

Photo: Árborg municipality

V.2. ÁRBORG IN ICELAND: Creating downtown to increase attractiveness

By Hjördis Rut Sigurjonsdottir, 2018/2019

Introduction

Why are some municipalities better than others at deploying their resources, attracting people and creating jobs? This was the key question studied in this analysis of the attractiveness of 14 rural municipalities in the Nordic Region.

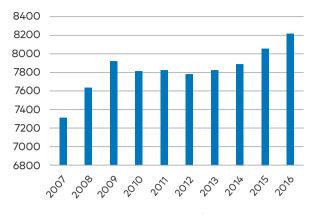
The 14 areas selected are all defined as attractive in the sense that their populations and the number of people in work have increased in recent years. The nature of the boost to employment in some sectors has been identified by means of shift-share analyses to determine how much of the change is attributable to specifically local factors.

Interviews then probed key stakeholders about motivation, working conditions, job creation and living conditions. These interviews were with public sector representatives (e.g. mayors and heads of planning and development), business representatives and entrepreneurs, high school students and people from the education sector, as well as families. Combined with analyses of other data and information, the interviews helped us to understand why some places do better than others.

One of two Icelandic municipalities in this case study is Árborg in South Iceland, with its fastgrowing population. Árborg was formed in 1998 by the merger of four municipalities – Sandvíkurshreppur, Eyrarbakkahreppur, Selfoss and Stokkseyrarhreppur. Of the three settlements, Selfoss is the largest urban area (with a population of 8,068), followed by Eyrarbakki (540) and Stokkseyri (515), according to Statistic Iceland (n.d.). Árborg is considered to be within the impact zone of capital area (Icelandic Regional Development Institute, 2016) and the distance from Selfoss to Reykjavik city centre is 59 km, or less than a onehour drive.

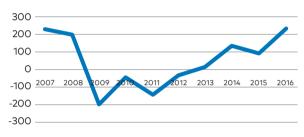
Demographic development

Since 1999, the year after the merger, the total population of the area has been steadily increasing, from 5,508 people 20 years ago to 9,485 in



Sveitarfélagið Árborg

Figure V.2.1. Population change in Árborg, 2007–2016.



Sveitarfélagið Árborg

2019 (up 72.2%). A slight reverse was registered from 2009 to 2012 following the economic crisis, but the subsequent increase has been rapid from 2015. Before the recession in 2008 there was a considerable influx of new residents seeking less expensive and larger housing. These people wanted to keep their jobs in the capital region.

Labour market, employment and business development Labour market

Over the decades Selfoss has grown from being a service centre for the heartland of agricultural in Iceland, to a service town for increased tourism in the region and for owners of second homes. Construction companies and a variety of other industries are among the largest in the area. These include building contractors, pipe production, a slaughterhouse, and a milk processing plant (MS) which is the largest of its kind in the country. In other areas of endeavour there are different significant employers such as the hospital, the prison in Eyrarbakki and educational institutions. The municipality itself is also a big employer. Despite this range of employers, the labour market is still not considered diverse enough, according to the interviews we have conducted. Missing are what would be regarded as valuable jobs requiring highlevel skills and university education.

Data for the number of jobs at local level is not readily accessible for Iceland.¹¹ Labour market development therefore needs to be observed and calculated by income, and then divided into industries and regions. The largest sectors by income are education, industry, construction, health and social services, and public administration. From 2008 to 2016, employment income increased by ISK 3,503 million. Some 38% of that increase was from 2016 to 2017 – ISK 1.325 million (Icelandic Regional Development Institute, 2018).

Other considerations regarding the mismatch between employment and education were outlined in an interview with Bergsteinn Einarsson, a director of the prosperous Árborg company Set Pipes.¹² His concern was that the particular guidelines and emphasis on educational pathways is not consistent with labour market needs, an outcome that is not beneficial for anyone. This is a concern that applies not only to Árborg, but to the country as whole, and to other parts of Europe as well. Part of his company operates in Germany, for example. In Einarsson's opinion people with higher education are over-represented, and he believes that the educational system therefore needs to be reviewed. He says that this shortage of skilled labour is the main challenge for his company, along with having to use the Icelandic krona, a small and fluctuating currency, in international business. Einarsson believes that more needs to be done for the local labour market to be able to attract people. The current situation, however, is that expensive housing in the capital area is driving people to the municipality. To diversify and strengthen the labour market, the region needs to collaborate as one, with a focus on each area's specific strengths, he argues.

