



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
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TRANSLATION OF THE EU'S COHESION POLICY INTO REGIONAL PRACTICE

An interview study of the regional management of
the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) in West
Sweden

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Abstract

This thesis aims to analyse how different subnational actors interact in and influence the regional management of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and what challenges there are in effectively implementing the ESF+ at the subnational level. Previous research has established that the effectiveness of the EU's Structural Funds, of which the ESF+ is a part, in general varies greatly between different European regions. This difference to a large extent depends on subnational characteristics, such as policy networks, institutional structures, and the capacity of potential beneficiaries. This thesis contributes with an analysis of what the processes and interactions related to the ESF+ looks like at the subnational level, focusing on Sweden. The region of West Sweden is used as an empirical case to capture the regional practice in detail, and the analysis is based on nine in-depth expert interviews. The thesis applies a Multi-level governance (MLG) perspective to analyse the roles played by different actors. Followingly, the interviewees represent key actors at three political levels: the regional, subregional, and local level. The study's main result is that the ESF+ in West Sweden is managed through well-functioning structures and networks by motivated and competent subnational actors, but that challenges arise in the implementation phase where coordination issues, administrative burden, and implications on the Swedish labour market hampers projects' effectiveness. The thesis' results contribute to the debate about the structural funds effectiveness and shows that challenges to implement the ESF+ arise also in regions with substantive capacities and robust cooperation networks.

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Abbreviations

CF	Cohesion Fund
CEECs	Central Eastern European Countries
EC	European Commission
ESF	European Social Fund
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EU	European Union
GR	Gothenburg Region
JTF	Just Transition Fund
MLG	Multi-level Governance
NUTS	Nomenclature of territorial units for statistic
RDS	Regional Development Strategy
ROP	Regional Operational Programme
SALAR	Swedish Association of Local Authorities and regions

1. Introduction

As one of the European Union's (EU's) most significant policies, the Cohesion Policy aims to achieve greater economic, social and territorial cohesion among European regions. Through its four structural funds¹, the Cohesion Policy allocates one-third of the EU's budget to decrease economic and social inequalities around Europe through investments in regional development, job creation and quality of life (European Commission, 2022). With its redistributive and complex nature, the Cohesion Policy is widely researched in terms of its meaning for European integration as well as regionalisation and macroeconomic impact (Piattoni & Polverari, 2016). In contrast to most EU policies, the Cohesion Policy involves both supranational, national and subnational levels in the policy process. According to the theory of Multi-level governance (MLG), this implies that the political power is diffused between political actors at different levels and hence not exclusively within the control of the national governments (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). Importantly, the Cohesion Policy is the first and only EU policy formally involving subnational actors, which in many Member States has initiated a form of decentralisation and transfer of political power from national to subnational level (Dotti, 2013).

A central concern for a successful Cohesion Policy is an effective translation of policies and priorities from the EU level into projects at the subnational level. However, the real impact of the Cohesion Policy does not only depend on the Member States' ability to quantitatively spend the funding from the structural funds but also on the qualitative allocation of the money in terms of what type of actions the funding is contributing to (Dotti, 2013; Sanchez Salgado, 2013). In line with this, concerns have been raised by both policy-makers and scholars regarding the effectiveness of the Cohesion Policy. Researchers agree that the structural funds lead to diverse results among European regions (Dotti, 2013) and that these varying results to a large extent depend on the context of implementation (Bourdin, 2019; Di Caro & Fratesi, 2022). Despite findings suggesting that variations in the policy's effectiveness depend on regional characteristics (Bachtrögler et al., 2020; Dąbrowski, 2013), little research is performed on what shape the structural funds take on a subnational level (Sanchez Salgado, 2013), and how subnational actors interact in this policy process.

Most research on the Cohesion Policy has been performed through comparative studies at the national level, but scholars have more recently established that actors and processes at the subnational level are of increasing importance in the management of the structural funds (Dotti, 2016). This is illustrated by research suggesting that subnational actors might use structural funding for promoting self-interests (Bachtler & Mendez, 2007), that the administrative capacity of subnational actors is

¹ The four Structural Funds are the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the Cohesion Fund (CF) and the newly established Just Transition Fund (JTF) .

decisive for effective implementation (Milio, 2007; Terracciano & Graziano, 2016) and that the Commission has limited control over how subnational governments decide to allocate the money (Blomhansen, 2005). However, most studies made on the subnational level are predominantly performed in Southern Member States such as Italy (Milio, 2007, 2008; Terracciano & Graziano, 2016) or the newer Member States in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs), which are characterised by lower absorption rates and weaker administrative capacities (Bourdin, 2019; Gorzelak, 2016). Hence, additional research is needed on how subnational actors interact and behave in the process of designing and implementing the different structural funds (Dotti, 2016), as well as in other types of EU Member States.

Additionally, most research has been performed on the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) due to its larger share of the Cohesion Policy budget and clear contribution to regional development strategies. Less research has been performed on the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)², which is the EU's main financial instrument for targeting social issues and investing in people (European Commission, 2022), despite an increased focus on the social aspect of EU politics due to recent developments in the Union. Moving beyond traditional Cohesion Policy studies, this thesis sheds light on the less researched area of structural funds management in a Nordic country, Sweden, using the management of the ESF+ as an empirical example. The promotion of further integration of social issues in the EU has spurred a debate between Member States. Sweden, a country with a strong corporative tradition, has been reluctant to accept regulations on common EU minimum wages (POLITICO, 2021), but has long been arguing for increased focus on improved living and working conditions of European citizens (Government Offices of Sweden, 2017). Accordingly, the case of Sweden with its strong welfare state and distinct labour market culture is interesting to study from a social cohesion perspective.

Further, the case of Sweden is interesting to study from a MLG perspective due to its historically strong municipalities with a high degree of local self-governance and local autonomy (Loughlin, 2001). In Sweden, the political system is arranged on three levels, national, regional and local, and each level is responsible for certain parts of the political administration. Notably, Swedish subnational actors are responsible for the implementation of welfare goals where for example education is local governments' competence (SKR, 2022). Accordingly, most actions and projects benefiting from ESF+ funding are managed at the subnational level. To capture the subnational policy process related to the ESF+ in detail, the analysis focuses on the region of West Sweden. As quite a heterogenous region, covering both rural and urban areas, West Sweden is a suitable case for studying the management of the ESF+ on the ground. Due to the diverging interests and conditions around the region, the interplay and bargaining between

² In the new programme period for 2021-2027, the European Social Fund (ESF) has merged with three other funds and is now called the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). The thesis will simply refer to the fund's current name ESF+.

different subnational actors become significant for the policy process and the effectiveness of the funds. Furthermore, the ESF+ might be particularly relevant for subnational actors in Sweden since it directly tailors their competence areas such as education and labour market integration.

Previous research has found that a well-established tradition of cooperation between political actors and stakeholders, strong and transparent institutional networks and the presence of a strong social capital (Boumans & Ferry, 2019; Dąbrowski, 2013) are contributing to the successful partnership required within the Cohesion Policy process. In turn, this partnership will contribute to an effective use of the structural funds. Realising Sweden's tradition of corporatism, established institutional structure with strong local governance and low corruption levels, it is expected to constitute a favourable context for effective management of the structural funds. Though, the involvement of several subnational actors with different competencies might complicate the policy process and create challenges to coordinate the ESF+ in accordance with all actor's needs and interests.

While the political environment in Sweden appears favourable with regard to managing the structural funds, little is known about what the processes and interactions between subnational actors in Sweden look like, especially in terms of the policy process related to the regional management of the ESF+. This thesis contributes with an analysis of how the Cohesion Policy is translated into regional practice in a case that in theory has the pre-conditions of being a favourable context for effectively managing the structural funds, but where different types of challenges than in other member states may arise. By studying the characteristics of the ESF+ in West Sweden with an established structure for the regional management of the funds, and active involvement of various stakeholders, one can understand how the practice of subnational actors' affects the effectiveness of the Cohesion Policy. Realising the significant share of the EU's budget allocated to the Cohesion Policy and its potential to contribute to regional development, it is crucial to understand how this funding is used, and which actors influence its shape. Since all EU citizens and politicians want the EU budget to contribute to current challenges met in the Union, this type of analysis will contribute to an understanding of whether the structural funds are effective as they are, or if revisions are needed to better fulfil its objectives.

1.1. Aim and research questions

This thesis has the overall objective to investigate the policy process related to the management of the EU's structural funds in a regional setting. The analysis focuses on the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) in West Sweden which is expected to constitute a favourable context for structural funds effectiveness. Through an analysis of subnational actors' practices and incentives regarding the ESF+, the thesis aims to understand how different subnational actors interact in and influence this policy process, and what challenges there are in effectively managing the fund in a heterogeneous region such as West Sweden. Moreover, the thesis applies a Multi-level governance (MLG) perspective to analyse the roles played by actors at different political levels and with various networks, interests and capacities. The thesis is designed as a qualitative interview study of the management of the ESF+ in West Sweden and answers the following research question and associated sub-questions:

How is the ESF+ translated into regional practice in West Sweden regarding the following aspects:

- *To what extent do different subnational actors participate in and influence the policy process?*
- *How do subnational actors cooperate and network regarding the ESF+?*
- *What interests and motivations for participating in the ESF+ do subnational actors have?*
- *What capacities and resources do subnational actors have to participate in the ESF+?*
- *Are there any challenges met in the policy process of the ESF+?*

2. Previous research and theory

This chapter presents an overview of the research field related to the EU's Cohesion Policy and the role played by subnational actors in its management. The chapter ends with the thesis' theoretical frame which combines concepts from previous research with the theoretical perspective of Multi-level Governance (MLG).

2.1. Previous research on the EU's Cohesion Policy

2.1.1. Subnational actors' participation in the policy process

The policy process related to the Cohesion Policy (Cohesion Policy) is usually divided into different stages, where actors from different territorial levels are participating to varying degrees (Dettmer & Sauer, 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Olsson, 2003). Firstly, the general policy guidelines are decided upon through a negotiation between the European Commission and national governments. Secondly, national governments establish the national priorities through the formulation of national programmes for the ESF+. At this programming stage, subnational actors play a crucial role in the process through the formulation of regional development programmes. Thirdly, the national programmes are implemented through the allocation of funding to regional projects. During this final implementation stage, regional governments have the main responsibility to implement the funds (Olsson, 2003). Accordingly, supranational and national levels are in charge of the financial and institutional scope of the Cohesion Policy, but the subnational level has significant substantive discretion as regards the selection of projects to be allocated funding (Dellmuth & Stoffel, 2012).

This thesis will mainly focus on the two later stages, the programming stage, where regional programmes are developed, and the implementation stage, where these programmes are realised through project development. Following Stephenson (2016), the thesis divides the last implementation phase into a programme level and a project level. The programming and implementation stages are central when analysing the practice of and interaction between subnational actors since it is only at these stages subnational actors are given formal power in the policy-making process. Even though regional politicians may influence the formulation of Cohesion Policy objectives at earlier stages (Dotti, 2013), this thesis contributes to the perspective of how subnational actors exercise, and possibly extends beyond, the formal powers offered to them under the Cohesion Policy framework.

As stated in the introduction, the Cohesion Policy is the first and only EU policy formally involving subnational actors (Dotti, 2013). Accordingly, the policy process has a MLG characteristic where actors from all political levels are influencing the design and implementation of the Cohesion Policy. Recent research has acknowledged the important role played by subnational actors in this process since they are in charge of the final implementation of the policy in terms of financial allocation and the

management and evaluation of projects (Dellmuth & Stoffel, 2012; Dotti, 2016). Several studies have been performed on the regional management of the structural funds in for example Italy (Milio, 2007) and Poland (Dąbrowski, 2013), but previous research has not sufficiently been able to capture how subnational actors influence and interact in the policy processes of the ESF+ in the welfare states in the northern Member States with strong local autonomy.

The involvement of subnational actors in the policy process is regulated within the principle of partnership which outlines that the programming of the Cohesion Policy must include political actors from European, national, regional and local levels, as well as social partners and representatives from civil society throughout the whole management process (European Commission, n.d.). Thus, the principle of partnership has had a significant effect on the involvement of subnational actors in the implementation of EU policies as it explicitly gives authority to the subnational levels and requires Member States to adapt their domestic administration to the partnership principle (Dotti, 2013). Dąbrowski (2013) holds that the partnership principle has affected regional public administration in terms of improving the institutional capacity of administrative actors, that it has generated new opportunities to encourage innovation and learning between previous organisation boundaries and that it might lead to new patterns of domestic governance.

As regards the management of the ESF+ in Sweden, the government has appointed the Swedish ESF council as the managing authority for the national programme for the ESF+ with responsibility to implement the fund by EU objectives and national priorities. In Sweden, the national programme is managed through eight regional operational programmes and each region has their own partnership for the structural funds where stakeholders and political actors from all over the region are represented (Svenska ESF-rådet, 2021). The partnership for the structural funds in West Sweden includes representatives from the regions of Västra Götaland and Halland, the largest municipalities in each region (the city of Gothenburg and the municipality of Kungsbacka), the Fyrbodal Association of Local Authorities as well as representatives from the labour market and other stakeholders (Västra Götalandsregionen, 2022).

