

Collaborative governance in times of political shifts

Abstract

This paper explores how a case of collaborative governance between public authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs) in Sweden was affected by political changes and reforms (2014–2024) that eventually contributed to the closing down of the project. The case addresses state-civil society relations in Sweden and how political shifts affect collaborative policy implementation. The collaborative project was carried out over a decade at a regional level and addressed migrant integration through involvement in activities run by CSOs. The project's development is analysed in relation to different ideological and political understandings of the role of civil society in liberal democracy and welfare, as well as the development of state-civil society relations in Sweden. Political changes related to welfare state retrenchment, privatisation of services, and restrictive migration policies impacted the public authorities, negatively influencing the preconditions for collaboration. Due to asymmetric power relations between the public sector and civil society, CSOs tended to adapt to these changes to uphold collaboration. In the article, the collaborative governance framework is used for understanding the preconditions for state-civil society collaboration.

Keywords: Civil society, Collaborative governance, Democracy, Migration, Welfare

COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN PUBLIC authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs) are often pursued in governance and for solving societal challenges. The added value of including CSOs in the definition and implementation of public policies can be attributed to increased effectiveness, both through participation in the decision-making process and through implementation (Casey 2004). This paper addresses state-civil society relations and how political shifts affect collaborative governance. It draws on a case study of a collaborative project within the policy area of migrant integration in the Scania region of Sweden. The project, called Network, Activity and Participation (NAD), was run as a collaboration between a regional network for civil society and public authorities. The project was conducted for a decade before being terminated unilaterally by one of the public-sector partners in December 2023. We analyse the development of relations between public authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs) within the project as a case of collaborative governance (cf. Ansell & Gash 2007).

Many models of collaborative governance focus on a meso-level of analysis invol-

ving participating actors' characteristics, the collaborative process between them, the institutional design (Ansell & Gash 2007; McNaught, 2024), and the "collaborative dynamics" (Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh 2012). These dimensions are included in the collaborative governance arrangement. Some authors emphasise the need to integrate the "general system context" to understand, for instance, political, legal and socioeconomic influences on collaborative governance (*ibid.*). Literature on state-civil society relations also often focuses on the organisational preconditions for collaboration, for instance, concerning different organisational logics (e.g. Billis 2010). However, within this literature, there is also an emphasis on the need to include the political and socioeconomic environment to understand the participation of civil society actors in policy processes (Casey 2004). Looking at state-civil society relationship concerning migrants' labour market integration in different European countries, Baglioni, Caló and Numerato (2022) argue that such a relationship "is affected by their specific social, cultural and economic contexts of their labour market, welfare state and attitudes towards migrants' integration" (*ibid.*: 859). While the impact of social, cultural and economic contexts on state-civil society relations is evident when comparing different country-contexts, we want to contribute to this strand of research by exploring the impact of changing context in a single country over time.

One of the collaborative governance framework's strengths is that it allows a multidimensional, dynamic understanding of collaborative relations between public authorities and CSOs. In this article we want to expand the meso-level analysis, common in the study of collaborative governance, by including broader policy-changes as contextual dimensions at the macro level. In line with this contribution, the aim of the article is to explore the interplay between factors at meso and macro levels to understand the preconditions for successful collaboration and the dynamics that can cause it to fail.

In this endeavour, we are inspired by Thomas Brante's (2001) meta-theory of sociology, divided into levels by addressing how the national level (in Brante, the inter-institutional level) policy development impacts the regional level inter-organisational collaboration (in Brante the institutional level). We treat the national level as a context for the collaborative project and explore it through relevant literature. The empirical analytical part of the study focuses instead on the regional-level case of collaborative governance. To achieve our aim, we will use an analytical framework to examine the relationship between public authorities and CSOs. The context will allow us to link the development of relations to broader national-level policy development.

The case

The NAD-project involved a collaboration between two state public agencies, the Swedish Public Employment Agency (hereafter Employment Agency) and the County Administrative Board, one regional public authority, the Region of Scania, and the Civil Society Network in Skåne, a regional lobby and interest organisation for CSOs (hereafter the Network). The operational part of the project involved the Employment

Agency's offices (EOs), i.e. local bureaus that implement the state agency's policy, the Network and local CSOs.

The project aimed to support newly arrived migrants in learning Swedish, improving their health and well-being and expanding their social network to increase their job prospects. These aims were to be achieved by involving the migrants in CSOs' activities within the framework of the integration program run by the Employment Agency. While the EOs provided participants for the CSOs' activities among the newly arrived migrants enrolled in the integration program, the Network provided a "match" between the participants and specific activities provided by local CSOs. The CSOs received a small grant as recognition of the costs associated with including the participants in the activities. To have these activities included in the individual integration program was voluntary for the participants. However, after acceptance, attendance became a condition for receiving the full introduction benefits provided by the Employment Agency. The CSO activities ranged from language cafés to sports and cultural activities.

From the point of view of the public authorities, the project could contribute to a more effective implementation of their policy aiming at newly arrived migrants becoming self-sufficient through employment. From the perspective of the CSOs, the project would allow them to engage with a target group they had difficulty reaching, contribute to social inclusion, and promote newly arrived migrants' knowledge of and engagement in civil society (Jönsson & Scaramuzzino 2016). During its approximately ten years of existence (2014-2023) the project provided activities for almost 3500 participants, with 2016-2019 being the most productive period.

