERSIFICATION BY IMPLEMENTATION: REGIONAL PLANNING STRATEGIES, RPS, IN NORWAY (1049)

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**Abstract.** This paper applies the theory on translation and strategic planning theory to address two questions. (1) As a new tool in the Planning and Building Act (PBA), how is the Regional Planning Strategy (RPS) understood and implemented, and how can this implementation be seen as an institutional change of the regional planning system? (2) How is the strategic orientation understood and implemented?

The basis for our analysis is a study of the implementation of the RPS in Norwegian counties over three 'generations'. We find that the translation, contextualization, and re-contextualization of the PBA regarding how the RPS are implemented are clearly diverse in 2011/12, a convergence of concepts between the counties in generation two, and that diversity reappears in new ways in generation three.

**Keywords:** regional strategic planning, translation, storytelling.

#### 1. Introduction

##### 1.1. Regional planning strategies (RPS) – research questions

We are experiencing an increased European interest in strategic planning, both in practice and in theory. It is a good starting point for our research on a new statutory strategic element in regional planning in Norway, Regional Planning Strategies (RPS).

By following the implementation practice for all Norwegian regions over three generations of RPSs from 2011 to 2022, we seek to answer the following research questions. (1) As a new tool in the Planning and Building Act (PBA), how is the RPS understood and implemented in practice, and, consequently, how can this implementation be seen as an institutional change of the regional planning system? (2) How is the strategic orientation understood and implemented?

To our knowledge Norway provides a unique case because no other Anglo-American or European country has introduced the equivalent of this statutory tool at the regional planning level.

This paper contributes to new knowledge of how new strategic elements unfolds within a

country's law through its implementation in practice. We add to the planning-theory dialogue by discussing regional re-contextualization in implementation (Røvik, 1998, 2002), combined with the perspectives of storytelling (Throgmorton, 1992), and co-creation/co-production (Osborne, 2010; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011; Aastvedt & Higdem, 2022).

## **1.2. New types of strategic planning in Europe**

Strategic Planning (STP) has to some extent held a subordinate and fuzzy position. According to Albrechts (2009) strategic spatial planning evolved in the 1960s and 1970s toward a system of comprehensive planning in several western European countries that integrated nearly everything at different administrative levels. When the neo-liberal paradigm replaced the Keynesian-Fordist one in the 1980s, Europe witnessed a retreat from both public intervention and strategic spatial planning (Albrechts, 2009).

By the turn of the 1990s, STP experienced a renaissance. The EU launched many STP processes, such as the ESDP – European Spatial Development Perspective. Since 2000, the EU has developed, adopted, and implemented other strategic documents. Planning researchers broadly agree that this is why there is an increasing European interest in strategic spatial planning today. See for example Albrechts (2012), Healey (2009), Balducci et al. (2011), Abis & Garau (2016).

Though there are many interpretations of STP, this statement captures the main points: *“... action-oriented instead of plan-oriented, transformative instead of regulative, selectively visionary instead of comprehensive, to cope with uncertainty instead of fixing certainties, and to deal with relational space instead of the essentialist spaces of ‘zoning’ or given administrative boundaries. It is characterized by networked and co-productive governance, to transgressing boundaries between the public, private and the third sector, and between the sectors and scales within the government, as well.”* (Mäntysalo et al. 2015).

There also seems to be a general perception in planning research that we are about to see a new style of strategic planning: a combination of traditional and new approaches to planning of sustainable development, regional development and “new” regional politics based on the contemporary development of critical thinking and practical experiences in Europe (see Albrechts, 2006a, 2006b; Healey, 2006a, 2006b; Olesen and Richardson, 2012; Mäntysalo, Kangasoja and Kanninen, 2015a).

Politicians seem increasingly to be in favor of strategic planning by using plans as a frame of reference during decision-making processes (Desmidt & Meyfroodt, 2021). Experiences with local and regional STP processes show they can be imaginative and creatively suitable to frame citizen participation and stakeholder collaboration (Lingua & Balz, 2019; Purkarthofer, et.al, 2019) and that transformative, innovative, visionary STP-processes can cope with wicked problems (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2020).

## **1.3. A renewal and strengthening of Norwegian strategic planning**

In Norway, STP has been present both in the field of practice since the 70s (Kommunal- og regionaldepartementet, 2001; Kommunal- og arbeidsdepartementet, 1997), and in the field

of theory (Amdam and Veggeland, 1998, 2011). The Norwegian planning system is based on the Planning and Building Act (PBA 2008), which designates the planning system as the main tool for directing societal and territorial (spatial) development in municipalities and counties (Kommunal- og Regionaldepartementet, 2002; 2015; (Higdem, 2018). Local and regional elected bodies (municipality council and county council) are the main planning authorities (PBA, 2008; Hanssen and Aarsæther, 2019). A distinct Norwegian example of a ‘strategic turn’ in planning has been RPSs, which the government of Norway introduced in the revised PBA of 2008.

The regional planning system of Norway is illustrated in figure 1. RPS is thus defined in the statutory text: ‘... [RPS] shall give an account of important regional development trends and challenges, assess long-term development potentials and determine which issues are to be addressed through further regional planning’ (PBA 2008).

