

Metagovernance challenges in regional development: A comparison of Sweden, Denmark, and Finland

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Abstract

Regional councils collaborate with municipalities, government agencies, universities, non-governmental organisations, and businesses when forming regional development policies in Nordic countries. Political representatives use metagovernance to steer this collaborative process, but previous research shows that politicians often struggle with metagovernance. There are few empirical studies on metagovernance and little is known about how institutional context affects it. This article comparatively explores the political metagovernance of regional development in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, studying what metagovernance challenges politicians encounter and how institutional contexts shape their perceptions. The study uses survey data from 1006 regional council representatives, which are analysed using a mixed-methods approach. Findings reveal common metagovernance challenges in regional development, but also show the importance of institutional context. The regional councils' institutional capacity has a clear impact: Danish and Finnish representatives request more formal powers and resources to develop their metagovernance role, while this is less of an issue among Swedish representatives.

Keywords: metagovernance, collaborative governance, regional development, regional political leadership, regional governance

Introduction

Modern societies often struggle with complex and unruly political challenges. These challenges are referred to as “wicked problems”, in other words, complex challenges that are difficult to define and solve (van Bueren, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 2003; Kooiman, 1993). Climate change, social inequality, and youth employment are examples of such problems (Torfing & Ansell, 2017).

New modes of governing society have emerged over the last decades, including the involvement of new actors in political decision-making (Geissel, 2013; Peters, 2010). Thus, political leadership is not reserved for elected representatives in democratic institutions but has become interactive through collaborative governance (Sørensen, 2020; Sørensen & Torfing, 2019). Collaborative governance occurs when state actors and non-state actors jointly work on policy-making in governance networks (Rhodes, 1997; Talpin, 2012). For this to occur, elected politicians must delegate some of their authoritative power to the gover-

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nance network. The advantages of such collaborations include a strengthened problem-solving capacity, enhanced efficiency, and increased legitimacy of political decisions (Heinelt, 2010; Schmalz-Bruns, 2018). Innovative policies formed through collaboration between state actors and non-state actors are considered necessary for solving wicked problems (Weber & Khademian, 2008; Torfing & Ansell, 2017).

Collaborative governance is generally considered to have democratic potential, but there are challenges. Studies show that politicians often play a peripheral role in governance networks, while public managers tend to be quite influential (Sørensen, 2006; Hofstad & Hanssen, 2015; Torfing & Ansell, 2017). Moreover, collaborative governance networks often lack the transparency that is embedded within representative democracy (Papadopoulos, 2010; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). Still, the democratic challenges of collaborative governance is a rather neglected research topic (Geissel & Joas, 2013; Hedlund & Montin, 2009; Sørensen, 2006).

Sørensen (2005) claims that a democratic anchorage between representative political institutions and governance networks is necessary to avoid democratic problems of collaborative governance. This connection can be secured by letting political representatives exercise metagovernance over governance networks. Here, elected politicians steer norms and principles of the collaborative process (Jessop, 2012; Kooiman & Jentoft, 2009).

This article explores regional politicians' metagovernance of regional development, a policy field that is full of "wicked problems". The study compares how regional council representatives in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland perceive this leadership since regional development is a key responsibility of these representatives. National legislation also requires political representatives to form regional development strategies in collaboration with stakeholders from public, private, and voluntary sectors.¹ Local governments, government agencies, businesses, universities, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are expected to be involved from discussion to implementation, but regional council representatives are still responsible for metagoverning this process.

This article examines two research questions. First, *what metagovernance challenges do regional council representatives face in their leadership over regional development?* Second, *do the regional council's institutional differences shape representatives' conceptions of metagovernance?* The first question has an exploratory purpose and focuses on what metagovernance challenges political representatives deal with in their leadership. Regional development gathers many stakeholders and interests, so metagovernance concerns should appear rather clearly in this field. The second question asks how institutional contexts affect the representatives' views on metagovernance. Regional characteristics are rather similar in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, but some variations in responsibilities and political mandates still exist, which may cause slightly different challenges. Political leadership unarguably depends on institutional conditions, but institutional context has been overlooked in metagovernance studies. However, this comparative study offers an excellent opportunity to investigate how metagovernance is shaped by institutional contexts.

The study is unique in two ways. First, it adopts a comparative approach, and thus breaks the tradition of studying specific regions or governance networks. This study explores politicians' metagovernance in a policy field that involves many stakeholders and interests, investigating how the institutional contexts in the three countries shape politicians' views on metagovernance. Second, its methodological approach to collaborative governance studies is innovative; analysing survey data (n=1006) with both quantitative and qualitative methods, while most previous studies are based on interview data (e.g., Qvist, 2017; Sørensen, 2006; Vabo & Røiseland, 2012). The surveys were conducted among regional council representatives in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland in 2018 and 2020.

