



CHAPTER 1

The Nordic Municipal CEO

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1.1 THE MUNICIPAL CEO IN THE NORDIC WELFARE STATE

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst. (Mills, 1959, p. 6)

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The Nordic municipal chief executive officer (MCEO) is the highest-ranking non-elected leader in the municipality. The position is part of a political–administrative leadership team at the apex of the Nordic municipality. The exact organization of municipal leadership varies within and among the Nordic countries, but the collaboration between the politically appointed mayor and the MCEO is crucial in all contexts and may be characterized as a twin-principal authority at the core of the interaction between politics and administration. Metaphorically, the MCEO position can be characterized as the ‘hub’ of the Nordic welfare municipality—linking politics, administration, professionals, and citizens together. This position is variously referred to as chief executive officer, chief administrative officer, city manager, or council manager. Here, we use the term MCEO.

The five relatively small and affluent Nordic states together constitute a major part of the Nordic region.¹ The Nordic countries have a century-long tradition of economic, cultural, and political exchange, cooperation, and in earlier centuries military conflict (Hansen, 2011; Hansen et al., 2011, 2020; Strang, 2016). Since the Helsinki Treaty in 1962, Nordic cooperation has been formally institutionalized in the Nordic Council, which recently characterized the present-day Nordic countries as ‘the most sustainable and integrated region in the world’ (Grunfelder et al., 2020, p. 14). Though perhaps overstated, the report espouses a widely shared image of a specific Nordic culture, identity, or even a Nordic model that is also preeminent in recent academic publications (Bruno et al., 2022; Byrkjeflot et al., 2022; Eloranta et al., 2022; Sellers et al., 2020).

The Nordic model, sometimes called the Scandinavian or Swedish model (Byrkjeflot et al., 2021; Kuhlmann et al., 2022), has been analysed from various perspectives. In the political economy welfare state tradition, Esping-Andersen (1990) labelled it the social democratic model in a seminal book, while Rothstein (1998) coined the term the universal welfare state, since the Nordic model is largely characterized by free or subsidized universal welfare services for all citizens (e.g. education, health care, and social protection), financed primarily by high taxes. Nordic municipalities are especially well known for taking care of the ‘fourth dimension’, that is, the provision of welfare (Goldsmith & Larsen, 2004; Stoker, 2011).

Therefore, in terms of the organization and management of welfare services, the Nordic model is dependent on the quality of local

¹The Nordic region also includes the autonomous territories of the Faroe Islands and Greenland and the autonomous region of Åland.

government. With the notable exception of Iceland, a distinct, locally organized welfare state evolved in the Nordic countries after the Second World War. The spectacular growth of the global economy during this period, especially from the 1960s, was translated into investments in comparatively large, locally organized welfare states in the Nordics (Albæk, 1995; Hansen et al., 2020; Tanzi & Schuknecht, 2000). Local government—local and regional levels combined—made up two-thirds or more of the public sector in terms of public consumption and employment in the early 1990s (Rose & Ståhlberg, 2005, p. 84), which continued (OECD, 2021a, 2021b) into the late 2010s.

Thus, Nordic local government has emerged as the major organizer and provider of welfare services in the Nordic countries, a transformation with important implications for the position of the MCEO. Consequently, Nordic MCEOs manage relatively large organizations in terms of tasks, employees, and budgets, and discussions about the future of the Nordic municipality are related to the general question about the sustainability of the Nordic welfare state model (Haveri, 2015).

After decades of criticism around its high cost and questionable economic sustainability (Bowitz & Cappelen, 1994; Ervasti et al., 2012; Haveri, 2015), the Nordic model of coordinated capitalism has drawn international attention for its resilience, innovativeness, and flexibility in tackling serious challenges and crises (e.g. Sandbu, 2020). The ability of the Nordic region to combine liberal market economics with high levels of social welfare seemed almost counterintuitive to some proponents of the new public management (NPM) perspective of the 1980s and 1990s, while others saw NPM as the answer to reforming and saving the welfare state (Hansen et al., 2020).

So far, the Nordic approach seems to have made the impossible possible, placing the Nordic countries at or near the top decile of most transnational performance indices (Anheier et al., 2018), such as the United Nations Human Development Index (Schubert & Martens, 2005, p. 25), the Global Innovation Index (WIPO, 2020), the Gender Equality Index (Humbert & Hubert, 2021), and the Democracy Index of the Economist Group (Amoros, 2022). All Nordic countries recently ranked among the top 10 in the World Happiness Report 2023 (Rowan, 2023), which even talked about ‘The Nordic exceptionalism’ (Martela et al., 2020). There have been multiple explanations for this relative success, for example, the tripartite corporatist model, relatively low economic inequality, high social security, and a generally high level of trust both inter-personally and

vis-a-vis public authorities (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015; Schramm-Nielsen et al., 2004).

In this book, we examine the characteristics of the Nordic model of governance from the perspective of the MCEO, a figure responsible for organizing and managing the municipality. As such, we will not include the regional level or regional CEOs in our study. The focus of the book is on how the institutional surrounding, position, and role perception of the MCEO have evolved in the last few decades. A local government perspective on the Nordic model and the position of the MCEO has largely been absent from the literature, with notable exceptions (Albæk, 1995; Baldersheim et al., 2017). For instance, two recent volumes on the Nordic model barely mentioned local government and municipalities (Byrkjeflot et al., 2022; Eloranta et al., 2022).

