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Exploring Institutional Framing of Local Labor Market Programs by Politicians and Managers in Swedish Municipalities

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Abstract: This study explores the governance and implementation of local labor market programs (LLMPs) in Swedish municipalities, analyzing the tension between national mandates and local policy practices. Drawing on institutional ethnography (IE), intersectionality, and emotional labor theories, we examine interviews with politicians and managers from eight municipalities. Politicians frame LLMPs as budget-driven initiatives, depoliticizing local labor market issues to comply with national policies like the January Agreement. This approach prioritizes efficiency, workfare models, and quick labor market entry, often sidelining individualized support. In contrast, managers describe their role as navigating policy constraints while addressing diverse local needs. They emphasize the challenges of aligning “one-size-fits-all” activation strategies with the realities of their participants, advocating for flexibility and adaptation within national frameworks. These contrasting perspectives reveal how LLMPs, although locally implemented, are shaped by textually mediated national policies, which influence local governance practices. Politicians focus on the need to meet national objectives, while managers struggle to reconcile these goals with participant-centered approaches. This study contributes to the understanding of how LLMPs operate within a governance framework that prioritizes efficiency over holistic support, highlighting the limitations of workfare-oriented policies and their implications for labor market integration.



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1. Introduction

Sweden has historically played a key role in developing activation strategies, particularly through the “Rehn–Meidner model”, which emphasizes full employment and education (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004). The origins of activation policies can be traced back to reforms in the 1990s, particularly in Denmark and the U.S., but these policies have since spread to more countries and become a key part of European political discourse. In recent years, building on the transformation of the Swedish labor market policy that began in the early 1990s (Berglund 2024), the political landscape has continued to redefine the boundaries of the welfare system concerning the unemployed. The changes in activation policies in Sweden appeared gradually but substantially over time, reflecting a move towards workfare and neoliberal governance (Östling 2025). Such transformations reflect a broader reorientation of state responsibilities, where welfare services increasingly emphasize individual accountability over systemic responses to unemployment (Bengtsson 2014).

This process involves reforms to the unemployment insurance system (Prop. 2023/24:128 2023) and efforts to track an expanding group of job seekers who are ineligible for insurance

(Östling 2025). This is not specific only for Sweden; Minas (2010) discusses how social assistance and activation policies have increasingly shifted from the national level to the municipal level in many European countries. This shift is part of a broader trend of decentralization, where local governments take on greater responsibility for designing and implementing welfare policies. The idea behind these changes is that it (at least in theory) allows for more tailored, flexible policies that can respond to local labor market conditions and social needs. Minas (2010) points to how in some cases, municipalities collaborate with regional or private actors, creating hybrid governance structures, as in the case in Sweden. This paper explores institutional framing at the local level specifically focusing on one of the largest policy reforms of the field, called the January Agreement (JA).

This paper examines institutional framing at the local level, focusing on how municipalities navigate changes in national labor market policies, with a particular emphasis on the January Agreement (JA). While the JA does not directly alter the regulatory framework governing local labor market policies (LLMPs), it has had significant indirect effects on municipalities, which this paper explores. Previous studies (e.g., Bergström and Bothén 2023; Panican et al. 2025) have highlighted how municipalities' ability to collaborate with the PES was affected by the reform, particularly in terms of access to local offices and the shrinking of available resources. The municipalities in our material, especially those with substantial assignments of participants from the Public Employment Service (PES), expressed concern about how the JA would reshape their responsibilities. The municipalities' primary form of support for participants referred to by the PES consists of providing settings for work-based training. Although the legal conditions for municipalities have not formally changed, the JA restructured the PES, reducing its workforce, closing local offices, and shifting the focus towards independent actors and digital solutions. This was, in our interviews, expressed as generating uncertainty and new duties for municipalities.¹ Moreover, for municipalities that were paid to act as suppliers to the PES, the economic implications were also significant, as the shift towards independent actors raised concerns about lost funding.² These developments illustrate how LLMPs—despite lacking a statutory foundation—have become a contested policy space, marked by a precarious balance between local autonomy and national oversight. Municipal actors operate within a dual structure: striving to meet community-specific needs while responding to shifting, efficiency-driven national directives. The JA thus serves as a crucial lens for understanding the broader dynamics between local and national policies, and the challenges municipalities face as they adapt to these evolving conditions.

By interviewing politicians and managers involved with LLMPs in eight Swedish municipalities, this study examines how these actors navigate and interpret their roles within a decentralized policy landscape. The experiences of local politicians and managers serve as an entry point into the broader institutional workings that underly labor market policies, enabling us to reveal how governance relationships operate within and across municipalities. In particular, we analyze how politicians' and managers' framing practices reflect and reproduce governance relationships, thereby highlighting the intersections between individual agency and institutional control.

2. Analytical Entry Points

In investigating how local politicians and municipal managers interpret their responsibilities in labor market policies following the January Agreement, we apply a theoretical framework grounded in both policy frame analysis and inspired by institutional ethnography (IE). This combined approach offers a lens to examine the power-laden “ruling relations” that structure local policy implementation and reveal how socially organized practices inform the everyday work of policymakers. We use the approach as a way of

understanding the work with LLMPs and how local politicians and managers demarcate boundaries around aspects of labor market issues, drawing attention to certain elements while relegating others outside the frame. The perspectives of politicians and managers are thus understood as different interpretative frames serving their institutional sensemaking. These understandings are thus not neutral; they affect which actions are perceived as feasible by defining and constraining decision-makers' options, often marginalizing arguments that do not align with the dominant frame (Clegg 2002). Fischer et al. (2007) further note that frames organize attention, shaping how actors perceive a problem, how they see their role, and what actions they deem appropriate. Frames, therefore, mediate power relations by embedding particular assumptions as institutional "common sense", subtly influencing which narratives gain traction and which are sidelined within the policy arena.