Metagovernance has been thoroughly described from a theoretical perspective, but there is a shortage of empirical studies. Thus, this article makes an important contribution by providing an empirical study with an ambitious comparative design. The results shed light on typical metagovernance challenges in regional development but also manifest the importance of institutional context. The study also reveals that metagovernance challenges at a regional level often are multi-level governance challenges.

Theoretical framework and previous research

Collaborative governance: involving the stakeholder community

Collaborative governance occurs when state actors and non-state actors collectively engage in consensus-oriented decision-making (Ansell & Gash, 2007). The literature refers to governance as a new way of governing society, where interdependent actors from public, private, and voluntary sectors collaborate in political decision-making. Governance is often discussed in terms of a shift “from government to governance”, implying that politicians’ traditional sovereign rule has been replaced by a more coordination-based governance approach (Bevir, 2010; Papadopoulos, 2010; Rhodes, 1997). The governance paradigm assumes that society nowadays consists of networks of mutually dependent actors from different sectors (Rhodes, 1997; Pierre & Peters, 2005). This requires new modes of governing since networks must be governed through governance rather than by sovereign rule.

Governance is not a coherent theory but rather a plethora of theories about the complex interactions among participants in a policy-making process (Heinelt, 2018). It has been described from the perspectives of, for example, collaborative governance, network governance, and policy networks, which are all overlapping concepts (Enroth, 2010; Grönholm, 2020; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007).

There is a relative consensus on what characterises a collaborative governance network. Ansell and Gash (2007, p. 544) define it as “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets”. The collaborative arrangement is thus a publicly initiated process that involves non-state actors as participants in the decision-making process. The aim is to achieve a consensus on a public policy issue or in the management of a public policy. Torfing and Ansell (2017) claim that collaborative governance can enhance policy innovation in wicked problems. These collaborative processes generally spur an interactive political leadership (Sørensen & Torfing, 2019; Sørensen, 2020).

Rhodes (2007) specifies four characteristics of collaborative governance networks: (1) interdependence between participants in a network; (2) a continuous interaction within the network; (3) game-like interactions where participants follow agreed rules on how the interaction should work; and (4) some degree of network autonomy. The main function of collaborative governance is to enhance cooperation between citizens, public authorities, and stakeholders, and to build consensus in political decision-making through bargaining, negotiation, and deliberation (Elstubb & Escobar, 2019). Participants in collaborative governance often depend on each other for resources and must act jointly to achieve pursued outcomes (Enroth, 2010).

Metagovernance: connecting representative institutions and governance networks

Collaborative governance is praised for its flexibility, efficiency, inclusiveness, and proactive nature, but its democratic impact has been overlooked (Heinelt, 2010; Papadopolous, 2003; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007). Despite the advantages, collaborative governance processes have democratic challenges. Governance networks often suffer from lack of visibility, uncoupling from representative institutions, and problematic network compositions (Papadopoulos, 2010; Torfing & Ansell, 2017). The uncoupling from representative institutions is particularly problematic because it leads to poor democratic legitimacy (Sørensen, 2005).

Metagovernance is a continuation of the governance debate. It is a theoretical concept of exercising governance over governance networks and is generally defined as “the governance of governance” or “the organisation of self-organisation” (Kooiman & Jentoft, 2009). Gjaltema, Biesbroek, and Termeer (2019, p. 1771) define it more precisely as “a practice by (mainly) public authorities that entails the coordination of one or more governance modes by using different instruments, methods, and strategies to overcome governance failures”. Any actor with competence or resources can take the metagovernor role, but politicians are

the natural metagovernors of governance networks as a way of ensuring democratic control (Peters, 2010). Political representatives metagovern networks by setting the rules for the collaborative process, increasing accountability and transparency (Jessop, 2012; Kooiman & Jentoft, 2009).

Metagovernance provides a way to connect governance networks to representative institutions. Sørensen (2005) describes how this democratic anchorage can be secured. First, politicians of representative institutions should be able to govern governance networks through metagovernance. Second, all relevant stakeholders should be included in the governance networks. Third, network decisions should be held accountable to public contestation by a group of citizens within a defined territory, such as a local government, a region, or a nation. Fourth, governance networks must follow certain democratic rules and norms. These principles should function as guidelines for the interaction between representative institutions and networks and regulate interactions within the network. Collaborative governance does not only enhance efficient governance when the four criteria are met, but it contributes to democratic participation.

Politicians can use different metagovernance strategies to steer governance networks, such as network design, network participation, or network framing (Sørensen, 2005). Another way to look at different strategies is to distinguish between hands-on strategies and hands-off strategies in relation to the degree of engagement. This results in four strategies, which are shown in Figure 1.

