

**Strategies and goals for growth  
among small-scale food enterprises in Norway:  
A gender sensitive approach.**

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## **Abstract**

Since 1990 close to 1000 small-scale food enterprises have been established in Norway. This can be seen as a result of a proactive policy promoting diversification in rural areas, which fosters and financially supports rural entrepreneurship in the start-up stages. Part of the funding has been dedicated to women and young people to ensure better gender equality and recruitment, particularly within agriculture. The instruments for starting a new business have been quite successful gender - wise; the amount of women receiving grants is now over 40 percent. However, a recent evaluation reveals that the goals of increased profit, settlement and employment in rural areas have not been met (The Office of the Auditor General). Several different theories of entrepreneurship and management focus upon profitability. Normally the 'local' or 'rural' is not accounted for in these normative theories. 'Portfolio theories' has, however, been used to explain farmers' ability to diversify. Cultural theories and gender theories also point at other qualities of management. In a survey of small-scale food enterprises, 50 percent are women managers, reflecting more than the gender distribution of those receiving economic support. Analysis of these data focuses upon the strategies and goals expressed by local food enterprise holders, looking at potential differences among male and female managers in particular.

## **Local Food Production – the context**

The development of local food production has been emphasized in Norway by government since the early 1990s. Also EU rural policymakers have focused on this group of food producers of the same reason; its association with a range of socio-economic benefits connected to rural development (de Roest and Menghi 2000).

The development of local food and agro-food systems has been a strategy to revitalize rural communities in Norway. Prior to the 1990s, there was little activity to promote local food production in Norway, and farm-based food production was nearly nonexistent. One important reason for this situation was that the cooperatives within the agriculture sector have been responsible for processing and marketing food products on behalf of the farmers during the past decades. Nearly all farmers in Norway were members of the agriculture cooperatives and delivered their products to the cooperative (Kvam et al. 2003). This meant there was little

opportunity for the farmers to add value to their products, or tap into niche areas to market their differentiated products.

In the beginning of the 1990s a greater consumer demand for niche food emerged. Niche food as food produced with certain qualities, such as local aspects, traditions and history, embodied into the products and for which customers was willing to pay a premium price (Stræte 2008). Some Norwegian farmers recognised the potential in farm-based quality production, in many cases based on successful stories from the south of Europe. The desire for greater variety and less vulnerability in the rural economy combined with a sharper consumer focus on traditional food, or food with specific qualities, were important reasons why the Norwegian Government encouraged the establishment of farm-based food production at the beginning of the 1990s. Since then, support systems have been developed, both at national and regional levels, to support farmers and other small-scale food producers and manufacturers in establishing local quality food enterprises (Kvam et al. 2003).

Several goals with connected means have been developed. Special rural development means have been developed (Bygdeutviklingsmidler). These are meant to enable business development that focus on long-term, economic sustainable value creation and decentralised settlement based on agricultural resources. The main target group for these means is farmers involved with agricultural activities. These can either apply for entrepreneurship grants for new economic activity at or in connection to the agricultural property or business development grants for new products or new markets. For the latter option, 75 percent of the budgets can be allocated women and young people (positive discrimination). There are also specific investment grants aimed for buildings and production equipment.

In 2001, The Value Creation Programme for Food Production (VSP-mat) was established by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. This is a 10-year programme with the objective of developing quality food firms which are competitive and profitable. One important initiative in this programme was the establishment of five competence networks (NAV) located in different areas of the country to support the development of quality food producers with shaping ideas, product development, marketing, accommodation of hygiene instructions and so forth. Target groups for VSP-mat, is in addition to farmers that either supply the industry with raw materials or produce food at the farm, other food enterprises and tourism and travel

businesses, both deeply rooted in primary industries. The small-scale food enterprises that are subject of this paper are at the core for the programme.

In connection to and in addition to the VSP-mat programme, a number of competence and network activities exist to assist the becoming or established enterprise holder. There are specific entrepreneurship groups that offer coaching of fresh entrepreneurs, exchange of knowledge and networks. There are mentor programs for young entrepreneurs. There are network credits aimed for networks or groups of women in particular. There also exist entrepreneurship courses, courses for design of small scale food and tourism and other options. These means and grants are administered by Innovation Norway, a state owned company that promotes industrial development and helps release the potential of different districts and regions by contributing towards innovation, internationalisation and promotion (Innovation Norway 2009a).