In this paper, we are inspired by institutional ethnography, as described by Smith (2006), and particularly DeVault and McCoy's (2006) IE methodology based on interviews. This complements the framing analysis by locating individual actions within a network of "ruling relations"—the translocal, text-mediated practices that socially organize and control activities within institutions. Smith (1987) describes these ruling relations as complex structures of coordination and control, activated through textual forms—policy documents, regulations, and professional guidelines—that exert power across locations. These texts do not merely record actions but actively organize work, objectifying social worlds into operational categories that shape, constrain, and define what counts as relevant knowledge and action. As Smith (1987, 2001, 2005) suggests, we will start from the managers' and politicians' actual experiences, rather than from abstract theories of institutions, and the feminist commitment to grounding knowledge in situated experiences. In investigating how local politicians and municipal managers interpret their responsibilities in labor market policies following the January Agreement, we believe that this approach offers a lens to examine the power-laden "ruling relations" that structure local policy implementation and reveal how socially organized practices inform the everyday work of policymakers, providing a powerful framework for exploring how everyday experiences are organized by broader institutional forces. Central to this approach is the standpoint of individuals whose lives are shaped—but often not represented—by dominant institutional discourses. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Swedish context, where modern welfare policy has historically defined a normative framework for labor market participation (cf. Östling 2025). While Sweden is often recognized for its expansive welfare state, there have always been limits to who is included within the "normal" unemployment system. Those who fall outside these boundaries—due to migration status, health, age, or other social positions—are governed through differentiated interventions that vary across time and place. From an IE standpoint, such exclusions are not simply policy outcomes but rather manifestations of institutional relations that organize everyday lives in ways that obscure the experiences of those at the margins. The question of (un)employment is thus not only central to Swedish political life but also reflects a deeper structure of governance through welfare practices. In this way, Smith's feminist approach provides critical tools for uncovering how institutional power operates in the Swedish welfare state.

Through this integrated framework, we position politicians' and managers' frames as articulations of governance relationships in local labor markets. In doing so, we highlight the social organization of local governance, where personal accounts are mapped onto a larger, text-mediated constellation of power, illuminating how governance and power relations extend beyond the immediate experiences of local policymakers and permeating the operationalization of labor market policies.

3. Research Background and the January Agreement

Although the January Agreement (JA) has played a significant role in the decentralization of labor market policies in Sweden, it is part of a broader trend that has been unfolding since before 2019. Previous studies have shown how municipal activation services have gradually expanded as part of a larger welfare state transformation (Bonoli 2022). In this context, municipalities have increasingly become key actors in delivering activation services, despite labor market policies remaining formally a state responsibility (Ulmestig 2007). The JA's influence, particularly in relation to its restructuring of the Public Employment Service (PES), fits into this broader trend, with Point 18 of the agreement being especially relevant. It highlights the shift of responsibilities for matching job seekers to employment opportunities from the PES to independent operators, leaving the PES to focus on oversight and regulatory functions.

The relevance of the January Agreement in this study lies not only in its alignment with ongoing shifts but also in its centrality to the interviews conducted, particularly with politicians. Many respondents expressed significant concerns about how the reform would impact their municipalities, especially regarding service provision and funding. These concerns echo previous studies (e.g., Panican and Ulmestig 2019), which have pointed out that municipalities were already integral to labor market policies but faced uncertainty about how the introduction of independent operators and a restructured PES would affect their roles and financial viability. While the legal framework for municipalities remains unchanged, the JA has nonetheless triggered uncertainty and concern, positioning municipalities as central players in the evolving labor market policy landscape.

Thus, the January Agreement serves as an important starting point for understanding how national policy changes have tangible effects on local labor market practices, particularly in relation to municipalities' responsibilities and financial considerations. The ongoing transformation of the Swedish welfare state, reflected in both the JA and previous studies, underscores the evolving role played by municipalities in activation services and highlights the broader political and practical challenges they face in this new landscape.

Activation Politics and Measurement Systems as Quasi Regulations

The impact of activation policies has been widely studied, with research focusing on their effectiveness in reducing unemployment and poverty, as well as their unintended consequences. For example, Bonoli (2022) notes how these policies often come with "Matthew effects", meaning that they tend to benefit those who are already closer to the labor market while leaving out the most disadvantaged groups. This has raised concerns about the inclusivity and fairness of activation strategies. Common activation policies, such as job training programs, work requirements, or stricter benefit conditions, tend to favor individuals who are already relatively close to employment; that is, those with higher skills, stronger work histories, or fewer personal barriers (Bonoli 2022). Meanwhile, groups that face greater structural disadvantages, such as long-term unemployed individuals who are targeted by Swedish LLMPs, may struggle to meet the requirements of activation programs. Bonoli (2022) highlights how situations of unintended exclusion may appear due to the way activation policies may disproportionately leave out or disadvantage certain groups of unemployed individuals, despite being designed to increase labor market participation. In this case, it is of significance to study how structural changes interplay with the activation paradigm that LLMPs are a part of. Municipalities provide a range of activation measures that parallel state-run active labor market policies (ALMPs), including job-seeking assistance, internships, and coaching. These measures reflect the state's textually embedded approach to labor activation, which positions unemployment as a problem of individual readiness for the labor market (Dean 1995). Thus, the textually mediated policies effectively

direct how municipalities should address unemployment and define the boundaries of acceptable activation practices.