	<i>Hands-off metagovernance</i>	<i>Hands-on metagovernance</i>
<i>Low engagement</i>	Framing of self-governance	Support and facilitation
<i>High engagement</i>	Storytelling	Participation

Figure 1. Metagovernance strategies (Sørensen 2006, p. 101).

When political representatives choose a hands-off strategy with low engagement, they frame the self-governance of governance networks by shaping political, financial, or institutional contexts. Representatives can thereby provide networks with more or less autonomy. Hands-off metagovernance with high engagement results in storytelling. Political representatives then let governance networks work rather autonomously but simultaneously lead by creating a narrative or a success story of the collaborative process.

A hands-on strategy with low engagement means that political representatives actively offer support and facilitation to the governance networks to help them. A hands-on approach with a higher level of engagement means that politicians directly participate in networks and thereby steer the collaborative process. Politicians mostly prefer hands-off strategies that do not require direct contact with stakeholders, but a limited use of strategies may lead to insufficient metagovernance.

This article examines a participatory setting, where political representatives and stakeholders from multiple sectors cooperate on regional development policies. Figure 2 presents a framework on how the concepts in the theoretical discussion apply to this study.

The regional councils represent the traditional democratic institutions, while local governments, government agencies, businesses, universities, and NGOs are part of a stakeholder community. Collaborative governance is the participatory process, where representatives from representative institutions and the stakeholder community come together to work on consensus-oriented policy-making. The networks formed within this process are called governance networks. Therefore, governance networks consist of both political representatives and stakeholders from public, private, and voluntary sectors. The interactions within the governance networks are part of collaborative governance.

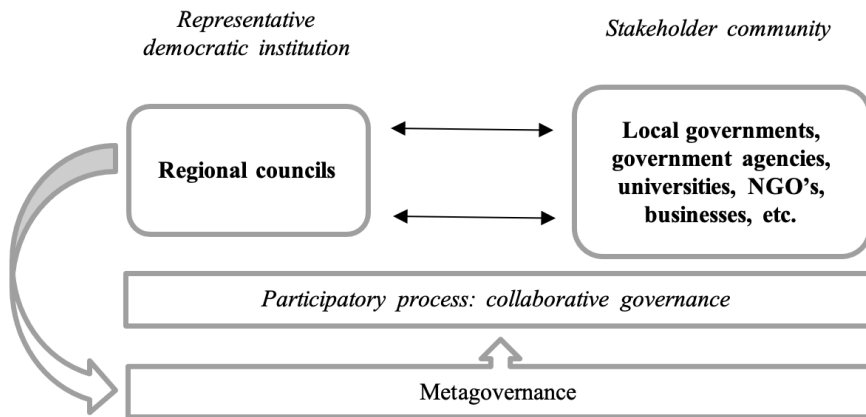


Figure 2. Theoretical framework of the participatory process.

Regional council representatives steer these networks through metagovernance. This means that they make the rules for the collaborative process by setting norms and guidelines for the process. Metagovernance connects the governance networks to the representative political institutions and thereby ensures democratic legitimacy.

Research design

The regional councils as metagovernors

The described characteristics of collaborative governance apply well to this study since regional councils lead regional development in cooperation with regional stakeholders. Political representatives metagovern this collaborative process by setting a strategic direction, mobilising stakeholders, and coordinating resources (Hofstad & Hansen, 2015).

Regional development is governed through an official regional development strategy in all three countries. Each region creates a strategy that is based on the specific challenges, needs, and conditions in that particular region. These strategies typically include policies for environmental issues, planning, economic growth, infrastructure, public health, education, and the labour market. While political representatives have a special influence over strategic objectives, goals should also be negotiated with relevant stakeholders. Collaborative governance is, therefore, present from initial discussions to implementation. This strategy process is largely based on hands-off strategies, such as storytelling and framing of self-governance. However, the process also includes some hands-on metagovernance as public managers and politicians have a dialogue with stakeholders.

Previous studies reveal that politicians identify strongly with the metagovernor role, but that political representatives often struggle with exercising metagovernance (Hofstad & Hanssen, 2015; Sørensen, 2006; Torfing & Ansell, 2017). Subsequently, it is interesting to study how regional council representatives perceive this leadership, what metagovernance challenges they encounter, and how institutional contexts affect their leadership.

This study is based on survey data from three online surveys answered by regional council representatives. The surveys addressed different aspects of political leadership over regional development, includ-

ing the use of strategies, stakeholder influence, collaborations, priorities, and challenges. The surveys in Sweden and Finland were conducted simultaneously in April 2018, while the Danish survey was conducted in June 2020. All surveys were active for six weeks and five reminders were sent throughout this period. This section will further present the characteristics of the regional levels in the three countries, provide information about the survey data, and discuss the methodological approaches.

