

Assessing the impact of political partnerships on coordinated meta-governance of regional governance¹

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Abstract

New partnership-arrangements appear to increase the need to impose democratic controls over devolved processes. The challenges of political anchorage in meta-governance alter when several public meta-governors are accountable for the results. This article focuses on political partnerships' ability to establish coordinated meta-governance of regional governance between the politically elected bodies, which in this case is the county council and the municipalities. On the basis of an empirical study of a Norwegian case of regional councils, namely, partnerships between the municipalities and the county, I show how the traditional concept of steering and the understanding of meta-governance together may provide a comprehensive way to analyse the capacities of meta-governance amongst public actors. The analysis suggests that the most important factors of the partnership for creating or enhancing coordinated and meta-governance of regional governance are story-telling, formal agreements, and facilitation. Even though politicians are 'hands on' in the partnership, the analysis suggests that an insufficient anchorage back to the democratically elected bodies still presents a challenge of coordinated meta-governance to the partnership.

Introduction

Keywords:
Coordinated Meta-
Governance
Regional Councils
Regional Governance

New partnership-arrangements appear to increase the need to impose democratic controls over devolved processes (cf. Jessop 1999, Kooiman 2003, Sørensen and Torfing 2005, 2007, Sørensen 2006). Where the public sector holds a major interest and acts as a part in partnership arrangements, a vast body of literature has dealt with questions of accountability and democracy at all tiers and levels (cf. Rhodes 1997b, Scharpf 1999, Östhol and Svensson 2002, Veggeland 2004a, Bogason and Musso 2006). Where representative elected bodies like municipal and regional councils enter a partnership, they refrain from exercising influence on a certain area of policy and transfer policy- and decision-making to a structure of governance (Veggeland 2004a, b). It is therefore important in these cases to reconcile the relations between the partnership and the elected bodies from which the partnership owe its legitimacy (Haveri et al. 2009). One way to do this is by practising 'meta-governance' (Kooiman 2003). Meta-governance is defined as the 'regulation of self-regulation' (Kooiman 2003), and further described as a soft, more diffuse way to anchor and direct the partnership democratically (Sørensen 2006, Sørensen and Torfing 2005, 2007).

Meta-governance strategies have until recently been neither well recognized nor well developed in the Norwegian context, even though some research related to regional issues of development has been done (Haveri et al. 2009, Røiseland and Vabo 2012, Sandkjaer Hanssen et al. 2011, Higdem and Sandkjær Hanssen

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2014). The most recent research and reports published by IRIS¹ in 2013, however, provide a substantial empirical and analytical contribution to this field. Still, most studies address partnership situations where representative elected bodies constitute one part amongst other non-public partners. This article adds to this body of literature by addressing a situation of multi-level governance where several representative elected bodies, the municipalities, and the county form the partnership (i.e., a public-public partnership), specifically a sub-regional council. The contribution of this article lies in the application of the perspective of meta-governance and political anchorage in partnership of public governance where the democratic bodies and the politicians occupy the leading positions and are possibly in rivalry with one another. The activities of meta-governance within a setting of several meta-governors between equal and autonomous public actors have not been sufficiently studied compared with the huge body of studies and theory on public-private partnerships, where the meeting of the concepts of market, hierarchy, and network often is used as an analytical framework (cf. Entwistle et al. 2007). Some Scandinavian cases have touched upon this theme (Haveri et al. 2009, Nordberg 2014, Fotel and Hanssen Sandkjær 2009, Hanssen Sandkjær et al. 2011, Tennnås Holmen and Sandkjær Hanssen 2013). The aim of this article is to examine the partnership's ability to establish coordinated meta-governance between the politically elected bodies, which in this case is the county council and the municipalities. I shall refer to this activity as 'meta-governance'. Meta-governance denotes the securing of democratic anchorage of the partnerships' decisions and activities from and within each county and municipal council. This article contributes to the theoretical understanding of this phenomenon first by examining coordinative meta-governance between politically steered public bodies in partnerships, where the meta-governance seeks to direct other politicians. Secondly, the empirical findings provide a basis for a discussion of further theoretical consequences on perspectives of meta-governance.

Both Sørensen (2006) and Torfing and Triantafiliou (2011) have developed an analytical framework for understanding meta-governance. In the Nordic and Norwegian context of this study, arrangements of networked governance, like partnerships, are always in the shadow of government. This implies that autonomous public actors may combine traditional and new methods of directing partnership-arrangements, like the regional councils. Therefore, I argue that a combined analysis of steering or directing public partnership arrangements provides a more comprehensive way to assess the different public actors' meta-governance strategies. Meta-governance strategies are vital for a single municipality or a county to ensure democratic anchorage of the partnership. For the analysis within the traditional concept of steering, I have used the scheme of 'Nodality', 'Authority', 'Treasure', and 'Organization' (NATO) (Hood and Margetts 2007) in a version further developed by Røiseland and Vabo (2008). The analysis is based on a case-study of all regional councils (the partnerships) within a Norwegian county (Bråtå et al. 2014).

