



# The Nordic Municipal CEO Model: Stability in Change

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## 9.1 INTRODUCTION

To outsiders, Nordic local governments appear very similar across countries, almost identical. This impression often leads scholars to overlook important country differences. For example, since the 1960s, the Danish system has repeatedly been restructured both territorially and administratively in order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of local government. Although amalgamation and efficient service provision have been

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on the agenda in all the Nordic states, none of them have diverged as far from their origin after World War II as Denmark.

In assessing this development on a spectrum, the Icelandic system still holds on to its very traditional community origin, rooted in pre-World War II practices, and plays a decidedly smaller role (although growing) in providing welfare services than the other Nordic local government systems. Consequently, the balance between management and community leadership is still tilted towards community leadership, while the Danish municipal chief executive officer (MCEO), for example, is primarily a strategic manager and political-administrative coordinator. In general, the management part of the Nordic MCEO's position has been growing in concordance with the growing number of tasks, which has led to a strengthening and clarification of the Swedish Local Government Act (no. 2017:725, chapter 7, paragraph 1-3) of the MCEO's role as a leader and manager. We still do not know how the Finnish or Norwegian MCEO role will be affected by the ongoing changes at the local level.

The term 'Nordic' in Nordic local government comes with a certain level of generalization which may lead to simplification in relation to the position of the MCEO, as there are considerable differences both between and within countries, especially in relation to the size of municipalities.

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Consequently, there is significant within-country variation in the role of the MCEO, especially in Finland and Norway, where the differences in municipal size are most extreme, ranging from a few hundred inhabitants to hundreds of thousands.

The chapter begins by applying the MCEO model of embeddedness to the Nordic MCEO position by discussing each of the seven conditions of the model through the lens of the demands–constraints–choices framework. The third section discusses the findings in relation to the four questions presented in the introductory chapter of the book (Hansen et al.), followed by a concluding section.

## 9.2 THE NORDIC MCEO MODEL OF EMBEDDEDNESS

As the country chapters in this volume made clear, the MCEO is a key actor in the coordination of Nordic local government systems. While Chap. 3 (see Hlynsdóttir et al.) presented an overview of what is meant by the Nordic model of local government, the question of what this model means for the Nordic MCEO has been less clear. The main purpose of this book was to address this question from different angles by focusing on two approaches, the first of which was to introduce the country-specific contexts of the MCEO in each of the five Nordic countries. The second was to introduce a new conceptual model for the Nordic MCEO—the embedded demands–constraints–choices model of the MCEO position. The model was introduced in Chap. 2 (Hansen and Solli) and again

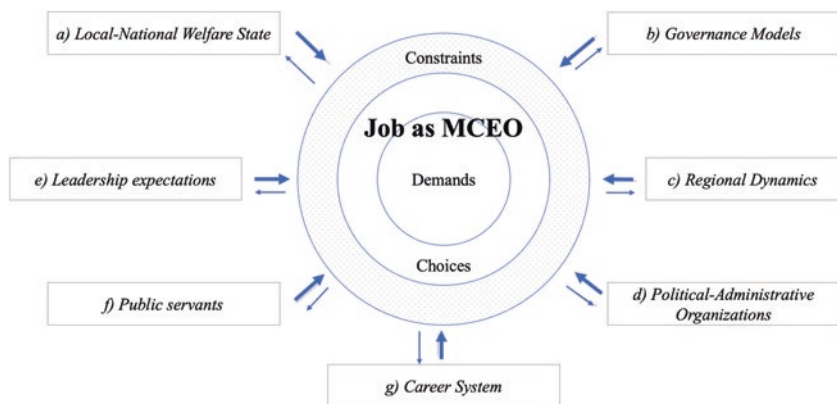


Fig. 9.1 The embedded demands–constraints–choices model of the MCEO position

presented in Fig. 9.1. It is based on the demands, constraints, and choices model advanced by Stewart (1982a, 1982b). The original model was extended to cover the entangled institutional web of the Nordic MCEO's position. Seven contextual conditions were identified for the model: the local–national welfare state, the governance model, regional dynamics, political–administrative organizations, leadership expectations, public servants, and career paths. MCEOs' choices in the context of each of the conditions are affected by *demands* (i.e. the things that MCEOs must do), *constraints* (i.e. the internal and external limitations to what the MCEO can do), and *choices* (i.e. the opportunities for individual choices within the given context).

The following sections will discuss the role of the Nordic MCEO in relation to each of the seven conditions and how the MCEO is challenged by the demands, constraints, and choices embedded in each of the conditions.

### 9.2.1 *Local–National Welfare States*

As pointed out in Chap. 2 (Hansen and Solli), there must be a balance between the local government's role in providing services according to national policies and adapting these policies to local circumstances. Helping to provide and coordinate this balance is one of the key tasks of the Nordic MCEO. All the Nordic states have gone to great lengths to decentralize tasks onto the local level and, thus, have created entities capable of providing extensive services to their citizens. One of the key ingredients of successful decentralization is the level of autonomy that local governments have over their fiscal, political, and administrative organizations. The level of delegation is high throughout the Nordic countries, which demands greater professional capacity from MCEOs, as it increases the complexity of the position.