2.1.2. Regional variation in Cohesion Policy management

Despite a well-defined structure regulating the programming and implementation of the Cohesion Policy, the practical processes vary greatly between and within Member States (Bachtrögler et al., 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Kolařík et al., 2014). Several scholars agree that Cohesion Policy implementation to a large extent depends on the territorial context and the domestic conditions in which the structural funds are to be realised (Di Caro & Fratesi, 2022; Moreno Serrano, 2020; Surubaru, 2017). Recognising the Member States' varying political systems and administrative structures and the fact that the subnational levels are in charge of the final implementation of the Cohesion Policy, variations in

structural funds management will naturally arise. For this reason, research has been focusing on the varying ways in which the structural funds are implemented by different Member States, and what determines these variations (Dotti, 2016; Milio, 2007; Mukhtar-Landgren & Fred, 2019; Sanchez Salgado, 2013; Smith, 1997; Surubaru, 2017).

A common strategy to measure variations in EU Cohesion Policy efficiency is through the Member States' absorption capacity of their structural funds, meaning a country's or region's ability to allocate its financial share of the structural funds to projects within the given time frame (Cace et al., 2009; Kersan-Škabić & Tijanić, 2017; Milio, 2007). Hence, a high absorption rate is a necessary condition for the possibility of the structural funds to make a difference in the first place. However, as expressed by Dotti (2013, p. 596): "The effectiveness of any policy is strongly dependent on how this policy has been designed and implemented, not just on goals and resources allocated." Thereby, a country's absorption capacity can tell us something about the efficiency of the Cohesion Policy, but less about the "specific performances of regional governments, their institutional frameworks and the capability to implement this policy" (Dotti, 2013, p. 601). While absorption capacity can measure the efficient implementation of Cohesion Policy, in terms of implementing projects in time and cost-efficiently, it does not measure the effective implementation of Cohesion Policy, in terms of reaching the general policy objectives (Jordana et al., 2012).

The substance of the structural funds and their impact on domestic politics is to a large extent determined by the national programme outlined during the structural programming. However, since the financial frameworks do not specifically imply how the funding should be allocated, power remains within regional authorities to shape the funding outcomes (Dellmuth & Stoffel, 2012). This issue was stressed by Sanchez Salgado (2013), stating that "even if European priorities are reflected in the ESF+ operational programmes, their actual implementation in the territories is still not ensured". Therefore, scholarly attention has shifted focus from the traditional issue of institutional policy-making and the economic impact of the structural funds (Milio, 2007) to the issue of capacities for effective implementation (Blom-hansen, 2005; Dotti, 2016) and translation of EU objectives to regional actions (Mukhtar-Landgren & Fred, 2019). In other words, the focus has shifted from the quantitative implementation, meaning the ability to spend the money within the time frame, to the qualitative implementation, meaning what projects the money is allocated to and how different actors impact this allocation (Milio, 2007).

2.1.3. Policy networks and partnerships in structural funds management

A recently developed strand in the Cohesion Policy research is focusing on the connection between policy networks and the effective implementation of Cohesion Policy (Boumans & Ferry, 2019). The functionality of national and regional policy networks is found to be an effective tool for the analysis of

variations in regional management of the structural funds since the Cohesion Policy framework requires partnerships involving different stakeholders (European Commission, n.d.). The analysis of characteristics and functionalities of networks contributes to an understanding of how, and by which actors, the structural funds are implemented in different territorial contexts. While some researchers have found that networks have a positive effect on Cohesion Policy implementation due to their contribution to knowledge and preference sharing between different actors (Polverari et al., 2009), others have argued that the increased amount of actors involved in the process might further complicate the implementation process and increase the administrative burdens for actors involved (European Policies Research Centre and Metis, 2014). Boumans and Ferry (2019) employ a mixed-methods approach to analyse the role played by networks in the implementation of Cohesion Policy projects. Their results reaffirm the finding that too many actors may affect the implementation negatively, but further underlines the importance of “the strategic position of key actors in the network” and a strong governance network for the efficient implementation of the Cohesion Policy (Boumans & Ferry, 2019, p. 425).

Other researchers have established a connection between the regional actor’s social capital and the regional shape and functioning of policy networks. Paraskevopoulos (2001) suggests that an actor’s network depends on the region’s social capital, and further acknowledges trust between different regional actors as decisive for an effective Cohesion Policy implementation. This connection is reaffirmed by Jordana et al. (2012, p. 664) who studies the practical implications of the partnership principle and finds that “only when the actors involved share certain social capital characteristics, it produces and reinforces more pluralist contexts for decision-making.”. Accordingly, policy networks are found to be decisive for variations in Cohesion Policy management, but less is known about the informal relationship within these networks (Boumans & Ferry, 2019) since the characteristics of policy networks to a large extent depend on the institutional context in which they are operating (Fink-Hafner et al., 2019). In line with these findings, more research is needed on the characteristics of on the one hand regional policy networks (Boumans & Ferry, 2019), and on the other hand the social capital of regional elites (Jordana et al., 2012).

One way of evaluating this interaction between subnational actors within policy networks and what preferences are driving the final allocation of the structural funds is to analyse the national application of the partnership principle, which formally regulates the participation of public and private actors at local and regional levels in the programming and implementation phase of the Cohesion Policy (Jordana et al., 2012). Dąbrowski (2013) investigates the impact of the partnership between different political actors at the subnational level in Poland and finds that the Cohesion Policy has increased interaction and cooperation between these actors. Acknowledging the substantive discretion possessed

by subnational actors in the policy process (Dotti, 2016), a well-functioning partnership is crucial for an effective Cohesion Policy. A weak partnership may result in European priorities being lost in the translation from national development programmes to the allocation of funding to selected programmes. Therefore, an analysis of Member States' compliance with the partnership principle is useful to understand how the structural funds are used in practice. Dąbrowski (2013), studies the application of the partnership principle in Poland and finds that the extent to which the partnership principle was exercised and used beyond its formal requirements was found to depend on a few factors in the domestic context. Significantly, participation in partnership for the structural funds implementation was dependent on subnational actors' interests and preferences (Dąbrowski, 2013).

2.1.4. Subnational actors' interests and motivations

Recently, the impact of subnational actors' behaviours and interests has received increasing scholarly attention for understanding the qualitative management of structural funds in different contexts (Barca, 2009; Blom-hansen, 2005; Dąbrowski, 2013; Dellmuth & Stoffel, 2012; Dotti, 2016). Dellmuth and Stoffel (2012) argue that subnational actors hold 'substantial discretion in the actual implementation of the structural funds due to their role in selecting and implementing projects. According to Dąbrowski, differences in Cohesion Policy outcomes to a large extent depend on the subnational "actor's preferences, attitudes and capacity" (2012, p. 730).

Acknowledging this substantive discretion exercised by subnational actors, scholars have analysed to what extent these actors may, or can, use the structural funds to benefit their self-interest (Barca et al., 2012; Dellmuth & Stoffel, 2012; Dotti, 2016; Surubaru, 2017). Dellmuth and Stoffel (2012) analyse the local allocation of the structural funds in Germany and finds that the selection of projects corresponds with European objectives. Although, they also find evidence showing that subnational governments' strategies for allocating funding are based on electoral incentives. On the one hand, a study of Latvian regions and Bulgarian municipalities found that 'domestic "pork-barrel" politics' have an influence on the allocation of regional development funding and that most of the funding is allocated to wealthier municipalities (Bloom & Petrova, 2013). On the other hand, other studies on structural funds in Western Europe have found that funding has been allocated to poorer regions, following EU cohesion objectives (Bouvet & Dall'Erba, 2010).

Dotti (2016) studies how regional politicians' behaviours affect the management of the structural funds and finds that subnational politicians highly influence the implementation of the structural funds.. They mobilise with other actors and stakeholders to gain access to funding that can develop their region, and thus shape the outcome of the policy (Dotti, 2016). Mukhtar-Landgren and Fred (2019) study how the Cohesion Policy is translated through EU projects with a focus on how municipalities prepare and apply for EU projects, and they conclude that specific EU experts have emerged within the

municipalities who can fit local needs with available EU funding. Hence, with the help of EU experts, the municipalities can prepare and apply for EU projects based on their priorities, but adjusted to fit within the context of EU funding (Mukhtar-Landgren & Fred, 2019). Since the process related to the structural funds is complex and requires some specific knowledge, subnational actors are reliant on individuals with specific knowledge to apply for and run ESF+ projects.

However, Dellmuth and Stoffel (2012) underline that more research is needed on how subnational actors' self-interests and motivations for allocating structural funding can be linked to variations in Cohesion Policy effectiveness.

2.1.5. Administrative capacity and administrative burden

Another factor that is found to be decisive for both national and subnational actors' ability to participate in the policy process and to implement structural funds projects is the actor's degree of administrative capacity (Bachtler et al., 2014; Milio, 2007; Surubaru, 2017; Terracciano & Graziano, 2016). Administrative capacity can be defined as "a combination of institutional, bureaucratic and human resources capabilities" possessed by Member States to achieve efficient and effective spending of EU structural funding (Surubaru, 2017, p. 848). Milio (2007) finds support for the claim that the regional variations in structural funds effectiveness can be explained by the region's varying levels of administrative capacity. Moreover, the organisational structure of the regional administration and political stability are found to be decisive for the region's administrative capacity. A strong hierarchy and a larger regional administration are found to harm the implementation of structural funds resources (Milio, 2007). Others maintain that it has to do with the availability of financial resources for co-financing (Holt, 2015), and Milio (2008) develops his argument further to state that political stability is the pre-condition for developing the administrative capacity necessary for efficient structural funds implementation.

Surubaru (2017) suggest that administrative capacity can be operationalised through the three concepts of institutional capacity, bureaucratic capacity and human resources. Institutional capacity is used to measure the institutional set-up of the policy process, bureaucratic capacity is used to measure the access to legal and administrative tools to absorb the funds, and human resources are used to measure the quantity, qualifications and incentives of employees (Surubaru, 2017).

While the administrative capacity is an important factor influencing a country's structural funds management, questions remain as to which capacities subnational actors, both administrative and political, obtain to implement the regional operational programmes through local ESF+ projects. Since most studies analysing both absorption and administrative capacity are performed on a national level, there is still much to explore about how subnational actors' behaviour and capacities affect the outcome

of the policy process (Dellmuth & Stoffel, 2012; Dotti, 2016). Dąbrowski (2013), reconfirms the importance of the administrative capacity for the involvement of subnational actors in the policy process, calling for the importance to not only assess the administrative capacity at the national level but also within regional policy networks and among other subnational actors and stakeholders. Although subnational actors in Sweden may obtain sufficient administrative capacity to administer the structural funds, attention has been attracted to the administrative burden associated with this funding. Apart from the operational work done within the project, substantial time and resources are required by the beneficiaries to administrate an EU project, an issue that repeatedly has been addressed by the EC (Brunazzo, 2016). Piattoni and Polverari argue that the administrative burden following the structural funds management is “acting as a disincentive to engage with the policy for those Member States, regions or beneficiaries that can afford not to do so” (2016, p. 10). Since the literature is limited on how subnational actors perceive the administrative burden associated with the ESF+, there is a need to focus attention on whether the issue of administrative requirements may impact the subnational management of the ESF+.

2.2. Theoretical frame

2.2.1. Multi-level Governance as a theoretical perspective

A common theory used for analysing the EU’s Cohesion Policy is the theory of Multi-level governance (MLG) which focuses attention on the diffusion of political power between different territorial levels. MLG was first defined as a “system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers—supranational, national, regional and local” (Marks 1993, 392; Hooghe 1996). Subsequently, the concept was further established by Hooghe and Marks (2001) in their work *Multi-level Governance and European Integration*. The MLG perspective was developed in response to the traditional view of state-centric governance where independent states are seen as the main decision-makers (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). But along with the dual processes of European integration and Regionalisation, the political authority has on the one hand shifted from national governments to the European level, and on the other hand from national governments to subnational actors. As a consequence, a new form of governance has developed where “authority and policy-making influence are shared across multiple levels of government – subnational, national and supranational.” (Hooghe & Marks, 2001, p. 2). Accordingly, MLG concerning European integration implies that the political authority and decision-making power in the EU does not solely belong to the national governments, but also involves subnational actors and supranational institutions. This has created vertical shifts in the distribution of political authority where actors both beneath and above the national governments are involved in and interact in the decision-making at the EU level (Bache 2008). With this theoretical perspective, the diffusion of power between supranational, national and subnational actors related to the

policy-making and implementation of complex EU policies such as the Cohesion Policy can be understood.

The idea of the EU as characterised by MLG is generally accepted, but there is a lack of consensus regarding how the dispersion of policy-making power among different actors should be or is designed. Therefore, Hooghe and Marks (2003) developed two types of MLG to better capture how this diffusion of power can be organised. Type I is characterised by “general-purpose jurisdictions, nonintersecting memberships, jurisdictions at a limited number of levels and systemwide architecture”, while Type II is characterised by “task-specific jurisdictions, intersecting memberships, no limit to the number of jurisdictional levels and flexible design” (Hooghe & Marks, 2003, p. 236). The two types of MLG are not mutually exclusive and can hence co-exist, but they outline two distinct ways of organising the division of political authority within European states. A significant difference between Type I and Type II is their strategies to concur the coordination issue that arises when several actors are involved in decision-making (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Type I decreases the risk of coordination struggles by limiting the number of actors with jurisdiction to a few territorial levels and Type II decreases the same issue by limiting the interaction between actors giving them jurisdiction on different issues. Accordingly, Type I relates to the division of power on territorial levels which leads to general-purpose jurisdictions, while Type II relates to the division of power around competencies resulting in task-specific jurisdictions (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Concerning the Swedish case is Type I the most suitable since jurisdiction is based on territorial levels, but the practical reality is more complex than this theoretical model.