The local government systems of the Nordic region may provide an additional explanation for the region's relative success. According to recent attempts at constructing comparative indices of local government autonomy, the Nordic municipalities are some of the most autonomous in the world (Ladner et al., 2023; Ladner & Keuffer, 2018). A large and autonomous local government sector—democratically and functionally anchored among local citizens while being integrated into the national governance system—has the potential to generate broad mobilization from below. In this respect, the MCEO plays a pivotal role and will probably do so even more in the years to come, especially due to the growing size and complexity of local government organizations.

Against this backdrop, it is paradoxical that we still lack an integrated and updated text on administrative leadership in Nordic local government and its evolution over time. Therefore, the purpose of this book is to narrow this knowledge gap. As such, it represents a milestone. To our knowledge, the top administrative managers of Nordic local government have never been described, analysed, and compared in an international academic text of this size before.

1.2 NORDIC MUNICIPALITIES: SPATIALLY BOUNDED, MULTI-TASK ORGANIZATIONS

The MCEO position is characterized by a spatially delimited area of responsibility. In other words, this responsibility is bounded by geographic locality. Spatial characteristics and challenges are often not accounted for

in local government studies, but MCEOs and the political–administrative system in which they work are heavily influenced by such realities, since they are responsible for delivering welfare services within a specific geographic area. In Table 1.1, we present key information on the variation among the Nordic countries in terms of geography and the number and size of municipalities.

The Nordic region is geographically situated in Northern Europe, between the Arctic Ocean to the north and the European continent to the south and between North America and the United Kingdom to the west and Russia to the east. Despite low fertility rates, the Nordic countries have, through migration and increased life expectancy, experienced an increasing but aging population from around 23 million people in 1990 to around 28 million people in 2023. Importantly, while these population changes vary substantially between regions and municipalities (see Fig. 1.1), understanding them is crucial to Nordic municipal management because tasks such as childcare, eldercare, and public schools are strongly related to demography.

As Fig. 1.1 shows, the northern areas of Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are more sparsely populated, while the southern parts, including

Table 1.1 Facts on local government in the Nordic countries in 2023

	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Iceland</i>	<i>Norway</i>	<i>Sweden</i>
Number of municipalities	98	309	64	356	290
National population in thousands	5933	5525	0,387	5489	10,328
Average size of municipalities	60,540	17,869	6047	15,022	35,444
Median size of municipalities	44,207	6060	1258	5163	15,435
Proportion of municipalities with less than 5000 inhabitants	3%	43%	83%	51%	5%
Second sub-national level	5 regions	1 + 18	0	15 counties (fylkeskommune)	21 regions (landsting)
Surface area (1000 km ²)	43	338	103	324	450
Population per square km	138.9	16.3	3.7	16.6	23.0

Note: Data from the OECD (2021b); Icelandic Statistics (2023)