This brings both formal and informal constraints, and we see clear tendencies of increased levels of regulation, auditing, and strict guidelines in all the Nordic countries. Nonetheless, Iceland remains the least regulated, as the law only provides a loose framework for local government, giving municipalities great leeway in political, fiscal, and administrative matters (Baldersheim et al., 2019). This makes Iceland an anomaly in the system of co-operative governance introduced by Baldersheim et al. (2017), which views Nordic local government as a co-operative tool to achieve national policies at the local level. Given the high level of decentralization in all the Nordic countries, the differences between individual countries

are, nevertheless, fine-tuned as Nordic local governments generally enjoy a relatively high level of autonomy (see Hlynsdóttir et al., this volume). Some of these differences lie in the level of institutionalization of the MCEO position. The position of the Finnish MCEO has been institutionalized for the last century, while the role of the Swedish MCEO has only recently been formally clarified. The legal framework for the position also varies, as Danish law does not mention the MCEO, making the role much less formally institutionalized than in the Norwegian system. Moreover, according to Sletnes et al. (2013), the Finnish and Norwegian local government acts contain the largest number of provisions of all the Nordic countries concerning the MCEO. Additionally, the implementation of a regional level in Finland in 2023 will undoubtedly change the role of the Finnish MCEO, which has traditionally been one of the most powerful MCEO positions of the five countries.

### 9.2.2 *Governance Model*

The country case chapters in this volume demonstrate that there are many similarities between Nordic local governments. However, institutional logics in local government have evolved in various ways in the respective countries. The mutual point of departure is the traditional public administration model discussed in Chap. 1 (Hansen et al.), which emphasizes the power of the directly elected municipal council, the rule of law, and the neutral public servant (Baldersheim et al., 2017). Until the latter part of the twentieth century, this was the main logic behind all local governments in the Nordic countries. New challenges and ideas gradually emerged and altered how municipalities were organized and administered. In sum, the traditional model of governance has not disappeared; it has been supplemented by other models. The most notable of these new ideas is the neo-liberal new public management (NPM) paradigm, which provides a toolbox of ideas and approaches, such as improved managerial autonomy, the use of performance management, citizens' involvement, innovation, transparency, openness, as well as outsourcing, marketization, and corporatization (Hansen, 2011; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). NPM has affected the organization of municipalities in all five countries, although perhaps Denmark and Sweden were under a stronger influence for a longer period than the remaining three countries. The least affected has been the Icelandic local government system, which held onto its traditional public administration roots until only very recently (Hlynsdóttir, 2020).

This suggests that the modern outcome of the Nordic local government organization is more akin to the neo-Weberian state model than the NPM framework. The more recent approaches of new public governance, which advocate widespread collaboration, co-creation, and digitalization, are, therefore, important additions to the local government toolbox rather than novel approaches (Hansen et al., 2020; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Torfing et al., 2020).

Consequently, in the modern approach to local government, the traditional public administration model has been supplemented by tools from other institutional logics (see Hansen and Solli, this volume). We can talk of a hybrid organization (Hallonsten & Thomasson, 2023), as it gives the MCEO more choices in relation to management and organization. At the same time, it constrains the manoeuvrability of the MCEO, albeit in very different ways. The traditional model was centred on the political arm, while the modern approaches are more focused on the professional capacity of management and leadership. The MCEO has become more specialized, as demonstrated in their level of education and the organization of local government becoming more management oriented. The increased professional capacity of the MCEO has fuelled the traditional tensions between the political and administrative arms. For example, this is demonstrated in the increased turnover of MCEOs throughout the Nordic countries, as the elected municipal council still has the final say in their hiring or firing. Thus, if there is a difference of opinion about the professionally orientated MCEO and the elected council, the MCEO must abide by the council's decision. The Swedish case is a good example of this trend, as research findings suggest that increased conflict between the MCEO and the political arm is an important reason why MCEOs leave their position (see Cregård, this volume).

### 9.2.3 *Regional Dynamics and Disparities*

Similar to the situation in many other European countries, there has been a gradual population movement from the periphery to capital or city regions. The Nordic region is no exception, with the population of the capital city regions ranging between 21% of the population in the Stockholm metropolitan area, 28% in the wider Helsinki and Oslo areas, and 35% in the Greater Copenhagen area. The most extreme case is the capital region of Reykjavík in Iceland, consisting of 65% of the population. These population dynamics have led to profound changes in the local

government systems of all five countries. The municipal systems are occasionally being rearranged through top-down amalgamations, such as in Denmark in 1970 and 2007, Sweden in 1952 and 1971, and Norway in 1964, or more informal incentives to merge, such as in Iceland (from 1994 onwards) and Norway between 2018 and 2020 and the nationally guided bottom-up reform in Finland in 2007–2013. Moreover, changes have also been introduced on a regional basis, with new tiers being added (e.g. in Finland in 2023) or partially removed (e.g. in Denmark in 2007).