We understand the project as a case of collaborative governance in the way Ansell and Gash (2007) describe it. They 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" (ibid.: 544). In 2023, the county administrative board decided to dismantle the overarching partnership. Soon thereafter, the other public authorities followed suit and the project was terminated. The CSOs were not part of the decision of terminating of the project.

The analytical framework

Ansell and Gash (2007: 550) propose a model of collaborative governance in which they link several dimensions at a meso level as explanatory for the outcomes of the collaboration. The collaborative process is understood as affected by both starting conditions, institutional design and facilitative leadership. The collaborative process is, in turn, understood as a dynamic process involving different interrelated dimensions. Four dimensions in the collaborative governance model are particularly relevant to our analysis. Firstly, we focus on "commitment to the process" and "shared understanding", as these tended to fluctuate during the project. Secondly, we focus on one of the main starting conditions of the project, namely "Power-Resource-Asymmetries", which in-

teract with “Incentives for and Constraints on Participation”. The latter, in turn, are affected by changes in the political context surrounding the project.

While the collaborative governance model allows us to understand the dynamics of collaboration as it evolves over the project, we will also use the concept of “organisational logics” (Billis 2010) to account for how public authorities and CSOs differ. Inspired by Billis’s (2010: 55) ideal-typical distinction between private, public and third sector, we emphasise in particular that while the public sector has public service and public policy as its operational priorities, CSOs prioritise their commitment to the distinctive mission they have organised around. Such a mission might, of course, be more or less aligned with, or at odds with, public agencies’ priorities, which would affect collaboration. Additionally, while public authorities are administered by public servants within legally established bureaus, CSOs rely primarily on members and volunteers within associations. These different organisational logics could be added to the other “starting conditions” (e.g., Power-Resource-Asymmetries) as factors affecting collaboration.

To understand the macro-level political shifts that have impacted the collaborative project and contributed to its cancellation, we will turn to civil society studies and how they have described the political context for state-civil society relations. First, the paper addresses three broad ideological currents that have influenced how the role of civil society in modern society has been conceptualised and understood: social democracy, (neo)liberalism and nationalist conservatism/populism. Then, we relate these currents to the development of state-civil society relations in Sweden. We interpret the implementation of the project as part of a liberal turn in Swedish state-civil society relations and its cancellation as a consequence of changing policies concerning employment, migration and civil society.

State, civil society and politics

The concept of civil society is debated, as is its role and relation to the state. In this section we will address the overall developments of state-civil society relations in modern Western democracies, and in the next section address its relevance in a Swedish context and for the case at hand.

The modern history of the concept civil society is related to the development of political theory and, as argued by Foley and Hodgkinson (2003), to the “...seemingly sharp distinction between the modern, bureaucratic state and a complex society built on the division of labour and increasing acknowledgement of difference among its citizens” (p. vii). Since, the relation between state and civil society has been tightly linked to the development of democracy, and the debate around state and civil society has also been tied up with the debate about the welfare state (Cohen & Arato 2003).

Historically, civil society has been given different roles in the social democratic, conservative/corporatist and liberal welfare models (Esping-Andersen 1990). While both the social democratic and the conservative model place the state in the role of the guarantor of the general interest, the liberal model leaves a considerable autonomy

to the individuals to provide for their needs. Classical liberalism puts much faith in civil society as a counter-weight to both state and market. Neo-liberalism, on the other hand, can be viewed as a belief in the free market as the most effective and just way of distributing resources and in individualism as personal freedom from the state. The state's role is reduced and, as much as possible, replaced by market solutions in expanding the private sector into new areas (Cummins 2018). Ideally, the state will become a mere "nightwatchman" that makes sure that the market can function freely (*ibid.*), while the more caring state is diminutively labelled a "nanny state" (Steer, Davoudi, Shucksmith et al. 2021a).

A tangible aspect of neo-liberalism is austerity measures focused on cutting public spending. Cummings (2018: 22) argues that the austerity measures cannot be reduced to a "technocratic exercise in economic management" but is instead "an ideological attack on the foundation of the social contract that formed the basis of the post-war society". Austerity measures have not simply reduced public spending but instead shifted the spending from the public welfare to the private sector to provide solutions (Farnsworth & Irwing, 2018) in what can be labelled a "rollback" and a "roll-out" phase (Steer, Davoudi, Shucksmith et al. 2021b).

Civil society and CSOs' role in neo-liberal austerity can be understood from various perspectives. Civil society, particularly social movements, is among the chief protesters of neo-liberal politics (della Porta 2015). Neo-liberal politics can cause a double stress upon civil society to take on issues when the welfare sector withdraws and the grants from the public sector are decreased (Steer, Davoudi, Shucksmith et al. 2021a). Neo-liberal politics focusing on the marketisation of the civil society sector also affects civil society (Webb, Mallo, Tardiveau et al. 2021); it is not merely that the private sector is expanding, but the civil society sector is forced to adapt to the ideology of the private sector to survive.

