Managing broad responsibility together in a municipal company
Communication as prophylaxis

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MANAGING BROAD RESPONSIBILITY TOGETHER IN A MUNICIPAL COMPANY

COMMUNICATION AS PROPHYLAXIS

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COMMUNICATION AS PROPHYLAXIS

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Abstract

Municipal companies are important actors in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 and are often formally obliged by their owners to work towards achieving these goals, but without jeopardizing ongoing production and the delivery of vital public services. This has, however, shown to be challenging, and managers are often unsure how to develop new ways of organizing to meet such complex challenges and take on broad responsibility. What has been recognized is the importance of collaboration, which is a beneficial and distinct organizational form of its own that creates value greater than what individual organizations can do separately. Such ways of working are, however, hardly straightforward endeavours, since they usually involve members with contrasting goals and approaches, are inclined to fragmentation, and can sometimes even add to the challenges they set out to resolve. The aim of this thesis is to understand the practical challenges associated with collaborative efforts to manage broad responsibility in a municipal company. In response to this aim, responsible managing is studied both empirically and through a research literature review. The purpose of the literature review is to better understand the challenges of managing broad responsibility and what is currently being done to achieve the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level. To understand how responsible managing is accomplished in practice, the enactment of responsible managing is empirically studied in a municipal company over a total of four years. Particularly, two cases have been studied using a participatory research approach: first, the case of a top management team managing responsibly together and second, the case of responsible managing in interorganizational collaboration in a municipal company. For both cases, a theoretical lens is used, resting on a social constructionist and processual-relational ontology, supported by practice-based studies in the communicative stream. This means that attention is focused on communication (both talk and text) in an approach that views responsible managing as a communicative practice, a form of emergent, relational, and situated practice and the means by which responsible managing emerges, is sustained, and transformed. The overall results show how situated communicative practices are influential for preventing the limitation of broad responsibility, fragmentation of the share responsibility, and the deprioritization of obligations over time. Based on this, a metaphor of dental prophylaxis is proposed. By conceptualizing responsible managing as a situated communicative practice and showing how responsible managing may be enacted, this thesis contributes theoretically to the field of organization and management.
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Abstract

Municipal companies are important actors in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030. Often these companies are formally obliged by their owners to work towards achieving these goals, but without jeopardizing ongoing production and the delivery of vital public services. This has, however, shown to be challenging, and managers are often unsure how to develop new ways of organizing to meet such complex challenges and take on broad responsibility. What has been recognized is the importance of collaboration, which is a beneficial and distinct organizational form of its own that creates value greater than what individual organizations can do separately. Such ways of working are, however, hardly straightforward endeavours, since they usually involve members with contrasting goals and approaches, are inclined to fragmentation, and can sometimes even add to the challenges they set out to resolve. The aim of this thesis is to understand the practical challenges associated with collaborative efforts to manage broad responsibility in a municipal company. In response to this aim, responsible managing is studied both empirically and through a research literature review. The purpose of the literature review is to better understand the challenges of managing broad responsibility and what is currently being done to achieve the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level. To understand how responsible managing is accomplished in practice, the enactment of responsible managing is empirically studied in a municipal company over a total of four years. Particularly, two cases have been studied using a participatory research approach: first, the case of a top management team managing responsibly together and second, the case of responsible managing in interorganizational collaboration in a municipal company. For both cases, a theoretical lens is used, resting on a social constructionist and processual-relational ontology and being supported by practice-based studies in the communicative stream. This means that attention is focused on communication (both talk and text) through an approach that views responsible managing as a communicative practice, a form of emergent, relational, and situated practice. It is through such a practice that responsible managing is sustained and transformed. The overall results show how situated communicative practices are influential for preventing the limitation of broad responsibility, fragmentation of the share responsibility, and the deprioritization of obligations over time. Based on this, a metaphor of dental prophylaxis is proposed. By conceptualizing responsible managing as a situated communicative practice and discussing how responsible managing may be enacted, this thesis contributes theoretically to the field of organization and management.
To Petra and Pernilla
Sammanfattning

Kommunala företag är viktiga aktörer i strävan mot målen i Agenda 2030. Ofta har det formella ansvaret för detta arbete delegerats från ägarna, kommunerna, till de kommunala företagen, tillsammans med förväntningen att omställningen ska genomföras utan att varken produktion och leverans av företagens viktiga samhällstjänster eller lönsamhetsnivå äventyras. Detta har visat sig vara utmanande och arbetet i kommunerna fortsätter i stort sett utan några större förändringar. En anledning till att omställningen låter vänta på sig är att ett så brett ansvarstagande kräver samverkan på helt nya nivåer, både mellan och inom organisationer. För detta, har det visat sig, är det sätt kommunala företag traditionellt organiserar sitt arbete mindre lämpat. Vad som krävs är nya arbetsätt, men de som förväntas leda denna utveckling saknar oftast både stöd för och kunskap om hur det ska gå till.

Syftet med denna avhandling är att utveckla kunskap om de utmaningar som det innebär för ett kommunalt företag att leda ett så brett ansvar i samt. För att uppnå detta syfta studeras ansvarsfullt ledarskap både genom en analys av existerande forskningslitteratur och genom att empiriskt studera arbetet i ett kommunalt företag under totalt fyra år. Med teoretisk utgångpunkt i en processuell och relationell ontologi och med understöd av studier inriktade på kommunikativa praktiker, analyseras specifikt det sätt på vilken en koncernledning arbetar tillsammans i möten samt hur det gemensamma ansvaret för att nå målen i Agenda 2030 diskuteras inom och mellan olika organisationer.

De övergripande resultaten visar hur sättet kommunikativa praktiker (såsom exempelvis en mötesagenda, ett mötesprotokoll, turordning i möten, samt retoriska resurser) används leder till att det breda ansvaret delas upp, det gemensamma ansvaret fragmenteras, och det specifika åtaganden nedprioriteras över tid. Baserat på detta föreslås en metafor om tandborstning som profylax mot dålig tandhälsa och, i förlängningen, försämrad livskvalitet. Syftet med metaföre är att dra uppmärksamhet till hur arbetet med att leda ett brett ansvar i samt menar handlar om att säkerställa att det gemensamma och breda ansvaret inte begränsas, fragmenteras och nedprioriteras. Genom att betrakta ansvarsfullt ledarskap som en profylaktiskt, noggrann och uthållig kommunikativ praktik, bidrar denna avhandling teoretiskt med ny kunskap till forskningsfältet organisation och ledarskap.
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I would like to extend my gratitude to all my colleagues at the municipal company for granting me the opportunity to work as an industrial doctoral student and for allowing me the freedom to observe, participate in, and ask questions about the organization throughout the research project. So many of you have contributed to the results and made my every visit to the office pleasant. You made me feel right at home. To my mentor, my manager, and the CEO, thank you for all the support and the confidence you have shown. For confidentiality reasons, you will remain unnamed, but you have my eternal gratitude.

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relatives, my neighbours, and walking friends, thanks for all the inspiring conversations beyond the scientific sphere and for cheering me on.
List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.


IV. Ahlström, K., Lindell. E., Stier, J. (In review). Negotiating shared responsibility for sustainable urban development: Pronouns and In-here-ness as rhetorical Resources.

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Introduction

“We have great expectations for you. You have relationships with each and everyone in the city and are able to introduce new topics of conversation at the breakfast table with your magazine and other information. You should be the good example, and be climate neutral, at least, by 2030.”

Technical manager at private property owner

“First of all, we expect you to deliver a sustainable electrical refueling solution for our vehicle fleet and that the delivery is secure and stable. Our business is extremely dependent on this to work, and that we will have the network that has been promised. Beyond that, we also expect you to be at the forefront of development and to work hard to offer solutions for us, as your customer, so that we will be able to compete in our market. As a municipal company, we expect you to contribute to the city's further development.”

CEO, Local logistic company

“One expectation of a municipal company is that you manage to work for the public good even though you are also being business driven.”

Director of city planning

Municipal companies are important actors in sustainable urban development, with a large number of stakeholders. Often, these stakeholders have great expectations for the municipal companies, not least since they consider their own opportunities for high standards in relation to meeting the goals of Agenda 2030, which is highly dependent on how sustainable the production and service delivery of the municipal companies are.

Given these expectations and obligations, municipal companies struggle if they lack guidance and support, and this very struggle is what serves as the basis for this thesis.

Background

Leaders from 193 nations have signed on to the UN agenda 2030 action program, which aims to create a more secure and sustainable future for all. By signing on to the program, the leaders promise to work to end poverty, fight inequality, tackle climate change, and build peaceful societies that
respect human rights. The ambitions are specified in 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), which are formulated for the global level and expected to be implemented through actions at both the national and the local level. The importance of actions taken at the local level is particularly emphasized through the inclusion of Goal 11 (aiming to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable by 2030) with its direct relation to at least eleven other SDGs (UN, 2015). The significance of local actors for achieving the goals is also well documented by researchers (Fenton & Gustafsson, 2017; Florida, 2017), both in relation to the causes and consequences of the problems and for finding and implementing solutions to these problems (Niemets et al., 2021; UN Environment, 2018; UN-Habitat, 2018; Butcher et al., 2021; Bibri & Krogstie, 2017; Florida, 2017; Krellenberg et al., 2019).

However, the transformation toward the goals of Agenda 2030 has shown to be demanding, and the goals have this far had quite a limited effect on practices at the local level in Sweden and in other countries (Bexell & Jönsson, 2021; Fox & Macleod, 2022; Ansell et al., 2022). Activities are largely carried out without any significant changes (Taylor et al., 2021). What has proliferated so far is awareness raising and advocacy activities, while verifiable implementation and monitoring lag behind (Fox & Macleod, 2022).

Many reasons have been suggested for the delay. One obstacle that is often highlighted is the ambiguity regarding responsibility (Bexell & Jönsson, 2021). While responsibility is an ambiguous concept, the formal documents of Agenda 2030 distinguish between two forms: obligation and accountability (Bexell & Jonsson, 2017). The first form, obligation, implies responsibility in a forward-looking sense for what needs to be done for the future. This is the form that is given the most emphasis in the document, which lays out the obligations of nations in terms of the 17 goals. However, the obligations of local level actors, non-governmental actors, and individuals are largely absent in the documents (Bexell & Jonsson, 2017; 2021; 2021). The other form, accountability, implies a backward-looking form of responsibility, focusing on what has already happened and which actors need to answer for in one form or another (Bexell & Jonsson, 2017; Breuer & Leininger, 2021). However, reporting on progress is voluntary for nations, and no formal sanctions will be issued for countries that do not comply with the agreement.

Since no directives are given in the Agenda 2030 documents for how each country is to allocate, respond to, and follow up on responsibility at the local level (Bexell & Jonsson, 2017; 2021; 2021), it seems to be up to each country to sort out how to proceed. In Sweden, the National action plan for agenda 2030 (Government offices, 2018) points to municipalities as central actors, since they already have a wide range of responsibilities, including providing services for child and elder care, social welfare, education, energy and utilities, housing, transportation, waste management, business sector development, etc. However, since these local authorities are self-governing with a high degree of freedom of action in carrying out their mission, their
engagement with Agenda 2030 is voluntary. Voluntariness, as such, has been identified as a main reason for the lack of action. For example, when codes of conducts are created by the organizations themselves or when social standards created by third parties are optional and not legally binding, it has shown to be less likely that responsibility will be taken beyond self interest (Waddock, 2008; Rasche, 2010; Tamvada, 2020).

Still, many municipal authorities are committed to Agenda 2030. A study by the Swedish Agency for Public Management (2019) shows that 70 percent of the 290 municipalities in Sweden use the framework in Agenda 2030 as a tool for urban development and 40 percent have made decisions based on the framework. Moreover, municipalities implement requirements based on the Agenda 2030 in the owner directives of the municipal companies that they own. Thus, for these companies, working towards the goals of Agenda 2030 is not a matter of voluntariness. What is stated in the owner directives dictates what municipal companies are obliged to do in their operations.

Municipal companies are commonly delegated responsibility for producing and delivering vital services to society, such as housing, energy, water, and waste management. The production and delivery of such services has an extensive impact on society and the environment. For instance, access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene is the most basic human need for health and well-being (UN, 2015). Moreover, close to a third of global greenhouse gas emissions comes from the energy sector (Europaparlamentet, 2023). Therefore, these companies are quite important actors for the achievement of the goals of Agenda 2030, not the least in regard to production and delivery of clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), and waste management (SDG 11.6, 12.3, and 12.4).

However, concerns have been raised about the conditions for holding municipal companies accountable for their obligations (Bergh et al., 2019; 2022). While the main motivation for establishing municipal companies is increased efficiency compared to traditional public management (Voorn et al., 2017), this also has negative side effects in undermined political control, accountability, public ethics, and ultimately, democracy (Bergh et al., 2019; Erlingsson et al., 2020). What the delegation of responsibility to autonomous companies does is to add extra distance to the ultimate stakeholder, the citizens. Delegation involves a transfer of power and thereby an emergence of competing interests, such as the self-interest of the company, which may put the interest of the citizens at risk while sowing the seeds for corruption. Moreover, when those (board members) who are expected to audit and oversee the operations managers of the companies are politicians with dense local social networks, decision making tends to become more informal, and the possibility that managers of municipal companies will engage in self-serving conduct increases (Bergh et al., 2019).

Therefore, this thesis argues that it is important to understand how responsible managing within these companies is accomplished, that is, the way the
managers enact managing processes and practices to fulfil the company’s obligations (Laasch et al., 2021; Gherardi & Laasch, 2021; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). The notion of responsible managing has often been used in the field of organization and management and is defined in different ways (e.g. Friedman, 1970; Drucker, 1974; Freeman, 2001). For the most part, the focus has been on narrowly defined legal or contractual obligations to primary stakeholders (such as employees, customers, and suppliers) or the responsibility to protect secondary stakeholders (e.g. citizens and future generations) from any negative consequences (Van Tulder et al., 2020). In the research field of responsible management (Laasch et al., 2020), however, the definition has been broadened beyond responding to stakeholder obligations and acting ethically in general, to also include sustainability.

In regard to managing responsibly in municipal companies, research is limited (Voorn et al., 2017; Hawrysz & Foltys, 2015; Abellan-Gimenez et al., 2021). What is known, though, is that the managing in a municipal company is quite complex. While existing in many different forms, in general, municipal companies have independent corporate status, are governed by an executive board appointed by local government officials, operate under multiple private as well as public laws (Voorn et al., 2017; Voorn & Van Genugten, 2022), and are subject to many competing responsibilities towards many different stakeholders (Maine et al., 2023). Thereby, work in such companies is organized and managed according to many different, and often contradicting, forms of logics (Olsen et al., 2017; Maine et al., 2023), i.e., the set of material and symbolic practices, values, and assumptions that both guide and constrain efforts to accomplishing the purpose of the organization (Radoynovska et al., 2020).

Firstly, municipal companies are subject to a community logic (Olsen et al., 2017). Since the legitimacy of the companies depends on their ability and willingness to perform and to provide services of high public value, their relationship with their communities is often described as complementary, cooperative, and horizontal, based on a foundation of shared values and mutual trust (ibid).

Secondly, these companies are subject to different prevailing logics in local governments (Olsen et al., 2017). While local politics are normally quite peaceful, building on the logic that contradictions are firstly to be solved in dialogue, different forms of formal decision-making procedures are also in place in the event that dialogue fails. It is mainly the formal procedures that are based on the logic of bureaucracy, which involves managing by rules and hierarchy while striving to secure equity, control, and accountability. To this end, functional areas within public organizations tend to be demarcated, and employees are steered towards specialisation in areas of professional expertise. Delimited areas of responsibility are often formalized in agreements, for example, job descriptions and project specification, and reinforced through strict budgetary follow-up processes (Head & Alford, 2015).
Thirdly, municipal companies are influenced by the logics of markets. To a great extent, municipal companies have been established as a means to respond to international competition due to the deregulation of markets, such as the electricity, telecommunications, and waste management markets. As sellers, municipal companies compete in the same way as any other company, according to the logic that buyers and sellers negotiate prices on a balanced market between supply and demand (Olsen et al., 2017). To respond to competition, municipal companies commonly have developed features of corporations with subsidiaries and cross-ownership structures based on a result-oriented logic that highlights the performance of the organization itself rather than the pursuit of the public good for the benefit of the local community (Head & Alford, 2015). The demarcation of the organization is further stressed when municipal companies, as buyers on the free market, are restricted by public procurement laws. The purpose of these laws is to promote fairness in trade, equal opportunities between suppliers, and the free movement of goods and services across countries. For fairness and equality to be accomplished, arrangements whereby suppliers are separated and distanced from the purchaser are used, and what is supplied is defined and made transparent in formalized contracts.

This way of separating and limiting responsibility, which has emerged over time in response to these co-existing and often contradicting forms of logics, implies that what each organization is responsible for is defined by what it has agreed to accomplish in return for something else (Kittay, 1999; Brunsson et al., 2022). In this way, an obligation may be considered a promise, which is restricted to those to whom the promise is made, to the content of the promise, and until the promise is fulfilled. To clarify who is responsible for what and to balance obligations between different actors, formal agreements are commonly established, for example, job descriptions, project specifications, or various contracts between buyers and sellers on the market. While beneficial for providing clarity regarding who is responsible for what, this way of organizing and managing work has also been criticized since actors, by focusing narrowly on their own tasks and areas of responsibility, tend to resign from the wider consequences of their actions (Jensen & Sandstrom, 2019).

When, above all, municipal companies are delegated the responsibility for pursuing the goals of Agenda 2030, this adds other logics (Laasch, 2018) and also implies another kind of responsibility. This means to simultaneously pursue economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity (Elkington, 1998), and to care for the needs of current as well as future generations (WCED, 1987), while responding to the purpose of the company, with all the stakeholder obligations that entails, in an ethical way. Such an understanding of responsibility is what is called "broad responsibility". Responding to such broad responsibility is, obviously, quite challenging and implies many tensions for managers to handle (Hahn et al., 2015; Jay et al., 2017 and the way of separating and limiting responsibility commonly used in municipal
companies has shown to be counteractive for this (Kerrissey et al., 2017; Head & Alford, 2015; Fobbe, 2020; Gustafsson et al., 2022).

In order to integrate all aspects of such broad responsibility, many advocate for new, more collaborative ways of managing, across nations and sectors, between actors (local authorities, government agencies, private sector, and civil society), and within organizations (Koschmann et al., 2012; Head & Alford, 2015; Fobbe, 2020). Collaboration, at its core, implies the accomplishment of shared responsibility, based on a certain degree of shared understanding, agreed purposes, mutual trust, and interdependence (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Such accomplishments are, however, seldom a straightforward endeavour, since they usually involve dealing with contrasting goals and approaches (Vangen & Huxham, 2013). Without joint goals that can be aligned with the goals of each partner, the commitment to the collaboration may be at risk. Differences in approaches, in turn, may also impair the possibility to achieve the desired benefit from the collaboration (ibid). Occasionally, collaborations may even add to the challenges they set out to resolve (Bryson & Crosby, 2006).

There is limited knowledge on how collaborative efforts to manage broad responsibilities may be enacted. Research in the field of responsible managing is mainly centred around individual (ir)responsible managers and their efforts to manage responsibly, and less on a group of managers working together (Laasch et al., 2020; Adler & Laasch, 2020). The same applies to the literature in the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR), where the focus is usually on the establishment of an empirical relationship between the individual organization’s activities in CSR and the company’s benefits in terms of financial gain, risk reduction, brand reputation, and attractiveness to talents (Velte, 2022).

Hence, when it comes to developing collaborative responsible managing practices to accomplish the goals of Agenda 2030, managers of municipal companies are left to tackle these challenges without much guidance (Fenton & Gustafsson, 2017; Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021).

Aim and research questions

As shown above, managers of municipal companies are important actors in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 and are often formally obliged by the owners of the companies to work towards these goals, but without jeopardizing the ongoing production and delivery of vital public services. This has, however, shown to be quite challenging, and managers often lack knowledge on how to transition to new responsible managing approaches, which are required to meet the complex demands of such broad responsibility. Based on the stated problem, the aim of this thesis is to understand the challenges that collaborative efforts to manage broad responsibility encounter in a municipal
company. In response to this aim, responsible managing is studied in this thesis both empirically and through a research literature review. The question the literature review aims to answer is:

**What are the challenges of managing broad responsibility, and what is currently being done to achieve the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level?**

To understand how responsible managing is accomplished in practice, the enactment of responsible managing is empirically studied in a municipal company over a total of four years. To this end, a theoretical lens is used, resting on a social constructionist and processual-relational ontology and supported by practice-based studies (Carroll et al., 2008; Crevani et al., 2010) in the stream focusing on communication. Particularly, three research questions are investigated. Two questions concern the case of a top management team that engages in responsible managing together, asking:

**How is an obligation made to matter in situ in the work of a top management team, and**

**How does the work of a top management team in meetings affects the accomplishment of broad responsibility?**

The last question concerns interorganizational collaborative efforts to manage responsibly, asking:

**How is shared responsibility for sustainable development constructed in negotiation between different stakeholders?**

The overall results show how situated communicative practices are influential for preventing the limitation of broad responsibility, fragmentation of the division of responsibilities, and the deprioritization of obligations over time. Based on this, a metaphor of dental prophylaxis is proposed. By conceptualizing responsible managing as a situated communicative practice (Nicolini, 2012; Cooren et al., 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017) and showing how responsible managing may be enacted, this thesis contributes theoretically to the field of organization and management.

**Thesis Outline**

The thesis is comprised of six chapters and four appending papers.

- **Chapter 1** Introduction the theses and provides a background. The aim, research questions, and how these have been addressed are presented together with a short summary of contributions.

- **Chapter 2** An overview of the how the concept of responsibility has been constructed and studied in the field of organization and management and where the research gaps are to be found.

- **Chapter 3** Description of the theoretical framework for this thesis by
introducing the author’s ontological position and then outlining the epistemological approach taken.

Chapter 4  
Explanation of the methods used in this thesis, starting with a description of how the research process has evolved over time. Based on this description, the three studies performed are described along with the approach used to generate and analyse the empiric and scientific material. After that, a clarification of the authors position, role, and responsibilities follows.

Chapter 5  
A more detailed review of the four appended papers with a summary of the aim, results, and contributions to provide a background for the discussion in chapter 6.

Chapter 6  
A more detailed discussion of the overall results of the thesis as a whole in relation to the aim and previous research.

Chapter 7  
Outline of the theoretical and practical implications of the thesis and, based on this, recommended directions for future research.
The question of responsible managing has repeatedly been used in the field of organization and management (e.g., Friedman, 1970; Drucker, 1974; Freeman, 2001; Laasch et al, 2021). However, the meaning of responsibility varies (Jonas, 1984; Bovens, 1998; Bexell & Jönsson, 2017). Generally, responsibility is either considered in a forward-looking or in a backward-looking form (Jonas, 1984; Bovens, 1998; Bovens, 2007; Brunsson, et al., 2022), assuming that acting makes an impact on the world, positing that this acting is under the actors’ control, and that the actors, at least to some extent, can foresee the consequences of their actions (Jonas, 1984).

Forward-looking responsibility, that is, matters that need to be addressed for the sake of the future, takes the form of obligations, thus making actors responsible for some matter. Regardless of what matter the actor is tasked with addressing, it creates determination and a sense of obligation to respond in a responsible way (Jonas, 1984; Brunsson et al., 2022), whether it means accomplishing good or preventing undesirable outcomes (Cane, 2002). The matter may be something that is institutionalized, by law or by a role or duty, but may also be something that rests on moral or social custom principles (Bexell & Jönsson, 2017). In organizational settings, it is common that obligations are institutionalized through the allocation and acceptance of certain tasks or duties based, for example, on the role that a actor fills (Bovens, 1998). In this case, the matter at hand is determined in mutual agreement between the parties.

Backward-looking responsibility, that is, deeds that have already been done, takes different forms. In one form, responsibility implies a causal connection, meaning that someone or something is the reason for, or has contributed to, certain situations and is therefore responsible for the outcome and the consequences. In case of damage, responsibility is evaluated as a cause after the fact in order to find the root cause of a problem, irrespective of whether the person causing the damage will be required to answer for the consequences or not. In another backward-looking form, answering is key, and the notion of accountability is used. In organizational settings, accountability commonly involves asking the actor to explain and justify decisions and actions made in relation to mandated obligations in an oversight forum, for example, a court of law or a meeting with a supervisor (Brinkerhoff, 2001; Bovens, 2007).
Asking questions, judging, evaluating, and enforcing consequences are important aspects of the practice of accountability (Friesl et al., 2020).

The different forms of responsibility presented above are connected to one another in various ways. Holding actors accountable for situations that they have caused mainly has legal implications. In that case, remuneration must be provided for the damage caused, regardless of whether the action was intentional or could be foreseen (Jonas, 1984). Actors may also be held accountable for obligations to which they have committed. In this case, accountability is what can make obligations consequential (Tamvada, 2020; Brunsson et al., 2022), meaning that the oversight forum has the power to impose sanctions on the accountable actor for failure or inappropriate actions or to reward the actor in the case of success (Brinkerhoff, 2001; Bovens, 2007). The idea of accountability is thus based on the assumption that the expectation of being held accountable encourages people to perform better (Painter-Morland, 2006). However, the result is often instead that people realize that the less they do, the less they can be held accountable (Jonas, 1984), and as a result, obligations are avoided.