With increased decentralization and more tasks and responsibilities being transferred to the local level, the pressure for territorial and functional reorganization grows. This is then heightened through large demographic displacement, as increasing numbers of people move from the northern regions to the southern parts and from inland to coastal areas. Currently, this development has led to a serious lack of competent labour, hampering the ongoing economic growth and reindustrialization in northern Scandinavia, especially in Sweden. Thus, the role of the Nordic MCEO is frequently that of a change manager. However, there is a major difference between the change management expected of MCEOs in the northern regions compared to those in the southern regions. In many cases, the MCEOs in the northern part of Norway have more in common with their counterparts in the northern parts of Finland or Sweden than MCEOs in the Oslo region. Although the demand side of the embedded model is usually strongly related to the local government system in place, and the constraints and choices of the MCEO role are often more related to other conditions, such as financial or territorial conditions. Thus, an MCEO in a more financially stable and accessible municipality is less constrained and has more choices than their counterparts in more financially or territorially challenging situations. Consequently, MCEOs' benefits may differ radically. For example, the lowest paid MCEOs in Sweden in 2019 were stationed in the northern part and earned about 35% of what their counterparts in Stockholm earned (Helte & Halth, 2019). The regional context thus affects expectations, opportunities, and status—and probably also attractiveness.

#### 9.2.4 *Political–Administrative Organizations*

The formal relationship between different actors at the municipal administrative apex, sometimes referred to as horizontal power relations, was discussed in Chap. 3 (Hlynsdóttir et al., this volume). Conversely, the

informal power structure is embedded in the institutional logics and is best demonstrated in the MCEOs' views on the influence of different actors within the organization. The original UDiTE study referred to this as the influence of local government officials (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002, p. 201), and the main objective was to evaluate whether and how administrative authorities were able to shape policy decisions at the local level.

By exploring the generic models demonstrated in each country chapter, we see strong similarities between the formal organizations of the political-administrative relationship across the Nordic countries. Based on the formal role of the MCEO and, thus, its formal constraints, we see a clear demand in all Nordic countries that the MCEO serves the municipal council. However, the extent of the dependency varies significantly. The Finnish and Norwegian cases exemplify systems where the formal separation of politics and administration is an essential component. Recent Norwegian studies characterize the relationship between local politicians and administrators as mainly co-operative (Baldersheim et al., 2021; Lo & Vabo, 2020). Consequently, MCEOs in Norway and Finland have more choices and are less constrained by political considerations than, for example, Danish or Swedish MCEOs. However, we also witness substantial changes within these systems over the period in question, as both Norwegian and Finnish MCEOs are currently being fired more frequently from their position, making their position more sensitive to political changes in the council than at the beginning of the time period. In the Finnish case, some of the largest cities have applied the committee-leader system (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002), which puts a politician into the role of the MCEO, similar to the Icelandic executive mayor (see Hlynsdóttir, this volume).

There are considerable differences in terms of informal constraints. For example, both the Icelandic and Danish cases stress political leadership where the local council and political leaders (usually the mayor) are in a key position to influence the scope and condition of the MCEO's role. This partly explains the increasingly high MCEO turnover rates in the Danish case and the increased turnover in the Icelandic case. The Swedish case differs somewhat from the other four cases, as the position of the MCEO as the sole administrative head was only recently established. Moreover, political leadership is more dispersed in the Swedish case than in the other four states, although turnover has also been on the rise there. The turnover of Nordic MCEOs has increased on average, becoming increasingly similar across the countries. This signals that the formal



MCEO position is similar across countries, as shown in the generic model in Chap. 1 (Hansen et al.) and applied in the country case chapters; furthermore, the informal traditions have a considerable effect on MCEOs' scope of action, thereby influencing the development of the position. This is especially true in relation to size, as small municipalities tend to be less rigorous in their organization, often giving MCEOs more freedom while also restraining them through local political traditions.

In reviewing the survey results presented in the five country case studies, we see how the division of tasks and power between the MCEO, as the head of the administration, and politicians has evolved and changed since the 1990s. There is a tension between those who believe that elected politicians should rule or at least strongly guide the implementation of tasks and those who believe that this is best left in the hands of a professional MCEO, where rules relating to professional merits safeguard citizens (Goldsmith & Larsen, 2004). If we explore the power relations in the generic model (see Hansen et al., this volume, Fig. 1.3) of the Nordic municipal political-administrative system from the perspective of the MCEO, we see that MCEOs view the mayor as the most influential actor, substantiating reports by Mouritzen and Svara (2002) in their original study of leadership at the apex. The MCEO is also rated highly in terms of influence, except for Iceland, but it should be noted that the mean indices are generally lower in the Icelandic measurements (Table 9.1).

