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Meta-governance and the segregated city: difficulties with realizing the participatory ethos in network governance – evidence from Malmö City, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to strategically implement governance reforms have become a common way in which to deal with complex social and political issues. The analysis presented in this article addresses recent governance reforms in Malmö, Sweden, that are intended to help resolve complex problems of urban segregation and social inequality. The article identifies important difficulties that have been encountered in promoting increased participation in spite of the great awareness on the part of local actors of the problems facing the community. The study brings forth evidence that there are good reasons for reassessing the inclusive ethos of network governance and for a critical investigation of precisely who gains access to political processes when network governance arrangements are implemented from above.

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Introduction

A positive air has been associated with governance reforms and collaborative efforts in light of the claim that they potentially promote pluralism, multiple perspectives, knowledge use, deliberation, and broader participation (Sørensen and Torfing 2007, 245; Bevir 2010, 116f; Ferlie et al. 2011). All these aspects are vital elements of an inclusive and democratic political environment that accords with the goals of socially sustainable cities. Unfortunately, however, the practice of governance is every bit as tricky as the traditional implementation of policy through public administration (McGuire and Agranoff 2011; Huxham and Vangen 2013; Klijn and Koppenjan 2016; Ansell and Gash 2018, 2). In addition, scholars have argued that collaborative efforts and networks may give rise to exclusion and network closure (Johnston et al. 2010; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012; Davies 2011), which potentially creates relations of domination between participants and non-participants (Larsson 2019).

The *meta-governance approach* has emerged as a response to potential problems associated with the rearrangement of democratic procedures that accompanies network governance. In contrast to self-organizing networks, meta-governance resides upon deliberately

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chosen strategies aimed at fostering inclusion and accountability in order to mitigate such negative aspects of networks as exclusion and power asymmetries (Sørensen and Torfing 2009, 2016b; Hovik and Vabo 2005).

In the light of this theoretical conception of meta-governance as strategic policy aimed at creating network governance, this article explores a recent local governance initiative undertaken by the city of Malmö, Sweden. Although Sweden has a long tradition of multiculturalism, there nevertheless is evidence of “ethnically divided welfare,” with substantial social and political inequalities continuing to exist between different ethnic groups (SOU 2005; De los Reyes 2006; Regeringskansliet 2011; Borevi 2014; Darvishpour and Westin 2015). Malmö, the third largest city in Sweden, found itself in a difficult situation marked by increasing segregation and associated divisions in life expectancies and health (Commission 2013a, 5). In response, the Malmö City Executive Board (MCEB) took the decision to launch the locally-based Commission for a Socially Sustainable Malmö (the Malmö Commission), which consisted of researchers and experts in a variety of fields who were charged with collecting data, analyzing contributing factors, and providing recommendations for how to combat these problems. This was the first local commission in the world of such magnitude (Commission 2013a). The Commission issued 31 reports and made over 200 recommendations, ranging from establishing a greater number of green spaces to instituting significant structural changes in political and democratic processes. Most significantly, they argued that it was necessary “to complement representative democracy’s hierarchical structure (government) with network-based and horizontal structures (governance)” (Löfgren 2012, 12; Commission 2013b).¹

This explicit recommendation to adopt network governance in an effort to promote democratic participation and resolve social and political problems provides an opportunity for us to test the core thesis of meta-governance. The latter may be stated as deliberate efforts aimed at encouraging *other* actors to become engaged in collaborative governance, along with increasing pluralism and deliberation by means of the active involvement of NGOs, private companies, citizens, and policy recipients (Larsson 2017, 2019; Agger and Poulsen 2017). We should bear in mind, however, that the project of reforms in Malmö provides a difficult test for meta-governance in that it is a well-known fact that immigrants, ethnic minorities, and those who are socio-economically disadvantaged rarely participate either in formal political institutions, or in informal governance structures (Andrew 2009; Hertting 2009; Dekker et al. 2010; Parés, Bonet-Martí, and Martí-Costa 2012; see also Andersen and Biseth 2013).

The present discussion addresses a potential discrepancy between governance as an ideal and governance as a strategy, and it also examines difficulties associated with ensuring the participation of those groups who are often absent from formal political arenas. The main research questions may thus be stated as follows:

- 1) Can strategic meta-governance help us overcome problems associated with network governance and provide the grounds for a more socially sustainable city governance?

And if not,

- 2) What issues have hindered the implementation and realization of governance and policy goals in Malmö?

The article continues below with a theory section, followed by a presentation of the design, methods, and materials that have been utilized. It then turns to our specific case study, analyzing policy formulation, implementation, and goals. It concludes with a discussion of the findings and theoretical implications of the study.

Network governance, democracy, and meta-governance

Governance theorists have long argued that there is a need to further explore the recent substantial change in political and institutional structures that has taken place, which constitutes a shift from *government* to *governance* (Rhodes 1996, 1997; Pierre and Guy Peters 2000; Ansell 2000; Bellamy and Palumbo 2010; Emerson and Nabatchi 2015, 8–9; Klijn and Koppenjan 2016, 22). Network governance refers to a specific form of governance in which public and private actors collaborate within networks in order to address various public issues (Rhodes 1997, 19f; Klijn and Koppenjan 2016, 21).