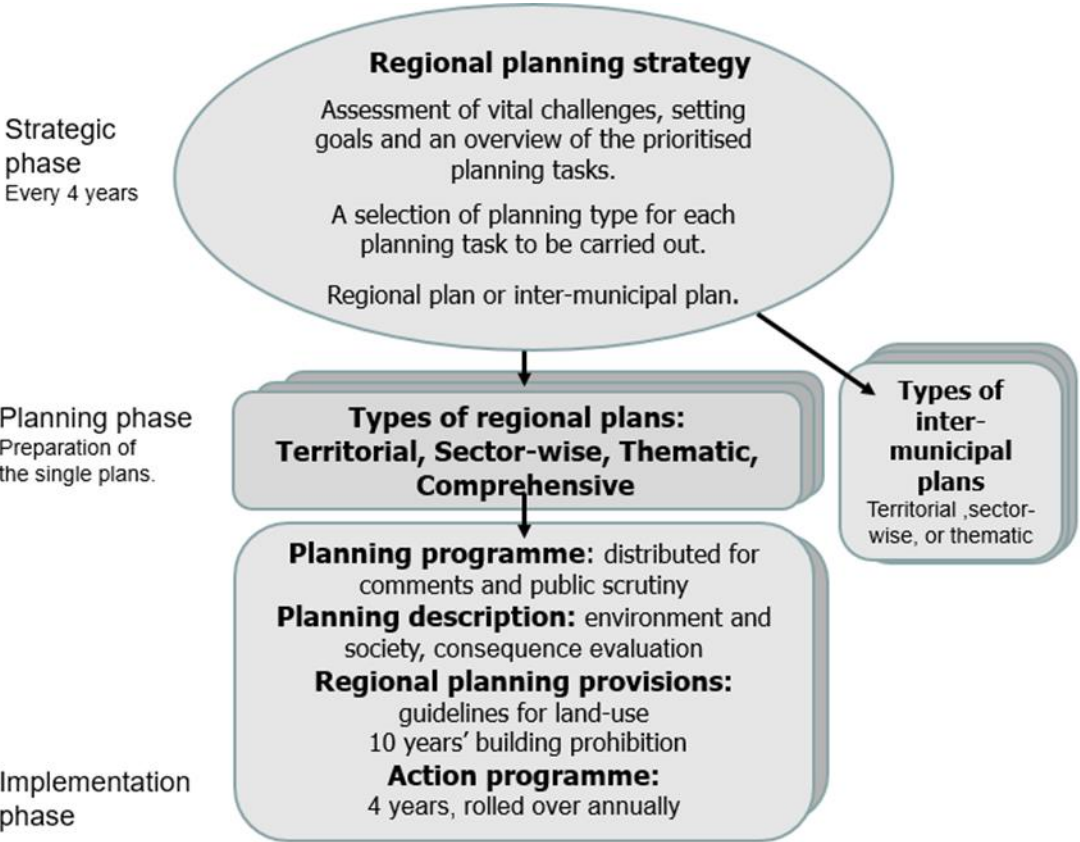


Figure 1. The Regional Planning System of Norway  
Source: Higdem, 2018.

The regional planning authority is to prepare an RPS every four years in close cooperation with the municipalities, the county governor, regional state, and other state bodies. The county council may also invite other organizations and institutions to participate.

The main intention for introducing the RPS into the regional planning system was to make the political priorities for regional planning more targeted by focusing on the vital challenges,

and increase regional planning's efficiency and flexibility (Miljøverndepartementet, 2007–2008). These were heavily debated issues within the former PBA and its practices (cf. Falleth and Johnsen, 1996; Higdem, 2001; Asmervik and Hagen, 2001; Vike, 1995; Røsnes, 2001). Additionally, the government strengthened the principle that regional elected bodies must have a significant responsibility for the development of the region. Finally, the RPSs were understood as a better instrument for regionally adapted implementation of the central state's policies and a tool for coordination between the major planning actors of the region (Miljøverndepartementet, 2004).

The idea was to give priority to planning by necessity rather than planning by duty, hence the strategic orientation. The RPS should therefore include an overview of how the prioritized planning challenges should be followed up by planning instruments.

## **2. Theoretical position**

### **2.1. Institutional theory and translation theory**

The Norwegian planning system is a hybrid system comprising different but side-by-side logics of steering and directing (Mahony and Thelen, 2010; Hanssen et al., 2018). Regional planning is a mediating meso-level process in a multi-level democracy (Hanssen et al., 2018). National political ambitions of addressing complex societal challenges, such as sustainable development, are to be translated into regional and local contexts (Healey, 2006), and find their arena in regional planning. A networked multi-actor system where civil actors and interests are also included is addressed by planning as well as institutional scholars (cf. Healey, 1998; Sagalyn, 2007; Bevir et al., 2003; Rhodes, 1991; Sørensen and Torfing, 2005, 2007). The logic of co-creating the future through networks and partnerships is prominent in regional planning (Hanssen et al., 2018; Higdem, 2014, 2018). Our point of departure is the understanding of implementation of new ideas, models, concepts in public sector as translation-processes, where ideas are conceptualized in the implementation phase (Røvik, 1998)

How the introduction of a new idea like the concept or tool of RPSs in the regional planning system (PBA 2008) turns out depends on the country, that is, the counties' implementation. The implementation logic is thus a top-down process from the central government to the county level. In this top-down chain of translation within a hierarchical structure, there is presumably limited freedom of translation. There will be room for local adjustments (Røvik, 1998), but the central government (in this case) may develop mechanisms to control the implementation. The chain of interpretation will develop sequentially as a stimulus-response situation, where the contextualization of a model will proceed in steps from one hierarchical level to another. The possible translators are multiple even in a hierarchical public order (Røvik, 1998; Hardy et al., 1998). Thus, ideas and discourses about how this new element of RPS is to be understood and handled in practice will presumably take many forms and will be contextualized and even re-contextualized (Røvik, 1998) into a new framework at several stages.