2.2.2. Limitations of the Multi-level Governance model

Although the two types of MLG describe how the division of power is formally structured and organised between different actors at the national and subnational level, it does not explain how different actors behave in the policy process and practise the jurisdiction given to them. To better capture how national and subnational actors interact in the policy process, one needs to study the actions of relevant actors, which to a large extent depend on their preferences and motivations (Dotti, 2016).

Despite its usefulness to analyse and explain the nature of the EU’s policy-making process, especially regarding the complex structure of the Cohesion Policy, the MLG model has met some criticisms in terms of its ability to explain who governs the implementation of EU policy and how different actors interact in the policy process (Bachtler & Mendez, 2007; Blom-hansen, 2005). Blom-hansen (2005, p. 628) argues that the MLG model “does not explain which actors, at which levels, will be causally important, and when.”. Accordingly, the MLG model is useful for describing that the EU policy-making involves several political actors at different territorial levels, but fails to specify how the interaction between actors within the Member States works. As regards the Cohesion Policy, this issue

becomes even more prominent realising the political authority that subnational actors possess in the policy process, in contrast to other policies (Dellmuth & Stoffel, 2012). For example, the model does not explain how supranational and national governments can ensure that subnational governments use the structural funds to achieve European goals and do not finance projects for simply regional interests (Blom-hansen, 2005). Instead, Blom-hansen (2005) applies the principal-agent approach to better capture how and when different actors impact the implementation of the Cohesion Policy. This approach has the advantage of looking at the issue of control through analysis of how the principal, in this case, the European Commission, can control that the agent, in this case, the national governments, act in the interests of the EU.

However, Blom-hansen (2005) focuses his analysis on the principal-agent relationship between the EU and the Member States and thereby misses the interactions between national and subnational actors within Member States. For that reason, more research is needed on the potential issues that may arise within Member States by looking at which actors are participating, what the policy processes look like and how control can be exercised by the EU down to the subnational level (Blom-hansen, 2005).

Another scholar who has been trying to explain how the process of European integration has contributed to a distribution of resources and political power between national and subnational actors is Ian Bache (2008), who combines the concept of Europeanisation with the MLG model. According to Bache (2008), the MLG structure in the EU has been promoted through Europeanisation. The connection between Europeanisation and MLG is explained through the use of policy networks, which are defined by the Rhodes model as “a set of resource-dependent organisations” (Bache, 2008, p. 33). Within these policy networks, different actors are dependent on each other since they share resources such as authority, financial capacities, organisational structures and information channels. According to Bache (2008), the policy networks approach helps to explain the interaction between domestic actors that is necessary as a result of the division of political power that is required in the management of the structural funds. Although, studies have mainly focused on how European integration has impacted the functionality of national policy networks (Blom-hansen, 2005), and less on what the processes and interactions look like within these policy networks. Therefore, less is known about how regional policy networks function and impact structural funds management at the subnational level.

2.2.3. Specification of theoretical frame

Taken altogether, the MLG model offers a significant descriptive perspective on the structure of the Cohesion Policy implementation and how it involves several different actors, at different territorial and political levels. However, scholars have underlined the model’s limitations in explaining what the practices and processes look like behind the formal multi-level structures. As suggested by both Blom-hansen (2005) and Bache (2008), the MLG model can be combined with the policy networks approach

to better capture the processes and preferences within Member States. Additionally, when viewing subnational actors as agents in a principal-agent relationship between the European, the national and the subnational levels, one can analyse the issues of control and loyal implementation (Blom-hansen, 2005). This thesis, therefore, uses the MLG approach as a theoretical perspective to analyse subnational actors as agents operating within national and/or regional policy networks. Previous research has established that subnational actors have a substantial discretion regarding the structural funds, and that their networks, interests and capacities impacts their actions. A combination of the abovementioned concepts from previous research and theoretical perspectives offers the opportunity to analyse how the structural funds are qualitatively managed within the Member States, and what challenges may arise when they are translated into regional practice. This theoretical frame is further developed into an analytical scheme which is presented in section 3.5.2.

3. Method and material

This chapter presents the thesis' overall research design and motivates the choice of a qualitative interview method. Moreover, the selection of case and material as well as the process of analysis is explained. Lastly, the operationalisation of the theoretical framework aligned with the analytical scheme is outlined.

3.1. Research design

The thesis is designed as a qualitative interview study with an abductive approach. The use of an abductive approach allows the collection of data to be guided by previous theories, but at the same time be open to new concepts and patterns revealed from the material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). For this thesis, the data collection aims to reveal how the objectives of the ESF+ are translated into regional practice in West Sweden, and what central challenges this policy process may encounter. An interview strategy is considered the most suitable method to collect in-depth data and generate direct information on how different actors interact in the regional management of the ESF+. With an interview study, concepts and theories established by previous research can be tested in a specific setting and generate a new understanding of the issue of interest that goes beyond formal structures and processes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). In this thesis, the interviews will be used to generate new knowledge about the interaction between different actors involved in the policy process of the ESF+.

Interview studies can be of different character, the most common being either respondent or informant interviews (Esaiasson, 2017). For this thesis, a combination of in-depth informant and respondent interviews are chosen. They are of informant character since the main purpose is to analyse the regional practice of the ESF+ from the perspective of the organisations, but they are also of respondent character meaning that an additional interest lies in understanding the interviewee's networks and perception of the issue. The interviews are carried out with experts selected for their expertise and knowledge relevant to the research problem (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Interviewing experts has the advantage of directly supplying insight into the organisation of interest and efficiently producing primary data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). However, the use of expert interviews may also result in subjective views since it surrounds their everyday work and they have an own interest in the issue. Thus, the combination of several experts representing similar organisations will contribute to a more all-encompassing result when the actors are compared with each other.

3.2. Case selection

For the purpose of this study, the management of the ESF+ in West Sweden is used as an empirical case. An interview study is used to capture the complexity of the issue of interest and to study the specific setting more in-depth. This specific setting can then offer descriptions and explanations to be transferred

to similar settings. Realising the vast research performed in the Southern regions of the EU and the CEECs, this study expands the understanding of the characteristics of the policy process of the ESF+ to a region subject to little previous research.

As outlined in the introduction, this thesis focuses on the issue of social cohesion and therefore focuses its analysis on the structural fund targeting these issues, the ESF+. The Swedish labour market is considered an interesting case due to its tradition of corporatism, which is mirrored in the composition of the Structural Funds Partnership (SFP) in West Sweden, and the local governments responsibility for education and economic support. Adding the Swedish government's focus on promoting social issues at the EU-level further makes it a valuable case to study from a social cohesion perspective. Further, the case of Sweden is interesting to study from a MLG perspective due to its historically strong municipalities with a high degree of local self-governance and local autonomy (Loughlin, 2001). Since the Swedish corporative labour market differ from many other Member States' labour markets the study's generalisability may be limited to similar cases. But since most previous studies are performed in other European regions, an analysis of a corporative Member States will contribute with a valuable perspective to the research field. Moreover, the results regarding the subnational actors' interaction and interests can be transferred to other European regions to analyse whether labour market characteristics are decisive for the structural funds effectiveness, or if similar patterns are revealed anyway.

Swedish regions are noteworthy since the European NUTS 2 regions do not correspond with the political regions and hence complicate the process of managing the structural funds, which allocation is based on the NUTS 2 division. For Sweden, this means that the subnational actors involved in the structural funds' regional administration not only include several strong local governments but also more than one regional government. In addition, many Swedish regions cover territorial areas with significant differences in terms of population, business climate, accessibility to public transport and political interests.

The case of West Sweden, which is the selected site for this study, covers the political-administrative regions of Västra Götaland and Halland. Together, they constitute Sweden's second-largest NUTS 2 region, counting for around a fifth of Sweden's total population. Notable, Västra Götaland's 49 municipalities and Halland's 6 municipalities are highly diversified, ranging from the commuting municipality of Töreboda in the east-north and the rural municipality of Bengtsfors in the north to the highly competitive and fast developing city of Gothenburg on the west coast (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2016). The heterogeneity of the region makes it a crucial case to study from a MLG perspective where different actors need to cooperate and bargain to make the structural funding effective and suitable for their preferences and interests. Possibly, the allocation and administration of the structural funds become bargaining between the larger region Västra Götaland and

the smaller region Halland since they have an equal amount of chairs in the partnership agreement. Moreover, a specific form of networks called coordination associations have emerged in the region where stakeholders from different authorities, the regions and municipalities cooperate on issues related to rehabilitation and to find measures to prevent ill health and exclusion from the labour market (samverkanvg, n.d.). These coordination associations have become central actors in ESF projects and their existence gives West Sweden a different character than many other regions where coordination associations are not so large and active.

3.3. Selection of experts to interview

The strategy to select informants for the interviews is aligned with the site-specific purpose of analysing the translation of EU policies into regional practice in West Sweden. Since the data collection depends on the interview persons' knowledge and willingness to contribute with their expertise to the study, the choice of experts is crucial. In the initial stage, the sampling strategy is to reach maximum variation in terms of perspectives and experiences of the regional implementation of the ESF+ in West Sweden. Then, a strategic sample from identified key actors is selected. The strategic sampling of the experts is based on the centrality of the actors, meaning their role in the management of the ESF+, and their expertise on the topic (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Realising the complexity of the researched topic, only people in a position explicitly working with structural funding or ESF+ projects as well as with substantial knowledge of the practical implications of the ESF+ are selected. Though, the study is delimited to regional political actors and can therefore not speak of other actors involved in the regional management of the ESF+, such as civil society organisations and authorities.

Accordingly, interviews are conducted with experts representing the two political regions in West Sweden, Region Västra Götaland and Region Halland, three of the four associations of local authorities in West Sweden and five municipalities. Firstly, the two experts representing the regions are selected due to their centrality in the structural programming of the ESF+. Secondly, experts from three associations of local authorities are selected due to their roles as influential actors in the policy process related to the structural funds, at the same time as they are crucial beneficiaries of the ESF+. However, while the Gothenburg Region (GR) has a pronounced work with EU issues and the EU's funds and programmes, Skaraborgs Association of Local Authorities is becoming more of an active actor in ESF+ projects, and Fyrbodal Association of Local Authorities is still developing their work with EU's funds and programmes. These differences between the three associations of local authorities thus contributed to the maximal variation of the sample and strengthens the trustworthiness of the study. When perspectives from actors with different resources and strategies are compared, a more comprehensive picture of the characteristics of the regional management of the ESF+ in West Sweden emerges.

Lastly, experts from four municipalities in West Sweden are chosen to capture the issue at a more local level. The four municipalities are chosen partly due to their geographical location, as the study aims to cover as many parts of the region as possible, and partly due to their work with EU-related projects. Interviews are only carried out with municipalities that have been project owners and/or partners in one or several ESF+ projects. See table 3.1. for a full list of the interviewed experts.

Table 3.1.: List of interview persons

Organisation	Interview person	Date of interview	Information about interviewee
Regional level			
Region Västra Götaland	Andreas Catoni	14 th of March	Acting Secretary-General of the Structural Funds Partnership.
Region Halland	Lena Neinhart	10 th of March	International strategist and the region's contact person for the ESF+.
Subregional level (Associations of Local Authorities)			
Gothenburg Region (GR)	Anita Tóth	8 th of March	Planning leader for EU/External financing.
Skaraborg Association of Municipalities	Hillevi Larsson	22 nd of March	Educational strategist.
Fyrbodal Association of Local Authorities	Anna Lärk Ståhlberg	21 st of March	Team leader for the social development unit.
Local level (municipalities)			
City of Gothenburg	Marie Svensson	17 th of March	Planning leader international relations at the primary and lower secondary school administration.
Svenljunga municipality	Madde Lind	9 th of March	Unit manager for the labour market unit at the municipal board administration.
Mariestad municipality	Maria Johansson Berg	11 th of March	Project- and development manager.
Halmstad municipality	Marina Zivojinovic	11 th of March	Quality developer in the education and labour market administration.

3.4. Interview structure and interview guide

Due to the current situation and the now well-established tradition of digital meetings, most of the interviews are performed online using either Zoom or Teams. Since both the interviewer and the interviewees speak Swedish fluently, all of the interviews are conducted in Swedish to create an optimal dialogue climate and reduce the risk of misinterpretations. All of the interviews are recorded following the interviewee's approval. The interviews were conducted between the 8th of March and the 22nd of March 2022. All of the interviewees are asked and accept their name and role to be stated in the thesis.

