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## People, place and culture in regional policy

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In the last decade culture, creativity and valorisation of an entrepreneurial spirit has gained prominence in regional<sup>1</sup> development policy in Iceland. These developments mirror a general trend at the intersection of hegemonic discourses of market led globalisation and a normative cultural economy approach in policy circles (Gibson & Kong, 2005). A new regionalism has become stronger in policy and implementation at the EU-level (Ray, 1998), where a territorial approach has replaced a sectoral one in funding regional development. In the territorial approach people living in the regions are encouraged to identify and value local resources, including cultural identity, which can be used both in place-promotion and for strengthening community cohesion in times of global economic restructuring. In the northern European periphery culture has become prominent in processes of place reinvention (Nyseth, 2009).

Despite new approaches to sustaining economic growth in regions, the stated rationale for regional policy has not changed much over the decades. In Icelandic policy formulations the central aim has been to improve conditions for living outside the capital area,<sup>2</sup> combat population decline and promote social equality in rural areas (Þingskjal 849, 2001-2002; Þingskjal 473, 2005-2006). With these goals in mind, the lack of both gender and multi-ethnic analysis in regional policy documents is striking, considering the gender gap among younger people, with fewer women in many regions, and increased ethnic diversity. My aim is to problematize this lack in a policy that looks to cultural economy as a new base for employment and women as the prime target for training in entrepreneurial skills. In this context I find it interesting how the relationship between culture and place is conceptualized in regional policy documents and if the increased complexity and intersections of social divisions is problematised. Which subject positions and social divisions are made visible or invisible in what context? Here context refers both to diverse policy goals and how groups are positioned in discourses on these, e.g. how arguments used in regional policy are assigning social groups different subject position and value (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2007).

## Grasping complexity in place identity and intersectionality

In geography, local reactions to global restructuring processes in the deindustrialising North/West and theoretical debates in feminism on multiple and fluid identities, initiated Doreen Massey's (1994) reconceptualisation of spatial identities (place, rural, region, etc.) as relational constructs. She conceptualised places as unbounded and constructed through present and historic connections with other places and spatial scales, as well as through complex internal social relations. These relational processes are imbued with power, meaning and symbolism. According to Massey (2004, p. 6)

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term regional policy to refer to national policy, *byggðastefna* in Icelandic, as well as policy developed in and for specific regions, as part of recent emphasis on decentralisation in the national policy.

<sup>2</sup> In the new regional policy proposal for 2010-2013, still in parliamentary process, the focus is on all regions and only a few proposals mention specific targeting of regions outside the capital area (Þingskjal 910, 2009-2010). In the context of changes in spatial reach and imaginary of regional policy this is a new and interesting development, but outside the main topic of this paper.

the initial aim was to “combat localist or nationalist claims to place based on eternal essential, and in consequence exclusive, characteristics of belonging: to retain, while reformulating, an appreciation of the specific and the distinctive while refusing the parochial.”

As with reformulation of place identity the concept of intersectionality seeks to theorise multiple relationships in construction of personal identity and hierarchical social locations. Although debates in feminism in the 1970s centred much on the intersection of gender and class, the specific concept of intersectionality is traced to the merging of feminism and critical race studies in the United States in the late 1980s (McCall, 2005; McDowell, 2008; Valentine, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Debates on theoretical and methodological developments on intersectionality are prominent in recent publications and conferences (Lewis, 2009). Just to mention some main threads, there are different approaches on the use, and usefulness of, analytical categories in studying the complexity of intersectionality. McCall (2005) makes distinctions between three approaches. *Anticategorical*, with focus on deconstruction and resistance to homogenized discourses on social categories. *Intracategorical*, using categories strategically to reveal formerly neglected points of intersection of social divisions. The focus is usually on one group and different social dimensions added on to each other, like *black* and *woman* and *working class*. This has been presented as triple oppression, used for political mobilisation and to make visible structures and dynamics of subordination and discrimination, not adequately covered in institutional practices (Lewis, 2009). Although not denying the political usefulness of the additive/intracategorical approach, Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that social divisions are not reducible to each other and contextual analysis are needed for an intersectional review of policy and implementation. The third approach, *intercategorical*, McCall (2005) advocates for a realist approach when studying changing hierarchies of inequalities in places affected differently by restructuring processes. In an extensive statistical analysis of wages of various groups in the United States, her conclusion was that “no single dimension of overall inequality can adequately describe the full structure of multiple, intersecting, and conflicting dimensions of inequality” (McCall, 2005, p. 1791). The outcome varied by place.