The room for regional contextualization and interpretation will also depend on the central government's managerial and control mechanisms, like the "National Expectations of Local

and Regional Planning” (NE). In addition, the implementation of the RPS may influence how the regional planning system is perceived and how it works in practice as a form of further regional institutionalization of a certain regional planning practice. This implies that we *may find* diverse forms of RPSs and therewith forms that may add to the hybridity of the regional planning system of Norway.

## **2.2. STP Strategic planning – storytelling and co-production**

In our analysis of the RPS in Norwegian regional planning, we select two main elements of STP: *storytelling* and *co-production/co-creation*. These two elements contribute to different STP focuses, but also overlap. For example effective storytelling usually requires that they be developed through co-creation.

### *2.2.1. Storytelling*

We have chosen to understand and analyze RPSs as storytelling – about the past, the present and the future, about vital challenges, and about who should participate in the planning process and in what manner. Olesen (2017) claims that strategic spatial planning has since the early 1990s developed into an exercise in persuasive storytelling. The increased interest in strategic planning in the 1990s was often linked to the intended persuasiveness of spatial strategies, which often relied on spatial concepts and metaphors with supportive storylines that sought to mobilize attention and actors around their core ideas and to transform how key actors think and act in urban areas (Healey, 2009; Olesen, 2017).

Throgmorton (1992:17) emphasizes that good planning is “... persuasive storytelling about the future, and that planners are future-oriented storytellers who write persuasive texts that other people read (construct and interpret), in diverse and often conflicting ways.” Storytelling is both a model *of* the way planning *is* done, and a model *for* the way planning could or should be done. Storytelling is an important aspect of everyday planning practice” (Van Hulst 2012: x), whether it is intentional or not (Asmervik and Hagen, 2001). Storytelling is a planning method that needs to be developed in praxis, through praxis (cf. Flyvbjerg, 1991; Hillier, 2002; Healey, 2009; Throgmorton 1992; Olesen, 2017). Planning fundamentally revolves around the successful use of language – spoken, written or as maps and images (Hellspong, 1992, 1995; Ramirez, 1995a, 1995b; Asmervik and Hagen, 2001).

Storytelling is closely linked to key planning concepts like dialogical planning, collaborative planning, and communicative planning (Healey, 1997; Forester, 1999; Sager, 2013; Harper and Stein, 2012). These concepts and related theories are obviously also relevant in the analysis of RPS. Albrechts et al. (2003) argue that much of the power of strategic spatial planning lies in its use of concepts and images to mobilize and fix attention.

Healey (2006b) has introduced the concept relational complexity to focus on how complex and demanding dialogue and cooperation in strategic planning can be: “‘Relational complexity’ is therefore decidedly not ‘comprehensive’ in its approach. It needs to be highly selective, focusing on the distinctive histories and geographies of the relational dynamics of a particular place. It may recognize borders and cohesions, but also the tensions, exclusions and conflicts which these generate” (Healey, 2006b:542). As long as RPS is a new procedural praxis characterized by multi-level governance and networked multi-actor systems (Bevir et

al., 2003; Higdem, 2015; Higdem and Sandkjær Hanssen, 2014), relational complexity appears to be a useful analytical concept, both for the storytelling and for RPS.

### 2.2.2. *Co-production - Co-creation*

Another appropriate concept introduced into the strategic planning by Albrechts (2012) is *co-production*. Strategies, policies, and plans are increasingly realized in collaborative settings and processes of co-production.

The term has been used for many years in different contexts and in different intellectual traditions, from co-production in the delivery of services to co-production as a political strategy and a method of planning (Mitlin, 2008; Watson, 2014; Higdem, 2014, 2018; Hanssen et al., 2018; Aastvedt & Higdem, 2022;). Here, we use the better term of co-creation (Aastvedt & Higdem, 2022), even though it has been used interchangeably with coproduction (Albrechts 2012). The activity of co-creation is used to “enhance the production of public value for example in terms of visions, plans and policies” (Aastvedt & Higdem, 2022: 60). It emphasizes the substantial engagement of citizens and grassroots organizations (Le Galés, 2002; Higdem, 2014) and a process ‘more realistically grounded in citizen preference’ (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004, p. 55).

Co-creation goes right to the core of both RPS and regional planning in the exhortation that all public bodies and all community organizations need to participate and contribute to more innovative and transformative practices (Albrechts, 2006a), in what is called collaborative innovation (Sørensen & Torfing, 2018). In this sense it is an expression of a development of collaborative and communicative planning (Watson, 2014).

Co-producing RPS, or a regional STP, helps to highlight a more managerial approach to regional planning by focusing on the interaction between various layers of an organization or a public sector (cf. Klijn & Koppenjan 1997; Bryson, 2018; George & Desmidt, 2014). The two ‘co-terms’ are closely related to terms such as ‘collaborative methodology’ (Wolf, Nogueira & Borges, 2017), ‘modern governance’ (Kooiman, 1993), ‘network governance’ (Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997), ‘interactive governance’ (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007), and ‘new (public) governance’ (Osborne, 2010).

All this co-creative activity in strategy development and planning also has its own challenges. Collaborative planning approaches are often torn between the legitimate demand for public participation and the necessity for assuring accountability and responsibility of decision-making bodies (Renn et al., 1993). This can cause co-creation to become mainly a ritual activity (McClymont, 2014).