A common strategy for in-depth interviews is the semi-structured interview, which is structured around a few themes to be covered during the interview, aligned with a list of prepared follow-up questions (Kvale, 2007). This strategy has the advantage of being flexible as to which follow-up questions are posed and in which order and letting the interviewer's answers shape the direction of the interview. However, while a flexible interview guide allows for new or unknown patterns to be revealed and built further on, a more structured interview guide produces more similar and clearer data that is more efficient to analyse (Kvale, 2007). Therefore, careful attention is paid to the balance between obtaining the spontaneous perceptions of the interviewees and following the same structure for all interviews. Accordingly, the expert interviews are structured around predetermined themes that are the same for all interviews, but with room for more specific follow-up questions tailored to the interviewee's varying backgrounds and expertise.

Interview guides are formulated to structure the central themes of the interview and outline the prepared questions. Acknowledging the variations in the subnational actors' formal mission linked to the management of the ESF+ in West Sweden, three different interview guides are formulated. The different questions posed to the different type of actors are outlined in a merged interview guide that can be found in Appendix 1. Importantly, the focus for the regions is on their official mission to develop a regional operational programme for West Sweden, while the focus for the subregions and municipalities are on their development and implementation of ESF projects. Nevertheless, all interview guides follow the same structure, where the first theme covers the programming of the ESF+ in West Sweden, the second theme covers the development of regional projects and the third theme covers the implementation of projects. Questions based on the concepts from previous research as outlined in section 2.1 are included in all three themes. More specifically, for each of the themes the interviewees were asked about their participation and influence in the process, their networking structure, motivations and interests, capacities and resources and the challenges met in the process. See section 3.5.2. for a throughout description of these analytical concepts.

3.5. Process of analysis

3.5.1. Transcription

The raw data, comprising of digital recordings from the interviews, are transcribed into analysable text manually by the author. To assure a correct translation of the spoken word into text, the transcriptions are gone through several times by the author. Firstly, the author listens to the recordings in sections and manually transcribes the speech into written text. Secondly, the author listens to the full recordings while reading the initial transcriptions to correct misspellings and misinterpretations. This two-step process is crucial to ensure that all information from the audio files is transferred correctly to the written transcriptions. The quotes used in the thesis are sent out to half of the interviewees for approval to ensure a correct interpretation of the answers and to increase the scientific quality of the analysis.

3.5.2. Operationalisation of the theoretical framework

The theoretical framework, as presented in chapter 2, is used to analyse the regional practice related to the ESF+ in West Sweden. More specifically, the theoretical concepts are used to explain the characteristics of how different actors participate and influence the policy process, what their policy networks and cooperation patterns look like, what preferences and motivations actors have for participating in the management of the ESF+, and what challenges they perceive in this process. The concept of regional practice related to structural funds management is thus operationalised through five different themes, in which the material is coded; descriptive participation and influence, network characteristics, motivation and interests, administrative capacity and challenges. See table 3.2 for the complete analytical scheme. Each theme captures an important aspect of the regional practice in terms of subnational actors' behaviours and incentives in the policy process related to the ESF+ in West Sweden. While the first four themes are guided by concepts from previous research, the last theme is guided by new information from the material.

Descriptive participation and influence in the policy process

The first theme relates to a descriptive analysis of how the management of the ESF+ works in practice in West Sweden through examining how different actors participate in and influence the policy process, including the programming, the project planning and the project implementation. The actor's participation is operationalised through descriptions of their formal and informal participation in the policy process as well as how, and if, the organisation can influence the policy process.

Network characteristics

The second theme is operationalised through descriptions of how the organisation cooperates with other subnational actors in the policy process, what type of networks they are involved in and who their main partners are. Participation in both external and internal networks are accounted for. Moreover, this theme captures what type of network role the interviewees portray themselves in.

Motivation and interests

The third theme is operationalised slightly different for the regional and the subregional and municipal levels. For the regional level, aspects related to the region's incentives are captured, such as the possibilities they see with ESF+ for regional development and what type of projects they would like to see in the region. For the subregional and the municipal level, aspects related to the actor's self-interests are captured, such as how the experts explain their motivation for influencing the programme and the processes, why they choose to initiate and implement ESF+ projects and what their priorities are.

Administrative capacity

The operationalisation of the fourth theme looks at the actor's access to resources, both financial, organisational and human, and the capacity and experience within the organisation to participate in the policy process and effectively implement ESF projects. Moreover, the theme captures the actor's perception of the vast administration that is associated with participating in ESF projects.

Challenges

The fifth theme relates to the challenges met within the policy process as expressed by the interviewees, both in terms of influencing the programming and in terms of running projects. The challenge theme is operationalised through the examination and comparison of the different actor's expressions of perceived challenges and obstacles, as well as suggested solutions. This theme has more of an inductive approach, but is derived from the questioning in previous research regarding the policy's effectiveness, and the impact of contextual conditions.

Table 3.2.: Analytical scheme

<i>Themes</i>	Regions	Subregions	Municipalities
Participation and influence			
• <i>Opportunity to influence</i>			
• <i>Type of participation</i>			
Network characteristics			
• <i>Co-operation patterns</i>			
• <i>Role in network</i>			
Motivation and interests			
• <i>Priorities in ESF+-projects</i>			
• <i>Incentives for participation</i>			
Administrative capacity and resources			
• <i>Access to resources and competencies</i>			
• <i>Perception of administrative burden</i>			
Challenges			
• <i>Perceived challenges</i>			
• <i>Suggested solutions/improvements</i>			

4. Results

This chapter presents the study's main results deriving from the expert interviews. Following the structure of the analytical framework, the five themes will be outlined separately in the following order: participation and influence in the policy process, network characteristics, motivation & interests, administrative capacity & resources and challenges. Moreover, the results will be presented separately for the three different types of subnational actors; regional, subregional and municipal .

4.1. Participation and influence in the policy process

4.1.1. Regions

Region Västra Götaland and Region Halland have received the official mission from the government to develop and write a regional operational programme (ROP) for West Sweden. As regards the programming phase, the experts from the regions explain their role as strategic, not operational, with the mission to gather regional perspectives to develop an operational programme that will work for entire West Sweden. The writing process of the operational programme was mainly performed in an internal working group, but with the support from external reference groups and different forms of reconciliation and dialogue with subnational actors.

Both experts describe the programming process as simple since they are only two regions with similar challenges. The programme was grounded in a socioeconomic analysis done by the two regions jointly, which revealed that the regions had similar challenges to tackle with the ESF+. None of the experts saw it as a problem that Region Västra Götaland is considerably larger than Region Halland, but rather stated that it became natural for Region Västra Götaland to take the lead and be responsible for the secretariat of the Structural Fund Partnership (SFP).

As regards the implementation phase, the regions are responsible for preparing projects and documentation for the SFP meetings. Both regions agree that they do not have any role in the operational implementation of the projects, but acknowledge their crucial role to coordinate, mobilise and inform actors throughout the programming period. The expert from Västra Götaland underlines that it is the Swedish ESF+ council's role to handle the implementation of projects, but that they have a regional mission to spread information about the ESF+ and to prepare regional actors for the responsibility it entails to administer an ESF+ project.

When asked about their role in the preparation for regional projects, the expert from Region Halland describes their role as in-between the strategic and the operational since the project ideas and implementation of projects needs to be undertaken by the actor who are the closest to the issue. Pointing

at the regional development strategy, the expert emphasises that the region's role is to make sure that projects contribute to the fulfilment of the development strategy.

[...] this is where we are going. Then it is up to the actors in some way in Halland to find the solution. [...] it is not us as a region that can come up with the solutions, it must be in other places, but we see the problem and we see what effects it has. So it's more the middle role if you say so.

The expert from Region Västra Götaland mentions that they do not have the resources to offer project coaching. Instead, they are working to facilitate for actors to participate in the ESF+ programme through discussion with the government about state aid, dialogue with SALAR and search for good examples from other European regions.

4.1.2. Subregions

The three subregions share the characteristics of being politically governed associations working on behalf of their member municipalities. In their role between the municipalities at the local level and the regions at the regional level, they participate both in the regional reference group VåReg³ and coordinate internal networks together with their member municipalities. This structure gives the subregions a unique position to mediate between the local and the regional level and to transfer local needs to the ones in charge of the structural programming at the regional level. According to all experts interviewed, the subregions believe they have a good dialogue with the regions through VåReg and that they are offered opportunities to influence the content and the structure of the new operational plan for ESF+. Thus, the regional operational programme is described to be all-encompassing and reflect the subregions' main preferences. As argued by the expert representing GR, it might be more relevant for them to give concrete input in the later stages of the policy process:

[...] we see the regional operational programme more as an overall framework that is not so detailed and therefore much of our work falls within the framework of it. [...] Then the regional operational programme will be narrowed down so that they also have two-year call plans and there it may be even more important for us from the metropolitan region perspective to come with views and input.

The experts emphasise the importance of the strategists working within the association and their associated profession networks for the collection of input from several different perspectives. However, the experts express the issue of slowness in the structural programming organisation, and that structural fund's issues are difficult for the member municipalities to grasp due to distance from their everyday work. This slowness seems to be accepted by the actors but creates a disincentive to actively participate

³ VåReg is the West Swedish reference group for the Cohesion Policy, assembling representatives from Region Halland and Region Västra Götaland and the four subregions; Gothenburg Region, Skaraborgs Association of Local Municipalities, Fyrbodal Association of Local Authorities and Boråsregionen Sjuhärad Association of Local Authorities.

when the process is postponed or changed. Although all subregions seem to deliver input to VåReg when asked for it, GR is understood to have the resources to participate more actively than Fyrbodal and Skaraborg. Even though opportunities have been offered to give input on different proposals, it is also a question of time and resources which is not always available in the two smaller subregions of Skaraborg and Fyrbodal.

While GR mainly is a project owner and arranges several own projects, Skaraborg and Fyrbodal have each been project owners of one larger regional project. Due to GR's established project organisation and their position as one of the largest beneficiaries, they are describing themselves as a driving force on these issues, but acknowledge the importance of giving voice to all subregions.

Then it is clear that the regional perspective is super important, if we are the engine in many situations, it is also important that we involve the other subregions in that work so that you get equal opportunities as well.

In sum, the experts argue that the cooperation works efficiently with the region, but one interviewee underlines that there is more difficult to influence the working methods of the Swedish ESF+ Council and that there is a feeling of lack of flexibility from them.

You feel like the region has its regional mission to support and it is so incredibly much easier administration towards the region. The answers you get from the ESF+ is that no it is not possible, it is regulated at EU level and we cannot change.

4.1.3. Municipalities

Regarding the municipality's possibility to participate in and influence the structural programming of the ESF+ in West Sweden, quite varying views are expressed by the four experts interviewed. Halmstad municipality, which is the only interviewed municipality from Halland Region, express that they have been able to participate and influence the ESF+ to a high degree and have been invited to raise their perspective in different forums. While Halmstad has close cooperation with the Region Halland, the municipalities in Västra Götaland express different perspectives as to their possibility to have an impact.

In the City of Gothenburg, which is the largest municipality and also one of the largest beneficiaries of ESF+, the mission to raise the city's viewpoint on the regional operational programme is located at the city management office. Although, the interviewee representing the City of Gothenburg, who works at the primary and lower secondary school department, argues that even though the city has been invited to participate in and influence the structural programming it has been problematic to form a unified voice due to the city's size. In addition, the expert argues that due to the changed direction of the new ESF+ programme, the city should probably have been invited differently to more efficiently capture the perspective of not only the labour market departments but also the social departments.

[...] we know it is not at the labour market and adult education administration where most ESF+ projects have been conducted, but it is within social administrations and in other activities. I think it would have been interesting then in a regional programme to actually look at who is active in this specific programme, cause there is a user perspective that you did not really capture if you ask me.

Moreover, Mariestad municipality on the one hand argues that they have not heard about the possibility to influence the structural programming of the new ESF+ programme. However, when asked about it, the interviewee mentions that there could have been possibilities to influence if one would have looked for them, but questions what significance such influence would have and holds that it could depend on the aspect of distance.

So in that case you have to be a lot in their operation, there will be some distance here as well that certainly comes into play, so it depends. If you had someone who had time for it and worked their way into the corridors then you could certainly have influenced.

Svenljunga municipality on the other hand holds that they are not explicitly influencing the ESF+ policy process, but rather have an implicit impact through their monthly reports which they use to raise their opinions about the programme.

I do not really know...It is clear that we certainly affect some parts thanks to the fact that we express a lot in our monthly reports and final reports on the projects. But I think large parts are affected by what happens, what wars are coming, or what events, pandemics, unemployment. So we get the question sometimes about being involved, but I do not think we can influence directly.

The municipalities express different views as to their possibilities to influence politicians and the ESF Council during the implementation phase, and how regional ESF+ projects are best implemented. Again, the City of Gothenburg has a different position due to them being considerably larger than the other municipalities, with more resources. The interviewee describes that they have an internal structure to mobilise the interests of the city and form a united voice to be raised both to the city management office and at VåReg meetings. Through this type of internal mobilization, they are trying to influence once the regional programme is in place and the call for proposals is formulated.

So there we have probably tried to influence more and there are also the social administrations involved but it is rather in the next step when the plan is in place that we sort of try to influence announcements. [...] and that is where I think that we have more of a channel into the ESF+ and can influence what it should be about.

