Public administration and the evaluation of cultural production: Cultural Index Norway (CIN)

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural Index Norway (CIN) is a benchmarking tool, that ranks local and regional cultural activity in Norwegian municipalities and regions. It was initiated by Telemark Research Institute (TRI) in 2011.

CIN analyses, benchmarks, and publishes register data from more than 50 data sources providing statistical information on spending on culture, the number of artists and creative workers, memberships in voluntary organisations and the provision and participation in libraries, museums, cinemas, concerts, theatre, and dance performances, summed up in ten indicators. Based on this, CIN suggests an "objective" picture of the state of cultural activity within Norwegian regions and municipalities (see: www.kulturindeks.no).

CIN is popular, not least because of its ranking of municipalities and regions, a function that triggers heavy media coverage in local press, and consequently sparks competitiveness among many local cultural bureaucrats and politicians. Moreover, the index is widely used by municipalities as a basis for cultural planning and implementation.
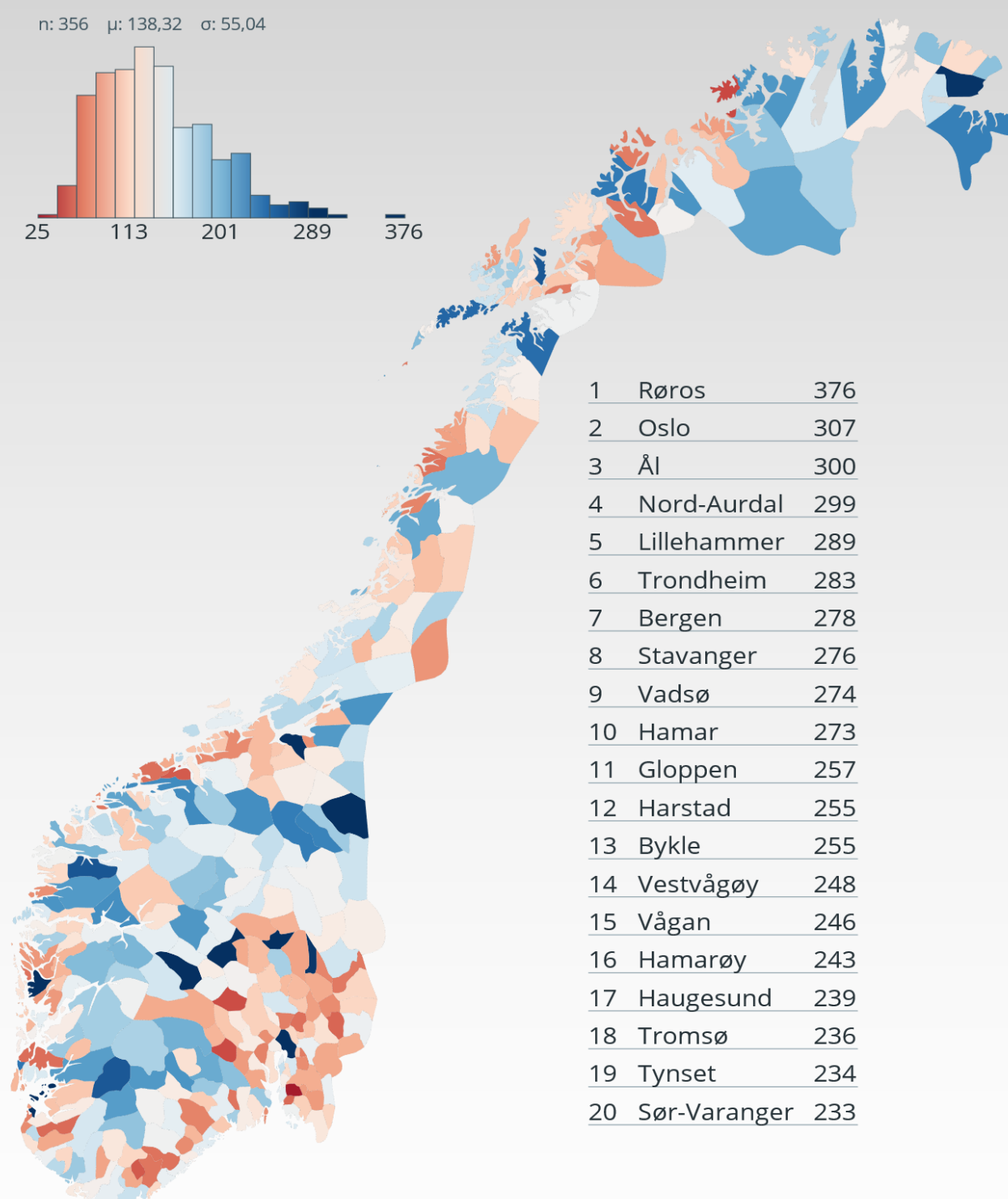