This article begins by introducing the regional councils and regional development and planning in the context of Norway. Secondly, I shall present the theoretical approach of meta-governance and the NATO framework for the analysis. I shall then provide a short description of the case county and the methodological approach for the study. The article next provides the analysis of the impact of the political partnerships of the regional councils on coordinated meta-governance as it is related to the democratic anchorage of the politicians in the county and municipal councils. Finally, I shall conclude on the findings and discuss some theoretical implications.

Background: The sub-regional partnerships (regional councils)

I shall first set the regional partnership in a simplified institutional context. Secondly I shall briefly introduce the background for and the notion of a special arrangement of public-public governance between representative elected bodies (i.e., the municipalities and the county), which is the object of this study. Figure 1 illustrates the sub-regional partnerships, the regional councils within the institutional context of Norway. Norway is a unitary state based upon a three-tier model. Local and regional bodies have their authority allocated from the national state. The representatives to the county and the municipal councils are directly elected, and they have wide responsibilities within their territory, such as welfare services, schools, and infrastructure. The 428 municipalities and 19 county-municipalities of Norway are all political-administrative entities with equal status as autonomous bodies. According to the principle of municipal self-government, both the municipalities and the counties have considerable freedom to decide for themselves how and when problems are to be solved and which developmental tasks are to be undertaken. It is primarily the central government, however, that defines their tasks and monitors their implementation. Both the counties and the municipalities have significant responsibilities relating to local and regional development and planning, though with somewhat overlapping mandate and powers. Since 2001 (Kommunal- og Regionaldepartementet 2002), along with further changes in 2012 (Kommunal- og Regionaldepartementet 2013), the counties in Norway have been defined as having a key role in regional development within their spatial territories. Sub-regional partnerships between the counties and geographical clusters of municipalities have been formed. These partnerships have been established in order to facilitate more coordinated regional policy, planning, and joint actions for regional development of a larger territorial unit than a single municipality.

The left side of figure 1 illustrates the three-tier model of Norway. As this figure illustrates the regional councils are arrangements of multi-level governance, mainly between the tiers of the county and the municipalities (tiers 2 and 3).² The right side shows of the regional partnerships in our case-county, Oppland. The county consists of 26 municipalities and has five regional councils. The smallest of these regional councils encompasses three local municipalities,

and the larger up to five local municipalities. The county council is a partner in all regional councils.

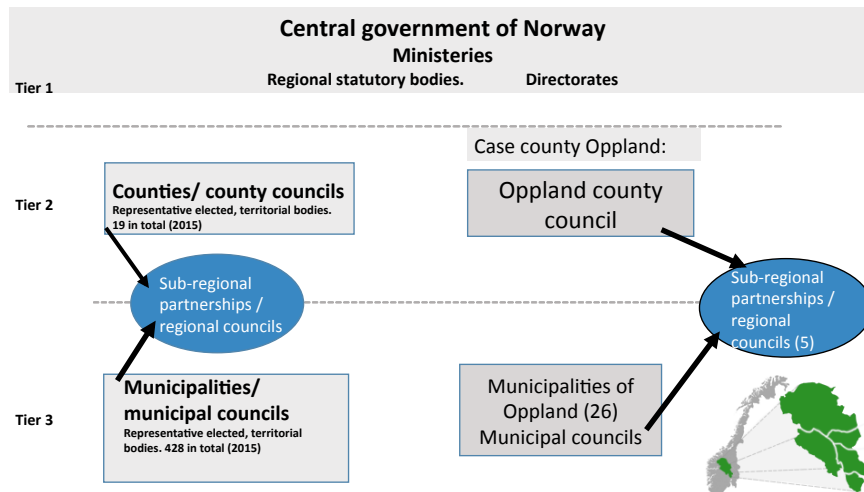


Figure 1: The sub-regional partnerships / regional councils in the context of the Norwegian three-tier system

Politically, the central government has regarded partnerships as the preferred model, especially for regional policy development. Autonomous actors are supposed to develop policy, planning, and implementation amongst themselves. The county is charged with assuming a nodal role, that is, of establishing and developing the partnerships on the basis of its authority as the political principal of regional policy and the key actor (Higdem 2007a). Regional development policy has changed – at least on paper – from a top-down, exogenous development based on the redistribution of resources according to a policy based on equal development (Amdam and Bukve 2004). With this new policy, the regional partnerships between the county and the municipalities (i.e., the regional councils) have become the norm. The regional councils represent the formal, politically settled partnership-arrangements between the municipalities and the county. These regional bodies, then, are partnerships consisting of both municipalities and counties and they are arrangements of multi-level governance. Together they form a regional council regulated by formal and politically based contracts, which both the municipal council and the county council have adopted. These are political partnerships, where top politicians from the municipalities and the county are voted by their respective municipal- or county-councils to be representatives to the regional council. In these cases there are in fact several meta-governors who are supposed to meta-govern the regional partnerships and the regional councils, and this is why there are several political principals. Consequently, the regional partnerships’ governors will to some extent need to deliberate, negotiate, and bargain in order to reach a consensus. In a bargaining situa-

tion between several autonomous and political tiers, it is likely that they will have conflicting interests, both between the local councils and the county council. This article labels conflicting interest between autonomous political entities as 'rivalry'. A rivalry between meta-governors is likely, but consensus is the norm of the partnership's decision-making.