Insofar as network governance requires a new set of relationships that bridge organizational and political boundaries, it is perhaps most readily utilized on the local level, in which case it is understood as urban governance (Kearns and Paddison 2000, 846; Parés, Bonet-Martí, and Martí-Costa 2012, 240; Brandtner et al. 2016; Agger and Poulsen 2017). It is noteworthy that networks are typically presented as constituting a revitalization of democracy insofar as they expand the range of actors and stakeholders engaged in public rule. From this perspective, networks are regarded as empowering communities, stimulating an expansion of the public sphere, cultivating inclusive policy making, and involving larger numbers of citizens in the management of public issues (Sørensen and Torfing 2007, 245; Bevir 2010, 116f).

However, the need to include all relevant stakeholders brings ethical as well as political pressure to bear upon those who initiate, design, promote, and convene networks (Johnston et al. 2010, 2). Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh (2012) thus argue that network collaboration requires the “principled engagement” of all significant and relevant interests, and that such collaboration should be informed by the perspectives and knowledge of all participants. Inclusive participation is of substantial importance in network governance insofar as networks relocate public reasoning and deliberations into closed settings of participating stakeholders (Weale 2011, 64). Consequently, non-participants may have little or no opportunity to review either decisions or decision-making processes, which would render it difficult for them to identify who is responsible for the content of a given public policy and its implementation (Larsson 2013, 2019).

The *meta-governance approach* has emerged as a response to potential problems associated with the rearrangement of democratic procedures accompanying network governance. In contrast to self-organizing networks, meta-governance resides upon deliberately chosen strategies aimed at fostering inclusion and accountability in order to mitigate such negative aspects of networks as exclusion and power asymmetries (Hovik and Vabo 2009; Sørensen and Torfing 2016a, 2016a, 2018). Against this background, we need to investigate the challenges that may arise when managers chose to utilize network governance in the political field of integration and seek to rectify the inequities in public health associated with urban segregation.

In spite of the view that networks allegedly possess the potential to foster openness and inclusion, studies have shown that actual participation often involves a self-selected subset

of the general population (Fung 2006). Arnstein noted as early as 1969 that the questions of “citizen participation,” “citizen control” (including potential influence over policy), and the “maximum feasible involvement of the poor” were largely accompanied by exaggerated rhetoric and misleading euphemisms (Arnstein 1969). It is thus necessary to analyze the inclusion and exclusion of stakeholders in respect to a given network as well as its degree of responsiveness to both policy recipients and the general public (Johnston et al. 2010; Davies 2011; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012). In doing so, we should keep in mind that individuals with low socio-economic status often refrain from engaging in politics since they typically have a low level of political efficacy (Fiorina 1999).

A number of studies indicate the existence of a significant gap between the ideal of political equality and actual inequalities in respect to participation and influence among and between the various ethnic groups in Sweden (Dahlström 2004; Dahlstedt and Hertzberg 2007, 177). Even if network governance accords well with the notion of expanded political engagement, it has paradoxically been “imposed” from above upon immigrants through strategies of activation and innovation in order to promote *their* participation (Dahlstedt 2008). Since immigrants tend to be subject to inequitable conditions to a greater degree than other segments of society, they frequently remain a silent and marginalized group in spite of efforts to empower them and regenerate the disadvantaged neighborhoods in which many live (Andersen and Van Kempen 2003, 81).

Efforts to combat such political inequality have been prioritized today on many urban public policy agendas in Europe, but with discomfiting results. A recent study in Catalonia, for example, revealed that the ability of individuals to exert an impact upon regeneration programmes in the neighborhoods where they lived was significantly restricted because of institutional issues that limited their influence upon management. There were also obvious and persistent asymmetries between community stakeholders, on the one hand, and politicians, planners, and technicians, on the other (Parés, Bonet-Martí, and Martí-Costa 2012, 265; see also Scuzzarello 2010, 2014). Another study has found that previous attempts in Malmö to implement Area Based Initiatives in the period 2010–2015 often generated conflicts due to the opposing interests involved. This turned street-level bureaucracies into mediators within local and informal networks (Agger and Poulsen 2017, 17).

A study conducted in Stockholm indicated that the political participation of ethnic minorities may need to proceed by means of specific ethnic organizations that defend minority interests, provide new bargaining resources, and make it possible to exercise influence upon neighborhood councils (Hertting 2009, 142). In contrast, Dekker et al. (2010) have drawn the conclusion that organizations with a high percentage of ethnic minorities tend to participate less in local governance networks. In addition, differing histories of migration and ethnic group relations can lead to divergent experiences of inclusion not only in different cities, but even within separate neighborhoods in one and the same city (Bolt, Sule Özüekren, and Phillips 2010; Andersen and Biseth 2013). Although self-representation, participation, and access to democratic processes are attractive goals, it may be difficult to attain them in real life insofar as passive and submissive roles are often a direct consequence of marginalization and dis-integration (Cornwall 2008). It is in this regard that the turn to more strategic meta-governance has seemed appealing.