Steps have now been taken to respond to the needs of people for vocational education within the field of technology and industry, Einarsson mentions. In the Action Plan for South Iceland increasing the educational level in the region is

Figure V.2.2. Net migration patterns in Árborg, 2007-2016.

¹¹ For the development in the number of jobs in Iceland in 2008-2016, see appendix.

¹² Set Pipes produces a wide range of pipes and piping systems.



Bergsteinn Einarsson, director and owner at Set Pipes, is calling for more cooperation within the region to strengthen and diversify the labour market. Photos: Hjördis Rut Sigurjonsdottir

emphasised. As a part of that, the Association of Municipalities in South Iceland held a jobs and education fair, for the third time, in the spring of 2019. The focus was on introducing both educational and professional links with industry, technology and vocational employment for students in the last years of grade school, and in the first years of upper secondary school. Initial evidence indicates that this can be a successful way of increasing interest, and the plan is to continue to have fairs like this to attract more students to these professions.¹³

The ratio of agricultural production to GDP is high in the region, as well as the level of knowledge in the food industry (VSÓ, March 2018). The importance of agriculture there has led to the headquarters of the Icelandic Food and Veterinary Authority (MAST) being moved to Selfoss. MAST serves as an inspection and administrative body. It is the Competent Authority (CA) in Iceland in the fields of food safety, animal health and welfare, the control of feeds, seeds and fertilisers, plant health, and water for human consumption (MAST, n.d.).

This transfer was an effort to bring public jobs to a more rural area. In the prelude to the relocation, several regulatory bodies merged to become MAST, which began operations in Selfoss in 2006. The institution also has offices around the country. It has a total of 90 employees, half of whom are located in Selfoss. Jón Gíslason, the general director, says that around 90% of the employees have a university education. He believes that the institution is of great value to the municipality and to the region as a whole, both because of the jobs it creates directly for university graduates, and also as result of derivative jobs. Even so, the location can be challenging when searching for new employees with the right competences, according to Gíslason. He is sure that MAST would receive more applications when it advertises vacancies if it was based in the capital area. On the other hand, its presence in South Iceland is important for the region from a regional development perspective.

Tourism

South Iceland is the most popular part of the country among tourists all year round. It does not face the same seasonal fluctuations as other parts of the country (Icelandic Tourist Board, 14 May 2019). Many tourists only drive through Selfoss, often making just a short stop. The risk is that even fewer will stop when a new bridge over Ölfusá river comes in to use and the main road through South-Iceland then bypasses Selfoss. The hope is that ongoing developments in the downtown area will counteract this, and that they will make Selfoss a popular destination for tourists and owners of second homes , as well as being a meeting place for residents (Árborg, 28 April 2016). Tourism has

¹³ Interview with Þórður Freyr Sigurðsson, project manager for the South Iceland's Action Plan. This is an unpublished part of the final report on the Job Education Fair in 2019.



The bridge over Ölfusá river is over 70 years old and carries a heavy traffic load. Photo: Hjördis Rut Sigurjonsdottir

been a growing sector in Árborg and one where income increased most between 2008 and 2017 – that is by ISK 1 billion (Icelandic Regional Development Institute, 2018).

Policies and action supporting municipal attractiveness

No special policies or actions have been implemented to attract new residents to the municipality, apart from a discount on plot prices in selected locations, which might be regarded as an incentive. On the other hand, the municipality has been striving to keep its infrastructure in line with a growing population in recent years, according to Bragi Bjarnason, the Director of Sports and Culture in Árborg. It is evident that lower house prices, compared with the capital area, have been a significant pull factor (VSÓ, March 2018). These have occurred in parallel with the construction of a range of modest private homes and town houses. Most of the building of private homes has been in Selfoss. However, in recent years, such construction has also occurred in the two smaller towns, Eyrarbakki and Stokkseyri. The selected areas where the municipality offered a discount on plot prices were in these two towns. Until rather recently, almost no houses or apartments had been built there for many years.