While these theoretical perspectives have dominated the literature on the role of civil society in modern Western democracy, the rise of right-wing populist parties to power has potentially created new conditions for state-civil society relations (Scaramuzzino 2026). What can be labelled a neo-conservative turn has occurred where financial austerity, in line with neo-liberalism, is combined with a conservative focus on state, crime and gender roles (cf. Mishra 1989). This neo-conservative turn also puts emphasis on national security measures and anti-liberal nationalism (Forcier & Dufour 2016), viewing multiculturalism as a threat and favouring cultural homogeneity (Schierup & Ålund 2010).

The issue of "shrinking" civic space for civil society, understood as reducing the space of manoeuvre for civil society actors, has become central in recent literature addressing new authoritarian tendencies (e.g. Ploszka 2020). The concept of "populist governance" has been developed to address how populist parties tend to govern when in power (Muno & Pfeiffer 2022). Scholars of civil society and social movement studies have been increasingly interested in how right-wing populist parties and civil society actors interact and relate to each other (Ruzza 2020; Chiodi 2021). Conflicts arise due to the specific style of governance, where right-wing populist parties tend to promote

a direct link between the charismatic leader and the masses. Within this framework, any intermediary body is often depicted as part of an illegitimate elite that is against the will and interests of the people (see also Arato & Cohen 2021). Ideological conflicts also arise between populist parties' often nationalist, nativist and illiberal agendas and many civil society actors that have their roots in social movements driven by missions of humanitarianism, solidarity and human rights (Ruzza 2020).

State-civil society relations in Sweden

The social-democratic model

The development of state-civil society relations in Sweden has been informed for a long time by the social-democratic ideology with a vision of the state as providing services to citizens as a social right (ca. 1930-mid 2000s). Such an ideal left little room for a civil society as a service provider or a philanthropic institution. Instead, the role of civil society in the welfare system would be to advocate for groups' rights, scrutinise the functioning of the state and act as a watchdog against the state and market (Lundström & Svedberg 2003). In general, the contribution of civil society was conceived more in democratic terms than economic ones. Also, public funding of civil society was often provided in the form of organisational grants supporting the organisations rather than based on activities and purchase of services (Danielson, Zetterberg & Amnå 2009).

In the 1990s, with the introduction of New Public Management schemes, organisational grants were increasingly replaced by project grants (*ibid.*). The rise of the project form of organising (hereafter the project form) as a way of running new activities within the welfare system has been so pervasive that scholars have talked about a "projectification" of the public sector (Fred 2015). The project form has allowed CSOs to become a complement or even an alternative to the public provision of services. However, projectification has hindered the sector from taking more responsibility for the welfare of society and making political influence more difficult (Herz 2016), not least due to short-term funding, resource dependency and bureaucratisation (*cf.* Scaramuzzino 2012). The project that is the case for this study can be seen as part of this projectification. However, as a case of collaborative governance arrangement, the project is much more in line with a liberal turn in Swedish state-civil society relations.

The (neo)liberal turn

Although reforms inspired by liberalism had been pursued since the 1990s, a strong (neo)liberal turn in Swedish politics came in 2006 with the election of the first liberal-conservative government in 12 years. The government launched a set of civic dialogues with civil society to reach agreements or compacts that would allow a more service-providing role to civil society in welfare and migrant integration. These policy initiatives were accompanied by reforms allowing non-state actors, including both for-profit and non-profit organisations, to provide services on behalf of public agencies.

These reforms included public procurement and the liberalisation of service production in key areas of the welfare system (Linde, Arvidson & Scaramuzzino 2018).

Many of these initiatives were inspired by liberal ideology (Johansson & Johansson 2012; Reuter, Wijkström & von Essen 2012), which was in line with the set of political parties in power. However, liberalisation and privatisation of welfare service provision have often resulted in for-profit actors becoming service providers on behalf of public authorities rather than non-profits (e.g. Blomqvist & Winblad, 2019). This development, favouring the for-profit rather than the non-profit sector, is more in line with a neo-liberal than traditional liberal view.

Resistance to marketisation, which is understood as market-based competition, has pushed CSOs to find new ways of relating to public agencies in providing services. Relations based on partnership, rather than competition, were promoted by many civil society actors, not least at the local level, which has been interpreted as inspired by a corporatist rather than liberal model (Arvidson, Johansson, Johansson et al. 2018). Service delivery has involved developing new frameworks such as “idea-based-public partnership”, a form of public-private partnership involving CSOs (Linde, Arvidson & Scaramuzzino 2018). While these collaborative arrangements have been developed clearly within the framework of a shift of the role of civil society from voice to service (Lundström & Wijkström 2012), the extent to which they entail a liberal or corporatist understanding of the relation between state and civil society is not always clear.

The object of study in this article is clearly part of the development of Swedish civil society towards a more active role in contributing to welfare and integration through services. However, the form of collaboration is, as said before, closer to the model of “collaborative governance” than pure marketisation. A regional agreement or compact is at the base of the collaboration, and the relationship between the funding public agencies and the local CSOs providing the activities is not framed as “on behalf” of the public sector, but as a collaboration. Also, elements of market competition are not present in the allocation of funding; instead, it is based on voluntary engagement from local CSOs and a selection of activities that are suitable for the target group. The logic behind the relationship has been interpreted as being in between a classic project grant, where civil society actors get funding based on their own idea, and public procurement, where a civil society actor is delivering services on behalf of the public agency following the latter’s requirements and demands (Jönsson & Scaramuzzino 2016).