The case countries: Sweden, Denmark, and Finland

The comparison strives to investigate what impact institutional contexts have on politicians' perceptions of metagovernance in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. These case countries are highly suitable for comparison due to their many similarities, including a shared political culture, administrative structure, and historical traditions (Loughlin & Peters, 1997). However, the regional councils have different political mandates and responsibilities in the three countries (Torfing, Lidström, & Røiseland, 2015). These variations in institutional conditions may result in different metagovernance challenges and perceptions of metagovernance. The comparison resembles the Most Similar Systems Design approach, where varying institutional conditions work as the differential factor (Anckar, 2008). Table 1 presents the institutional characteristics of the regional councils in each country.

Table 1. Characteristics of the regional level in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland.

	Sweden	Denmark	Finland
<i>Number of regional councils</i>	14 regional councils* 6 cooperative councils*	5 regional councils	18 regional councils
<i>Representatives per council</i>	Between 23 and 152 representatives	41 representatives	Between 39 and 119 representatives
<i>General elections</i>	Yes	Yes	No
<i>Taxation right</i>	Yes	No	No
<i>General competence</i>	Yes	No	No
<i>Responsibilities</i>	Health care, hospitals, regional development	Health care, hospitals, regional development	Planning, regional development
<i>Regional reforms</i>	Several failed reforms, minor changes in 2019	Extensive reform in 2007, minor changes in 2018	Reform planned in 2022

* Based on the regional organisation in Sweden in 2018.

Swedish regional councils have a strong political mandate based on general competence, the taxation right, a broad scope of tasks, and directly elected representatives. The regional councils' main responsibility is operating the health care system, but they are also responsible for regional development issues, such as infrastructure, public transport, and environmental issues. Sweden was fragmented on a regional level in 2018 when the survey was conducted. The questionnaire was sent to executive board and assembly members

of the regional councils in 14 regions, where the regional councils (*regionkommun*) were responsible for health care and regional development. In six regions, a county council (*landsting*) handled the health care, while regional cooperative councils (*regionförbund*) were responsible for regional development matters. The survey was sent to members of the cooperative councils in these six regions. The Stockholm region was excluded from the survey since an administrative regional board handled regional development matters there in 2018.

Denmark has five regional councils (*regionsråd*), and the survey was sent to all their representatives. Danish regional councils also have a fairly strong political mandate due to direct elections and are responsible for both health care and regional development, including infrastructure, public transport, and environmental policies. However, Danish regions have faced significant changes in the last decades. During the public sector reform in 2007, the previous 13 provinces (*amt*) were merged into five new regions. Simultaneously, the regional councils lost important formal powers, such as the taxation right (Christiansen & Klitgaard, 2008; Vrangbæk, 2010). Danish regional councils have experienced an even further loss of responsibilities after 2007. For example, they may no longer promote regional business industry—now a municipality and state shared responsibility since 2018. Thus, the regional councils lost an important tool for influencing economic development in the region, though they are still responsible for regional development.

The Finnish survey was sent to executive board and assembly members in the 18 regional councils (*maakuntaliitto*). The autonomous region of the Åland islands was excluded from the survey since their administration is organised differently. All regional councils are responsible for planning and regional development (except for the Kainuu region which also manages health care). The regional level is rather weak since regional councils are intermunicipal cooperation authorities. Additionally, regional representatives are chosen among local politicians. The state level has a strong influence on regional development policies too since regional development tasks are shared between regional councils and regional government agencies. Subsequently, Finnish regional councils have fewer responsibilities and formal powers than Swedish and Danish regional councils. Governments have aimed to create a more solid regional level in recent years, but no reform has yet been implemented.

Political leadership is often considered a reflection of formal powers (Hooghe, Marks, & Schakel, 2010). Metagovernance is also dependent on institutional contexts and it can, therefore, be expected that metagovernance challenges vary in different institutional settings. Swedish regional councils have the greatest formal powers, while Finnish regional councils have the weakest, and Danish regional councils lie in between. Political mandate, formal powers, and responsibilities will most likely affect what kind of metagovernance challenges these politicians encounter. Regional council members with fewer formal powers or weaker political mandates will likely pinpoint insufficient formal powers as a challenge for metagoverning regional development, while representatives with stronger powers may highlight other challenges.

Mixed methods with explorative and comparative ambitions

This study uses mixed methods to analyse survey material (n=1006), a fruitful way to comparatively study metagovernance. This is an innovative methodological approach to collaborative governance studies as most previous studies are purely qualitative and focus on specific regions or networks. Information about the data is provided in Table 2.

The surveys were answered by 27–45% of respondents, a better response rate than expected. Survey response rates have generally decreased over the last decades, and it is particularly difficult to obtain answers from regional politicians, who do their political work in their spare time. For example, the response rate was only 12.9% in a large European survey targeting regional councillors a few years ago (see Bertrana, Egner, & Heinelt, 2016).

Table 2. Data material.