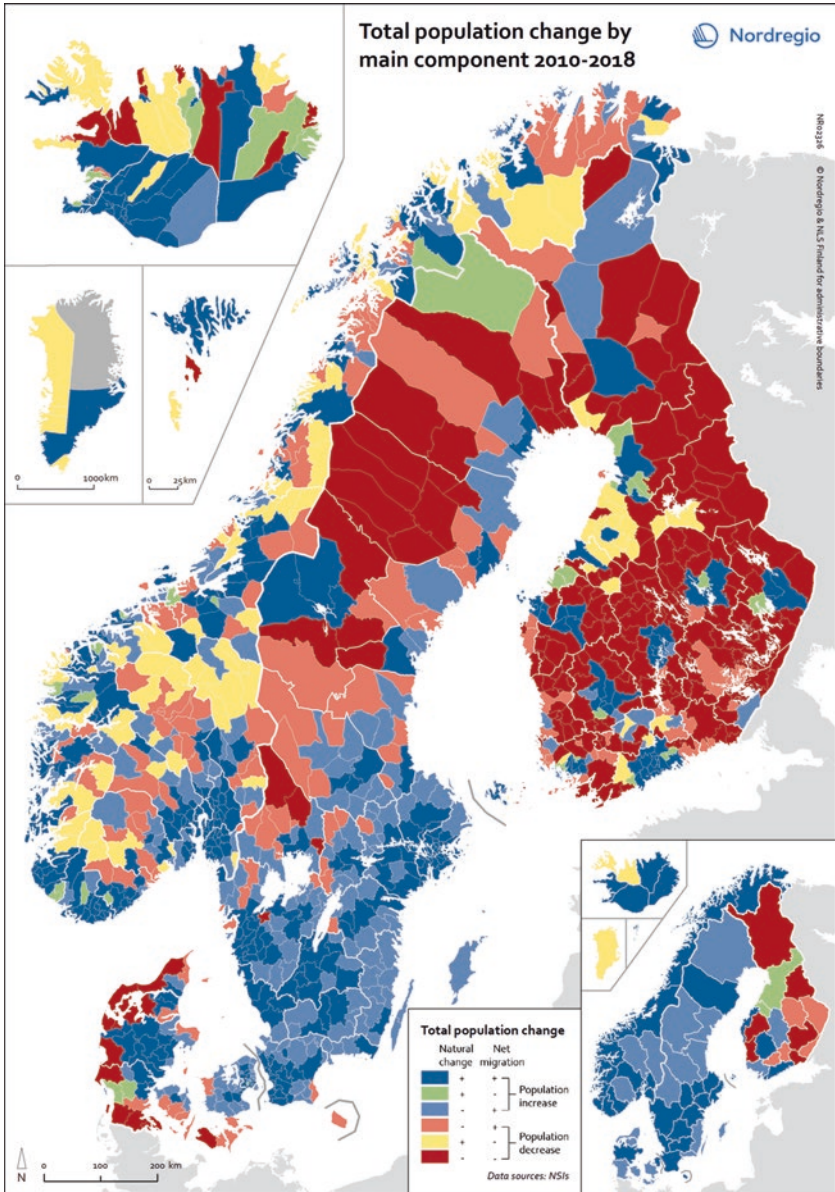


Fig. 1.1 Map of Nordic countries, with municipalities and regions depicting population change 2010–2018. (Nordic Council of Ministers; Grunfelder et al., 2020)

most of Denmark, accommodate most of the population. The map also illustrates how the population in Nordic municipalities has changed during the period 2010–2018, exposing vast areas experiencing population decrease, most evidently in Finland and Sweden (Grunfelder et al., 2020) and parts of Denmark and Norway.

Figure 1.2 offers a prognosis for population change up to 2030 (Grunfelder et al., 2018). The map indicates prognosed areas of population decline (grey areas) and growth (areas within red bold line). The uneven distribution of settlements, which are still growing, constitutes an important contextual factor for local government organizations and has significant implications for the various situations and challenges, which the municipalities and MCEOs must handle in different parts of the Nordic region.

The maps in Figs. 1.1 and 1.2 indicate the different challenges faced by political and administrative leaders in the various types of municipalities. Depending on their location within the Nordic geographical space, some municipalities in peripheral and rural areas face depopulation and an aging population, while others, mostly in central urban areas, face various problems relating to growth. These problems include difficulty recruiting employees in the periphery and getting cheap accommodation for young families in the growth areas. Thus, a spatial approach illuminates that some MCEOs face the challenge of managing decline, while others face the challenge of managing growth.

1.3 THE NORDIC MUNICIPAL MULTI-TASK ORGANIZATION

The challenges associated with managing decline and growth become obvious when we explore the tasks performed by Nordic municipalities (see Table 1.2). The basic logic of the Nordic universal welfare state is that all citizens are entitled to free or cheap high-quality public services, such as childcare, eldercare, and public schools. The organizational unit responsible for most of these services is the Nordic municipality. Thus, in principle and largely in practice, municipalities are responsible, irrespective of size, for providing the same portfolio of services within their respective countries. This principle—referred to as the generalist municipality principle in Norway—implies that a municipality in the periphery with a small

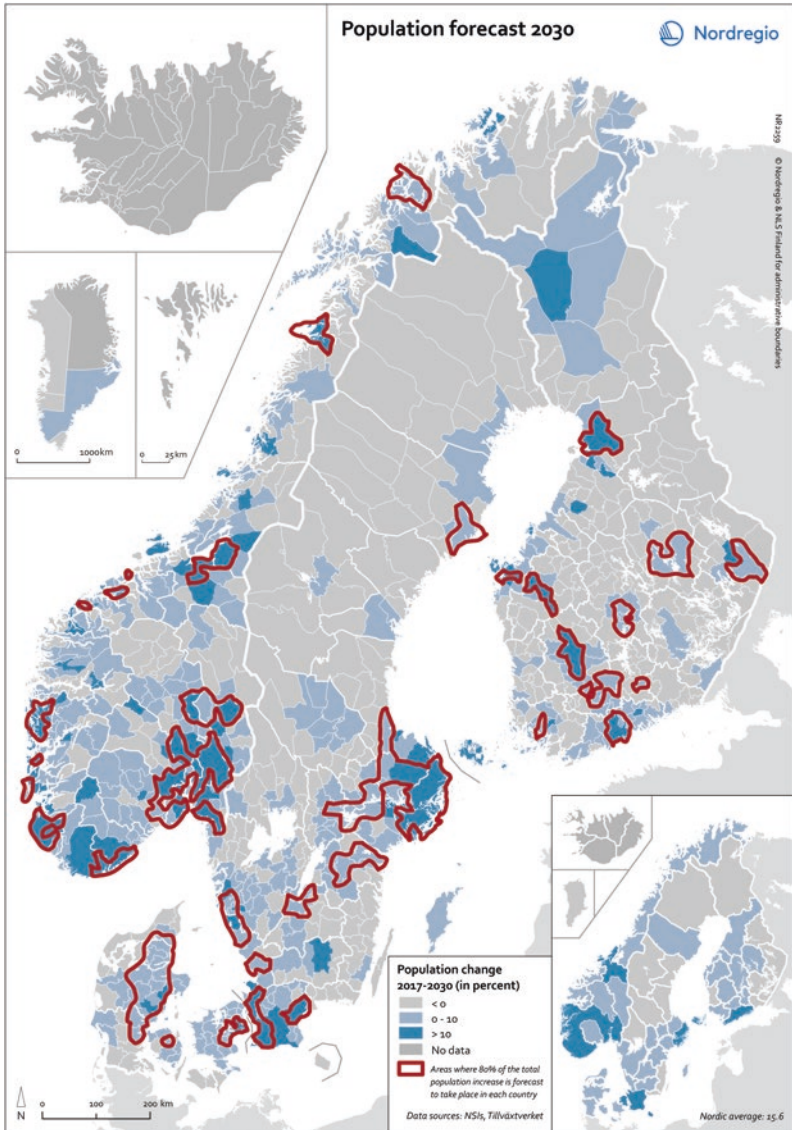


Fig. 1.2 Prognosed change 2030 (left maps municipal level, right small map regional level). (Nordic Councils of Ministers; Grunfelder et al., 2018). *Note:* The blue tones represent expected population increase, with dark blue indicating the greatest increase (above 10%). The light grey tone indicates population decrease. Municipalities with no available data are shown in dark grey (e.g. Iceland). The areas encircled in red are groups of municipalities that will contribute to 80% of the population growth in each country