The analysis will return to how the collaboration developed over time. However, it might be important to mention that the Swedish political context shifted during the decade 2014-2023. The project started at a time when a government supported by a liberal-conservative coalition was replaced by a government supported by a coalition of the Social-Democratic Party and the Green Party. This coalition stayed in power from 2014 to 2022, although often in a position of minority in the parliament and sometimes with a budget passed by a liberal-conservative-nationalist majority. The state’s “civil society policy” did not change much during this period. Most changes affecting the collaboration in the project were in the policy area of migration and integration. The intake of migrants was severely limited in late 2015, when then prime minister Stefan

Löfven, at a press conference, announced that Sweden would adjust their migrant intake to match the EU minimum (Sveriges Radio 2015). The policy on residence also changed, so that temporary, rather than permanent, residency became the norm.

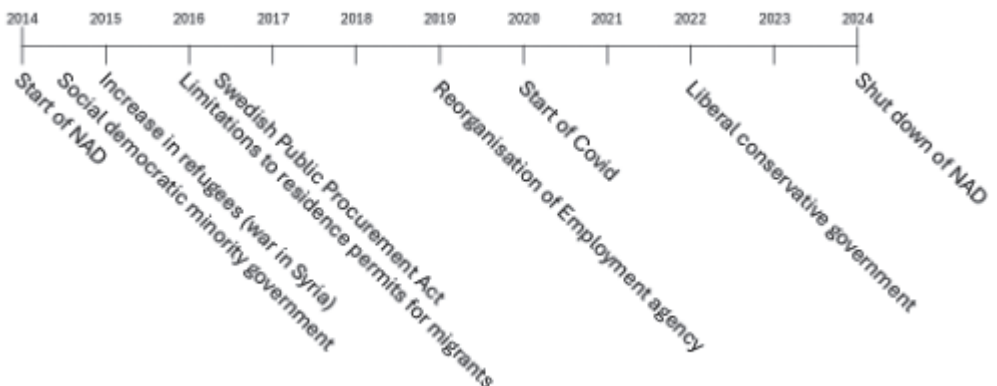
As we will see, reforming the Employment Agency by downsizing the sections working with newly arrived migrants also impacted the project implementation (Jönsson & Scaramuzzino 2024a).

The nationalist conservative turn

With the 2022 elections, a new government was elected by a liberal-conservative coalition with external support from a right-wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats. Although the consequences of such a political shift for state-civil society relations are still to be seen, many CSOs have expressed strong criticism towards the content of the agreement signed by the four political parties supporting the new government concerning different policy issues, e.g. women's rights, children's rights, and the protection of the environment (Forum 2022). Representatives of the Sweden Democrats have reacted strongly to this criticism. High-profile politician Björn Söder, for instance, stated that CSOs criticising the agreement should lose their funding (Expo 2022). This episode could be interpreted as a break with a culture of advocacy by which Swedish CSOs have not only been allowed to voice critique against public actors and policies but have also been expected to do so without risking losing public funding (Arvidson, Johansson, Meeuwisse et al. 2018). While there is no sign in the project's development of changing public policies towards civil society, we find reference to changes in the migration and integration policies towards even more restrictive measures instead. In the decision to end the collaboration, the public authority responsible refers to "a paradigm shift" in the political direction of these policies as aiming to reduce migration to Sweden (Länsstyrelsen 2023:1).

The following figure presents a timeline of the project in relation to important events in its socio-political context.

Figure 1. Timeline of the project



Method

The case study draws on two separate studies that were commissioned by the management of the collaborative NAD-project. The results of the studies have been published in separate reports in Swedish (Jönsson & Scaramuzzino 2016; 2024a). This article draws on a meta-analysis of the results of the two studies. The first set of empirical material was collected in 2015 and 2016 and consisted of 27 interviews with employment officers and CSO representatives. This set of interviews focused on evaluating the collaboration between the EOs (employment offices) and the CSOs. The second set of empirical material was collected in 2024 and consisted of 12 interviews with employees of the county administrative board and the regional administration (in the analysis defined as public sector representatives), employment officers and CSO representatives. The focus of this study was to understand how structural changes and organisational strategies had affected collaboration, which was shut down at the turn of 2023-2024.

In this article, we draw on findings from both studies to derive novel conclusions beyond the previous studies' scope. As such, we draw on the previous analyses and adopt a new analytical perspective when revisiting the material for the present study (cf. Åkerström, Jacobsson & Wästerfors 2004). We extrapolate the discrepancy between a public sector logic and a civil society logic that we found in the first study and the structural and organisational changes highlighted in the second study to better understand the development of collaboration and its links to political changes. This extrapolation is then viewed through the lenses of social democratic, neo-liberal and nationalist-conservative ideologies as well as changes in Swedish politics and policies. It is through this lens that we understand the closing down of the project.

There are ethical issues with reusing qualitative interview material (cf. Medjedović 2011). In the case of this article, the interviews that are used were collected by the same authors in previous studies. The interviewees gave their informed consent to participate in the previous studies, and the present article is an extension and revisit of those studies' results. The quotes used in the article have already been used, and published, in the previous reports. As such we have not asked for consent to reuse the previous interviews for this study.

The analysis is informed by the analytical framework through which the meso-level analysis focusing on the collaboration between the parts is continuously integrated with and understood through changes in the general system context as macro-level dimensions.