	Sweden	Denmark	Finland
<i>Survey response rate</i>	45 percent	40 percent	27 percent
<i>N</i>	619	76	311
<i>Responses to open survey questions</i>	30% of respondents answered open-ended questions	57% of respondents answered open-ended questions	40% of respondents answered open-ended questions
<i>Answers to analysed open-ended question*</i>	232 useful comments	52 useful comments	163 useful comments

*The analysed question is “what challenges does your region have in terms of regional development?”

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The results section first presents the representatives’ perceptions of the institutional context through quantitative analyses and later qualitatively explores which metagovernance challenges the representatives face in each country. This second part is based on an open-ended survey question, where respondents reflected upon challenges in governing regional development. Most surveys suffer from poor response rates in open-ended questions, but respondents were active in this questionnaire. Many gave insightful answers, enabling a qualitative analysis. A selection of comments answering the question “what challenges does your region have in terms of regional development?” was made for each country. These comments have been inductively analysed, and several that reflect frequently mentioned issues in each country are presented.

Results

The results section is divided into two parts. The first explores the leadership context in each country by presenting data on how much regional council representatives find different government levels influence regional development policies. This creates an understanding of the institutional environments in which the representatives exercise leadership. The second part presents country-specific analyses that give in-depth views regarding which specific metagovernance challenges representatives encounter in their leadership and how institutional contexts affect politicians’ perceptions of metagovernance.

Representatives’ perceptions of the institutional context

The conditions for exercising regional political leadership are unarguably dependent on institutional conditions. However, studies show that institutional conditions do not explain political representatives’ assumed powers completely, but subjective perceptions of power also play an important role (Lidström & Roos, 2016; Sundqvist, 2021). This part of the paper investigates the context for exercising leadership over regional development, showing how political representatives perceive their position and possibilities to govern regional development. Table 3 shows how the representatives rated the regional council’s power in relation to other government levels’ power over regional development policies.

Table 3. How much power do you think the following government levels have over regional development policies? (mean)

	Sweden	Denmark	Finland	Sig.
<i>The municipalities</i>	3.28	3.22	3.33	
<i>The regional councils</i>	3.73	3.52	3.67	
<i>The state</i>	3.87	4.21	4.20	**
N	521–523	66–68	275–278	

Significant differences confirmed with Oneway ANOVA, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.
The scale ranges from 1 (very little power) to 5 (very great power).

Results show that the situation is similar in the three countries. Regional representatives believed that the state has the most power over regional development policies, while municipalities have the least power in this policy field. Danish and Finnish representatives suggested that the state is significantly more influential than Swedish respondents did. This corresponds well with the regional councils' institutional characteristics, as Swedish regional councils have the greatest formal powers.

The regional level has been a subject of political debate in all Nordic countries and attitudes towards it have become somewhat polarised between left-wing parties and right-wing parties. Left-wing parties mostly aim to strengthen the regional level, while right-wing parties often want to abolish the regional level completely, and populist parties tend to have more unclear opinions (Sandberg, 2009). The representatives were asked how they would want responsibilities in regional development to be shared among government levels. The political dimension is also considered here because it constitutes an essential part of the institutional conditions. Table 4 first presents a general mean and then shows how means differ between left-wing, right-wing, and populist parties.

Table 4. How do you think that regional development tasks should be shared between government levels? (mean)

	Sweden			Denmark			Finland			Sig.
<i>The municipalities</i>	3.43			2.97			3.60			**
<i>The regional councils</i>	3.83			4.12			3.70			**
<i>The state</i>	2.73			2.46			2.93			**
	L	R	P	L	R	P	L	R	P	
<i>The municipalities</i>	3.33	3.59	3.08	2.77	3.17	3.75	3.66	3.59	3.21	**
<i>The regional councils</i>	3.88	3.89	3.27	4.40	3.87	2.75	3.66	3.74	3.68	**
<i>The state</i>	2.91	2.56	2.42	2.38	2.48	3.25	2.91	2.90	3.21	**
N	497-501			66-67			272-273			

Significant differences confirmed with Oneway ANOVA, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

The scale ranges from 1 (much fewer tasks) to 5 (many more tasks). Party codes in Sweden: left-wing (the social democrats, the green party, the left party), right-wing (the moderate party, the centre party, the liberals, the Christian democrats), populist (Sweden democrats). Party codes in Denmark: left-wing (the social democrats, socialist people's party, red-green alliance, the alternative), right-wing (venstre, conservative people's party, the new right, liberal alliance, Danish social liberal party), populist (Danish people's party). Party codes in Finland: left-wing (the social democrats, the green alliance, the left alliance), right-wing (national coalition party, the centre party, Swedish people's party, the Christian democrats), populist (the true finns). Representatives for local parties are excluded.