Table 1.2 A typical portfolio of tasks performed by Nordic municipalities

<i>Typical tasks of Nordic local governments</i>	
Education	Kindergarten Preschool Primary school
Health care and social services	Primary health care Out-of-hours services Elderly care Nursing homes Home care Social work Income security Social income Social housing, refugee accommodation Disability services Child protection services
Sports and culture	Library services Parks and recreational areas Sports arenas
Technical tasks	Water and waste management Local roads Seaports Urban planning, zoning Local development Civil contingency planning

Source: Authors compilation

population should deliver by and large the same quality and quantity of services as a densely populated urban municipality.

This ‘generalist municipality principle’ is made possible by ‘co-operative decentralization’ (Baldersheim et al., 2017), which includes state funding schemes, redistribution of finances between municipalities (Etzerodt & Hansen, 2018), intermunicipal cooperation (Arntsen et al., 2018; Klausen & Torsteinsen, 2023), and other institutional arrangements.

This means that many tasks, which in other countries are assigned to the state, are decentralized to local government in the Nordic countries. This kind of decentralization is called ‘policy scope’ in the Local Autonomy Index and is one of seven measures of local autonomy in its recently published second version (LAI 2.0), which places the five Nordic countries in top eight in terms of local autonomy among the 57 countries measured in the index (Ladner et al., 2023; Fig. 4). However, there are important

variations between countries in terms of the portfolio of municipal tasks. For example, Danish municipalities are responsible for paying all types of pensions, a task which makes the municipal budgets appear significantly higher than in the other Nordic countries. Conversely, Icelandic municipalities have fewer responsibilities than their counterparts in the other Nordic countries.

1.4 LONG-TERM STRATEGIC CHALLENGES TO NORDIC MUNICIPALITIES

The Nordic municipalities and their leadership are currently faced with several strategic challenges. The criteria for including these challenges are as follows: that they are (a) currently high on the agenda of Nordic MCEOs; (b) likely to be long term in nature for at least a decade or two; and (c) relevant to most if not all Nordic municipalities. Thus, these challenges influence the daily work agenda of Nordic MCEOs in important ways. The politics of coping with these challenges are often visible in MCEOs' attempts to manage public finances and in the yearly process of municipal budgeting (Haveri, 2015). However, the challenges are more basic and relate to the vision of the Nordic welfare state. Our claim is not that the list is exhaustive—other candidates for the list could be considered—but that the basic vision and strategic situation of Nordic municipalities highlight the importance of these challenges:

1. *Demography and migration*: The most basic challenges are associated with demography and migration. The demographic shift in the Nordic countries towards an aging population (Holmøy et al., 2020) implies 'increasing costs and diminishing resources of the welfare function' (Haveri, 2015, p. 145). The costliest tasks (e.g. eldercare, childcare, and education) and a substantial part of the financial resources (tax base) of the Nordic municipalities are related to demography. Internal national migration, with urbanization trends towards young people moving to cities and leaving the elderly behind, implies different sides of the challenge, but all MCEOs need to cope with challenges related to demography and migration. The influx of refugees and asylum seekers constitutes part of the demography–migration challenge, and its importance is likely to increase, though it may vary substantially over time and among countries and

regions. The demography–migration challenge is associated with the generational contract embodied in the vision of the universal welfare state and empirically reflected in the so-called dependency ratio (Rouzet et al., 2019).

2. *Employee recruitment and retention*: Associated with the demography and migration challenge are the recruitment and retention of sufficient numbers of qualified personnel. This challenge is important for managers of all organizations but has recently become more urgent in Nordic municipalities, especially those in peripheral regions. Demographic prognoses indicate an increasing long-term shortage of employees in the Nordic countries in general and in welfare professions in particular, a challenge not limited to the Nordic countries (Boulhol & De Tavernier, 2023).

Municipalities have sought to meet this challenge in various ways, including onboarding programmes for new employees, improved human resource functions and relations-oriented leadership, as well as attempts to recruit employees from other countries and automating and digitalizing some work processes and welfare services, including the growing use of artificial intelligence.

3. *Multi-level networks and intermunicipal collaboration*: Nordic municipalities are multi-task organizations expected to deliver by and large the same level of welfare services, albeit under drastically different conditions. This challenge is partly handled through multi-level (state, region, and municipality) and inter-municipal collaborative networks. These networks of horizontal and hierarchical external relations—Baldersheim et al. (2017) coined the term ‘co-operative decentralization’ to describe these networks—are important to most if not all Nordic municipalities and their leadership. In fact, MCEOs and other actors in the Nordic municipal political–administrative system spend a great deal of time in these networks (Hansen & Villadsen, 2017)—for good reasons. These networks contribute considerably to (a) ensuring efficient delivery of welfare services, (b) the alignment of the financing and production of the services, (c) enhancing innovations in the delivery of services, and, perhaps most importantly, (d) it is in these networks that trust and mutual understandings of the main problems and solutions are formed concerning how to ensure the long-term sustainability and reliability of the system.