Something that is underlined by all municipalities is the importance of an internal project organisation for the development of and implementation of ESF+ projects. According to the expert from Svenljunga, their success in developing and managing ESF+ projects to a large extent depends on their closeness to their politicians and that they have developed an internal project organisation that is closely related to the development needs they see in their everyday operations. As described by another interviewee, a

lack of structure and knowledge about how to work with ESF+ in the municipality may hamper the international development work, making good working methods and political anchoring of a project idea of utmost importance for the municipalities' possibility to participate in ESF+ projects.

It's a lot about the fact that this cannot be done as a point effort, but it must be a question that exists in the regular management work if it is to lead anywhere. So in answer to your question, we have made attempts to structure it before but then we have done it in project form and then it has more run out in the sand.

4.1.4. Summary of the actors' participation in the policy process

Participation and influence	Regions	Subregions	Municipalities
<i>Opportunity to influence</i>	Responsible for ROP and encounter regional needs.	Participate in Vareg, given opportunities to influence.	Varying levels of influence, most offered opportunities.
<i>Type of participation</i>	Strategic role to mobilise and inform about ESF+.	Initiate, develop, enforce subregional projects.	Develop and implement regional or local projects.

In sum, the MLG structure is clear regarding the different actors' participation in the policy process of the ESF+ in West Sweden. The regions have a strategic role to develop a regional operational programme and mobilise potential beneficiaries as well as participate in (Halland) and hold the secretariat of (Vastra Gotaland) the SFP. The subregions contribute with the perspectives of their member municipalities to Vareg and are participating both at a strategic level to influence the direction of the ESF+, and at an operational level to develop and implement ESF+ projects. Most municipalities have been offered the possibility to influence the content of the new ESF+ programme, but the interviewees express a view that it might not have that much of an effect and that the later stages of the process are more relevant for them, such as what the call for proposals look like and implications during the implementation phase. Taken altogether, while the regions are participating strategically at the regional level, the subregions are both participating strategically and operationally with a subregional focus, and the municipalities are participating less in the strategic development of the programme, and more actively in the operational stages of implementing local ESF+ projects.

4.2. Network characteristics

4.2.1. Regions

When looking at Region Halland's and Region Vastra Gotaland's cooperation patterns in the policy process related to the regional management of the ESF+ in West Sweden, it becomes clear that a specific network structure has emerged around the Cohesion Policy management. In line with the principle of partnership, which requires national and regional governments to involve different subnational actors in the process, network structures have been developed to capture the perspectives of different actors. The

regions work actively with reconciliation and dialogue with different actors and according to the interviewees, most of the work with the Cohesion Policy is based on consultation with different networks and other constellations.

Then we coordinate a lot of networks and different constellations and it is through those constellations that we work many times. [...] Yes, so that there are different structures, but a lot is built on the network structure, we have a lot of networks where we meet actors in different ways.

Due to their coordinating mission, the regions express that they cooperate and interact with a wide range of regional actors, ranging from politicians and authorities to actors who are large receivers of ESF+ funding. Most importantly, VåReg which is the main reference group for the Cohesion Policy in West Sweden is referred to as a crucial network to gather the perspectives from the four subregions in Region Västra Götaland and Region Halland, with the addition of dialogues with other actors.

We have partly had these reference groups then in Region Västra Götaland as I said, and there we have had more regular meetings and then the other dialogues were that we tried to come to meetings that the actor or actors hold and presented and heard what they have to say.

Both experts say that they have tried to reach out to several different forums and constellations, but the involvement of actors outside the permanent reference groups requires the individual actor to invite the region and actively seek forums to raise their voices in. The material reveals that there is an established structure of whom to consult on these issues, especially with these permanent reference groups and the so-called competence councils gathering different professions.

Both regions emphasise the importance of regional cooperation, not only in the process of developing a regional operational programme but also in the implementation of regional ESF+ projects. From the perspective of Region Västra Götaland, projects where several subregional actors align forces are preferable since it is expected to generate a greater regional benefit. Therefore, he underlines the importance of both the coordination associations and especially the associations of local authorities for the development of successful ESF+ projects.

We have had several projects linked to individual municipalities and then it is, yes the city of Gothenburg is big of course because of their size and if they run a project, there are many who get to take part in it quite simply. And then we have the coordination unions which are very large in western Sweden compared to other SFP areas, so they are a good player. But we may see that since it requires some size, experience and capacity to run these projects, the associations of local authorities are a good association for this type of collaboration.

Both of the regions have a coordinating and information sharing role in these networks, where they work to collect input from different actors and mobilise actors to cooperate on projects that will generate results for the region as a whole. The network structure is crucial for the regions to fulfil their mission

to create regional development and enhance for actors to participate in the Cohesion Policy, as illustrated by the interviewee from Region Halland:

Yes, and that one has a coordinating role, well now we see that you want, shall we sit down together? Then we also have an information-spreading role, it is an important part for us that we inform that the opportunities exist and that we ensure that the ESF+ Council in this case then comes into certain contexts and that they need to contribute with information and such.

4.2.2. Subregions

The subregions have similar cooperation patterns where the most important partners for collaboration and interaction naturally are their respective member municipalities. The associations of local authorities are collaborative by nature and built on networks where officials and managers from the member municipalities are represented. Especially GR and Fyrbodals Association of Local Authorities underlines the importance of their internal professional networks which is their main forum for collection of ideas and different perspectives to develop project ideas. The interviewee from GR points out that their strategic managerial networks are a crucial complement to the politics in the formulation of more specific development needs.

It is our strategic networks of managers, but also our political steering groups that identify areas that are important for us to work with. While politics may identify broader issues, the strategic networks contribute with more detailed requirements of needs. And based on what we observe in our networks, we try to find opportunities to run different types of projects.

In addition to their internal networks, all subregions highlight their participation in VåReg as their main arena for networking with the region and the other subregions on issues related to the Cohesion Policy. Although, the subregions actively cooperate and network with other subnational actors such as the business sector, the civil society, the academy, coordination associations and relevant authorities to develop project ideas and implement ESF+ projects. One of the experts argues that the type of cooperation and interaction with other actors to a large extent depends on what type of project it is and that they especially have a lot of stakeholders who are interested in the process and results of a specific project, even though they might not be involved as project partners.

[...] there are many who could be collaborators, but then we may have, above all, many stakeholders in our various projects.

Above all, the subregions naturally mention their member municipalities as their main cooperation partners, but they are also mentioning increased cooperation between the different subregions. The expert from GR states that even though the four subregions might have reached different levels and that some might have come a little further in some areas, they all share the same challenges. The expert from

Skaraborg argues that they have seen some great development related to their external funding and project operations in recent years, which enhances regional collaboration.

GR is good at this, very good. While Skaraborg is almost catching up. And then, when you have the same challenges and are in about the same place, then you will find arenas for collaboration in completely different ways.

Followingly, the subregions see the benefit of further developing their network structure to also include joint project applications and the development of projects for the whole region. The expert from Skaraborg continues to argue that they see a whole new collaborative climate emerging that has not existed before when the subregions have worked more independently.

The new thing we are happy about is that we also see the opportunity for collaboration between the four associations of local authorities that we have not had before. Or we may have had the opportunity but we have not done so. It is a new collaborative climate that we have not seen the smoke of before, which is incredible.

Even though the interviewees see the benefits of cooperation between the subregions and are positive about it, one expert also underlines the challenges in managing large projects including several subregions. Being the project owner of a pan-regional project requires a lot of time and resources and if they do not have that type of resources within their association, it can create tensions between the project partners. Instead, the interviewee argues that a better option would be if the region would take the lead on larger regional projects and be project owners, instead of one association of local authorities being responsible for the other subregions.

4.2.3. Municipalities

Looking at the municipalities' cooperation patterns, similar results from the subregions emerged. Primarily, they are cooperating within their own organisation, with other departments, private actors in the municipality and relevant authorities. Although, while the City of Gothenburg mainly cooperates within the municipality due to its size and access to resources and has created an internal forum for mobilisation in ESF+ projects, the smaller municipalities to a larger extent cooperate with other municipalities in their territorial area. As argued by one of the interviewees, cooperation with other municipalities is a necessity to get participants since there are not enough individuals in one municipality, but the involvement of several municipalities in one project may also hamper the results due to the division of project positions.

And we do not have enough participants, so then we need to be more municipalities and then we will not have substantive efforts, because you have to divide the positions and you may only get a half-time here, and what can a halftime affect? Then it's better that we demand money for a full-time position ourselves instead.

All of the municipalities are cooperating with other actors in varying ways both during the programming and implementation phases, mainly because ESF+ projects are large projects with substantive budgets that require resources and capacity. Most municipalities have also been participating in ESF+ projects where national actors are project owners, such as SALAR or the National Agency for Education.

Concerning regional cooperation, the subregions and especially GR are brought forward as a crucial network for collaboration with other municipalities. However, the benefit of being able to deliver more substantive projects for more individuals has to be weighed against the issue of coordination and the resources needed to administer such a large project. This was illustrated by one of the interviews, pointing out that whether to cooperate or not depends on what type of effects one is aiming for.

If we are talking implementation, I also think that it is when a large collaborative project cracks a little then it is very difficult to run... The bigger the orchestra is, the worse it sounds if someone plays wrong. So it depends very much on what we want here now, what are the effects we want to achieve. If we want effects at the local level, then a small pilot project might be good.

One of the smaller municipalities goes even further to argue that the concept of collaboration on these issues could be questioned since the collaboration might just be a theoretical promise in the application but does not really function in practice.

You get money if you cooperate with another municipality, but it will only be a matter of pretending. Alright, so we'll say it, we take a course together and then we have shown that we cooperate. [...] My job as a project manager in municipality X is impossible, they work really well themselves, but I cannot lead their work which means that cooperation will not function in practice. At the same time you have to put a lot of resources on collaboration in theory, when applying for the project money.

Consequently, the interviewed municipalities acknowledge that collaboration with other subnational actors is necessary to run larger projects that reach a greater target group, but some issues arise regarding the efficient implementation of these projects. The administration increases due to a larger amount of participants and project partners, there is a challenge in dividing the funded position for example project manager between two municipalities, and the focus ends up on the strategy rather than the results.

4.2.4. Summary of the actors' network characteristics

Network characteristics	Regions	Subregions	Municipalities
<i>Co-operation patterns</i>	Coordination of and dialogue with networks.	Both internal networks and external networks/forums.	In internal networks and with close municipalities.
<i>Role in network</i>	Mobiliser and information spreader.	GR engine, others participate when possible.	Dependent on capacities and experience.

One can conclude that the different networks are crucial for the regional management of ESF+ in West Sweden since most of the work is built on different networks. Although, while the region's networks span over the whole of West Sweden, the subregions are both cooperating regionally with the regions and other subregions and locally with the municipalities, and the municipalities are mainly cooperating locally with nearby municipalities or within their subregion. For various reasons, participation in different networks and cooperation with other actors is crucial for the actor's involvement in ESF+ projects. Although, a dividing line emerged as to whether the cooperation that is required in larger projects leads to more effective use of ESF+ funding since the actors can learn from each other, or if one-municipality projects are more effective since the administration becomes smaller and fewer actors needs to be coordinated.

4.3. Motivation and interests

4.3.1. Regions

Regarding the region's incentives in the development of the regional operational programme and the mobilisation of regional ESF+ projects, the experts underline the importance of the structural funding, including ESF+, for regional development goals. Both of the interviewees highlight the connection between the regional operational programme and their respective regional development strategies (RDS), and that these regional strategies guided the work with the regional operational programme. This was illustrated by the expert from Region Västra Götaland.

And what is important to say is that the basis for the operational plan is the region Halland's growth strategy and Region Västra Götaland's RDS, so that's where it is and it is easy to link these priorities that we have selected to the RDS, you could say. And the point is really that these EU programs are a way to finance and achieve the goals we present in the RDS and the closer you see the connection, the easier it will be.

Accordingly, the regions see the ESF+ programme as an important tool to reach regional development goals. However, Region Halland argues that there is a difference between Region Halland and Region Västra Götaland since the structural funding is Region Halland's most crucial source for regional development investment. Therefore, Region Halland might have even higher expectations of their regional actors conducting ESF+ projects, as well as greater incentives to mobilize good actors to run ESF+ projects.

We have a very high expectation of them, there is a very big difference between Halland and Västra Götaland because we do not have many other development funds. In Halland, these structural fund resources are extremely important to be able to conduct regional development work.

Also, Region Västra Götaland underlines the importance of the money being allocated to projects that will contribute to the goals set out in the operational programme, and acknowledge a wish that the knowledge is spread in the region.

Concerning what type of ESF+ projects the regions would like to see implemented in the region, the interviewee underlines the significance of innovative projects going beyond what has traditionally been done within the ESF+, and especially Region Västra Götaland expresses a priority of larger, strategic projects involving several subregions that will contribute to a regional added value. Even though the prioritization of these larger projects above one-municipality projects is not as explicit in the new operational programme for West Sweden, the interviewee highlights it remained focus:

But still that you can see that there is a little volume in it and especially with the utilisation of results and so, that you can learn a lot from each other.