The general pattern is also similar here. Political representatives generally say that regional councils should gain more responsibilities, while the state should have fewer responsibilities. This is especially apparent in Denmark, where respondents strongly expressed that more responsibilities should be given to regional councils but also clearly want the state to have less influence over regional development. Finnish respondents perceive the state as very powerful as well, however, they do not have a particularly strong interest in decreasing the state level's responsibilities.

Political attitudes are most polarised between left and right party representatives in Denmark, while the polarisation does not even show among Finnish respondents, and there is a small polarisation in Sweden. Populist party representatives' opinions differ from other representatives' views in all three countries, which confirms that their opinions are opaque.

Summed up, regional representatives perceive the institutional context somewhat differently in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. Politicians' perceptions generally correspond well with the regional council's institutional conditions. Danish and Finnish respondents find the state level to be quite influential in regional development policies, while Swedish respondents find the state level less influential. Representatives generally want regional councils to gain more responsibilities and the state level to have fewer tasks.

Sweden: metagovernance in a multi-level setting

Swedish regional council representatives have a strong political mandate with extensive formal powers. Swedish respondents rarely mention insufficient means or lack of formal powers as a challenge for governing regional development, but they face other leadership difficulties. Many respondents stress that many actors and interests must be taken into consideration when forming regional development strategies. One respondent stated that it is hard to develop clear political leadership since public managers have a strong influence over the agenda:

The regional matters tend to be handled by public managers in the first place. Politicians should have more influence over strategic questions.

– Center party representative, Västmanland region

Many Swedish respondents find collaboration with stakeholders a difficult challenge in general, although partnerships are essential in governing regional development. Several respondents wrote that regional development objectives are difficult to reach because they require stakeholders to commit to the strategies, and politicians cannot control stakeholders' engagement. As one respondent put it:

The strategies require actions from actors that the region does not control. These [actions] are not always taken, which ultimately means that goals are not achieved.

– Moderate coalition party representative, Blekinge Region

The fact that multiple government levels influence regional development policies also results in metagovernance challenges. This becomes especially apparent in questions about infrastructure, but the challenge occurs to some extent in most policy fields. Regional representatives often find it difficult to take the metagovernor role in infrastructure issues, because the regions and the state level have a shared responsibility in this area. This means that the state level has a stronger influence on crucial regional development issues than the regional level. For example, respondents in border regions often highlighted that cross-border barriers prevent deeper regional integration. This is the case at the Swedish-Danish border in the Skåne region, across which many people commute daily. One representative mentioned challenges that must be solved on a state level to further pursue regional integration:

Demolish border obstacles to Denmark. Tax and social security barriers hinder cross-border integration - state responsibility. Lack of infrastructure further hinders the development of public transport and jeopardizes what has already been accomplished – state responsibility.

– Liberal party representative, Skåne region

It is still apparent that the state level's role in regional development is somewhat necessary because regions mainly drive their own interests. One respondent noted that some state-level responsibility is important since regions do not take responsibility for interregional infrastructure.

(...) Furthermore, it is important that the state takes full responsibility for the railway network, county roads, and national roads. Otherwise, there is a risk that interregional connections fade. Many regions do not show interregional responsibility.

– Center party representative, Kalmar region

Many mentioned that regional development issues are typical “wicked problems” that require collaboration between state actors and non-state actors. Promoting economic growth, creating a good infrastructure, enhancing integration, and attracting new citizens are all good examples of such complex challenges. The comment below elegantly captures some multifaceted challenges in the Kalmar region:

Achieve fewer and larger labour market regions. Create a good infrastructure throughout the whole county and functional public transportation for commuting to work. Increase economic growth in the private sector to increase tax bases and funding of the common sector. Contribute to integration and a good matching in the labour market.

– Center party representative, Kalmar region

Denmark: metagovernance without responsibilities or resources

Danish regional councils have a strong political mandate. Their main responsibilities are operating hospitals and managing regional development. Danish regions have gone through several reforms recently and their formal powers have consequently been decreased. Results from the first part of the results clearly show that Danish representatives think that the state level is very influential in regional development matters, and most of them wanted the state to have fewer regional development responsibilities.

Reduced formal powers is also a recurring topic here. Most representatives pointed out the lack of sufficient formal powers and decreasing resources as their main challenges in governing regional development. There is a frustration about how previous reforms have reduced their responsibilities and also a clear request for additional responsibilities. Two representatives reflected similarly on this:

*Too few responsibilities. Particularly cross-sectoral challenges that need an overall view could well be managed by the regions. The regions have lost tasks after the business promotion reform [ehrværvsfremmereformen] and gained too few responsibilities, when the *amts* were abolished.*

– Social democratic party representative, Region Hovedstaden

The main problem is the cutting of tasks, where the regional councils should have more tasks, especially regarding climate, environment, business, and other tasks where the facilitating role is important. And tasks where the state is too remote and the municipalities too small.