There are studies which indicate that meta-governance can be effective for dealing with homelessness (Doberstein 2016), securing housing in rural regions in Australia (Wilson,

Morrison, and Everingham 2017), and promoting co-management in the reception of newly arrived immigrants (Qvist 2017). Other studies have shown, however, that meta-governance can lead to deadlock when it utilizes the competing rationalities of differing styles of governance (Larsson 2017, 2019). But there have been no studies that actually investigate how to deal with biased political participation in segregated cities, the effects of which can purportedly be mitigated by meta-governance. This provides a strong motivation for investigating recent governance reforms in Malmö and taking stock of the lessons that can be learned from this case.

Design, methods, and materials

As noted above, the present discussion resides upon a study of the local governance reforms that have recently been undertaken in Malmö City. It may not be possible to generalize the results on the empirical level because of our focus on this one particular example. However, the theoretical arguments and findings associated with this effort to implement network governance reforms in order to foster participation and combat segregation are of great interest beyond this specific case (George and Bennett 2005, 31). Moreover, the example of Malmö was selected for this study because the turn to network governance was preceded by an intensive investigation undertaken by an expert commission that provided recommendations to the city administration, which were then formally accepted and implemented. This constitutes a particularly significant case of meta-governance aimed at increasing pluralism and participation through the adoption of specific governance reforms for the purpose of combating segregation and social inequality on the local level. We may thus regard the present examination of governance reforms in Malmö City as comprising a theoretically informed *heuristic case study* of strategic network governance in segregated urban settings (Weibe, Mills, and Durepos 2009).

The empirical investigation consists of two parts. The first examines the reports and recommendations presented by the Malmö Commission, while the second investigates how key concepts and proposals were adopted and implemented by Malmö City and the various other collaborating actors. We should note, however, that since the present discussion presents an analysis of only the first four years of reforms that are still underway, there remains room for both improvement and deterioration in the Malmö City network governance project.

I have employed qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz 2014, 51) in my study of the official documents and reports of the Malmö Commission in order to analyze their main recommendations concerning the utilization of *knowledge alliances* and *holistic management* as specific forms of network organization. I have also analyzed the available documentation related to the adoption and implementation of the recommendations provided by the Commission. These include local evaluations and reports concerning the work performed during the period 2014-2017, budget reports, other official texts, and follow-up investigations of the various aspects of implementation.

In addition, I conducted 12 interviews with various stakeholders insofar as a combination of policy documents and interviews often provides for a richer analysis since interviews may either confirm, qualify, or contradict the more official and polished image that documents often contain (Yanow 2000, 32). The interviewees included senior urban managers and coordinators with specific assignments related to the implementation of the Malmö Commission's recommendations, representatives of NGOs, various experts, and

former members of the Commission. The main focus in these semi-structured interviews (Kvale 2008) was to obtain further information regarding both the work of the Commission, and how the turn to governance was adopted and implemented. I have examined the transcripts of the interviews as well as the relevant policy documents for specific conceptions of governance in respect to the reforms being implemented in the effort to resolve current social problems in Malmö City. The goal was to recover the local understanding of governance rather than work from predefined notions. This type of inductive method is consistent with the use of interpretive policy analysis in order to reveal local and conflicting notions of a particular issue. This approach allows us to gain an understanding of specific views and strategies that have emerged for addressing local political issues of segregation and problems associated with limited participation (Larsson 2015; Yanow 2000, 31f).

The following discussion presents the empirical analysis of the Malmö Commission's ideas and recommendations concerning network governance as well as an evaluation of the efforts that have been undertaken to realize the turn to governance in Malmö City.

The Malmö commission

The Malmö City Executive Board (MCEB) took the decision in 2010 to appoint the politically independent Commission for a Socially Sustainable Malmö (the Malmö Commission), chaired by Professor Emeritus Sven-Olof Isacson, in order to further investigate the causes of the growing inequalities in public health within the city's population (Commission 2013a, 10; Haglund 2014). The Commission was also tasked with recommending solutions and strategies for how to reduce these inequalities and foster integration. Previous official reports, coupled with facts on the ground, had clearly indicated that the quality of health, mortality rates, and the overall welfare of individuals varied greatly across the city.

The Malmö Commission consisted of fourteen permanent members who worked on the project from multidisciplinary perspectives for a period of two years. They were assisted by specially appointed senior advisors, who acted as a reference group and ensured the scholarly and professional quality of the Commission's findings. The project itself comprised three parallel processes involving the preparation of expert background reports, dialogue, and the production of the final report, which included extensive and detailed information, recommendations, and strategies for combating the problems addressed. Just over 200 short-term, long-term, specific, general, and normatively-oriented recommendations were presented in the various background reports (Commission 2013a). Dialogue was also undertaken with politicians, civil society organizations, representatives of cultural and sports associations, local businesses, youth leaders, and a diverse set of city administrators (Commission 2013a).

The final report contained two primary recommendations:

- 1) To establish a social investment policy aimed at reducing inequalities in living conditions and societal systems.
- 2) To change the character of political processes by means of knowledge alliances and democratized management.