Strategy and planning instruments

The Norwegian context of planning has increasingly emphasized the overarching ambition to achieve comprehensive, holistic, and coordinated regional planning through the deliberation with actors from different tiers and levels owing to the Planning and Building Act (PBA) (2008). This approach to regional planning is partly driven by increased fragmentation and complexity, including in the public sectors (Higdem 2004, Higdem 2007b, a). Here, the counties play a key role. The counties are now expected to assume the responsibility for developing regionally differentiated policies, including targeting business development and innovation in order to reach district and regional political goals. Even though the political rhetoric and the foundation that the PBA provides should ideally equip the county with regional developmental policy and planning powers, this is not the case in practice. The county level has continued to be challenged since the 1980s, and the central government has been quite sceptical about delegating authority and power to the regional level (Bukve 2012). The state's presence at regional levels is strong and can be seen, for example, in regional state authorities for roads, railways, agriculture, hospitals, and the environment, all of which have manifest influence on regional development (referred to as regional statutory bodies in figure 1). Thus, the regional-development issues dealt by the regional councils are in principle comprehensive, but the authority, means, and measures are divided between local, county, and regional state bodies, where the regional state bodies have the upper hand. Consequently, the regional partnerships' authority and resources for regional development are limited compared with the central government's.

Theoretical approach: The traditional concept of steering and meta-governance

According to Hood and Margetts (2007), all systems base their activities of control and direction-setting activities on four basic resources: Nodality, Authority, Treasure, and Organization (NATO). These four types of resources may explain the different ways of steering or directing, including local-regional forms of governance (Røiseland and Vabo 2012), like the regional councils. *Nodality* refers to the strategic resource of being a crux, or the property of being in the middle of a network, like how the public sector is in the case of regional and local planning and development. The public sector is in a central position, has more expertise, more information, and more contacts to other important actors than other types of actors. In this context, being a crux may also describe the different capacities of the counties in contrast with the local municipalities, since

the central government has assigned the county the role of the key actor in policies of regional development. *Authority* is primarily connected to the use of state power, that is, the use of legal and official power. The state may, for example, according to the PBA, delegate power and distribute (state) authority amongst public tiers, like the municipalities and counties. *Treasure* relates to money, but it also encompasses all resources which may be exchanged. Treasure may include subsidies and grants as well as penalties or charges. Finally, *organization* refers to knowledge, property, and other material resources which may be put to use. The possibility of the public sector to organize is an asset deployed for the construction of regional partnerships and the establishment of the regional councils. Below is Røiseland and Vabo's (2012) division of these directing measures into 'hard' and 'soft' categories.

Table 1: Types of directing measures, divided into 'hard' and 'soft' types, Røiseland and Vabo, 2012: 63

| Degree of force in the type of measures for direction | | Degree of force in the actual use of measures for direction | |
|---|---------------------|---|-------------------------|
| | | Soft | Hard |
| Soft | Nodality | Supplement of information | Monopoly of information |
| | Treasure | More sources | One source |
| Hard | Authority | Non-binding regulations | Binding regulations |
| | Organization | Indirect actions | Direct action |

Meta-governance exercised by politicians is a way to increase democratic control and input-legitimacy. Because the coordinating mechanism in partnerships is the mutual dependence and trust amongst operationally autonomous actors that recognize the need to achieve coordinated action for dealing with common problems, sufficient room for self-organization is pivotal. Thus, the direct use of power typical of hierarchical command-and-control steering that traditionally has been used in democratic systems might reduce the chance for the desired outcome (Sørensen and Torfing 2007). Here, meta-governance has been proposed as a concept that describes a diffuse, soft mode of guidance better than the concept of 'steering' does (Kooiman 2003, Osborne 2010, Peters 2010, Sørensen and Torfing 2005). More precisely, Torfing and Triantafiliou (2011, 2) define meta-governance as: '*a reflexive and strategic attempt to govern interactive governance arenas without reverting too much to traditional statist governing tools based on command and control*'.

The different ways of meta-governing networks and processes are often categorized into four types (Sørensen 2006:101). First, the *framing* of self-governance describes the ways of giving direction by institutional design, game structures, overall political priorities, budgets, and so on. One way of increasing

the legitimacy of regional partnerships might be to introduce procedures that ensure transparency and public scrutiny (Sørensen and Torfing 2005, Veggeland 2004a)). Meta-governance by *institutional design* also requires an awareness of the need of these processes to be democratically anchored, for example, by the ratification of the results of the processes by elected councils' decisions. Another meta-governance strategy is *storytelling*, which often involves shaping images and visions of the future. Here, the meta-governors take a leading role in the construction of meanings, interests, and identities. A third strategy is the *support and facilitation* towards promoting activities and facilitating good working conditions in partnerships in regard to cooperation, knowledge, and other resources (Andersen and Røiseland 2008). Finally, *participation* is also considered to be a form of hands-on meta-governance, where the meta-governor actually participates in the networks or processes as one of the participants. However, as several empirical analyses have shown, politicians are often reluctant to enter into the new role of meta-governors (Hanssen Sandkjær, 2012; Hanssen Sandkjær et al., 2011; Sørensen, 2006).

