**Norway: The Nordic model at company level**

How prevalent is the Nordic model at the workplace in Norway? According to data gathered by the Norwegian research institute Fafo, the scope of cooperation between the social partners at the company level varies. Many trade union representatives report that the cooperation works well at company level, though almost three out of ten representatives do not have formal nor informal talks with their employer on issues related to their role as shop steward. This indicates that the potential of the Nordic model at the workplace is not fully utilized.

**Background and methodology**

The Nordic model is a term used to describe the welfare state and the system of cooperation between workers and employers. The Nordic model is considered a success, as the Nordic countries score better than other European countries on indicators such as economic development, employment and relations between the social partners. In a time of economic crisis in Europe, the model has received renewed attention.

The success of the Nordic model at the macro level is well documented through research but there exists less knowledge of how the practical collaboration between trade unions representatives (TU reps) and employers unfolds at the workplace. Former research on local level cooperation has mainly covered large manufacturing companies, and has contributed less to the understanding of what is going on in smaller companies and in other industries. The TU reps are one of the key components of the Nordic model, as they are responsible for protecting the interests of the members, as well as representing their members while executing co-determination rights at the workplace. The aim of co-determination is to make the companies run efficiently and to safeguard jobs. In order to understand the Nordic model at the company level, it is therefore important to look at the quality of the cooperation between the TU reps and the employers of the company, and how this collaboration unfolds at work. This was the issue examined in a study conducted by Fafo between 2013 and 2015 resulting in the report [The Norwegian model at the company level](http://www.fafo.no/images/pub/2015/20423.pdf) (Trygstad et al. 2015).

In this study, the researchers executed a survey among TU reps in three trade unions affiliated with the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO). In all, 1782 TU reps answered the survey. Additionally, the researchers interviewed TU reps and employers in 33 companies. The research was not an attempt to substantiate whether the cooperation between the social partners at company level has improved or deteriorated over time, rather it is an attempt to depict how the situation is today. The research was commissioned by LO, and several of its affiliated trade unions were covered by the study. The unions represent manufacturing, construction, hotel & restaurant and retail trade.

**Results**

**Variations in how well the Nordic model is embedded at the workplace**

The main result of the research is that the scope of cooperation between the social partners at the company level varies depending on sector, the number of employees and union density within the company. The Nordic model is well embedded in many workplaces, meaning that the relations between the social partners are characterized by trust and respect, regular communication and exchange of information. At the same time, almost three out of ten union representatives are never in meetings with their employer, and rarely or never have informal conversations with their closest leader. This indicates that the potential of the Nordic model at the workplace is not fully utilized.

TU reps in retail trade and hotel & restaurant are the ones who have the least amount of formal and informal meetings with the employers. Fewer workers are organized in retail trade and hotel & restaurants than in manufacturing, and as such, the Nordic model is less embedded in companies where few workers are organized. TU reps in manufacturing and construction participate more frequently in meetings and conversations with their employers.

**The potential of the model not fully utilized**

The results from the survey indicate that there are many tools available at the local level, which are currently not utilized. The tools the researchers are referring to are for instance rights, institutions etc. that is derived from collective agreements, and the Working Environment Act. Three out of ten of the TU reps did not use the tools provided to them in order to participate in cooperation at the local level. These tools might be important to ensure workers participation and influence in challenging situations, like in downsizing- and restructuring processes.

The results also indicate that institutions established by agreements, such as works councils, is less widespread than institutions established by the law. Companies with more than 100 employees are bound by collective agreements to have a works council. However, according to the TU reps surveyed, only 37 percent of these companies actually have one.

The research indicates that many TU reps desire more training and discussion around central issues of cooperation, such as wages and working hours. This is particularly the case for TU reps in retail trade and hotel & restaurant. The TU reps also report that employers could need significantly more training than the TU reps. This view is shared by the interviewed employers.

For the TU reps to perform their tasks and develop competence in trade union work, it is necessary to be facilitated to do so, especially as many TU reps in the survey are new in their role. There are differences between sectors in how good the employers are at facilitating trade union work. Over half of the TU reps within industry respond that the company facilitates trade union work. The corresponding share in the retail sector is only 20 percent.

**Robust relationships important in times of crisis**

In workplaces with regular meetings between the TU reps and the manager, both parties express that this is important in order to build trust over time. Even though the two parties do not have conflicts or many issues to discuss in the everyday life, the two parties meet to exchange information. This might contribute to a more robust relationship, which is beneficial in times where the must cope with challenging situations.

The absence of formal meeting places does not necessarily mean that the relationship between the employers and employees is poor. An important aspect of the Norwegian working life model is informal cooperation and trust between the social partners. More than half of the TU reps say they have informal meetings with the employers on a monthly basis or more often. Does this imply that the relationship between the TU reps and the employers might be revived in times of crisis? The researchers indicate that the cooperation might be revived, but this depends on several factors and is not certain.

**Commentary**

The report *The Norwegian model at company level* is an important contribution to the literature on the Nordic model. It explores how the collaboration between the TU reps and the manager at the workplace unfolds, and sheds a new light on the Nordic model at the micro-level. The main findings from the research is that the scope of cooperation between the social partners at company level vary and that there are many tools found in the collective agreements and in the law available for the social partners at the local level that are unutilized. In times of crisis, it is important that both parties understand how to use the tools available to them in order to better cope with the challenges.