In respect to the first of these, the report stated that an important obstacle to the creation of a socially sustainable Malmö was the lack of understanding and commitment

concerning social investment. The report argued that the current governance systems of Swedish municipalities were in fact incompatible with the ideal of social sustainability. It was instead necessary to place a greater emphasis upon health, welfare, and ecological sustainability in order to attain this goal, in which equality in public health and integration play central roles (Commission 2013a, 49).

Perhaps more importantly, the Malmö Commission maintained that fundamental alterations in the governing process were necessary. This is stated explicitly in the second recommendation and constitutes the focus of this article. The report argues that

In order for societal systems to not further contribute to an increased inequity in health, there is a need for knowledge alliances, new measurements of societal development, democratized management by means of, among other things, changed forms of leadership, and holistic management instruments. These instruments require network-like forms of organization and management that emerge from cross-boundary cooperation. Governance means that you go outside institutions and create politics in partnership with other types of stakeholders. What we are advocating is the development of a type of governance that entails the involvement of many interested parties in the management of societal systems. In other words, we advocate a deepened democracy, particularly through the democratization of governance (Commission 2013a, 32).

This statement expresses a pluralist ethos concerning governance, along with the conviction that this type of governance can be realized through the utilization of knowledge alliances and holistic management instruments. The Malmö Commission also argued, in accord with the World Health Organization's report *Closing the Gap in a Generation*, that the creation of a new and collective form of knowledge was required for the implementation of this type of governance processes. They observed that

Various stakeholders must be involved in these processes. Knowledge and learning should thus be linked to the questions of management, involvement, and influence, or what is usually called governance (Commission 2013a, 52).

Moreover, the Commission not only made straightforward recommendations concerning the changes that they felt should be made, their expertise provided both legitimacy and a strategic foundation for a major shift in the way public politics was to be conducted in Malmö.

The Malmö Commission clearly stated that

We regard it as desirable to increase citizens' influence and participation at all levels so that they have a greater sense of participation and, by extension, experience increased control over their own lives. While this obviously applies to democracy and governance, our proposal is considerably more extensive, concerning not only City Hall and politics, but municipal processes in general (Commission 2013a, 128).

But even though the Commission avidly promoted governance, they were not naïve in this regard, remarking that “we have a fundamentally positive view of governance, but are of the opinion that it must be democratized.” While they regarded governance as possessing significant potential for enhancing the democratic quality of public rule, they were also convinced that it was necessary to safeguard the new organizational forms in order to avoid a narrow type of participation that primarily involved stakeholders from the business sector. They observed that

[G]overnance processes can also embody great advantages, primarily through flexibility, a focus on solutions, and the relaxing of more hierarchical types of decision-making,

concluding that

the vertical management of society according to the principles of government must be complemented by network-based and horizontal management (governance) ... that utilizes new and more effective methods of participation and influence in order to solve complex problems in a complex world (Commission 2013a, 129).

The final report thus explicitly recommended that the introduction of two specific organizational forms, namely, *knowledge alliances* and *holistic management*, would make a turn to network governance possible. The Commission argued that these would substantially improve the democratic quality in the city through increased *participation*.

Knowledge alliances

The Malmö Commission's position was that the adoption of network governance could foster expanded participation. While this is associated with the direct involvement of previously unheard voices, it also demands the development of an open type of knowledge that is capable of incorporating new perspectives. This would enable governance networks to integrate, discuss, and problematize both experienced-based and scholarly knowledge (Commission 2013a, 129). The Commission maintained that there was in fact a "great opportunity to create such networks through so-called knowledge alliances" (Commission 2013a, 2013c, 30). As a result, they proposed that knowledge alliances be understood as "equal partnerships between researchers and stakeholders, such as the public sector, the voluntary sector, trade, and industry, focused on combining excellence and relevance" (Commission 2013a, 131). The Commission further added that

[K]nowledge alliances can be created within many different contexts ... the participants in a knowledge alliance have differing types of knowledge and experiences, and none is necessarily better or worse than any other. Collaboration in a knowledge alliance should meet the requirements of relevance and excellence (Commission 2013a, 131).

The ambition of the Malmö Commission was that the interests of all parties involved be taken into consideration. They also felt that knowledge alliances should be concerned with innovative societal development as much as they were concerned with research and education.

Nonetheless, although the Malmö Commission recommended that Malmö City strategically utilize knowledge alliances that involve equal collaboration between researchers, public administrators, civil society, and local businesses (Commission 2013b, 29), they did not explicitly mention policy recipients and ordinary citizens in this regard. An omission of this order can obviously lead to the neglect of the everyday knowledge-based experiences of such citizens, downplay the importance of their participation, and open the door to collaboration that primarily involves elites. This would potentially render knowledge alliances incapable of promoting inclusive participation and introducing the perspectives of precisely those whom such alliances were supposedly intended to help.