Within the Swedish welfare sector, the governance model commonly referred to as New Public Management (NPM) has dominated over the past few decades. This model embeds all public activities within an economized framework, emphasizing outcomes rather than processes through measurement and cost calculations (cf. [Hood 1991](#); [Power 1997](#)). Previous research has shown that such measurements often position local actors within a “national perspective of governance”, where the metrics and criteria through which activities are reported and compared are themselves performative and frequently function in a disciplining manner (see [Nord 2017](#); [Nordesjö and Fred 2021](#)).

While there is no single national statute that explicitly requires municipalities to report on “efficiency, constant evaluation, and performance metrics” for local labor market programs (LLMPs), several national-level systems and recommendations create strong, quasi-mandatory incentives that effectively shape municipal practice. Two central and inter-linked aspects that we have identified are Kolada, which is in fact a national performance system, and budgetary incentives from the central government. The Kolada database, maintained by the Swedish Council for the Promotion of Municipal Analysis, collects standardized indicators on productivity and efficiency for all municipalities and regions (e.g., cost per participant, outcomes per krona invested). Although Kolada is formally a voluntary benchmarking tool, its data are routinely used in national political debates, media reports, and by oversight bodies to compare and rank municipalities. Anecdotally, municipalities that score poorly in Kolada risk negative media coverage and political pressure to reorganize services. In practice, municipal managers and local politicians treat Kolada metrics as if they were compulsory targets, adjusting staffing and program design to avoid “falling behind” in national comparisons. The central government allocates block grants and, in some cases, earmarked funds for activation services. Though not tied to a single law on LLMP performance, national budget bills and government directives frequently attach conditionality to these funds, e.g., requiring municipalities to demonstrate “cost effectiveness” or “outcome orientation” in order to secure continued support ([Prop. 2023/24:128 2023](#)).

Municipalities, however, vary in their interpretation and enactment of these texts, as local politicians and managers work within both the textually prescribed responsibilities and the local, non-statutory nature of LLMPs. Each municipality interprets and adapts to the changes brought about by the January Agreement differently, reflecting variations in policy emphasis, administrative structure, and cooperative arrangements with service providers ([Bergström et al. 2023](#)). In our IE-inspired approach, Kolada as well as national reforms, for example, the January Agreement and related policy changes, can be viewed as a collection of powerful scripts that both direct and constrain the work of actors within the local Swedish labor market policy context. These scripts—texts—the policy documents, guidelines, reporting protocols, and legal frameworks—function as “invisible threads” that connect local municipalities to the ruling relations of the state, prescribing how local labor market programs (LLMPs) should operate and framing what constitutes policy-relevant work in decentralized settings. By examining how politicians and managers relate to these documents, we can trace how municipalities’ increasing responsibility over labor market initiatives is coordinated across multiple layers of governance, even as the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES) formally retains authority.

Finally, researchers note that these changes underscore the emergence of a dual welfare structure, with municipal activation services functioning parallel to those managed by the PES ([Govander 2023](#); [Davidsson 2018](#)). This duality in labor market policies reflects textually embedded distinctions between the insured and uninsured unemployed, reinforcing

social stratifications. By examining how municipal actors interact with these texts and adapt their practices accordingly, this study maps the ruling relations within decentralized labor market policy.

4. Methodology

This study is part of a broader research program designed to systematically map and examine local labor market programs (LLMPs) across Swedish municipalities. Our focus spans institutional structures, organizational practices, and participants' experiences within these programs, using a longitudinal approach to identify ways to enhance LLMPs and increase participants' inclusion in the workforce (Olofsdotter et al. 2024).

We selected eight municipalities across two regions (one in the north and one in the south) using a combination of structural and local criteria, aiming to capture the varied conditions that shape municipal LLMPs. We recognize that structural factors, for example demographic dependency ratios, socioeconomic characteristics, unemployment levels, and fiscal capacity, alongside local factors, like organizational structures, professional competencies, and municipal ambitions, contribute to the unique challenges and resources each LLMP unit encounters. The municipalities in the northern part can generally be said to have higher unemployment and larger challenges in the job market than the municipalities in the southern part, which are also in close connection to one of Sweden's largest cities. The municipalities in the southern part have a lower risk of socioeconomic support for citizens compared to the northern municipalities (Nyhlén et al. 2023).

Interviews were conducted within the selected municipalities between 2022 and 2023, yielding a total of 20 interviews, 8 with local politicians and 12 with managers at various organizational levels. Each interview lasted between 45 and 80 min. In each municipality, we aimed to include both administrative leaders and unit managers; however, participation varied due to factors such as time constraints, recent role changes, or preferences to delegate the interview to a colleague. To maintain confidentiality, we do not specify the exact titles or municipalities when quoting informants, as job titles often vary across municipalities, with comparable roles carrying different designations. The project has received ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

The interview structure was conversational, centering on thematic areas relevant to each municipality's daily labor market policy work. Key themes included organizational structure, program objectives, target populations, and municipal visions or strategies (or lack thereof) for local labor market policies. Following interviews with program managers, we interviewed politicians responsible for overseeing the LLMPs, representing diverse administrative boards, including those of Social Welfare, Education, and Labor Market and Integration. To be more specific, the interview guide focuses on local labor market policy and its conditions within an unclear state governance, with emphasis on discussing issues related to, for example, the role of the labor market unit (daily work, attractiveness, and available resources), political factors (the impact of local and national politics, election results, and government shifts), the participants (their needs and changes over time), collaboration (the relationship between municipalities, state actors, and private companies), changes and developments (effects of reforms which the January Agreement is an example of, activation requirements, and discontinued support programs), long-term effects (whether labor market measures lead to employment and self-sufficiency), and future visions (suggestions for improvement and ideal scenarios for labor market policy). In summary, the guide explores how local labor market initiatives function, how they are influenced by politics and policy changes, and the opportunities and challenges ahead.