Although special measures to increase attractiveness are not listed in any policies, a largescale building programme is ongoing in the Selfoss down-town area. These major changes were approved by a residents' public vote in August 2018. In the past, different possible developments have been discussed, mainly arising from the perceived lack of a functional downtown area, and the fact that the route of the main road (the ring road/ highway) through the centre of the town was going to need to change. The planned routing of this main road over a new bridge east of Selfoss would clearly risk the town receiving fewer visitors. In the end it was decided that the residents would need to vote on the propriety of such a large-scale and expensive downtown reconstruction. Of those who voted, 60% supported the change.

The Sigtún development company is responsible for the downtown project. It has secured funding for the first of two phases of work, and construction started in the autumn of 2018. Both phases will include building around 30 houses across 16,200 square metres. It is expected to be completed in 2021. The aim of this project is to create a meeting place for people, as well as space for business and cultural life. The design of these particular houses is inspired by that of other classic houses across Iceland. The Old Milk House in Selfoss will be restored in the centre of town, in collaboration with MS, the country's largest dairy production company. An exhibition is planned in the Old Milk House, with the main focus on Skyr, Iceland's most famous dairy product (Selfoss miðbær, n.d.). Criticisms of this overall development include the claim that it is will be too dense, that the buildings are mere reproductions of those



Not everything will be new in the new downtown area. The tree in the middle of this picture has been left in place, despite the heavy construction work. Photos: Hjördis Rut Sigurjonsdottir



From the music and town festival Kótilettan in the summer of 2019. The President, Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, and the Mayor of Árborg, Gísli Halldór Halldórsson, run a barbecue for charity (left). The relaxed town provides entertainment for young people (right). Photos: Courtesy of Kótilettan.is

from other towns, that the project is too extensive, and that it is taking too much of the existing green belt. There is also some dissatisfaction with the fact that no public-sector bid was made for the construction project (RÚV, 21 April2018).

Although little has been done to attract people to Árborg, a regular town festival Kótilettan has attracted visitors and introduced the municipality to different people. Also, many people pass through Selfoss, which is on the main road, and the town has been a service centre for South lceland as a result of the bridge over Ölfusá. The first bridge, built in 1891, was replaced by the current one over seventy years ago. Selfoss is also an important service centre for the largest secondhome areas in Iceland, located in the neighbouring municipalities. The overall result is that many are now familiar with Selfoss.

Education

There is an upper secondary school in Árborg, as well as a university centre for distance learning and an earthquake research centre. The fast pace of population growth in the municipality has made it hard to keep pace with the overall increase. In response, one grade school and two kindergartens are now under construction. Additionally, there are two other grade schools and five kindergartens in the municipality.

A low level of education, especially among women, is considered a weakness for the South Iceland region. The proportion of people who have completed further education is 63%, which is somewhat lower than the national average (VSÓ, March 2018). Clear data on the educational level in Árborg is not available, but in a residential survey among nineteen rural regions/counties it was deemed highest in Árborg and also highest in the South Iceland region (SSV þróun og ráðgjöf, May 2018).¹⁴ It is quite likely that the educational level has risen in recent years due to more people moving from the capital area, where educational attainment is highest.

Evidence from Statistics Iceland demonstrates an unusually high dropout rate at the upper secondary school level in South Iceland. A preliminary project is ongoing to obtain better data on how enrolment is distributed across municipalities and years. The project has a clear link to the regional action plan, which includes creating an inclusive educational environment (Sass.is, 16 August 2017). Along with a reduction in the years spent at upper secondary schools in Iceland as a whole, from four to three years, the number of students has decreased in the Árborg upper secondary school (FSu). The number of students used to be up to 1,100, but by 2018 there were only 750-800.

FSu offers vocational education for carpenters, electricians and mechanics, and basic education for hairdressers. The school management claims that it is difficult to offer specialised education in a region with such a small population. For instance, there was not enough interest to run a programme in hotel and food processing, despite the labour market's needs. Equally, only a basic hairdressing course is available. FSu is one of three

¹⁴ In this survey, Árborg is a part of Arnessysla. There are seven municipalities in Arnessysla, with more than half of the inhabitants in the region living in Árborg.

schools at the upper secondary level in Iceland that has a sports academy, and which offers such diversity. it has indoor athletics, basketball, handball, football and track and field events, as is appropriate for a town with such a positive attitude to sports. In addition, the school has also a shorter line of study in Horsemanship, which is unique at this level of schooling.