– Representative, Midtjylland Region

As per these comments, both representatives want the regional councils to gain new responsibilities in areas where coordinating leadership is needed. Danish representatives clearly perceive the regional councils as metagovernors of regional development since many emphasise the facilitative leadership role. However, Danish regional councils are still mostly known for operating the health care, and one respondent highlighted this as a challenge for developing their metagovernor role in regional development:

Most people just think we are dealing with health care. This is a big barrier. And the municipalities are only interested in themselves. They do not see things in a larger perspective and they are rarely interested in things beyond their own municipal border. This hinders development.

– Representative for Venstre – Denmark's liberal party, Sjælland Region

Many representatives find it natural for the regional councils to metagovern regional development because it is the most suitable government level to manage these responsibilities. Representatives from the Midtjylland region and Sjælland region both emphasised that local governments are mainly focused on their own interests, while the state level is too remote to have sufficient regional knowledge.

The most stressed issue among Danish representatives concerns regional business promotion. Most representatives commented that the regional councils cannot promote regional businesses anymore. Stimulating the regional economy is crucial for regional development, so this is understandably considered a huge barrier to developing regional leadership. One respondent summarised this in the comment below:

The challenge is that the state has taken over business development without knowing much about the conditions in the regions. The regions lack funds for public transport. We need more means for cleaning up contaminated soil/groundwater.

– Social democratic party representative, Sjælland region

Moreover, representatives often find that that regional councils lack genuine opportunities to solve many regional development tasks because they lack formal powers or financial resources. Danish representatives find it troubling to depend on state transfers since the regional councils had taxation rights until 2007. One respondent outlined the dilemma in the comment below:

We cannot collect taxes and we cannot solve the tasks with the money we get from the state.

– The alternative party representative, Region Hovedstaden

The main lesson to be learned about regional political leadership in the Danish case is that representatives have a clear perception of themselves as metagovernors, and most of them would like to gain additional responsibilities. Many politicians now find that they do not have the resources, powers, or capabilities to manage their responsibilities.

Finland: weak political mandate and territorial polarisation

Finnish regional councils are mainly responsible for planning and regional development, and representatives have fewer formal powers than in Sweden and Denmark. The regional level is closely linked to the municipal level too, which makes political mandates weaker.

The weak political mandates, the lack of taxation rights, and insufficient financial resources were commonly mentioned as major metagovernance challenges. Many Finnish respondents focused on the regional council's weak position between a strong local level and an influential state level, which makes it difficult to develop political leadership. For example, regional representatives are chosen among local politicians, and they, consequently, must drive both local and regional interests. This is discussed in the comments below:

There is a lack of an overarching view because the regional councils do not have enough decision-making powers; instead things must be developed to keep all the member municipalities satisfied. This leads to lukewarm compromises.

– Green party representative, Keski-Suomi region

Regional development should be given as an explicit task to the regional councils. Local conflicts of interests often prevent regional development when it is based on purely intermunicipal cooperation, and the state does not often have a proper understanding of the situation in different regions' regional development is more successful, when the "ownership" is in the hands of those whose lives are most affected by the decisions.

– Center party representative, Varsinais-Suomi region

The first comment addresses the regional councils' weak formal powers and the pressure to form policies that keep the municipalities satisfied. Several other representatives also mentioned that the largest city in

the region often has a strong influence on regional policies. The second respondent wrote that regional development should become a more explicit task for the regional councils because the local governments' interests often interfere with a strategic regional perspective. Both the local governments' interests and the state level's influence are thus considered significant challenges.

Finnish representatives also discussed stakeholder collaboration as a metagovernance challenge. They noted the difficulty of implementing regional development strategies, saying that strategies often remain only as planning documents. One respondent reflected upon strategies and the lack of dialogue with stakeholders:

The regional development strategies are created in an inclusive way, through lots of hearing and lots of collaboration. Yet their nature remains paper-like. A real dialogue is missing. Few involved participants take an active role. There is not sufficient correspondence between the strategies of the regional council, the local governments, and the intermunicipal authorities, nor between the strategies of the stakeholders operating within the innovation environment (educational institutions, universities, research institutes, etc, strong business actors).

– National coalition party representative, Etelä-Savo region

One thing that prevents the regional councils from developing their metagovernance role is uncertainty about what regional political leadership should aim to fulfil. Finland is a geographically large country with a disadvantageous demographic development. Migration flows to the largest cities and low birth rates and an ageing population create extensive challenges even on a national scale. A common challenge in many regions is that the largest cities have growing populations, whereas the populations in more remote municipalities are shrinking and ageing. Regional development strategies are thus characterised by competition between different regions on the one hand, and conflicting interests between the largest city and more remote municipalities within a region on the other hand. One respondent aptly stated:

Regional development is mainly focused on developing the largest city, which does not however keep up with development on the national level. The peripheral areas remain unfamiliar and the attitude towards developing them deteriorates.