Our approach means that organizations and ruling relations must be examined through the everyday work that makes them function, rather than assuming they exist as

independent entities. In this article, the process of coding data involved identifying and exploring how individuals' everyday experiences are shaped by institutional relations and ruling practices of the municipalities and the LLMPs. For example, during the interview, we talk about discretion, and the conversations were often focused on the managers describing their role in implementing programs or enforcing eligibility requirements. We use this methodological approach that also stems from Smith's feminist insight that institutions are not neutral; they are actively maintained through people's labor.

In this study, we employ IE's concept of the "problematic" as a methodological entry point, directing attention to the ways in which policymakers' and managers' experiences are coordinated by broader institutional structures. We do this in relation to the JA and the structural changes that the LLMP as a political field has been undergoing in Sweden in recent decades. In this way, the approach helps us to reveal how local actors' accounts of labor market programs are not isolated perspectives but rather interfaces with ruling relations (of the JA) that dictate the scope and limits of their agency. The "ruling relations", according to Smith, activate power-laden practices through which individual frames are aligned with institutional agendas, often subordinating local needs to standardized policy goals. By analyzing these ruling relations within policymakers' narratives, we trace how textually mediated structures dictate not only policy implementation but also the framing of labor issues at the local level (Smith 2001). In this paper, we examine structural changes—such as the introduction of incentives—and analyze them as ruling relations, referring to the often invisible mechanisms through which power operates within municipalities and local labor market programs (LLMPs). We explore how political decisions shape managers' everyday practices and influence their access to resources. Ruling relations are primarily text-based, meaning that they are enacted and maintained through documents, forms, reports, laws, and policies (Smith 2001), and we trace them and their effects through the narratives from the politicians and the managers using DeVault and McCoy's (2006) approach. When analyzing the material, focus was on references to institutional texts—policy documents, eligibility criteria, or reporting forms—and tracing how these coordinate the managers' or politicians' actions with larger political and administrative goals. Through this approach, IE seeks to map the social relations that structure these interactions, revealing how the everyday work of the participants is shaped by, and reinforces, institutional discourses around productivity, responsibility, and social inclusion. In doing so, the analysis moves beyond individual experience to uncover the broader institutional processes that govern encounters with the unemployed. In line with DeVault and McCoy (2006), we employ this institutional-ethnography-inspired approach to reveal how participants in their interviews are positioned and coordinated by prevailing governance structures and rules ("ruling relations"). Through this interview-based method, we can highlight the institutional structures shaping participants' agency without conducting an extensive ethnographic field study.

Smith's notion that "practice and structure are not separable" (Smith 2005, p. x) underscores our focus on how local practices—what people do, think, and say—are enmeshed within governance relationships. This entanglement reflects how power operates within institutional contexts, positioning individual frames as both products of and contributors to broader governance relationships. As IE emphasizes, individual accounts provide a vantage point into the institutional mechanisms that organize and regulate work, showing how individuals' actions and interpretations contribute to the larger, abstracted governance structures of contemporary society. By talking to the participants about everyday (standardized) work practices, we can trace how the institutions generalize power and authority. This is achieved by examining how bureaucratic mechanisms, professional regulations, and administrative systems emerge and operate within their narratives. In this way, Smith's (2001, 2005) IE approach inspires us to look at how people's everyday work and activities

are shaped by the ruling relations; we perform this in line with DeVault and McCoy's (2006) interview methodology.

Through this approach, this study aims to reveal how the January Agreement and related policy texts shape the work of municipal LLMPs, framing the boundaries within which local actors coordinate labor market services and define policy-relevant outcomes. The findings contribute to our understanding of how institutional texts serve as invisible threads that bind local actors to national ruling relations, illustrating how policy is enacted, interpreted, and adapted at the municipal level.

5. Divergent Frames and the Institutionalization of Workfare

We will here analyze how the frames of politicians and managers around LLMPs reflect broader governance dynamics. When doing so, we situate the personal accounts of politicians and managers within a larger constellation of power, revealing how textually mediated constraints, like the January Agreement, frame their narratives about the policy field. To contrast the managers' frames with those of politicians, we analyze the empirical data through the lens of IE, emphasizing how managers experience and interpret the local governance of labor market policies under the influence of textually mediated ruling relations. Whereas politicians' narratives reveal an effort to strike a balance between local needs and national mandates, the frames of managers provide a closer look at the operational challenges and strategies they employ as they navigate the specific demands of LLMPs. In contrasting the managers' frames with those of politicians, we observe two distinct orientations: while politicians tend to depoliticize LLMPs and emphasize budget efficiency, managers focus on the practicalities of implementation and the need for flexibility. This will be further elaborated on below.

5.1. Politicians Framing LLMPs: Depoliticizing Workfare and Budget Efficiency

In analyzing how politicians navigate between national and local politics, we see how national texts and municipality comparisons influence local governance by setting limits on how politicians understand LLMPs. Labor market policies are enacted. These texts are not merely informational but serve as active instruments of coordination (Smith 1987).

Although the JA does not regulate municipal labor market policies, the politicians in our study express frustration with the national directives in the reform, particularly in the county of Västernorrland. It is clear from our research, however, that some municipalities, where participants are primarily referred from the Public Employment Service (PES), are more affected by reforms to the PES than municipalities in the Gothenburg Region, where participants are mainly referred from municipal social assistance programs. This distinction further illustrates how local municipalities' responses to national policies are shaped by their specific institutional contexts, as well as the varying degrees of influence national reforms have on local labor market practices.