Most business innovators are men. Almost two out of three entrepreneurs are men, 80 percent of industry top leaders are men. In 2008 ministers of Ministry of Trade and Industry, Ministry of Children and Equality, Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development presented a plan of action for more entrepreneurship among women (Departments 2008). The government states that 40 percent of all new entrepreneurs should be women. Among the initiatives that were launched, 'Women in focus' and Kvinnovasjon (women innovation) is two important ones. Women in focus ("Kvinner i fokus") is an Innovation Norway programme that aims for a strengthened position for women in business, both as entrepreneurs, leaders and board members. Even though more women in business is a general objective, it is the rural development means and the entrepreneurship grants that were most frequently used by women in 2008 (Innovation Norway 2009b). There is also a little deviation between the number of grants that women received (42.1 percent) and the share of money that was disbursed to these women (37.2). Alongside and in connection to Innovation Norway's efforts, Kvinnovasjon is running activities such as networking, mentoring, competence development, and profiling arrangements all over the country. In March 2009, 16 short films of successful women entrepreneurs were launch to motivate more women to start their own businesses (Entreprenørskap.tv 2009). Selskapet for Industrivekst (SIVA) – an organization facilitating industrial growth – is the coordinator behind this effort to promote and support women's business development (Kvinnovasjon 2009). Facilitating women in business is an important policy goal. In the present paper, growth ambitions and strategies of small-scale

business holders are analysed. Among these entrepreneurs the amount of women are equal to men. Why is this branch so special?

The authorities' objectives in promotion of local food production have been and still ambitious (Brekke 2009; St.meld. nr.19, (1999-2000); St.meld. nr.21, (2005-2006)). The goal for specialty food production is to constitute 20 % of total food turnover in grocery shops until 2020 (Brekke op.cit.). To increase value creation in rural districts through niche production, it is envisaged that some enterprises must grow in size to become larger units with a greater impact and a wider market focus, or alternatively, small firms must cooperate in joint ventures to achieve the same goals. A governmental strategy is designed to support local food firms with growth ambitions and potential (Verdiskapingsprogrammet for mat). One particular aim of this strategy is to help successful small-scale enterprises to grow so that they can access the standard assortment of the major food chains (Brekke 2009). Do these goals correspond with small-scale food enterprises aims and strategies?

### **Growth ambitions and multiple goals**

Local food firms' contribution to regional development is an ambiguous entity (Tregear 2005; Magnus and Kvam 2008). One prerequisite for development is growth ambitions among firms. Several studies, however, claim that small firms do not want to grow, nor do they have the ability to do so (Gray 1992; Greenbank 2001; Westhead 1997). There are mentioned a lot of different reasons why small business owners are found to be reluctant to grow. In many cases these reasons are connected to the objectives of owner managers. It is agreement upon that the objectives of micro firms tend to relate to personal rather than business criteria (Greenbank 2001). Several studies of family firms verify the multiple goal approach (for example Westhead 1997; Hall 2002). Hall (2002) states that to understand small family firms, it is important to go beyond a mono-rational perspective to a multi-rational one which supplements the calculative rationality with social rationality.

Running a small business is for some a way of life. The business is often owned by owner manager and ownership affects the attitude toward risk taking. Because money that is invested is personal or family money, many have a reluctance to spend on anything but the bare essentials, for short-term obvious return (Bridge et al. 1998). Gibb (1996) characterize the world of small business owners as a world of managing sets of interdependencies on a day-to

day basis with a wide range of stakeholders. A turbulent environment makes long term planning difficult and businesses vulnerable to change. Managing daily operations overtakes long term planning (Gibb 1996).

Family owned firms seems to have multiple goals according to earlier research (Hall 2002). Westhead (1997) refers to several studies showing that family firms desire for stability. Self-sufficiency, independent ownership and the retention of managerial control by family members may be just as important as the desire for expansion. Other important objectives of family firms reported, is to increase value of the business, increase profitability, accumulate family wealth, pass the business to the next generation and employ family members (Westhead 1997).