– Center party representative, Pohjois-Karjala region

Representatives in the capital region Uusimaa face similar dilemmas but from another perspective. The capital region is expected to solve national challenges with their regional development strategies, which is not expected from other regions. One respondent noted this gap in expectations:

The state does not treat Uusimaa region and the Helsinki metropolitan area equally. The Helsinki metropolitan area is crucial for Finland's international attractiveness and job market development.

– National coalition party representative, Uusimaa region

The challenges regarding territorial polarisation and demographic development create many complex issues, including population loss and unemployment. Remote regions situated far away from the capital region often struggle with unemployment and the emigration of young people, which have severe effects on the labour market. One respondent pondered these difficulties in the Pohjois-Karjala region:

The lack of money is always on top of everything. The shrinking and ageing population is a challenge, and so is maintaining jobs in the region. The transition of public jobs to southern Finland has also affected this. (...)

– Social democratic party representative, Pohjois-Karjala region

The metagovernance challenges in the Finnish case are rooted in institutional and contextual factors. The regional councils' close linkage to the local level and the state level prevents regional representatives from developing regional leadership. Moreover, many urgent regional development challenges stem from

uneven territorial and demographic development. Most representatives find that they lack the means to deal with these issues.

The broad scale of metagovernance challenges

These results reveal the range of metagovernance challenges that regional council representatives face. Representatives often legitimise their metagovernance role by concluding that local governments drive their own interests, while the state level is too remote to govern regional issues. Still, many representatives stress that the regional councils' position between the state level and the local level often limit regional political leadership to some extent. Many metagovernance challenges on the regional level appear to be and should be acknowledged as multi-level governance challenges.

Moreover, the lack of formal powers and financial resources are considered major metagovernance challenges among Danish and Finnish respondents. This was not considered a huge problem among Swedish representatives, who have a stronger political mandate. This confirms that the institutional capacity of regional councils matter and that institutional contexts affect metagovernance.

However, metagovernance is not only dependent on institutional contexts. Many metagovernance challenges remain, although politicians find themselves to have enough formal powers or resources. Creating meaningful dialogues with stakeholders and transforming strategies into concrete actions are considered challenges in all countries. It takes time to develop collaborations between regional councils and stakeholders because it requires trust, mutual benefits, and an understanding of the interdependence between them. Swedish and Finnish representatives noted that poor stakeholder collaboration prevents regions from achieving regional development. This may be because of little dialogue or stakeholders who do not commit to strategies.

Conclusions

This study has examined the metagovernance of regional development in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. Political representatives govern regional development through collaborative governance, where regional councils and stakeholders jointly work on strategies and implementation. This article examines how the representatives perceive their leadership role, what metagovernance challenges they encounter and how institutional contexts affect their perceptions of metagovernance.

Regional representatives perceive themselves as metagovernors to varying extents. Danish representatives have clearly adopted the metagovernor role within regional development, but they want additional responsibilities. Finnish representatives request a more autonomous political mandate to legitimise their metagovernance role since the regional councils' weak position prevents a strong political leadership from forming. Swedish respondents are the least concerned about their leadership role, which is likely a result of their relatively strong formal powers. In Denmark and Finland, respondents said that their lack of formal powers, responsibilities, and resources are major challenges for metagoverning regional development, while Swedish respondents rarely expressed the desire for additional powers or responsibilities.

Institutional contexts are often overlooked in discussions of metagovernance, but this study shows that they have an important impact. The institutional capacity of regional councils clearly shapes how politicians exercise metagovernance. Thus, decision-makers should consider institutional conditions thoroughly when forming regional reforms. There should be a clear correspondence between the means and goals of regional political leadership, otherwise regional council representatives cannot exercise proper metagovernance over regional development. The possibilities to exercise metagovernance are also largely dependent on how influential the state level and local governments are. Many metagovernance challenges on the regional level are, in fact, multi-level governance challenges. This should also be kept in mind to minimize frictions between government levels.

Summed up, metagovernance challenges may occur when politicians lack sufficient resources or formal powers, due to poor stakeholder collaboration or because responsibilities are shared between several government levels. Institutional context should therefore be considered to a greater extent to strengthen political metagovernance.

Endnotes

¹ Regulations regarding this can be found in Lag om regional utvecklingsansvar 2010:630 (Sweden), Lov om regioner og om nedlæggelse af amtskommunerne, Hovedstadens Udviklingsråd og Hovedstadens Sygehusfælleskab LOV nr 537 af 24/06/2005 (Denmark) and Laki alueiden kehittämisestä ja rakennerahastotoiminnan hallinnoinnista 2014/7 (Finland).

Data availability statement

Participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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