In recent decades, the dynamics of these networks have changed due to public management reforms associated with NPM and new public governance (NPG). In the last 30 years, local governments in the Nordic countries have increasingly corporatized and externalized important sections of their service provision, even sometimes privatizing it (Klausen & Torsteinsen, 2023; Lindholst, 2023; Lindholst & Hansen, 2020; Van Genugten et al., 2023). This implies that some types of local public service provision are placed outside the democratic and hierarchical authority of the municipal decision-making system, making local government more fragmented and increasing the importance of the external networking activities of Nordic MCEOs.

4. *Digitalization and artificial intelligence:* For decades, digitally enhanced automation, administration, communication, and more recently artificial intelligence—in short, e-government—have been seen as an important part of the solution to almost all public sector challenges in advanced economies (Moon et al., 2014). The Nordic countries have been some of the frontrunners in this trend, and today, all Nordic municipalities are heavily digitalized and highly dependent on digital solutions often delivered by large IT corporations. Almost all administrative work processes are conducted by means of digital solutions, with the continuous increase of digitalization. While the impact is difficult to measure, there seems to be growing evidence that the digital revolution has significantly enhanced efficiency and quality in the delivery of many welfare services in Nordic municipalities. The Nordic countries' pursuit of e-government strategies, as indicated by very active investment in and enforcement of digital innovations, may also have fostered the growth of the Nordic high-tech industries and, thus, enhanced the competitiveness of the Nordic economies (Collington, 2022). Notwithstanding, this digital-era governance imposes new challenges, as Nordic municipalities are dependent on large private IT companies who provide expensive solutions and are vulnerable to cyber-attacks and other threats to the reliability of IT systems. Nevertheless, in the coming decades Nordic municipal leadership will also very much constitute a digital-era leadership (Kristensen, 2023).
5. *Climate change and sustainable development:* For decades, environmental issues have been on the political agenda in Nordic municipalities, but until recently, they have been of secondary importance.

Climate change and sustainability, once an issue for United Nations (UN) conferences, environmental groups, and national politics, have now also become a major concern for local governments. Since the Brundtland Report (UN, 1987), sustainable development has been defined as development that ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. It involves at least three dimensions—economic, social, and environmental sustainability—often referred to as the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1994). The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) decided by the UN (2015) provide a more detailed and complex account of the meaning of sustainable development. While the focus on economic and social sustainability is integrated into the routines of Nordic municipalities, which has been the case for decades, the same does not hold for environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, evidence of the need to do so appears overwhelming (Pörtner et al., 2022), and the political reality in the Nordic countries also tends to propel a higher focus on environmental sustainability. There are trade-offs and paradoxes in the relations between the sustainability dimensions, which pose challenges for MCEOs and other municipal leaders, but the argument that municipalities and other ‘welfare systems should be conceptualised as embedded in ecosystems and in need of respecting the regeneration capacity of the biosphere’ (Koch, 2022, p. 448) seems mandatory.

As the core agents of municipal political–administrative leadership, MCEOs carry the overall and ultimate responsibility for implementing and monitoring these activities in a manner that secures sustainability and prevents damage, for example, flooding, avalanches, pollution, and threats to biodiversity (Toft et al., 2022).

The six challenges discussed are only some of the issues faced by Nordic MCEOs; however, they are almost universal across the Nordic municipalities, and in the short, medium, and long terms, they will influence the daily work agenda of Nordic MCEOs in important ways.

6. *Crisis or emergency management*: In recent years, this has been imposed on the agenda of Nordic municipal leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and the environmental crises associated with climate change arguably indicate that crisis management to ensure *resilience* in the delivery of welfare services and *security* to municipal citizens is qualified

as a seventh core universal challenge. Of increasing concern in the Nordic region is the renewed military tension following in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The broader regional outcome was that Finland joined NATO, and Sweden is about to join, like its neighbours Denmark, Iceland, and Norway (Alberque & Schreer, 2023). Many Nordic municipalities and regions are influenced by this new situation, for example, by hosting refugees and making land available for military purposes (Berlina, 2022). MCEOs play an important role in civil emergencies by setting up local or regional emergency plans to safeguard the supply of food, water, electricity, all types of communication, shelter, etc. within the municipal jurisdiction. Currently, however, the military conflicts and broader environmental destruction have influenced a minority of municipalities and may be temporary. Nevertheless, the obligation to ensure a sufficient level of readiness for emergency management is a universal task for municipal leadership, and its importance is likely to increase in the decades to come.

The six strategic challenges suggested above provide an important context for understanding the work of Nordic MCEOs. As mentioned earlier, closely associated with these challenges is the permanent problem of limited economic resources. The trade-offs, dilemmas, and paradoxes related to prioritizing among these challenges have, therefore, become highly visible in municipal budget and finance decisions. We will occasionally return to them in the country chapters. In the next sections, we briefly explain the theoretical perspectives of the book (Sect. 1.5), review the previous research on Nordic MCEOs (Sect. 1.6), outline the basic research questions in focus in the empirical analyses of the book (Sect. 1.7), and present an outline of the book (Sect. 1.8).

