

When Top-Down Meets Bottom-Up: A Study of the National Strategy for the Survival of Local Stores in Rural Norway

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Background

Rural grocery stores in small local community's face:

- Economic vulnerability

- Risk of closure

At the same time, they serve as:

- Providers of essential goods and services

- Social meeting places in local communities



Existing research primarily focuses on local actors and internal dynamics

Research Gap and Aim

Limited attention to:

External actors

State-led support schemes

Some studies of relevance

(Sadílek et al., 2023, Halvorsen & Båtevik, 2025, Herslund & Tanvig, 2024, Jussila et al. , 1992, Küpper and Eberhart 2013)

This study examines:

The Norwegian Merkur Programme

Central aim:

To explore how the interaction between top-down and bottom-up is solved in the case of the Merkur programme

Research Questions

On what grounds is the community perspective safeguarded?

How is the programme implemented in practice?

How can its success be understood by the Merkur programme's ability to balance between:

- Top-down governance

- Bottom-up representation and interests

Theoretical Framework

Local communities understood as open systems

(Frisvoll, 2015, Thuen & Wadel, 1978)

The interaction between:

External and local actors

The values that underpin these relationships

(Haugen & Villa, 2016, Thuen & Wadel, 1978)

Two ideal-type approaches:

Top-down: Central planning, expert-driven

Bottom-up: Local knowledge, participation

Synnevåg, 2018)

(Chaskin, 2013, Garrod, 2003,

Key argument: The ability to balance these approaches

The Merkur Programme



Established: 1995

State-initiated programme

Objective: Secure services in small rural communities

Instruments:

- Financial support

- Competence development

- Advisory services

More than 1,000 store managers involved

Method and Data Material

Primary data: Merkur annual reports (30-year longitudinal source)

Reports analysed as governance and legitimisation instruments

Focus: strategic orientation and local interaction

Supplemented by external evaluations and stakeholder interviews (2023)

Strength: multi-source, multi-perspective analysis

Results: Core Values

Rural stores conceptualised as:

Key social institutions

Not merely commercial enterprises

Rooted in:

Norwegian policy guidelines (since 1975)

Important principle:

The survival of the store is a means to support local communities

Results: Strategic Approaches

The four main trajectories of the Merkur programme:

Development of supplementary services

Strengthening local engagement

Enhancing the store as a social arena

Building local political support

Results: Key Actors and Interactions

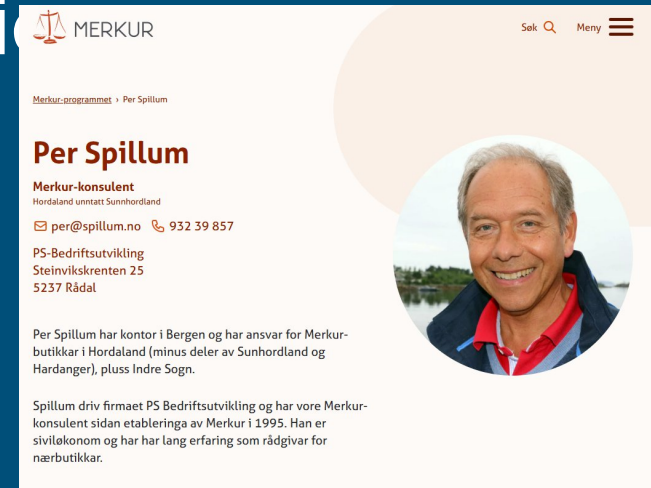
Actors involved:

- Ministry and national authorities
- Merkur board
- Consultants
- Storekeepers
- Local communities

Consultants play a crucial role:

- Intermediaries between levels –particularly the local community and the Merkur board
- Combine commercial and community expertise

Programme functions as a “listening post”



Some examples based on the annual reports of Merkur's board

The type of competence our consultants possess—particularly in facilitating processes, combined with knowledge of retail operations, supplementary services, and local community development—is rare. This part of the programme has become increasingly relevant and occupies much of the consultants' efforts. (Annual report 2010)

In recent years, the programme has gradually been adapted in line with a stronger emphasis on the community perspective, and we believe that it has now acquired a more operational function. The programme board continuously seeks to renew the programme when evaluations, feedback, and political signals provide grounds for doing so. (Annual report 2008)

Main Findings

The programme's success is explained by:

- Strong value foundation

- Continuous interaction across levels

- Institutional design that:

 - Facilitates local engagement

 - Integrates experiential knowledge

Result:

- High legitimacy

- Adaptability to local contexts

Discussion

Demonstrates how:

State-led initiatives (top-down) can support local autonomy (bottom-up)

Key insight:

Success depends on institutional mechanisms enabling interaction, not only formal organisation

A critical perspective:

Is “the absence of conflict” simply a result of Merkur's primary task as an organization established for facilitating local development?

Conclusion

The Merkur Programme represents:

A successful combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches

Ensures:

Service provision

Community development

The road ahead: How will recent (2025) organisational changes affect the programme?

Thank you for your attention!