Previous research has shown diverging results on growth aspirations among small firms. Carland et al. (1984) and Low and Macmillan (1998) found that only a minority of owner-managers had growth aspirations. A study of Norwegian and Swedish niche food producers show high ambitions according to expand in volume. 75 percent of the Norwegian enterprises and 69 percent of the Swedish enterprises wanted to grow. The Swedish producers were more reluctant as to expansion, something which was explained by the fact that they had more years to explore the markets than the Norwegian entrepreneurs (Borch and Iveland 1997). The firms studied were very small with 1,3 number of full time employed in both countries, about 75 percent was farm-based, and most firms were established after 1990. Kaikkonen (2006) has studied growth orientation in rural food processing micro firms in Finland. 40 percent were growth-oriented. However these rural micro firm owners wanted to achieve their firm's growth by using their own and the family's resources and capabilities to avoiding risk. For these owners growth was not an essential goal of their firm, rather to get a reasonable living for owner and family.

Many studies show that pursue personal goals, lifestyle, independence and family welfare and stability correlates to preferences for no growth (Carland et al 1984; Chell et al 1991). In such a perspective lifestyle motivation conquers economic rational choice. This is e.g. found among Norwegian farmed based food producers (Melberg 2003). Tregear (2005) also found in a UK case study a combination of lifestyle-, growth- and community involvement goals in local food firms. Also many of these rural producers did not want to become "managers" of

businesses, but wanted to maintain involvement in the physical production process. Such involvement can be compromised by up-scaling the production (Tregear 2005).

Research on gender differences in business have shown that women are underrepresented among owners and managers. Many women also ground their reason for business in realizing an idea, support their family, and create their own workplace rather than making a profit (See e.g. Ljungren et al 2000, Ljungren 2002). These studies correspond to theories of multi goals above that emphasize also other dimensions than profit as business motivation.

### **Network activities - a prerequisite for growth?**

In theories of entrepreneurship and network it is believed that networking by owner managers of small firms will enhance business performance (for example Chell and Baines 2000). This has resulted in encouragement of networking in small businesses by support systems in many countries during many years. Interventions to promote networking are sometimes advocated to help to overcome the problem that many small firms lack resources to implement a growth strategy (Chaston 1996). An association was found between the growth of individual business and their networking activity, and according to Johannisson (2000) most firms' needs active networking capabilities to growth.

Result from research show different results according to networking among small firms. Curran et al (1993) concluded that business owners' contact with their environment are much more limited than notions of "networking" imply (Curran and Blackburn 1994). It was the minority of growing businesses whose owners were most likely to enter into non-family business partnerships and to network widely and actively with other businesses and organizations (Baines and Wheekock 1998; Chell and Baines 1998).

Network and cooperation is seen to be an important strategy for local food firms to reach scale advantages in different areas and in particular when they aim to grow. Early studies of local food firms in Norway found that there was little cooperation and network among firms (Borch and Iveland 1997). The one that cooperated was in the area of sale and marketing. Lack of cooperation may be explained by distance to other producers, producers were newly established and/or that producers' operates in their local market and at a very small scale (Borch and Iveland op.cit.).

Later studies on food networks reports challenges according to establishing networks, and often there is a need of a mediators to support establishment (Kvam et al 2003; etc). Many face difficulties because of different ambitions among producers, different needs and involvement and lack of recourses and business experience. Forsman (2003) found in a finish study that cooperation in various areas is growing significantly in the shift from a local to a national market focus of local food firms.

According to Chell and Baines (2000) business owners are often suspicious of interventions especially to government-promoted ones. They found the most valued network by owner-managers was, almost invariably, those which they have worked hard and build up themselves, often over long periods. Butler (1995) states that networking with competitors rather than upstream and down-stream business-partners foster firm growth. In the industrial district literature, the combination of cooperation and competition is usually referred to as a main source of viability (Johannisson et al 1994).