Holistic management

The commission also emphasized the importance of "leadership" and "holistic instruments" of governance insofar as "Modern and courageous leadership is required at all levels to create good conditions for all Malmö residents" (Commission 2013a, 132). However, the

final report presented nothing of substance concerning how this could be carried out. That is to say that the report provided no particular instructions concerning the meta-governance skills needed to manage the new processes of governance. It stated only that the

development of holistic instruments of management, such as impact assessments of planned actions and investments, budget systems, and systems for annual accounts/monitoring, is necessary to get past the well-known but difficult to rectify “silo phenomenon” (Commission 2013a, 133).

The so-called silo phenomenon was identified by the Malmö Commission as a specific problem that arises when administrators focus too narrowly on their own particular responsibilities, not the larger picture, follow a strict budget, and emphasize reducing costs (Commission 2013a, 133). The Commission argued that the adoption of a holistic view, characterized by collaboration involving both public administration and various representatives from society, would have

a potentially huge impact upon equality, perhaps upon public health in particular, insofar as the socio-economically weaker groups in society are those most dependent upon the compensating effects of public services (Commission 2013a, 133).

Holistic management and new social structures were thus regarded as fostering citizen influence, participation, and a greater sense of control and empowerment among socially “weaker” groups. The Commission explicitly claimed that “the goal of fostering democratic advances in governance, which makes possible new forms of participation,” could be attained through the establishment of “holistic governance systems” and of “programs of close collaboration between scholars and other experts that will enable Malmö to reach the next phase of development” (Commission 2013b, 29).

The Malmö Commission thus pushed for extended collaboration between the main stakeholders in the city, and they argued that the creation of knowledge alliances and the implementation of holistic management would increase citizen participation and democratize governance processes. But although they highlighted the importance of collaboration between various “organized” interests, they nevertheless substantially ignored the perspectives and voices of ordinary citizens and policy recipients. It is also noteworthy that the Commission provided little explicit guidance concerning *how* to create and manage collaborative networks in a holistic spirit. Since the Commission consisted of known experts in a number of fields, it is somewhat surprising that more consideration was not given to how attempts to combat segregation in the past had played out. They also did not address how it might be possible to resolve the issue of unequal participation insofar as it is commonly known that socio-economically weaker groups tend to shy away from participatory forms of political engagement. Even more difficult to understand is the lack of detailed advice on how networks could be set up and managed in respect to the organizational forms of knowledge alliances and holistic management so that potential power asymmetries between different stakeholders would be minimized. Some of these shortcomings, which will be addressed below, became painfully obvious when the Commission’s recommendations were adopted and implemented.

Implementing governance

The MCEB decided on March 5th, 2014, to endorse the two primary recommendations of the Malmö Commission, which was followed by a call to all units in the city administration

to become familiar in detail with the various reports that the Commission had presented. The central municipal office was also instructed to review directives for political decision-making in accordance with the need to transform political procedures (Malmö City 2014, 8). The Commission's recommendations thereby acquired substantial official status and were incorporated into city budgets and management reforms aiming to realize holistic management and knowledge alliances.

One major problem that quickly became evident concerned the difficulty of establishing appropriate forms of collaboration involving public and private actors that did not violate the anti-corruption laws within the Public Procurement Act. This legal framework, which regulates and specifies relationships between public and private actors, is intended to guarantee fair competition against various forms of corruption. However, it also makes it difficult for local governments to sponsor and utilize resources and services provided by volunteer organizations. Paradoxically, numerous NGOs in Malmö City organize activities aimed at fostering integration and providing the basis for both social and political participation, such as language cafés, bicycle schools, gardening courses, and so forth. But even if the local authorities wish to support these activities, they are prevented from doing so insofar as the legal framework gives precedence to economic and contractual relations. The municipality and the local administration are simply not allowed to financially support participatory efforts provided by local NGOs.

This was a recurrent concern and source of frustration, and it led to significant difficulties in establishing practical collaboration aimed at realizing the type of holistic management that the Malmö Commission had recommended. The Chairperson of the local Red Cross, which is an organization that sponsors many activities and performs a great deal of community work, maintained that it continues to be difficult to collaborate with the municipality. They observed that

since they [politicians and public administrators] don't see the added value provided by NGOs and volunteer resources, there is still no proper support from the municipality for low-scale voluntary contributions by dedicated individuals (*eldsjälar*) (Respondent No. 7).

Another example of how the national legal framework hinders local governance initiatives is the 11/11 Project, in which Malmö City representatives met on three separate occasions with the representatives of local businesses concerning a job creation programme. Even though this led to the adoption of a policy aimed at the development of 200 new jobs and internships in local companies, existing national employment regulations, including the need to individually approve each employee, resulted in the creation of only three internships in one year. This led to a great deal of disappointment among all participants. One of the private actors who initiated the project bitterly stated that

all this talk of collaboration and all the hours of work invested by both sides [local authorities and private actors], and then nothing – I will never engage in this kind of project again (Respondent No. 6).