Regardless of what form responsibility is conceptualized, at its core is the idea of someone’s obligation(s) to do the right thing(s) towards others (Waldman & Galvin, 2008; Kempster & Jackson, 2021) in a certain way. The research on responsibility in the field on organization and management mostly focused on the human actor(s) who manages responsibly, rather than what responsibility is or how it is conducted (Cane, 2002). In the following sections of this chapter, a compilation of previous research on responsible managing will be presented in order to elaborate on 1) who is the responsible actor?, 2) what is the right thing to do and towards whom?, and 3) how is responsible managing accomplished? The latter, how is responsible managing accomplished, is presented last in this chapter and is what has received the least attention by researchers (Barnett et al., 2020; Kempster & Jackson, 2021). In this thesis, it is the main focus.

Who is the responsible actor?

Within the field of organization and management, the focus is largely on the responsible actor (Cane, 2002). This field has, to a limited extent, been informed by the ongoing debate in the literature on moral philosophy that asks whether only an individual can be a responsible actor or whether a collective can also be a responsible actor. Many authors (e.g. Narveson 2002) argue that only human individuals can have intentionality and thus be moral agents. Collective actions are, in this view, just aggregations or constellations of an individual’s activities, and in the case of blameworthiness, it is considered rational to allocate proportionality to individual contributions and to divide activities and consequences into shares. Furthermore, it is argued, a
Collective can never be an irreducible entity, since every group action always involves the doing of individuals who each decide to do what they do. Organizations, in this perspective, are compared to machines or systems, incapable of intentional action on the basis of moral obligations.

Others (i.e. French, 1984) take an alternative view. While still seeing humans as given actors, the argue that collectives as a whole can indeed be moral actors, since it is the processes and procedures that make organizations and groups capable of planning for future events and acting on these plans. Groups can therefore have their own identity and intentions and can be held accountable as a collective. This is the case when individuals engage in joint actions that require the contribution of more than one individual. This may be due to the inherent complexity and ambiguity, for example, when collective responsibility is ascribed to identifiable moral agents (a board or a representative body), or when groups share common needs or interests and therefore become a collective.

In the field of organization and management, instead, it seems that shared responsibility in practice and in companies is constructed as a relationship between legal persons and the law (Cane, 2002; Schwenkenbecher, 2020). It thus appears to be taken as a given, and organizations and groups are commonly constructed as responsible actors capable of making decisions and being assigned obligations and rights (Bovens, 1998).

In the following two sections, research in the field of organization and management that focuses on organizations and managers as the responsible actor is explored further.

**Responsible organizations**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a concept used by researchers and practitioners to refer to obligations of business organizations towards society (Carroll & Brown, 2018). In reviewing the extensive research on CSR, most studies seek to establish an empirical relationship between the individual corporation’s CSR activities and the corporation’s financial performance and how the corporations themselves may benefit from CSR activities in terms of reduced costs and risks, and improved brand reputation, attractiveness to talents, and competitiveness (Dyllick & Muff, 2015; Banerjee, 2017; Velte, 2022). Exploring what motivates corporations to implement CSR activities, for example, reveals that regulatory frameworks, stakeholder expectations, and possibilities for an improved image tend to precipitate action (Agudelo et al., 2020). Branding and reporting, where companies communicate their social responsibility to a wider array of stakeholders, seems to have gained particular attention (Khan et al., 2020). In recent years, the number of CSR reports published by corporations has grown rapidly, as has also the volume of scholarly work on CSR reporting. At the same time, an increasing number of
organizations have been accused of not following up on their CSR claims with actual activities, a practice commonly known as greenwashing (Gatti et al., 2019).

When studying issues of irresponsibility (CSiR) (Riera & Iborra, 2017) resulting from an intentional strategy that damages the interests of the organization’s stakeholders, the emphasis tends to be the impact such conduct has on the companies themselves rather than the impact on others (Alcadipani & de Oliveira Medeiros, 2019). What this research reveals, is that irresponsible actions have negative consequences on the corporations themselves in terms of financial loss, lawsuits, and reduced attractiveness to customers, investors, or employees. Despite being less studied, it seems to be clear that the damage from irresponsible actions (e.g. fraud, corruption, or environmental disasters) on society and on external stakeholders is also quite serious (Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013; Berghoff, 2018).

Most research in the field of CSR focuses on private companies, while public-sector organizations are discussed less frequently in terms of responsible entities (Hawrysz & Foltys, 2015). Instead, some interesting contributions have been made in the field of public management in relation to responsibility and public sector organizations. One contribution relates to the aforementioned concerns raised about impaired conditions for holding municipal companies accountable for their obligations (Bergh et al., 2019; 2022). Particularly, it is the impaired transparency in combination with dense informal local networks that makes such companies danger zones for corruption (ibid).

Other contributions come from research on inter-organizational collaborations aimed to carry out activities for a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished, which has developed into a field of its own (Bryson et al., 2015; Koschmann et al. 2012). Such collaboration has long been suggested as a means to address complex challenges, such as sustainable urban development (Huxham & Vangen; 2013; Head & Alford, 2015). When collaboration operates effectively, it can be helpful for understanding the problems at hand and for finding, agreeing upon, and implementing the necessary solutions (Head & Alford, 2015). A number of important aspects of fruitful collaborations have been suggested in earlier studies, such as issues of trust, reliability, accountability and, not least, open communication (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). However, collaboration involving public organizations has shown to be especially challenging, since the way these organizations separate and fragment responsibility often leads them to overlook interdependence and to barriers against collaboration (Koschmann et al. 2012; Head and Alford, 2015; Stafford-Smith at al., 2017).

Responsible Managers

Rather than focusing on the organization, researchers in the field of CSR and the emerging field of responsible management focus on the individual
responsible manager (Lasch et al., 2020). This is based on the idea that managers are responsible motors of organizations (Drucker, 1974). Valuable contributions have been made by studies of the individual behaviour and competence of responsible managers (Osagie et al., 2016; Laasch et al., 2022).

Osagie et al. (2016) identified individual competencies that support the effective integration of the three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic) in strategies and in stakeholder interactions, based on empirical interviews with directors and managers. The competencies are organized according to four domains: 1) cognitive, 2) functional, 3) social or 4) meta-oriented. The first refers to the ability to visualize relevant challenges and to understand systems, standards, and regulations. The second involves the ability to lead and manage CSR programs and to identify and realize related business opportunities. The third refers to having good social, communication, and networking skills. The fourth involves recognising the urgency of addressing sustainability challenges; the ability to handle resistance to change with patience, resilience, flexibility, creativity, empathy, and positivity; and the ability to use self-evaluating and self-learning approaches.

Laasch et al. (2022) adopted a more comprehensive approach, involving contributions made on managerial competencies from ethics, responsibility, and sustainability research, offering an interdisciplinary competence framework based on a literature review. The framework highlights six competence domains that may enable responsible managers to accomplish responsible managing. These domains are defined broadly to involve responsibility, ethics, and sustainability (Laasch & Conaway, 2015; Laasch et al., 2021). Three competence domains are referred to as independent competencies, meaning that they are static and self-contained (Laasch et al., 2022). The domains are being, acting, and thinking, which represent common ways of organizing competence frameworks. To this, Laasch et al. (2022) add an additional three interdependent domains: becoming, interacting, and thinking, which are more contextual and dynamic in character. This emphasizes how responsible managers need to have certain abilities to respond to the needs of people and the planet in an aware and conscious manner. Becoming competencies enable moral development with and within the context through reflexive introspection. Interacting competences refer to the ability of create and foster responsible relationships with stakeholders and to work in collaboration to accomplish responsible managing. Thinking competences involve the ability to use knowledge to evaluate, judge, and make decisions in a systematic manner. This means that the competence needed for responsible managing is located between people and the environment, not merely in the minds of the people (ibid).

However, the literature that focuses on the manager who manages responsibly still lacks knowledge on groups of managers who work together (Adler & Laasch, 2020), particularly on groups of managers that are placed at the top of the organizational chart. Top managers, instead, are studied in the field
often called strategic leadership (Hambrick, 1989) or executive leadership (Hiller & Beauchesne, 2014). Literature reviews in this field (Denis et al., 2017; Stewart & Amason, 2017) shows that researchers mainly dwell on the relationship between characteristics (age, gender, and functional background) of individual executives on the team and the performance of the organization.

Some contributions have also been made in regard to the responsibility of top management teams. It is argued that sharing the overall responsibility of the organization gives the top management team a role that distinguishes this group of managers from managers on lower levels of the organization. On the one hand, they have the primary responsibility for setting the organization’s overall strategy (Hiller & Beauchesne, 2014). This requires taking into consideration both long- and short-term perspectives in order to balance proactivity and reactivity in relation to a changing context (Hambrick, 1989). On the other hand, they have responsibility for deciding on formal systems and structures that the rest of the organization works within and for positioning the organization in the external environment (Hiller & Beauchesne, 2014). This implies focusing on what benefits the organization as a whole. Being a member of such a team, entails struggling with various, at times conflicting, obligations. Some of the member’s obligations can be enacted in the role as head of a function or unit of the organization and others must be enacted in the role as member of a top management team.

The idea that discipline, focus, and control can be accomplished at the top of the organization and that this is achieved by executives establishing strategy, forming structure, and managing systems that direct and drive the organization as a whole, has long dominated the field of organization and management. Setting the organization’s overall strategy, deciding on formal systems and structures that the rest of the organization work within, and positioning the organization in the external environment have thus been highlighted as the primary responsibilities of the top management team (Mintzberg, 1979; Hambrick, 1989; Hiller & Beauchesne, 2014).

In smaller organizations with a well-established and bounded business model, the accomplishment of such responsibility may be manageable, but the more complex an organization and the more fast changing the environment in which organization operates become, the more difficult it becomes (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1994). If top managers in complex organizations still try to exert themselves to control the organization from the top, the result will be nothing more than a form of superfluous control, and the top management team may also risk standing in the way of the performance of the organization. In a study of ethics in corporations, Robert Jackall (1988) describes corporations that are organized in a way that benefits the powerful managers at the top but not the organization itself. By delegating tasks and decisions as far down the line as possible, managers at the top are able to distance themselves from responsibility in case of problems. Instead, great pressure is put on middle managers to protect not only the whole organization, but also themselves from being
held accountable for any failure. Since the top executives also have the power to influence the career development of middle managers, the obligations towards the top will always be prioritized at the expense of the middle manager’s loyalty to his or her individual moral conscience (ibid).

To come to terms with these problems, scholars have instead suggested (e.g. Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1994; Kempster et al., 2011) that the responsibility of executives of complex organizations needs to be broad. Rather than having responsibility for the strategy and thereby deciding what is to be done, they ought to be shaping the purpose of the organization and answering the questions why and to what end? This is based on the insight that the relationships with the wider range of stakeholders are interdependent. When focusing on purpose, the responsibility of top management teams, rather, becomes more multifunctional and integrative and involves greater degrees of navigation of complexity and tensions than work on other levels of the organization, demanding an ongoing positioning of the organization with its changing internal and external context (Hambrick, 1989).

While a focus on the responsible actors (organizations or the managers) has attracted most attention in the field of organization and management, issues related to what these actors are responsible for and towards whom have also gained significant interest. This is further elaborated in the next section.

What is the right thing to do and towards whom?

In asking the question, “What is responsible managing?”, the question “What matters and for the sake of whom?” has long been debated in the study of organization and management (Clegg et al. 2007; Beckmann et al., 2020).

In the extensive research field on CSR, which focuses mainly on the responsible conduct of private corporations, the definition of what matters has a normative origin. Since it was first addressed in the literature in the 1950s, CSR aims to determine corporate responsibilities that stretch beyond financial return to owners and legal requirements (e.g. Bowen, 1953). The concept has since been shaped and re-shaped by international policies, academic contributions, and other significant events (Latapi Agudelo et al., 2019; Carroll, 2021). Significant developments are, for instance, when Carroll (1991) introduced his Pyramid of CSR, when Freeman (2001) presented Stakeholder theory, and when Porter and Kramer (2011) proposed the concept of Shared value. Without the normative premises of CSR, however, there is no consensus among researchers of what the object of responsible corporate is (van Oosterhout & Heugens, 2008), nor is there a consensus among corporations. Instead, the meaning of responsibility, in the concept of CSR, tends to be determined by each top management team (Bevan et al., 2011; Laasch & Conaway, 2015; Laasch et al., 2021).
It is interesting to note that in fields such as corporate social responsibility, comparatively little attention has traditionally been given to exploring what is not the right thing to do (for an exception, see e.g. Jackall, 1988), despite the considerable evidence produced in other fields of research that corporations can and do inflict harm on society (Alcadipani & de Oliviera Medeiros, 2019; Berghoff, 2018). Corporate social irresponsibility (CSiR) is, however, gaining more attention (Riera & Iborra, 2017). While there is no consensus on the definition of what constitutes irresponsible corporate social conduct, it is commonly viewed as more than an isolated event where corporations fail to act responsibly. Rather, it is the result of an intentional strategy that damages the interests of the organization’s stakeholders (ibid).

In the field of responsible management (Laasch & Conaway, 2015), the focus on the responsible conduct of individual managers, rather than the conduct of corporations as a whole, efforts have been made to clarify the meaning of responsible managing. Drawing from the UN initiative Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), bringing together management academics from the disciplines of ethics, responsibility, and sustainability to improve business education of future leaders, the definition of responsible managing is determined to involve responsibility, ethics, and sustainability (Laasch & Conaway, 2015; Laasch et al., 2021). In this definition, responsibility is distinguished from ethics. Whereas responsibility involves a manager’s obligations towards stakeholders, building on stakeholder theory, ethics relates to the manager’s individual moral decisions on what is right and wrong in specific situations, based on normative moral philosophy. Moreover, a main concern is making sustainability a core object for all managers, not only for specialized sustainability managers.

For each of the three domains – responsibility, ethics, and sustainability – what matters and for the sake of whom is detailed further in the following sections.

Promises matter
Responsibility in the organization and management context refers to the various stakeholder obligations to which the organizations and managers have committed (Carroll, 1991; Laasch et al., 2021). Who those stakeholders are and who matters has long been the subject of debate.

One assumption is that, besides following the law, the main responsibility of managers, particularly those at the top of the organization, is towards the shareholders. The pursuit of profit is usually what dictates this responsibility, since without profit, the organization would not persist (Chassagnon, 2014). This view, famously advanced by Milton Friedman (1970), implies that executives are entrusted to act as the shareholders’ agents. As such, they have committed themselves, implicitly or explicitly, to work for the shareholders’ interests and are in return entrusted with the authority, power, and resources...
needed, as well as financial compensation for their acceptance of responsibility. An alternative assumption that has increasingly been gaining traction is that top managers bear responsibility for a broad set of stakeholders (Freeman, 2001; Parmar et al., 2010). From this stakeholder perspective, business can be understood as a set of relationships among groups with a stake in the activities. It is about how customers, suppliers, employees, financiers, and communities interact to jointly create and trade value (ibid).

In both of the above assumptions, responsibility is seen an obligation, accepted freely, like a promise (Kittay, 1999; Brunsson et al., 2022), in return for something else. Acting responsibly suggests that promises made are taken seriously and that the actors involved need to respond accordingly. The input and return in such relationships may be difficult to compare, and may therefore lead to questions as to whether the return is appropriate or sufficient. In order to reduce ambiguity and risks, companies try to limit and divide responsibilities by setting up and following up on a series of mutual expectations stipulated in some form of formal agreement, such as a job description, a project specification, a client agreement, or a partnering contract (Robinson, 2009; Lindkvist & Llewellyn, 2003). While actors may have accepted many different obligations, each obligation is limited to be to the one(s) to whom the promise is made, the stipulated timeframe, and the content of the promise. Nothing is owed to anyone to whom a promise has not been made. Therefore, failure to attend to issues outside the scope of the agreement will not be considered irresponsible conduct. Failure to fulfil an obligation and breaking the trust, on the other hand, is seen as irresponsibility in a reckless sense (Brunsson, et al., 2022).

Making obligations mandatory has been shown to make a difference for whether the obligations are made to matter or not (Tamvada, 2020). Lack of clarity, direction, and voluntarism, on the other hand, lead to random picking and free choice rather than actions that target societal and environmental needs. This makes it possible to ignore the adverse impact of the business’s own operations and to avoid taking responsibility if no clear business cases or other benefits can be found for the organizations or the managers themselves (Waddock, 2008; Rasche, 2010; Barnett, 2020; Tamvada, 2020).

However, the assumption that responsibility can be limited to the content of a contract between parties is often questioned. When responsibilities are rigidly demarcated, people tend to resign from responsibility for any wider consequences of their actions (Jensen & Sandström, 2019). For instance, actors may obey environmental laws, labour laws, and codes of conduct but still contribute to pollution and the suffering of humans and nature. Furthermore, contracts usually presuppose relationships between equally empowered parties and cannot, therefore, be applied with full force in relations with, for instance, children, animals, nature, or future generations (Painter & Morland, 2011).
The shortcomings of divided and limited responsibility have given rise to a broad understanding of responsibility, one that also includes ethics. This is further elaborated in the next section.

Principles matter

Real-life managing is a complex and disorderedendeavour, and due to competing obligations and emerging situations, managers continuously need to deal with ethical dilemmas. Therefore, it has long been recognized that researchers who study responsible managing need to broaden their attention beyond the obligations owed to stakeholders, to also include ethical managing (Clegg et al., 2007; Laasch & Conaway, 2015).

In traditional moral philosophy, there are two dominant approaches for determining what is right or wrong behaviour. In the principled approach (also referred to as deontology), what matters is shaped by moral laws and principles which are universal, general, and unconditional and can be articulated in rules and codes of conduct to regulate responsible conduct (Clegg et al., 2007; Taylor, 2018). This thinking often informs organizations, which typically use codes of conduct and value statements to deal with ethical dilemmas. It is also what informs researchers, who then have something concrete to compare responsible conduct against (Clegg et al., 2007). In the consequentialist approach, instead, following rules and principles is not enough. It is not before the outcomes of one’s actions and how they affect others are known that an action can be considered truly responsible. What matters is thus the greatest well-being for the greatest number of people. A central question for managers is thus, “Who do I need to take into consideration when summing up all consequences?”

Responsible conduct, according to both of the above approaches, is grounded in the assumption that humans are capable and free to make rational and objective judgements of what is the right or wrong thing to do (Taylor, 2018; Barbi et al., 2021). This assumption has, however, been questioned for different reasons. Firstly, objective moral judgements seem to be difficult to apply, at least when it concerns one’s own judgements (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Even people who have been charged with serious crimes consider themselves to have high moral standards. Furthermore, people tend to consider their own good deeds as manifestations of their personality and their bad deeds as dependent on circumstances (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Secondly, the ethics of traditional moral philosophers, which are derived from the ideals of the Western Enlightenment, have been found to be more subjective than objective. By presuming that (some) humans matter most in the world, these principles and social norms primarily tend to benefit those who are Western, heterosexual, white, male. In this view, other beings and the natural resources of the world are subordinate to the needs of those who benefit (Taylor, 2018). Thirdly, people are seldom free to make moral choices based on well-
considered deliberations on principles, norms, and values. Instead, most people find themselves in a network of pre-existing relationships with family, friends, colleagues and so on, in which concrete obligations arise due to dependencies and expectations (Kittay, 1999).

These concerns, where ethical conduct is judged based on moral rules and principles, have led to broad understandings where what matters is the perceived need of someone or something else (Jonas, 1984; Tronto, 1993). This is explained in more detail in the next section.

People, planet, and profit matter

The last domain that has been distinguished to matter for responsible managing, according to the field of responsible management, is sustainability (Laasch & Conaway, 2015; Laasch et al., 2021).

The term ‘sustainability’ was first used in the global sense in the Brundtland report "Our Common Future" from the UN Worlds Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. The concept is frequently used synonymously with ‘sustainable development’ (Ashrafi et al., 2018) and defined in many different ways. The maybe most cited is the one coming from the Brundtland Report, specifying sustainable development as ‘development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. This definition recognizes both a long-term perspective and that what matters is the needs of others. Acknowledging the latter, reveals how responsible managing as a relational construct. This connects to arguments made by, for example Jonas (1984) and Tronto (1993), that people always are connected, and that vulnerability and dependency are characteristics of the condition that all life on earth share, and therefore we all need others to care for us. A decade later Elkington (1998) provides a further specification of what sustainable development entails, based on the theory of the ‘triple bottom line’ (TBL), meaning the pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity. The aim of the triple bottom line, also known as 3Ps, is to achieve a balance between social (people), environmental (planet), and economic (profit) dimensions of sustainability in equal harmony. However, twenty years later Elkington (2018) returns to recall the concept, arguing that the goal has been largely forgotten, and the triple bottom line thinking had been reduced to a mere accounting tool, a way of balancing trade-offs instead of actually doing things differently. Nevertheless, Elkington’s aspiration for higher ambitions were met when the UN (2015) provided a global framework with 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), specifying what nations are obliged to do and emphasizing that responsible managing for sustainability is a shared, collective responsibility (Beckmann et al., 2020). Thereby, it is clearly stated what matters is the needs of people and the planet.
This means defining responsibility as broad, implying that responsible managers besides meeting stakeholder obligations and following ethical principles and norms, need to stretch out to meet the needs of the current as well as future generations (WCED, 1987), and to include the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity (Elkington, 1998). Accomplishing such a broad responsibility, obviously, holds a multitude of contradictions and tensions, not least due to different perspectives of what matters in different situations (Hahn et al., 2015; Jay et al., 2017).

Many recurrent tensions managers need to handle are highlighted in the literature. Firstly, although the importance of integrating all three dimensions of sustainability into organizational processes, routines, and practices seems to be generally accepted, decoupling still often occurs at multiple levels (Hahn et al., 2015; Hengst et al., 2020). For example, it is common that the ecological or social dimensions are often used to build image without being grounded in the purpose of the company and the action of the managers, where the economical dimension is prioritized. Secondly, integrating disparate business units, typically operating in silos, making them collaborate to create processes that cut across boundaries, is an important function of the TMT (Smith & Tushman, 2005). Still, fragmentation has been identified as a common problem for top management teams working together to accomplish the overall responsibilities of the organization (Hambrick, 1989). Individual members may have capacity to lead their own parts of the organization in a certain direction, they may be unable to look beyond their own domains, to act for the benefit of the organization as a whole. Thirdly, even though the long-term aspect of the sustainability is acknowledged (WCED, 1987; Jay, 2017), it is common that companies primarily reward short-term performance. This makes it difficult to pursue sustainability goals that may impact the company for a long time (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Granberg & Wallenberg, 2017).

Situations matter

At the same time, while responsible managing is defined to include responsibility, ethics, and sustainability (Laasch & Conaway, 2015; Laasch et al., 2021), there has been a call for an exploration of responsible managing based on a practices approach (Laasch & Gharardi, 2019). With such an approach, what is considered responsible managing relies on a situated logic that emerges through the negotiation and mutual construction of global rules and local enactment (Gherardi, 2019). Drawing on practice theory, Price et al. (2020), who seem to be one of few studies that considers responsible managing in this way, show how the reproduction of certain practices, and not others, is anchored in the kinds of sites and historical and sociomaterial conditions at play. Thus, what may be considered responsible managing in a purely share-holder-focused, for-profit organization is not the same as in a publicly sub-sided private-sector organization nor in a co-operative community.
With situated logic, the focus shifts from who is responsible and for what, to *how* responsible managing is accomplished in situ (Nicolini, 2012; Gherardi, 2019), which of course may be studied using different perspectives. Still, as already mentioned, most attention has been given to the responsible actors themselves, to what they are responsible for and towards whom, and less attention has been given to how the actors work together to accomplish responsible managing (Kempster & Jackson, 2021). What is already known in the literature on organization and management on how responsible managing is accomplished is developed further in the next section.

**How is responsible managing accomplished?**

Even though managers of municipal companies are important actors in the challenging pursuit of meeting the goals of Agenda 2030, they generally lack knowledge on *how* to go about addressing these challenges. The question of *how* responsible managing can be accomplished in practice has largely been unexplored in the field of organization and management (Barnett et al., 2020; Kempster & Jackson, 2021), and this is also the case in the field of responsible management (Laasch & Gherardi, 2019). However, what the literature does offer is studies on how the learning of responsible managing is organized in organizations.

In terms of creating conditions for learning responsible managing, Constantinescu and Kaptein (2020) argue that embedding responsible managing into all managerial practice requires a systematic process of first determining what matters in terms of responsibility and then developing, implementing, and monitoring interventions that respond to this. These interventions need to include both learning (Andrianova & Antonacopoulou, 2020) of responsible practices and unlearning of irresponsible practices (Padan & Nguyen, 2020). Traditionally, such processes have been facilitated by experts who work in shared human resource and sustainability management functions. However, in general terms, responsible managing that is expected to work for the whole organization has been more difficult to translate into something that is relevant for actual situated ways of working (Andrianova & Antonacopoulou, 2020). Therefore, there has been a shift towards providing organizations with continuous learning opportunities closer to the daily work and involving the managers throughout the organization in order to facilitate the situated learning process. It has been shown that both quality and usefulness improve when managers work together with the central experts to design and implement training programs that promote responsible managing practices in organizations (ibid).