### **Regional development**

There is a great deal of literature focusing on local or regional quality food production and its influence on rural development. In many cases its significance extends beyond the number of jobs provided. The European Committee for Regions (1996) identified a number of contributions which local or regional products can make to strengthen rural areas. They can provide the link between the product, the landscape and the culture of a region and they enable the maintenance of a culinary heritage which itself contributes to regional identity. Furthermore they also argued that regional quality food production frequently provide the bases for synergies with other activities, such as agri-tourism, heritage and conservation and direct marketing. In this way quality food production generates what Knickel and Renting (2000) refer to as “cluster of compatible and mutually reinforcing activities”

McDonagh and Commins (1999) argues that benefits include the fostering of an enterprise culture; the development of bottom-up initiatives; the reliance on local resources; innovation in terms of new product lines and higher value added products and diversification of the base of the local economy. It also provide these individuals with an opportunity to live in an area which offers an enhanced quality of life and their economic motivation can be best described



as one of “profit sufficiency” rather than “profit maximisation” (Ilbery and Knesfsey 1999). Different case-studies from European countries have shown these kinds of versatility according to effects (e.g. O’Connor et. al. and Gorman, Tregear et al 2007; Magnus and Kvam 2008, Marsden et al 2000).

## **Small-scale Food Enterprises in Norway – exploring data**

Since local food production was “reinvented” in the 1990s about 900 - 1000 local food firms are established. Norwegian local food production is generally farm-based, where owner manager have other work besides food processing. Firms are mainly micro in size and the economic impacts are currently minimal (Magnus and Kvam 2008).

Analyses in this paper are based on data collected among small-scale local food enterprises in Norway in 2008 (Magnus and Kvam 2008). A questionnaire was e-mailed to 871 local food enterprises that produce and refine local or regional food. Small-scale was defined as ten or less employees and “local” or “regional” food products are those that can be attracted to a certain area through qualities that are communicated to consumers by way of branding, design or narratives. 293 answered the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 35.

### **The Norwegian small-scale food enterprises**

The majority of the enterprises in the material are established between 1996 and 2005. The average enterprise employ 1-4 man-labor year. As already mentioned, half of the owner /managers in this material are women. There are no significant difference between men and women in the matter of who is manager or owner. The amount of women is higher than average statistics on women in business. Gender differences do occur in different business sectors. Traditional gender divisions goes across traditional women’s “interest” such as health and care against “men’s areas” such as building and construction, transport and industry. A parallel to this is business activities that take place at farms in addition to traditional farming. A farm based survey revealed traditional gender patters in these activities – but a group emerged in between – the food refiners and tourist hosts where data showed no gender differences (Bjørkhaug 2009). Analyses in this paper will elaborate further on this interesting gender balance finding. Analysis of data focus upon the strategies and goals expressed by

local food enterprise holders, looking at potential differences among male and female managers in particular.

### **Small-scale food enterprise owners and managers**

Seventy percent of the owners/managers are between 40 to 60 years old. Our data shows that women owners are younger than men. Almost half (47%) of the enterprise owners/managers are newcomers in the local community. Women more frequently moved to the location where the enterprise is set up than men (Close to 60 percent). Correspondingly 30 percent of men in the material always lived there, while 30 percent have moved back to the place they grew up. Fifty percent holds a university/college degree. There are some educational differences between men and women; Men more often have secondary vocational education while women more often have university background. The pattern is however not linear and half of all owners/managers have a university or college background.

### **Organisation**

One third of the enterprises are organised as limited companies (AS). The domination way of organising the firm is however sole proprietorship (56 percent). Women are more often than men represented in the latter way of organising the firm, infrequently than men in the first one. Four percent of the firms are organised as cooperatives. About one third of the firms have a board. A little less than average in women owned businesses, a bit more on men's. A woman chair 40 percent of the boards when a woman is owner/manager, only 10 percent of the boards of men headed firms. More women (36 percent) than men (26 percent) are full time occupied in the business.

### **Products**

Most frequently these enterprise holders are involved with some sort of meat production /service. Men are dominating this product group. Women are more frequently found occupied with fruit and berries, bakery and honey, herbs and mushroom. Eggs and poultry, fish, vegetables and beverage are just as popular among men as women. Sixty percent are involved with refining products at the farm, 37 percent are involved in food serving. There are no

gender differences on this issue. 43 percent of the enterprises are involved with organic products either the entire production or in part.

### **Business results**

Women and men report equally on business results, around half of the enterprises reported business had profit, 30 percent had deficit. Women do however report lower turnover.