An attractive place to live: housing, ameneties and infrastructure Housing

Housing has been the greatest pull-factor for new residents settling in Árborg. The difficult housing situation in the capital area in recent years has pushed people to widen the scope of their search for a suitable place to live. Being close to Reykjavík makes Árborg a reasonable choice, along with the availability of larger and cheaper houses. That applies especially to families and those close to retirement age who want to free up capital for their retirement years. In Árborg's housing policy (Vsó, March 2018), it says that an increase in population has occurred alongside an increase in the supply of modest private homes, duplexes and townhouses.

Municipalities in South Iceland face a shortage of residential housing, not least with regard to rental housing and smaller apartments (Magnúsdóttir, 27 September 2018). Three-quarters of the housing in Árborg consists of detached houses. Almost half of all real estate purchases in South Iceland in 2017 were in Árborg. That is, 358 out of 733, of which around 35% were newbuilds. Prices have increased in Árborg by around 30% per square metre from 2016 to 2018 (Helgason, 27 September 2018).

Sport, culture and club activities

Selfoss is known for its sporting culture– a claim reinforced by the profile of recent sports events. The bulk of the men's national handball team for the World Cup in 2018 was from Selfoss, a fact which received widespread attention across Iceland during the tournament. Then the local men's team became Icelandic champions for the first time in May 2019. Bragi Bjarnason, Director of Sports and Culture in Árborg, says that Selfoss has drawn noticeable attention to itself through athletics "We are active in praising them, and they are diligent in mentioning where they come from," he comments. Apart from handball, a variety of sports are available for children to practice and succeed in at a national level. In 2005, a basketball academy was established at the upper secondary school, FSu, where there five different sports are now available: basketball, football, handball, gymnastics and track and field. Students get the opportunity to combine exercise with study and to make progress in their sports.

The number of sports halls and fields in Selfoss is the result of a decision that was made to continue development (rather than to delay) following the economic crisis in 2008. "During that time, we decided to go into the construction of sport facilities. This made it possible to build at a lower cost, and to keep sport and recreational activities going," notes Bragi Bjarnason. The municipality has a running and athletics track, a football field with artificial turf and another with real arass, a swimming hall, two general sports halls and a hall for gymnastics. Development of more sport facilities is planned in the near future. This will include an indoor football hall. The swimming pool in Selfoss was renovated in 2015. It attracts many visitors, some 316,000 in 2018.

The music school in Árnessýsla county has been noted as a quality factor for families living in the area, as recorded in interviews with family members. The music school operates in 12 locations across the county, of which six are in Árborg. They had 490 students in private lessons during the winter of 2017-2018 (Tónlistarskóli Árnesinga, October 2018). In a residents' survey, among activities for adolescents, opportunities for sports and leisure, kindergartens, grade schools and libraries had an above average rating in the 19 regions/ counties covered in the survey. Many other factors the municipality is responsible for were ranked as average (SSV þróun og ráðgjöf, May 2018).

Regarding public services, Selfoss benefits from being on a transit route in the vicinity of the capital area, which carries both advantages and disadvantages. The town has a good supply of shops and services utilised by residents, by travellers passing through, and also by the many owners of second homes in the neighbouring municipalities. On the other hand, locals often travel to Reykjavík to shop. The main health institution in South Iceland is located in Selfoss. This is also important for the region, and for maintaining the overall level of services.

Transport

One of the main disadvantages for Árborg is the number of people who travel long distances to work in the capital (SSV þróun og ráðgjöf, May 2018). In Árborg's housing policy, the road between Selfoss and Reykjavík is described as good. However, the first 15 km of road from Selfoss has faced criticism for being unsafe for a long time, with only one lane in each direction and many intersections. According to the national transport plan, extensive road improvement on this road section, with 2+1 road and fewer intersections, is planned to be completed in 2022 (Vegagerðin, 2012), making travel to and from the capital area much more feasible than before.