1	Røros	376
2	Oslo	307
3	Ål	300
4	Nord-Aurdal	299
5	Lillehammer	289
6	Trondheim	283
7	Bergen	278
8	Stavanger	276
9	Vadsø	274
10	Hamar	273
11	Gloppen	257
12	Harstad	255
13	Bykle	255
14	Vestvågøy	248
15	Vågan	246
16	Hamarøy	243
17	Haugesund	239
18	Tromsø	236
19	Tynset	234
20	Sør-Varanger	233

Fig. 1. The 20 highest ranking municipalities in the 2021 CIN. Source: www.kulturindeks.no.

OBJECTIVES

The case study sought to identify how a cultural information system like CIN represents and produces cultural value.

More specifically, we wanted to investigate in what ways a cultural information system like CIN represents and produces cultural value.

Main research questions evolved around

— *how this takes place, what negotiations that take place to balance the index as both a legit academic output and a feasible tool for its users,*

and

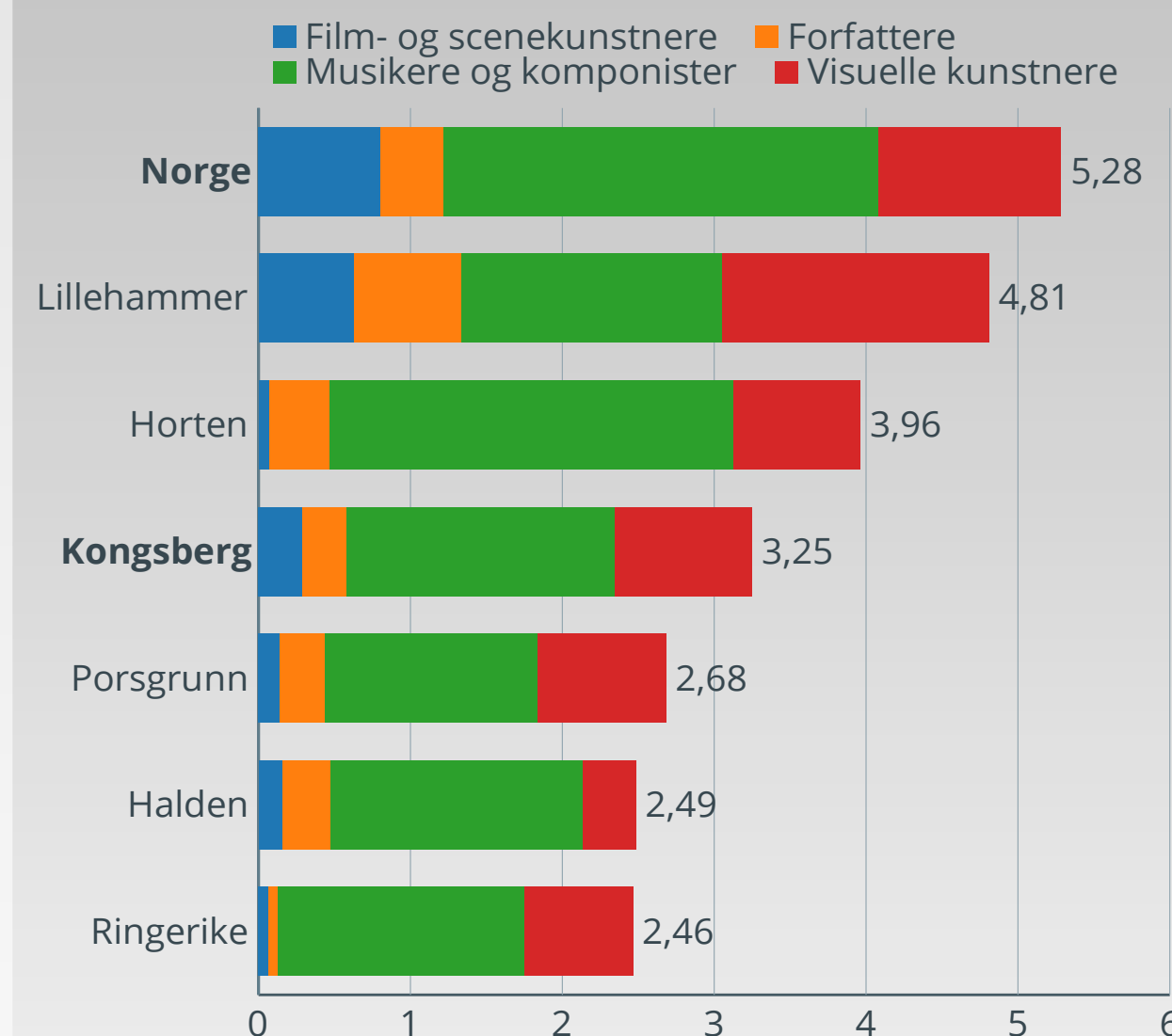— *what tensions arise from such representations and negotiations.*