1.5 CORE CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The theoretical perspectives of the book are rooted in public administration, public policy, and organization studies and will be further elaborated in Chap. 2 (Hansen and Solli). Here, we will briefly introduce the notion of the MCEO as a position embedded in formal and informal institutions.

The ontology of the book is institutional and interpretive in nature. It is institutional in the sense that we perceive the MCEO position as embedded in formal and informal rules that both enable and constrain individual

MCEOs in multiple ways (Giddens, 1984; Hansen, 1997, 2002). It is interpretive in the sense that the meaning of these rules is enacted by humans in networks of social relations (Bevir & Blakely, 2018). We elaborate on these multiple ways in Chap. 2 (Hansen and Solli), but in this chapter, we introduce two important concepts: transnational governance models and the political-administrative management structure.

Since the heydays of public sector growth in the 1960s and 1970s, various transnational models (or paradigms) and tools for managing and organizing large public sectors have been suggested and tried out to varying degrees in the Nordic countries (Albæk, 1995; Hansen et al., 2020; Torfing et al., 2020). Traditional public administration—characterized by the Weberian bureaucratic logic, that is, a competent hierarchy, transparent procedures, political accountability, and the rule of law—has to some extent been supplemented by managerialism and blended into hybrid public administrative logics (Skelcher & Smith, 2015), often referred to as NPM (Hood, 1991), transforming top municipal administrators into managerially oriented leaders. The extent to which this is also the case for Nordic MCEOs will be analysed in the forthcoming chapters. In Fig. 1.3, we present a simplified visualization of how traditional and NPM-inspired institutional logics may merge into a hybrid, neo-Weberian type of local government administration.

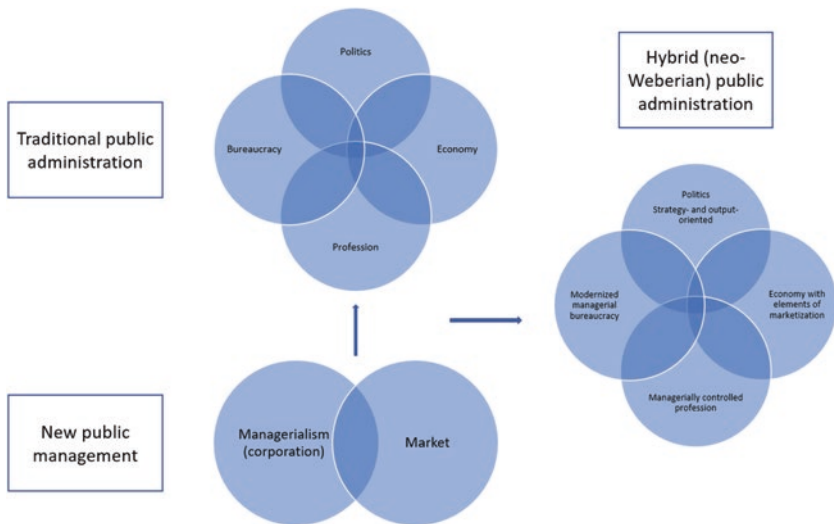


Fig. 1.3 Transnational governance models and change

1.5.1 The Formal Political–Administrative System

As discussed above, Nordic municipalities are multi-task organizations (see Table 1.2). They provide, or are responsible for the provision of, all sorts of social and technical services within their geographically delimited jurisdiction. The responsibility for organizing and delivering these services is situated in the political–administrative system (see Fig. 1.4).

The basic features of the Nordic municipal political–administrative system are visualized as an ideal type (Weber, 2002) in Fig. 1.4. The upper part of the model—the political management structure—is inhabited by democratically elected, mostly part-time politicians organized in a municipal council, an executive committee, and several standing committees. The lower part of the model—the administrative management structure—is inhabited by professional full-time managers. They are not elected or politically appointed but hired based on meritocratic principles.

In Denmark and Sweden, formal legal decision-making power is situated in the political part of the system and shared among the municipal council, the various committees, the mayor, and the chairs of the standing

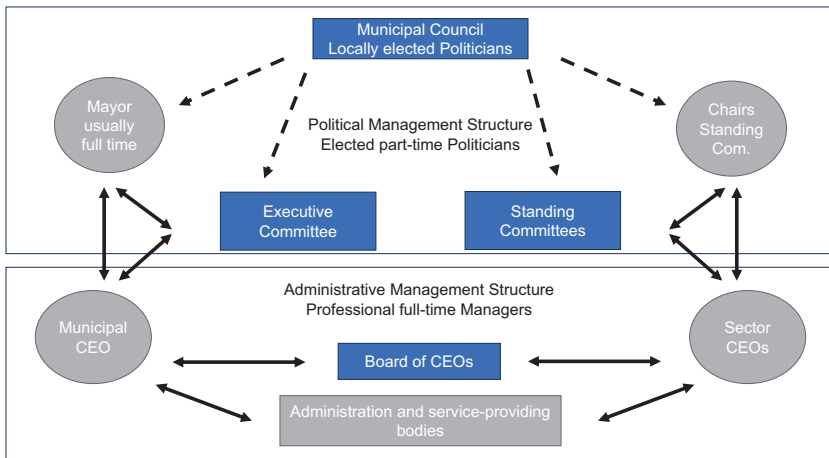


Fig. 1.4 Generic model of the Nordic municipal political–administrative system (based on Hansen, 2002). *Note:* The dotted arrows from the municipal council indicate that the actors (mayor and chairs) and committees (executive and standing) in the political management structure are appointed by the majority of the municipal council. The two-way arrows indicate triangles of frequent interaction

Table 1.3 Variations in the Nordic municipal political-administrative system

<i>Committee-leader form</i>	<i>Council-manager form</i>
Denmark	Norway
Sweden	Finland
Iceland (type 1)	Iceland (type 2)

Note: adapted from Mouritzen and Svava (2002)

committees. In Finland and Norway, part of the formal legal decision-making power is delegated to the MCEO by law.