The manageble size of the town

Árborg is a good municipality in which to have and raise children, according to family members interviewed in the survey. "It was great moving here with kids, really good," was how one father expressed his experience. "There is so much available for children – almost too much," was one comment by a couple with two children who had recently moved to Selfoss. The second part of the remark was intended more to underline the number of things on offer than anything else. Another parent said that it felt good to raise children in a community of this size, where people both know and support one other, which means everybody feels safe and secure.

Focus on sporting activies

Family members in particular noted the availability of different sports as well as good conditions for training and the presence of quality trainers. "This town has some of the best sport facilities in the country," said a father of three children. In addition, the town is manageble in size for children to get around, at least for those in the older age bracket. It is aso convenient for parents needing to run the kind of errands so common in modern life. To make sports and leisure activities more accessible, the municipality has recently provided a free bus service to transport children between school and their different activities. This is much appreciated. Such a new solution to a regular problem saves parents from taking time from work to drive their children to different locations.

Families are planning to stay, but students were in doubt

Few were planning to move away from the municipality, according to the survey covering nineteen regions/counties across the country. One specific question was about the possibility of moving within the next two years. Árborg had the best outcome of all the municipalities on this (SSV þróun og ráðgjöf, May 2018). However, the students interviewed in the upper secondary school were uncertain if they would return to Árborg after their education, and even considered it unlikely that they would do so. They described the region as a low-income area with few opportunties for people with a university education. In 2018, the average income in Árborg was 89% of the national average (Byggdastofnun, 2018).

Nevertheless, they also recognised that it was the responsibility of them and their peers to help create employment. Starting and running a company might look even more realistic if the population kept growing, it was suggested. Unemployment is relatively low in Árborg compared to elsewhere in Iceland, and it can even be hard to find people for jobs with lower skills requirements, especially if the working hours are outside normal office hours. On the other hand, many people drive to Reykjavík for work due to a lack of employment opportunities that tie in with their education and experience. This was the situation described by one of the interviewees.

A desire for better public transport

The students interviewed felt dependent on owning a vehicle, or having a good access to a car, to fulfill all their obligations – notably school, work and social life. Students and others considered public transport inadequate. This was a complaint brought up in quite a few interviews. The lack of a local bus service in Selfoss was the main complaint. Students described the bus to Reykjavík as being too expensive. Also mentioned was the very limited number of routes to other parts of the South Iceland region, where many of the interviewees' fellow students live. This is something that can make social life complicated at times.

New downtown and cultural life

Most interviewees where quite positive about the new developments in the downtown area and some had hopes that it would increase the range of cultural offerings, becoming a more functional and practical meeting place. More green space, and even more services than are currently available, was considered desirable. Some family members mentioned that social occasions for middleaged people were rather limited in Selfoss, which could be linked to a lack of cultural centre. A venue for cultural activities has long been planned in the cellar of the Hotel Selfoss, but this project has been left uncompleted for decades, despite numerous campaign promises. Otherwise, there was general satisfaction with availability of facilities like grocery stores, hardware stores, pharmacies and restaurants in Selfoss.

Integration for new residents

Many people have moved to the region in order to be able to afford to live in a detached home or a chain house with a garden, instead of an apartment in the capital area. Views are divided among interviewees concerning how easily new residents are able to integrate into the community. A couple interviewed described their way into the community being through their children, as they did when they lived abroad. They did this through their children's sport activities and through getting acquainted with the parents of their children's friends. Examples were raised of people that have had a hard time making friends. This is often connected with not having a job in the area, and not having any real roots in the community. "I think a lot depends upon yourself. We were very active and signed up to different clubs and activities. We are into horses, golf and other social activities," said a man who had moved with his family to Árborg without having any ties to the municipality before the relocation.

Challenges regarding location

Even though proximity to the capital area makes it possible to commute for work, commuting has its disadvantages, people reckon. *"I feel like I am risking my life when driving to and from Reykjavík for work,"* said one family member. Experiencing lack of safety was worse than the time factor involved in driving to Reykjavík five days a week, he said. Since neither he nor his wife had been able to find suitable work in the area, their plans were now to move to the city. However, when one person in a partnership can find an appropriate job in the region, the interviewee felt that it makes more sense to live in Árborg and enjoy living in a larger house.