### **3. Method and data**

We evaluate the RPS work limited to (1) the process leading up to the RPS adopted by the county council in all the counties, (2) the product, the actual RPS document, (3) the national approval – relevant only for the 1st RPS generation. The requirement for national approval was later abolished, and the county council itself now approves the RPS.

We have assessed the RPS work against relevant legislation and national expectations. Both the law and the specific national letter of expectations place demands and expectations on

the county councils, which will ultimately adopt the final RPS text. We examine how the RPS is understood, interpreted, and implemented as practice, i.e., as the planning strategy process and the adopted planning strategy document.

At the same time, the entire RPS institute rests on a necessary premise that many different actors must do their part of the work, i.e., making their contribution by ‘understanding, interpreting and implementing’ the planning strategy.

Our research material (data) comprises documents about and from the RPS processes in all the counties in Norway. There were 19 counties until 2018, 18 until 2020, and 11 until 2024.

Our data are based on the study of these documents: (1) the PBA of 2008 with changes, preparatory work to the PBA and the guidance material to the RPS; (2) all RPSs developed in 2011-2012, 2015-2016 and 2019-2020, and the case papers following the discussion and the adoption of the RPS; (3) the ‘National Expectations of Local and Regional Planning’ and the central state’s letters of final approval to each RPS developed in 2011-2012.

The data from the PRP’s generations one and two is published in Norwegian from the now finalized EVALPLAN-research project (Higdem & Hagen, 2017; Higdem & Kvalvik, 2019). Research on the third-generation RPS and the analysis of the whole timespan is therefore new.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1. RPS - criteria for classification**

To classify the RPSs, we have developed a list of criteria of key questions related to the RPS. The criteria are taken from what is expected of RPS in the planning act PBA as a document and as a process, and in national expectations (NE) for regional and municipal planning.

### **4.2. The first generation of RPS 2011/12**

The two main dimensions of how the counties have implemented the RPSs are (1) whether, or to what degree, the counties have complied with the PBA’s provisions of the RPS, and (2) whether, or to what degree, the counties have addressed, answered, and complied with the National Expectations of the RPS. Table 1 shows the implementation status for the first round with RPS. The two dimensions (axes) constitute (1) the “master model” of how a RPS is to be understood and implemented – the procedural and model side, and (2) the substantial side, meaning the central government’s expectations of what policy themes the RPS is to encompass and assess. In the scheme below, the two dimensions are the two axes that form the four-field table below (Table 2).

Table 1. RPS first generation 2011-2012. The counties' four types of adaptations to implementation

<b>National Expectations (NE) of RPS</b> PBA's demands, requirement of RPS	Meet by and large the PBA's requirements <b>The law-abiding</b>	Does not meet the PBA's requirements <b>De disobedient</b>
	Relates and responds to, and possibly fulfill the NE to a great degree. <b>The dutiful</b> The law-abiding and dutiful: <b>Loyal</b> 6 counties	The disobedient and dutiful <b>Challengers</b> 4 counties
Relates and responds to, and possibly fulfill the NE within their own context and frame of interpretation. Possibly also not relating to the NE. <b>The independent</b>	The law-abiding and independent <b>Translators</b> 6 counties	The disobedient and independent <b>Heretical</b> 2 counties

Accordingly, the two axes produce four possible adaptations when implementing the RPS. The law-abiding counties comply with the law's provisions, whereas the disobedient deviate from these or have significant shortcomings. On the "National Expectation" axis, the loyal are counties that address, answer to, comply with national policy, and adhere to it. The independent are those that contextualize the national policy expectations within their own regional context and frame of interpretation and translation. Consequently, four different types of adaptations occur. We have called the four types as follows: the loyal, the challengers, the heretical, and the translators. There are different degrees and sorts of adaptations within each main type, since there is a continuum along both axes. Consequently, these are ideal types. The vast diversity of implementation practices in this first round in 2011-2012 is illustrated by the presence of RPSs in each group.

*The loyal* are the counties that comply both with the law and with the National Expectations. However, we find that there are many forms of loyalty. For instance, a county may be loyal to the National Expectations but simultaneously raise critical questions to these and demand a



closer dialogue with the central government.

The *challengers* represent the combination loyal/disobedient; they contest the interpretations of the RPS according to the PBA and the guidance booklet, even though they are loyal to the National Expectations.

*The translators* are independent/law-abiding, meaning that the execution of the RPS is according to PBA, but they are independent from the National Expectations. Their picture of the actual challenges for the county are more influenced by their own analyses and understandings – rather than the National Expectations. An example from two counties in the middle of Norway illustrate that translation is the dominant view regarding the National Expectations. By way of introduction to this view in the RPSs, they refer to the Government Cabinet's own directive stating: 'The Government Cabinet has in earlier directives on regional planning stated that the goals and directions the central state points to will not be equally important in all counties and municipalities.' Therefore, the main issues for the county and municipal planning are the counties' and the municipalities' own policies. Accordingly, the counties interpret the power of direction of the National Expectations and the counties' own legitimate execution of discretion as follows: 'The Government Cabinet therefore expects that those who participate in the planning processes to develop good comprehensive solutions in a regional and local perspective. Consequently, the Cabinet paves the way for local and regional competence represented by the local and regional political bodies and the elected representatives to practice the necessary discretion and to provide for local and regional added value.'

*The independents* also tend to offer the central government policy advice or demands based on their assessment of the regional development challenges ahead. The policy recommendations are put forth with issues where the central state holds the authority, such as policy means and measure for agriculture, fishery or employment.