By presenting LLMP work as a non-ideological matter with broad political consensus, politicians effectively subordinate local needs to national mandates, reflecting Smith's (1987) notion of ruling relations that depoliticize and routinize complex social issues into manageable, budget-focused objectives. In reference to this, we can observe how politicians react differently to the national guidelines. In the absence of clear guidelines for municipal labor market policy, politicians in some municipalities seem to follow national reforms, as described in the interviews in relation to the JA, as frameworks to guide local decisions. In contrast, others do not view national policy as precedent-setting or binding for shaping the direction of LLMPs. This divergence is shaped by the municipalities' limited budgets and local political rule, given that labor market policy largely remains under national jurisdiction, with the JA mainly regulating the Public Employment Service (PES). As a

result, some local actors use the available policy space to tailor solutions to local needs, while others, lacking alternative guidance, default more to trying to adopt LLMPs to national directives.

In our interviews, several politicians explicitly link national transfers to local evaluations and recommendations. Taken together, these two mechanisms operate like a national regulation as they define what counts as “success”, they are monitored at the national level, referring to Kolada, and they carry real consequences for municipal budgets and reputations. According to Smith’s (1987, 2001) theoretical framework, textual artifacts—in this case policy documents and databases—activate ruling relations by constructing both opportunities for and constraints on local actors’ actions. In this way, framing logic becomes intertwined with institutional governance relations, helping to reproduce and reinforce national priorities in local practice. This trend drives local actors to prioritize budget adherence over participant-centered support, shifting the policy orientation from addressing individuals’ needs to promoting self-sufficiency in line with national objectives (cf. Giritli Nygren et al. 2022). This illustrates the power of ruling relations in shaping local practices and framing the LLMP participant as a cost to be managed rather than as an individual to be supported. In practical terms, this means that the focus becomes less about understanding the personal barriers and circumstances that might hinder an individual’s ability to enter or sustain employment and more about ensuring that participants are funneled through programs that meet numerical targets for cost control and efficiency. The expectation is that individuals will become self-sufficient as quickly as possible, in alignment with national policy goals, regardless of whether these goals genuinely reflect the complexities of their unique situations.

The budget discourse is not a neutral backdrop but a performative mechanism that enacts New Public Management (Hood 1991) logics in municipal practice. From a policy frame perspective (Fischer et al. 2007), budget metrics and efficiency targets function as dominant “efficiency frames” that define what counts as a problem and legitimate solution within LLMP governance. Drawing on, for example, Power’s (1997) concept of an “audit culture”, it is possible to understand these metrics as disciplinary texts that shape actors’ subjectivities and organizational routines. According to Smith’s (1987, 2001) institutional ethnography, such textual artifacts activate ruling relations by constructing both opportunities for and constraints on local actors—politicians and managers—thereby embedding fiscal norms into everyday work. In this sense, financial rationalities govern local agents by internalizing these frames, leading to self-policing performance. Budgetary talk thus both reflects and reproduces ruling relations, steering local actors toward cost efficiency at the expense of more holistic support. When politicians insist on “keeping to the budget”, they do more than express financial constraint—they enact a governing rationality that disciplines municipal LLMPs in line with NPM, audit culture, and the institutional coordination of ruling relations.

While national policy seeks to promote activation and responsibility through conditionality, local managers face challenges when interpreting this mandate within their unique socioeconomic contexts. For instance, several municipalities have created quasi-markets to address budget constraints, attempting to generate revenue through reinforced work training programs. However, a national policy change now discourages municipalities from delivering these services, thereby placing financial strain on local LLMPs:

But then the government said that it is not okay for the municipalities to be delivering reinforced job training [. . .]. And of course that’s not so fun, because . . . Well, at the end of the day, we have income from having job training. And we are organized to have several working groups so those who work train can choose several different activities. Then they can also do work training in the entire

municipality's organization. But now we don't know what's going on, with the government. It's a cause for concern, actually. (Politician Västernorrland Region)

In examining the politicians' frames, the concept of the "problematic" helps us see how the ruling relations constrain local actors' agency within an ostensibly flexible, locally managed framework. The politicians' emphasis on budget constraints and economic imperatives highlights how LLMPs by politicians are framed less as community support systems and more as mechanisms for enforcing labor market discipline. By requiring LLMPs to produce successful results within national evaluation standards, these ruling relations transform local programs into instruments for economic productivity, often sidelining more complex social needs in favor of measurable outcomes.

We have a number of people employed at the LLMP unit who are administrators who do the match making. And then we have a number of activities that the administrators match people to [...]. And then you match them [the LLMP participants] and the different activities, and then the people who are inside the system [the LLMP participants] at least get an occupation to do over a period of time. (Politician Gothenburg Region)

The January Agreement illustrates the power of textually mediated governance in defining acceptable practices within LLMPs. For instance, the emphasis on keeping the budget reinforces the structural reorganization of LLMPs in all eight municipalities, with reorganizations often justified under the guise of increasing efficiency or effectiveness. Such framing reflects how ruling relations are embedded in institutional practices, wherein national texts shape local realities by prescribing administrative priorities that resonate with NPM logics. Whether this approach recognizes the individual as a subject with legitimate views and with the rights to influence the activation process is debatable, because the state uses either strong financial incentives or monetary sanctions to bring people into gainful employment. One politician frames this as follows:

We understand that the LLMP is important and that it helps people, but the most important thing must be to keep to the budget and then, when the municipality doesn't do that, so then we need to close things down and this effects the things that is not statutory. Then we have to shut down a lot of activities within the LLMP. It will be, like, in the event of a budget deficit, the LLMP will be the main weapon in the budget debate. (Politician Gothenburg Region)

This process is particularly evident in how LLMPs are framed by politicians as solutions to the regional skills supply challenge. Politicians frequently emphasize aligning LLMP activities with the labor market needs of the region, advocating for participant training that addresses sector-specific shortages. This alignment is often presented as both urgent and necessary. However, this framing also raises important and potentially ambivalent questions about the evolving role of LLMPs.