Fig. 2. Number of artists per 1000 inhabitants in the Norwegian municipality *Kongsberg*, in selected comparable municipalities, and the national average. Different colours represent different artist genres. Source: www.kulturindeks.no.

DATA AND METHODS

- **Document studies** of 11 CIN reports published 2011–2021.
- **Interviews** with the researcher in charge of CIN at TRI and representatives of six municipalities that use CIN actively.
- **Auto-ethnographic research**, looking self-reflexively into how the CIN has been developed and adjusted in order to become both feasible for its users, and keeping a scientific high standard as a quantitative benchmarking tool.

THE CIN INDICATORS

1. **Museums:** *Number of museum visits and number of exhibitions and events.*
2. **Concerts**: *Concerts and ticket sale of a certain size.*
3. **Performing arts**: *Ticket sales from the Arts Council Norway data on the national theatre companies and 30 national theatre companies and dance performances.*
4. **Cinema**: N*umber of movie-displays and the number of visitors from 283 cinemas throughout Norway.*
5. **Library**: *Number of visits, number of lending's, participants on events* and *the number of persons lending books.*
6. **Art for Children**: *Number of teaching hours, diversity of the supply* and *number of pupils* in public art education, and *supply* and *attendance* in the Cultural Rucksack.
7. **Artists**: *Total number of artists residing.*
8. **Cultural workers**: *Total number of cultural workers residing.*
9. **Voluntarism**: Membership in choirs, school/marching bands, local history communities, crafts, visual art associations, etc.
10. **Grants**: *Grants from Arts Council Norway, Frifond (a scheme primarily directed to voluntary work for youth culture), and funding for cultural heritage protection.*
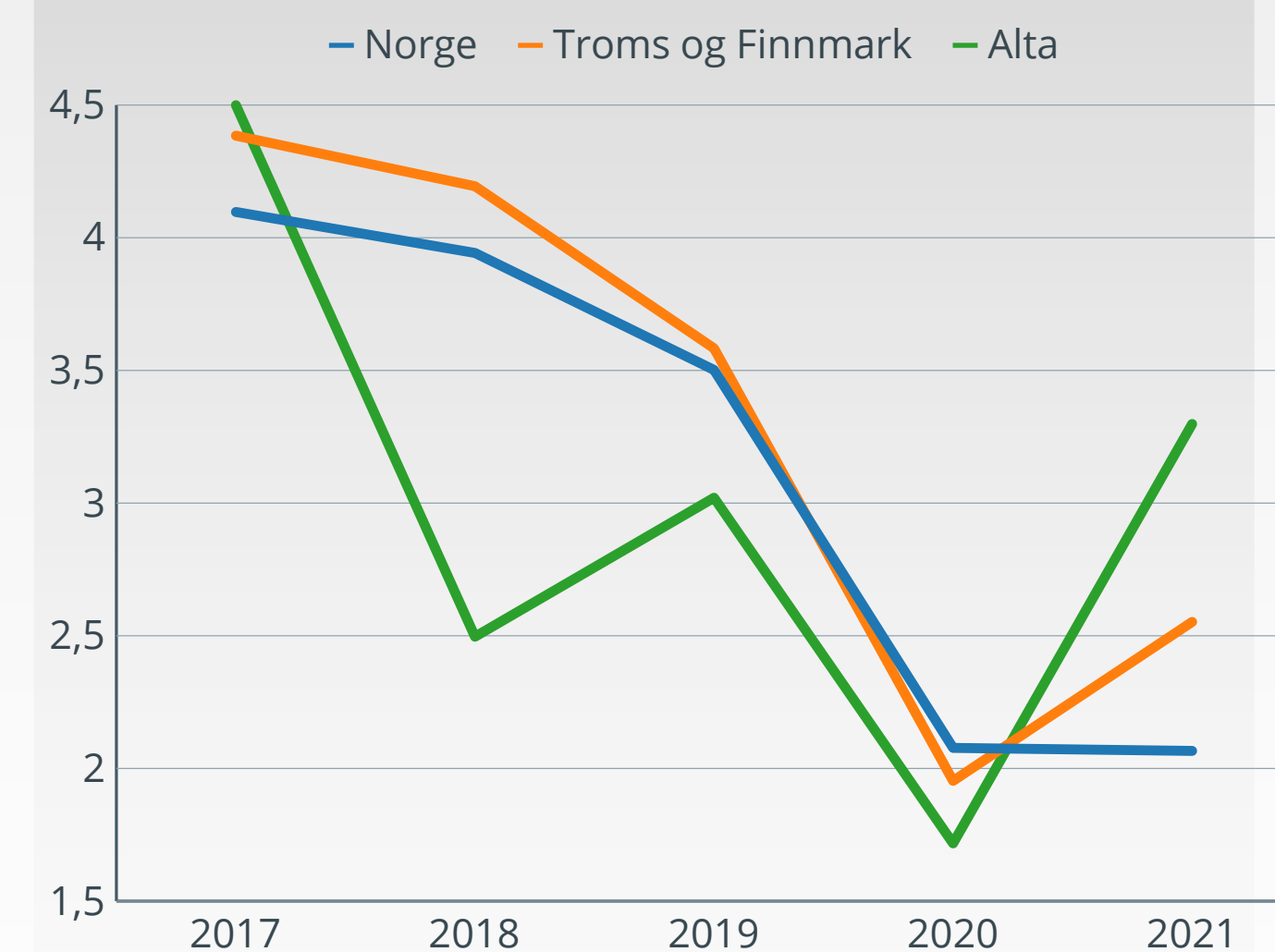

Fig. 3. Number of visits at the Cultural Rucksack performances per child in primary school (6-15 years) in the Norwegian municipality *Alta*, in the county *Troms og Finnmark*, and in the country as a whole in the period 2017-2021. Source: www.kulturindeks.no.