Commitment to the process

In 2016, at the time of our first study of the project, most stakeholders generally deemed the collaboration between the EOs and the CSOs positive. The collaboration exhibited conflicts that could be traced to different institutional and organisational logics informing the public and civil society sectors (cf. Billis 2010). These conflicts were apparent in our first study, and there were obstacles to organising the activities

due to these conflicting logics. Mainly, the ways of the Employment Agency were considered too bureaucratic and sluggish for the CSOs, while the CSOs were considered too unorganised and fuzzy, as emphasised in the following two quotes.

I know how it is with the Employment Agency; it does not move that fast. That's something I always try to explain [to the CSOs]. [--] it won't be handled quickly, and there won't be a rush of participants. There will be occasional participants, but it will take time. (Civil society representative 2016)

[In the CSOs] it's just "But we'll do it like this. There's no problem, let's get it done now! Bang! Why make a fuss about it?" (Employment Officer 2016)

However, both parties were committed to trying to work through these differences and overbridge the different organisational logics. Generally, the EOs wanted a more formalised and systematic collaboration to fit into their *modus operandi*. At the same time, some employment officers acknowledged the added value of the CSOs even if this was not clearly in line with the ways of the Employment Agency:

The [group activities] are recurring because they are more practical from the Employment Agency's point of view [laugh]. However, I believe the individual [activities] are more important and better for the participant. I definitely believe that. (Employment Officer 2016)

The employment officer emphasised that although group activities were more practical for their own organisation, individual activities, which were based on the specific interests of individual migrants, were more advantageous for the target group.

Conflicts between logics were often resolved at a personal level by establishing a good relationship between the contact persons within the EOs and the coordinators from civil society. Many representatives from the CSOs pointed out that "their contact person" was not as strict and bureaucratic, and that they facilitated the collaboration.

It has worked very well with [my Employment Agency contact person]. They are very reasonable, competent and ready and all that jazz. But it is their colleagues, the case managers, that it has been difficult to work with. (Civil society representative 2016)

Fading commitment

During the project's time, many interviewees expressed a perception of fading commitment. This is particularly evident among CSO representatives concerning the Employment Agency and its officers.

During the ten years of the NAD-project, there were several changes in the conditions for the collaboration. It is difficult to map out a clear trajectory of the project due to the fact that there have been many changes. I mean, when you look back at these ten years, there have been different phases, and in every phase, there have been some changes. [--] Even if we thought that this had been a stable collaboration, there has never been a long stretch of time... And I mean that there have not been five-ten

years of quiet progress and implementation; there have been changes all the time (Civil society representative 2024).

Several interviewees, both from civil society and public agencies, emphasised that the reorganisation of the Employment Agency affected the collaboration in a significant way. Part of the changes in the EOs' ways of working stems from the austerity measures dating back to 2019, when a social democratic minority government was in power but working with a state budget passed by the liberal-conservative majority opposition.

At the same time, the Employment Agency was receiving considerably less funding. Because now the funding went to [procurement of] activities. Moreover, the Employment Agency is supposed to work with fewer people, that is, fewer employees. [--] And perhaps that was the starting point of us working more task-based because when you work with "personal remote meetings", as it is called, you are only working task-based. (Employment Officer 2024)

The quote refers to the provisions in the new state budget, which heavily cut funding for the Employment Agency, and the effect on the EOs was massive. Another employment officer expressed that the 2019/20 period was a painful ordeal (a "steel bath", as the Swedish metaphor goes). Several employment officers were laid off, and many of the remaining ones started working more task-oriented through digital communications rather than face-to-face meetings, as expressed in the quote. This shift was accelerated by the restrictions imposed due to the Covid pandemic. The same officer expressed that the EOs could not return to working "client-based", and the more cost-effective "task-based" way of working prevailed.

Here, we see how austerity measures forced the public agencies to distance themselves from the clients, working more as a customer service than a case-management social service. The government also called for more procurements from the business sector, diverting resources and attention to collaboration with private enterprises, which aligns well with austerity measures and neo-liberal politics (Cummings 2018; Farnsworth & Irving 2018). The lack of personal relations between the EOs and their clients and the focus on procurement of services had a negative impact on the EOs' capacity and interest to refer newly arrived migrants to the CSOs' activities. One employment office pointed out that referring migrants to the project's activities used to be the primary objective but had since been degraded to a side task.

The changes, combined with the new, more restrictive migration policies introduced by the government in 2015, resulted in the CSOs receiving significantly fewer participants from the EOs. To compensate for this, the different parties of the collaboration developed new strategies to increase the number of participants. Several CSOs and coordinators started to recruit participants from the schools teaching Swedish for migrants (SFI), which is technically the same group as the participants from the EOs, but did not need to be processed through the EOs. Here, the fading commitment of the EOs sparked the need for new ways of reaching the target group, bypassing the EOs.