While addressing skill mismatches can be seen as a positive development—particularly if it leads to greater investment in skill enhancement rather than punitive workfare-style activation—it also suggests a shift in focus. Rather than prioritizing the individual needs and aspirations of unemployed participants, LLMPs may increasingly be steered toward serving regional economic demands. One part of the proposed solution involves not only employing the unemployed but also equipping them with relevant skills (SALAR 2024). The narratives we encountered reflect this dual goal. One politician from the Västernorrland Region states the following:

We have to be alert and we have to dress our participants, so that they can also be part of the skills supply development in the region. (Politician, Västernorrland Region)

This view—adapting LLMP activities to fit regional labor market needs—is echoed across several interviews. Yet, there are also contrasting perspectives among politicians, with some emphasizing that LLMPs should center on the needs of the individual rather than simply aiming to make participants “productive” in a narrow economic sense.

This tension—between labor market alignment and individual empowerment—reveals a deeper ambivalence in the political framing of LLMPs. It invites further scrutiny into whose interests are prioritized and what visions of participation and productivity underpin these policies.

From a policy frame perspective (Fischer et al. 2007), politicians’ depoliticization of LLMPs functions as a discursive move that silences alternatives to the NPM framework. Yet, Smith’s (2001) emphasis on textual ruling relations reveals that both politicians’ and managers’ frames are mediated through the same institutional texts (for example, the January Agreement and Kolada), albeit in different interpretations. It is therefore not just a matter of language choice but the social organization of the texts themselves that shapes how various actors act and are understood within LLMPs.

5.2. Politicians Framing of a “Real Job”

We can also see different ideas of what a job is, and the idea of a “real” job emerges. In relation to work, some politicians narrate the LLMP activities to ensure LLMP participants a good quality of life, while others frame them as a way to make unemployment figures look better in the statistics. One politician expresses this latter view by saying the following:

There are other parties that in the past have cleaned up the statistics and called all sorts of things employment [laughs], but it... our absolute goal is still to get to people into self-sufficiency, and if you have a job that is in some way sponsored by the municipality, it is not really a self-sufficiency. It’s some kind of daily occupation instead. I can’t imagine we would allow that. (Politician Gothenburg Region)

What we can see here is the ongoing debate surrounding the nature of work: here emerges a clear distinction between different conceptualizations of what a “real” job actually is. The concept of a “real” job, especially in the context of labor market programs, is often tied to ideals about self-sufficiency, financial independence, and long-term career development. However, there is a tension between these more traditional views of employment and the nature of work that is promoted by LLMPs, which may involve short-term, subsidized, or less secure positions. The emphasis here is on the potential of these programs to improve participants’ livelihoods and economic stability, even if the initial job placements may not be ideal or permanent. From this perspective, any work experience, even if it is temporary or subsidized, is seen as contributing positively to individuals’ well-being, as it helps reduce dependency on welfare and fosters a sense of purpose.

However, other politicians offer a more skeptical perspective, viewing these types of jobs not as genuine opportunities for self-sufficiency but as a tool for cleaning up the statistics. This framing is critical of the idea that such work can be considered “real” employment because it often lacks the characteristics associated with stable, full-time, wage-paying jobs. In this view, LLMP jobs are seen as temporary, low-quality placements designed primarily to reduce the official unemployment rate rather than as pathways to genuine economic independence. These jobs may be seen as “daily occupations” or forms of busy work, not contributing to true economic self-sufficiency, since they are subsidized or short-term rather than offering permanent or meaningful career growth.

In essence, these competing views also reflect broader social and economic values about work and its role in society. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on inclusivity and the belief that all forms of work, even temporary or subsidized, are valuable for the

individual's social and economic reintegration. On the other hand, there is a more stringent perspective that focuses on the quality of work and its alignment with national objectives like fiscal responsibility, personal autonomy, and reducing dependency on state support. This divergence also underscores the underlying political tensions between prioritizing immediate, practical solutions to unemployment and focusing on longer-term goals of self-sufficiency and economic independence.

5.3. Managerial Framing of LLMPs: Navigating Policy Mandates and Practical Constraints

In analyzing the managers' narratives, the theme of policy adaptation emerges prominently, highlighting the practical difficulties managers face in meeting both national and local policy goals and the unique needs of their local participants. Unlike politicians who are focused on broader policy and budgetary implications, managers' frames reflect a hands-on perspective that centers on the operational impact of these policies on day-to-day administration.

Through policy frame analysis (Fischer et al. 2007), we see how managers generate counter frames to balance the dominant "efficiency frames". Smith's institutional ethnography elucidation of ruling relations (Smith 1987) shows that these counter frames are not merely individual interpretations but practical entry points for how textual governance relations are reshaped in everyday practice. Managers' actions thus represent both expressions of policy frames and concrete renegotiations of institutional power structures.

For instance, managers frequently express frustration with the rigid focus on measurement activities at the national level (such as that reproduced by Kolada) structure of national policies, noting that these mandates often fail to align with the realities of their local labor markets. As one manager remarks,

We have to make it work with what we have, but sometimes the policies don't consider our local conditions. (Manager, Västernorrland Region)

When it comes to local conditions, the managers often refer to the LLMP not being mandatory and thereby very open for adaptation or even cancelation due to budget constraints. The managers also refer to different conditions in the labor market when it comes to unemployment figures but also the supply of skills. Here, we see a frame that emphasizes flexibility and adaptability, as managers perceive their role as filling in the gaps left by national directives. This aligns with IE's emphasis on empirical linkages, where the everyday experiences of local actors reveal the disjunctions between policy texts and the practicalities of implementation (DeVault and McCoy 2006).