Other actors, such as committee chairs, also seemed to have great influence—apart from Iceland where this actor had a low ranking. Department heads also consistently received relatively high average values in the most recent survey, although this is somewhat lower in Sweden. Thus, Nordic MCEOs emphasize the strong influence of the mayor and MCEO at the apex of Nordic municipalities, suggesting a high concentration of power at the top of the decision-making ladder. Therefore, the top leaders have much more influence within the system compared to middle managers. This suggests that even though the generic model of the Nordic political-administrative system has strong formal similarities across countries, individual systems give leeway to less systematic constraints and more room for individual choices for the mayor and MCEO. As demonstrated in the country chapters external actors are generally perceived to have low levels of influence, the exception being actors in upper-level government. MCEOs in Denmark, Finland, and Norway tend to rank them as actors with high influence; those in Sweden as medium-influence actors; and those in Iceland as low-influence actors. Thus, Danish, Finnish, and

**Table 9.1** Nordic MCEOs' perceptions of actor influence

<i>Country</i>	<i>Denmark</i>		<i>Finland</i>		<i>Iceland<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>Norway</i>		<i>Sweden<sup>b</sup></i>	
	<i>1995</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>2020</i>
Mayor	<b>91</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>81</b>	64	<b>92</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>93</b>
Executive mayor	–	–	–	–	<b>90</b>	<b>83</b>	–	–	–	–
Committee chairs	<b>73</b>	<b>82</b>	52	65	58	45	42	66	<b>72</b>	<b>73</b>
MCEO	<b>72</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>72</b>	58	66	<b>92</b>	67	<b>76</b>
Department heads	<b>71</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>82</b>	–	51	53	<b>89</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>67</b>
Upper-level government	68	<b>75</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>76</b>	–	48	<b>80</b>	<b>74</b>	64	67
<i>N</i>	200	60	324	114	62	66	324	174	223	185

Note: Country mean values. A 5-point scale from 0 (of very little or no importance), 50 (of moderate importance), to 100 (of utmost importance); mean values interpreted roughly as Low = less than 50, Medium = 50–70, High = more than 70 (**Bold**)

<sup>a</sup>When the Icelandic MCEO is hired from outside the council, the role of mayor falls onto the council leader; in other cases the mayor is an executive mayor, also serving as MCEO

<sup>b</sup>In the Swedish case the mayor corresponds to the chair of the executive committee

Norwegian MCEOs are highly influenced by upper-level government actors, while Icelandic MCEOs are not. The findings support the notion that political leadership remains central to Nordic local government, with professional leadership manifested in the administrative echelon being secondary in local decision-making.

### 9.2.5 *Leadership Expectations*

The autonomy of both local government and the MCEO is constrained by geographical territory. The MCEO has a clear role within a given territory, but there are also limits regarding how much the MCEO can do to act on behalf of the municipality. Inter-municipal cooperation may give the MCEO some policymaking influence over other municipalities; however, it is difficult to measure the extent of this influence. Still, as the law often provides a loose role description, this gives the MCEO considerable choice in how, when, and where to act. This is especially visible in relation to their leadership priorities.

Several typologies were derived from the findings of the original UDITE study, one of which was based on MCEO leadership priorities and role in policymaking. The four roles were identified as the 'policy innovator' (i.e.

the MCEO's role in fostering change), 'political advisor' (i.e. providing the political arm with guidance), 'classical administrator' (i.e. the emphasis on generic administrative tasks), and 'organizational integrator' (i.e. an emphasis on cooperation and human resources within the organization) (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). The findings of the country case studies demonstrate that all four roles were deemed important by the MCEOs, although their relative importance differed between countries and at different points (years).

As indicated in our country cases, the role of Nordic MCEOs includes participation in the most strategic issues for their municipalities. Additionally, they are expected to lead municipal development and innovation and work closely with the political leadership, leading to a paradoxical institutional entrepreneurship and fostering both the reproduction of municipal institutions and the nurturing of an entrepreneurial role, as discussed in the Norwegian country chapter (Torjesen et al.).

However, while leadership expectations unite Nordic MCEOs and thus point towards a strategic and influential top leader, there are also some differences between the countries, especially in terms of how the managers prioritize fiscal management and rule enforcement—two classical administrator tasks (Table 9.2). Fiscal management is a high priority issue in Finland, Iceland, and Norway but less so in Denmark and Sweden. Rule enforcement divides the countries into Denmark, Finland, and Sweden on the one hand (lower priority) and Iceland and Norway on the other (higher priority). The closer we get to the present, Nordic MCEOs award higher priority to both fiscal management and rule enforcement. One explanation for this may be that Nordic municipalities have been hit by the transformation of public organizations to fit the ideology of a network society, a risk society, and an audit society, which in recent decades has increased the influence of the technical expert, sometimes referred to as a technostructure (Esmark, 2017).