Moreover, authors (e.g. Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015) point to the benefits of engaging participants in training programs in reflexive practices that involve continuous questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions and ways of working related to specific situations that may promote harmful values. In the
context of situated learning in the actual workplace, Valentin (2015) points to how certain situations, such as intra-organizational collaborations, can be useful for learning how to integrate sustainability into mainstream practices.

However, less is known about how responsible managing is accomplished by managers in the every-day practice of managing. Waddock and Bodwell (2017) offer a manual in an attempt to provide guidance for how to integrate responsibility into all practices used to achieve the company’s goals. Using the concept of responsibility management, rather than responsible managing, the authors focus on the managing of the company’s relationships with, and impact on, stakeholders and the environment, performed through a systematic and sequential process. The goal of this process is to reduce the negative impact of the company’s activities and to develop mutually beneficial practices and ways of interacting with stakeholders so that long term relationships can develop. This, the authors claim, makes good business sense as it is beneficial for the company itself in terms of financial performance. While acknowledging that the specifics of such a process are unique for each company depending on its industry, products, and stakeholders, the authors argue that a general approach is feasible. The systematic framework offered in the manual builds on the three principles of inspiration, integration, and innovation and follows a traditional process sequence embedded in most quality systems in their implementation – plan, do, check, and act – in three phases. Inspiration involves setting and implementing a vision. This requires stakeholder engagement and top down, long term commitment. Integrating the vision into strategic and operational practices across all stakeholder-related functional areas, in turn, concerns the use of measurable indicators, incentives, reporting, and information. Based on this, an evaluation process is developed so that innovations and improvements can be made (ibid).

Others (e.g. Painter-Moreland, 2011) argue that such a top down, mechanistic way of managing is inadequate for responsible managing. These authors question whether responsible managing entails a deliberate decision-making process on the part of top managers acting with integrity and suggest that the line of influence is not linear. Instead, responsible managing involves a multidirectional flow of communication about what matters in an organization and thus has to be taken into account for responsible managing to be accomplished. This does not mean that change is impossible, but it demands a critical examination of how work is practiced in the organization and a practical exploration of how things can be done differently. What this implies is that responsible managing cannot be accomplished at arms-length but emerges only as a result of engagement with the situation at hand by closely participating in the messiness of everyday work practice (ibid).

This view is further developed by researchers who combine a communicative focus with a focus on practice, thus considering responsible managing as a communicative accomplishment produced interactively in specific situations through the ongoing practices of organizing and managing that managers
engage in their everyday work (Cooren et al., 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017). Based on the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) approach, Schoeneborn et al. (2020) point particularly to the importance of stakeholder communication, in this case, how the goal of such communication is not necessarily to reach consensus. Instead, the authors argue that it is important that stakeholder dialogues about what responsible managing means are maintained over time, and it is particularly through different opinions and interpretations, and even misunderstandings, that actors are likely to return to their conversations and keep them alive over time. Thus, agreements between stakeholders are not as important as the communication itself when it comes to facilitating organizational change and upholding responsible managing. However, the ongoing communication is only important as long as it is connected with other communicative practices in the organization, such as communication about strategizing, purchasing, or marketing. In practice, this means that responsible managing is accomplished in any given situation by considering what it is that matters considering the complexity of the situation (ibid). However, empirical studies on how responsible managing is accomplished in practice, taking into account activities, knowledge, discourses, and materialities that are brought together in practice, seem to be limited (Laasch & Gherardi, 2019; Gherardi & Laasch, 2022).

Having discussed what is already known from research in the field of organization and management, which has focused mainly on responsible organizations and managers but also on what is considered to be responsible managing and how this may be accomplished in practice, the conclusion here is that few empirical studies have been produced on the latter. Moreover, arguments state that the use of a practice-based lens, particularly with a focus on communicative practices, may be a useful way to capture the multi-directional flow of communication that constitutes what matters in an organization and could help increase our understanding of how communication matters for the accomplishment of responsible managing. As this approach constitutes the theoretical framework for this thesis, the implications will be developed further in the next chapter.
Theoretical framework

This thesis is based on a processual-relational social constructionist ontology, using a practice-based epistemology (Carroll et al., 2008; Crevani et al., 2010) with a particular focus on communicative practice, a form of social and situated practice (Nicolini, 2012). This theoretical framework will facilitate an understanding of the mundane activities that actors engage in when working together to accomplish responsible managing in a municipal company formally obliged to work towards the goals of Agenda 2030.

In this chapter, this ontological stance will be delineated and elaborated, followed by a discussion on the chosen communicative practice-based approach.

A processual-relational ontology

Research based on a social constructionist ontology has become increasingly common in the field of organization and management. According to such a view, the social world is constructed and re-constructed through social practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In this view, there is not one objective or pre-existing reality (in the positivist sense), but rather multiple realities that are constructed through daily interactions between people, particularly through the use of language. These constructions have implications for what people do and how they relate to others (Burr, 2003; Cunliffe, 2008), not least since they tend to be taken for granted. Language is, in this view, considered a principal means by which the world is constructed.

This literature reveals the development of many different orientations in terms of research questions, designs, methods, and theoretical approaches (Cunliffe, 2008). The orientation that this thesis follows is based on a relational (Cooren, 2020) and strong process perspective (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017). With a strong process perspective, organizing and responsible managing are rendered as emergent phenomena (Cooren et al., 2014). With a relational perspective, they emerge in relationships.

A strong processual perspective means that change is considered the fundamental state of the world (Chia, 2003). The world is, in this view, considered to be something temporary and dynamic, always unfolding, and constantly becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas & van
de Ven, 2013). Attempts to find a stable, final description of different phenomena are thus in vain (Burr, 2015), and this view therefore invites us to acknowledge, rather than reduce, the complexity of the world (Tsoukas, 2016). The strong perspective can be compared to the weak-process perspective adopted in the majority of early process organization and management research. In this weak view, a process is seen as a sequence of events, where activities occur linearly over time in a given direction (Chia & Langley, 2004; Crevani & Endrissat, 2016), and change is viewed as something that happens to organizations and management. By contrast, while not denying the existence of entities, this thesis rests on the strong-process view that considers entities as temporary expressions of the ongoing process, allowing the complex ongoing activities they consist of to be seen (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017). This allows us to study how and why different phenomena emerge, evolve, and disappear. The aspect of temporality is important in this context (Langley et al., 2013) as processes occur over time.

A relational perspective, in turn, assumes that social reality is built from relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Rather than viewing the world in terms of entities or systems, it is considered a nexus of relationships between people who move forward together in time and space, in a complex interplay between relations and contexts.

Taken as a whole, the ontological stance this thesis rests on is one where organizations are viewed as emerging relational and communicative communities whose characteristics are continuously negotiated and created through shared ways of talking and acting in everyday interactions (Cunliffe, 2008). Accordingly, responsible managing is considered to be achieved in continuous interaction. The purpose is to seek to understand responsible managing by relying on how the people involved have collectively come to enact this phenomenon, rather than searching for a single, objective reality that is based on a set of laws and principles that govern how things work. Moreover, research is viewed as a co-production between the researcher and the people involved in the phenomenon studied, which will be further discussed in the methods section.

With such a world view, it is possible to use many different approaches when addressing empirical phenomena (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017). In this case, a practiced-based approach will be used, seeking to account for particular accomplishments by directing attention to the practices that generated them and how the practices emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time (Langley et al., 2013). The meaning and implications of this approach explored in more detail in the next section.
A communicative practice-based approach

In order to advance knowledge on how responsible managing is accomplished in practice, this thesis rests on practice-based theorizing (Gherardi 2019; Nicolini, 2012) with a focus on communicative practice, a form of social and situated practice (Nicolini, 2012). This means that the researcher focuses on the mundane communicative managing practices and that attention is paid to how such practices are reproduced and adapted in situ and what is ultimately accomplished.

Practice theories have become well-established in management and organization studies (Nicolini, 2012) and have developed in many directions. Different notions of practice are used, with some studies treating practice as a simple phenomenon, some as a theoretical perspective, and others as a fundamental ontological building block (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Strategy-As-Practice (S-a-P) is the most studied phenomenon in this stream of studies, and the contributions made from these studies have also provided useful insights for the practice approach in general. Based on a literature review, Koh tamâki et al. (2022) point to how many different, more or less distinctive and overlapping streams have also emerged within the approach over time. One is the praxis stream, where praxis refers to actual activity and what people do in practice (Whittington, 2006). Another is the sense-making stream, emphasizing how activity relies upon actors’ subjective interpretation with a focus on social construction, where different phenomena are made and remade through interactive episodes of sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). A third stream is the communicative stream, which highlights the significance of language (Vaara & Fritsch, 2022). A fourth stream, the sociomaterial stream, recognizes the interplay between the social and material worlds (Seidl & Guerard, 2015) since many physical and immaterial artefacts (language, acts, objects, values, beliefs, and feelings) participate in social practices, just as human beings do (Yanow, 2006). A fifth stream, the institutional stream, emphasizes the interplay between the micro and macro levels of strategy (Kouamé & Langley, 2018).

This thesis applies the communicative stream to consider language, both talk and text, as a communicative practice, a form of social and situated practice (Nicolini, 2012). What this stream, in general, has in common with all the other streams mentioned above, is that practice is to be understood as situated, collective knowledgeable doings that accomplish something by ordering actions and relations (Nicolini, 2012; Gherardi, 2019). Being situated means that practices cannot be understood without reference to a specific place, time, and concrete social and historical context (Nicolini, 2012). Certain kinds of sites and socio-material conditions enable or constrain the possibilities for the emergence of certain practices over others. What is considered the right thing to do for the collective in a particular context may not be same as in another context (Price et al., 2020). That practice is to be understood as collective
knowledgeable doings, in turn, implies that within practices, knowing is not separate from doing (Gherardi, 2019). Knowledge is viewed as a form of mastery, a knowing shared with others that is acquired through learning, inscribed in objects, embodied, and only partly articulated in discourse. Knowledge does not, in this view, reside in the heads of people, nor is it a commodity (compared to capital, labour, and land). Rather, it is a collective activity that takes place in the flow of experience, with or without awareness of the knowledge itself. Becoming a competent manager and mastering the practice of managing involves learning how to act, speak, and feel (Nicolini, 2012). When learning, people watch, sense, and listen to others while carrying out meaningful activities. They also use their bodies while enacting work practices. Sensible knowledge is admittedly personal, but at the same time, it is inscribed in the collective body of the community in question (Gherardi, 2019). Conceptualizing responsible managing as an accomplishment, finally, means that such managing is produced through the ongoing processes of organizing that managers are constantly engaged in (Gherardi & Laasch, 2021). Responsible managing does not exist prior to or separate from its practice.

By joining the communicative stream in practice-based studies, attention is turned to communicative practices (talk and text) and what such practices accomplish. The research in this stream has also evolved in different directions (Kohtamäki et al., 2022). In one direction, the discourse is situated within a larger societal and historical context, often drawing on Foucault’s ambition to understand the power effects of language (Nilsson, 2008). In another direction, the direction that will be followed in this thesis, the focus is instead on micro-level conversations in an attempt to understand how people do things with their words. Within the micro-level direction of communicative practice-based studies, different approaches are used to illustrate how different aspects of communication matter for what is accomplished in different ways. Using the approach of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1993) allows us to create an understanding of how talk and text are used by human actors to attain specific interpersonal goals in certain social contexts. By instead using the communicative constitution of organizing (CCO) approach, the focus is not solely on the human actor. The focus instead turns to how human beings share agency with various other actors, humans as well as non-humans, that lend weight to what is being said and put forward in conversations (Cooren et al., 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017).

These two approaches complement each other, enabling a better understanding of how responsible managing is accomplished, which is why both approaches are mobilized in this thesis. In the following sections, the two approaches that are used in this thesis will be further described.
Communicative Constitution of Organizing (CCO)

In this thesis, the practice-based approach is combined with the approach of CCO when exploring the role of talk and text for responsible managing among the top management team of the municipal company. Inspired by the Montreal School approach to communicative constitution of organizing (CCO) studies (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017), communication is considered the means by which organization is constituted and sustained (Taylor & van Ever, 2000). Responsible managing, in turn, is considered a communicative accomplishment and something that is integral in the managing process itself.

Communication is thus both what is being studied (the communicational events on a micro level) and the theoretical framework used (communicational explanation) in the study (Cooren et al., 2015). As an event, communication is marked by a beginning and an end, and occurs in and through a specific space (Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017). Considering communicative events as the main building blocks of organizations means following the ongoing stream of actions, focusing on what is performed by communication and how, and identifying the consequences. As a theoretical framework, in turn, communication is positioned as a vital explanation for organizational phenomena (Schoeneborn et al., 2019). This is based on the view that communication is a process of negotiating meaning, and meaning is understood to reside in the practices in which the participants engage (Kuhn et al., 2017) while organizations are systems of meanings (Schatzki, 2006).

CCO acknowledges the inherently relational and performative character of communication. The relational aspect of communication implies that it is an accomplishment that unfolds interactively in the context of a conversation. The process of communication is circular, where people continuously interpret and make sense of what is being said and the context, before responding with an utterance that, in turn, is left open to interpretation, and so on. In this way, people collectively produce an overflow of meanings that must be continually negotiated. This negotiation of meaning may eventually produce an agreed-upon account of the situation to some degree, which, with or without a consensus, is a tentative common ground always subject to future revisions (Taylor et al., 1996; Vasquez et al., 2018). Communication, thus, calls into play interpretation and implies interaction.

The performativity of communication, in turn, means that talk and text display agency, that is, the capacity to act to make a difference (Castor & Cooren, 2006). This is not to be understood to imply that agency is equal to intentionality, which is a characteristic of human beings. Instead, attributing agency to a policy, for example, is a way of recognizing the activities of human beings (who have written the policy), but when made present in a conversation, it is the policy as such, not the authors, that makes a difference. Therefore, at the same time human beings do things with words, other agents (persons, artifacts,
machines, principles, traditions, institutions, expertise, knowledge, documents, etc.) also contribute to the activity (Cooren, 2010). In CCO, the metaphor of ventriloquism is used to capture the idea that agency is shared (Cooren, 2010). People can thus choose to act either as the ventriloquist, animating other agents, or as the puppet, being animated (Cooren, 2015). For example, a top management team member can act as the ventriloquist by referring to a document, such as the owner directive, thereby animating the voice of the owner who contributes authority to what is being said. This illustrates how authority not only stems from being in a powerful position, it may also be coproduced in interaction by making sources of authority present (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). A top management team member may also act as the puppet and argue that, even though the goals of Agenda 2030 are important, the owner’s demand for financial return on investment makes it impossible for the member to do anything else. In this case, the demand for financial return animates the team member.

However, shared agency does not imply that people lose their own status as agents, nor is it a way to evade responsibility. Instead, Cooren (2016) argues that shared agency highlights the importance of viewing responsibility as an object of decision, based on careful valuation of what matters in every situation. However, due to the complexity of many situations and the fact that people value what matters differently, responsible managing is a necessarily challenging endeavour. What an organization is, does, or says is always subject to what is made present and how in the various acts of communication (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). Therefore, for responsible managing to be accomplished, a wide range of stakeholder voices needs to be heard and acknowledged by those making the decisions for an organization (Schoeneborn et al., 2020).

Moreover, what matters needs to be provided with endurance in order to make a difference outside of the situation at hand (Vasquez et al., 2018). This is commonly done by inscribing what matters into written texts, allowing what matters to travel in time and space (Cooren 2004; Cooren et al., 2007). Written texts can inform, tell, direct, assert, deny, predict, question, accuse, and much more, and by developing such textual actors, an organization is created where documents in different forms specify the criteria for success, define objectives, and oblige employees to act (Cooren, 2004).

Recognizing what textual agents accomplish thus connects the micro level communicative practices in top management team meetings with the macro level dimensions of organizing (Cooren, 2004).

Communicative practices through discursive psychology

In this thesis, the approach of discursive psychology is used to study how issues of shared responsibility for sustainable development are discursively constructed in negotiations between municipal actors.
Discursive psychology was developed as a response to the mainstream, individualistic, and essentialist model widely used to analyse different phenomena in the discipline of psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1993). Instead of assuming that some pre-existing inner qualities define who people are, people’s attitudes, beliefs, personality, and behaviour are instead a product of language-based social and communicative practices (Burr, 2003). Talk and text are thus considered a form of social practice used by people to attain specific interpersonal goals in certain social contexts. Hence, to speak is to act (Potter, 1996), and when people do things with words, it has consequences (Stier & Blomberg, 2015).

The main interest of research in this field is the performative and transformative functions of language in the quest to understand how certain phenomena, such as responsible managing, are performed by people in communication and how what is said and done impacts people. One issue that commonly interests discursive psychologists is how people discursively manage stake and interest (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996). In daily interactions, it is in people’s interest to display themselves as agents of their own actions. In other, more problematic situations (e.g. when risking blame), people can instead use language in one way or another to shift the blame away from themselves or towards someone else. When managing dilemmas of interest and stake, whether it is in one’s own institution or another institution, there are two general ways of representing reality that differ in terms of how agency is treated (Potter, 1996). On the one hand, people can use communicative practices to assign agency to the speaker, and on the other, they can use these practices to externalize agency to matters “out-there”. Since all communicative practices are constructed from a range of resources, for example, arguments, metaphors, anecdotes, terms, or factual descriptions (Potter, 1996), a common way of studying communicative practices is to analyse how discursive resources are used by scrutinizing text extracts.

Having described the theoretical framework of this thesis, the method used to understand how responsible managing is accomplished in a municipal company that is obliged to work towards the goals of Agenda 2030 is further developed in the next chapter.
Method

Communicative practice-based studies aiming to produce situated knowledge for a particular context and purpose require close attention to what is being done in practice (Gherardi, 2019) and a timeframe that is long enough to observe how the practices evolve over time (Gehman, et al., 2018). When the context and purpose address complex societal problems that require sharing and the exchange of knowledge and experiences among a variety of disciplines and work practices, an approach that uses some form of participatory research is often beneficial (Lang et al. 2012; Westberg & Polk, 2016; Miller & Wyborn, 2018) as a complement. In this thesis, responsible managing has been studied using these approaches in two empirical case studies in a municipal company that is obliged to work towards the goals of Agenda 2030. The case studies were conducted over a period of four years by the author of this doctoral thesis, who was employed by the company as an industry-employed doctoral student.

Being an industry-employed doctoral student means that the researcher works closely with the company and is able to closely observe and participate in what is being done in practice over time. The researcher is also able to study how the situated practices of interest to the study evolve over time. The ability to concentrate on responsible managing in one and the same company over an extended period of time has been an important prerequisite for building trustful relationships which, in turn, have allowed the author to gain insight into daily activities and to carefully capture and illustrate responsible managing as enacted in everyday work in this municipal organization. During this period, two empirical case studies have been performed to capture and illustrate the phenomenon at hand in a nuanced and detailed manner (Jensen & Sandström, 2016). The research strategy of performing an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system, (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), a case, is well suited for a phenomenon like responsible managing, which is both complex and context dependent, particularly when the research question refers to how something is done and why (Jensen & Sandström, 2016). The specific situation is thus important in order to be able to contribute meaningful insight to increase the understanding of the phenomenon. Through this research strategy, the researcher is also granted the opportunity to take in consideration different aspects of the phenomenon and allow the research questions, theory, method, empirical material, and analysis to evolve abductively and iteratively over
time, an endeavour that would otherwise be impossible in such a complex and changing context (ibid).

The first case is that of a top management team in a municipal company that is managing responsibly together. This case is studied over a period of two years and focuses on two specific research questions: “How is an obligation made to matter in situ in the work of a top management team?” “How does the work of a top management team in meetings affect broad responsibility?” and “How is shared responsibility for sustainable development constructed as linguistic negotiations in localized face-to-face talk?” The case in the second study is that of responsible managing in interorganizational collaboration, which is studied over a period of one year. The question for this case is how shared responsibility for sustainable development is constructed as linguistic negotiations in localized face-to-face talk. The two cases in one particular municipal company are carefully chosen to be of strategic importance for the problem of this thesis (Flyvbjerg, 2006), and the knowledge attained may therefore have more general relevance. The managers of this municipal company are important actors in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030, as are many other municipal companies, due to the vital services the company delivers. The company is obliged to work toward the goals of Agenda 2030, but without jeopardizing the ongoing delivery of vital public services while also maintaining high levels of profit, which is a challenge other municipal companies also face. The company has organized its work in a way that divides and limits responsibility, which is quite common for municipal organizations in general. Finally, knowledge on how to transition to the responsible managing practices required to meet such complex tasks and broad responsibility is still largely missing for all municipal actors.

In both of the two empirical case studies, a participatory research approach is used based on practice theory (Westberg & Polk, 2016), however, to what extent and in what respect the research is participatory differs between the studies. Participatory research that addresses complex problems by engaging actors across diverse social groups in research that is situated in real-life contexts (Westberg & Polk, 2016) allows for an outcome that is both scientifically rigorous and socially robust. Co-producing socially robust outcomes means that instead of the researcher providing recommendations of what the practitioners should do to achieve a certain effect, the outcomes are understandable, acceptable, and communicable by the participants (Scholz & Steiner, 2015). Thus, rather than using a linear and sequential model of knowledge and action, where objective knowledge is produced first (by researchers) then applied to action (by practitioners), knowledge and action are co-created in close collaboration between the researchers and the participants (Lang et al., 2012; Miller & Wyborn, 2018). This approach rests on the idea that requirements posed by real-world problems and scientific goals can be addressed if knowledge and experiences are shared (Lang et al., 2012). Using this approach, this thesis can contribute to ongoing learning, not only for the research community and
academia, but also for the participants involved in the practices being studied (West et al., 2021). Applying practice-based theory on participatory research (Westberg & Polk, 2016) means that the research project is seen as a practice that is co-constructed together with the participants while working together to understand and develop responsible managing practices.

As a complement to the two empirical studies of situated practice, a research literature review has been performed in order to better understand the challenges of managing broad responsibility and what is currently being done in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level. In the following sections of this chapter, the thesis project, the municipal company, the research cases, the literature review, and the role and responsibility of the author of this doctoral thesis will be further explained.

The thesis project

In this section, the way this thesis work has evolved over time (see Figure 1) will be described.

Figure 1. An illustration of the thesis project

Initially, the author spent six months (from December 2018 to May 2019) gaining a general understanding of the organizational purpose, challenges, and work practices in the organization. At the same time, the author worked to build trust and relationships with key employees in the organization. To help the author with the latter, an article was published on the intranet presenting the author and purpose of the research (2019-01-15). The president of the company also arranged for the author to host the yearly kick-off (2019-02-01) through a presentation to 750 new colleagues (a few employees skipped the
presentation to stay on site and maintain the operation). This introduction helped to legitimize the author’s presence in the organization and opened the door for people to accept requests for semi-structured interviews or informal meetings. In addition to direct conversation, the author spent time reading the owner directive, strategic plans, process descriptions, project plans, and other relevant documentation in order to get an understanding of the organization. The author was free to ask anyone in the organization for interviews and to read any documents.

At this stage, the semi-structured interviews were performed with top management team members and with other key people (in total 34 interviews) in an interpretative way (Hallin & Helin, 2018) in order to investigate how the participants make sense of their organization. The interviews were recorded and verbally transcribed and then summarized in a document for the author’s reference.

At the end of the introduction period, the author met with the president and the HR director to discuss the best approach to studying managing in the organization and how the company could make use of the knowledge produced during the process, rather than just waiting for scientific articles to be published. The first decision was to focus on the collective work of the top management team and to observe every other monthly team meeting starting in May 2019. The author was allowed access to every other meeting rather than every meeting due to a decision by the president. The reasoning was that this arrangement would allow the team to have some time to work undisturbed, while still allowing an adequate amount of material to be produced for the study. The second decision was to arrange regular workshops where the author could get feed-back on insights presented to the team and allow team members an opportunity to discuss and reflect on them together. In this sense, the project adhered to the practice-based participatory research approach in two ways: it included participants from the studied work practice in the process of setting the direction for the research project (Polk, 2015), and it created space for reflection and meta-learning (Westberg & Polk, 2016).

In the first empirical study, which lasted 24 months (May 2019 to May 2021), the work of the top management team was studied through observations, interviews, workshops, and documentation, activities that will be further described in the next chapter. All of these activities and interactions were beneficial for the understanding of the phenomenon studied and had an impact on how the research project evolved over time. The four workshops performed during this period were particularly important and influenced the development of the study and the subsequent production of papers. In the first workshop (2019-05-28), the focus was on the how the team worked together to engage employees in transformational work, including digitalization. During the discussions, the team emphasized the urgency of the need for change and expressed frustration regarding how the current managing approach continued
to reproduce the status quo instead of transforming the organization so that it could meet its obligation to work towards the goals of Agenda 2030.