Table 2: Meta-governance, after Sørensen 2006 and Røiseland and Vabo, 2012: 47

| Type of public involvement | Degree of public involvement | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| | Low | High |
| Hands off | Framing | Institutional design - Storytelling |
| Hands on | Support and facilitation | Participation |

Planning is not assessed as a mechanism of meta-governance in the literature of traditional political science. Sørensen's category of storytelling may be further developed to encompass planning in partnership arrangements. The precondition for this argument is that this planning activity is done in within a domain where one or more public entities have the authority over the planning. One can understand public planning through the perspective of storytelling. Storytelling by shaping images and visions of the future is a vital part of planning. Planning may be defined as knowledge-based action (Aarsæther 2001), where the planning's story, so to speak, is based on knowledge. This definition also highlights the view of planning as action; hence, the result of planning is action. Scholars also see the planning process itself as action, meaning the activities performed by all actors in the planning process, where planning legitimates developmental processes (Amdam 2003). Knowledge in planning may be produced through systematic strategies for shaping images and visions for the future, which would include different types of knowledge, for example, scenarios (Durand 2006),

foresight (HLEG 2002, Koschatzky 2005, Miles and Keenan 2002) or the creation of joint visions (Raimond 1996, Senge et al. 1994, Higdem 2001).

A county with a systematic public-partnership approach to regional development

Regional partnerships' main function is to enhance regional development, and these partnerships of different size and activities between local and county councils are established in Norway (KRD and REGA 2003). The inspiration for these regional partnerships, both at the central level and county level, have come mainly from EU's partnership strategy in several kinds of regional-development programmes, and also from the Swedish 'tilvextavtal' (Higdem 2007a). The reason for choosing Oppland as the case county in this article is that Oppland is the only one in Norway (2010) with a general systematic approach to the regional partnerships linked to it.³ The county council itself calls its concept 'The Partnership Institute'. The common characteristics are the presence of an agreement of partnership between the county and the local municipalities, a pooling of resources from the partners to the partnership, a coordinator for each partnership, and political representation from each partner. The partnership is to target and make the regional developmental work more efficient through systematic and frequent dialogue. The regional development programme and regional plans constitute the steering-documents of the regional partnerships. The regional action-plan provides the basis for the partnership's common projects and activities. The partnership-agreement is renewed every fourth year. Projects and activities may come in many forms, from developing a region within the concept of a 'Nature-and culture park', to education, technology, and music. A common activity for these partnerships is the development of infrastructure, which includes lobbying activities directed towards the central authorities. Another is to support promising and new local and regional businesses and to secure employment (Bråtå et al. 2014). Oppland is an inland county, as shown in the small map in figure 1, with an area of 25 192 km², and approximately 187 140 persons inhabitants. The two most populated cities in the county have around 28 000 inhabitants each. The rate of employment in Oppland is high. In 2014 only 2.3 per cent were unemployed, just below the rate for Norway (2.9 per cent).⁴

Methodological approach

This study has examined how satisfied the political principals, the municipalities and counties, have been with their regional partnerships with regard to factors important to the issue of meta-governance strategies. Further, how the political principals have perceived and assessed the work of the regional councils on regional issues of planning and development was also investigated. The assessments were drawn from elected representatives in both the municipalities and the counties as well as from those employed in the public administration. A survey was conducted in Oppland amongst all municipal- and county-elected politicians and the administrative coordinators of each region. The rate of response was 55

per cent of this population, or 364 responses. Amongst ordinary county-council politicians, the rate of response was 61 per cent, and amongst municipal-council politicians, it was 49 per cent. There was an over-representation of men, but it is difficult to see how this could have affected the results. In-depth studies were also carried out in three sub-regional partnerships within this county, in the regions of Hadeland, Gjøvik, and Midt-Gudbrandsdal. These in-depth studies involved both perusals of the key documents and interviews with key actors. The actors interviewed were political representatives as county-council politicians, leaders of the regional council, local politicians (mayors and leaders of the opposition), administrative staff (coordinators) from the county and the municipalities, leaders of regional-council-supported projects, and representatives from relevant business sectors (Bråtå, Higdem & Stokke, 2014). Thus, a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods has been applied.

The actors' assessments of the regional partnerships

The findings of this survey were published in the report by Bråtå et al. (2014). The analysis concentrates on the political anchorage and activities of direction in partnerships, between autonomous political bodies accountable for the result. The analysis begins by relating to the meta-governance scheme by Sørensen (2006), where I apply meta-governance factors of public involvement, that is, the *politicians' involvement* in the regional partnership in *framing, institutional design and storytelling, support and facilitation, and participation*. Secondly, the NATO scheme provides the basis for other parts of the analysis, which allows other types of meta-governance to come to the fore, such as *nodality, treasure, authority, and organization* (Hood and Margetts 2007). Since some of the categories in the two analytical perspectives overlap, the analysis is combined in these cases. The perspectives of *hands-on/hands-off directing* and participation and *soft/hard measures* will be addressed accordingly.

Political involvement

Degree of political anchorage amongst the meta-governors

The survey shows that more than half of the members of the county or municipal councils and of the executive committees regard the region's anchoring to the elected bodies to be too low or far too low (too small and very small in figure 2). This result indicates a low ability of the partnership to create coordinated meta-governance.