In this paper my analysis and arguments draw mainly from studying various policy documents at national and regional level in Iceland. The focus is on how discourses on culture and regional development are weaved together. Initially my research interest in regional development was on gender and entrepreneurship in the context of cultural economy focus in policy. At the same time activities and big money, presented as contribution to regional development, was in construction projects, mainly involving men in a gender segregated labour market (Júlíusdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir, 2009). In the case of the large construction projects in Eastern Iceland in 2003-2007, mainly foreign men temporally hired for the work. There was little preparedness in the region for the effects of this large scale project on both multi-ethnic composition (Hjalti Jóhannesson et al., 2010) and viability of smaller firms. Firms in trade, service, art and handicrafts, mainly run by women entrepreneurs, were loosing in the competition for housing when new actors entered this large investment site (Helga B. Ragnarsdóttir, 2004).

## Culture and place in regional policy in Iceland

In the Icelandic context tourism and culture were woven together as one of the main paths to regional growth in Growth Agreements in the first decade of the 21st century (Magnfríður Júlíusdóttir, 2008). The emphasis was on making the cultural heritage of the nation more visible for both Icelandic and international tourists (Þingskjal 849,

2001-2002). In the parliamentary resolution on regional development plan for 1999-2001, allocating more finances to cultural activities was a central theme. Since then a cultural economy understanding of culture has been dominant in regional development policy at the national level, with heritage tourism running as a red thread in policy documents. In the policy for 2006-2009 creative industries get on board (Þingskjal 473, 2005-2006), defined as creative fusion of art and culture with technology and science (Prime Minister's Office, 2005). In the policy proposal for 2010-2013 "strengthening tourism" is one of seven key areas and tourism is the only economic sector drawn out in the policy as a key area (Þingskjal 910, 2009-2010).

Although economic arguments for investing in culture are predominant in the regional policy documents, strengthening of community identity in the regions by facilitating the cultivation of local cultural roots is more problematic. This call for a reinvention of cultural heritage resembles a nationalistic discourse of territory, with the merging of land and people with cultural roots in the area. This kind of a geographical imagination assumes that everyone living in the same region shares a cultural origin, which has developed in a bounded space into a unique and distinct culture. In a report from the Icelandic Regional Development Institute, accompanying the latest proposal for a regional policy, the "situation" and "future outlook" in regional development is presented (Byggðastofnun, 2009). Reconnecting with local or place identity, by preserving the local heritage, is seen as necessary for community cohesion and shared experience in times of globalisation. The argument is that with globalisation arrives international culture and local values weaken and disappear. In the report it is claimed that a common reaction in regional policy in other countries in Europe is "to identify and strengthen local culture as a base for quality of life, employment and sustainable development" (Byggðastofnun, 2009, p. 20). This line of argumentation is the main theme in the subchapter on society (meaning community), where weak or strong self-esteem/identity of individuals are projected on to community identity. Weak identity leads to passivity but a strong one to having initiative and energy. The similarity between common stereotypes of femininity and masculinity are clear. The weak community identity is attributed to communities with a long history of population decline and they "need to make use of local specialty, knowledge and culture to reawaken and rebuild the identity of the local population and the outward image" (Byggðastofnun, 2009, p. 20). The use of local culture and knowledge become key strategies in the socioeconomic development of sparsely populated areas, capitalising on creating new attractions in heritage tourism. Thereby, heritage becomes the main frame of reference for representing culture-place relations in regional development policies.

Following the rhetoric of cooperation in clusters, the whole community has to be mobilized for making heritage tourism successful, as everyone in the community is seen as taking part in constructing the "tourism product" just by living in the destination (Byggðastofnun, 2009). This discourse is an example of othering processes that both marginalize the growing number of people of foreign origin living and working in these regions (see Table 1) and in-migrants of Icelandic origin, but not embedded in the valorised local heritage. It is also in tension with another dominant discourse where places need to connect to a global urban youth culture and offer vibrant cultural activities to become attractive places for young talented people, the creative class leading developments in creative industries (Florida, 2002). In the regional Growth Agreements and Cultural Contracts, developed in the last ten years, this discourse comes in strong. The next section draws mainly on an analysis of policy documents from (or for) East Iceland, starting with the Cultural Contract.

### Oscillating between local heritage and global art

In 2001 the Association of Municipalities in East Iceland signed the first regional cultural contract with the Ministry of Education and Culture. Other regions have followed this initiative. Cooperation between municipalities, enhancement of cultural diversity and access for all was emphasised (Menningarráð Austurlands, 2008). The meaning of cultural diversity is varying art forms, not socio-cultural stratification by lifestyle, ethnicity, gender or other identity markers. The only social division mentioned is age/generation and cultural activities attracting young and old people are favoured.