*The heretical*, which comprise only two counties, comply neither with the PBA's provisions of a regional planning strategy nor with the National Expectations. They define their own political and planning methodological reality. The challengers and the heretical share a characteristic, which is to develop a strategic plan (STP), rather than a strategy of the regional planning to come (RPS). We also observed examples where central actors such as the county politicians, the county as an organization, the municipalities and the regional partnerships utilize the goals and strategies of the RPS as a planning document in their own planning (Bråtå et al., 2014; Higdem & Hagen, 2015). The two types separate on a central provision of the PBA; the challengers have also worked out an overview of which plans are to be made during the four-year period to come, which is a planning strategy.

Regardless of this diversity, the government approved all RPSs of the first generation, as our analysis of the letters of approval show (Higdem & Hagen, 2017). However, the government's feedback identified these deviations and deficiencies: a) the absence of an overview of future planning tasks, b) the failure to account for the national expectations, c) national challenges not resulting in regional planning, and d) the presence of too many plans or plans that do not accord with the PBA.

### 4.3. The second generation of RPS 2015/16

The main picture of the second generation of RPSs is convergence (Higdem & Jacobsen Kvalvik, 2018). (See Table 2.) This is the counties' logical reaction to the government's thorough feedback of the first generation. Such elaborate translations from the government increases the possibility of the county's compliance to the PBA's requirements and to the National Expectations to regional planning. Hence, we find the RPSs in only two adaptations, the Loyal and the Translators.

Table 2. RPS second generation (2015-2016) of adaptations to implementation

National Expectations to RPS	PBA's demands, requirement of RPS	
	Meet by large the PBA's requirements <b>The law-abiding</b>	Does not meet the PBA's requirements <b>De disobedient</b>
Relates and responds to, and possibly fulfill the NE to a great degree. <b>The dutiful</b>	The law-abiding and dutiful: <b>Loyal</b>	The disobedient and dutiful <b>Challengers</b> none
Relates and responds to, and possibly fulfill the NE within their own context and frame of interpretation. Possibly also not relating to the NE. <b>The independent</b>	The law-abiding and independent <b>Translators</b>	The disobedient and independent <b>Heretical</b> none

The Government adjusted the PBA before the second generation of the RPS, where the requirement for national approval was removed, giving the county councils the final authority. Secondly, by adding 'to take a stand on long-term development goals' in § 7.1 (Ot.prop nr. 47 (2003-2004), the RPS is directed towards being a planning document instead of a strategy for the future planning tasks of the county.

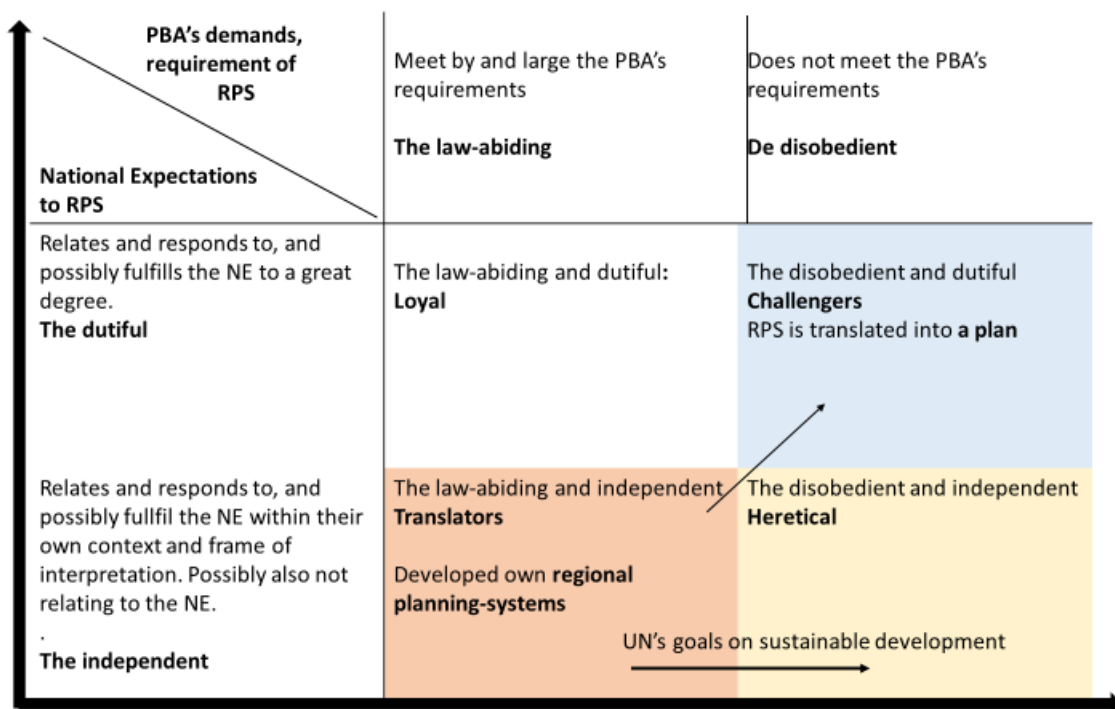
### 4.4. The third generation of RPS 2019/20

The UN's member states' decisions of the 17 goals of sustainable development toward 2030 were announced in 2015, and the NE (2019- 2023) was launched in 2019 (Nasjonale

forventninger 2019-2023).