There were, however, regional differences: two regions regarded their regional partnership's work to be only to a very low degree rooted in their political bases. The politicians who were (elected) members of the regional partnerships rated the degree of anchoring from good to average by almost 60 per cent (figure 2). This finding shows only a slightly higher percentage than the result for the whole county. No member of the regional partnerships assessed the anchoring as being 'very good'. A reasonable interpretation of this result is that the regional

council's work is not well anchored to the municipal councils, which do not contribute to coordinated meta-governance.

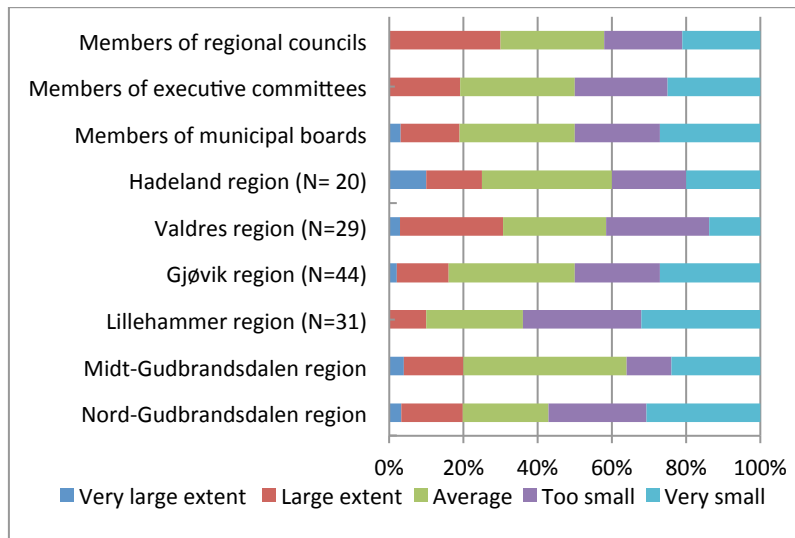


Figure 2: Assessment of how well the regional council's work is politically anchored in the local municipality (Bråtå et al. 2014)⁵

Political involvement and influence between meta-governors

Our survey shows that the respondents from the local municipalities state that the county council's direction of the regional development work has increased owing to working through the regional partnerships. The findings of this case-study suggest that the regional developmental work also is strengthened as a consequence of the county's transfer of money to the regional partnerships, which the municipalities add their share to. The pooling of resources towards the regional partnerships also enables all regions in the county (including those outside the pre-defined developmental areas in Norway) to contribute in better and more concrete ways to their regional development.

The survey also shows that the members of the municipal councils and the executive committees only to a small degree assess their influence of the regional developmental work as having been strengthened as a result of their participation in the regional partnerships. The answers from the actual participants in the regional partnership's council suggest a somewhat stronger influence from the municipalities than do the answers from the representatives in the local councils. However, the main finding is that the influence is low. This finding corresponds to the findings from the case-study. Some informants related stories about how the partnerships' elected representatives introduced strategic discussions on regional developmental issues, for example, into the agenda of a joint meeting between the municipalities' executive committees. *'They find it boring, it gives*

them nothing', one informant stated and continued, *'They are mostly concerned about what is happening within their own municipality's borders'*.

The degree of political involvement and mayors' trust

The analysis of the interviews suggests that how the municipal mayor assesses the need for deliberation in her or his municipality's council and acts accordingly is the most important factor for both local political anchoring and the possibilities of developing coordinated meta-governance capacities. It is clear that in local municipalities where the mayor believes the executive committee and the majority of the local board trusts him or her, both the formal and informal feedback loops are few. The mayors were clear about their own ability to determine when feedback and deliberation of central issues were needed. The results of the survey suggest that 1) overall the mayors do not assess the situation correctly since the vast majority have far too little influence, and 2) the mayors have a somewhat overrated belief in their own assessments as opposed to the elected representatives in general. The mayors' few feedback loops to their local council and executive boards suggest diminished possibilities for meta-governance capacity.

Political involvement in the regional council and lock-in situations

How does the regional council itself work as an arena of discussion and deliberation? One must bear in mind that consensus is the central principle. Yet, from the perspective of efficiency, proposing suggestions that will be turned down by one or more partner will slow the progress of the partnership. Most regional partnerships have established a forum that includes the local partner's mayors, executive officers, and the administrative coordinator of the partnership. The task of this arena is to function like a working committee, where the agenda for the region's council is set, the meetings are planned, and issues are discussed. As a result, proposals put forward to the regional partnership's council are mostly agreed upon beforehand.

Many interviewees criticized this practice because it tends to set the points of view in a 'fixed' position before the regional council's actual debate, thus making the very point of debating immaterial. As one informant said,

...it is ready-made, already discussed in the meeting between the mayor and executive officers. The result is an absence of political debate, which worries me. The regional council should be a political workshop.

Even though such practices may be efficient, it certainly restricts the opposition's opportunity to introduce their views into the discussion. Consequently, the partnership is usually in a lock-in situation. The leadership's answer to this critique is that the partnership's meetings are open for all other representatives to introduce issues into the agenda and to bring other views forward. However, we should do well to take a sceptical view of this response because the setting of agendas is a most vital strategic activity and in fact restricts such possibilities.