The Development Association of East Iceland (Þróunarstofa Austurlands in Icelandic) took the initiative of urging the municipalities to unite in the proposal for the Cultural Contract in 2001. The main argument was that a better supply and quality of cultural activities would increase the satisfaction of inhabitants, with special attention drawn to needs of young people, as potential out-migrants. It was also stressed that cultural activities create employment and have direct impact on sectors like tourism and commerce (Þróunarstofa Austurlands, 2000). In these formulations cultural activities are an important ingredient in perceptions of quality of life in certain places and hence a factor in migration decisions.

Citizen forums held at the beginning of the 21st century also stressed the importance of creating a good community for young people, with more cultural activities and building up arts education (Alta, 2005; Austur-Hérað, 2001). Equal opportunities, compared to urban settings, for children and youth living in rural areas were a priority. The forums were open to all interested inhabitants willing to participate, in spirit of Agenda 21 vision of broad community engagement in providing roadmaps for a sustainable future development. There was a gender balance in participation in the two citizen forums, but judging from the names of participants no immigrants were involved. Many of the ideas and visions developed in these two forums were taken up in project proposals in the Growth Agreement with East Iceland.

In 2009 a new cultural policy for East Iceland *A cultural policy for the community* was developed after consultation with focus groups in six towns in the region (Menningarráð Austurlands, 2009). Apart from people in culture administration and artists, representatives from tourism companies, older people and young people, either living in the town or originating from it, were mentioned as participants. Like in 2001, the focus is on supporting diversity of art forms and especially some new and innovative performances. The problematic understanding of culture-place relations, as found in policy at the national level, is coming stronger in now than in the original proposal for a cultural contract. In a chapter on “Needs and expectations of inhabitants and tourists” the reader learns that “Most people [in the focus groups] agreed that among tourists there is a general need to experience authentic way of life and authentic people. Introducing food culture and hunting culture were some ideas about how to meet this need” (Menningarráð Austurlands, 2009, p. 13). Although this is presented as a view from the focus groups (without direct quotes), the strong discourse on heritage in regional policy at the national level might be ‘trickling down’ to the consulting firm carrying out the study. In another statement it is claimed that „[t]he history and the people are the pillars of the settlements. The knowledge of the history of the places ... has become weaker as the years go by, not least because of much migration *to and from* East Iceland” (Menningarráð Austurlands, 2009, p. 12 – my emphasis). These quotes clearly demonstrate boundary drawing around both place and people. The discourse on cultural heritage, as both creating income from tourists and saving local culture from threats of globalisation and even modernisation, is feeding the parochial Massey (1994) was challenging when theorising place as a relational

construct. In her theorisation, the configuration of historic and present relations to other places is what makes a place unique.

### Regions without social divisions?

In the period 2004-2006 the Ministry of Industry and Trade (now Industry, Energy and Tourism) made Regional Growth Agreements with six regions in Iceland.<sup>3</sup> They are all built on the same script, which raises interesting questions of power relations between the ministry and the regional actors in what is claimed to be a big step towards decentralization in regional development. The individual agreements can be divided into three parts. The first is the theoretical or ideological context. This part is the same in all the contracts, just changing the name of the region. Regional development in times of globalisation is framed into the neoliberal discourse of regions competing in the global market, just like firms (Harvey, 1989). To succeed they need to define their competitive advantage and create a positive image to attract investment, inhabitants and tourists. The best method is to develop clusters of firms working in related businesses (Iðnaðar- og viðskiptaráðuneytið, 2006). The second part is presentation of key statistics for the region; demography, educational levels and labour force by sectors. Only the demographic material shows gender and age structure. The gender gap is addressed but little effort made to explain it by referring to studies on the subject. The third part contains project proposals, competing for funding from the agreements. Local initiative in regional policy seems to be limited to applying knowledge of regional specialities and priorities for developing new projects, which may or may not get funded. The wider framework is delivered in a top-down fashion.

Only in the Growth Agreement with West Iceland is the gender gap presented as a problem which needs to be researched and reacted to for sustainable future development. The increased number of immigrants is also noticed and research into their socioeconomic situation proposed. They are seen in need of access to service and building bridges between immigrants and local people is recommended. These proposals are placed last of 30 project proposals, which indicates a marginal placement of issues problematising social divisions in regional development context.