In the second workshop (2019-11-13) and third workshop (2020-02-11), the focus was turned to how the team worked together to accomplish a goal laid out in the strategic plan, which was adopted in response to the owner’s request in the owner directive to work towards the goals of Agenda 2030. The goal was to develop new sustainable business opportunities expected to generate extensive value. The team discussed the difficulty in simultaneously capitalising on resources and exploring new opportunities and articulated the importance of improved accountability to move the transformation forward. This, together with the literature on complex leadership practices and accountability (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2015) and top management work and responsibility (Sillince & Mueller, 2007), steered the author’s interest towards the phenomenon of responsible managing. Thus, the team’s joint responsible managing practices, which aimed to fulfil the obligation towards the owner, became the empiric material for one of the articles in this thesis (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023). Having witnessed the difficulties involved in fulfilling a single obligation to the owner, the author became curious about the complexities of the overall responsibility the top management team shares, which involves all of the different obligations they have towards all of the stakeholders a municipal company serves. By shifting the focus to better understand how the team works together, the author gave greater attention to meeting practices. As the author was invited to observe every other monthly team meeting (lasting 4 hours on average), the author could integrate into these meetings (10 in total) and discern what was accomplished, or not accomplished, through the way they were enacted.

In the fourth and last workshop during this period, (2021-04-13) the top management team reflected on the author’s accounts of how the top management team meeting was enacted and to what end. The team agreed to use the insights to adapt the meeting practice to better suit the purpose of their shared work. This led to the team changing their meeting practice and to the author writing another article focusing on how meeting practices may lead to broad responsibility (Ahlström, In review).

In this first empirical study, guidelines for conducting participatory research (Polk, 2015), which state that the researcher and the practitioners should work together in all steps of a study and co-create all results, were followed to a lesser extent. In terms of co-leadership, the author did consult with the practitioners and her supervisors at the university throughout the study. The discussions in the workshops also had a great influence on how the study emerged. Still, overall, the author led and carried out the execution of the study independently. The managers were not actively part of formulating the design of the study, nor were they involved in the data collection, analyses, and production of scientific results in peer-reviewed articles (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023; Ahlström, In review) and conference presentations. Instead,
the author worked alone to generate empirical material on how the top management team manages responsibly. When it comes to analysing the material and authoring the scientific articles, the author produced one article (Ahlström, In review) independently and another (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023) together with the main supervisor. Furthermore, the author was not involved in the changes that were made to the top management team meeting practice as a result of the four workshops. The approach to data collection, analyses, and production of scientific results will be described further on in this chapter.

Towards the end of the first study (September 2020), the author was admitted as a doctoral student in Future Proof Cities (FPC), a program that includes 10 industry-employed doctoral students across three universities in mid-size cities in Sweden, as well as 10 municipal companies, including the company that served as the case study for this thesis. The purpose of the program is to co-create knowledge and action for sustainable urban development. Through the school, the author was introduced to new emerging approaches to research, for example, participatory research (Lang et al. 2012; Polk, 2015), which are useful for addressing complex societal problems and for producing results that are both scientifically rigorous and socially robust. Given the benefits of participatory research (Lang et al. 2012; Polk, 2015), the author engaged in a new discussion with the president and the HR manager on how to proceed with the project. This resulted in a decision to engage the author in a project to develop the work process for partnering, namely, work practices to engage internal and external stakeholders in the collaborative sustainable transformation of the city. Hence, the first study of responsible managing practice was concluded and a new study was initiated.

Since a participatory research project implies balancing the different aims of academia and the company (Florin & Lindhult, 2015), two meetings were held (21-02-25 and 21-03-12) with the researcher, the strategy manager and the sustainability manager from the company, and one of the supervisors from the university to establish common ground in terms of the purpose and expected outcomes, as well as norms of interaction. The meeting resulted in an aim to develop a practice for responsible managing to meet the goals of Agenda 2030 in collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. The development of the new practice was to be performed together with those in the organization who were involved in this work in their daily practice, and the enactment of the first iteration of the new practice involved both internal and external stakeholders. It was also decided that the project would be co-led by the author and the sustainability manager. In practice, it meant that the author would act as the main project leader and regularly confer with the sustainability manager, who was not actively involved in the execution of the project.

The project ran for one year (April 2021 to May 2022) and engaged participants from across the organization, as well as key external stakeholders. In this way, the purpose of the second empirical study was not merely to describe and explain how practices emerge and evolve over time, but also to take an
active part in shaping them (Polk, 2015; Westberg & Polk, 2016). The socially robust results (Polk, 2015) produced through this second empirical study, which were intended to be used by the practitioners in their collaborative practice, were the improved practice for partnering and stakeholder collaboration and the prioritization of two improvement projects. For one of these projects (sustainable procurement), a project specification was co-produced. The scientific results from this study focused on how rhetorical resources matter in negotiations of shared responsibility (Ahlström, Lindell & Stier, In review). In terms of the scientific results, there was no participation from the company. Instead, the author co-authored the paper with two of her supervisors, based on the empirical material produced in the project. By engaging co-authors without a close relationship to the organization studied, the empirical material could be read without the preconceptions that the first author may have developed, thus enhancing credibility.

Finally, after concluding the participatory study in May 2022, the author concentrated on the writing of the four scientific articles and this thesis. In addition to authoring three articles based on the two empirical studies already described, the author also co-authored an article based on a literature review together with two researchers from the university, who are not involved in this thesis project apart from their participation in this review. The review resulted in a scientific article (Ahlström, Bruzzone & Farashah, In review), contributing up-to-date scientific knowledge on what is currently being done in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level, as well as the challenges associated with this. This is important knowledge due to the significance local actors have for developments that will lead to achieving the goals of Agenda 2030 (Fenton & Gustafsson, 2017; Florida, 2017), both in regard to the causes and consequences of the problems and for finding and implementing solutions (Niemets et al., 2021; UN Environment, 2018; UN-Habitat, 2018; Butcher et al., 2021; Bibri & Krogstie, 2017; Florida, 2017; Krellenberg et al., 2019).

The focus on authoring scientific results implies that the author’s presence and participation at the company decreased considerably in the last year and a half of the thesis project, however, with one exception. The author was asked to facilitate a workshop with all 90 managers of the company in May 2023. Together with the strategy manager, the HR manager, the secretary, and the president, the author organized and implemented a full day workshop based on the results of the thesis project. The managers worked throughout the day in their ordinary management teams to reflect and take action based on issues of responsible managing. The workshop resulted in two lists with identified improvements. The first list concerned how to improve the collaboration between teams during meetings. The second list dealt with how the different teams across the organization can use their power as purchasers to prioritize issues of sustainability. To support the teams’ work during the workshop and
afterwards when the improvements were to be implemented, a facilitator was assigned to each team (mainly from the HR function).

Responsible managing in a municipal energy and utility company

The author was offered a position as industry-employed doctoral student in a Swedish municipal company in the energy and utility sector. The company is a typical example of a municipal company that is obliged to work towards the goals of Agenda 2030 according to the owner directive, but without jeopardizing profit or the accessibility of the vital services the company provides to the community. The company operates in the energy and utility sector, which is particularly interesting due to the extensive impact on society and the environment from the production and delivery of heating, electricity, water, and sanitation (UN, 2015; Europaparlamentet, 2023). Being employed as an industry-employed doctoral student in such a company offers good access for the study of responsible managing in practice.

The company, the context where the two cases of responsible managing are studied, is a midsize (employing approximately 700 people), male-dominated (67% men) energy and utility company operating in a rather prosperous middle-size town in Sweden. The company is responsible for building and maintaining the infrastructure for, and producing and delivering the services for, district heating, electricity, water and sewage, and broadband. The services have been delivered without any major disturbances and the company has shown positive financial results for many years. Things are changing, however, given the different ongoing transitions in society, such as climate change, changed legislation relating to the environment and security, the restructuring of the energy system, and the digital transformation.

The company owner, the municipality, has issued owner directives (2017, 2021) requiring the company to take an active role in working towards a transformation to achieve the sustainable development goals (UN, 2017). More precisely, the company is obliged to contribute to the reduction of energy consumption and carbon emissions and to the transition to renewable fuels. This is expected to be achieved with sustained levels of profit and accessibility to services in the community, a challenge that the owner directive (2021) acknowledges will require collaboration with the municipality and other important stakeholders in the region. The only tangible goal specified in the owner directive (2021) is related to the financial status: solvency and return on investment (ROI). To clarify how the company plans to respond to the owner’s requests, the company is asked to establish a strategic plan once a year, including tangible goals and a financial budget for the coming three years. Accomplishing responsible managing that works towards the goals of
Agenda 2030 is thus not a matter of voluntariness for the managers in this company, but rather an explicit obligation where objectives are inscribed in the owner directive and means to achieve these objectives are inscribed in the strategic plans.

The way the company’s operations are organized is rather typical for municipal companies, where responsibility is divided hierarchically and functionally (see Figure 2). The majority of the company’s operations and employees are allocated to one of five units. Three of the units are legally part of the parent company with the president as CEO, while two of the units are formally limited corporations of their own, subsidiaries owned by the parent corporation together with other municipalities in the region. The subsidiaries have their own board, owner directives, and CEOs. Approximately 100 people work in a group staff unit organized on the overall level of the organization. The Strategy and IT function (30 employees) manages business developers and IT specialists, the Business support function (30 employees) covers financial aspects, facility managing, and purchasing, the HR and sustainability function (15 employees) handles issues of sustainability, security, and HR, and the Communication function (10 employees) works with PR and communication.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 2. The overall organization chart*

Studying the practice of responsible managing in such a context is particularly interesting due to the major role such a municipal company plays in the effort to achieve the goals of Agenda 2030. In this thesis, responsible managing in this company is empirically studied in two ways, first, by focusing on how the top management team manages responsibly together and second, by focusing on how responsible managing is enacted in interorganizational collaboration.
The case of a top management team managing responsibly together

While responsible managing, of course, involves all employees in an organization (Denis et al., 2017; By, 2021), the collective work of the top management team is especially interesting, since the purpose of such a team is to lead and control the operation of the organization as a whole according to the owner directive (Hambrick, 1985; Hiller & Beauchesne 2014; Granberg & Wallenholm 2017). To this end, the top management team works together as a collective. Knowledge of how to manage collaborative work at the executive level of organizations is still scarce (Denis et al., 2017), and most leadership research concerns the relationship between leaders and their subordinates, rather than the leader’s responsibility towards their many other stakeholders (Kempster & Jackson, 2021).

In this case, the president of the organization has appointed the top management team to share overall responsibility. The top management team consists of 12 members (the president, the vice president, and the secretary, four people leading shared functions (strategy, finance, HR, and communication), and five unit-managers who are responsible for profit and loss for either a business unit or a subsidiary. Each member of the team has been assigned many different obligations. For example, a team member may be assigned ownership of a shared processes or a business-critical competence and may participate in different steering committees for various shared projects, such as digitalization and product development, in addition to their main responsibilities as a manager for a unit or a function. How the different obligations are distinguished from, and relate to, one another is not clearly defined, and the team members are seldom asked to account for the additional responsibilities.

Regarding what the shared obligations of the top management team entail, the team has agreed on a list of duties in a TMT meeting (2019-08-15). The shared obligations are defined to perform business intelligence, to contribute to establishing a strategic plan, tactical plan, and budget each year, and to prioritize common goals and implement the collective action plan. The purpose and magnitude of the expected effort required is, however, not further detailed in the agreement. The interpretation of what the collective work implies in practice is therefore an ongoing issue of discussion for the team.

The main feature of the team’s collective work is the regular, four-hour monthly top management team meetings in which they monitor operations, organize work, and strategize. Admittedly, the top management team members also engage in interactions with each other outside of these meetings, however, the monthly meetings are the primary occasions where the whole team gathers to work together as a group. Therefore, in this thesis, attention is paid to how the top management team manages responsibly together in these meetings. This is done both by studying how the team manages together to
make the obligation to work towards the goals of Agenda 2030 matter over time (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023) and by studying how they manage to take on broad responsibility, including all their obligations (Ahlström, In review)

The results are articulated in two of the appended articles. How the empirical material is generated and analysed for the articles is further detailed in the following sections.

Generating empirical material
In the first study, the author spent 24 months (May 2019 to May 2021) following the top management team’s collective work practices, while producing empirical material through observations, interviews, and a thorough reading of related documents.

Observations
A practice-based approach implies that knowledge is imbedded in practical actions (Gherardi, 2019) and that people may be unaware of or never have reflected on how this is done. The understanding of how responsible managing is practiced may therefore be difficult to obtain, at least through the use of interviews alone (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). Therefore, observations have been used to capture how responsible managing is enacted by a top management team working together in the natural environment (Rasche & Chia, 2009). Since the regular, four-hour monthly top management team meetings are central for the team’s collective work to accomplish their shared responsibilities, the author observed every other meeting over a period of two years. In total, the empirical material was generated from observations of 10 such meetings.

In the first observed meeting, the author was seated on a chair placed along the wall, but the members protested and asked her to join them at the table. This meeting started with the president explaining the role of the author and informing that she was present to observe and record every other meeting. The team members signalled their consent by nodding and nothing else was said. Since the author had already interviewed each of the team members on at least one occasion, they were all acquainted with the author and the project. Throughout all of the following observed meetings, the author sat quietly, listening and taking notes. The only time the author spoke during the meetings was at the beginning of the meetings when the team performed a check-in ritual, where they went around the table to give accounts of their present situation. When they all had taken their turn, they gave the author the opportunity to speak, and she briefly gave an update on the project and life at home. After the check-in, no team members seemed to be affected by the author’s presence. However, in discussions outside of these meetings, some of the managers admitted that they were quite aware of the author’s presence. Still, they all
acted in a very friendly and inclusive manner during the breaks and before and after the meetings.

By taking this peripheral membership role (Adler & Adler, 1994), observing and interacting closely enough with members of the top management team to establish an insider’s identity without participating in the meeting practice itself, it was impossible for the author to avoid affecting the practitioners’ behaviour and what was observed. The mere presence of an observer always has impact on what is being done and said (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, people who know that they are being observed tend to behave in a way that creates a positive image, most often in more formal ways, and they adapt in response to even subtle forms of feedback from the observer. To what extent and in what direction the author has changed the way the top management team works together is difficult to say, since the team was subject to requirements from the owner to change their work practices. Nevertheless, it is likely that the author was a catalyst for changes that were already taking place (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), but it is possible that the interviews and the workshops had an even greater impact on these changes.

Nevertheless, observing the top management team working together in their natural environment allowed for insights into what is being done and to what end. These insights were aspects the team members may not have been aware of themselves, and they may not have been accessible through other data collection methods (Langley & Abdallah, 2011).

**Interviews**

To better understand what the participants were trying to accomplish and what they were doing when working together in meetings, the observations were complemented with semi-structured interviews with the top management team members (29) and other key employees (19) who work closely with the top management team. This is based on the view that people who construct their reality in an organization are to a great extent knowledgeable agents. They know what they are trying to accomplish and can explain how they think and act (Gioia et al., 2012). Furthermore, the interviews provided insights into how the practitioners experienced and reasoned around their interpretations of different situations (Hallin & Helin, 2018).

In the interviews performed in August and September of 2019, the respondents were mainly asked about how the team worked towards the strategic objective to renew the product portfolio, which was defined in the strategic plan that had been established by the board in June. During the spring of 2020, the interviews instead turned to the issue of the top management team’s overall responsibility for sustainable urban development. During the spring of 2021, the questions focused on the meeting practice as such.

For each interview, the author sent an email to the person in question, briefly explaining what she or he was to be asked about and asking if she or he would agree to an interview. After getting consent, a decision on a time and
place was made. While in the meeting (face to face or in a Teams meeting), the author began by repeating the questions and asking for consent to record the conversation. The interviewees were also informed that only the author would listen to the recordings and read the transcriptions, and that their privacy would be protected. After the interview, the recordings were transcribed and saved securely.

Documents
As the author was employed by the company, the author was given access to the internal document database. While there was, of course, a system for authorisation, restricting access to certain documents to certain groups in the company, there were no restrictions regarding access to the documents relevant for this study. A few documents played a particularly important role in this study. The first was the owner directive (in two different versions: 2017 and 2021), where the owner (the municipality) states the purpose of the company and how it is expected to act, thus creating the conditions for the responsibilities of the board and the president. The second is the strategic plan (in three different versions: 2019, 2020, and 2021), which describes how the company plans to respond to the owner’s expectations. The third set of documents are the meeting minutes for each of the monthly top management team meetings observed (10 in total).

Analysis of empirical material
To advance knowledge on how responsible managing is accomplished by a top management team in practice, two separate analyses were performed on the empirical material from the observed top management team meetings, each resulting in a scientific article. In the article that aimed to investigate how the meeting practice of the top management team affects the accomplishment of broad responsibility, involving all of the different obligations (Ahlström, In review), the meeting practice as such, including all conversations in all ten observed meetings, was analysed. In the article that aimed to investigate how the top management team works to make one important obligation matter (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023), instead, the communicative events in the meetings where this particular obligation was addressed were chosen for analysis.

Both analyses rested on a practice-based approach (Gherardi, 2019; Nicolini, 2012) with a focus on communicative practice, a form of social and situated practice (Nicolini, 2012), and used CCO (Cooren et al., 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017) as the theoretical framework in combination with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was particularly used to identify, analyse, and report themes in the data set in rich detail. A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research
question and represents some kind of meaning within the data set. In this case, the themes were recurrent communicative practices and accomplishments.

The analysis of data was, in both cases, an ongoing recursive and gradual process of moving back and forth throughout different steps between the entire data set, the coded extracts of analysed data, and the analysis of the data that are being produced, rather than being a linear process of simply moving from one phase to the next (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dubois & Gadde, 2014). In this process, the transcription of data was an important and useful way to become acquainted with the material. Even though thematic analysis does not require the same level of detail in the transcript compared to, for instance, discursive psychology (Potter, 1996), writing was also an integral part of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first analysis set out to understand how the meeting practice of the top management team affects the accomplishment of broad responsibility (Ahlström, In review) and was quite comprehensive, including all the transcribed texts from 10 meetings. The analysis was performed in the following steps.

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Table 1. Summary of how the data from the 10 observed top management team meetings are organized. The cells with numbers show the number of minutes spent on the respective meeting issue.

The first step of the first analysis was to get an overall understanding of the top management team’s work. In order to grasp the purpose and the obligations of the top management team, the owner directive (2017, 2021) and the strategic plan (2019, 2020) were analysed. Then, to understand what the top management team spent time discussing during the meetings, the empirical material from the 10 observed meetings was organized (see Table 1) based on issue, minutes spent discussing each issue, and the categorization inspired by...
prior literature (i.e., Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Mintzberg, 1979; Hambrick, 1989; Priem et al., 1999; Smith & Tuschman, 2005; Hiller & Beauchesne, 2014; Granberg & Wallenholm, 2017; Denis. et al., 2017; Stewart & Amason, 2017; Porter & Nohria, 2020).

The second step was to code the data in a systematic fashion to capture what was being done across the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This implied going through all data collected and transcribed from the 10 observed meetings that was related to each category and associated issues, and identifying and coding doings manifested in the data, for example, “reporting one by one on own present situation”, “starting every meeting by giving voice to the Board”, moving on to the next issue”, or “refusing to co-author the plan”. Hence, these codes corresponded to what the team did when enacting broad responsibility together in relation to each category and issue. The third step was to collate codes into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using the theoretical framework of CCO (Cooren et al., 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017). This means going through the coded doings related to each issue and searching for repetitions and similarities that make up themes (i.e. repeated communicative practices) that had an impact on the accomplishment of broad responsibility. For example, the way the communicative practices of restricted turn taking were enacted stood in the way of the accomplishment of broad responsibility. Finally, the fourth step was to go through the repeated communicative practices and to identify what they had accomplished. Through this, it became clear that certain communicative practices (the use of an agenda, minutes, timeslots, turn-taking, and stakeholder voicing) stood out as particularly important as obstacles to the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

When setting out to understand how one obligation is made to matter in situ (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023), the data set for analysis was more limited, since this obligation was only dealt with in eight communicative events across all of the observed meetings (marked in grey in Table 1). Also, in this case, the analysis was performed by moving back and forth throughout different steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006), but due to the reduced scale of the data set, fewer steps were required. In the first step, the data was coded systematically after going over the transcription repeatedly to capture doings that were significant for making the obligation matter. Six doings (articulating; negotiating and co-authoring; defining objectives and tasks for others; defining objectives and tasks for the team; providing and accepting accounts; and answering) were found to be significant and recurrent. In the next step, these doings were analysed in regard to what they had achieved in relation to the obligation studied. Through this step, three accomplishments emerged: making the obligation present, letting the obligation enable action, and accounting for the obligation. In this way, knowledge was developed on how responsible managing, in the sense of making one obligation matter, is an ongoing process involving each of the three accomplishments.
The case of responsible managing in interorganizational collaboration

The municipal company plays an important role in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level. Collaboration is acknowledged as an important work practice in this endeavour, both in the owner directive (2017, 2021) and in the strategic plan (2021). Interaction and collaboration with a large number of stakeholders (citizens, landowners, media, politicians, authorities, academia, industry colleagues, owners, customers, private homeowners, housing cooperatives, corporate property owners, suppliers, etc.) was already something that the employees enacted on a daily basis. However, the way the organization organized collaborations was considered to be in need of improvement. For example, many company employees worked together daily with municipal employees in projects all over the city. However, only a few of the interactions were documented in the customer relationship management (CRM) system. This made it difficult to get an overview of the relationships and so much was dependent on what individuals knew. On the overall level, the municipality was responsible for the strategic and detailed planning, governance, and follow-up of sustainable urban development in the region. Central in this work was the steering committee for the urban building process (SCUB), where representatives from the municipality and their companies worked together. The municipal company was represented by one of the business unit managers in the top management team, who was expected to represent the company as a whole and therefore play an important role by linking the company to the owner. Still, during the top management team meetings, the manager never reported back and was never asked to account for what had been said and done in the SCUB meetings. Nor were the issues brought up in the SCUB meetings disseminated and followed up throughout the organization in a systematic way that could have an effect on what was done in the organization.

Another example concerns the municipal company’s role as a purchaser, an important role that offers enormous potential in terms of achieving the goals of Agenda 2030 (Alhola et al., 2019). While the purchasing functions oversaw and managed the strict contracting process in public procurement, the focus was on how to handle tenders and contracts rather than supplier relationships. Even though a supplier may be formally contracted to collaborate with many actors from several parts of the company for as long as eight years, and what was supplied could have extensive environmental, social, and financial impact, the relationships and the outcomes were seldom followed up in a coordinated way after the contracts were signed. Furthermore, no one in the company was assigned the main responsibility even for the largest suppliers.

A third example concerns customers and CRM. While the municipal company delivers vital services to all households and companies in the region, the responsibility for sales was divided between the business units, and no one
was assigned the overall, long-term responsibility for the relationship with customers or for customer segments. One exception was the three employees who manage 12 key accounts. The accounts were for the companies that had generated the largest billable amounts in 2017. The three key account managers had not been assigned any goals for what they needed to achieve, neither in financial nor in other terms, and due to the way the financial systems was set up, it was not possible to follow up on the profit generated per client or for any non-financial results.

Therefore, in this thesis, attention is paid to how the municipal company works to manage their interorganizational collaboration responsibly. A particular focus is how the company collaborates with municipal companies and other actors (both customers and suppliers) in the area of sustainable development at the district level. The idea to focus on city districts has already been applied in the literature (Ahlström, Bruzzone & Farashah, In review), particularly in terms of how innovative technological solutions can curb energy demand through holistic approaches to neighbourhoods or by working on one district at the time. However, focusing on collaboration as such and studying how responsible managing is accomplished in collaboration is rarely done (Koschmann et al., 2012), particularly not with a communicative practice approach.

The scientific result of this case is documented in one of the appended articles (Ahlström, Lindell & Stier, In review). How the empirical material is generated and analysed for the article is further detailed in the following sections.

Co-producing data corpus

Faced with the challenges of working towards the goals of Agenda 2030 without jeopardizing the ongoing, profitable production and delivery of vital public services, the company acknowledged the need for collaboration between internal and external stakeholders. A project was therefore initiated to develop a new practice for partnering and stakeholder collaboration. The project was organized as a 12-month (May 2021 to May 2022) participatory research project, managed by the author together with the company’s sustainability manager. The aim of the project was to develop instructions and routines for strategic collaborations, while at the same time working through the four phases of the process (see Figure 3).

In the first phase, key stakeholders were identified in interviews of members of the top management team, as well as interviews with the owners of the company’s main shared processes (17 interviews in total). The purpose of the interviews was to listen to how employees explained the way they think and act (Gioia et al., 2012) regarding stakeholder collaborations for sustainable development. Before each interview, an email or a telephone call was made to explain the purpose of the interview and to ask for consent. In the meetings,
which were performed digitally via Teams, the author started by repeating the purpose and requesting consent to record the conversation.

![Diagram of stakeholder collaboration process]

Figure 3. The process developed for stakeholder collaborations and partnering.

The interviewees were also informed that the author was the only one who would listen to the recording and performing the transcription step, and that their privacy would be protected. The interviews were semi-structured around two questions: 1) “Who are the most important stakeholders for your part of the organization (business area, function, or process)?” and 2) “What would you like to ask them regarding future collaborations?” At the end of this phase, the findings were discussed with the sustainability manager, resulting in a decision to proceed with 13 stakeholder organizations, including customers, suppliers, public institutions, the university, and the owner. Furthermore, a decision was made to ask the chosen stakeholders the following questions: “What expectations do you have of the municipal company in relation to sustainable urban development?” and, “Do you have any suggestions on issues where we could collaborate for long-term sustainable urban development?”