Owing to the UN's 17 goals, a new NE, and the two major changes in the PBA (presented above in section 4.3.), we were surprised to observe in the third generation of RPSs the renewed development of diverse practices between counties and wider translations of the RPSs, as well as quite new adaptations or figurations. See Table 3.

Table 3. RPS third generation (2019-2020) of adaptations to implementation



In the third generation of RPSs, our analysis shows there are no adaptations (translations) in the *Loyal* category. No RPSs comply both with the law and the NE of 2019. However, we find RPAs in the three other categories. The *challengers* dispute the goals of RPSs according to the PBA. These counties have translated the RPS from a strategy of future planning tasks into a plan for the county. In doing so the county's political planning authority discusses and decides upon a common strategic spatial plan which sets the direction the county itself, the regional state-bodies, and the local municipalities. For example, one county calls their RPS as '*The development-plan for Rogaland*' (Rogaland fylkeskommune, 2021), which sets the direction for further planning of societal development and the county's economic priorities,

organizational development, and governance. These counties are loyal to the NE.

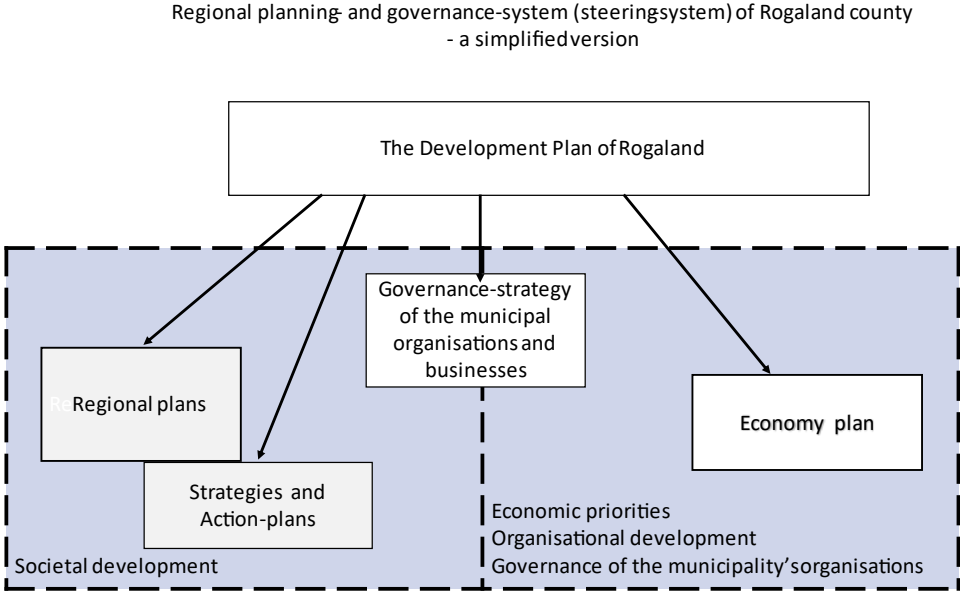


Figure 2. Translations of the RPS into a Regional development Plan, Rogaland County

The *Translators* abide by the PBA’s expectations regarding the understanding of a RPS, but they neglect to take the NE into account. As Figure 3 illustrates, the UN’s goals of sustainable development (UN17) are implemented as superior to the NE. The RPSs in the translator group focuses on how the UN17 is to be implemented in the RPS. The arrow from the group of *Translators* and into the Heretical group illustrates that the UN17 goals also seem superior to the NE in this group.

The translators share another characteristic in that the RPS also consists of an independent understanding of the county’s regional planning system, which applies to the PBA, but also extends the PBA. An example of extension is the operationalization by Møre og Romsdal County of the RPS and the Comprehensive Regional plan by evolving a new layer of *County strategies* for four years, instead of the PBA’s Action programmed of the plan itself.

*The Heretical* counties are disobedient to as well as independent of the NE. The examples here show that these RPSs may not have long-term goals and may neglect the NE in the planning. However, as indicated by the arrow from the category of *Translators* to the Heretical – the heretical may take the UN17 goals into account.