The technical expert (Galbraith, 1967/2007) views the organization as a system that needs to function well through the creation and fortification of routines and processes—that is, formal and informal institutional rules. The technical expert is part of, and reinforces, discourses of auditability, transparency, and the organization as a system (Cregård, 2022). Today's municipal organizations must be able to meet the expectations of a rational and auditable organization. According to Elbanna et al. (2016, p. 1020), this has resulted in more 'priority-setting/strategic planning, budgeting and performance reporting functions as key elements of their

**Table 9.2** Nordic MCEOs' leadership priorities (classical administrator and political advisor)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Denmark</i>		<i>Finland</i>		<i>Iceland<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>Norway</i>		<i>Sweden</i>		<i>Role type</i>
	<i>1995</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>2020</i>	
<i>Year</i>											
Fiscal management	41	61	72	87	-	75	66	85	37	58	Classical administrator
Ensure that rules and regulations are followed	33	43	38	51	-	77	53	88	40	51	Classical administrator
Give the mayor legal, economic, and technical advice	84	73	39	61	-	66	64	58	74	76	Political advisor
Influence decision-making	83	72	81	80	-	73	-	-	76	81	Political advisor
Develop norms of the proper roles of politicians vis-à-vis the administration	78	65	65	70	-	50	73	81	71	78	Political advisor
<i>N</i>	199	81	324	114	-	66	324	174	224	205	

Note: Country mean values. A 5-point scale from 0 (of very little or no importance), 50 (of moderate importance), to 100 (of utmost importance). mean values interpreted roughly as Low = less than 50, Medium = 50-70, High = more than 70 (**Bold**)

<sup>a</sup>Icelandic data for 2011 not available

performance management and accountability frameworks'. The primary representative of administrative and professional organizational governance is expected to embrace these expectations and incorporate them into the leadership role. The Nordic MCEO is embedded in the municipal organization's ideal context of auditability, and it would be surprising if this was not reflected in the findings at least to some extent. An increasing prioritization of rule enforcement and involvement in fiscal management may therefore be seen as compliance with broader organizational and top administrative leadership expectations.

The role of political advisor (Table 9.2) was consistently of highest importance in Sweden followed by Denmark while reports were mixed from the remaining countries. Influencing decision-making was the most important leadership priority of this role in all the countries (Norwegian data not available)

As demonstrated in Table 9.3 the role type of organizational integrator was mostly demonstrated through the task of stimulating cooperation between departments with all MCEOs seeing this of high importance with the exception of the Icelandic MCEOs who gave this task a medium priority. The role of policy innovator was ranked much higher in all the countries with the tasks of formulating visions and efficient use of resources of very high importance. Only the Norwegian MCEO ranked formulating visions of medium importance in the last survey round. This is an interesting indication of the way in which Nordic MCEOs perceive the so-called purple zone, that is, the area between politics and administration where policies are transformed into actual municipal services and regulations (Alford et al., 2017). While stimulating cooperation between departments and improving efficiency (Table 9.3) are tasks that traditionally fall within an administration's area of responsibility, formulating visions (Table 9.3) and influencing decision-making (Table 9.2) may be considered close to the political sphere. Therefore, MCEOs view the work of nurturing relations with politicians as important, both for their own role and for organizational functioning.

Other cross-country differences from our findings include how the MCEOs prioritized giving technical advice to politicians and solving problems and conflicts regarding human relationships. How managers prioritize also fluctuated over the years. The findings indicate that the position of Nordic MCEO includes a great variety of tasks where the manager has the capacity to combine different types of roles and prioritize among leadership tasks depending on the perceived situation and context. The above

**Table 9.3** Nordic MCEOs' leadership priorities (organizational integrator and policy innovator)

Country	Denmark		Finland		Iceland <sup>a</sup>		Norway		Sweden		Role type
	1995	2022	1996	2019	2011	2019	1997	2017	1995	2020	
Stimulate cooperation between departments	<b>82</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>84</b>	-	67	<b>80</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>82</b>	Organizational integrator
Solve problems and conflicts of human relationships	60	52	57	66	-	71	68	60	62	55	Organizational integrator
Formulate visions	<b>83</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>84</b>	-	<b>81</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>77</b>	Policy innovator
Make sure that resources are used efficiently	<b>80</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>83</b>	-	<b>88</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>86</b>	Policy innovator
Informed about citizens' views	69	61	71	72	-	79	68	60	63	70	Policy innovator
N	199	81	324	114	-	66	324	174	224	205	

Note: Country mean values. A 5-point scale from 0 (of very little or no importance), 50 (of moderate importance), to 100 (of utmost importance); mean values interpreted roughly as Low = less than 50, Medium = 50–70, High = more than 70 (**Bold**)

<sup>a</sup>Icelandic data for 2011 not available

discussion also demonstrates that the space for manoeuvre in relation to constraints and choices is not the same across the Nordic countries, and a closer look at the findings reveal evidence of differences within the respective countries. The fact that the MCEOs placed different levels of emphasis on different tasks shows that they did have considerable space to choose how they prioritized their tasks. However, there were trends and similarities in the changes in perceptions of expectations that made it interesting to talk about a Nordic leadership role influenced and adjusted by a common societal discourse.

### 9.2.6 *Public Servants*

An important part of the MCEO's role is how they interact with other parts of the organization, of which politicians are of great importance. As demonstrated in the country cases, there is a crucial relation between political and bureaucratic roles at the local level. This is especially true for the Icelandic case, where politicians frequently assume the role of the MCEO. Thus, how MCEOs view their own leadership role must be discussed in relation to their overall perception of what the ideal politician looks like. The original model of the ideal politician (Klausen & Magnier, 1998; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002) distinguishes between five governmental roles for political leaders: governor, stabilizer, administrator, ambassador, and representative. The model can be seen as an indirect indicator of how MCEOs view their own role (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002).