In the second phase, the author organized and engaged key employees in dialogue meetings with representatives from the 13 identified stakeholders. Employees who already had an established relationship with the stakeholder in question were asked to set up and participate in the meetings. Each stakeholder was contacted via telephone or email, informed of the three questions, and asked to participate in a one-hour meeting. All but one accepted. They were also informed that the project was a participatory research study performed in collaboration with the university. Also, each of the key employees from the municipal company were contacted via telephone by the author to explain the purpose of the interview and to inform that the role of the employees is mainly to listen to the stakeholder’s answers to the questions, but also to participate in the subsequent discussion. Five of the 13 dialogues were performed in face-to-face meetings, while the remaining eight were held digitally via Teams. In the meetings, the author acted as the facilitator, starting by repeating the purpose of the meeting and asking the participants to provide
consent to record the conversation, which all did. Thereafter, the members from the stakeholder organization were asked to reflect on the three questions, which were also displayed on the screen during the meeting. While the stakeholders started the reflection process, the meetings eventually evolved into a dialogue involving all participants in the meeting. The stakeholder dialogues resulted in a list of expectations and ideas for collaborations. For example, the company was asked to sharpen its demands in relation to following up on sustainability in procurement, to collaborate in sustainable district planning, and to use its position as a municipal company to create awareness in society about how to act in a sustainable way. Furthermore, all stakeholders pointed to the urgency of sustainability and the need for prompt action.

In order to collectively process and act on the expectations and ideas submitted by the stakeholders in the dialogue meetings, meetings (34) with key people within the municipal company were conducted in phase three. The main purpose was to engage employees across the company in discussion on what actions should be taken in relation to the different ideas for collaboration. During this phase, the author worked to summon people who were involved in the issues being discussed in their daily work. For example, a series of meetings concerning interorganizational collaboration at the district level, engaged strategists, business unit managers, and key account managers (9) across the organization, all of whom had participated in one or more of the stakeholder dialogue meetings. In the meetings, the author acted as the facilitator by repeating the purpose of the meeting and asking the participants for consent to record the conversation. Furthermore, one of the meetings in this phase was a digital workshop (2021-12-15) with top management team members and all other employees who were engaged in the stakeholder dialogues. The purpose of this workshop was to discuss which of the stakeholder suggestions were worth pursuing and to discuss the new work practice. Two suggestions turned out to be the most interesting for the company. The first was the idea to work together with external actors in the area of sustainable development on a district level. The second was to respond to the suppliers request for tougher procurement demands in order to prevent less ambitious suppliers from winning procurements based solely on price. When discussing the new work practice, the participants reported that it was beneficial for both external and internal relationships. As stated by one of the members of the top management team: “The benefit from this project is that, in a structural way, we have involved people from different parts of the organization, and actions have already been taken. It is not just information stored in a binder”.

In the fourth phase, feedback meetings (7) were scheduled with stakeholders who had provided suggestions that the company wanted to discuss further. Two of the feedback meetings were performed in face-to-face meetings and the remaining five were performed digitally via Teams. Each of the stakeholders was contacted via telephone or email, informed of the purpose of the
meeting, and asked to participate in a one-hour meeting. All accepted. They were also informed that the meeting was part of the participatory research study with the university. The author again took on the role of facilitator in the meetings, starting by repeating the purpose and asking the participants for consent to record the meeting. Thereafter, the participants introduced themselves to other attendees. While all of these meetings were perceived as rewarding by the participants in terms of knowledge sharing and relationship building, the main result was the decision to continue working together in the area of sustainable procurement and sustainable development on a district level.

The data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006) co-produced through this participatory research study resulted in recorded material that was transcribed verbatim from 17 interviews from phase one, 13 stakeholder meetings from phase two, 34 internal meetings in phase three, and seven follow-up meetings with selected stakeholders. Moreover, every recording and transcription has been stored securely.

Selecting and analysing a data set

In the aim to increase knowledge on the challenges encountered in collaborative efforts to manage broad responsibility in a municipal company, based on a theoretical communicative practice approach where responsible managing is conceptualized as an emergent communicative phenomenon, integral in the management process itself and accomplished in practice by people in interaction (Nicolini, 2012; Schoeneborn et al., 2020), one specific idea stood out from the stakeholder dialogues as especially interesting to further explore. The idea is to organize interorganizational collaboration around city districts, based on the assumption that sustainable development is a shared responsibility that needs to involve all stakeholders (Koschmann et al., 2012; Head & Alford, 2015; Fobbe, 2020). This idea has already been presented in the review performed by Ahlström, Buzzzone, and Farashah (In review). For example, the authors show that innovative technological solutions can curb energy demand through holistic approaches to neighbourhoods (Rossiter & Smith, 2018) or by working on one district at a time (Giourka, et al., 2020). However, emphasizing collaboration as such and studying how responsible managing is accomplished in collaboration has rarely been done in the research (Koschmann et al., 2012), particularly not by using a communicative practice approach. The idea is also interesting for the aim of this thesis because collaboration involving public organizations has shown to be especially challenging due to the tradition of separating and fragmenting responsibility, which often creates barriers to collaboration (Koschmann et al., 2012; Head & Alford, 2015; Stafford-Smith et al., 2017).

Therefore, the part (data set) of the vast empirical material produced through the participatory research project (data corpus), where
interorganizational collaboration at the district level is discussed, was chosen to answer the question, “How is shared responsibility for sustainable development constructed in negotiations between different stakeholders?”

Resting the analysis on practice-based theorizing with a focus on communicative practice and using the theoretical framework of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1993), the focus of the analysis was to understand how issues of shared responsibility are discursively constructed in negotiations between the municipal actors who discuss interorganizational collaboration around city districts (Ahlström, Lindell & Stier, In review). For this, the chosen empirical material (data set) included discussions related explicitly to the discussion on city district collaboration in seven meetings (see Table 2). The analytical refinement of the data set occurred over two steps.

In the first step, the different ways the participants described the collaborative work on the district level was examined, which revealed many different constructions. For instance, the participants described the collaboration as a means for generating new business for their own organization, for marketing, or for managing what cannot be accomplished alone. Moreover, what was revealed was how the participants, throughout the different constructions, positioned themselves either as part of or outside of the collaboration. The latter is something commonly identified in studies using the lens of discursive psychology, which has been conceptualized by Potter (1996) as out-there-ness.

In the second step, the data set was scrutinized to make the communicative practices clearer and ultimately choose four extracts (A-D) that illustrate how shared responsibility was constructed in the negotiations (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Phase</th>
<th>Meetings related to collaboration on district level</th>
<th>Extracts selected for further analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1. Stakeholder dialogue with a client, a property owner in a city district</td>
<td>A. One of the managers from the municipality raises the issue of collaboration at the district level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2. Dialogue with the municipality in a meeting with the Steering Committee for Urban Development.</td>
<td>B. A strategist from one of the business units reflects on stakeholder dialogues and collaboration at the district level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3. Internal meeting with strategist from different business units of Middletown Energy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the second step, the original Swedish transcripts of the four chosen extracts were again transcribed in a more thorough manner based on a system developed by Jefferson (2004) (see Table 3). By representing what people say and how they say it as precisely as possible, the actors can be given voice. The new transcripts were then translated into English by the author, after which the translation was reviewed by one of the co-authors. In order to remain true to the original wording and meaning of what was said, the authors did their utmost to check the translated transcripts against the original transcripts throughout the analysis (Steyaert & Janssens, 2013). Transcripts were done using a simplified version of Jefferson (2004) notations (see Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>DEFINITION AND USE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>End of one sentence and beginning of next with no gap/pause between</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>Brief interval, usually between 0.08 and 0.2 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.4)</td>
<td>Time (in seconds) between end of a word and beginning of next.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>Underlining indicates emphasis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;word&lt;</td>
<td>Right/left carats indicate increased speaking rate (speeding up)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;word&gt;</td>
<td>Left/right carats indicate decreased speaking rate (slowing down)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Explanation of which meeting (1-7) and project phase (1-4), each of the four extracts (A-D) are chosen.
Table 3. *Transcription symbols, simplified version of The Jeffersonian Transcription System*

In the third step, each of the four extracts (A-D) were analysed to determine how the speakers position themselves in different ways in relation to shared responsibility through the use of rhetorical resources. For example, in the following two rows taken from extract A (see below), the speaker positions shared responsibility by using the rhetorical resource of pronouns (we), demonstrations of performance (willingness), and by addressing circumstances (ability) for constructing the organization as wanting to take responsibility but lacking agency.

7 (0.5) =if we are to have a higher ambition regarding sustainability issues in the implementation phase it feels as if we need a network together (.) or perhaps different groups even (.) uh (.) and work together= Hence, by zooming in on discussions where shared responsibility is negotiated (Ahlström, Lindell & Stier, In review) and particularly on how rhetorical resources are used by the speaker to position himself as part of the shared responsibility, as well as capable of the shared responsibility (or not), it was revealed that the construction of shared responsibility is quite fragile.

**A research literature review on the challenges of managing broad responsibility at the municipal level**

In addition to the two empirical studies on responsible managing in a municipal company, a research literature review was conducted to better understand the challenges associated with managing broad responsibility and what is currently being done in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level (Ahlström, Buzzone & Farashah, In review). To ensure the quality of the systematic literature review (SLR), Fink’s (2014) process was followed when identifying, critically assessing, and synthesizing the available scientific literature (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008).
Identifying and analysing articles

The search of articles was conducted in the Web of Science database, a multidisciplinary database covering journal literature in both the natural sciences and social science (Fink, 2014). The focus of the search was articles published in Europe in journals on management, urban studies, and regional planning between 2017 and 2022. Three main keywords were used in the search: Agenda 2030, implementation, and municipality, each complemented with synonymous terms (realization, transition, transformation, achievement, materialization, and enactment; UN Agenda 2030, sustainable development goal, SDG, and sustainable urban development; public or municipal company). The search resulted in 126 articles that were read thoroughly to exclude conceptual articles without empirical data and those that were not related to the municipal level, but private companies or the individual or national level. Finally, 77 articles were chosen for further review.

The coding of the remaining 77 articles was based on the steps of the practical guide to data analysis of general literature reviews in Popenoe et al. (2021). An article matrix was made to get an overview of all articles. The matrix was filled in with information in four coding steps. To ensure the quality of the analysis, each article was initially coded by the first author, after which the other authors verified the results. In case of disagreement, the articles were discussed by the three authors together in order to reach a consensus.

In the first step, the matrix was filled in with information for each article in terms of authors, year of publication, title, journal, and abstract and also the focus of each study in terms of research question, SDG, industry, country, theoretical framework, and method. This was done by reading the abstracts of all the articles, and when necessary, the full-length articles.

Second, the full-length articles were read again, back and forth, aiming to answer the research question: “What are the challenges and what is currently being done in relation to the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level?” What emerged from this round of analysis was the identification of three process phases: policymaking, strategizing, and planning (43 articles), developing, transforming, and adaptation (22 articles), and monitoring and measuring the effects of sustainable development work (12 articles).

Third, the articles were read again, this time focusing on what phenomenon was being studied. As a result, five recurrent sub-themes were identified: 1) setting the conditions right (8 articles), 2) integrative approaches (9 articles), 3) participatory and collaborative approaches (21 articles), 4) approaches to territorial development and land use (19 articles), and 5) smart cities and technological solution (16 articles). Many of the articles focus on more than one sub-theme.

Fourth, each sub-theme was analysed in terms of if the articles highlighted any challenges or other impeding factors in their work towards the goals of Agenda 2030.
The author

The author of this thesis was employed as an industry-employed doctoral student by the company where responsible managing was studied and was simultaneously enrolled as a doctoral student at the School of Industrial Economics and Organization at Mälardalen University. Additionally, the author was associated with two research schools. The first was the Swedish Research School of Management and IT (MIT), a collaboration between twelve universities. The second is Future Proof Cities (FPC), a collaboration between three universities, three municipalities, and a number of municipal companies that aims to co-create knowledge and action for sustainable urban development.

Being an industry-employed doctoral student means being a link between academia and public and private sector organizations and playing an important role in knowledge sharing and knowledge production in collaborative research projects (Thune, 2009). Working in such a position requires skills beyond academic skills (Tavares et al., 2020). This commonly involves the ability to work with others, communication skills in terms of selling and justifying ideas and the outcome of the research, negotiation skills for reconciling different interests, and skills suited for stakeholder involvement (Wardenaar et al., 2014). The author’s experience from three decades as a management consultant in different infrastructure sectors has been helpful in handling these issues.

In the study of responsible managing while relying on a participatory case studies approach based on a process-relational perspective, the author recognizes that she, herself, is an essential and ever-present aspect of the research work. As researcher, the author not only describes and analyses what is going on, but also directs and changes it through who she is, her role, and her status in relation to the participants (Cunliffe, 2003). The position of the author is far from static. Rather, the author’s position is quite dynamic and emergent, produced though her own performance and the other participants’ perceptions in a negotiation (Lonsmann, 2016).

As a researcher who becomes immersed in the flow of events in real time, responsible conduct is to be considered situated and contextual (Gherardi, 2019). This means that responsible research is a practice of choice and evaluation since novel situations can never be entirely predicted (Clegg et al., 2007) nor can issues of responsibility. In some cases, the issues are also difficult to recognize, and if they are recognized, clear answers are seldom found. Engaging in the practice of research therefore implies experiencing and evaluating every situation in terms of what is the responsible way to act based on what matters to those who participate in and are affected by the consequences of the research practice. At the same time, since the author is a student, she concedes that she is in the process of learning the practice of research and that there are already accepted standards for ethical research conduct (MIT-D-LAB, 2015; ALLEA, 2017; Swedish research council, 2017) and literature in
the field of qualitative research conduct (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gherardi, 2019).

Hence, the author of this thesis recognizes her obligation to adhere to responsible research, including the questions asked, interpretations made, and all of the other choices made during the process (Mustajoki & Mustajoki, 2017). In the following sections, the author aims to create transparency in relation to how reflexivity and respect have been enacted throughout the thesis project.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a means to question one’s own way of being, relating, and acting, as well as the assumptions underlying the practices performed (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). A reflexive approach to responsible research thereby involves challenging the questions asked, choice of data, theoretical framework, method, analysis, and results throughout the research process. Furthermore, if any of the actions taken could be considered wrong or harmful to anyone, the researcher needs to be prepared to change the practice.

Throughout this thesis project, the practice of reflexivity has been systematically applied to the research process and results. For each scientific article, new versions of the manuscripts have been presented and discussed in meetings with supervisors and the other co-authors monthly and sometimes even weekly. Additionally, the manuscripts have been presented and discussed in international conferences.

In addition to the above, the author has tried to the best of her ability to reflect and account for who she is, what she stands for, and how this may leave its mark on the research, the company, and how she is perceived by the other participants of the research project. To this end, ongoing conversations with supervisors and colleagues who also work as industry-employed doctoral students have been valuable tools.

To ensure transparency, the author will provide an account of who she is and what she stands for in her own words (Cunliffe, 2003), as follows.

*I am the researcher, and I understand that my experience and actions matter in many different ways for the development and outcome of this research project. In the first place, my professional experience from working as a management consultant for almost three decades has had an impact on the research project in both positive and negative ways. Right from the start, my experience was beneficial for the study of responsible managing in the municipal company since I had already met some of the members of the top management team. They were engaged in one of the one of three interorganizational change programs that I managed for 16 years before becoming a researcher. The purpose of the programs was to increase diversity and inclusion in certain sectors (IT and telecom, construction, and energy and utility). And I believe*
that the managers’ familiarity with me and my work positively influence the decision to employ me as an industry-employed doctoral student.

I also believe that my experience, my position as an employee in the company, and the fact that I already knew people in the organization made me an insider in terms of sharing identity, language, norms, and experience with the participants of the work practices that I studied (Asselin, 2003). This comes with both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, it allows me, the researcher, to become quickly and completely accepted by the participants, to more quickly access situations I aim to study, and to help me interpret what I see and hear based on previous knowledge of how organizations in the sector organize their work. On the other hand, it put me at risk of having difficulties finding my role and responsibility as a researcher, and my preconceptions and presumptions could overshadow my actions and interpretations of what I observe. To avoid this trap, I used three different reflexive methods during the project. First, I spent the first six months of the project getting to know the organization. This allowed me time to really understand the situation and what might be interesting to study. Second, I conducted many interviews in connection with my observations of responsible managing, which provided different perspectives of what I observed. Third, I met with my three supervisors at least once a month throughout the research project to discuss the emerging versions of each paper and the thesis itself.

I understand that my experience is also of significance for the theoretical stance of this thesis. Before my career as a managing consultant, I studied Industrial engineering and management, graduating with a Master of science in 1986. My education background in engineering implies being trained in the tradition of the natural sciences, which, I must say, was never questioned during my education nor through all my years as a consultant. This means that I entered my role as a researcher with a perspective that assumes that reality is objective, tangible, and singular (Rosenberg, 2016) and that reality exists independently of what people may think or understand. I thus expected my job to be finding a set of general principles governing how things work according to a linear relation between cause and effect and then to empirically validate the findings (Burr, 2015). So, imagine my surprise when I was exposed to the world of social science in various doctoral courses and in dialogue with my supervisors. In the journey of developing my own theoretical stance, I worked to try to make sense of the pillars of social constructionism (Rosenberg, 2016; Berger & Luckman, 1966; Burr, 2105; Gergen, 2015), the process perspective (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017), practice theory (Nicolini, 2012; Gherardi, 2019; Lammi, 2018), CCO (Cooren et al., 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017), and discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1993). Step by step, I realized what perspectives and approaches would be helpful in understanding responsible managing. Nevertheless, integrating the theoretical foundation of this thesis has been, and still is, a process, but as such, it has been at the fore throughout the research process and my
supervisors have been very helpful in reminding me to consider my own and other's perspectives in almost every meeting we have had.

Studying responsible managing in the organization that I am employed in as an industry-employed doctoral student has provided me with a fantastic opportunity to pursue my research. Meanwhile, it also means having two jobs, where I am required to generate results for academia and for the company. This can be challenging and time consuming at times since the purpose of academia is to produce knowledge and to contribute to existing scientific learning, while the purpose of the company is to pursue solutions to specific problems and improve existing practices in order to produce value for shareholders and other stakeholders (Florin & Lindhult, 2015). To overcome these challenges, I am lucky to be part of the research school Future Proof Cities, where I meet more or less every week with my fellow industry-employed PhD students to discuss this very dilemma.

The results of this thesis work (i.e. the scientific manuscripts) have been discussed with other researchers in conferences, seminars, and doctoral courses. The discussion has opened the door to other perspectives in my research process and findings, as well as new perspectives on myself as a researcher.

Respect

Respect for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage, and the environment is at the core of ethical research conduct (AL-LEA, 2023). This is, perhaps, even more valid for participatory research. In terms of respect for the practitioners, respect comes down to being as open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the participants’ experience, and committed to accurately representing their experience as possible (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Respect means conducting an informed consent process in which people can feel free to reject participation without the fear of negative consequences (MIT-D-LAB, 2015). Asking professional actors about their work may, admittedly, not be considered collecting personal information, but since the information often tends to be about the actors themselves, their views, or someone else, the researcher finds it important to carefully ensure that informed consent is obtained, confidentially is observed, and safe storage practices are used, even though full anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, in this project, each interviewee was asked if he or she was willing to be interviewed after being provided with an explanation of the purpose of the interview and an overview of the main questions. All accepted willingly, whereupon an agreement was made on where to meet. In the meeting, the researcher again explained the purpose of the interview and asked for consent to record the conversation. All but one consented to recording. For the interviewee who declined, the researcher took notes instead.
When studying how the top management team manages responsibly together in meetings in the first case study, the president decided to allow the researcher to observe and record every other monthly meeting. In the first meeting, in May 2019, the president started by presenting the purpose of the observation, whereupon the members consented to the researcher’s presence and recording. In the second case study, in meetings with internal and external stakeholders, the participants were asked for consent twice. First, when the invitation was sent via e-mail with an explanation that the purpose is both for the company to better understand the stakeholders’ expectations and views on collaborative sustainability work and to produce material for the research project. Second, at the beginning of each meeting when the participants were asked for consent to the recording of the dialogues. Every participant agreed at every meeting.

Yet another issue of respect is that of the company’s dual role as a funder of the research project and contributor to the data. This requires some balancing by the researcher in terms of communicating the results of the research and negotiation skills for handling different interests (Wardenaar et al., 2014). On the one hand, the research needs to be understandable and accessible, and to be framed in ways that can inform action and decision-making, in order to be of value for this stakeholder (MIT-D-LAB, 2015). The way the results of the studies are presented in scientific articles may, however, not meet this need since they are written with other researchers as the target group, with a language that includes certain concepts that make them less comprehensible to outsiders. Therefore, the researcher has taken it upon herself to translate these texts into a more accessible language and present them verbally in workshops or other meetings with the practitioners throughout the project.

On the other hand, the results from studying the meeting practices of the company have highlighted some challenges. This is of course just one aspect of the company, that still runs a successful, well-established, operation, delivering high-quality services. Therefore, the researcher has made an effort to explain to the participants that the strict formalities of publication in academic journals does not allow a very nuanced description of context and complexity, but rather emphasize one problem, at the time. Furthermore, in the articles, the researcher and co-authors make sure to point out that what is highlighted is the challenges, and that when struggling with those challenges during the period of observation, the managers of the company still ran a successful and well-established operation.

Moreover, in respect to the municipal company, it was stipulated in the formal contract between the university and the company that 30 days before any publication, the company would be given the opportunity to review the manuscripts and would have the right to request changes if needed due to the organization’s need for secrecy. Therefore, each of the three empirically based articles was e-mailed to the researcher’s mentor at the company (for the first study, the mentor was the HR manager and for the second and third, it was the
strategy manager) in good time before being submitted to a journal or a conference. No requests for changes were made.
This thesis is supported by the contributions of four manuscripts, as summarised in Table 4 and appended to this thesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>My contribution</th>
<th>Outlet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Table 4. Description of scientific articles supporting the thesis
In this chapter, the results of each of the scientific manuscripts and their relevance to the overall aim of the thesis are presented, whereupon the results relevant to the practitioners are described.

Paper 1 – A literature review

To get an understanding of the challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice, a literature review has been performed (Ahlström, Bruzzone & Farashah, In review). The question asked in the review is and what is, to date, being done for the pursuit to reach the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level and what are the challenges municipal organizations face? In order to capture what existing scientific literature reveals in relation to the research question a systematic literature review is performed, using the keywords of implementation, Agenda 2030, and municipality. The search is limited to articles published between 2017 and 2022 in the field of management, urban studies, and regional planning. This resulted in 132 articles. Reading the heading and abstract of each of these articles, another 48 articles can be excluded due to lack of empirical data (conceptual papers) and not being relevant to a municipal level of action (papers focusing on the national or individual level, or on private corporations). The remaining 77 articles were coded based on the practical guide of data analysis of general literature reviews of Popenoe et al. (2021). Central for the analyse was a matrix summarizing the information gained from stepwise analysis of the articles. Aiming to answer the research question, focus was on what process phases, phenomenon, and challenges was studied in each of the articles. The results revealed two main themes and five sub-themes and an understanding of what challenges that municipal organizations face in their pursuit of reaching the SDGs.

Findings

Overall, the research is quite limited in terms of the number of articles, and the contributions are therefore spread thin in terms of different focus areas, such as phenomena, SDGs, industry and sector, and geographical span (European cities). Particularly limited is the number of articles focusing on municipal companies (3 articles). Nevertheless, with 77 articles found, the review still offers insight into the relevant challenges and the two recurrent themes (Ahlström, Buzzzone & Farashah, In review). The first theme is: a paradigm shift in local government, holding three sub-themes: a) setting the conditions right, b) integrative approaches, c) collaborative and participatory approaches. The other theme is the mobilization of socio-technical approaches to sustainable transition consisting of two sub-themes: d) approaches to territorial development and land use, and e) smart and technical solutions.
Quite a few articles focused on certain conditions that challenge or impede the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030. Some pointed to regulations and politics, forms of ownership, or the implication of discourse. For example, the practice of attaching the label “sustainable” to almost any projects and activities, whether or not they actually have any such impact, has become common.

However, most attention was given to challenges related to integrative work. Not least were challenges associated with the incorporation of all three dimensions of sustainability (economic, environmental, and social) in processes and activities. In some articles ecological goals were addressed exclusively at the expense of social or sustainability targets and in others activities are decoupled from already existing processes or sustainability is only part of the planning process but forgotten during implementation.

When it comes to collaborative ways of working, one obstacle identified to inter-organizational sustainable work is the highly ambiguous role municipalities tend to play in such collaborations. This ambiguity seems to arise from the municipality’s dual role as a procurer and a collaborator.

The review reveals how smart city and technical often are insufficient and sometimes even counteracting when it comes to contribution to the SDGs. What has been accomplished, so far, is merely re-crafting existing technology-based practices (e.g., electric and biofueled vehicles) that make little difference in practice. Moreover, while smart city pilot projects have recently become quite common in Europe, there is still an uneven deployment between different cities and what is being done is mainly polite projects. Upscaling smart city pilot projects is highlighted as a widely perceived problem.