Another issue that was raised by several of those whom we interviewed concerned the fact that the Malmö Commission were not the first to address the problem of segregation since it was already a well-known issue among the staff of the public administration. Malmö City in fact has a long history of projects aimed at remedying the existing lack of integration and inequalities in public health (Malmö City 2015, 7–8), one example being

the recent Neighborhood Project (*områdesprogrammet*). In this fairly long project, which was active from 2010 to 2015, each neighborhood nominated one area that was in need of special attention and resources in order to foster equality and resolve social problems. Many of the efforts undertaken were clearly successful, including the creation of new forums for socially-oriented activities as well as dialogue with politicians and the public administration. While some of these forums still exist, others were forced to close when funding was cut as this particular project came to an end. This was an immediate result of the decision to accept the Malmö Commission's recommendations that redirected the official funding that had already been earmarked for resolving social problems in Malmö. Many of the activities that had been undertaken in the Neighborhood Project, including the centers for dialogue with public officials, were in effect simply placed on hold insofar as knowledge alliances would supposedly take their place (Malmö City 2015; Respondent No. 1).

An incessant launching and termination of projects that are often not properly evaluated, and seldom continue in their initial configuration, typically leads to frustration and apathy among the participants. One project manager described her experience in this regard, remarking that

Here we are out in the field, working hard to gain the approval and commitment of the youngsters. Once we have created a relationship with the people living in an area, we can build something together. It is not easy, I tell you, to gain the trust needed to be able to create something that will be accepted. And then all of a sudden – in two-year's time – I have to tell them that their [activity] house is being closed. It breaks my heart. But what is worse, it completely destroys their trust in public figures (Respondent No. 1).

Short-term projects with insecure funding can thus not only be detrimental to social cohesion, they can actually breed distrust and increase the distance between policy recipients and the public officials who manage integration efforts. Against this background, we may conclude that a significant risk is connected with the constant reformation and termination of projects, which may be termed *project disease*. This undermines trust between policy administrators and end-users instead of increasing confidence and political efficacy among active project participants. As noted above, the local commission failed to provide a proper evaluation of existing and functioning efforts that indeed had been able to boost participation in vulnerable neighborhoods.

The knowledge alliances proposed by the Malmö Commission, which are to play a prominent role in the transformation of political processes in the city, constitute the principal organizational form within which both scientific knowledge and experience-based knowledge can supposedly be utilized in the creation of new and more adequate knowledge on the basis of deliberation. Although this notion may seem to be very progressive, it soon became obvious from an analysis of the relevant policy documents that the perspectives of policy recipients and ordinary citizens were explicitly not taken into consideration. For example, knowledge alliances bring together powerful organizations and interests, including the public administration, politicians, various departments of Malmö University, and some of the more well-known NGOs that have a well-established history of collaborating with public authorities (Respondent No. 3; Respondent No. 1). But only a few of these so-called knowledge alliances now include alternative views that are based upon the life experiences of ethnic and/or faith-based organizations, in spite of the fact that such

organizations can make valuable contributions by virtue of the varied perspectives they represent. Knowledge alliances, regardless of their stated character, have not yet engaged with the experiences and knowledge of those who are the main targets of the policy reforms. These groups also comprise those who are most likely to experience marginalization in the first place. The implementation of knowledge alliances has so far fostered a new form of elite collaboration, not increased participation among non-organized citizens. This serves to reinforce existing political divisions as well as the marginalization of migrant groups living in vulnerable areas.

The Chairperson of the Social Economy Network in Skåne (SENS), the region where Malmö is located, spoke of this as being a serious problem, adding that only a very few of the NGOs in SENS have an ethnic-based membership or represent the interests of such groups (Respondent No. 5). This lack of direct involvement with ethnic minorities was also confirmed in an interview with a field worker and former project manager for one of the Neighborhood Project programmes (Respondent No. 1). It is noteworthy that the Coordinator of the Office for a Socially Sustainable Malmö remarked that it is difficult to determine whether any of the somewhat more than 50 knowledge alliances that were active in 2016 have had any effect in promoting citizen involvement in governance processes (Respondent No. 8).

The stated view of the Malmö Commission is that knowledge alliances, together with holistic management and new types of municipal leadership, will heighten collaboration and expand participation in political processes. Furthermore, the Commission explicitly claimed that holistic management instruments were necessary in order to overcome the silo phenomenon noted above (Commission 2013c, 133). The Commission also maintained that adopting a holistic view, characterized by collaboration between the public administration and various sectors of society, would have

a potentially huge impact upon equality, perhaps upon public health in particular, insofar as the socio-economically weaker groups in society are those most dependent upon the compensating effects of public services (Commission 2013c, 133).

Holistic management and new social structures were thus regarded as comprising ways in which the influence and participation of citizens would allegedly increase, thereby creating a sense of empowerment and control among “weaker” groups.

Nevertheless, the present study reveals that it has been difficult to implement these reforms due to the rather imprecise governing tools provided by the Malmö Commission, even though it was explicitly stated that “this new view is to be incorporated in all offices and administrations throughout the City” (Respondent No. 8). For instance, a Security and Safety Coordinator and former member of the Commission described holistic management during my interview as emphasizing processes rather than goals, although she added that

we need to remember that this challenging undertaking is a way in which to realize the goal of a socially sustainable Malmö – this is often forgotten in difficult times (Respondent No. 4).