Meanwhile, different public agencies started to compensate for the lack of parti-

cipants by expanding the target group for the project. The EOs expanded the group of participants to include long-term unemployed people who were not part of the introductory program for migrants. The county administrative board brought on asylum-seekers as participants. With the new groups of participants, the parties of the collaboration no longer shared responsibility for all the participants, and the target group of the project was therefore widened and fragmented into sub-groups, each with its specific needs and policy areas. This fragmentation of the target group created a situation where public agencies' commitment to the project became increasingly fragmented. A representative from civil society expressed that, for the Network, in its coordinating function, it was straining to hold it together. With these changes, the collaboration moved from one process to three parallel processes with three different groups of participants. The responsibility had become fragmented, where one public authority had responsibility for a sub-group of the participants but was not invested in the target group as a whole. There was no longer a commitment from all parties due to the public authorities' different areas of responsibility (cf. Ansell & Gash 2007).

Regardless of the politics, you need to understand that the County Administrative Board has a certain mission, the Employment Agency has a certain mission, and the civil society, with all its diversity, has different missions. I think that has been an eye-opener for many people, and with it, an understanding that you cannot take things for granted; we need to put them in context. (Civil society representative 2024)

The fragmentation can be understood as the negative effects of austerity measures in employment policy, new public management in the Employment Agency, and restrictive measures in the policy area of migration on the public agencies' commitment to the collaborative project.

Shared understanding

At the start of the NAD-project, there was a shared understanding of the overarching aim of the project, albeit with tensions regarding the value provided by civil society activities in the integration process of newly arrived immigrants. There were, for instance, evident differences in the EOs' and CSOs' definition of integration.

The EOs defined integration as entering and staying in the labour market, a definition in line with the Employment Agency's task of policy implementation. An EO officer discussed labour market integration in the following way: "The guiding words are language, health, and network; things that in the long run should lead to a job". (Employment Officer 2016)

CSOs tended to view integration as becoming integrated into society, hence more of a social integration than labour market integration. This perspective is more in line with the organisations' mission of solidarity, humanitarianism and inclusion (Jönsson & Scaramuzzino 2016) as illustrated in the following quote: "Associational life is a great way to integrate into society and meet other people, that is to say, other Swedes" (Civil society representative 2016).

Although the parties had different understandings of the meaning of integration, there was still a shared understanding that labour market integration and social integration did not preclude each other but complemented each other. An EO officer for instance stated: "The participants should get something out of it [a job], but then it is just a bonus if they like it and think it's fun and continue to attend by themselves." (Employment officer 2016). A similar view is expressed by a CSO representative:

I know of a person who attended [an activity] and then got an internship at a school, through the contacts. Even if that isn't the ultimate objective to get employment or whatever. It is the social aspects, the development, the language, and health that are important. (Civil society representative 2016)

While tensions among different understandings of integration were evident, there was a shared understanding of the importance of finding some middle ground. The different viewpoints, in fact, enabled an added value to the activities that either part could not produce by themselves, something that was appreciated by the participants (Jönsson & Scaramuzzino 2024b).

A widening gap

During the project, the tension between the parties' views increased into a widening gap which can mainly be attributed to changes in migration and integration policies towards more restrictive measures. A representative from civil society described, for instance, how it had become increasingly difficult to push for the project idea in the new political climate:

I mean, we were talking about health, migration and health. And I can't see that it is something that is in focus [today, ---]. In the latter years, I think it has been questioned on a more fundamental level: "What are you talking about, health and the concept of health? We are talking about return migration". [laugh] Like that. (Civil Society representative 2024)

At times when discussions in migration politics were focusing on "return migration", i.e. migrants returning to their country of origin, it became less relevant to discuss health issues for migrants, according to the interviewee. These caring aspects are, in fact, more akin to what advocates of neo-liberalism call the "nanny state" (Steer, Davoudi, Shucksmith et al. 2021a). This shift in the focus of migration politics, which

became particularly evident after the elections in 2021, potentially meant that the CSOs' understanding of integration became less viable. A representative from a public agency argued that the new restrictive migration policy was characterised by "symbolic politics" (in Swedish *signalpolitik*), which refers to strong ideological positioning through specific policy measures, sending a "signal" to the voters. The new migration policies, arguably in line with a nationalist-conservative view on a culturally homogeneous nation, went against the project's key understanding of the issue of migration and integration. One of the representatives from civil society described this political development as a "doomsday feeling".

The changes in migration politics to more restrictive rules also indirectly created a situation where the activities provided by the CSOs became less desirable for the participants, who ended up in a more precarious position and much more preoccupied with finding a job and an income and securing their position to keep their residence permit:

You're so focused on managing everyday life, taking care of children, learning the language, filling out reports and activity reports, applying for benefits, and being out on internships. Attending a lot of different activities [--] And then going swimming in the middle of the day [as a NAD-activity]. You really do not understand to what benefit, "Why should I do that? Why would I want to do that?". (Employment Officer 2024)

There has been a more distinct hierarchy of needs. Like, if you don't have a job and don't have an income, then it isn't as important to go play football. Because you need to meet certain needs before you engage in a leisure activity. (Civil society representative 2024)

As expressed by both representatives of public agencies and CSOs, increasing difficulties in getting a permanent resident permit forced the target group to focus on activities related to quickly getting work to be allowed to stay in Sweden. Thus, because of the national policies on migration, the activities focused on social integration, "leisure activities" became less desirable. As expressed by a public agency representative, the new political context affected the agency's priorities rather than its funding of the activities:

I don't think [the political climate] has affected me that much. I mean, we have kept financing the NAD-project. It would have been a different story if we had cut the finance altogether and said that this is not something we believe in or will finance. We haven't done that. However, it is possible that due to the priorities given to us by the governing political parties, we have put more emphasis on the importance of labour market entrance and that these individuals, in the end, will be self-sufficient. There might be a certain political touch. (Public sector representative 2024)

As with the "rollback" and "roll-out" phases of the austerity measures (Steer, Davoudi, Shucksmith et al. 2021b), the interviewee highlights that changing politics did not

result in a public withdrawal from the project but rather a re-shaping of its content in favour of an understanding of integration as labour market participation.