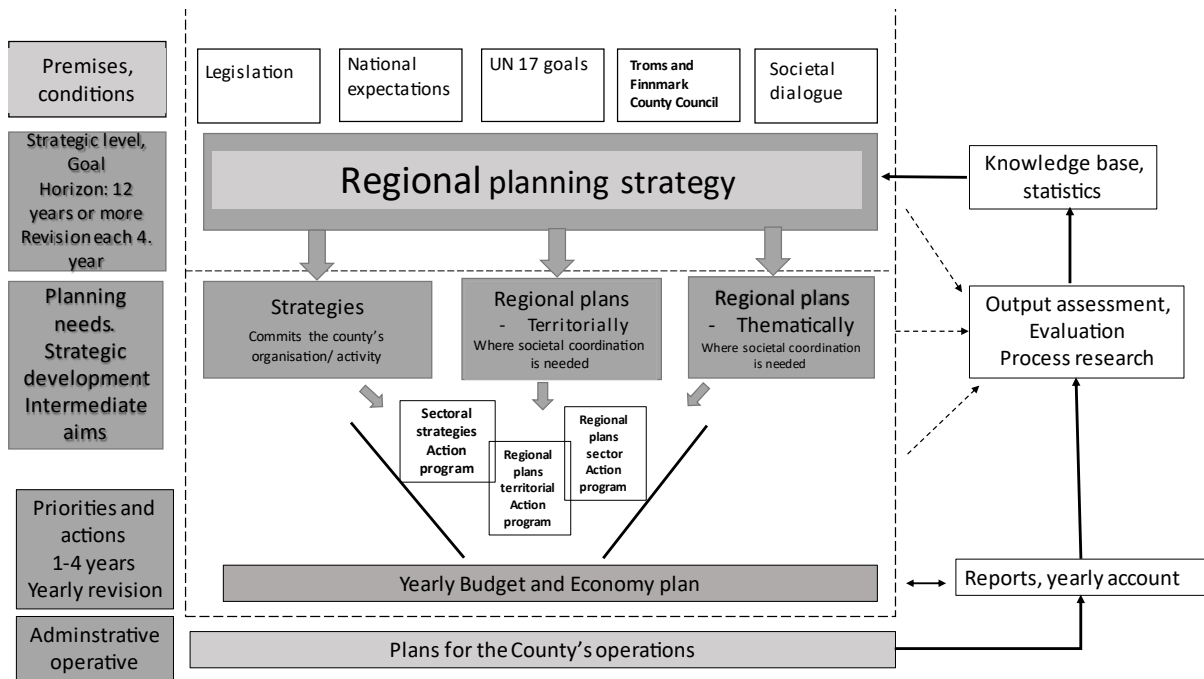


Figure 3. The planning system of Troms and Finnmark County - 'The planning funnel', 2021

## 5. Discussion

We shall now discuss our collected RPS material, which we have presented and analyzed in section 4, by employing the *translation and re-contextualization in implementation theory* for research question (1) and the theory on *storytelling and co-creation* for research question (2).

### 5.1. RPS - translation and re-contextualization

The Norwegian model derived its first interpretative stage from the Danish model of municipal planning strategies by reforming it to the concept of not a local, but a Regional Planning Strategy, the RPS, as a 'master version' (Røvik, 1998). Following the new law of 2008, the government supported implementation mainly with a booklet of guidance (ref), and the NE. The counties of Norway were to implement a new regional planning system, where RPS was a tool for strategic and goal-oriented regional planning focused on regional necessity.

As we have seen, there are vital differences in how the counties of Norway implemented the RPS in 2011-2012. Regarding complying with the RPS and complying with the NE to the regional and local planning – we find RPSs in all four of our ideal types: The loyal, the translators, the challengers, and the heretical.

What does this variety of the first generation tell us? The variety confirms the already vast evidence in the literature of the challenges concerning top-down implementation (cf. Hill, 2013; Røvik, 1998). Since this hierarchy consists of regional publicly elected bodies with a certain degree of autonomy from the central government (the counties and the municipalities), the counties feel free to translate the PBA into their own regional contexts. In the case of RPSs, the translations and contextualization are to be assessed along the two axes. First, the degree of regional adjustment is given by law, which should imply a relatively

narrow degree of regional freedom in how to implement the RPS as a planning strategy. As we have seen, this fact does not hamper a third of the counties' regional contextualization and translation. For most of these, we understand the translation as path-dependency (Scharpf, 1997), since these RPSs mostly continue the county planning tradition, as the RPS is contextualized and formed as a long-term plan. Of course, such adaptation also illustrates a need for comprehensive regional planning, which is downplayed in today's PBA. These counties have taken a shortcut by using the RPS as the overall and comprehensive strategic plan and translated the law to make it useful for their own needs or demands. Therefore, we argue that the new regional planning system in its realization may not fulfil the intended consistency *between strategies for planning and the planning itself*, and hence contribute to a hybridization. The central government also contributes to hybridization with the latest amendments in the PBA, from 2014, by requiring long-term development goals to be stated in the RPS for the future.

Compliance along the other axis, the NE, is quite another story. The counties have since the late 1990s been expected to develop a regional policy based on the region's own challenges and resources. This is the "regime shift" from a national allocation or re-distribution of resources for regional development to a more endogenous and regional resource-based approach (Amdam and Bukve, 2004) in collaboration with both public and private actors. Several White Papers stress this shift (Kommunal- og Regionaldepartementet, 2001, 2002, 2013), and by 2015, the counties' paramount task is the strategic and direction-setting function related to regional planning – to assess and contextualize the many priorities of the central state in the actual regional challenges comprehensively (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2015). Therefore, the counties' re-contextualization of the NE was anticipated. The interesting findings here lie in the government's response. We find that the letters of final approval overlook contextualization, meaning they reveal a narrow interpretation of the regional freedom (and expectation) to assess the national goals into the actual regional situation. The central government is torn between the notion of (and need for) flexibility in planning and the need for control or direction setting in policy- and strategy-making. Here, the direction-setting need won.

Many counties evade the national storytelling processes. They use regional co-production to make their own plans, to tell their own regional stories, and to create their own regional political frames for regional development. None of the RPSs is disapproved by the government, which means that this seems to function both for the regional and national authorities. Consequently, the perceived scope for regional contextualization (Røvik, 1998) was narrowed. The central government re-contextualized the counties' space of action by their role as approving authority, and, as we have seen, their thorough corrections and feedback of what was lacking. This course streamlined the second generation of RPSs.

From diversity in the initial implementation stage, we find convergence in the second generation (2015-2016) into the categories Loyal or Translators. The RPSs represent an almost identical story about the present and the future as we find in the NE, in the PBA. The challenges and the development goals are the same. Few counties make clear thematic and political priorities. It is not in the RPSs most of the counties signal their own political priorities, which is the intention of RPSs.