The first evaluation report also expressed the concept of holistic management in vague and overly general terms.

Politicians and service personnel need to have a good grasp of holistic leadership. The holistic approach provides opportunities for developing public leadership in a way that ties together

the local, regional, and national levels as well as global processes A key factor is its focus on the development of new methods for governance. Politicians and service personnel, both inside and outside the municipality, need to be open to new ways of governing through knowledge alliances and cross-boundary configurations that reduce the lock-in effects of silo phenomena (Malmö City 2014, 14).

However, the concept of holistic management continues to be presented and discussed in an abstract manner that renders it difficult to conceptualize, concretize, and articulate what it actually entails. In addition, evaluations of how it has been implemented not only are caught up in frustration, they excuse this vagueness (Malmö City 2017). Such lack of conceptual clarity, coupled with less than concrete suggestions for how to realize holistic management both within the leadership and in collaboration with others, has led to difficulties in establishing leadership and control in respect newly established networks and knowledge alliances. This indicates that there is reason to be cautious concerning the potential of a meta-governance perspective in attempts to strategically implement network structures as a means for resolving social problems and fostering participation and true equality. Such an approach may in fact have a negative effect upon political participation.

Another contributing factor concerning difficulties in realizing the new governance arrangements is the reorganization of the local public administration that has taken place. The issue in question concerns the fact that the ten municipal districts (*stadsområden*) that existed in 2013, which were responsible for the bulk of the social welfare services as well as the development of democratic forums for dialogue, were reduced to five (Malmö City 2016). This was followed by a second reform approved by the City Council in November 2016 that would eliminate all administrative districts. The stated intent was to centralize political power and administration in all policy sectors in order to create strong, effective, and specialized forms of administration that would supposedly be better able to manage their particular functions and services. This reform was regarded as a necessary step towards ensuring the equality of treatment and services to all citizens (Malmö City Council 2016). However, such reforms could well have a detrimental effect upon the actual provision of services as well as the local connection of the administration to the more troubled and segregated areas. In such neighborhoods, administrative presence and everyday social relations are highly important for sustaining both trust and political engagement (Respondant No. 1).

There is thus a significant risk that centralizing the city's administrative will further restrict the ability of individual citizens to interact with public officials. This would undercut both the spirit and process of holistic management, leading to a further widening of the gap between non-organized citizens and the social and political elites.

A former municipal district director, who was interviewed prior to the final elimination of municipal districts as the result of policy change, expressed deep concern concerning the administrative recentralization in Malmö.

You know, when Malmö abandons the current organization based on five districts and creates a centralized public administration, it may be very difficult to work according to the notion of holistic management. We will simply be too far away from the people who are affected by city policies and mainly focus on our core administrative tasks (Respondent No. 2).

Another major concern of this same respondent was the uncertain future of the discussion forums that had previously been established on the district level. He believed that these

were crucial for fostering dialogue between public officials and neighborhood residents, arguing that

These forums are necessary for reaching groups that rarely take initiatives on their own, and may in fact find it difficult to do so. Perhaps they do not understand how the political system works or how to approach public staff or politicians because of language barriers or a lack of knowledge (Respondent No. 2).

It is thus difficult to foresee in detail how holistic management, including its supposed efforts to increase participation, will develop in the long run. The common view is that knowledge alliances – which in fact have received much greater emphasis in both the relevant documents and the interviews – would potentially “promote the expansion of civil society” (Respondent No. 3). The overall analysis of the implementation and overall development in Malmö instead indicates that this expansion sustains the ethnic and social-economic divisions of the segregated city. Although it leads to increased collaboration between political, social and economic elites, those groups who are vulnerable and excluded appear to experience diminished access to both formal and informal political settings.

Conclusions

The first stage of my empirical study found that the local commission in Malmö conceptualized network governance as a promising means for democratizing public rule and expanding participation. The organizational and managerial means they proposed for realizing the potential of network governance were *knowledge alliances* and *holistic management*. The article then focused on the implementation of the Commission’s recommendations, including the activities undertaken in this regard by politicians and public administrators. The latter stage of the article identified important problems associated with the strategic implementation of network governance at the local level, particularly in respect to such significant political issues as integration, social inequality, and silent voices.

One of the problems I identified was that the ambitions and activities of local governments can be hampered by national legislation that limits the establishment of networks, restricts the types of relationships and collaboration that are possible, obstructs the development of appropriate organizational forms on the local level, and ultimately blocks the realization of local policy outcomes.

A second finding is that so-called *project disease*, which may afflict local efforts at integration, can make it difficult to establish and maintain a necessary level of trust between public authorities and individuals. This appears to have been fueled in the case we have discussed by the seemingly constant administrative reforms that disrupted existing structures and social relations in vulnerable neighborhoods. The centralization of administration, coupled with the closure of service and activity centers, has been viewed as detrimental for sustaining trust and local engagement.