In line with findings from Mouritzen and Svava, MCEOs view the governor role of local politicians as highly important. In other words, politicians must be able to act strategically. A comparison across countries and years revealed that this role was highly prominent, with its importance remaining stable over the years. Except for the Norwegian case, the MCEOs viewed the role of stabilizer in the context of creating stability for the administration and formulating goals of medium importance for the ideal politician. The Norwegian MCEOs awarded a high ranking to this role throughout the period in question.

The role of administrator generally had a low mean value, except for decision-making concerning specific cases where the Icelandic MCEOs ranked this role between moderate and high.

The importance of the ambassadorial role increased throughout the period in most cases; however, there were some interesting country variations. The MCEOs believed that it was clearly the mayor's role to

represent the municipality to the outside world, that is, defending decisions and policies externally. The mayor was expected to communicate with the media in Norway, where this is of high importance, but it received a medium ranking in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Iceland. The countries also differed somewhat when it came to procuring resources from upper-level government, ranked highly for mayors in Iceland, Norway, and Sweden but of medium importance in Denmark and Finland.

The MCEOs' view on the mayor's representative role differed considerably among countries, as demonstrated in Table 9.4. While it was consistently of high importance to be informed about citizens' views, being a spokesperson for local groups or individuals received a consistently low rating. In the Nordic model, therefore, the ideal politicians should not represent individuals or special interests, according to the MCEO, while our findings are mixed concerning the importance for a politician to be a spokesperson for their political party. Based on the medium values, MCEOs from Finland and Iceland find it of low importance, Danish and Norwegian MCEOs of medium importance, and Swedish MCEOs of high importance.

Based on the survey findings, we can draw some conclusions about the demands, constraints, and choices faced by the Nordic MCEO. On the one hand, we see that overall, the MCEOs viewed the ideal political role as strategic for setting policies and seeking access to upper-level government to procure resources, which placed constraints on their role. On the other hand, they may have more possibilities to choose different strategies in relation to representing the municipality to the outside world, especially in Denmark, Finland, and Iceland.

### 9.2.7 *Career System*

The position of the Nordic MCEO can be traced to its origin in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the development and traditions of the position as an administrative career vary considerably among the countries. Career systems are generally based on the possibility of vertical and horizontal promotion. Vertical promotion means that it is possible for an individual to move up the ranks from lower-level management to a higher level, with the position of the MCEO as a culmination of success. Further, vertical promotion involves moving into the same position in a larger municipality with more authority and prestige. Career systems may have a clear entry point, such as whether a specific educational



**Table 9.4** Nordic MCEOs' view of the ideal politician based on five role categories

<i>Country</i>	<i>Denmark</i>		<i>Finland</i>		<i>Iceland<sup>b</sup></i>		<i>Norway</i>		<i>Sweden</i>	
<i>Year</i>	1995	2022	1996	2019	2011	2019	1997	2017	1995	2020
Governor										
Decide on mayor policy principles	<b>84</b>	77	68	<b>92</b>	-	<b>82</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>79</b>
Have a vision of the way in which the municipality should develop in the long run	<b>84</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>94</b>	-	<b>89</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>95</b>
Stabilizer										
Create stability for the administration	59	59	67	<b>79</b>	-	<b>70</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>80</b>	56	64
Formulate exact and unambiguous goals for the administration	65	<b>70</b>	52	60	-	<b>73</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>81</b>	53	60
Administrator										
Lay down rules and routines for the administration	20	25	21	37	-	57	33	45	16	22
Taking decisions concerning specific cases	17	24	57	54	-	<b>71</b>	30	40	35	48
Ambassador										
Represent the municipality to the outside world	<b>73</b>	64	60	<b>70</b>	-	<b>70</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>86</b>
Defend decisions and policies externally	<b>74</b>	<b>70</b>	67	<b>78</b>	-	<b>75</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>83</b>
Be a spokesperson vis-à-vis the press	<b>70</b>	66	45	60	-	54	<b>71</b>	<b>73</b>	68	78
Procure resources from upper-level governments	54	49	44	<b>70</b>	-	<b>73</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>80</b>	67	71
Representative										
Be informed about citizens' views	<b>84</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>79</b>	-	<b>82</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>83</b>
Implement the programme on which he/she has been elected	56	57	25	30	-	<b>70</b>	53	63	<b>70</b>	<b>74</b>

*(continued)*

**Table 9.4** (continued)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Denmark</i>		<i>Finland</i>		<i>Iceland<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>Norway</i>		<i>Sweden</i>	
	<i>1995</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>2020</i>
Be a spokesperson for local groups or individuals who have issues pending decision by the authority	26	25	33	47	-	40	27	42	23	29
Be a spokesperson for their political party	61	66	33	32	-	46	51	63	<b>71</b>	<b>73</b>
<i>N</i>	199	81	324	114	-	64	324	174	224	189

Note: Country mean values. A 5-point scale from 0 (of very little or no importance), 50 (of moderate importance), to 100 (of utmost importance). Mean values interpreted roughly as Low = less than 50, Medium = 50–70, High = more than 70 (**Bold**)

Role categories adapted from Mouritzen and Svava (2002, Chap. 7)

<sup>a</sup>Icelandic data for 2011 not available

qualification is needed for a possible career. The US city manager system is a good example of a formalized career system, where most city managers attend specific study programmes and move upwards in a linear way from a small city to a larger one (Holman, 2017).