FINDINGS

Cultural information systems produce and represent diverse forms of cultural value. However, such value is an object of negotiation. Thus, in the case of CIN, we looked at how the index and its design has changed, and who initiated such changes. A general finding was that an important objective with the index has been to design and operate a tool that is viewed useful and flexible among its users. This has primarily been done by involving the municipalities in a stage-based dialogue about the index's benchmarking features. This involvement has been prioritized despite its potential for jeopardizing a more critical, academic output of the index. Consequently, we found a tension dynamic between the desire to make a feasible tool and concurrently an index with scientific credibility. On an overarching level, CIN is seen as a tool to measure participation and/or use. Since such use recently has become more important as a central source of legitimacy within culture (directly) and cultural policy/funding (indirectly), we also found tensions based on more principal grounds.
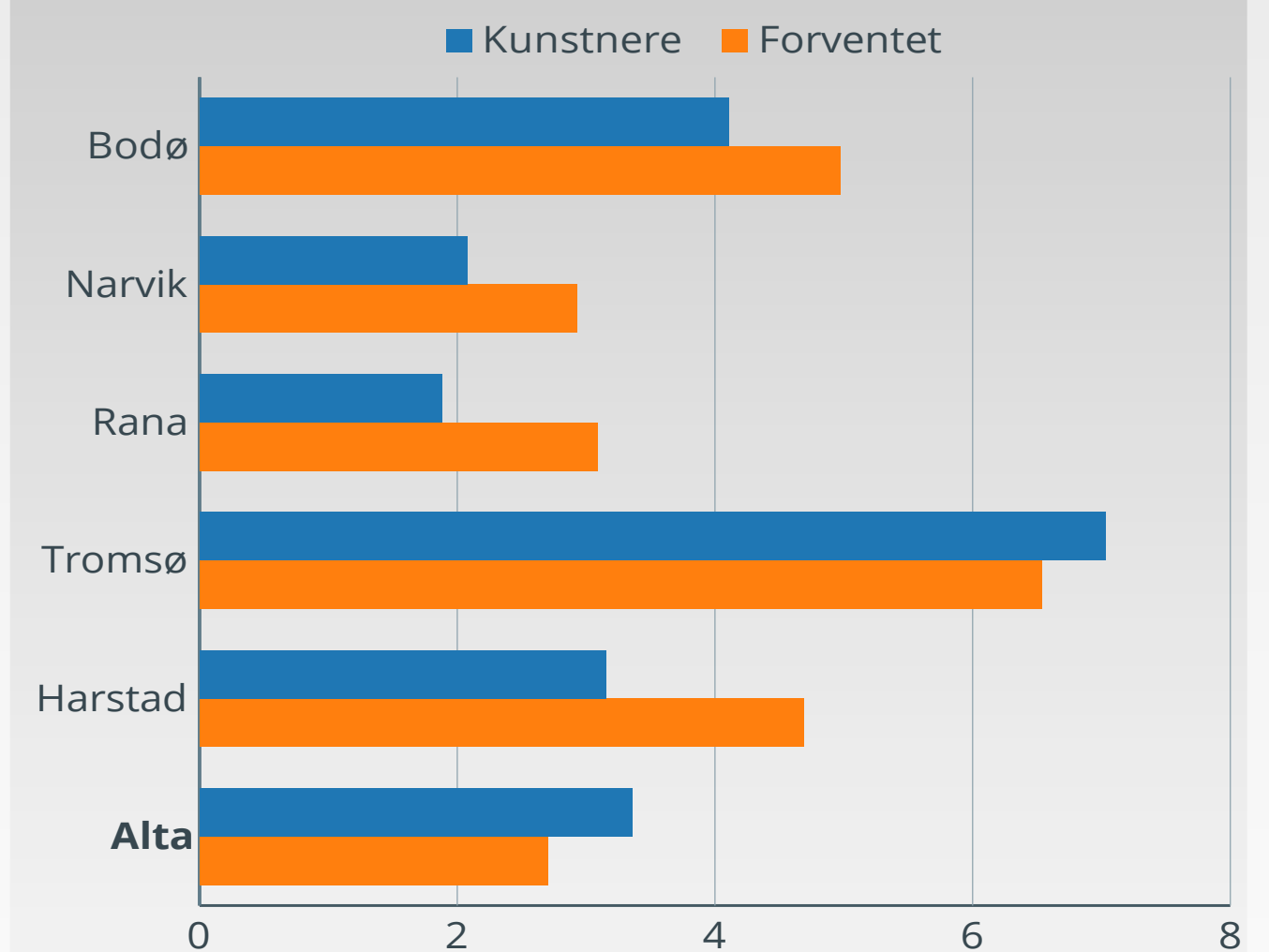

Fig. 4. CIN can derive expected values. This shows how many artists the municipality *Alta* can be expected to have, given e.g. demographic and other factors. When the expected and actual values are compared, we see whether the municipality has a larger or smaller offer than similar municipalities with similar structural characteristics. Blue column is number of artists, orange is expected number. Source: www.kulturindeks.no.

MAIN TAKEAWAY

From a cultural sector perspective, quantitative indicators tend to rise tension, as they are not seen to adequately represent core sector values like quality and impact. Still, such indicators are attractive as they offer an appearance of objectivity or neutrality.