### **Growth ambitions**

Fifty percent of the firms are growing at present and 32 percent have growth ambitions. Only 15 percent have no growth ambitions or have plans for reduction (4 percent). There are no gender differences on this issue. Further analyses (regression models) of growth ambitions does reveal a few interesting findings. When looking at owner characteristics, young people are more likely to plan growth than older. Educational level, connection to the local community or prospects of a family successor does not add any explanation. A separate model run on product and production characteristic showed that only fruit and berry producers were significantly more growth ambitious than the others. Farm refiners have on the other hand fewer growth ambitions than others. A third model run on business characteristics revealed that sole proprietorship had lower growth ambitions than the limited companies. Results, turnover or involvement by owner/manager does not explain any variation in growth ambitions.

### **Aims**

Securing own enterprise rates highest among reasons to grow. Earn more money is a close number two and third is conception of forming a more exiting place to workplace. These are all related to the owner/managers own business and situation. It is interesting to see that aims related to rural development contribution and creating new workplaces rates lower. But ratings are relative and scores are absolute. In a table of reasons given, all aims are in average rated as to some degree “important”. There are no gender differences on this issue.

## **Strategies**

Groups of possible strategies were evaluated by the owner/managers. Some related to market strategies, some were strategies for product and production, marketing and sales, distribution and organisation. Most enterprise holders planned to increase sales in the local market, possibly also to "go regional". For products and production most planned to increase the volume and quality of present production or develop some new products. Developing new markets rated higher than possible cooperation on marketing and sales. More sole distribution of products was also rated as more likely than cooperating. Enhanced competence among staff was by far the most important strategy organisation vice. Changing business structure to ltd company, establishing a board or merge with others were less likely.

## **Discussion**

Analyses in this paper have focused upon the strategies and goals expressed by local small-scale food enterprise holders with a particular approach towards potential differences among male and female managers. Entrepreneurship, innovation and value creation in rural areas are expressed goals in Norwegian policy. There are several opportunities for advice and economic support for potential entrepreneurs to start up and existing business develop and grow. The present Minister of agriculture even emphasize that successful local businesses should aim for a permanent place in the main supermarkets (Brekke 2009).

Our analyses have shown that present small-scale food enterprises are ambitious regarding growth. Most enterprise holders are either already in a growth process or planning to grow within few years. Few characteristics revealed themselves as possible explanations of variation among the businesses. Those involved with fruits and berries and younger people were more likely to plan growth than others. On the other end, those involved with farm refining of products and those organised as sole proprietorship were less likely to plan growth. A possible explanation for this might be prospects of possible growth is limited within the frames of the farm buildings or production at the farm and the owners evaluations of risk within a private firm that is possibly closely intertwined with family and household economy.

Expectations of revitalisation of rural areas, rural development and value creation beyond the local enterprise are integrated in the policy. How can this be ensured? Previous research and theory on rural development emphasise that growth and rural development is best ensured when enterprises and activities are coordinated or cooperate at a local level. Enterprise holders in our study do not plan for extensive cooperation on any level of their strategies. Most producers have plans for sole development of own products and productions. These strategies might prove vulnerable and are incompatible with professional business advice. On the other hand it might be rational within a family firm or multi goal approach to own business. Rather grow slowly within the local community where owner is responsible and in control with coming activities. Present allocation of support is mainly administered by Innovation Norway and most enterprise holders have a one to one relationship with the support systems. Better local (horizontal) integration could possibly be ensured and motivated through local administered initiatives and means. Prospects of good vertical integration of local food is better ensured within the present focus of VSP-mat. The potential of more local food products distributed on a national level is however not big. Analyses in this paper showed that most small-scale food enterprise holders plan for local growth and few have prospects of national distribution.

The paper started out with the fact that 50 percent of owner/managers of small-scale food enterprises are women. The number of women is high compared to general statistics of women. Support systems for entrepreneurs have enabled positive discrimination on behalf of women. For the sector analyzed in this paper, objectives of a gender balance have been realized. Analyses showed few differences between men and women in plans and strategies for their businesses. Proves of particular male or female management strategy regarding growth plans or objectives have not been brought to light. Women had however in average lower turnover, a finding that relates to general statistics of women in business. This particular issue will be further elaborated in regard to products and distributions and also related research of gender in other branches and sectors.

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