Other concerns were expressed with regard to high real estate taxes, to kindergarten fees and to class sizes in elementary schools. A comparison between different settlements in Iceland, from the Icelandic Regional Development Institute, shows that real estate taxes (including property tax, land lease, sewage fees, water rates and waste collection fees) were the third highest in the country in Selfoss in 2018. Kindergarten fees are also relatively high according to a comparative assessment from the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ), in 2018. The highest year-on-year increase in general fees (eight hours with food) was 2.9% in Árborg (ASÍ, 15 January 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

Different factors have been reported regarding what makes Árborg an attractive place to live (table V.2.1.).

The municipality has benefitted from being in the vicinity of the capital area, where high real estate prices have forced people to look further afield. The municipality has been keen and active in developing the infrastructure needed to keep up with population growth. This has proved to be more of a challenge than attracting people. However, a large and long-debated step has been taken to increase the attractiveness of the largest urban settlement in the municipality by approving large-scale construction in the downtown area. If everything works to schedule, it will be interesting to examine the effects of this over the next few years.

The strong focus on sporting activity seems to be greatly appreciated among interviewees, and it helps to support social cohesion. It is also a good brand for the municipality to display at national level, and it helps attract families with children. Completion of the cultural centre or another suitable meeting place for cultural activities could be an appreciable addition to the quality of life in the area. However, there is a question about how well such a facility would thrive in such close proximity to the capital city, the country's main cultural focus.

From this point, the main challenge in the coming years is for Árborg to develop and diversify its labour market. Increasing the number of employment opportunities for university graduates is of great concern, and will strengthen the municipality's position. There can be a mismatch between the supply of jobs and the skills required for them. Another possible way forward in addressing this issue is to work with prospective employees in developing and promoting different educational pathways.

Table V.2.1. Attractiveness of Arborg, together with obstacles and challenges to overcome

Good practices and main reasons underlying attractiveness	Obstacles and challenges
Access to public services Not too large, and a very good availability of services. Adaptive / participatory planning Reconstruction of the downtown area is an interesting project. Culture, sport, recreation Strong sporting culture. Housing Cheaper housing than in the greater Reykjavik area. Location Located within the capital area's impact zone Quality of life and local community Good place for children and families.	Access to public services Service fees are at the higher end. Employment and jobs Salaries are lower, compared to the national average. Employment and jobs Job availability; too little variety (especially for those with university education). Lack of a sufficiently skilled workforce; shortage of employees with technical skills and vocational education.

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Appendix

Development in the number of jobs in Iceland, 2008–2016											
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016		
A. Agriculture, forestry and fishing	6700	7000	7300	7400	7500	7600	7400	7500	7400		
B. Mining and quarrying	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100		
C. Manufacturing	21400	19900	20100	20700	21200	21800	22000	22100	22600		
D. Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	1600	1600	1600	1500	1400	1400	1400	1500	1500		
E. Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	800	800	800	800	900	900	900	1000	900		
F. Construction	16800	10700	9000	8500	8600	9100	9600	10400	11900		
G. Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	24600	21400	21200	21400	22000	22300	22700	23200	24300		
H. Transportation and storage	9700	8700	8600	8900	9200	9600	10000	10600	12000		
I. Accommodation and food service activities	7500	7200	7700	8300	9100	10000	11000	12400	14100		
J. Information and communication	7800	7200	7200	7300	7300	7500	7600	7800	7900		
K. Financial and insurance activities	8000	7000	6800	6700	6600	6400	6200	5900	5900		
L. Real estate activities	1300	900	1000	1000	1100	1100	1200	1300	1400		
M. Professional, scientific and technical activities	8400	7700	7500	7700	8000	8100	8300	8500	8800		
N. Administrative and support service activities	5200	4500	4600	4900	5200	5600	6100	6900	8600		
O. Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	12600	11500	11700	12000	11900	11900	11900	12200	11900		
P. Education	17900	19000	18800	18800	18900	19200	19600	19600	19500		
Q. Human health and social work activities	20300	20900	20300	19700	19800	20200	20500	20900	21000		
R. Arts, entertainment and recreation	4100	4300	4300	4400	4400	4400	4600	4600	4600		
S. Other service activities	4100	4000	3900	3900	3900	3900	4000	4100	4000		
U. Activities of extra- territorial organisations and bodies	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100		
TOTAL	179000	164500	162600	164100	167200	171200	175200	180700	188500		