Strategy and planning instruments

The foundation for the regional partnership's work in this case is the Regional Planning Strategy. Planning is central for both the direction and the directing of the regional partnership's work (Partnership-agreement, 2012 – 2015). Joint planning, partnership-agreements, and regional action plans follow each other like pearls on a string. Furthermore, the county is in a nodal position of these three-activities. We shall see that the nodal position of the county is important for the partnership's ability of creating coordinated meta-governance. Following Hood and Margetts (2009), the county is the *node* by virtue of being the creators of the regional partnerships, which the central government has prescribed (Higdem 2007a). According to this argument, the node holds more expertise, information, and contacts to important actors than the other partners. In this case the county has more planning resources, owing to their role as the municipality's advisors in planning according to the PBA, more skilled staff, and a wider variety of in-house expertise than the most of the local municipalities. In addition, the county's joint office and partnership with Innovation Norway, as well as the Norwegian Research Fund (amongst others), make this entity more informed about policies and issues of regional development.⁶ As stated earlier, the nodal position may also be explained by the county's role as the key actor in developing (more) endogenous-based regional developmental policies and strategies. In this case, the county's nodal position is 'soft' because it has no monopoly of information. The PBA designates the county as the regional planning *authority* (2008). The Regional Planning Strategy as an instrument is considered as a node for two reasons. The first is that a Regional Planning Strategy is in the terms of the PBA a 'strategy' and not a 'plan'; it has no authority to intervene (Higdem 2012). The second is that it is not authority since the Regional Planning Strategy is to be developed together with other public and private actors. To conclude, the county's nodal position of the Regional Planning Strategy also influence the dimension of storytelling. This is an asset of coordinated meta-governance for the county to use.

Political involvement through storytelling

As we have seen, regional planning as an activity is important for developing a common understanding of the challenges, strengths, and opportunities of each region amongst all partners. In short, developing a joint understanding of 'the world as it is', so to speak, is a vital part for regional development. A joint understanding of the regional realities will contribute to the development of inter-linked means, measures, and actions between the meta-governors in the regional partnership and between the partnership and the single municipality and county. As such, planning may contribute to the partnerships impact on coordinated meta-governance.

Amongst the regional partnership's members from the municipalities, over 50 per cent of respondents regarded the regional partnership as contributing to a joint understanding of the region's challenges to a considerable extent (see figure

3). Over 80 per cent of the regional partnership’s members and members of the executive committees together considered the regional partnership to an average or better extent has contributed to developing a joint understanding of the challenges. Member of the municipal councils, however, were somewhat more reluctant: 65 per cent of these respondents viewed the regional partnership to have contributed to an average or better extent to a joint understanding of the challenges the region faces. Over 70 per cent believed that the regional partnership has contributed to a view on the region’s resources as a whole, and the respondents were more proud of their region.

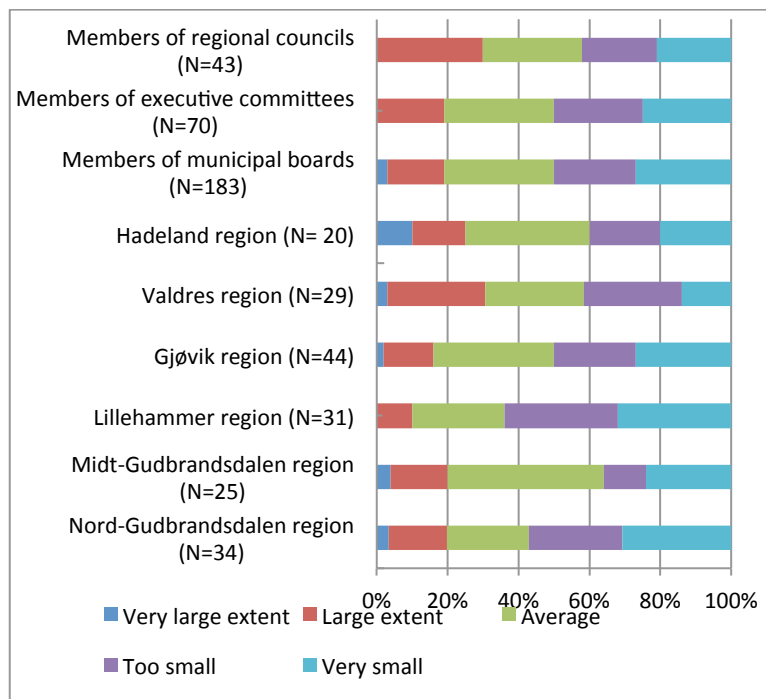


Figure 3: Degree of developed joint understanding of the challenges of the region, due to the regional council's work (Bråtå et al. 2014).

The in-depth interviews show, however, that the partners in the regional partnerships have gained more knowledge about each other and that each partner has a firmer view on the region as a whole.

The findings from the survey, figure 4, show that the elected politicians on local and county levels were satisfied about the chosen areas of strategic action of their region by 40 per cent. If we include the averagely satisfied group, it goes to up 80 per cent. In addition, about 80 per cent answered that the strategic plan reflected the region’s challenges to an average and great degree.