Nordic municipalities do not have formalized career systems, but the Danish case is probably the closest of the Nordic cases to an idea of a clear-cut career system. Most Danish MCEOs begin by moving upwards within one municipality, and if fortunate, they move on to a larger and more lucrative municipality. The system is incremental, as MCEOs from a very small municipality are normally not hired for a position in a big city; they must first use the mid-sized municipality as a stepping stone. As such, the career trajectory of the Danish MCEO resembles that of a CEO in a private firm, with each municipality creating their own criteria before hiring an MCEO. Another type of this upward mobility is the Swedish case (see Cregård, this volume), where MCEOs are now increasingly being chosen from within municipalities. An examination of the career trajectories of Nordic MCEOs reveals that their career is mostly constrained by informal rules rather than rigid formal rules that limit their choices. Normally, the only demand is that there must be an MCEO position in all municipalities, although this is not a legal obligation in the case of Denmark. However, there are informal constraints such as age and education. There are no

formal rules for a level or type of education in any of the countries. Nevertheless, there are many informal rules, which may remain stable or change over time. For example, the Finnish case has demonstrated a rather stable educational background from the early 1990s; in the remaining countries, the educational background has moved from technical education or law to a more management and finance orientation.

It is possible to argue that age is a constraint, albeit informal, as the median age for the various countries lay between 50 and 55. Being hired into the MCEO position is a sign of maturity. Moreover, the average MCEO was slightly older at the end of the period than at the beginning. However, the most interesting development in relation to the Nordic MCEO career trajectories was gender. Not so long ago, it was an informal demand that the MCEO had to be male. All things being equal, it is still more difficult for a woman than a man to become an MCEO in most of the Nordic countries. Women are more likely to be hired in smaller municipalities and less prestigious positions; their turnover is generally higher; and there is a lower proportion of long-lasting MCEOs among women than men. However, the differences between the countries were notable, with a significant proportion of the large Swedish municipalities now having a female MCEO. There were also other interesting cross-country differences, as Denmark had by far the lowest proportion of female MCEOs, with only 21% in 2023 compared to 25% in Finland, 30% in Norway, 36% in Iceland, and 41% in Sweden. Numerous international studies have shown that women tend to experience more difficulty in becoming CEOs of high profile and large companies. One explanation is that women are often hired for HR positions without staff authority, making it more difficult for them to accumulate experience for line management positions (Eagly et al., 2014). At this point, it is impossible to verify whether this was the reason for the low proportion of female MCEOs in Denmark. However, this was an anomaly compared to the other Nordic countries, thereby warranting further investigation.

### 9.3 THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE NORDIC MUNICIPAL CHIEF EXECUTIVE MODEL

This book explored the role and position of the Nordic MCEO with the aim of establishing a baseline for what it means to be a Nordic MCEO. Goldsmith and Larsen (2004) argued in their article ‘Local

Political Leadership: Nordic Style' that local political leadership in the Nordic countries had changed less than in other parts of Europe. Twenty years on, these words still ring true, as this overview and comparison of the working environments of Nordic MCEOs demonstrate remarkable stability over a long period of time. This does not imply that there have been no changes; however, changes have been incremental in nature, with only a few exceptions. In the introductory chapter, we posed four questions related to the characterization of the role and position of the Nordic MCEO.

The first characterization relates to the institutional context of the Nordic municipal administrative system. In the generic model introduced in Chap. 1 (Hansen et al.), which was adapted to individual country case chapters, the formal structure remained relatively stable throughout the period of investigation. There have been substantive territorial reforms and changes in all the countries except Sweden, but the formal institutional structure has remained intact. In general, there was an emphasis on a strong administration and strong administrative leadership collaborating with politically appointed committees and individuals. The same was true for the characteristics of the Nordic municipal political-administrative relations, as the two forms of government suggested by Mouritzen and Svava (2002) based on the original UDiTE study were still visible. Thus, municipalities in Norway, Finland, and to some extent Iceland use a form of government that emphasizes separation between political and administrative leadership, while Denmark, Sweden, and to some extent Iceland have forms of government that expect overlapping political and administrative leadership roles and more political influence over the day-to-day management of the municipality.

If we look at the MCEOs' biographical profile, we see that except for the influx of women into the MCEO position (of which there are some country-specific differences) and an increase in the level of education, it has remained relatively stable across all the countries. It is a position marked by middle-aged and well-educated individuals, and if anything, this trend seems to be strengthening, as MCEOs are now slightly older and their educational profile more homogeneous than before, with the baseline educational qualification being more concentrated in social science, business, and management.

