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Ministry of Government Administration, Reform and Church Affairs

European Days 2013 in Bergen - Intervention

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me as well to welcome you all to Norway and to Bergen, and to the 20th European Days for State Territorial Representatives. This is the second time we have the privilege of hosting this event. The first time was 11 years ago, in Oslo.

The thematic focus of this year's event, "*Between development and environment - what regulation for the State Territorial Representative?*", is both ambitious and important.

How can you, as key regional actors in your respective countries, balance these interests in a way that promotes new progress and optimism in a time of economic setback and high unemployment?

This is truly one of the greatest challenges we Europeans face today. It is on the table of every government, parliament and European institution. And of course you are concerned about it as well.

To meet these challenges successfully, we must work together to increase value creation.

That will lead to more jobs.

It is particularly important to create jobs for our young people.

Increasing value creation is essential to helping people become part of the productive work force instead of remaining passive recipients of welfare benefits.

We must renew and enhance efficiency.

This applies in particular to the public sector, which is not given the same market signals as the private sector.

Dynamic, modern public sector

Norway has a dynamic and modern public sector.

This is the result of conscious political choices in our country.

We seek community-based solutions because we believe these provide the best services for the most people.

To maintain the level of services and get the most welfare out of every *krone*, the public sector must employ new, modern methods and tools.

Like nearly everyone else in Norway, I use web-based banking services. The only paper-based communication I have with the bank is when they send me a new debit card because the old one has expired.

All my other banking communication takes place via the Internet. I can't tell you how long it has been since I last set foot in an actual bank office.

But when it comes to the public sector, some of my communication is web-based, but much of my contact still takes place via letters and invoices sent through the mail, phone calls and, sometimes, by having to meet up in person at a public office to deal with my tasks.

As part of our Ministries' portfolio we are responsible for ICT and the renewal of the Norwegian public sector.

It is the stated objective of the Government to digitise all public services in Norway.

In the future, all contact between the public sector and the citizens will take place via digital communication, by default.

That is our vision.

There are several reasons that we are setting our sights on digital communication as the default.

The application of ICT and development of digital services provides the best basis for constructive renewal of the public sector in coming years. This is where the core of the Norwegian modern public sector model lies.

Digital services and interaction will free up time previously used by the public administration for data registration, administrative procedures and compiling reports.

The time gained may be used to improve services, such as reducing time for administrative processing, or be used for other public tasks that require personal contact.

The greater the number of people using digital services, the greater the resources we can devote to other important public tasks.

If we succeed in introducing digital communication as the general rule, it will enable us to:

- improve the quality of the services;
- save money;
- redistribute resources;
- improve solutions for the public.

The process of digitalisation is wide-ranging and demanding, and will require a long-term, systematic effort.

But I am convinced that these efforts will promote economic growth, innovation and job creation.

These are things we need in Norway.

And these are things we need throughout Europe as well..

Responsibility

Norway has been very fortunate.

The financial crisis has not hit our country too hard – as of yet.

But we have a small, open economy.

We are dependent on exports, and a difficult international economic climate affects us as well.

Our industrial sector is starting to struggle, companies are closing down, and we have seen unemployment rise somewhat the past few months.

These problems affect us all.

No one can escape from reality.

As I have already said, Norway has a large public sector. Wage developments in this sector will thus affect our economy as a whole.

Getting through the difficult times as a nation means we need responsible trade unions.

There is close cooperation in the dialogue between the social partners in Norway.

This reinforces the sense of responsibility and community.

The tripartite system between workers, employers and the state is a fundamental component of the Norwegian model.

And it is one of the reasons behind our success.

Public sector employees must be efficient and adaptable.

If not, the public sector will not be able to renew itself in keeping with advancements in society.

The leadership has a particular responsibility to build a culture that encourages each individual to make the most of his or her best qualities.

Good leaders can create a framework that allows their employees to develop their skills.

And to share their expertise.

Good leaders develop a culture of responsible partnership.

Responsible partnership means that leaders and employees work together to develop a positive working environment – and to fulfil the objectives they have set.

Each workplace must cultivate an environment where everyone uses their best skills – and expands their horizons.

This means promoting commitment and job satisfaction.

It means encouraging solidarity and cooperation.

During the 1970s and 1980s, something happened here that radically changed our society.

It was during those years that nearly 360 000 women entered the workforce.

We wanted more women to have jobs.

We designed a policy to make it happen.

We are reaping the fruits of this today.

This is one of the strengths of Norwegian working life.

Now we are facing new challenges.

Now our task is to get more persons with reduced functionality and more immigrants into working life.

Because many of them lack jobs.

Many skills are going to waste.

- How can we dismantle the barriers to participation?
- How can we find jobs for these groups?

These are among the most important challenges we need to solve.

Having a job to go is rewarding in many ways.

It gives people an opportunity to use their expertise.

It allows them to realise their potential.

It gives them freedom of choice. To steer their own lives.

To develop their own identify, build a better self-image and enhance their well-being.

A sense of belonging and solidarity is a good preventive of social unrest.

Inclusive, community-based solutions are also vital here.

Community-based solutions offer obvious benefits, but they also entail costs.

It is essential to find a balance between these that has the support of the people. In Norway, we have what I would call a sensible level of taxation, although your countries might not agree.

Our tax levels are as low as possible while at the same time being high enough to cover the expenses we accrue.

There has to be a balance between what comes in and what goes out.

The idea is for as many as possible to contribute and everyone to benefit. This is why the entry into the workforce of women was so critical for the Norwegian welfare system.

We know a great deal about the challenges facing the welfare state in the future. We will need to utilise our resources even better if we are to meet these challenges. Modern ICT solutions are the most important tool we have in this context. Our success lies in the implementation of a national strategy, cooperation across sectors and the participation of all levels of society.

Growth and protection

Norway has a small population spread across a large area.

But we face the same problems relating to urbanisation, loss of arable soil, and pressures on vulnerable areas as the rest of Europe.

We are all dealing with the same challenges, we are all committed to finding solutions, and there is much we can learn from one another.

Most of the State Territorial Representatives are confronting the same kinds of questions regarding environmental protection and the natural surroundings.

You also share similar responsibilities for planning, development and industrial development.

I am certain that you find yourselves weighing protection interests against other interests every day.

This is a complicated task.

Decisions taken in complex societies must take into account divergent, and sometimes opposing, considerations and values.

Broad-based involvement takes time and resources, and can conflict with the need for rapid, cost-effective solutions.

It is important to find solutions that are based on local and regional prerequisites.

This is a critical societal function which those of you who are gathered here today deal with in many areas.

Naturally, I am best acquainted with the role of the Norwegian county governors. They are also part of our sphere of responsibility.

They play a key role in the efforts to devise good solutions, reach constructive compromises and achieve sustainable development.

They are strategically placed between the central government authorities and the municipalities.

They represent the Government, they have authority and competence.

They serve as a vital administrative link.

And we listen to what they have to say.

Even when we don't like it sometimes.

During this conference you will be discussing challenges in connection with growth and protection.

I would like to suggest that you approach this not as growth *or* protection, but rather as growth *and* protection.

To my mind, this is the only answer.

As a politician, my job is to contribute to progress and development for everyone who lives in our country today.

But I am charged with safeguarding the opportunities and welfare of coming generations as well.

That is why we call it sustainable growth.

I hope you have productive discussions and meetings during this time in Bergen.

Thank you for your attention.