Mouritzen and Svava (2002, pp. 55–66) defined different institutional arrangements at the apex of local government in different countries. According to their models, Denmark and Sweden have a committee-leader form, while Finland and Norway have a council-manager form. In Iceland, which was not analysed in their book, the formal structure of some municipalities resembles the council-manager form, while others resemble the committee-leader form (see Chap. 3 by Hlynsdóttir et al. for further discussion) (Table 1.3).

1.6 THE NORDIC MUNICIPAL CEO: PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

An anthology edited by Rose (1996), *Kommuner och kommunala ledare i Norden*, has an explicit Nordic perspective on municipal managers, among them MCEOs. The publications from the UDiTE project (Dahler-Larsen, 2002; Klausen & Magnier, 1998; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002) included country chapters of four Nordic countries but did not analyse the Nordic context nor apply a longitudinal evolutionary perspective. All four publications used cross-sectional data from the 1990s. One of the main findings of Rose's (1996) comparative anthology on municipal leaders in the four Nordic countries² was that Nordic MCEOs had very much the same orientations and conceptions about their roles, tasks, and obligations (Kjølholdt, 1996, pp. 127–129). For instance, they were asked to respond to questions about how they prioritized the following four issues: employees, management, democracy, and rules and routines. The differences

²Iceland was not included in the study.

between the MCEOs were relatively marginal in regard to employee and management issues, while the country differences were larger on the issues of democracy and routines. Danish and Swedish MCEOs put a stronger emphasis on democracy than their Finnish and Norwegian counterparts, possibly because the latter held a more independent position than the former. This interpretation finds support in findings from the UDiTE project of the 1990s (Baldersheim & Øgaard, 1998; Ejersbo et al., 1998; Haglund, 1998; Sandberg, 1998), where Danish and Swedish mayors were seen as much more influential than Finnish and Norwegian mayors by their MCEOs. Correspondingly, Norwegian and especially Finnish MCEOs saw themselves as more influential than their Danish and Swedish counterparts. Finally, in the 1996 findings, all MCEOs emphasized rules and routines over roles, tasks, and obligations (Kjølholdt, 1996). Although much has changed in politics and local government since the publication of these anthologies a generation ago, they provide a useful measuring rod for the research on which this new book is based.

The underlying theme of our book concerns the two dimensions of *change* versus *stability* and *similarity* versus *difference*. What is changing, how is it changing, and how can we understand these changes? What is similar across the Nordic countries, and what are the important differences?

In the context of these themes, the focus of the book rests on three phenomena: First, we look at the *institutional context*, such as formal rules and informal norms concerning the position of the MCEO, the political-administrative system, and norms of good governance. Second, we examine the *biographical profile* of the MCEOs in terms of gender, age, education, conditions of employment, etc. Third, we study the *role perceptions* of MCEOs by exploring their views on municipal leadership and their relations with politicians. To guide our discussion and analysis, we use the following four research questions.

1. What characterizes the institutional context (formal and informal) of the Nordic MCEO?
2. What characterizes the biographical profile of the Nordic MCEO?
3. What characterizes the role perceptions of the Nordic MCEO?
4. How can we understand the relations between the Nordic institutional context, the MCEO's biography, and MCEO role perceptions?

Our basic hypothesis concerning the relations among the three phenomena is that various aspects of *the institutional context*, such as the generic model (see Fig. 1.3), and *the biographical profile* of the MCEO, such as the gender, are significantly related to *MCEOs' role perceptions*. Thus, countries with similar generic models and biographical MCEO profiles are expected to portray more similar MCEO role perceptions.

1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGIES

In this study, we use the most-similar systems design (Yin, 2018) motivated by the relative similarities in Nordic local government systems, both in terms of the formal organizational structure and its importance in providing welfare services. In our analyses, we use five types of data:

1. Survey data
 2. Interviews with MCEOs
 3. Standardized indicators from descriptive statistics
 4. Desk research and literature reviews
 5. Expert knowledge and data triangulation
1. *Surveys* were conducted with MCEOs in all five Nordic countries (see Appendix). These surveys used parts of the survey items from the UDiTE studies of the 1990s (Dahler-Larsen, 2002; Hansen, 1997; Klausen & Magnier, 1998; Mouritzen, 1995; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). Thus, for selected items, we could compare MCEO responses from the 1990s and 2010s from four of our five Nordic countries. In Denmark and Sweden, the survey was conducted several times. In Iceland, we only had survey data from the 2010s and could only conduct a cross-sectional analysis based on these data. However, based on the expert knowledge of the project participants as well as desk research, we reconstructed reasonably trustworthy longitudinal patterns from all five countries. The analyses in this book use descriptive statistics, while more advanced multivariate analyses were retained for future research projects.
 2. *Interviews* were conducted, to varying degrees, with selected MCEOs in all five countries. Our primary interest in these case studies was to discuss survey findings and explore the MCEOs' own interpretations of stability and change and the similarities and differences regarding their role.