The political changes questioned the shared understanding of finding a middle ground between the Employment Agency's policy goals and CSOs' mission and values. The changes also tended to challenge a shared understanding among CSOs and public agencies. At the same time, as one civil society representative points out, the new migration policies in general and the politics of the Sweden Democrats in particular, are not necessarily negative for all areas of activities and CSOs. Accordingly, organisations that are more driven by activities and less by specific values or ideology are potentially less in conflict with the nationalist conservative policies put forward by the government.

The widening gap is evident not only in the relationship between the public agencies and the CSOs but also between the different public agencies. Due to changes in national and regional politics and organisational changes, the shared understanding of the public agencies that existed in 2016 was not apparent during the last years of the project. An interviewee from civil society argued that it was "extremely difficult" to navigate the separate demands of three large public agencies.

The widening of the gap between the parties' understanding created a situation where it became somewhat unclear what the aim of the project was, as expressed by a public official:

[We should] think more about what the core of NAD is. Is it to work with newly arrived migrants or something else that is the core? Is the core a method that can be applied to something else? What are we to administer? What in NAD is unique? (Public sector representative 2024)

The quote suggests that the many changes in the collaboration have produced a situation in which the "core" of the project was no longer clear, challenging a shared understanding of the mission.

Asymmetries and incentives

In the early years of the project, it was clear that the collaboration involved a relationship between public agencies and CSOs that was different from public procurement of services. The EOs pointed out that there were other partners from whom they procured services, but that the NAD-activities were something else. However, the CSOs did get economic compensation for the activities, and the compensation was important and, sometimes, a precondition for the collaboration:

No, if we hadn't received the compensation or part of it, it would have been difficult to start up an activity because my boss wouldn't have allowed me to hire [assistance]. So, I'm not sure if it would have worked out. Maybe, but no, compensation is important, especially considering the situation. I don't think

that much about this small sum, but my boss does. [...] He thinks more with his wallet than I do. (Civil society representative 2016)

Thus, the EOs did not simply buy the activities within the NAD-project as a service; at the same time, the CSO's efforts and costs were compensated, enabling them to arrange activities without being financially burdened by the NAD-activities.

Asymmetric dependence and shrinking incentives

The changes in the Employment Agency's *modus operandi* shifted the relationship between the two parties to more resemble a procurement of services, akin to those relationships that the EOs already had with private enterprises. This development is a consequence of the changes in migration policies already discussed. The new restrictive policies, in fact, promoted activities focused on direct labour market integration, making the most attractive and viable CSOs' activities those that were similar to the activities that private enterprises provided for the Employment Agency. Through this marketisation of CSOs' activities, the relevance of the social integration dimension of these activities was downplayed.

This move towards more labour-oriented activities shifted the power relations between the CSOs and the public agencies, and the EOs became less dependent on the CSOs to offer activities for the target groups since similar activities could be procured elsewhere. In the meantime, the CSOs were still dependent on the public agencies to reach the target group. Even though the CSOs were not dependent on the economic compensation *per se*, they were dependent on it to keep running the activities and reach the newly arrived migrants. Hence, rather than interdependence, the relationship between CSOs and public agencies shifted over time into asymmetric dependence.

The tension between asymmetric dependence and advocacy became particularly apparent with CSOs working with asylum seekers. Working with this target group became an ethical dilemma for some CSOs when the County administrative board proposed to include asylum seekers in the collaboration. What was considered ethically problematic was that the target group was potentially facing a rejection of their application and a decision of deportation in a time of restrictive policies, something many CSOs were strongly critical of. The CSOs were forced to choose if they wanted to continue providing activities for asylum seekers and get financial compensation or prioritise their advocacy function: "But if you are working as a coordinator and are funded directly by the county administrative board, if you go public with criticism of the government as a coordinator, it won't work. That collaboration cannot accommodate the advocacy function". (Civil society representative 2024)

Lastly, the asymmetry of the power relation can be exemplified by the fact that the final decision to shut down the project and the collaboration was taken unilaterally by the County administrative board without consultation with the counterparties, according to a Civil society representative, supporting the view of asymmetric dependency:

When we got the notice that the project would be shut down, it became evident that there was a hierarchy. There were many talks on the executive level, but we were not informed. We did not get to participate in the talks, and we were not given the opportunity to give our input before it was too late. (Civil society representative 2024)