A growing number of immigrants have moved into all regions in the last two decades, with fishing communities in the Westfjords having the highest proportion of foreign citizens in the 1990s. Immigrants in Iceland work in different occupation, but many are in jobs that are defined as low-skilled jobs in service and industry (Guðbjört Guðjónsdóttir & Kristín Loftsdóttir, 2009) and their numbers in agriculture are increasing, like in neighbouring countries (Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010; Magnfríður Júlíusdóttir, Anna Karlsdóttir, Karl Benediktsson, Inga E. Vésteinsdóttir, & Sigfús Steingrímsson, 2009).

From 1991-2009 nearly eight thousand people obtained Icelandic citizenship (Hagstofa Íslands, 2010a) and the number of people of foreign origin intending to live in Iceland grew steadily (Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, 2009). Still they are almost invisible in regional development policy, not to mention as gendered or differentiated by other identity markers. If immigrants are mentioned in the regional policy documents it is mainly in the context of status and outlook in the Westfjords, a region which has needed to import labour force for the fishing industry, to use the wording of the policy (Þingskjal 473, 2005-2006). Actually the report presented with the newest policy proposal mentions that the many nationalities in the Westfjords “can give

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<sup>3</sup> In February 2010 the Growth Agreements were renewed to 2013. Now the sum of 215 million kronas a year is divided between eight regions (Iðnaðarráðuneytið, 2010).

opportunities for work creation and development” in for example tourism and the creative sectors (Byggðastofnun, 2009, p. 41). The long history of immigrants in the region and the location of the Intercultural and information centre, at Ísafjörður, is a likely explanation.

Statistics on nationality by gender in regions outside the capital area, in 1998 and 2010 (Hagstofa Íslands, 2010b), show that the number of women with foreign citizenship was highest in the Westfjords in 1998. They were 7.1% of women in the region, by far the highest proportion seen in 1998. In January 2010 the percentage is still the highest (8.6%), but now only the Northwest has fewer foreign women (meaning foreign citizenship). The same trend is seen for foreign men in the Westfjords in 2010, although they are now 10.6% of men living there, which is similar to the Southwest. As shown in Table 1, the number of both foreign men and women in all regions has grown between 1998 and 2010, while the number of both women and men with Icelandic citizenship has decreased. The only exception is a modest increase of women in the Northeast.

Table 1. Population change by sex and citizenship in regions outside the capital area between 1998 and 2010 (Hagstofa Íslands, 2010b)

Region	Women	Men
<b>Soutwest (Suðurnes)</b>		
Icelandic citizenship	2013	1931
Foreign citizenship	677	1023
<b>West (Vesturland)</b>		
Icelandic citizenship	337	334
Foreign citizenship	342	433
<b>Westfjords (Vestfirðir)</b>		
Icelandic citizenship	-637	-905
Foreign citizenship	11	237
<b>Northwest (Norðurland vestra)</b>		
Icelandic citizenship	-472	-526
Foreign citizenship	131	109
<b>North East (Norðurland eystra)</b>		
Icelandic citizenship	81	-234
Foreign citizenship	308	328
<b>East (Austurland)</b>		
Icelandic citizenship	-377	-223
Foreign citizenship	226	411
<b>South (Suðurland)</b>		
Icelandic citizenship	1189	1077
Foreign citizenship	543	581

As indicated in Table 1 East Iceland is the only region where the decrease in the number of women with Icelandic citizenship is greater than among men. It supports warnings raised about the gendered effects of putting almost all the eggs into the basket of large construction projects, in a gender segregated labour market.

To explain the gendered and ethnic variation in population change in the regions requires a better database and deeper analysis than have been offered in regional policy documents so far. A large literature exists on both gendered labour market segregation and ethnic niches, and a growing interest in combining these studies

(Schrover, van der Leun & Quispel, 2007). Among intersecting threads in both literatures is the importance of networks, which are found to be differentiated by gender and ethnicity alike.