Despite all these challenges, a few interesting examples of actual contributions to the SDGs is also found. One example is that of an Italian waste management company, practicing responsible managing by holding itself responsible towards the natural environment, as an important stakeholder, and also making the end-users of the service pay for door-to-door collection of waste according to a “polluter pays” principle. Through this the company significantly contributes to the achievement of several of the SDGs. Other examples refer to way of increasing the collaborative capacity of cities required for transformation. For example, by seizing the opportunities that emerge in response to certain disruptive changes (e.g., a sudden closing of a cement factory or a fatal fireworks accident) or to develop participatory areas where different stakeholder can meet and network. A last example relates to how working together on one district at a time, can make the challenging endeavour of reaching the goals of Agenda 2030 more surmountable.

Relevance
This review (Ahlström, Buzzzone & Farashah, In review) is relevant in various ways to the overall aim of this thesis, as it increases knowledge on the
challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company. First, the review points to the lack of knowledge on municipal companies (only three articles), despite the important role they play in the urgent and challenging accomplishment of responsible managing towards the goals of Agenda 2030.

Second, the review put the challenges that managers in a municipal company face when managing broad responsibility in context. Showing what the challenges of managing broad responsibility are for municipalities, also creates an understanding for the challenges also municipal companies have to handle. Third, the review confirms the importance of increasing knowledge of collaborative and integrative ways of working to tackle the challenges of sustainable urban development. The review establishes that the potential of such approaches is still rather untapped in practice in European municipalities and offers a few concrete examples of how such work may be accomplished.

Paper II - Managing responsibly together: how an obligation is made to matter in the top management team work

To understand the challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company, a study has been performed to investigate how one obligation is made to matter in situ in the work of a top management team (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023). The obligation chosen is an obligation towards the owner to work towards the goals of Agenda 2030. The focus on a single obligation allows for a greater understanding of how the enactment of responsible managing evolves over time, and to what end. Responsible managing in this case means taking the obligation that has been imposed through the allocation and acceptance of the owner directive seriously and responding accordingly (Kittay, 1999; Brunsson et al., 2022), that is, making the obligation matter over time.

To answer the research question, “How is an obligation made to matter in situ in the work of a top management team?”, the work performed by the top management team in meetings is followed over a period of 18 months. Building on process and practice approaches to managing work (Nicolini, 2012) in combination with the approach of CCO (Cooren et al., 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017), an obligation is considered to be made to matter in communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009). If this obligation is articulated as a collective concern, and, in particular, if it is materialized in some artefact (e.g. a document), it can then travel and affect subsequent conversations, becoming a co-author of actions by enabling and animating actions (Vasquez et al., 2018).

By focusing on the eight communicative events (Cooren et al., 2011) in which the TMT engages in negotiations, arguments, and agreements on issues
related to this obligation, the data is analysed in a systematic fashion (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using the theoretical framework of CCO (Cooren et al., 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017). Through the coding of doings related to how the obligation is made to matter, some recurrent doings are identified: articulating, negotiating, and co-authoring the obligation; defining objectives and tasks for others and for the team; providing and accepting accounts; and answering for what is done. Then, when considering what the identified doings achieve, three accomplishments in which the obligation is made to matter are identified: making the obligation present, making the obligation enable action, and accounting for the obligation.

Findings

Figure 4. Ongoing accomplishments to make an obligation matter over time.

When a top management team works together to make an obligation towards the owner matter in communication, three recurrent accomplishments are found to be significant: making the obligation present, making the obligation enable action, and accounting for the obligation (see Figure 4). Without the ongoing achievement of all three accomplishments, the response to the obligation is at risk of being fragmented or perhaps minimised completely.

The first accomplishment is to keep the obligation present and at the fore throughout the collective work of the top management team. This is done through the repeated articulation of issues related to the obligation in talk or
written text, and by continuously negotiating what needs to be done and by whom. Furthermore, it is important that the team spends time together co-authoring what has been decided in order to ensure the obligation is granted authority. The second accomplishment is to make the obligation enable action. While a top management team does not perform all actions themselves, they need to actively ensure that the obligation is translated into objectives and tasks that others will respond to or that they will respond to themselves. The third accomplishment, finally, is to account for the obligation by providing and accepting accounts and answering for what is being done.

What the article (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023) highlights is the significance of all three of these accomplishments together and that they all need to be accomplished repeatedly over time for an obligation to be made to matter. Thus, making an obligation matter over time is not a rational or linear process, but rather one that unfolds as the obligation is repeatedly made present, is permitted to enable action, and is accounted for in the joint work of a management team.

Relevance
This article (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023) contributes to the overall aim of this thesis, by developing knowledge on how managing responsibly together may be considered an ongoing achievement, where three recurrent accomplishments are to be at play for an obligation to be made to matter. This means that an obligation keeps being translated in new ways and into new shapes in the different conversations and through the different documents where the obligation is handled.

By identifying the three accomplishments needed for the obligation to be made to matter, Ahlström and Crevani (2023) provide a vocabulary that may be particularly useful for top management teams that face special challenges due to their responsibility to set the overall direction for the organization as a whole (Hambrick, 1995), while dealing with all of the organization’s competing obligations (Maine et al., 2023). While top management teams pose a specific case with their own unique dynamics, the concepts may also be of relevance more generally for those who have to manage together to make obligations matter.

Paper III - How meeting practices affects the accomplishment of broad responsibility
To understand the challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company, a study has been performed to investigate how the work of a top management team in meetings
affects the accomplishment of broad responsibility over a period of two years (Ahlström, In review). Following the work of a top management team is of interest to this thesis since municipal companies are known to organize and manage work that stand in the way of accomplishing broad responsibilities (Head & Alford, 2015; Olsen et al., 2017). Focusing on meeting practices in particular is important since meetings are a central element in the top management team’s collaboration. While team meetings have been well studied (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. 2017) and have been shown to have an effect on the team and organizational level, less is known about how top management team meetings affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

The article builds on the communicative constitution of organizing (CCO) stream of research to consider communication as the means by which an organization is constituted and sustained (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Schoenneborn & Vasquez, 2017). This allows one to observe how micro-level communicative practices in top management team meetings affect what is accomplished by the team. The data selected is analysed in a systematic fashion (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by going through all of the transcribed data from the 10 observed meetings to identify and code doings and accomplishments that correspond to what the team does together when enacting broad responsibility. After going through several stages of refinement of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by using the theoretical framework of CCO (Cooren et al., 2015; Schoenneborn & Vasquez, 2017), certain communicative practices in the meetings (the use of an agenda, minutes, timeslots, turn-taking, and stakeholder voicing) stand out as particularly consequential for the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

Findings

Building on the CCO perspective, Ahlström (In review) shows that certain ways of enacting common communicative practices within meetings allow parts of the organization to be made present more often than the organization as a whole, the present time to be present more often than the future, and profit more often than the other dimensions of sustainability. It is not the communicative practices themselves, but rather the way they are enacted that enables the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

The results of the present study reveal that something as mundane and trivial as an agenda with restricted turn taking and delimited timeslots has a great impact on what the top management team accomplishes together, even enough to make it possible for the team to disregard the owner directive. Through the repetition and frequency of recurrent meeting practices, relationships, norms, and roles are allowed to evolve over time into rather fixed forms and therefore become quite difficult to alter (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). Furthermore, the findings show that the decisions made in one meeting and documented in the minutes of meetings are seldom invoked as a source of authority in discussions.
on the same issue in subsequent meetings (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). Without spending the time to conclude or co-author the outcome of conversations (Vasquez et al., 2018) in a document that can travel between team meetings, there is a risk that important decisions may not be made to matter. Finally, the top management team enacted a practice of using team members or other employees to give voice to important, but absent, stakeholders to promote issues of sustainability, but these voices were repeatedly silenced by other voices in the meeting with more authority. Without strengthening the authority of those who animate important stakeholders (Cooren, 2015), broad responsibility will not be accomplished.

Thus, the enactment of the communicative practices is found to stand in the way for broad responsibility to be accomplished. For the team to accomplish broad responsibility, other ways of enacting those practices may be necessary.

Relevance

This article (Ahlström, In review) contributes to the overall aim of this thesis, that is, to increase knowledge on the challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company, by opening the “black box” of top management team meetings to understand how certain communicative practices in the meetings affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility.

When a municipal company is obliged to pursue the goals of Agenda 2030 in combination with its existing obligations towards different stakeholders (Maine et al., 2023), new ways of organizing and managing that are able to embrace broader responsibility are needed (Kerrissey et al., 2017; Head & Alford, 2015; Fobbe, 2020; Gustafsson et al., 2022). While prior research has looked at different ways to handle such broad responsibility, particularly collaborative ways of working, the focus of this research has tended to be on the system and organizational level (Head & Alford, 2015). Instead, this article brings attention to the mundane work practice of a top management team working together to accomplish such broad responsibility.

Responsible managing is, admittedly, accomplished throughout the organization (Denis et al., 2017). Still, focusing on the top management team is motivated due to the role this team has for the organization as a whole (Hambrick, 1989) and the role it plays in shaping its long-term development (Bruch et al., 2005). To this end, the top management team works together as a collective. Knowledge on how the collaborative top management team work is managed in practice, is still relatively scarce (Denis et al., 2017). What is known, however, is that meetings are one of the most prevalent features in the everyday organizing and managing of an organization’s work (Sandler & Thedvall 2017) and that meetings have been shown to be quite consequential for what teams and organizations accomplish (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2017).
Therefore, the findings of Ahlström (In review), i.e., that the way certain communicative practices are enacted in top management team meetings creates the conditions for whether broad responsibility is accomplished, are in line with the overall aim of this thesis. Moreover, the findings have implications for which aspects of top management team meetings can be altered to support, rather than hinder, the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030.

**Paper IV - Negotiating shared responsibility for sustainable urban development: pronouns and in-here-ness as rhetorical resources**

To further understand the challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company, a study focusing on inter-organizational collaboration was performed. A focus on the challenges of shared responsibility is important since collaborative ways of working have been recognized as a key principle for addressing broad responsibilities (Head & Alford, 2015; Fobbe, 2020). Collaboration has been acknowledged as key for meeting the goals of Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015) and has also been acknowledged by the owner of the municipal company and the company itself. In particular, the focus is on how shared responsibility for sustainable development is constructed in negotiations between different stakeholders (Ahlström, Lindell & Stier, In review).

To be able to study the localized, situated negotiation of shared responsibility on a discursive micro-level (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000), a discursive psychology approach (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1993) is applied. With this approach, shared responsibility is seen as something that is accomplished on an ongoing basis through talk and text in negotiation (Potter, 1996), where people use rhetorical resources to manage dilemmas of individual and collectively shared responsibility and related dilemmas of stake (Stokoe, 2003).

For the purposes of the study, four text extracts were selected from the vast empirical material produced through the participatory research project, which was conducted to improve the work practices employed for strategic collaborations in the studied municipal company. More specifically, the extracts are taken from negotiations in meetings between municipal actors who have undertaken obligations to work towards the goals of Agenda 2030. In these meetings, the municipal actors discuss how to collaborate on the district level of the city. When analysing the text, attention is given to how the speakers use rhetorical resources to position themselves and others in relation to the willingness and ability to take responsibility, and to who is included in shared responsibility.
Findings

The analysis of rhetorical resources used by speakers to position themselves as part of, as well as capable of, shared responsibility, shows how fragile the construction of shared responsibility is. The way speakers use rhetorical resources continuously fluctuates between different positions along two continuums. Along the first, the speaker positions himself or herself in relation to who is responsible for sustainability. The second continuum pertains to discursive constructions of agency: the ability of the who to assume responsibility. This second continuum ranges from discursive constructions of the inability to assume responsibility, due to circumstances outside of the speaker that prevent responsibility, referred to as out-there-ness (Potter, 1996), to constructions of the ability to assume responsibility without anything standing in the way. The latter is referred to as in-here-ness by Ahlström, Lindell and Stier (In review). The two continuums are shown below (see Figure 5), including the four different rhetorical position explained above.

![Figure 5. Responsibility between who and agency.](image)

What the findings imply is that shared responsibility is to be understood as an ongoing communicative accomplishment, assumed or opposed through rhetorical resources in negotiation. The one position of shared responsibility (marked in grey), where the actor is constructed as both able and willing to take responsibility and as part of a collective identity, is not something that is accomplished once and for all through a linear process. Instead, shared responsibility is something that is continuously produced in communication. Hence, the study illustrates in detail what Koschmann et al. (2012) argue: that collective agency is a process of emergence based on communication, and certain communicative practices (text and talk) may accomplish the collective agency needed for carrying out what can only be accomplished in collaboration.
Relevance

This article (Ahlström, Lindell & Stier, In review) is relevant for understanding the challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company by illustrating how fragile the discursive construction of shared responsibility is and how shared responsibility is an ongoing communicative accomplishment, assumed, or opposed, through micro-level negotiations. In particular, the article shows how linguistically assuming shared responsibility as discursive action presupposes both the recurrent and concurrent discursive construction of in-here-ness, on the one hand, and a discursive construction of collective identity, on the other hand. Still, the speakers fluctuate between the different positions during the dialogues, making shared responsibility an occasional occurrence in practice.

Practical results to be implemented in the studied company

The relevance of this thesis project for the company depends on whether the project can contribute knowledge and action that is actually useful for improving the company’s current work practices (Florin & Lindhult, 2015). To ensure that the outcome is relevant enough, a dialogue has been started with different actors in the organization in one-on-one meetings in semi-structured interviews and in more informal meetings, as well as in reflective workshops, as already described.

The practical results produced throughout the thesis project are delivered in different forms (see Figure 6).

![Figure 6. An illustration of the practical results of the thesis work](image)

First, the results are delivered in the form of workshops, where the participants were given an opportunity to discuss and reflect on certain aspects of the findings presented by the researcher. In this sense, the project adhered to what is central to the participatory research approach by creating space for reflection
and meta-learning (Westberg & Polk, 2016). The top management team participated in the four workshops held during the empirical study of how the top management team manages responsibly together in meetings (case 1). The most concrete result from these workshops was that the team decided to change their meeting practices. This was done by lifting out issues related to long-term strategic work and urgent operational issues from the monthly meetings. In order to address strategic issues, separate monthly workshops lasting two hours each were organized instead. To handle the operative issues weekly, 15-minute meetings were instituted. Moreover, the team met twice a year in two-day workshops to go over certain important issues in depth.

During the second empirical study (case 2) on how shared responsibility is negotiated in collaboration, a variety of meetings were held that included both participants from within the organization and from the other organizations involved in the discussions about interorganizational collaborations. A workshop with the top management team was also held. In this case, the main results were improved practices for partnering and stakeholder collaboration and the prioritization of two improvement areas. The practice for partnering and stakeholder collaboration (see Figure 3), which was documented in a PowerPoint presentation, was handed over in its final form to the strategy manager who, in addition to functional responsibility, is assigned ownership of the process for strategic managing.

The decision to improve work practices with external actors in the area of sustainable development on the district level was further developed by the top management team, who nominated four districts to focus on and one top management team member for each to lead the collaborations. For the other decision, to pursue improvements to meet the suppliers’ demands for tougher procurement requirements, the researcher produced a project specification that was handed over to the sustainability manager and the purchasing manager who formed and led an improvement effort for sustainable procurement.

Finally, all 90 company managers participated in a workshop in May 2023 on how to manage responsibly to meet the goals of Agenda 2030 based on the results of this thesis project. This workshop produced three concrete results for the practitioners to use. First, an improved approach to manager workshops was introduced, which are conducted twice a year. What is new is that all managers now work throughout the day in their ordinary management teams on important issues related to the overall strategic plan. Also, facilitators are educated to support each of the teams in their work. Second, each team produced a list of improvements on how to improve their management team meeting practices. Third, each team worked in their own part of the organization to create a list of improvements needed to meet the suppliers’ demand for tougher procurement requirements. All of these results are to be followed up on in the next management meeting that will be held in December 2023.
In summary

The four articles that support the overall aim of this thesis, to create an understanding of the challenges that collaborative efforts to manage broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company, answer four specific research questions. The first question, “What are the challenges of managing broad responsibility and what is currently being done in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level?” is answered through a research literature review, concluding that municipal actors face many different challenges when working together towards the goals of Agenda 2030. Particularly, municipal actors have to handle challenges associated with the integration of all three dimensions of sustainability in processes and activities, manage collaborative ways of working, and make sure that efforts made are sufficient enough and not counteracting the goals of Agenda 2030.

The three following questions are answered empirically. The answer to the first question “How is an obligation made to matter in situ in the work of a top management team?” is that three recurring accomplishments – making the obligation present, making the obligation enable action, and accounting for the obligation – seem to be crucial for ensuring the obligation is not overlooked or is only partly accomplished over time (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023). The answer to the second question “How does the work of a top management team in meetings affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility?” is that the way certain common communicative practices are enacted within meetings (e.g. a predetermined agenda, limited timeslots, restricted turn-taking, minutes of meetings, and stakeholder voicing) seems to matter for whether broad responsibility is limited or divided between actors (Ahlström, In review). The answer to the third question “How is shared responsibility for sustainable development constructed in negotiation between different stakeholders?” is that shared responsibility is to be understood as an ongoing communicative accomplishment, assumed or opposed through rhetorical resources in negotiation. Without the use of in-here-ness and the pronoun “we”, shared responsibility may be fragmented into separate responsibilities, or no responsibility at all (Ahlström, Lindell & Stier, In review).

Based on these results, the overall result of this thesis is that certain situated communicative practices are influential for preventing the limitation of the broad responsibility, fragmentation of the share responsibility, and obligations not being made to matter over time. This is something that is quite challenging for municipal companies to manage since it requires the persistent and precise use of communication.
Discussion

The overall aim of this thesis is to shed light on challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company. By joining the communicative stream in practice-based studies, the relational and performative character of communication is acknowledged in this thesis. This means that responsible managing is conceptualized as a communicative accomplishment, produced interactively in specific situations, within social relationships, and through the ongoing practices of organizing and managing that managers continuously engage in during their everyday working life (Nicolini, 2012; Cooren et al, 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017; Gherardi & Laasch, 2021). Based on the findings presented in the previous chapter, a metaphor of dental prophylaxis is proposed. The metaphor has emerged after studying the two empirical cases of this thesis - a top management team managing responsibly together and responsible managing in interorganizational collaboration in a municipal company - rather than from and drawing attention to a theoretical gap. Therefore, the metaphor may have a practical relevance for this organization and can hopefully also be offered for guidance on how collaborative efforts to manage broad responsibility may be enacted.

Dental prophylaxis is used to protect teeth and prevent oral diseases which is of great importance for humans’ general well-being and long lifespan. Almost all food we consume contain sugar in some form that settles as a coating on the teeth and forms plaque. If the teeth are not attended to regularly bacteria that thrive in the mouth will convert the sugar into acid that corrodes the enamel and create fertile ground for other diseases. The prophylactic course of action used to prevent this involves dental care in the form of persistent teeth brushing and flossing, which needs to be performed twice a day, every day, throughout life, in a precise and thorough manner.

The general results of this thesis, that the way certain communicative practices are used may work to prevent the limitation of the broad responsibility, fragmentation of the share responsibility, and obligations not being made to matter over time, indicates that managing broad responsibility together in a municipal company, may also be considered prophylactic. By analogy with preventive dental care, the preventive actions suggested in this case, involves persistent and precise enactment of certain communicative practices in meetings (Ahlström, In review; Ahlström & Crevani, 2023; Ahlström, Lindell &
Stier, In review). By using the metaphor of dental prophylaxis, the need for persistent and precise communicative practices is brought to the fore. Persistence in this context means that responsible managing is an ongoing accomplishment, performed in a consistent manner over and over again, while precise means that what is being done is done thoroughly, every time.

Persistent and precise communicative practices in meetings, occurs in different forms and have different prophylactic implications. First, they may prevent obligations from being overlooked or only partly accomplished over time since precise communicative practices contribute to making each of the obligations of the broad responsibility matter over time (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023). For this, three specific accomplishments are involved, making the obligation present, enabling action, and being accounted for. This means that responsible managing is not a linear process where the three accomplishments are performed sequentially. Instead, responsible managing requires all three communicative accomplishments to be at play, one way or another, in different conversations, precisely and persistently over time (ibid). For this, the persistent and precise way of enacting certain communicative practices in the meetings has shown to be influential (Ahlström, In review). Not the least, something as mundane and trivial as the practice of a standardized agenda allows a series of meetings to be connected to each another as part of a process that contributes to making the obligations matter over time. The practice of keeping minutes during meetings, in turn, may also be used to allow decisions made in one meeting to travel to other meetings, where the decision can be called upon as a source of authority and thereby make the obligation in question present, enable action, and ensure that it is accounted for. Moreover, the practice of using predetermined limited timeslots in meetings to address a certain obligation affects the possibility to make the obligation matter over time. If the discussions are not allowed to deviate in time, there is a risk that there will not be enough time for negotiations and for moving what is agreed in relation to the obligation forward to a decision (ibid.).

Second, persistent and precise communicative practices may prevent broad responsibility from being divided or limited. Also, for this, the persistent and precise way of enacting certain communicative practices in the meetings has been shown to be influential (Ahlström, In review). The practice of using a standardized agenda may be used to affect what will be animated in the meetings or not. A carefully considered agenda may thus ensure that all obligations are integrated and made to matter through communication in the meetings. Furthermore, the practice of making the voices of a wide range of stakeholders to be heard in the meetings may contribute to a broad responsibility (ibid.).

Third, the persistent and precise enactment of communicative practices has also been shown to prevent the fragmentation of the construction of shared responsibilities (Ahlström, Lindell & Stier, In review). Shared responsibility, which is the very essence of collaboration, has been shown to be a fragile construction since speakers keep changing their position throughout
negotiations and only occasionally position themselves as responsible together with others. Only when the rhetorical resource of in-here-ness is used simultaneously with the rhetorical resources of the pronoun “we” can shared responsibility be constructed. When using other rhetorical resources, the position of the speaker is changed so that she or he is, either or both, constructed as unable to assume responsibility or being outside of the collective (ibid). Therefore, in order to prevent the construction of shared responsibility from becoming fragmented, the persistent and precise use of rhetorical resources matter for the accomplishment of broad responsibility being made in collaboration.

What the metaphor of dental prophylaxis does, is to draw attention to how collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility in practice are about ensuring that the limitation of broad responsibility, fragmentation of shared responsibility, and obligations not being made to matter are prevented. This amounts to the introduction of a new way of considering responsible managing. Considering responsible managing as a prophylactic, persistent, and precise practice, is quite new in the field of organization and management. Most of the research in this field has focused on the human actor(s) who manages responsibly (Cane, 2002) and defines what is the right thing to do normatively (e.g., Bowen, 1953; Latapi Agudelo et al., 2019; Carroll, 1991; Laasch et al., 2021). Very little attention has been paid to how responsibility may be accomplished, in practice (Barnett et al., 2020; Kempster & Jackson, 2021; Laasch & Gherardi, 2019). This way of viewing responsible managing also differs also from previous interpretations of responsible managing as an accomplishment in the form of an intervention, achieved through a systematic and sequential process with a beginning and an end (Waddock & Bodwell, 2017). By using the metaphor of dental prophylaxis, responsible managing may be understood as something that will never be finally accomplished. “Teeth brushing” is required to be enacted persistently, precisely, and in perpetuity.

Moreover, the metaphor entails considering responsibility in both a forward looking and a backward-looking sense in every situation. In the field of organization and management, responsibility has mostly been conceptualized in either a forward-looking form, referring to matters that need to be responded to for the future, or in a backward-looking form, referring to deeds already done (Jonas, 1984; Bovens, 1998; Bovens, 2007; Brunsson, et al., 2022). What the metaphor indicates, however, is that all three accomplishments of making obligations present, making the obligations enable action, and accounting for the obligations (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023) together - need to be at play in the conversations to make obligations matter. This does not mean that the accomplishments following each other in a linear process, first looking forward to what needs to be done and then looking back to see what has been done. Instead, the three accomplishments are connected to one another in various ways. What is important is that the two accomplishments, making the obligation present and enable action, where attention is paid to what needs to be done
ahead (Jonas, 1984; Brunsson et al., 2022), work together with the accomplishment of accounting for the obligations, where attention instead, is, paid to deeds already done (ibid).

This metaphor has evolved as a means for understanding that certain communicative practices are needed for the prevention of limitation of broad responsibility, fragmentation of shared responsibility, and obligations not being made to matter. These practices need to be persistently and precisely enacted. This may also contribute to the understanding of challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company. Previous research on responsible managing has identified voluntariness as a main reason for a lack of action (Waddock, 2008; Rasche, 2010; Tamvada, 2020). But the results of this thesis also show that in a municipal company that is obliged to manage broad responsibility, prophylactic communicative practices still need to be in place.

Managers of municipal companies are important actors in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 and are often formally obliged, by the owners of the company to work to achieve these goals, but without jeopardizing the ongoing production and delivery of vital public services. This has, however, shown to be quite challenging to accomplish, not the least since the way municipal companies organize and manage their work tends to limit and divide responsibility, impeding rather than supporting efforts to tackle broad responsibility (Head & Alford, 2015; Olsen et al., 2017; Maine et al., 2023). Still, managers lack knowledge on how to transition to new ways of managing responsibly. The metaphor constitutes a means for managers to start this transformation. Admittedly it is simply a metaphor, but it may be useful if it helps those who are able to make a difference in practice approach the subject of responsible managing. Understanding responsible managing as something that can be changed step by step in daily practices, for example, by changing the mundane communicative practices in meetings, rather than something that requires a massive transformation project, could make the transition more feasible.