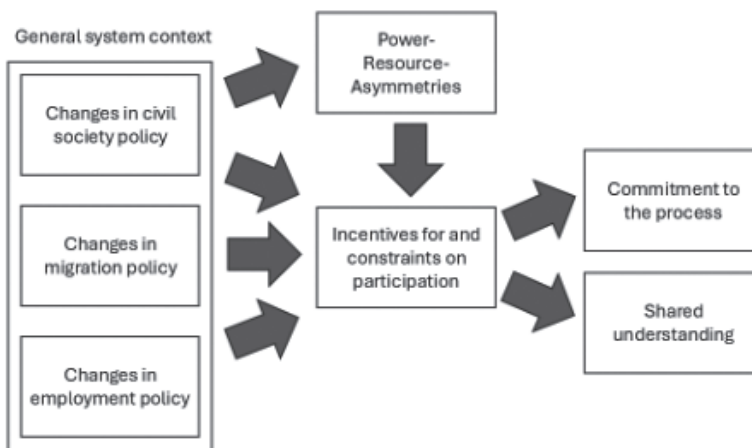
Conclusions

In this study, we have used the collaborative governance framework to develop a model for exploring the interplay between sets of factors at meso and macro levels to understand the preconditions for successful collaboration and the dynamics that can cause it to fail. The case we focus on illustrates how a successful implementation of collaborative governance, run in project form for a decade, is finally terminated after a long process by a state agency.

The figure below (figure 2) shows the theoretical contribution of the study. To the right and centre, we present the four meso-level dimensions taken from the model developed by Ansell and Gash (2007). The analysis shows that, over time, commitment to the process tended to fade, particularly on the part of the Employment Agency, and the shared understanding tended to widen into a gap. The incentives to participate, as well, tended to shrink.

In addition to the factors influencing development at the meso level, we identified a set of macro-level dimensions, which we present on the left side of the model as part of the “general system context” for the collaborative governance arrangement. These dimensions mirror the fact that the project that is the case for the study was carried out at the intersection of migration and employment policies, and as such, these policies impacted the incentives and constraints on participation. Also, public civil society policies influenced both the incentives for and constraints on participation and the power-resource asymmetries.

Figure 2. Macro- and meso-level dimensions of collaborative governance



The interplay between political changes and asymmetries in power and resources between the parties shaped the changing dynamics of the collaboration. As an implementation of public policy, collaboration was particularly sensitive to migration policy changes as it directly impacted the target group. Employment policies were also relevant as the main public sector party in the collaboration was the Employment Agency, a public authority whose local offices are required to implement public policies. Interestingly, either asymmetric relations or different organisational logics are the cause of the collaboration failing. Initially, in a different political context, the parties were able to overbridge such divides. However, asymmetric relations and different organisational logics created different conditions for the parties to adapt to political changes, undermining the actual overbridging of the divide.

We clearly see how CSOs tended to “chase” public-sector agencies, finding new ways to relate to and interact with public administration. Public agencies appeared as a “moving target,” shifting priorities and regularly restructuring their organisation following changes in public policies. This contradicts findings from previous studies of public-private partnerships involving CSOs, which show a tendency of public agencies being the stable partner and CSOs being the more vulnerable, resource-wise (e.g. Di Placido & Scaramuzzino 2019). While this might be true if we consider organisational capacity, it is potentially less so when it comes to priorities and mission, especially in times of political shifts and polarised political debates. In times of political shifts, public agencies can become less predictable in their commitment and priorities, while CSOs tend to hold the course based on their value base and mission (see Suter & Scaramuzzino 2020).

Beyond its focus on the general system context at the macro level, the study’s contribution lies in its endeavour to analyse a case of collaborative governance over a decade, during a period of significant changes in Swedish policy. The project is, in fact, clearly embedded in a tradition of projectification of civil society activities in collaboration with the public sector in Sweden. Although deemed successful, the collaboration model never became a permanent feature of employment policy implementation and remained vulnerable to termination. This type of state-civil society relationship is in line with the late development of the social-democratic welfare state.

The success of the project, however, needs to be understood in light of the many reforms implemented during the liberal-conservative governments (2006-2014), which opened the welfare system to non-state service providers and promoted greater collaboration and partnerships between the public sector and CSOs. Particularly interesting in this context is the framing of CSOs’ role in the project as distinct from that of a mere service provider. A service providing role would have implied constant adaptation to the “buyer” of the service (the Employment Agency in our case) in terms of the services delivered. Such a position became increasingly difficult to uphold for the civil society sector due to changes in employment policy, including rationalisation and downsizing. In this changing landscape, adaptation by CSOs became necessary not so much to adapt activities as to identify new avenues for collaboration.

The final blow to the project, however, is attributable to changes in migration policy.

While the 2015 restriction on immigration policies eventually reduced the number of migrants, it did not preclude efforts to address integration through civil society activities. The project consistently included a small percentage of newly arrived migrants, and although fewer resources were allocated to the Employment Agency for their integration, the project continued. The termination of the collaboration and of the whole platform supporting it is to be attributed to the paradigm shift in public policies concerning migration and integration, in even more restrictive terms after the 2022 election.

These results show that while collaborative governance is affected by meso-level factors, it is also highly influenced by macro-level factors such as the socio-political context. It is also evident that changes in the context affect the preconditions for collaborative governance, an effect that is reasonably amplified by projectification. A question for further studies is to what extent we are experiencing a crisis of collaborative governance tout-court as a way of implementing policy. Another interpretation would be that public authorities are shifting priorities from policy areas, such as migration and integration, to others, such as security and civil contingencies. Also, the eligible collaboration partners in civil society might shift from CSOs with an inclusive, human-rights value base to CSOs more in line with a nationalist-conservative agenda.

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