### Women's resistance spreading

From a feminist perspective, analysing gendering of power, resources and representation in regional development, an interesting project proposal is found in the Growth Agreement with East Iceland in 2006. Categorised under “welfare projects” is the Network of Women in East Iceland (*Tengslanet austfirskra kvenna* or TAK), applying for grants to run a newly established network. The aim of the women's network is increasing projects and research focusing on gender equality and the position of women in East Iceland. The network wants to encourage women to greater participation in political life, media debate, public and private boards and seek jobs in male dominated occupations (Iðnaðar- og viðskiptaráðuneytið 2006, TAK-Tengslanet austfirskra kvenna, n.d.). TAK's formulation of what needs to be done to make the region an interesting place for women to live in, and thereby reversing the present gender gap, has little resemblance with solutions proposed in the Growth Agreement. There it was suggested that balancing the supply of traditional women's and men's jobs and making the region attractive for young people with their families, would be the way forward. Auður Anna, who now chairs the board of TAK, was in 2006 the only woman found among the nine board members for the Development Association of East Iceland (DAEI) managing the Growth Agreement. According to her the incentive for creating the network was women's protest, when they lost a business and gender equality advisor in 2005. Then the government was not willing to extend this program, initiated by high unemployment rate of women in many regions at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The advisor was stationed at DAEI in 2003-2005, with a mandate to assist potential women entrepreneurs. The chairwoman of TAK said “we women were angry because we did not have this gender equality advisor. We started to meet, a small group of about 30 women, and then we just went on to announce a meeting, and there came much more women than we had expected.” (Auður Anna Ingólfssdóttir, chairwoman of TAK and DAEI, personal communication, August 2, 2010).

The initiative of women in East Iceland is now spreading to other regions, with women starting similar networks in 2009 and 2010, in the Westfjords, North West and North East. The women's network can be interpreted as a sign of resistance to the marginalisation of women in the new regional policy forums and male bias in the resource allocation of funds supporting business initiatives in regional development (Sigríður E. Þórðardóttir & Halldór V. Kristjánsson, 2005). Emphasis on direct competition in fund bidding, partnerships with the local private business sector and a preference for large-scale ‘flagship’ projects are processes that have been found to reinforce male power within policy-making, as women are poorly represented in leading positions and networks within the private sector. The result of the above emphasis being that the praxis of rural economic policy is increasingly masculine in style and direction (Pini, 2006; Little & Jones, 2000). Like in Swedish regional development the last decade, women have been presented as Other [to men] needing support to become entrepreneurs (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2007). Despite the dominance of that discourse in Icelandic regional policy and wider society, women are not using that opportunity well. According to a recent study, twice as many men as women are entrepreneurs. The gender balance has not changed since 2002 (Hannes Ottóson, Rögnvaldur J. Sæmundsson & Silja B. Baldursdóttir, 2010), which raises



questions about gaps between political rhetoric and implementation of policy, as well as lack of analysis of the context of implementation.

## Discussion

In this paper I have attempted to weave loosely together different threads from studies on regional development and regional policy, from critical perspectives in feminism and geography. The complexity of social divisions and contestations envisaged in reformulation of place identities and theorisation of intersectionality has still to reach the pages of Icelandic regional policy. The lack of such approaches is problematic in many ways. As presented, the discourse on heritage in connection with growing interest in capitalising on heritage tourism is not only a market issue. The arguments used are also about boundary making and questions of belonging in a place/region. If taken too far it risks becoming an exclusionary regionalism. Only people with deep roots in the regions are valued as permanent residents. Others are only welcome as tourists or guest workers.

Almost invisible in regional development policy and implementation are immigrants. They are a growing group in all regions, but if mentioned, presented as labour force in traditional industry, but not as a resource in the new pillars of economic growth. They are absent from the discourse on entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity, despite studies in Iceland showing that 25% of immigrants are interested in starting own firms and over half of them have university degree (Vala Jónsdóttir, Kristín E. Harðardóttir, & Ragna B. Garðarsdóttir, 2009). Women in some immigrant groups have a high rate of self-employment (Magnús O. Schram, 2005), but are never mentioned when strategies are shaped for the undifferentiated 'Woman entrepreneur'. According to the script on globalisation in regional development, reaching out to the world should be the goal. Immigrants' networks to other places in the competitive global market, seem to be of little value. The government initiated process of making a forward looking strategy for Icelandic industry and society in wake of the economic crisis (in Icelandic 20/20 Sóknaráætlun Íslands), is the latest round of citizens forums making visions for future regional growth. The information portal of this vision making process has no information in other languages than Icelandic, despite being located at the same webpage as information directed at immigrants (Prime Minister's Office, n.d.a and n.d.b).

In the various regional development policy documents age/generation is the main or only social division worth mentioning in the Icelandic regional context. If women are presented they are a resource for reproduction and it is a cause for worry that young potential mothers are leaving. If gendered labour market information is provided it is presented as comparison of women or men in different regions, instead of men and women in the same region. Despite some attempts to respond to the new demand of gender mainstreaming (Byggingastofnun, 2009) much needs to be done in provision and analysis of gendered data. Such analyses are needed for a contextualised planning and implementation of a regional policy aiming at equality and continued settlement in all regions of the country.

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