3. *Descriptive statistics* from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and international organizations, such as the OECD, the EU, and Our World in Data, were used. Recently developed indicators such as the LAI (2.0) were used along with well-known demographic (e.g. the dependency ratio) and economic (e.g. GDP) indicators. Such indicators are crucial to examine both cross-sectional variations between municipalities and countries and change over time.
4. *Desk research and literature reviews*: The research team benefitted significantly from previous local government studies, although the amount of research specifically targeting top managers is scarce and scattered, especially from the last decade. Also, various public white papers and evaluation reports contained valuable information that we used to supplement the primary and secondary research data.
5. *Expert knowledge and data triangulation*: All the researchers involved in the project have decades of experience with local government research and in-depth knowledge of the local government systems in their own country as well as abroad. The data triangulation and interpretation of the findings were enhanced by biannual research, face-to-face seminars, and online meetings.

1.8 OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The following chapters will explore in greater detail issues concerning, first, the volume's theoretical framing and the Nordic local government context before, second, presenting both historical and contemporary analyses of MCEOs in each of the Nordic countries. In the concluding chapter, stability and change and similarities and differences will be compared, and basic findings discussed.

Chapter 2, by Morten Balle Hansen and Rolf Solli, presents the basic concepts, typologies, and models, laying out the theoretical and methodological foundation of the book. It describes municipalities as both institutions and organizations functioning as autonomous but tightly integrated parts of the national welfare state. In this context, MCEOs operate as both civil servants and leaders, navigating the opaque waters between politics and administration, often triggering tensions but also spearheading opportunities for cooperation and co-creation.

Chapter 3, by Eva Marín Hlynsdóttir, Anna Cregård, and Siv Sandberg, examines Nordic municipalities from a comparative perspective. The basic

question is whether there is a Nordic model at all, and if so, what does it look like, and how does it stand out compared to other country clusters.

In the country cases, *Chaps. 4–8*, Nordic MCEOs and the municipal context in which they work are analysed for each of the five Nordic countries. In each country, the dimensions of stability versus change and similarity versus difference are examined concerning the characteristics of both the MCEOs and the municipal context in which they operate. In relation to our two dimensions, each chapter seeks to provide country-specific answers to our four research questions: (1) What characterizes the institutional context (formal and informal) of the Nordic MCEO? (2) What characterizes the biographical profile of the Nordic MCEO? (3) What characterizes the role perceptions of the Nordic MCEO? (4) How can we understand the relations between the Nordic institutional context, the MCEO's biography, and MCEO role perceptions?

In *Chap. 4*, Morten Balle Hansen describes and analyses how the collective profile of Danish MCEOs evolved since the 1980s. He shows the embeddedness of the MCEO position in a structure of local democracy and an expanding multi-task municipal organization, subordinated to national policy priorities and influenced by shifting global governance models. Today, MCEOs manage the largest and most complex public organizations in Denmark.

In *Chap. 5*, Siv Sandberg addresses the role of the Finnish MCEO from an institutional and longitudinal perspective. The tension between a strong appointed MCEO and a weaker political leadership has been a recurring theme in the Finnish debate since the 1990s. Despite recent reforms to strengthen political leadership, the position of the Finnish MCEO remains strong.

In *Chap. 6*, Eva Marín Hlynsdóttir discusses the history of the Icelandic MCEO position and demonstrates how the past influences the present. Still, the local government system has changed considerably in the last decades, adopting traits from other Nordic countries with a strong local identity, strong local councils, and a wide range of tasks. Finally, a special emphasis is put on demonstrating the similarities and differences between various types of MCEOs and the main challenges regarding the complexity of the Icelandic case.

In *Chap. 7*, Dag Olaf Torjesen, Harald Torsteinsen et al. describe the evolution of the Norwegian MCEO, from 1980 to the present, considered one of the most powerful in the Nordic region, second only to the Finnish MCEO. The most striking change regarding biography is the

increased number of women MCEOs. Despite multiple and significant changes in the municipal context in the last two to three decades, the essential role of the Norwegian MCEO has remained remarkably stable. Nonetheless, MCEOs meet increasing expectations to cooperate internally and externally and govern municipal affairs through complex hybrid networks.

In *Chap. 8*, Anna Cregård describes and analyses the development of the Swedish MCEO over the last 25 years. She discusses changes that have taken place in the demands and constraints relating to the role compared to changes in actual performance. The results show that while contextual factors, background, and justification for leaving the job have changed considerably, small or moderate changes are evident in MCEOs' role performance. However, there are some small, long-term indications that the role may become either more of an extended arm of majority politicians or a professional, administrative head—or perhaps both.

In the concluding *Chap. 9*, the authors of the book provide a comparative analysis of the findings from the country chapters, examining our research questions from a Nordic comparative perspective. Here, we use our theoretical framework from *Chap. 2* and the two dimensions of stability versus change and similarity versus difference. We focus on contextual, institutional, and organizational demands and constraints and discuss how these factors influence the manoeuvring space and choices of municipalities and MCEOs now and in the near future. In this discussion, we emphasize the paradoxes and complexities that Nordic MCEOs will have to confront.

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