A third finding indicates that network governance, as implemented in Malmö City, has evidently favored collaboration between what may be termed *elite stakeholders*. This would undermine existing theories concerning how it is possible to increase participation on the part of ordinary citizens through the strategic creation of given forms of network governance, such as knowledge alliances and holistic management. The knowledge alliances

created to date in Malmö have in fact provided little space for the knowledge, experience, and “alternative” voices of policy recipients, common citizens, and ethnic and faith-based organizations. In addition, the promise of holistic management to heighten the influence and participation of “weaker” groups has also not yet been realized. Indeed, the particular forms of network governance that have been chosen for implementation, together with the recentralization of city administration and the 2015 termination of the Neighborhood Projects, have led to there being fewer arenas than before for ordinary citizens to participate in political and social life and exert influence upon issues of concern to them.

For such reasons, I argue that the meta-governance approach which has been implemented in the efforts at local reform in Malmö has not been successful in realizing the participatory ethos of network governance that earlier scholars have advanced (Sørensen and Torfing 2007, 245; Bevir 2010, 116f; Ferlie et al. 2011). A wide range of scholars have in fact warned against potential exclusion and power asymmetries within network governance (Johnston et al. 2010, 2; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012). They point to the fact that “principled engagement” and the inclusion of all affected stakeholders and policy recipients are necessary if such problems are to be avoided and collaboration is to proceed as intended (Weale 2011, 64; Larsson 2013, 2019). Others have claimed that these and related problems can be ameliorated by the implementation of *meta-governance* understood as strategic and deliberate efforts by politicians and administrative leaders to actively establish and manage collaborative governance networks (Hovik and Vabo 2005; Sørensen and Torfing 2009, 2016b, 2018).

The possibility of such negative outcomes was discussed by the Malmö Commission, with reports arguing for an active approach to collaborative forums, including knowledge alliances and holistic management. We may recall in this regard that the situation in Malmö has represented a challenging test of meta-governance theory insofar as previous scholars have remarked that socio-economic status has a detrimental effect upon the political participation and efficacy of citizens (Arnstein 1969; Fung 2006; Andrew 2009; Hertting 2009; Dekker et al. 2010; Parés, Bonet-Martí, and Martí-Costa 2012; see also Andersen and Biseth 2013). Even though the Commission was clearly aware of such issues, the results of the present study support the view that the political leadership have struggled in their efforts to foster broader civic participation through the use of network governance.

Attempts to enact governance through the strategic utilization of knowledge alliances and holistic management has in fact resulted in a strengthening of collaboration between strong and well established organizations in both the public and private spheres. This took place at the same time that other reforms, including administrative re-centralization and the termination of specific community and activity centers, restricted the channels of communication and arenas for action available to those citizens who lack resources and live in marginalized neighborhoods. This undercut attempts on their part to acquire power, self-representation, and access to democratic and political processes.

The finding that meaningful participation can in fact be restricted by the strategic establishment of network governance for specific purposes complements and verifies the finding of Parés, Bonet-Martí, and Martí-Costa (2012) concerning how institutional structures can constrain the influence of marginalized groups over neighborhood reforms. It also lends support to the conclusion of an earlier study that ethnic minorities may well find that ethnic associations, comprising closed and informal collaboration, provide a more effective means for acquiring influence (Hertting 2009, 142).

Previous studies of meta-governance have argued that the strategic promotion of collaboration on the part of local and national governments may help in finding solutions to wicked and complex social problems (Doberstein 2016; Wilson, Morrison, and Everingham 2017; Qvist 2017). In contrast, this study reveals that although there may be successful cases of how policy solutions have been advanced to resolve social problems or reach specific recipients, such reforms do not necessarily lead to the inclusion and participation of ordinary citizens or marginalized target groups. As a consequence, it may be necessary to encourage self-organization among ordinary citizens and marginalized groups, rather than rely upon strategically chosen reforms, so that they can foster *their own* participation in informal networks.

Network governance has been described as a normatively attractive structure within which politicians and administrators on any given level can effectively address complex contemporary problems. While problems associated with network governance have been identified, including exclusion and power asymmetries, the recent turn to strategic meta-governance is said to resolve their negative side-effects. However, the extent to which networks have been increasingly promoted in efforts to overcome social and political problems makes it incumbent upon researchers to further examine the degree to which network governance does in fact foster increased participation, pluralism, and the principled engagement of all relevant stakeholders, including civil society actors, policy recipients, and target groups.

This case study has illustrated that there are substantial problems associated with an overly strategic approach to increased participation that substantially advances collaboration between political, social and economic elites, but minimizes the channels of influence and participation of ordinary citizens and marginalized groups.

Note

1. All translations in the text from Swedish are by the author unless indicated otherwise.

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Oscar L. Larsson currently (2017–2019) holds a post-doc position at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), where he investigates collaborative governance arrangements in rural contexts aimed at supporting integration. His doctoral thesis (2015) focused on the meta-governance of collaborative crisis management and historical development in the political field of security in Sweden. Larsson has previously published articles on collaborative governance in *Critical Policy Studies* and *Regulation & Governance*, on neo-institutionalism in *Critical Review*, and on crisis management in *Risk, Hazards and Crisis in Public Policy*.

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