In both politicians' and managers' frames, reorganization emerges as a recurring theme; however, the motivations and implications differ significantly. Politicians often frame reorganization as a means of achieving "efficiency" and "budgetary control", aligning with a broader depoliticized discourse. Managers, on the other hand, describe reorganization as a disruptive process that affects their ability to provide consistent support. One manager from the Gothenburg Region reflects on this below:

Every time there's a new reorganization, it feels like we're starting from scratch, having to re-establish processes and relationships. (Manager, Gothenburg Region)

This divergence illustrates the managers' frame as one focused on stability and continuity in service provision, in contrast to politicians' emphasis on cost-saving measures.

Another key theme in the managers' frames is the struggle to balance activation mandates with an individualized approach to LLMP participants. Unlike politicians, who tend to frame LLMPs as depoliticized instruments of budgetary efficiency, managers view them as spaces of intervention where they can make a difference in participants' lives,

albeit within the constraints imposed by national policy. One manager reflects the tension between policy and practice by saying,

It's hard because these are people with very different backgrounds and challenges, and we're expected to apply the same activation strategies to all of them. It's not realistic. (Manager, Gothenburg Region)

Here, we observe a frame that challenges the one-size-fits-all approach, demonstrating managers' commitment to tailoring LLMP activities to fit local needs. This approach positions managers as intermediaries who attempt to align national goals with the realities of their participants' situations, even as they operate under strict policy mandates. The managers have a different understanding of what constitutes a job, or a 'real' job, compared to the framing used by politicians. While politicians adhere to the strict boundaries of what is defined as work within the context of the formal labor market, some managers argue that this definition is too narrow. In the interviews, the managers describe practices within local labor market programs (LLMPs) where participants work for the municipal administration. This is characterized as entrepreneurial work, which, according to the managers, creates real jobs:

We work as . . . as a corporate spirit. We create real jobs. And what I mean by real jobs, real jobs can mean that we take care of the forest, that we move for the social administration, schools or other organizations. We take care of the streets; we clear the weeds in the summer and that is according to the regulations and according to the law. We do small renovations of premises in the municipality, we do carpentry, we bake and sell in cafes and kiosks in social institutions and elderly care homes. We have also started a laundry, where we wash the social service's clothes. (Manager, Västernorrland Region)

Whilst politicians frame Kolada as a tool for broader budgetary control, managers view it as a set of procedural constraints that define what is possible within LLMPs. For instance, several managers discuss the "monitoring and evaluation requirements" mandated by national comparisons, which, they argue, prioritize metrics over meaningful participant outcomes. One manager notes the following:

We're evaluated on numbers—how many people we 'activate'—but there's little consideration for the quality of jobs or if these placements are sustainable for the participants. (Manager, Gothenburg Region)

This critique highlights how the ruling relations organize the work of LLMPs around quantifiable outputs, reinforcing a logic of New Public Management (NPM). Several of the interviewed managers emphasized how neither national nor local politicians really understand the target group's needs, giving LLMPs high goals. This managerial frame contrasts with politicians' budget-centric narratives, illustrating how the ruling relations not only constrain but actively reshape LLMP operations to emphasize specific types of success. Managers are thus caught in a bind, forced to prioritize measurable outcomes even when these do not align with their professional judgment about what is best for participants.

We also have, just as I mentioned, incredibly high goals from politics. So that we have had, really, the blue light on us to demonstrate that we are able to work and that we are able to get people out with successful results during an as short time as possible. (Manager Gothenburg Region)

Finally, managers' frames highlight the complexity of enforcing conditional welfare policies within LLMPs. One manager (Gothenburg Region) says the following:

The PES, we no longer work on behalf of the PES. Instead, we work on behalf of social welfare, you could say. So, all individuals who come seeking livelihood

support first meet with the labor market unit. They do not meet with a social worker who assesses eligibility for social assistance and profiles them. Instead, they are given an appointment, come in to meet with the LLMP personnel, and there we assess whether they have . . . if I may put it that way . . . done their best to become self-supporting before applying for economic welfare. Then a signal goes to social services where a decision is made on whether they are entitled to livelihood support or not, and we begin the work towards self-sufficiency.

Unlike politicians, who see conditionality as a mechanism to reduce dependency, managers frame it as a moral and practical dilemma. When reading the material in light of conditionality on the one hand and inclusive welfare on the other hand, but also from the different institutional positions of politicians and managers, the different understandings of the situation become clearer. From a political frame, the activation programs, often compulsory and connected to sanctions, are framed as services offering increased individual choices by increasing job supply (cf. [Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004](#)). Managers view it more in terms of the broader trend of reducing traditional income replacement policies, expanding active labor market policies ([Bonoli 2022](#)), and increasing conditional welfare (cf. [Garsten and Jacobsson 2004](#); [Nord 2017](#)). They are responsible for enforcing conditions, such as participation in job training programs, but express concerns about the fairness and effectiveness of these policies, especially for participants facing multiple barriers to employment. One manager from the Gothenburg Region explains,

We have people with health issues, family challenges, and other barriers. Making them meet strict conditions can feel punitive rather than supportive. (Manager, Gothenburg Region)

This perspective reflects an underlying tension in the activation discourse, where managers are positioned as enforcers of policies they may not fully agree with, revealing the ruling relations' influence on their discretionary power. The managers' accounts raise the same concerns about the inclusivity and fairness of activation strategies that earlier research has pointed out ([Bonoli 2022](#)).