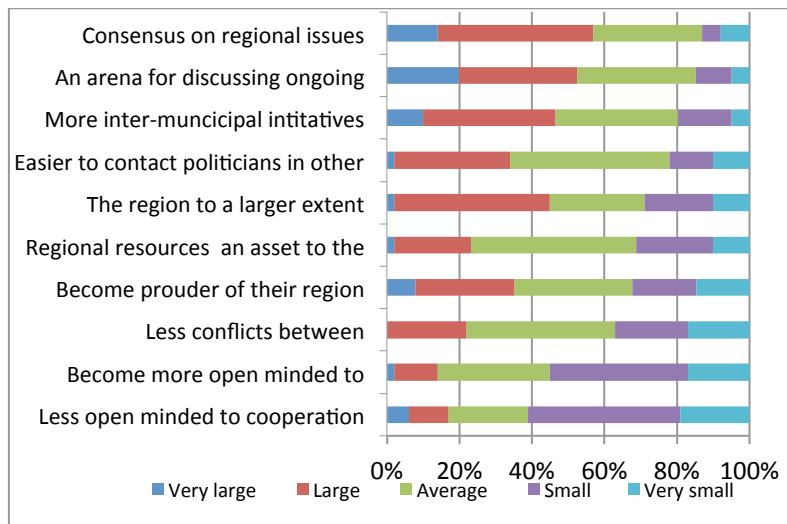


Figure 4: The members of the regional council's assessment of the extent to which the regional council has influenced the ways of working in each region (Bråtå et al. 2014).

An arena of common interest and regional problem-solving

The survey shows that the regional partnerships have become an arena for discussing current and common issues affecting the region. Over 80 per cent of the respondents stated that several inter-municipal arrangements are realized as a consequence of the regional partnership.

The partnerships anchorage through contracts and grants

Treasure (Hood and Margetts 2007) is an important part of the *facilitation* (Sørensen 2006) of the partnership's activities. The county grants each regional council the yearly sum of 2.5 million NOK, and the municipalities are obliged to add one million NOK to this. This is also a 'soft' measure because most municipalities have more resources for planning and regional development. Yet this study shows that this grant is vital for the partnership's possibilities of action for regional development. Moreover, the money is linked to a 'hard' contract with binding regulations within the partnership-agreement. Through the partnership-agreement between the partners, 'hard' regulations are implemented. When it comes to finances and reporting the agreement may be characterized as 'hard'. A joint-action plan is the condition for the distribution of money. The agreement also implies a yearly report from the partnership to all partners. The possible actions if partners do not comply or perform according to the agreement are the county's withdrawal of the funding, the expertise, and ultimately the possible termination of the partnership. However, these kinds of clauses do not exist in the current agreements in this case, and this is why an agreement-based partnership is mostly a 'soft' measure. Finally, *organization* (Hood and Margetts 2007)

overlaps Sørensen's category of *institutional design*. Organization is an asset the county council puts to use in relation to the construction of the regional partnerships and regulated by the partnership-agreement. In relation to the regional councils, organization is regarded as a 'soft' measure of the county.

Discussion

Meta-governance capacities and political involvement

One obvious question is why the local politicians in the municipalities, the local meta-governors, experience such a low degree of influence and therewith a low meta-governance capacity. The study of regional partnerships in the main period of implementation in 2003-2004 has found similar results. Part-time local politicians in the municipal councils were not engaged in regional developmental issues and were only to a limited degree informed of the work in their regional partnership's council. As a result, the politicians experienced a democratic deficit (Higdem 2007a). Jacobsen (2012) has also found that the elite politicians are elected to and participate in the regional councils. One might expect that the perception of democratic deficit would have gradually diminished since 2003, well over a decade now. The expectations were that the meta-governors, the municipalities and the county, would by now have discussed and established ways of directing the regional partnerships and consequently increased their meta-governance capacity. This survey and the in-depth interviews suggest that this has generally not been the case, however. As mentioned above, the survey indicates that the county has strengthened its influence as a meta-governor in the regional partnerships and the regional councils.

Planning as storytelling

Planning is most traditionally understood as a firm way of steering or directing. The activities of planning are manifold in Norway. In a meta-governance context, regional planning as activity and process finds its place more in the category of *storytelling*. Planning as storytelling is the development of the authoritative story about the county's and the region's challenges and visions of the future. Regional planning should imply direct involvement as participation of the county's and the municipality's elected representatives, according to the PBA (Higdem 2012). Even so, if the planning process is superficial or poorly organized, it might change the political direction from being 'hands on' to 'hands off'. In general this study shows that the meta-governors are satisfied with the storytelling of the regions, both in regard to the experience of joint views and how the regional planning strategy reflects regional challenges and possibilities. The diversity between regions in this matter, however, gives a picture of some regions with conflicting interests, and so joint storytelling is difficult to achieve. Accordingly, governing the partnership is also a challenge and those regions' local politicians experience themselves being deprived of directing capacities towards the partnership. The *framing of self-governance* is about giving directions through the partnership-agreement. As mentioned, such directions may be

categorized as ‘hard’, even if they eventually become ‘hands off’ in relation to the average municipal politician’s influence. One example could be where the partnership itself decides upon the distribution of the money from the county and the municipalities for tasks like regional development administration, actions, and other types of activities. It is the agreement that regulates the partnership’s domain and here we find important meta-governance strategies for coordination. The element of *support and facilitation* comes in forms of administrative resources, expert help and tutoring, and technical and office facilities. In the regional partnerships, support and facilitation is provided through the cooperation from all partners.