Third, we looked at what characterizes the leadership roles of the MCEO. As demonstrated in the country chapters, we see that their view of their own leadership roles and those around them was also relatively

stable, with only minor changes throughout the period. In general, the MCEOs emphasized good management in close collaboration with citizens and the political arm throughout the period in question.

The final and fourth question sought to understand the relations between the Nordic institutional context, the MCEO biography, and the role perception. Overall, based on our analysis of the country means, the findings show that the MCEOs' between-survey role perception was remarkably stable in all the countries. This is interesting, as one might expect changes such as a large influx of women into the MCEO position or a higher-age profile to have some effect on role perception. However, neither did this seem to be the case, nor did major territorial restructuring seem to have any notable effect on the MCEOs' role perception. Changes in the role perception throughout the period were mostly marginal and seemed to be connected to global trends related to good management practices. Thus, we observed a higher concentration of education in business and management and a greater emphasis on good management practices in all the countries.

This supports a notion of a Nordic model of local governance marked by strong administrative leadership in close collaboration with the political arm and citizens in general. This is further supported by the fact that the model shows a remarkable level of stability over three decades, which, from a global perspective, have been tumultuous regarding local government. Even profound territorial reforms, such as the 2007 Danish case, did not disrupt the core of local government, that is, a focus on good service provision for all citizens.

#### 9.4 CONCLUSIONS

This book has undertaken an in-depth exploration of the position of the Nordic municipal chief executive officer in relation to its internal and external environments. The main focus of the book was to provide a thorough and extensive description of the MCEO's position within Nordic local governance. The underlying theme of the book concerned two dimensions: change versus stability on the one hand and similarity versus difference on the other.

The findings from this investigation show that many of the characteristics of the MCEO position remained remarkably stable throughout the decades under investigation. There were some core indicators that were similar across the countries, with the importance of the position being

most significant. The cross-country differences at the beginning of the period could be observed at the end. Moreover, the differences between countries did not seem to increase and were relatively stable throughout the period in question. Thus, the core findings of the UDiTE study from the 1990s still seem to hold almost thirty years on.

This basic stability is an interesting finding, bearing in mind the major global societal changes marking these decades. For example, digitalization in the Nordic municipalities of the 1990s had barely begun, while almost every municipal administrative routine and decision-making process in 2023 was digitalized. Moreover, the management of the financial growth and affluence of the 1990s and early 2000s was substituted by the management of austerity and downsizing after the financial crises in the late 2000s and 2010s. Despite these and other important changes, the main finding, at least in terms of the Nordic municipal political-administrative system, is an astonishing level of stability.

However, there are some interesting contextual changes influencing the Nordic model of governance. For example, the Nordic MCEOs considered that the influence of business and civic society had grown considerably. This development corroborates the impression of an increase in new public governance-inspired practices of cooperation, co-planning, and co-production, especially in Finland and Norway. Findings from a recent Norwegian study confirmed this trend (Monkerud et al., 2016). Consequently, the attention of MCEOs has increasingly moved beyond the borders of the municipal organization and the municipal territory, thus including an increasing number of actors and issues. This suggests an increasing level of complexity in the MCEO role. The increased outsourcing and corporatization of municipal tasks and services create a more complex and hybrid municipal service provision through a network of relations with separate and independent actors. Therein lies the true challenge of the Nordic MCEO position, as power is more concentrated at the apex, while more tasks and authorities are delegated to other actors and agencies. The paradox of the situation is that it has made the Nordic MCEO very powerful while also weakening their local powerbase. Furthermore, it seems that external governance models such as NPM, while important, have left the core of the political-administrative system in local government largely intact. New managerial tools such as performance management, marketization, and management by contract also influence the substance of municipal decision-making and, thus, the work of the MCEO. Notions from the NPM toolbox, such as time-limited contracts,

have also influenced the basic public service bargain of MCEOs and made it more insecure, although there is the aspect of better pay in most of the Nordic countries. Nevertheless, the basic tenets of the formal structure have been surprisingly stable.

This book is only the first step on a journey to fully understand the position of the Nordic MCEO. In this volume, we focused on providing a deep and detailed description of the MCEO, with only marginal use of statistical analysis, thereby leaving more nuanced comparisons for later publications. Consequently, this book neither explored the survey findings to their fullest nor did it aim to. Still, during our analysis, we also came to realize some of the survey's shortcomings. A good example of such shortcomings is the issue of gender. An analysis of the country data showed only marginal differences between female and male MCEOs in relation to role perception. However, previous studies (e.g. Hlynsdóttir, 2020) have found evidence of gender differences in how women and men are recruited to the position of MCEO and how and why they leave the position. This suggests that a more focused and nuanced survey is needed to capture gender differences in the Nordic setting.

Perhaps the main finding of our book, and its true paradox, is that while the comparison with the UDiTE survey from the 1990s seems to reveal a stable system marked only by incremental changes, we also know that Nordic local governments and governance have undergone profound change in the last three decades. Our analysis of the Nordic MCEO model of embeddedness shows that in order to capture more fine-tuned differences in systems, such as those in the Nordics, and global influences, a broader and more extensive investigation is needed.

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