6. Conclusions and Discussion

This study highlights the complex governance dynamics that shape local labor market programs (LLMPs) in Sweden. Both managers and politicians operate in a policy field that, while locally implemented, is heavily influenced by national-level mandates, particularly those outlined in the January Agreement. The non-statutory nature of LLMPs creates an inherent vulnerability, as managers and politicians alike are aware of the constant risk of budget cuts. This precariousness is exacerbated by what interviewees characterize as "weak governance from the state", where local policy creation occurs in response to shifting national directives without consistent structural support. This duality—local control juxtaposed with national oversight—frames LLMPs as a contested space where local actors strive to meet both the unique needs of their communities and the efficiency-driven goals set by national policies.

The findings emphasize that the January Agreement plays a defining role in structuring LLMPs within each municipality, shaping the governance relationships within which managers and politicians operate. As illustrated in this study, the politicians' narratives offer two primary entry points. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on local control, where the national government's role is seen as secondary to the local work accomplished within municipalities. On the other hand, a significant portion of the political discourse expresses concern about the impact of national politics on LLMP stability and effectiveness, emphasizing the precariousness of a non-statutory, budget-sensitive field. This duality in

perspectives highlights the complexity of LLMP governance, where both local autonomy and dependency on national support coexist.

While the national regulation of LLMPs was loosely defined both before and after the JA, its implementation has still had significant consequences for the municipalities. The quasi-marketisation reform appears to have exacerbated service accessibility issues, likely impacting municipalities as their practical responsibilities increase when the PES offices close down.

For managers, the struggle is characterized by a negotiation between prioritizing participants' needs and adhering to governance requirements. The focus on efficiency, constant evaluation (through, for example, Kolada), and performance metrics positions managers in a system where failing to meet the national standards of "effectiveness" risks program closures. Despite their commitment to participants, managers are constrained by the expectations of workfare policies embedded in national mandates, which prioritize activation and employment over participant-centered support. The dual pressures of strategic alignment with national policy and the practical needs of participants illuminate the governance tensions that hinder the adaptive capacity of LLMPs.

This study also underscores how budgetary concerns overshadow social objectives. This prioritization of budgetary goals reflects a broader trend toward neoliberal governance, where LLMPs are increasingly aligned with a workfare model that emphasizes individual responsibility and minimizes structural explanations for unemployment. Previous research (e.g., [Lødemel and Moreira 2014](#)) has identified this shift toward individual-oriented explanations in labor market policies, and the current findings affirm that this trend persists, with LLMPs being increasingly geared toward managing individuals rather than addressing systemic issues.

While the tension between local autonomy and national directives is not a new finding, our results reaffirm that decentralization can enable more locally tailored interventions. At the same time, it introduces vulnerabilities, as local governments often operate with limited resources and may lack sufficient support from the central state. This mirrors the situation described by the interviews, where LLMPs are governed by ruling relations heavily shaped by national mandates, especially under workfare models that prioritize efficiency over long-term social objectives. This tension between local autonomy and national directives is also seen in New Public Management (NPM) critiques, which argue that the drive for efficiency and cost-effectiveness in welfare programs often limits the flexibility of local actors to meet specific community needs. [Hood \(1991\)](#) and [Christensen and Lægreid \(2007\)](#) discuss how the implementation of NPM frameworks in welfare governance has led to the erosion of local discretion, as national performance standards increasingly dictate how services should be delivered, often leading to a 'one-size-fits-all' approach that neglects the nuances of local labor markets.

While our study did not systematically compare frames across municipal contexts, it is plausible that local and structural characteristics—such as demographic dependency ratios, unemployment levels, and fiscal capacity—moderate how politicians and managers experience and respond to national frameworks. Future research could explore these contextual variations more explicitly.

This study also reveals how ruling relations, articulated through texts like the January Agreement, actively shape the work processes within LLMPs. This supports [Smith's \(2005\)](#) argument that texts do more than record processes, they organize and direct them, thereby structuring power relationships within institutions. This tension between local responsiveness and national control reflects a broader institutional dynamic where both political and managerial frames are shaped by ruling relations, though they differ in terms of their emphasis and objectives.

In our interviews, a fundamental tension also emerges between politicians and managers/administrators regarding the degree of flexibility versus the need to comply with national frameworks. Politicians tend to frame LLMPs as a matter of political governance and budgetary discipline, focusing on rapid results and cost control. Managers, on the other hand, often adopt a more pragmatic “street-level” stance (cf. [Lipsky 2010](#)), seeking to adapt national directives to local realities and participants’ specific needs. Theoretically, this tension can be understood as an internal renegotiation of ruling relations ([Smith 1987, 2001](#)). Politicians reproduce the norms and priorities articulated in central texts (e.g., the January Agreement), whereas managers reinterpret those same texts in practice, creating counter-frames that allow for local deviations. This dynamic illustrates how textual artifacts both bind actors to national logics and open space for localized interpretations. Although our interviews do not explicitly compare actors within the same municipality, they reveal overarching tendencies in which managers continuously challenge and renegotiate the efficiency imperatives signaled by politicians.

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Notes

- ¹ Although Swedish municipalities have a large amount of autonomy, they are nonetheless compelled to cooperate with state agencies within the framework of LLMP.
- ² There is a difference within the municipalities included in our study, for some of the municipalities the budget was impacted as they to a high degree were compensated for their role as service providers to PES, something that changed with the JA. (see also [Bergström et al. 2023](#); [Nyhlén et al. 2023](#)).

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