Conclusions and implications

To sum up, the empirical findings give a nuanced picture of the impact of the political partnerships on coordinated meta-governance of regional governance. I shall conclude by highlighting the most important factors of the partnership in order to create or enhance coordinated and meta-governance of regional governance: storytelling, agreements, and facilitation. Next, I shall discuss areas where the partnership does not succeed in achieving coordinated meta-governance: the lack of political and hence democratic anchorage of the partnerships issues into the county and the municipal councils and the possibilities of lock-in situations.

Storytelling is an important asset for the partnership to gain coordinated meta-governance. This study finds that the county and municipal politicians are satisfied with the regional planning strategies and the action-programmes of the regions. The close connection between regional planning as an instrument for creating joint regional strategies, followed by firm agreements by which the local municipalities in partnership with the county are compelled to act according to the plan, may provide an explanation for the county’s strengthened influence in the regional partnerships. This illustrates the use of both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ measures for coordinated meta-governance. The county council’s increased capacity and ability to meta-govern the partnerships have not come about at the expense of the local municipalities. The county council does not contribute to the hollowing out of the local municipalities’ authorities, but rather strengthens the coordinated regional governance comprehensively. This finding supports the argument of Torfing and Triantafiliou (2011), that is, that neither the hollowing-out nor the filling-in hypothesis in arrangements of governance is relevant because a governance-arrangement is a positive-sum game, rather than a negative-sum game. Planning as storytelling and binding arrangements of action may strengthen the regional council’s legitimacy in spite of weak political anchorage in general, and make vital contributions to a coordinated meta-governance of regional issues. This study suggests the importance of planning and storytelling for the meta-governors’ assessment of the partnership’s legitimacy. Financing based on a joint regional action plan connected to formal agreements between the partners also contributes to coordinated meta-governance.

Different from other types of (policy) partnerships (cf. Haveri et al. 2009) elite politicians are hands on in these partnerships as representatives of their elected councils. However, the governors, like the municipal and county council, are very much 'hands off'. This study reveals that the regional councils are insufficiently anchored into the elected bodies, and therefore there is a gap between the political principals and their representatives. The efforts of the political representatives to anchor the activities of the regional council into the elected bodies are consequently inadequate for filling this gap. Hence, the regional councils may not hold sufficient accountability because these partnerships are public-public partnerships with indirectly elected representatives, even though the partnership is supposed to be accountable not only to their local and regional councils, but also to the public, or the inhabitants, of each geographic entity. They may, then, face the problem of democratic deficit. Therefore, there is a potential to create a firmer foundation from the principals to the regional partnerships, and, conversely, to anchor the regional partnership's work more solidly into the principal's political bodies. More solid feedback loops are important for both the municipal councils and the county councils. As a rule, there are regional deviations from the overall picture of this survey. The deviations illustrate that regional partnerships may not be harmonious, and hence the presence of several meta-governors in partnerships is not free of friction. The concealment of rivalry by the exclusion of conflicting issues from the agenda may weaken the momentum of action in the regional council and unintentionally create 'lock-in' situations. Such partnerships may well induce a predisposed rivalry amongst the meta-governors, and this may constitute an obstacle for the partnership in order to create coordinated meta-governance of regional governance.

The theoretical implications of this analysis suggest the possibility of developing an analytical approach for addressing meta-governance of political partnerships. These are situations of multi-level governance where there are several (or only) meta-governors and where all meta-governors are accountable to their respective publics. We have seen that it is the mix of the available measures that matters, to borrow an expression from Rhodes (1997a). The analytical scheme of traditional measures of steering and directing, where the 'degree of force' (Hood and Margetts 2007, Røiseland and Vabo 2012) the governors, or the government, may impose on the partnership is essential, is fruitful for analysing autonomous and democratically elected public bodies as partners and their capacity for a coordinated meta-governance of the partnerships, such as the regional councils. This is especially true in the Norwegian context of regional-development policy and planning because partnerships largely exist in the shadow of government. The analytical perspectives of Sørensen (2006) bring to the fore the democratic perspectives of coordinated meta-governance.

There are still substantial gaps in the understanding of both how local and regional councils may meta-govern their political representatives in political partnerships and how a political partnership to a greater degree may organize their activity in order to anchor coordinated meta-governance democratically, which is needed in order to advance regional development.

Hence, there is a need of developing a comprehensive analytical framework for such situations in which governance is exercised, which could further advance our knowledge of this complex phenomenon.

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Notes

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Figure 1 is a simplification, which means that a regional council *may* include other parties.

³ Assessment of the partnership-institute (2010), hearing document to the local municipalities. Oppland County Council.

⁴ NAV, Main figures on employment, August 2014.

⁵ For figures 1 and 2, only regions with $N > 19$ are calculated.

⁶ The county's position of having more expertise is, of course, not true in all cases. Large cities like Bergen, Stavanger, and Trondheim would most likely have the same level of, if not more, expertise than the counties. In that regard, Oslo, as both a county and a municipality, would likely be at the forefront.