4.3.2. Subregions

All of the subregions clearly state that their priorities and incentives for participating in the ESF+ depend on the needs and wishes of their member municipalities. Similar to what was described by Region Halland, the subregions describe the structural funds as a necessity for their ability to conduct regional development work. The motivation for using ESF+ was clearly illustrated by one of the interviewees:

Because it is our development work, we do it with external funds. And if we did not have it, we would only have to go on, then it would only be the ongoing work, then the municipalities would have to work themselves in what they do anyway.

All of the interviewees emphasise the opportunity the ESF+ offers to test things they would not dare to try otherwise if they did not have external funding and argues that ESF+ is a fantastic way to perform development projects. As mentioned in section 4.1.2, the subregions have a special role working on behalf of the municipalities, but on another level with a more regional development focus. Therefore, the experts underline their need to both listen to the needs of the municipalities, but also to be attentive and drive development within the member municipalities.

We need to be responsive to listen to what the municipalities want, but we also need to be on our toes and show ourselves energetic and development-oriented and try to initiate processes and show the possibilities.

In general, the subregions express that their development needs are reflected in the regional operational programme and that the call for applications is connected to their priorities. For example, one of the subregions has been working intensely on the issue of completed studies, which is now a priority in both the regional development strategy and the regional operational programme for ESF+. Following this, they are planning for a large project on this issue jointly with the other subregions. However, although the subregions feel that the regional priorities for the ESF+ suit their needs and enable development

projects, the subregions argue that the demands from the ESF+ Council are too high for the subregions to design effective ESF+ projects. This was illustrated by one of the interviewees:

And it is very sad because the announcements are very good and it is incredibly important ambitions. They are important and good in every way to support the individuals. But it also becomes a question of the power of implementation, that you have to cope with these high demands that are set.

In line with the abovementioned quote, another expert argues that there is a need to not only focus on individual efforts, but also to develop projects that contribute to structural reforms at organisational level. According to the expert, this has been included in the new operational programme, which confirms that the subregion's needs have been listened to.

[...] we also see that no matter how many individual efforts we make, it does not help if there is no capacity in the organizations to take care of it. [...] This means that we do not only see projects that are about competence development in something, but also about the organisational building itself and the development of robust structures.

4.3.3. Municipalities

Similar to all municipalities interviewed, is their focus on individuals, with a specific focus on those most distant from the labour market. The participant in a project is always of utmost importance, with the main goal to get that individual to the right activity. All of the interviewees describe that a project idea always springs from a need in everyday operations.

As regards the municipalities' specific priorities in ESF+ projects, there is a clear focus on youth, integration, skills supply and the completion of studies. Since the ESF+ traditionally has been mainly tailored toward the labour market and the inclusion of individuals in the labour market, it has mainly been the labour market departments at the municipalities that have been involved in ESF+ projects. However, there is a larger social focus in the new programme period which for example includes a new programme area related to child poverty. As described by the expert from the City of Gothenburg, this new focus will make ESF+ more relevant for other departments than the labour market departments, such as the social departments.

In line with the subregions, the municipalities argue that their utmost motivation for running ESF+ projects is the possibility to get additional resources to try new and innovative working methods and activities. With the use of ESF+ funding, the municipalities can attract resources and attention to a specific issue in need of development.

I have always liked ESF+ projects, partly because you actually get a lot of funds and then also the fact that they have challenged you to dare to be creative, dare to try something new, it's kind of easier to come up with ideas.

Even though ESF+ funding is seen as a very positive way to gain development resources, one of the experts argues that what is being done within the ESF+ projects, possibly could have been done within the municipality’s ordinary operations. Due to the considerable administration that comes with an ESF+ project, this expert argues that they have been discussing whether ESF+ projects are worth it or if they could achieve the same results within their ordinary work.

Because it is not certain that the ESF+ projects are worth the effort... It may be that you work too poorly in regular activities, much of what you do in social fund projects when you highlight an investment and focus, you could do that in the ordinary work, it is not even sure it would be that much more expensive. ESF+ projects is a waste of time in comparison.

4.3.4. Summary of the actors’ motivation and interests

Motivation and interests	Regions	Subregions	Municipalities
<i>Priorities in ESF+-projects</i>	Strategic efforts contributing to RDS.	Tackle subregional challenges.	Focus on individuals’ needs.
<i>Incentives for participation</i>	Mission to achieve regional development.	Development opportunities and meet subregional needs.	Development opportunities and try something new.

Similar to what the results under 4.1 revealed, a difference emerges between the regions that prioritise strategic efforts that contribute to a regional added value and the municipalities that focus on individual needs and to larger extent favour projects involving fewer partners. While the regions have a clear regional focus aligned with the RDS, the subregions have a somewhat regional focus but are mainly focusing their efforts in their subregions, and the municipalities are focusing their ESF+ efforts on individuals needs within their municipality. However, the different actors agree that ESF+ funding is crucial for the regional development work and that they offer a fantastic opportunity to try something innovative. Also, the actors generally agree on the specific issues and target groups future ESF+ projects should be tailored towards.

4.4. Administrative capacity and resources

4.4.1. Regions

Both regions have a well-established organisation of strategists, politicians and other public officials to perform their official mission to develop the regional operational programme and to mobilise and inform actors throughout the programming period. Due to their difference in size and the amount of employees working with the structural funds, Region Västra Götaland has naturally taken the lead role, but Region Halland has sufficient resources to perform their tasks. The region's administrative capacity in terms of implementing ESF+ projects is not relevant for this study, but so is their administrative capacity in terms

of supporting other subnational actors in their involvement within the ESF+. Both experts from the regions acknowledge the high demand for administrative capacity within the project owner's organisation, and that they have a mission to enhance subnational actors' participation in ESF+ projects. According to the expert from Region Halland, access to the right resources and competencies are especially important in the application process:

No, but that it is the case that you will not get through if you have not written a fairly solid application, where you have made a very thorough analysis, where you should be able to talk in great detail about what the goals are, yes the goals must be, but what the goals and sub-goals are and what activities you need to carry out to get there.

Further, access to administrative capacity and competent employees is even more crucial in the implementation of an ESF+ project, due to the high demand for administration throughout the project. This was emphasised by the expert from Region Västra Götaland.

Yes but to have knowledge, opportunity... Well, administrative capacity to operate because it requires a lot of reporting and such so it is important to get into the idea of how to get even that part funded by the ESF+ as well.

As underlined by the experts from the regions, administrative capacity and access to resources in terms of time and skills is decisive for regional actors' possibility to develop project applications and run ESF+ projects. Therefore, the regions offer some support in terms of networks, strategic competence and to some extent co-financing with regional funding.

In terms of co-financing, Region Halland on the one hand underlines that they do not have access to a large number of regional funds that they can co-finance ESF+ projects, as stated in section 5.3. Region Västra Götaland on the other hand states that they have regional funds to co-finance EU projects with, but that these have traditionally been used to co-finance ERDF projects. However, the interviewee acknowledge that the regional development funds could be used to co-finance larger ESF+ projects in the upcoming years.

We think it is a small shift now connected to the new RDS and that there will be investments, partly then large competence investments and then also to completed studies that we have both in Halland and Västra Götaland. So we think that there may be a little more co-financing from the region's side in the future. [...] And then it is mainly these slightly larger regional projects that Region Västra Götaland goes in and finances, at least one or a couple of associations of local authorities that come together and cooperate.

4.4.2. Subregions

Regarding the subregions' access to resources and competencies, a difference emerges between the larger association of local authorities GR and the two smaller associations of local authorities Fyrbodal and Skaraborg. GR argues that they have resources in terms of competence and capacity within the

association, which the municipalities may experience a lack of, and thereby can offer support to their member municipalities.

Also something that has made it easier for the municipalities, based on the fact that we have had people here who have had the opportunity to explain the administration and the economy and made simpler templates and so on to facilitate participation. Which might have been much more difficult if you had been involved in a project as an individual municipality.

Skaraborg and Fyrbodol underline that their base organisations are very small, only including a few employees working on tasks related to structural funding and ESF+ projects. Due to their limited resources, one interviewee describes that the application process puts a high demand on their employees since they need to write the applications outside of their ordinary work tasks. Once they have been allocated funding for a project, the interviewees maintain that they hire people on a project basis to handle these issues. Although, there is also a challenge to hire competent staff that can handle the complexity of ESF+ projects since they need to have several specific competencies:

When we recruited sub-project managers for example, we had to have communication as a competence which also makes it even more difficult to recruit and find staff when you are supposed to be a good sub-project manager but also a communicator, and preferably then with academic education.

Although, another expert argues that since they have had several ESF+ projects, they have learnt by doing and now have staff within the organisation that can handle the challenges related to the administration who are prepared to help the municipalities out. But at the same time, these people have become indispensable to the organisation and the interviewee describes that they are reliant on specific employees with specific competencies. Thus, the administrative capacity of the association depends on a few specific individuals.

Even though the subregions have access to competent staff and have built up an experience to manage ESF+ projects, all of the interviewees argue that the administrative burden of running an ESF+ project hampers the projects to reach the set goals. All of the interviewees expressed the same thing in different ways, that *“it will be more of an administrative apparatus than it will be an operational apparatus.”* All interviewees expressed that the administrative apparatus surrounding ESF+ projects negatively affect the project’s results, the motivation of the project group and the budget of the project. Most importantly, there is a huge difference among the subregions' member municipalities in terms of their ability to handle the administrative requirements of running an ESF+ project.

4.4.3. Municipalities

As regards the municipalities' administrative capacity, all of the interviewed municipalities have built up at least a basic organisation for ESF+ projects, since the material only covers municipalities that have been involved in ESF+ projects.

Despite their experienced project organisations and their access to competent staff, the municipalities emphasise, similar to what was described by the subregions, the major administrative burden that is connected with both applying for and running an ESF+ project. Above all, the issue of the complex administration was raised by the interviewees when discussing their participation in the policy process and the possibility to manage ESF+ projects. Even though all of the municipalities acknowledge the importance of ESF+ funding for their development work and that it offers valuable opportunities to drive change, the time and resources required for the administrative tasks may affect the results of the projects:

The disadvantage of the ESF+ is that a lot of working time goes to, well, things that do not affect the direct result and purpose of the project. Pretty much actually, administration and work with everything around.

Funding is offered for managing the administrative tasks of an ESF+ project, which was acknowledged by the interviewees. However, the different municipalities have different views on whether the funding is enough to compensate for the amount of administration needed. While one interviewee argues that the funding allocated to the administration might be used inefficiently within the project, a second argues that there is no point to whine about it since ESF+ is funding the administration, and a third interviewee holds that even it is still an issue, it has improved significantly over the last ten years.

No, but there are a lot of lists, a lot of attendance reports, every person, every list, every month, it is always something wrong, it must be reported... But it is much easier now than it was ten years ago. So well, if you do this every day, it's no problem, it's just a task.

Despite different views on the severeness of the issue, the administration of an ESF+ project is demanding and requires time, resources and competent staff. In line with this, one of the interviewees argues that it is important for an organisation to understand what the management of an ESF+ project requires, and not only to see it as additional funding for everyday operation.

So that's very much how competent you are in development work. The ones that are not so cheer on it reason that if I have a little shortage of money in my budget I have to find external funding for what we really owe to handle ourselves. It is not a good entrance at all because if you apply for it, then you get the funds or the project, and you are not prepared for the work it actually entails.

4.4.4. Summary of the actors' administrative capacity and resources

Administrative capacity and resources	Regions	Subregions	Municipalities
<i>Access to resources and competencies</i>	Offer co-financing and strategic support.	Competent and experienced staff, but project-dependent.	Access to resources, issue to recruit competent staff.
<i>Perception of administrative burden</i>	Challenge – vast resources and experience needed.	Challenge – administration rather than operation.	Acknowledge burden, but varying views.

Regarding the subnational actor's access to resources and competencies, it is clear that access to co-financing and competent staff is a precondition for being able to participate in ESF+ projects. While the regions can offer some co-financing and support, the subregions and municipalities mainly have to cover financing and project groups on their own. As acknowledged by all interviewees, the administrative burden related to ESF+ projects is a severe problem that simply hampers the effectiveness of the projects when more time needs to be spent on administration rather than operations. Even if funding is offered to cover the administrative work and some actors have built up structures to handle it, it still constitutes such a burden on the organisations that several actors have started to question whether ESF+ projects are worth the effort.

4.5. Challenges met in the policy process

4.5.1. Regions

Concerning the perceived challenges met by the regional actors in the policy process related to the regional management of the ESF+, both Region Västra Götaland and Region Halland agree that the cooperation within the SFP works well and that the regional operational programme effectively captures the needs of subnational actors. Even though some challenges were raised related to the higher co-financing levels that will be required in the new programme period and the difficulty to involve private actors in ESF+ projects, the representative from Region Halland underlined that the main challenges do not lie in the operational plan, but rather within the task to mobilise actors.

[...] because I think the challenge is to mobilize actors, to want to pursue their development work via the social fund, and it may not be about the action plan then primarily but more about this with, how do we look at this with project form, how we look at the administration that is in some way associated with running a project in this way...

Additionally, the expert again underlines the challenge met by project owners and project partners due to the high administrative burden related to the management of an ESF+ project. Due to the high administrative burden and the demands the ownership of an ESF+ project puts on the beneficiary, the regions see a challenge in mobilising enough actors that have the right resources and networks to effectively contribute to the objectives of the regional operational programme.