However, this does not imply that the persistent and precise use of certain communicative practices is the only way to deal with the challenges of the multiplicity of contradicting obligations and different perspectives on what matters between the involved actors. Using the metaphor again, teeth brushing and flossing thoroughly twice every day may not be the only way to ensure general well-being and a long lifespan. While teeth brushing and flossing thoroughly twice every day is, indeed, an essential routine for protecting teeth and preventing oral diseases that affect general well-being and a long lifespan, diet, exercise, medical care, and social relationships are also known to make a difference for a long and health life. Translating this back to collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility in practice in a municipal company, this means that the municipal company, likewise, need to implement major transformation project, which in the sector that the case company operates, the energy and utility sector, may be about implementing solutions for reducing
carbon emissions, such as carbon capture and storage (CCS) or implement new sustainable business models, such as infrastructure and services for electromobility. In comparison to oral health routines, other prophylactic measures besides teeth brushing and flossing may be beneficial. Regular removal of plaque and tartar and examinations to check the mouth for cavities, gum disease, and oral cancer, and other problems are useful for the timely detection of problems that may need further treatment in terms of dental filling, orthodontic treatment, or oral surgery. In terms of responsible managing, this could mean developing other practices besides meeting practices, such as practices for stakeholder collaboration, practices for competence development, or practices for sustainable procurement.

Moreover, the metaphor of dental prophylaxis brings prophylactic, persistent, and precise communicative practices to the fore, which is a metaphor that is transferable to the case of responsible managing in municipal companies. However, at the same time the metaphor presumes the existence of institutional support, such as free dental care for children and teenagers, free guidance on teeth brushing through the schools, and access to public dental care in every city. In the case of responsible managing in municipal companies, equivalent support is unheard of. Managers in municipal companies are, in this respect, still largely ignored by academia (Ahlström, Bruzzone & Farashah, In review) and other societal institutions. Furthermore, in the metaphor about teeth brushing and flossing, these are tasks that most people perform by themselves. This is in contrast to responsible managing as the phenomenon is viewed in his thesis, that is, as a phenomenon emerging in interaction (Cooren et al., 2014), not from individual agency. It also contrasts with what has shown to be necessary to accomplish broad responsibility (Koschmann et al., 2012; Head & Alford, 2015; Fobbe, 2020).

Nevertheless, even though the metaphor has some limitations, it still brings to the fore important aspects, and it may still have managerial implications for those who struggle with the challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice. Similar to daily teeth brushing and flossing, the author recommends a persistent and precise enactment of the micro-level, mundane and seemingly trivial communicative practices in meetings. Particularly, attention may be paid to the practices of a predetermined agenda, minutes of meetings, limited timeslots, turn-taking, stakeholder voicing, and the use of rhetorical resourcing in speech. While the recommendations have not been scientifically tested but have instead emerged from a study of the challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company, they may well be useful. Given the challenging endeavours municipal companies undertake, there will never be just one way to manage responsibly. Every actor will need to find their own path, and this path will need to change and evolve over time. In this ongoing effort, the author hopes that the metaphor and the recommendations here may contribute a new way of thinking and suggestions on where to start.
Conclusion

The aim of this thesis is to increase knowledge on the challenges that collaborative efforts to managing broad responsibility encounter in practice in a municipal company. For this, one literature review and two empirical case studies have been performed based on a participatory research approach (Westberg & Polk, 2016).

The literature review aimed to answer the question, “What are the challenges to managing broad responsibility and what is currently being done in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level?” (Ahlström, Buzzzone & Farashah, In review). The finding showed that the integrative and collaborative ways of working require to manage broad responsibility in collaboration, are quite challenges in themselves.

In the two empirical case studies, in turn, responsible managing has been studied over a period of four years in a municipal company that is obliged to work to achieve the goals of Agenda 2030. A theoretical lens is used, resting on a social constructionist and processual-relational ontology supported by practice-based studies (Carroll et al., 2008; Crevani et al., 2010) in the communicative stream (Cooren et al., 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017). Altogether, three research questions have been asked. The answer to the first question, “How is an obligation made to matter in situ in the work of a top management team?”, is that three recurrent accomplishments – making the obligation present, making the obligation enable action, and accounting for the obligation – seem to be crucial for ensuring that the obligation is not overlooked or only partly accomplished over time (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023). The answer to the second question, “How does the work of a top management team in meetings affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility?”, reveals that the way certain common communicative practices within meetings, such as a predetermined agenda, limited timeslots, restricted turn-taking, minutes of meetings, and stakeholder voicing, seem to matter for whether broad responsibility is limited or divided between actors (Ahlström, In review). The answer to the third question, which focuses on how shared responsibility for sustainable development is constructed as linguistic negotiation in localized face-to-face talk, is that the rhetorical resources of in-here-ness and the pronoun “we” in conversation are key for the construction of shared responsibility (Ahlström, Lindell & Stier, In review).
Together, these results show that situated communicative practices are influential for preventing the limitation of broad responsibility, fragmentation of shared responsibility, and obligations not being made to matter over time. Based on this, a metaphor of dental prophylaxis is proposed as a way to think about responsible managing, understanding it as something that may be changed step by step in the daily practices by changing the mundane communicative practices in meetings.

By conceptualizing responsible managing as a situated communicative practice (Nicolini, 2012; Cooren et al., 2015; Schoeneborn & Vasquez, 2017) and showing how responsible managing may be enacted, this thesis contributes theoretically to the field of organization and management. So far, most research in this field has focused on the human actor(s) who manage responsibly (Cane, 2002) and has defined what is the right thing to do normatively (e.g. Bowen, 1953; Latapi Agudelo et al., 2019; Carroll, 1991; Laasch et al., 2021). By shifting the focus from who is responsible to how responsibility is accomplished, the results of this thesis allow for an understanding of responsible managing as a prophylactic endeavour and show that the persistent and precise enactment of certain communicative practices may work to prevent the limitation of broad responsibility, fragmentation of shared responsibility, and obligations not being made to matter over time.

Furthermore, by focusing on how responsible managing is accomplished in collaboration, within and between organizations, this thesis makes a theoretical contribution to the literature in the field of responsible management, which has thus far mainly focused on individual managers and their efforts to manage responsibly (Laasch et al., 2020; Adler & Laasch, 2020). With its focus on collaboration, this thesis also contributes by introducing a new concept to the literature in discursive psychology, which in turn may be used to understand responsible managing together. In this field, attention has been focused on how responsibility may be opposed through the use of the rhetorical resource out-there-ness (Potter, 1996; Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). By instead focusing on how responsibility may be assumed and by introducing the concept of in-here-ness (Ahlström, Lindell & Stier, In review), this thesis also adds to this discussion.

In relation to the stream of research within the field of organization and management focusing on communicative practices and building on the CCO approach (Cooren, 2016; Schoeneborn et al., 2020), this thesis also makes a theoretical contribution by further drawing attention to the phenomenon and contributing new knowledge. Building on the argument of Cooren (2016), that responsibility may be seen as an object of decision, based on careful valuation of what matters in every situation, and that of Schoeneborn et al. (2020), that a wide range of stakeholder voices need to be heard and acknowledged for broad responsibility to be accomplished, this thesis finds that beyond making what matters (the obligations) present though stakeholder voicing, two other accomplishments are also necessary. Together, three accomplishments –
making the obligation present, making the obligation enable action, and accounting for the obligation – are what make obligations matter over time (Ahlström & Crevani, 2023). Moreover, this thesis offers knowledge of how the enactment of certain communicative practices in meetings, such as the agenda, minutes of meetings, and limited timeslots, affect these three accomplishments and also the accomplishment of broad responsibility (Ahlström, In review).

Being an industry-employed doctoral student conducting a long-term study of responsible managing in a municipal company, particularly the work of a top management team, has also allowed for certain empirical contributions. On the one hand, the mundane, everyday enactment of responsible managing among a top management team working together in meetings has been thoroughly described in this thesis. This is an important contribution, since research on the work practices of such a team is still quite scarce (Denis et al. 2017) and the top management team is a context that is quite difficult to access (Jarzabkowski et al. 2022). Moreover, most leadership research concerns the relationship between leaders and their subordinates, rather than the leader’s responsibilities towards their many other stakeholders (Kempster & Jackson, 2021), and even less research has been done on the members’ joint response. On the other hand, the circumstances and challenges of managing broad responsibility together in a municipal company have been outlined in depth. This contribution is also significant due to the important role such companies play in the pursuit of the goals of Agenda 2030 and the scarcity of research on such companies (Voorn 2017; Ahlström, Bruzzone & Farashah, In review).

Finally, this thesis offers guidance to managers in municipal companies on how situated responsible managing practices may be enacted to accomplish broad responsibility by pointing to everyday conversations in meetings.

Limitations and further research

This thesis contributes knowledge on responsible managing in the field organization and management through results that can best be illustrated by a metaphor. What has been studied empirically over time in one particular municipal company constitutes an important case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of responsible managing in the sense that the company produces and delivers services that are vital for society and thus have the potential to make significant contributions to achieving the goals of Agenda 2030. The company is obliged to work according to the goals of Agenda 2030, but without jeopardizing the ongoing production and delivery of vital public services, while also maintaining high levels of profit, which is a challenge other municipal companies also face. The company has organized its work in a way that divides and limits responsibility, which is also quite common for municipal organizations in general. Finally, knowledge on how to transition to the responsible managing practices needed
to meet such complex and broad responsibility is largely missing for all municipal actors. The value of this study therefore lies in the particular knowledge achieved from unpacking how responsible managing practices are enacted in the particular context of this specific site. The way responsible managing is enacted in this municipal company is specific to this organization, and it cannot be expected that other actors work in exactly the same way. However, other actors may also use communicative practices in meetings, and the analysis made in this thesis may therefore lead to an understanding that is relevant in many other cases. Nevertheless, it is likely that similar communicative practices in meetings are to be found in other organizations, and the enactment found in this case is also recognised by other managers. What we learn from this study may well be consequential for many other municipal companies that are also faced with the challenges of multiple and contradicting obligations. If so, this may potentially have repercussions for society at large. That said, empirical studies on municipal companies are scarce in general (Voorn 2017), and even more so in relation to how such companies work to contribute to the goals of Agenda 2030 (Ahlström, Bruzzone & Farashah, In review). Therefore, more knowledge is needed, both in terms of additional case studies and comparative studies.

Moreover, the mundane, everyday enactment of responsible managing in a top management team working together in meetings has been given ample attention in this thesis. This does, however, not mean that top team managers are the only ones in the organization who affect the accomplishment of broad responsibility. Responsibility is taken throughout the organization (Denis et al., 2017). This being the case, research on the accomplishment of responsibility involving employees on other levels of the organization deserves further attention.
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Municipalities Working for Agenda 2030: Review and Agenda for Future Research

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Abstract
Considering the population density of urban areas, their levels of consumption and emissions, their influence on social equality and inclusion, and the resources and power allocated to urban actors, it is important to examine how municipalities organize work as they proceed to implement Agenda 2030 and to what effect. A systematic literature review is used to analyse 77 articles, published between 2017 and 2022, that examine the sustainability activities of municipal actors in Europe. Two themes are identified and explained: a) a paradigm shift in local government; b) the mobilization of socio-technical approaches (e.g., smart cities and regenerative land use). Also, the limitations of the literature and some areas for future research are discussed: research comparing practices across regions and countries; research analysing the interaction of different initiatives within a municipality; and research examining the role of municipal companies.

Keywords: municipality, sustainable urban development, Agenda 2030, Europe
1 Introduction

In the interest of making the planet a better place for us all, the UN has recognized the importance of taking action on the urban level with the adoption of different strategies, first, Agenda 21 and then more recently, the Agenda 2030 resolution (UN 2015), particularly through the inclusion of Goal #11 with its direct association with at least eleven other sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda of Habitat III in 2016.

Even though cities occupy just 3 per cent of the Earth’s land, their contribution to the problem, accounting for 70 per cent of energy consumption and 70 per cent of greenhouse emissions, is disproportionately large (Florida 2017). Many cities are also quite vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters (UN 2022). Furthermore, even though people generally do better in large, dense, knowledge-based cities, social inequality prevails. Blue-collar workers, service workers as well as other less privileged societal groups are falling behind (Florida 2017; Butcher et al. 2021). Still, for all of the challenges and tensions cities generate, they also hold a range of opportunities for change (Florida 2017; Krellenberg et al. 2019) and they are even acknowledged to play a key role in driving transition and in being a crucial connector between the global impact of climate change and the local dimension of needed solutions (UN 2015).

However, even before the UN’s acknowledgement and identification of this role, urban actors had already started experimenting with measures to address climate change and facilitate sustainable transitions (Broto and Bulkeley 2016). Still, for the most part, the transformations needed seem to be yet to come (Bexell and Jönsson 2021; Fox and MacLeod 2022). As Lorrain et al. (2018) claim, while the GIEC did not focus on the urban level in the first place (Lorrain et al., 2018), urban actors have become a central due to the services they provide to society (mobility, water, heating, waste, etc.).

Various reasons for the delay have been suggested. For example, Valencia et al. (2019) point to how the interpretation and the implementation of the SDGs have shown to be challenging due to the complexity of and sometimes contradictions between the goals as well as the constraints caused by the current global economic systems. Another criticism is that urban actors have been given a key role without having the real power (Graute 2016) and without guidance on how to effect change in their daily operations (Graute 2016; Fenton and Gustafsson 2017; Krantz and Gustafsson 2021). Others, in turn, pointed out how the way urban actors organize work impedes, rather than supports, their efforts to tackle such complex work (Head and Alford 2015; Quitzau et al. 2022). The studies underscore the gap between the challenge to be met and urban actors’ ability to make the necessary transition. Others, like Liverman (2018), clearly point at the open contradictions inherent in SDGs, which tend to combine economic growth and environmental protection.

Despite these limitations, it is undeniable that the Agenda and SDGs can be acknowledged as an undeniable driver for organizational and intra-organizational change (Dzhengiz, 2000) and learning for cities, as it is confirmed by scholars in urban and organization studies who have recently organized a track on this within the framework of the European Group for Organization Studies in 2022 (Sub-theme 57: Smart and Liveable Cities: SDGs in Urban Governance and Organization).

The aim of this literature review (2017–2022) is to explore the current state of research on how the work of implementing the goals of Agenda 2030 is organized and with what effect. Our research question is: what is, to date, being done in relation to the pursuit to reach the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level and what are the challenges municipal organizations...
face? To what extent do the Agenda goals represent a re-organizational principle for urban governance towards sustainable transition?

The contribution of this article is twofold: first, to present a comprehensive review which, to our knowledge, is currently missing; and second, to integrate knowledge developed in both management and urban studies. This approach is meant to enhance our knowledge in relation to Agenda 2030 with a focus on organizational processes. Moreover, the review is relevant since more than half of the time has passed from when the Agenda was signed and to when the goals are expected to have been reached.

Meanwhile, while researchers have focused on the challenges facing urban actors in the pursuit of the SDGs, the urgency of the matters remains, and, step by step, urban actors are making progress and learning how to work in new ways.

Many actors are involved in sustainable urban development work; politicians on municipal councils making all the major decisions and municipal departments and private and public companies collaboratively performing the organizational and operational work. However, in this paper we will limit the research to the activities of municipal organizations. Municipalities are important (Valencia 2019) as they already have a wide range of responsibilities in cities, as are municipal companies, since municipalities commonly have been delegated the responsibility for certain vital services, such as housing, energy, water, and waste management.

We have also limited our search to Europe since European municipalities have historically followed comparable developmental paths and, aside from their differences, play similar roles in the interplay between nation state and global goals (Le Galès 2002). In general, the EU's climate, energy, transport, and taxation rules and policies, particularly its emphasis on A2030 and the European Green Deal, make European countries comparable regarding sustainable development.

Our research presents two main themes in the literature: first it acknowledges the connection of sustainability transition to a wider and progressive paradigm shift towards local governance which has characterized European cities starting from the ‘90s. Secondly, it highlights specific socio-technical approaches connected to sustainable transition, including the development of models for measuring and monitoring SDG targets and indicators. Over and above that, as we will consider in the discussion session, we pinpoint a persisting fragmentation in the way that urban sustainability is tackled and researched. At the same time, we provide some suggestions for future research.

2 Method

A systematic literature review (SLR) was used to analyse the existing literature on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and of SDGs in municipalities across Europe. A SLR identifies, critically assesses, and synthesizes the available research on a specific subject and provides informative and evidence-based insights (Petticrew and Roberts 2008). To ensure the quality of the identification and analysis, Fink’s (2019) process for SLR was followed.

2.1 Selection of articles and inclusion criteria

We began by identifying relevant research by searching for articles in the Web of Science database. The main keywords for the search included “implementation”, “2030 Agenda”, and “municipality”, as they reflect the research questions. However, other similar terms used by researchers were also included. Therefore, “realization”, “transition”, “transformation”,
“achievement”, “materialization”, and “enactment” were used as alternative terms for “implementation,” while “UN Agenda 2030”, “sustainable development goal”, “SDG”, and “sustainable urban development” were used as alternatives for “2030 Agenda.” We limited our search to articles published after 2016, as the UN Agenda 2030 was published in September 2015. The search was done in published and early-access articles in January 2023. The keywords were then used to search the available papers by topic, title and abstract. The search was further limited to publications in English. The geographical scope of the review was narrowed to studies conducted in a municipality or municipalities, not only in the EU but also in the UK and the EFTA countries (e.g., Norway, Switzerland). These countries have comparable governance structures and regulatory frameworks. Moreover, given our focus on municipal government and management, our search was limited to articles published in management, urban studies, and regional planning. After the article abstracts were read to ensure the relevance of the articles (e.g., that they described research in our target European countries that was relevant to municipal responsibilities), the first search resulted in 126 articles.

The second round of article screening was done by reading the full text. A total of 49 articles were eliminated during the second round. Nineteen articles were conceptual papers with no empirical data (e.g., Buhmann and Fieseler 2022; Pesch et al. 2019; Wood 2019) and 30 were related to areas or a policy-making level not relevant to a specific municipality. Examples of levels of analysis other than municipality include citizen level (Beumer 2018), cooperative level (Mozas-Moral et al. 2021), sector/industry level (Hübshcer et al. 2022), national level (e.g., Pizzi et al. 2020), and international level (e.g., Voegtlin and Scherer 2017). The remaining 77 articles were included in the review. The main publication outlets were Cities, seven articles, Landscape and Urban Planning, five articles, European Planning Studies, five articles, Journal of environmental planning and management, four articles, and Smart cities, four articles.

2.2 Coding of the articles

Each article was coded inspired by the practical guide of data analysis of literature reviews by Popenoe et al. (2021), where coding is performed stepwise. Each article was initially coded by the first author and after that the other authors checked the results. In cases of disagreement, the articles were discussed by the three authors together in order to reach a consensus.

First, an article matrix was made to have an overview of all the 77 articles (see Appendix 1). After reading the abstract of all the 77 articles, the matrix was filled with information for each article in terms of authors, year of publishing, title, journal, and abstract and also the focus of each study in terms of research question, SDG, industry, country, theoretical framework, and method. In the cases where the abstracts did not provide sufficient information to fill these columns, the articles were read in full length. The result from the first step is summarized in table 1.

In the second step, a more thorough reading of the full-length articles was performed, aiming to answer the research question: what are the challenges and what is, to date, being done in relation to the pursuit to reach the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level? What emerged from this round of analysis was the identification of three process phases: policymaking, strategizing, and planning in 43 articles; developing, transforming, and adaptation in 22 articles, and monitoring and measuring in 12 articles. These three process phases are compatible with the plan-do-check cycle of management. Policymaking, strategizing and planning pertain to work of municipalities in establishing objectives and processes necessary for realization of Agenda 2023. For instance, Mahmoud et al. (2021) explained the efforts of some municipalities in establishing new mechanisms and methodologies for co-creation together with city stakeholders and Ring et al. (2021) presented cases of reengineering of the urban planning to optimize land use in the era of climate change and the sensitivity of green infrastructure.
Developing, transforming, and adapting refer to the actual work of realizing Agenda 2030 and implementing planned projects and processes. For instance, van Winden and van den Buuse (2017) presented processes for upscaling smart city pilot projects and Kroh (2019) identified success factors for implementing an urban innovation project. Finally, monitoring and measuring are efforts made by municipalities to quantify and control the progress and to report the results of their work regarding Agenda 2030. For instance, Angelakoglou et al. (2020) selected the most relevant indicators for smart city projects focusing on energy transition by combining several standards and offered a compressed multidimensional measurement model encompassing indicators for environmental, economic, and social dimension, as well as for energy, ICT, mobility, governance, and scalability. D’Inverno et al. (2021) referred particularly to SDGs #6 and #12 and suggested indicators to evaluate the performance of water utilities, encompassing economic profitability, financial solvency, water losses, and customer satisfaction. Ricciardelli et al. (2018) and Magliacani (2022) focused on SDG #11 and provided public organizations with a management model for sustainable resilience as advocated by this goal. The results revealed that more than half of the articles focused only on one of the abovementioned three process phases. The details are provided in Appendix 1.

The third step in coding was performed by going through the articles again, this time focusing on the phenomenon studied, the results, and contribution. As a result, five recurrent sub-themes emerged which we organized into two main themes: 1) paradigm shift in local government and 2) the mobilization of socio-technical approaches to sustainable transition. The former theme consisted of three sub-themes: a) Setting the conditions right (8 articles), b) integrative approaches (9 articles), c) Participatory and collaborative approaches (21 articles), The latter theme, in turn, consisted of two sub-themes: d) approaches to territorial development and land use (19 articles), and e) smart and technical solutions (16 articles). Given the breadth of activities that the municipalities are carrying out to reach the goals of Agenda 2030, these themes provide a more detailed account of the work of municipalities than the process phases explained in step three. The rest of the paper is organized around these two main themes and their five sub-themes. Appendix 1, in turn, provides an overview of the coding in detail.

The fourth step entailed an analysis of each sub-theme, this time in regard to whether the article is focused on challenges or other impeding factors that municipal organizations face when working towards the goals of Agenda 2030. This revealed that in total 30 articles described some kind of challenge that urban actors face in the pursuit of the SDGs. A summary of the number of articles identified in steps two to four is found in table 2.

3 Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the articles selected. It appears that research on the implementation of SDGs in the context of cities is growing, as the number of published articles is increasing by the year. The most frequently researched SDG was SDG 11, whereas research interest in the other SDGs was fairly evenly distributed. Most of the articles (62%) were related to SDG 11. Within this goal and of the 50 articles, 37 set forth a detailed position and focused on a specific target. Targets 11.1 (safe and affordable housing), with seven articles, and 11.7 (access to safe and inclusive green and public spaces), with nine articles, were the areas that received more attention. Regarding the geographical scope, municipalities in Scandinavia (18 articles) and Italy (13 articles) were the most frequently researched areas.

Moreover, only 3 of the 77 articles focused on municipal companies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Publication</th>
<th>SDG Number</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11. Sustainable Cities and Communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2. Sustainable Agriculture and 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Good Health and Well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6. Clean Water and Sanitation and 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7. Affordable and Clean Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8. Decent Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5. Gender Equality and 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10. Reduced Inequality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12. Responsible Consumption and 4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13. Climate Action</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17. Partnership for the Goals</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Unspecified</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Number of articles according to the demographic characteristics, the relevant SDG numbers, and the geographic scope.

4 Summary of the literature

This literature review aims to answer the question: what are the challenges and what is, to date, being done in relation to the pursuit to reach the goals of Agenda 2030 at the municipal level? After reading and coding the 77 articles, we identified two main themes in the literature: 1) what we call a paradigm shift in local government, 2) the mobilization of socio-technical approaches to sustainable transition. Both of the themes consist of sub-themes that will be further detailed in the following sections. The articles belonging to each sub-theme will be briefly described in terms of how the articles connect to the themes, what process phase is dealt with, and whether the article focuses on benefits or concerns with the issue of the sub-themes that urban actors face in the pursuit of the SDGs.

4.1 A paradigm shift in local government

The first trend in the literature consists of what we call the paradigm shift that sustainability issues have brought about in the traditional operations of local governments. Involved in this is the shift to more integrative and participatory approaches. The conditional impediments to that shift are also part of the paradigm shift. It is worth noting that not all these changes are connected to the Agenda itself or to the “sustainability turn” of cities. Some of them are connected to the broader reconfiguration of post-industrial economics and restructuring of the power relationships between national and local governments and between the private and the public sector.

4.1.1 Setting the conditions right

An important aspect of transformation in the direction of the SDGs is advocacy work (8 articles). This implies making sure that important issues are on the agenda of policy-makers, that national and local undertakings align, and that power and policy are coherent across all levels of government (Fox and Macleod 2022). This all refers to what we have defined as being part of the process phase of policymaking, planning, and strategizing. In total eight articles in our review illuminated different aspects of conditions that have shown to impede sustainable urban development. Four articles pointed out how the absence of legislation may prevent...
municipalities from taking responsibility and action (Klimas 2020) and how austerity and scalar politics impact the planning and governance of the circular economy (Turcu and Gillie 2020). Fern et al. (2021) warned that in England neoliberal deregulation of planning in the housing sector, while it did bring more flexibility to the sector and resulted in more houses being delivered, brought a deterioration in quality and lost opportunity to secure affordable housing and public infrastructure through planning gain. Garrido-Jimenez et al. (2019) highlighted how the current tax system in England impedes more sustainable urban development, since it promotes the production of a high volume of real estate properties rather than the effective use of such properties.