The cause of the vast diversity in the first generation may also be understood as a lack of understanding of what the new tool RPS is supposed to do. The lack of knowledge and incompetence was more prominent than the academic and political independence we observed in the RPSs of the first generation. In the second generation the planners, politicians, and other participants have learned their RPS lesson.

However, we find that the PBA and especially the NE (Higdem & Hagen, 2017) lead to highly varied interpretations. The linguistic formulations are vague, and the political priorities are few and weak. It is easy for the counties to be loyal, if they so choose. It is obvious that in the second generation almost all counties are loyal; they have no need to highlight disagreement.

The analysis shows that in the third generation, RPS (2019-2020), now with 11 counties<sup>1</sup>, they recreate their own contextualization, departing from the rather conformist adaptations in generation two. Generation three is more varied and even more nuanced than the first. Our analysis show that we now find RPSs in all four categories, but the re-contextualization of these is new.

There are three main contributing factors; 1), UN17 goals: the implementation of a sustainable society and the green shift which overrules the NE. 2), During the three generations, the counties have developed a systematic overview of their planning activities and tools (types) within and outside the PBA, assessment of these and knowledge-based assessment of the planning that is prioritized. 3) Long-term goals were first implemented in the third generation of RPSs, which spurred regional contextualization, and hence the development of more 'place-based' development goals.

## **5.2. RPS – a storytelling activity**

We argue that RPS can and should be analyzed, discussed, and evaluated as a storytelling activity (cf. Throgmorton,1992; Healey, 2009; Olesen, 2017.). RPS is fundamentally about developing, presenting, and deciding the knowledge base about the current situation, what the main challenges are, and how best to plan to meet these in order to achieve certain goals.

Our research shows that many RPS documents make for good reading, that planners and politicians have tried to be and have become good storytellers. This is especially clear in the third generation. They have realized how important 'persuasive storytelling' is: orally in the RPS processes and in writing, in the knowledge-base document as well as the RPS document in texts, pictures, figures, tables, videos, etc. Thus, they extend the tradition from the 1990s of making STPs in the processes and the documents more persuasive than before (cf. Throgmorton,1992; Healey, 2009; Olesen, 2017.)

It is striking that both the planners and the politicians have a basic understanding that an absolutely necessary prerequisite for success with the RPS work is a 'successful use of language' (Hellspong, 1992, 1995). They show in practice that they agree with Albrechts et al. (2003) who argue that much of the power of strategic spatial planning lies in its use of

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<sup>1</sup> Norway had 19 Counties until 2018, 18 Counties to 2020, and from January 1. 2020, Norway has 11 Counties.

concepts and images to mobilize and fix attention. The collective development of new knowledge, new understandings, and new goals for the desired future, along with the aim and ability to follow up on later planning, is therefore also a rhetorical challenge (Ramirez, 1995a, 1995b; Asmervik and Hagen, 2001).

This is particularly demanding all the time the RP work is characterized by many participating actors, from many different environments, who may well have different languages, different ways of communicating, cf. concept 'relational complexity' (Healey 2006b, Bevir et al., 2003; Higdem, 2015; Higdem and Sandkjær Hanssen, 2014).

At the same time, it is precisely in such complicated interactive processes that good storytelling, understanding, and skills are most important.

### **5.3. RPS – a co-production/co-creation activity**

RPS was introduced as a form of 'co-activity'. Our research illustrates that this has varied greatly between the counties and the RPA processes; that is, few or none have actually practiced all the process ambitions in PBA and NE.

We have discussed the RPS processes with participation from many actors in section 5.2 storytelling, and thus already discussed RPS as a co-production activity, as an ideal/norm (PBA and NE), and as well as practice mapped in our research. The analysis suggests; a) a more managerial approach to regional planning by focusing on the interaction between various layers 'collaborative methodology', 'modern governance', 'network governance', 'interactive governance', 'new (public) governance' b) torn between the legitimate demand for public participation and the necessity for assuring accountability and responsibility of decision-making bodies and c) all public bodies and all community organizations both need to participate and contribute to more innovative and transformative practices (Albrechts, 2006a). We argue this expresses a development of collaborative and communicative planning (Watson, 2014).

## **6. Conclusion**

RPS was introduced before the 2011-2015 election period as an institutional change of the regional planning system. It has indisputably established itself as a popular change, among the majority of politicians and planners, for renewing and strengthening the strategic aspects of the counties' societal planning.

We have confirmed that how a new idea like RPS develops in regional planning processes depends on both the central government's need and ability to manage the counties' RPS work, and the county municipalities' ability and need to make regional adjustments. All the other participants in the RPS processes have also contributed to translations and interpretations.

Our observed RPS practices demonstrate the explanatory power of theories about translation and re-contextualization in implementation, cf Røvik (1998) and Hardy et al. (1998). They *describe* a specific strategy element within Norwegian regional planning in a



relevant and precise way.

The regional translation and re-contextualization processes in the three generations of RPS have not weakened the original ambitions of RPSs. On the contrary, the increase diverse practices between counties and the wider translation of the RPSs, as well as quite new adaptations or figurations in the third generation, illustrate that the regional planning authorities are actively using RPS as a tool for taking greater responsibility for their own societal development.

As a strategic activity the RPS provides an arena where the knowledge base, the long-term goals and strategies are co-created through storytelling between a vast set of actors on county level.

Our research indicates that central authorities generally value the regional RPS variations. At the same time, our data also indicate that both the regional and national state evade regional political governance to a certain extent, even though the variations could (or should) have implications for the PBA, a fact that should also engage the national government.

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