Furthermore, the expert from Region Västra Götaland recognises an issue related to the reorganisation of the Swedish Public Employment Service (Swedish: Arbetsförmedlingen) since their work directly affects the effectiveness of the ESF+ at the subnational level. The interviewee explains that there has been a discussion regarding how big the share of the ESF+ dedicated to the Swedish Public Employment Service relatively to the regional operational programme should be, and which actors that are responsible for which type of participants. However, the structures regarding the different actor's involvement in labour market-oriented projects such as ESF+ are not yet clear, resulting in a challenge to implement the regional operational programme of the ESF+ effectively:

Yes, the biggest challenge is that the Swedish Public Employment Service has not really landed on its task yet, which is because we do not really know what kind of participants we can get and not get simply and that we stand there and wave a little. The Swedish Public Employment Service does not know and we do not know and that can make it difficult to get participants in a lot of activities and then we cannot use the program as it is intended.

4.5.2. Subregions

Different from the regions, the subregions relate the challenges more directly to the practical implementation of ESF+ projects in their role as project owners. Hence, the subregions also mentioned the issue of the total budget of the ESF+ being lower than for the previous programme period which, in combination with higher co-financing levels, could make it more difficult for the subregions to pursue ESF+ projects. As underlined by one of the experts, this may result in them having to look for other types of financing since they cannot risk being reliant on ESF+ funding.

Moreover, the most frequently mentioned challenge met in the policy process concerns ESF+ projects' high demands on administration which creates an administrative burden for the subregions which in turn creates a disincentive to participate in ESF+ projects. According to several of the subregions, the administrative burden related to for example participant reports, search for co-financing and applications for amendments, affect the outcome of the activities performed within the project. As mentioned by one of the interviewees, the ESF Council themselves are not equipped to handle this amount of administration and suggests that much more could be administrated retroactively.

[...] the project is lagging behind because the administrative requirements are so high and the ESF+ Council itself is not equipped to cope with this type of project that we have been granted. [...] And it will be counterproductive as well because the companies will lose their appetite and the ESF+ will have to sit and administer a lot that we think could be handled more retroactively.

While GR has access to more internal resources that can provide their municipalities with support, Fyrbodal and Skaraborg are more dependent on resources within the member municipalities. And as stressed by one of the experts, there is growing inequality among Swedish municipalities which has had a significant impact on both the subregions' and the municipalities' ability to obtain external funding

and pursue development work through for example ESF+ projects. As well described by the expert, this inequality results in the EU funding not being dedicated to the ones who need it the most:

[...] It is difficult to recruit people, officials at all levels, to the small municipalities. There are vacancies, there are uneducated people... You have to take what you get. [...] And again, these are the ones in need of support. They are the ones who need the EU money.

On a similar note, the experts mention that the type of support they are given from the Swedish ESF Council to a large extent depends on which administrator they are allocated. Acknowledging the abovementioned inequality in access to resources and competent staff, the support from the ESF Council can be determinant as to whether the actor can pursue the project or not. Consequently, the experts express that the different types of support offered by different administrators can create a real challenge in the process, especially if they are allocated two different administrators during the same project.

They are very different, they can also have different answers to the same question. It can be different degrees of zeal and different degrees of support, different degrees of thinking that we should find the answers or that they give us the answers. Different things. The administrator is actually a parameter on the whole.

4.5.3. Municipalities

As regards the challenges perceived by the municipalities, they are of further practical character since the municipalities are almost exclusively involved in the later stage of the ESF+ policy process concerning project implementation. Something mentioned by several interviewees concerns the issue that limitations in the internal project organisation may hamper the project's effectiveness. Therefore, a challenge with ESF+ projects is to not only focus on results in a specific project but to ensure that the results are integrated into the ordinary work.

The projects are great for the individual, but at the organisational level it is far too small changes. That it is in my world connected to the fact that we have not worked with implementation and development work in our own organisation but we have only added that on the project.

Thus, the internal project organisation and access to personal contacts and resources are crucial for the successful management of ESF+ projects. But some municipalities emphasise that the real challenges lie in the societal organisation of the Swedish labour market and the enlargement of regional actors, such as coordination associations, making it harder for small municipalities to design their ESF+ projects. Most importantly, the interviewees acknowledge the reorganization of the Swedish Public Employment Service as a challenge for their possibility to access participants. As the system looks like today, the municipalities are dependent on the Swedish Public Employment Service's approval to receive participants in their projects. As described by one of the interviewees, the system has created a catch 22 where individuals are circulating between the Swedish Public Employment Service and the municipalities, and the municipalities are enabled to keep the individuals and perform efficient efforts.

In addition, the behaviour of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Swedish: Försäkringskassan) is pointed out as a challenge for the municipalities to succeed in labour market-oriented projects since some individuals are too sick to work. Due to the challenges met by the municipalities to design effective ESF+ projects and access participants, one of the interviewees suggests that the ESF+ needs to be more closely adapted to what the Swedish society looks like today.

The Swedish Social Insurance Agency has changed its behaviour, which means that we have a lot of sick people in the municipalities' systems today as income seekers, and then we should not talk about the Swedish Public Employment Service's transformation. It makes me think that there is something wrong with the Social Fund's structure today, which means that they should change the form of the projects a little.

Furthermore, the Swedish system surrounding efforts targeting social cohesion has resulted in an enlargement of coordination associations (Swedish: Samordningsförbund), working to enhance cooperation between the authorities, regions and municipalities in West Sweden. Even though they gather subnational actors with the common aim to combat illness and reintegrate individuals into the labour market, one of the municipalities expressed a feeling that when the coordination associations are growing, it limits the municipalities' possibility to pursue their ESF+ projects.

It is also the case that the coordinating associations have begun to build together in Sweden, they are getting bigger and bigger. And this means that if they apply for EU funding, ESF+, and link to all municipalities, then there are no more activities to apply for in the small municipalities.

As underlined by the interviewee, this results in large regional ESF+ projects owned by the coordination associations which in turn support the municipalities during the project. Followingly, as argued by the interviewee, two similar actors with social funds resources emerge where the funding is used to finance the coordinator associations as an intermediary between the ESF+ Council and subnational beneficiaries.

4.5.4. Summary of the actors' perceived challenges

Challenges	Regions	Subregions	Municipalities
<i>Perceived challenges</i>	Mobilisation of actors and Swedish Public Employment Service reorganisation.	Administrative burden, co-financing and inequality among municipalities.	Organisational anchoring, access to competence, Swedish Public Employment Service reorganisation.
<i>Suggested solutions/improvements</i>	Organisational anchoring and two-year call plans.	Digital administration, organisational anchoring.	Flexible requirements, clearer task division.

In sum, the subnational actors do not see any remarkable challenges related to the process or the substance of the regional operational programme. Rather, most actors see that their needs and priorities are reflected in the programme. However, the challenges met in the policy process are related to the later

stages of the process when the projects are to be designed and implemented. As mentioned at all political levels, the reorganisation of the Swedish Public Employment Service has created a problem for the programme to be used as planned dependent on which participants the projects can access. Generally, there is a preconception that the ESF+ as it looks today does not fully reflect what the Swedish labour market and other social needs look like. Further, the issue of the administrative burden related to ESF+ projects is mentioned by all interviewees as a challenge in their work. When more time and resources are spent on administration than the project's activities, it becomes difficult to motivate staff to be in project groups and to anchor a project idea politically. As suggested by the interviewees, the requirements for ESF+ projects need to be even more flexible and the administration needs to be digitalised and made more efficient.

5. Concluding discussion

This chapter presents an analysis of the results outlined in chapter 4 jointly with a concluding discussion answering the research questions. The material from the interviews are analysed using the analytical scheme as presented in chapter 3 and a comparison between the different subnational actors is done to capture the MLG structure of the regional practice related to the ESF+. Table 5.1. presents an overview of the comparison between the subnational actors included in the study.

Table 5.1. Analytical scheme

THEMES	REGIONS	SUBREGIONS	MUNICIPALITIES
Participation and influence			
<i>Opportunity to influence</i>	Responsible for ROP and encounter regional needs.	Participate in VåReg, given opportunities to influence.	Varying levels of influence, most offered opportunities.
<i>Type of participation</i>	Strategic role to mobilise and inform about ESF+.	Initiate, develop, enforce subregional projects.	Develop and implement regional or local projects.
Network characteristics			
<i>Co-operation patterns</i>	Coordination of and dialogue with networks.	In internal networks and external networks/forums.	In internal networks and with close municipalities.
<i>Role in network</i>	Mobiliser and information spreader.	GR engine, others participate when possible.	Dependent on capacities and experience.
Motivation and interests			
<i>Priorities in ESF+-projects</i>	Strategic efforts contributing to RDS.	Tackle subregional/regional challenges.	Focus on individuals' needs.
<i>Incentives for participation</i>	Mission to achieve regional development.	Development opportunities and meet subregional needs.	Development opportunities and try something new.
Administrative capacity and resources			
<i>Access to resources and competencies</i>	Offer co-financing and strategic support.	Competent and experienced staff, but project-dependent.	Access to resources, issue to recruit competent staff.
<i>Perception of administrative burden</i>	Challenge – vast resources and experience needed.	Challenge – administration rather than operation.	Acknowledge burden, but varying views.
Challenges			
<i>Perceived challenges</i>	Mobilisation of actors and reorganisation of authorities.	Administrative burden, co-financing and inequality among municipalities.	Organisational anchoring, access to competence, reorganisation of authorities.
<i>Suggested solutions/improvements</i>	Organisational anchoring and two-year call plans.	Digital administration, organisational anchoring.	Flexible requirements, clearer task division.

Regarding the different actors' participation and influence during the policy process of the ESF+ in West Sweden, most actors believe their needs and interests are mirrored in the regional operational programme and that the dialogue with the regions is well-functioning. In line with previous research, different actors were involved to varying degrees in the different phases of the regional management of the ESF+. As outlined by (Olsson, 2003), the regions are more involved in the structural programming and the writing of the regional operational programme, while the subregions and especially the municipalities are more involved and interested in the project development and implementation of projects. However, all interviewees expressed that even if they might not actively influence the structural programming, there are different ways to raise their opinions and shape the substance of the fund according to their needs. For example, the larger municipality City of Gothenburg described that they are invited to participate in the VåReg meetings, and the smaller municipality of Svenljunga expressed that they have an explicit influence through their monthly project reports. This confirms the claim in previous research that the existence of the structural funds has created new ways for subnational actors, such as municipalities, to impact EU policies and shape the outcome of policies that directly affects them. As such, the policy process related to the ESF+ in West Sweden is found to effectively integrate different subnational actors in the structural programming and the implementation of the fund.

Moreover, different subnational networks are found to be crucial to analyse local or regional needs and to formulate input to the ones in charge of the ESF+. The networks have a MLG structure, where discussions begin at the municipal level and is brought up to the subregional and the regional levels. For example, the municipalities clearly describe that their project ideas are grounded in the needs within their everyday operations and since several municipalities lack the resources to design an ESF+ project on their own, the idea is lifted to the profession networks in the associations of local authorities. Within the associations of local authorities then, the idea and needs are discussed and possibly formulated into a project application. Additionally, different needs and wishes brought up within the subregional networks are then forwarded either to the reference group for the structural funds in West Sweden, VåReg, or directly to the regions or the Swedish ESF Council. A picture that emerged from the material is that all project ideas and inputs are based on individual needs at local level. Starting from the regional level, they account for inputs from the subregions participating in the VåReg meetings, which in turn base their priorities on the needs brought up in their internal networks, which consists of municipal officials that have experienced a need within their everyday operations. Accordingly, these different networks and constellations for dialogue is of utmost importance for the regional management of the ESF+ to reflect the needs and capacities of different subnational actors.

In line with similar studies on policy networks and the Cohesion Policy (Polverari et al., 2009), the increased cooperation between different actors has contributed to a positive knowledge and

preference sharing within the region. As described by one of the subregions, they are beginning to catch up on the leading actor GR which opens up for a new collaborative climate due to their similarities in challenges, capacities and resources. Thus, this study reaffirms the importance for actors to share certain social capital characteristics (Jordana et al., 2012) to reach a successful cooperation. As shown by several interviewees though, there are several municipalities that are struggling to catch up with the leading project actors which results in them either being ‘dragged behind’ or not involved in ESF+ projects that could have been useful for them. Although West Sweden has an established networking structure related to the structural funds, there seems to be difficult to integrate actors that do not have the same levels of project experience and human and financial resources as the largest beneficiaries. Notably, this risks creating an inequality among municipalities and excluding the ones in most need of the funding.