Moreover, one article in this review focused on the ownership forms of municipal companies, showing that whether the municipality is the sole owner of such a company or not may have a certain effect on the company’s financial and ecological performance (Esposito et al. 2021). Two other studies highlighted the importance of discourse: Elander and Gustavsson (2019), on the one hand, find that the label of sustainability is applied to many projects, most of which have no actual social impact. Instead, in Sweden, socio-spatial inequalities and segregation have continued in parallel with the programmes. Saldert (2017), on the other hand, explored how the sustainability discourses in two Swedish municipalities have shifted from focusing on adapting to the eco-cycle to focusing on sustainable growth.

Finally, two studies addressed the issue of responsibility: De Laurentis (2020) examines the relationship between state policy and regional sustainability in Italy and the UK, in relation to renewable energy deployment. This study confirms that delegating responsibilities to the local level allows solutions to be tailored to each local situation as regards energy resources and land-use interests. Elander and Gustavsson (2019) explained how the organization of work impedes the implementation of social sustainability in a Swedish urban development programme. The authors observed how the central government governs at a distance by combining financial rigour and regulatory power with a hands-off approach and selective fragmentation into local projects, in which local governments play a leading role. Responsibility is thus only partly decentralized.

4.1.2 Integrative approaches

In this review, attention so paid to (nine articles) issues of incorporating the three dimensions of sustainability (economic, environmental, and social) into and across processes and activities. All of them refer to what we have defined as being part of the process phase of policymaking, planning, and strategizing.

Two examples of successful integrative efforts were found. Pla-Julian and Guevara (2020) analysed the impact of gender and sustainability being jointly mainstreamed and integrated with different processes of a municipality, such as urban planning, public procurement, and municipal tenders. The outcome indicated more awareness of women’s experience of the use of transportation and increased gender parity in collaboration and horizontality in public–private relationships. Finally, we found an example of how to perform integrative work related to different time spans. Neuvonen and Ache (2017) address the issue of integrating both short and long-term perspectives by promoting the framework of back-casting in order to introduce long-term visions into urban planning.

Still, more articles were found on decoupling, incomplete implementation, and impeding factors for integration. Bibri and Krogsstie (2020) and Ring et al. (2021) illustrated how urban green infrastructures are still considered as addressing ecological goals exclusively, rather than addressing social and climatical goals as well, and this may also be because of the lack of tools. By contrast, based on a study of strategic plans of 18 European cities, Hersperger et al. (2020) concluded that a strong anthropocentric perspective on landscapes is predominant.
Others, instead, highlighted challenges of integrating sustainability targets and activities into and across already existing processes (Krantz and Gustafsson 2021) or of keeping the priority of decisions across process stages (Callway et al. 2018). Kassis et al. (2021) showed the importance of integrating different land use projects (i.e., coherence between development policies an agri-food strategy). More precisely, they showed that local farmland preservation can constrain the ambition for a sustainable territorial development. Giljevic and Novak (2020), finally, analysed the administrative capacities of local units for the integration of migrants and reveal that local administrative capacities must be further developed to better respond to the individual needs of migrants.

4.1.3 Participatory and collaborative approaches

In our analysis we find many articles (21 articles) concerned with different aspects of collaborative and participatory ways of working. Half the articles focus on policymaking, strategizing, and planning. Cross-level interactions are highlighted in Högström et al. (2018), who point out how the combination of statutory and informal planning tools may be considered decisive to interaction between the regional and municipal levels. Pietrapertosa et al. (2021), in turn, show how transnational networks can be drivers of engagement in climate/energy planning, while Trygg and Wenander (2021) claim that urban planners – who have many ideas on climate changes, transitions and initiatives – should be closer to political processes and agendas. Gustafsson and Mignon (2020), on the other hand, contend that it is the local circumstances, rather than the relationships between the local level and the higher levels of government or the guidance of national policies, that influence the choice of intermediation strategy. Finally, Bernardo and D’Alessandro (2019) illustrate how a multi-stakeholder deliberation process may stimulate innovative urban climate governance that is tailored and adapted to the local arena, by focusing on energy action plans projecting local policy makers as leaders in the fight against climate change.

Demazieres (2020) observed that “green city” branding can be a good strategy for achieving urban sustainability, as this type of branding allows the city to attract public attention, mobilize firms and develop new public–private partnerships leading to economic benefits from enhanced eco-tourism and the export of sustainable technologies. Grassini et al. (2018), finally, argued for an agreement first being in place between stakeholders on the most important directions of change.

Still, the review reveals that the potential for stakeholders’ participation and collaboration is still untapped in places. In German municipalities, for instance, the main aim is to inform the broad public of strategies already adopted, while less is done as regards allowing stakeholders to influence, be consulted on, or otherwise be involved in decisions (Meschede and Mainka, 2020). In the Slovak Republic, local governments only involve those whose participation is legally required (mayors, councillors, and citizens) in the strategic planning process. Other stakeholders are not even aware of the relevant role they could play in supporting the policy-making process (Vitalisova et al. 2021).

In the other half of the articles concerning collaboration and participation, focus is on developing, transforming, and adapting. No articles focus on monitoring and measuring such work. Several articles verify the importance and benefits of stakeholders’ participation and engagement. German studies demonstrated how the strong involvement of civil society actors contributed to breaking the status quo in transportation and increasing cycling and walking (Lehmkühler et al. 2020) and how interaction between stakeholders enforces urban innovation implementation (such as energy-efficient heating and mobility infrastructures) in urban ecosystems (Kroh 2021). A study from Denmark showed how stakeholders’ different perspectives and types of knowledge are acknowledged as an advantage during implementation
of smart solutions for sustainable transport and waste management (Bjorner 2021). A study that involved the Netherlands and the United Kingdom illustrated how collaboration on cross-sectoral urban infrastructure projects can capture values besides cost, profit, and risk reduction (Ersoy et al. 2020). Katsavounidou (2017) studied how a municipality in Greece involved multiple local stakeholders in the entire process, from strategy development to project selection and implementation. Others focused on certain parts of the process, such as how to create awareness (Hughes et al. 2022; Höller 2021) or how to build trust and engage key actors (Attolico and Smaldone 2020). Nilssen and Hanssen (2022) point to how one important condition for cities to increase the involving transformative capacity is to develop participatory arenas where conflicting interests meet. Related to the latter, i.e participatory arenas, two other articles focused on how municipalities can support stakeholder engagement (Santos 2021; Mahmoud et al. 2021).

Two articles offer reasons why the transformation towards more collaborative ways of working is stalling. Candel and Törnå (2021) as well as Lindkvist et al. (2022) argue that one impeding factor for collaborative work is the significantly ambiguous role municipalities tend to play in private–public partnering, instead of leveraging the upper-hand position they actually have as public procurers.

4.2 Socio-technical approaches to sustainable transitions

A second major theme concerns specific concepts and tools that are connected to the realizing of the SDGs. In this respect, we found several concepts connected to the urban space and its restructuring: sustainable urban regeneration, densification, blue and green infrastructures, and ecosystem services. These trends are more specifically connected to the concept of sustainable transitions and its broader implications in terms of land use and the need to reach a more integrative understanding of sustainability.

Also, part of this theme is the concept of smart cities, particularly the key idea of a technologically driven approach to sustainable transitions. Experimentation with technological innovation is abundant, especially in the mobility sector or in sector coupling (energy/waste, mobility/energy, etc). In this regard, key issues emerge, such as upscaling of technology or whether smart technologies automatically bring emissions reduction.

4.2.1 Approaches to territorial Development and Land use

Urban regeneration is defined as the vision and actions of renewal that lead to the resolution of urban problems and improvement of economic, physical, social, and environmental conditions of an area (Roberts 2000). In this review, there are three articles looking at this focusing on policymaking, strategizing, and planning and one focusing on monitoring and measuring. All four illustrate positive examples of how such renewal may be accomplished. Glumac and Decoville (2020) as well as Roost and Jeckel (2021) showed how brown-field redevelopment policy could allow the preservation of green-field sites. The latter examined the sustainability benefits of building new small and medium-sized factories in old industrial grey-fields on the outskirts of cities rather than in suburban green-fields. What the article shows is how such a change in urban planning enables better networking with the city, improves accessibility for pedestrians and other non-car users, and opens up potentials for higher spatial and design quality. Romanelli and Zbuchea (2020), in turn, reveal how culture-led urban regeneration promotes social and economic growth through social innovations and value co-creation processes. Having conducted a study in Catania, Italy, a high-density urban area with few green spaces and one that is exposed to seismic risk, La Rosa et al. (2017) proposed a method for evaluating the benefits of urban-regeneration programmes with appropriate spatial indicators, which is, therefore, a fundamental step towards identifying specific planning measures on which to orient future urban transformations.
Another recurrent concept identified is densification. This is suggested as a relevant strategy for sustainable urban development since contemporary outward urban expansion implies converting natural areas and farmland with serious effects on ecosystems and biodiversity (Naess et al. 2020). In the review five articles examined this strategy focusing either on policymaking, and strategizing or planning or on developing, transforming, and adapting. Li et al. (2022), first of all, have showed how densification is a stable trend in the centre of large cities for the last half century, while their surrounding rural areas showed an opposite trend, suggesting an urban polarization effect. Other authors have suggested different solutions for how to densify. Juwet (2020) argued that collective heating and cooling solutions, representing 50% of the energy demand in Europe, can support urban densification and renewal if strategically planned as an integrated spatial solution. What has to be ensured is sustainability as well as socio-spatial equality. Pozoukidou and Angelidou (2022) advanced the "15-minute-city" concept, the core premise of which is that critical urban services and facilities should be reachable within 15 min of walking or cycling from a residence. Constantin et al. (2021), finally, promoted the solution of urban rooftop community gardens that respond to challenges such as limited resources (water, soil, labour force) and unfavourable environmental conditions. Not all, however, express positive judgements on densification. Salvati (2019) found that densification in regions in the Global South that already had a high population density led to potential trade-offs in terms of human well-being.

In this review we also found other concepts related to urban land use such as green and blue infrastructure, cultural landscape, and ecosystem services. In all the articles found, the focus is on how to approach these strategies. Wuijts et al. (2022) called for planners to look beyond built-up spaces, particularly to the still-neglected area of blue infrastructure. By studying five European cities, the authors showed how blue infrastructures have a promising effect, not only on the environment, but also on the health of the urban population. Padro et al. (2020), who share that view, introduce a Socioecological Integrated Analysis (SIA) as a helpful tool by which to combine urban development planning with the agroecological performances of the surrounding open spaces. Regarding cultural landscape, special attention is given to old city centres (Martinis and Kontoni 2017) or other cultural heritage structures (Lillevold and Haarstad 2019; Magliacani 2022; Gandini et al. 2017). Riechers et al. (2018), instead, add to the discussion of ecosystem services by stressing the necessity of distinguishing the different potentials of ecosystem services among different population groups.

4.2.2 Smart and technical solutions

The concept of smart cities implies an urban environment that utilizes information and communication technologies (ICT) and other related technologies to enhance the performance efficiency of regular city operations and services provided to citizens (Silva et al. 2018). In this review 16 articles are found focusing on this or other technical solutions were identified. Out of these, three articles focus on policy making, strategizing, or planning activities. Particularly, these articles deal with how smart city and sustainability policies may complement each other. Serbanica and Constantin (2017) point to how smart specialization, i.e. effective matching of knowledge domains with market potentials to find a niche market, is the way to achieve this. Others, instead, contend that the sustainability does not appear to be a very important motivating driver (Haarstad 2017), pointing to the trend towards autonomous vehicles, that does not meet the goal of emissions reduction (Grindsted et al. 2022).

Another eight articles of this sub-theme focus on developing, transforming, and adapting. Among these, a few articles illustrate the benefits of using technical interventions. For example, it is argued that green innovations can curb energy demand when used together with holistic approaches to neighbourhoods (Rossiter and Smith 2018) or by working on one district at a
time (Giourka, et al. 2020). García-Fuentes and de Torre (2016), furthermore, have developed a sustainable urban regeneration model including a holistic catalogue of innovative technologies and solutions in energy, mobility, and ICT in order to significantly increase resource and energy efficiency, improve the sustainability of urban transport and reduce emissions in urban areas.

Still, as Kornec (2020) pointed out, while smart city pilot projects have recently become quite common in Europe, there is still an uneven deployment. Polish cities, for instance, are lagging behind. Furthermore, some articles point to the limited effects the interventions performed have had on achieving the goals of Agenda 2030. Schrage and Kjaeras (2022), in turn, found that none of the many interventions made in Scandinavia to reduce urban emissions were comprehensive enough to make a difference in practice. Salmi et al. (2022) came to the same conclusion when studying the transformation towards entire wooden constructions in Finland. The widely perceived problem of upscaling smart city pilot projects is highlighted by Van Winden and van den Buuse (2017).

Finally, five articles focus on monitoring and measuring. Two of these take the targets and indicators of Agenda 2030 as their starting point. By comparing the SDGs with other standardized indicators (i.e., ISO, ETSI, and ITU), Huovila et al. (2019) provided guidance for city managers and policymakers in the selection of the most suitable model. What may be the most appropriate indicators, the authors argued, depends on the particular phase of city development (planning or operation), scale (district, city, region, or nation), timescale (real-time or annual), and purpose of the assessment (target setting, monitoring, reporting, or benchmarking). The main principle is that each city has to select and adapt indicators corresponding to its particular needs. Angelakoglou et al. (2020) continue in the same spirit by assessing the SDGs using various other standards and selecting the most relevant indicators for smart city projects focusing on energy transition. As a result, a compressed multidimensional measurement model was presented, encompassing a broad palette of indicators.

The other articles, however, did not use targets and indicators developed by the agenda. Instead, researchers and practitioners developed separate assessment and measurement standards for particular contexts and dimensions. Warnecke et al. (2019) developed a smart city maturity model for practitioners to self-assess and benchmark the sustainability impact of urban development related to the domain of transport. While the model does not refer specifically to the SDG, it includes indicators for environmental concerns (reduce pollution, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and reduce noise) and social concerns (number of traffic incidents and fatalities, affordability, and accessibility for public transport). Ntafalias et al. (2022) proposed an impact assessment framework for evaluating the impact of implemented smart solutions focusing on the energy domain, including financial concerns (ROI), environmental concerns (reduced CO2 emissions, energy demand and air quality), and social concerns (increased citizens’ quality of life) impact. Lastly, Chondrogianni and Stephanedes (2022) developed a performance model for evaluating the smartness and sustainability of individual plans for public spaces. Although these efforts are of great value, their specificity prevents us from forming a comprehensive picture of progress towards a sustainable city and comparing cities to each other.

5 Discussion

In this section we return to the research question to elaborate on how municipalities organize their sustainable development work and to what effect. To push the inquiry further and provide some insights for researchers, we also highlight important research areas that are overlooked and may warrant further attention in future research.
5.1 An emerging Field of Research

Overall, research on municipalities working towards Agenda 2030 is growing steadily. However, the number of articles is still quite limited and consequently the research becomes scattered in different respects. One aspect of this fragmentation can be tied to the vast geographical span of the research (i.e., European cities), another to researchers targeting different SDGs (i.e., 12 of the 17 goals have been targeted). Mainly, research on the subject is case-oriented, context-driven and limited to a particular urban development process, SDG, and or city. While this provides an in-depth understanding of organizing work within a specific institutional framework, there is an urgent need for generalization and multiple case studies in future, as also confirmed by Liverman (2018). Furthermore, fragmentation in terms of method (mathematical/engineering modelling vs. social science methods, such as statistical inferences and qualitative thematic analysis) and disciplinary field (e.g., organization and management, public policy, science and technology) pervades the literature. There was also a spread in regard to focus areas, relating as described earlier to the two identified themes.

In sum, what we found was an emerging field of research that has begun to create fragmented knowledge in various ways and areas, and that still needs to be developed in terms of more comparative studies and systematic analyses. In this regard, we posit that in future research researchers should reframe cities as holistic entities by integrating technology, governance, management, and sustainability. Overall, what is needed is more cross-cultural research (i.e., research comparing similar practices and projects across regions and countries) and cross-functional and multidisciplinary research (i.e., research analysing the interaction of different projects and initiatives within a municipality and from different perspectives, such as governance, management and economics, and technology and science). Furthermore, the fact that our search found only three articles studying municipal companies clearly shows a limitation of the existing literature, particularly regarding the important role of municipal companies in sustainable urban development, being delegated responsibility for vital services such as water, energy, broadband, housing, transportation, and waste management. This is in line with prior literature (Voom 2017) pointing out the lack of empirical studies on municipal companies in general, and clearly stressing a need for more research in this area.

Moreover, we would like to draw attention to the need for theoretical underpinnings in the analysis of Agenda 2030 implementations, and how such a foundation is lacking in many of the articles. A few of the papers in this review were particularly insightful in this regard: Trygg and Wenander (2021) used institutional capacity in strategic planning for sustainable development; Kroh (2019) used complex adaptive system theory in sustainable urban innovation and transformation; Saldert (2017) used Foucauldian discourse analysis and governmentality to study municipal sustainable development; and Callway et al. (2019) used a strategy-as-practice lens.

An interesting question would be whether this research limitation and fragmentation is reflected in practice at the city level. After having performed our analysis of the 77 articles, we found it to be likely. For example, the potential for stakeholder participation is still largely untapped (Meschede and Mainka 2020; Vitalisova et al. 2021); integrating all three aspects of sustainability is rare (Bibri and Krogstie 2020; Ring et al. 2021); and upscaling smart-city projects is still a widely recognized problem (van Winden and van den Buuse 2017). It should be noted that this review does not completely reflect the level of engagement of municipalities in realizing A2030 as it was limited to the cases and municipalities whose activities are presented in published scientific research. However, it is essential to critically analyse existing research and highlight some areas that should be explored further in order to develop a better
theoretical explanation and identify effective practices to promote sustainable development as it is a critical issue and a long-term challenging goal.

The next section provides some concrete examples of how municipalities organize sustainable development work and to what effect and provides suggestions for enriching the literature on the subject.

5.2 More impactful Approaches

After thorough reading and coding of the articles to better understand how municipal efforts to meet the goals of Agenda 2030 are being organized and with what effect, three main themes emerged. Related to the two identified themes, paradigm shift in local government, and socio-technical approaches to sustainable transition, we found articles discussing both challenges of these approaches and examples of actual contributions to the SDGs.

One example of positive impact is related to issues of responsibility. Puntillo (2022) finds how the way a waste management company holds itself responsible to the natural environment, being considered as an important stakeholder, and also makes the end-users of the service pay for door-to-door collection of waste according to a “polluter pays” principle, significantly contributes to the achievement of several of the SDGs. This example of a municipal company actively considering issues of responsibility is quite interesting, considering that earlier literature expressed concern as to the conditions for holding such companies accountable (Bergh et al. 2019). The reason is that when municipalities delegate responsibilities to the companies they own, an additional step is added to the distance to the ultimate stakeholders, the citizens. Since every step of delegation increases the risk of losing track of the responsibility towards the citizens and for different forms of corruption, the more important responsible managing within these companies become as well as the auditing and overseeing of the board. Therefore, we suggest other researchers should explore issues of responsibility further.

Another positive example refers to collaborative ways of working. Nilssen and Hanssen (2022) highlight how institutional innovations, i.e. new ways of organizing that have emerged in response to certain disruptive changes, may increase the involving transformative capacity of cities. The authors thereby both point to specific situations (e.g., a sudden closing of a cement factory or a fatal fireworks accident) as being opportunities for transformative efforts and to how collaborative ways of working involve building shared visions, engaging actors with real influence, and developing participatory arenas where conflicting interest can meet. Since collaborative ways of working are quite key to sustainable urban development, we propose more research on how municipalities can support such work.

A third example of positive impact concerns the concept of smart cities. While the numbers of smart city pilot-projects have escalated all over Europe, they have shown to remain small and experimental, fading out after a demonstration phase. Van Winden and van den Buuse (2017), found that the design of the pilot projects mattered greatly in terms of how the upscaling process would later take shape. If issues concerning commitment to moving forward, economies-of-scale, funding, knowledge transfer, ambidexterity, as well as laws and regulations, are addressed right at the start of pilot projects, the impact of the solutions developed in these pilot projects on urban development can increase.

However, we also found articles describing efforts to promote sustainability insufficient and sometimes even counterproductive. Schrage and Kjaeras (2022), for instance, pointed out how, in Scandinavia, what has been accomplished so far is merely re-crafting existing technology-based practices (e.g., electric and biofueled vehicles), making little difference in the pursuit of the SDGs in practice. In terms of more comprehensive substitutions that also include behavioural and infrastructural interventions, they seem to take time to implement, despite the
role municipalities ought to be playing in promoting such sustainable solutions. The conclusion that efforts made were not comprehensive enough is supported also by Salmi et al. (2022) and Hynes and Seoighthe (2018) Furthermore, Salvati (2019) found that densification in regions in the Global South, already have a high population density, led to potential trade-offs in terms of human well-being. And, related to smart city solutions, Grindsted et al. (2022) found how autonomous vehicles do not meet the goal of emissions reduction and that city plans lack requirements for refuelling with renewable energy sources for such vehicles.

Furthermore, Elander and Gustavsson (2019), point to the common practice of attaching the label “sustainable” to almost any projects and activities, whether or not they actually have any such impact. This relates to the issue of “green washing”, a practice that has grown enormously and has led to a growing scepticism among consumers towards sustainability claims by organizations, as well as to a growing body of scientific literature on the subject (Gatti et al. 2019). While the body of literature on green washing is also growing, focus is mainly on private corporations, leaving a gap in the research on municipal organizations.

Therefore, we argue that research is needed that supports urban actors in making changes that have greater impact.

5.3 Not just measurement; also, to create a sense of accountability

The third area emerging through our analysis concerns the challenging endeavour of monitoring and measuring the effects of sustainable development. The complexity arises from different and often contradictory pillars of sustainability, a lack of historical data on environmental and social pillars (compared with the economic pillar), the variety of municipal operations (e.g., utilities vs. transport vs. healthcare) and dependence on available data, which is often of poor quality and scattered in terms of both time and space. While there are papers that document efforts to integrate and yet simplify KPIs, linking the KPIs to SDGs is an area that needs further research. The A2030 is structured in the form of a list of goals; therefore, translation of SDGs into KPIs at the municipal level may be a key task. Future research can work on a set of indicators that can tie municipal-level progress towards sustainability to national or European progress and eventually to global progress. This would lead to standardized and comparable performance on different levels and across different cultures.

Further attention should be paid to mobilizing monitoring and measuring, not only as a form of managerial control but also for communication to stakeholders, and to using it as a tool for behavioural change and to increase stakeholder engagement and motivation. The opportunities that digitalization and big data can provide are mainly discussed in smart cities. This research stream can be continued and expanded to include projects in urban regeneration and circular cities.

In this review, we have attempted to provide an overview of the efforts of municipalities towards the realization of Agenda 2030. Despite the variety of the forms and scope of municipal services and the dependence of their operations on a complex set of variables, several common approaches were identified. However, as sustainable urban development and transformation is a challenging issue, and unsustainable urban management remains widespread in many societies across the globe, it is our hope that our review will encourage other researchers to address this important topic by conducting more theoretical, interdisciplinary, and comparative research.
6 Conclusion

The aim of this contribution was to shed light on how municipalities in Europe organize sustainable development work towards the goals of A2030 and to what effect, through a literature review revealing three major themes. Based on our literature review, we can highlight two main trends: first, a paradigm shift in local governments towards more integrative and collaborative ways of organizing and managing. Second, the introduction of socio-technical approaches such as regeneration and smart cities together with development of specific models for measuring and monitoring SDG targets and indicators.

While the literature review offers a few examples of actual contributions to the SDGs, the articles mainly revolve around issues impeding transformation or efforts being illusive, insufficient, and sometimes even counterproductive, what emerges is a persisting fragmentation in the way that urban sustainability is tackled and researched. In reaction to that, we advance some suggestions for future research.

More generally, this literature review confirms that the Agenda represents a major re-organizational principle: as connected to wider transformations that characterize modern societies towards stronger global processes (of which the Agenda is part). At the same time, there is an increasing shift towards local governance and processes which allow cities to emerge as central actors of sustainable transitions. But this also means that the Agenda cannot be considered as a stand-alone organizational driver of change in itself.

What our systematic review show is, on the one hand, the need to strengthen the framework provided by the Agenda with stronger theoretical foundations and more systematic studies. On the other hand, it leads us to propose to dig even more into the specificities of urban contexts and examine how the Agenda may play a role in connection with other processes, for example the dynamics connected to the accessibility of resources, the re-organization of infrastructural networks and the identification of different pattern of transformations (Lorrain et al. 2018). In this regard, depending on whether it is in terms of viable, sober, durable, sustainable cities, the Agenda may perform different roles and potentials.

What we thereby add to the literature is knowledge of the current state of research on how work to implement the goals of Agenda 2030 at the urban level is organized and with what effect.

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