This study confirms that the network structure related to the regional management of the ESF+ has contributed to an increased cooperation between subnational actors and many successful ESF+ projects where the results have been spread across the region. However, several interviewees acknowledge that an increased amount of actors in a project may increase the administrative burden and hamper the effectiveness of the results. Municipalities describe that they often have to divide the role of the project leader between two municipalities, which risks leading to less efficient work when two different organisations need to be considered. Moreover, the subregions underline that being the project owner of a project involving several subregions may harm the relations between the associations of local authorities if the project does not succeed. The results reaffirm Boumans and Ferry (2019) finding that too many actors may complicate and weaken the implementation of ESF+ projects. Although, with an established network structure and project experience, the cooperation of several subnational actors may instead enhance the effectiveness of an ESF+ project. Hence, cooperation on ESF+ issues is often appreciated, but requires a well-structured cooperation. For that reason, actors such as the municipal and coordination associations have emerged as grand beneficiaries since they can coordinate the actors involved and be responsible for the vast amount of the administration. However, while the regions welcome these associations as project owners, some municipalities express a scepticism towards these large organisations and questions whether they contribute to the objectives of the ESF+, or if most of the money is used to finance these associations’ internal organisations. Additional research is needed on the role played by coordination associations in the implementation of ESF+ projects, and their effect on different actors involvement in the fund.

Following these different views regarding the role played by subnational associations, the different subnational actors have slightly different preferences of how to design ESF+ projects. While the regions favour strategic projects covering larger parts of the regions, the municipalities favour more

locally oriented projects directly targeted towards individuals. Thus, depending on what type of political level the actor is operating on, they prioritise different types of projects. Following the argumentation of actors acting of self-interest (Dellmuth & Stoffel, 2012), this study shows that the actors can use ESF+ funding to pursue their own objectives. For example, the regions prioritise pan-regional projects since their interest is to achieve regional added value, while the municipalities have a more local mission. Although, most actors agree on the general priorities and target groups of ESF+ projects and that ESF+ funding is crucial to reach regional development and social cohesion. As such, all of the interviewees express that their preferences are reflected in the regional operational programme and that the call for applications suit their needs.

The regional operative programme and the institutional setup surrounding the regional management of the ESF+ in West Sweden seem to correspond to subnational needs and create a good climate for dialogue and contributions. Nevertheless, all interviewees in some way address the high administrative burden related to ESF+ funding. Several actors have access to sufficient resources in terms of time and skilled staff, but still acknowledge the high demands on administration required within an ESF+ project. As a result, the interviewees feel that more time is spent on administration than on operational work. Interestingly, this issue is raised at all levels which means that despite the organisation's competence and experience regarding ESF+ projects, the administrative burden is still affecting the possibility and willingness to participate in the fund.

Even though the regional management of the ESF+ is well structured, includes an efficient partnership between different subnational actors and captures the needs within the region, the project owners have real struggles to create substantial results of the allocated resources due to practical implications in the implementation stage. This was concretised by one of the subregions, arguing that *the purpose of the ESF+ has been very good, but the rules have made it very difficult to implement.*

According to the results from this study, the real challenges related to the regional management of the ESF+ in this case concerns the huge administrative burden, the high demands on own co-financing, uncertainty regarding different authorities' role in the process and the possibility to access participants and competent staff. Although all interviewed actors agree that the ESF+ contributes with great possibilities for social development work, the administration that is required within the implementation of an ESF+ project has created a scepticism towards the effectiveness of the funding, especially from smaller actors with less resources and competencies. This has created an inequality among Swedish municipalities, where the ones who need funding the most might be unable to write a project application and implement projects due to lack of competent staff and co-financing, as well as competencies and capacities to fulfil the requirements of an ESF+ project. At the same time though, associations of local authorities and coordination associations have emerged as crucial actors in the

regional management of structural funds due to their access to competent and robust project organisations as well as access to skilled staff and economic resources. As argued by the regions, these associations can contribute to the development of more strategic, regional projects that creates a greater benefit for the whole of West Sweden. With the help from subnational associations, these smaller municipalities can develop a capacity to participate in ESF+ project. However, participation in an ESF+ project still needs to be worth it in terms of offering opportunities to do things that could not be done with other funding or within the ordinary operations.

Through interviews with experts representing the regional, subregional and municipal levels, the thesis contributes with an understanding of how the ESF+ is translated into practice in a region which in theory constitutes a favourable context for an effective management of the structural funds. A comparison between the interviewed subnational actors at regional, subregional and local level, shows that the policy process of the ESF+ in West Sweden is characterised by an sufficient involvement of both political actors and other stakeholders, where most key actors believe they have been offered the possibility to participate and influence the design and outcome of the fund. Thus, the regional operational programme and the call for applications adequately meets the needs and interest of subnational actors and the challenges met in the region since subnational actors are involved in the process. Additionally, the work surrounding the ESF+ has created new forms of networks and cooperation patterns positively affecting the region's development work. While West Sweden obtain several actors with high levels of capacity and experience, the study shows that some actors are struggling to meet the requirement within ESF project. Above all, the administrative burden associated with ESF projects is pointed out as a challenge met by actors at all political levels. This illustrate that even though West Sweden has established an proficient structure to manage the ESF+, subnational actors are struggling in the implementation stage. As a result, some actors express that the slowness, inflexibility, rules and requirements of the ESF+ may act as a disincentive to engage in the fund despite its incredible opportunities to perform development work.

As shown in this study, subnational actors undoubtedly obtain a significant discretion regarding the shape and outcome of the ESF+, as expected from previous research (Dotti, 2016). Thanks to the established network structure in West Sweden, the decisions surrounding the ESF+ reflects local needs and perspectives. As shown by the analysis, the regions underline that they base their work on what is being brought up in their networks, which are comprised of representatives from municipalities and other important stakeholders. Consequently, the thesis concludes that all actors covered in this study can be seen as agents acting within these different types of subnational networks to shape the fund according to their needs and interests. However, the analysis shows that most actors agree on which general priorities the ESF+ should have, which in turn are in line with overall EU objectives. Hence, while

subnational actors design and implement the fund according to their self-interests, the results of the funding still contribute to the objectives of the Cohesion Policy.

In conclusion, the ESF+ in West Sweden is managed through well-functioning structures and networks where subnational actors have the motivations and competencies to effectively manage the ESF+ and develop substantial ESF+ projects. Accordingly, the ESF+ is effectively translated into projects targeting regional needs and challenges through a policy process which involves a range of subnational actors. However, the regional management of the fund encounter challenges in the implementation stage where coordination issues, administrative burden and implications on the Swedish labour market hampers the projects' effectiveness and results. Most importantly, subnational actors experience that the challenges lies within the framework of the ESF+, and that more flexible requirements and a more digitalised and retroactive administration would enhance their participation. Another conclusion drawn from the material is that a project idea must be anchored politically and organisationally to be successfully implemented and lead to long-term effects. Moreover, the division of responsibilities between stakeholders active within the field, including the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, the Swedish Public Employment Service, the coordination associations, and political actors at different levels, needs to be clarified and reconsidered to effectively absorb the ESF+ funding in various projects.

In contrast to many other studies within the research field, this thesis bases its analysis on the fact that the case constitutes a favourable context for an effective implementation of the ESF+. As shown, while the structures and networks related to the regional management of the fund are sufficient, the effectiveness of the funding is affected by challenges met in the implementation stage. Accordingly, we know that factors such as administrative capacity are decisive for structural funds effectiveness, but even actors with a sufficient degree of administrative capacity associate the ESF+ with a too high administrative burden. This study shows that issues related to the effectiveness of the structural funds is not only apparent in the newer Member States or the ones with lower capacities. Rather, the ESF+ might entail problems to be effectively implemented anywhere.

To fit within the scope of a master's thesis, this study only includes regions, subregions and municipalities. However, the regional management of the ESF+ includes several other actors and stakeholders that are relevant to study further. The results could for example be elaborated on to include and look more directly into the coordination associations' central role in ESF+ projects. Moreover, future studies would benefit from a comparison of different regions within one member state. Consequently, the results of this study need to be seen in the light of which actors that are included. Nevertheless, it has highlighted the importance of looking into the effectiveness of the EU's structural funds in terms of the actors' ability to participate in the fund, how subnational actors shape the outcome

of the ESF+ and individuals possibility to gain from the projects. Through an analysis of the structural funds all over Europe instead of in a few Member States that are expected to perform less, the Cohesion Policy's need to adopt to societal changes can be evaluated more accurately. A recommended way to further study subnational actors' ability to design and implement successful ESF+ projects is to perform more in-depth evaluations of ESF+ project's qualitative parameters such as what individuals gained from a project rather than how many participants the project had.

The theoretical findings from this study can be transferred to similar settings and elaborated on to analyse whether alike challenges are met in other European regions, especially those with a similar labour market as Sweden. If so, then the effectiveness of the Cohesion Policy might not only depend on the capacity of the administrative actors and beneficiaries, but rather on the set up and requirements within the structural funds. This thesis highlights the need to attract more focus to subnational actors who are the ones in charge of the actual implementation of the structural funds, as well as the diverging needs and challenges met in different European regions when considering the future of the EU's Cohesion Policy.

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Appendix - Interview guide

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview! As I mentioned briefly in my email, my master's thesis aims to analyse how the implementation of the European Social Fund works in practice, by studying how different actors interact in and influence processes related to both the planning and implementation of EU structural funds, and what challenges exist in implementing the Social Fund in an effective way in a heterogeneous region such as Western Sweden.

The interview will be structured according to the different phases in which the implementation of the Social Fund is carried out, in other words we will first focus on the writing of the regional action plan, followed by the design of/planning for regional projects and finish off by talking more in detail about the actual implementation of your projects. I would like to start by asking if you accept that I record the interviews? The recording will only be used to support my notes and the transcript will not be saved after the thesis is completed. If there is any question that feels unclear or that you do not want to answer, just let me know. Is there anything you are wondering about before we start?

Opening questions

Would you like to start by telling me a little about your role at *name of organisation* and what your work entails in relation to the regional management of the Social Fund?

- Are you alone in these tasks at your organisation, or do you also have colleagues who work with issues related to EU projects?

Theme 1: Program writing (development of regional operational program)

Regions: Could you tell me a little more about what your role means in practical terms for the development of the regional action plan, and how you collaborate with other actors in this work?

- How does the division of responsibilities differ between you and VGR / Region Halland?
- How would you describe the possibility of designing a joint regional action plan for the whole of western Sweden?
- In what way do you involve other regional actors in the work on the action plan?
- Does the work differ in any way from the preparation of the regional action plan for the previous program period (2014-2020)?

Subregions and municipalities: Could you tell me about how you view your role in the development of the regional action plan?

- Do you feel that you are given the opportunity to influence and raise your interests to the regions and the ESF Council that are responsible for the development of the regional action plan?
- Through which forums and/or individuals are these opportunities given to influence the priorities that will guide the regional implementation of the ESF?
- Do you collaborate in any way with other municipalities or regional actors to raise your perspective and your wishes about which direction the action plan should take?

What are your main priorities in the development of the regional action plan?

- *Regions*: Does your priorities differ from Region Västra Götaland's/Halland's priorities?
- *Subregions and municipalities*: What are your main priorities that you would like to see included in the regional action plan?
- *Regions*: Is there any part of the proposal that you think could be difficult to transpose around the region?
- *Subregions and municipalities*: Do you think that the proposal for the action plan corresponds to the region's needs, or is there something you are missing, or something you think may be difficult to implement?

Theme 2: Program implementation (project development and allocation)

Regions: Can you tell me about how you work to develop and plan for social fund projects in western Sweden?

- What does your role as an official in the SFP mean?
- How would you describe the regions ability to influence the allocation of project funds?
- What types of projects, and by which actors, do you see in the region's greatest need?
- Are there actors who you think would have been good and important project owners, but who for various reasons have not applied for / been allocated project funds? Why?
- To what extent do you offer advice and support to other regional actors in the development of ESF projects and in project applications?
- To what extent do you run your own ESF projects, and what does the collaboration with other regional actors in these projects look like?

Subregions and municipalities: Would you like to tell me about how you work to develop Social Fund projects and write project applications?

- What types of projects, and of which actors, do you see the greatest need among your member municipalities?
- What is your main motivation for running ESF projects?
- How do you collaborate with other actors in the planning of future ESF projects?
- Do you encounter any kind of challenges in your work to plan for ESF projects and in writing project applications?
- Do you feel that you have access to advice and support from actors in your work to develop Social Fund projects? What does this support look like?

Theme 3: Project implementation (implementation of approved projects)

Regions: Can you tell me about the role you play in the actual implementation of ESF projects around the region?

- What are the expectations of the projects, and project owners, that have been allocated funding from the Social Fund?
- What would you say are the most important success factors for the successful implementation of ESF projects?

- How do you see the opportunities for regional actors to conduct ESF projects in terms of financial resources and access to staff with the right skills?
- Do you assist project owners with any form of support or assistance?
- What kind of challenges can you see with project owners in the implementation of projects?

Subregions and municipalities: Can you tell me about how the implementation of ESF projects works for you and what types of projects you have carried out?

- What is your division of labor in the implementation of ESF projects?
- What are the most important goals for you when you carry out an ESF project?
- What opportunities and/or benefits do you see in running projects financed by the Social Fund, compared to projects funded by national funds?
- What is your staff's type of educational background and previous experience regarding the application writing and implementation of ESF projects?
- What types of challenges do you face in the implementation of ESF projects?
- In what way do you collaborate with other actors in the implementation of your projects?

Concluding questions

- What would you say is your most important mission when it comes to developing and implementing regional ESF projects?
- Is there anything you would like to add, or something you think we missed during the interview?