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A Platform for Collaboration: The Views of Civil Society Organisations on a Local Compact

ABSTRACT: *A considerable degree of collaboration between civil society organisations (CSOs) and governmental organisations (GOs) occurs in various collaborative areas, such as collaborative platforms, that aim to increase mutual understanding and reach shared solutions to complex social challenges. However, little is known regarding how CSOs relate to and discuss the starting conditions for participating in collaborative platforms. By highlighting the perspectives of CSOs supporting refugees, this article shows that the starting conditions affect whether CSOs decide to participate. Nevertheless, the starting conditions are also essential for their general understanding of the platform's aim and purpose, thus affecting more than the initial decision to participate or not. A primary barrier to their participation is the political agenda behind the platform and what role CSOs think they should have in society. Consequently, the inclusive 'whole society approach' that collaborative platforms intend to create might be out of reach before starting the collaboration.*

KEYWORDS: CSO, relations, collaborative governance, partnership, refugees

RECEIVED 24 May 2022; **ACCEPTED** 11 November 2022.

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration between civil society organisations (CSOs) and governmental organisations (GOs) is crucial for solving future and present complex social challenges, for example, climate change, increasing migration, trafficking and corruption (Blatt & Schlauffer, 2021; Gash, 2016; Smith, 2012). However, collaboration and interaction between CSOs and GOs are often complicated and problematic (Smith, 2012; Waardenburg, 2020), not least in countries where welfare issues generally and historically have been handled exclusively by GOs (Nemec et al., 2019; Johansson, 2011). A wildly conflicting area is supporting refugees since CSOs and GOs often differ in views on the appropriate actions (Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018).

In recent decades, CSOs have become increasingly active in providing welfare services through various partnerships and contracts (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Johansson & Johansson, 2012). The shift, often mentioned as a move from government to governance, is evidenced by the increased establishment of codes of conduct, so-called compacts, and other non-binding governance tools between GOs and CSOs to regulate their collaborative relationship (Morison, 2000; Reuter et al., 2012). Compacts, also described as partnerships (Brock, 2020; Davies, 2007) or a type of collaborative governance (Laforest & Orsini, 2005), are non-legally binding agreements based on central mutually developed values and collaboration principles (Reuter et al., 2012; Zimbeck, 2010). Specifically, they are a combination of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' actions (Butcher et al., 2012), which aim to serve as the foundation for effective and stable relations. Although compacts have been criticised for not contributing to better relations (Morison, 2000), saying more about 'the game' than 'the rules of the game' (Johansson et al., 2011), they have been implemented in several Western countries (Reuter et al., 2012).

Compact implementations are one of many governing tools (Brock, 2020; Morison, 2000; Reuter et al., 2012) that aim to regulate, shape and increase equality and mutual decision making, that is, collaborative governance, between CSOs and GOs. This collaboration can be organised in various ways, for example, through various platforms, a collaborative governance that facilitates, enables and regulates multiple collaborative relationships (Ansell & Gash, 2018). However, effective collaborative governance is difficult to accomplish as it rests on the voluntary participation of CSOs and is dependent upon various aspects, such as system context, institutional design, leadership, starting conditions and the collaboration process itself (Gash, 2016; Ansell & Miura, 2020; Ansell & Gash, 2007, 2018; Emerson et al., 2011; Purdy, 2012).

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Previous research has established that CSOs have various views on compacts (Johansson, 2011), making it critical to understand the incentives that CSOs have to engage in collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2007, p. 552), that is, starting conditions. Still, the primary attention in previous research concerning compacts has mainly focused on how compacts have been translated to different contexts and levels (Butcher et al., 2012; Casey et al., 2010; Johansson & Johansson, 2012) and can be understood as policy documents (Acheson, 2010; Butcher et al., 2012; Coule & Bennett, 2018), as well as how political leadership or key individuals affect the ways that compacts are used (Alcock, 2016; Craig et al., 2005). Although the abovementioned topics are important, the perspectives of the CSOs have yet to be explored.

The primary aim of this article is to understand the views of CSOs on a local compact, especially how CSOs relate to the starting conditions. Therefore, two research questions will be asked: *From the perspective of CSOs, what are the strengths and weaknesses of collaborative platforms? How do starting conditions affect CSOs' incentives to participate in collaborative platforms?*

Empirically, the local compact *Malmöandan* (MA, English translation: 'the Malmö Spirit') will be used as an example of a collaborative platform. MA, initiated in the city of Malmö, Sweden, in 2018, aims to 'simplify and intensify collaboration to increase the condition of the people of Malmö to well-being, health and a meaningful life' (Malmöandan, 2017, p. 2, author's translation). This type of structured collaboration between CSOs and a local government organisation (LGO) has not previously existed in Malmö. As participation in MA is voluntary, some CSOs decided to participate, while others did not. Independent of their participation, some had positive opinions of MA as a platform, whereas others were more sceptical (cf., Johansson, 2011). The contribution of this article is that it exclusively focuses on the views of CSOs, both members and non-members. Therefore, the article will contribute to our theoretical and empirical understanding of compacts as a governing tool.

In Sweden, the relationship between GOs and CSOs is often positive, with CSOs actively participating in policy evaluation and decision making at the governmental level (Reuter, 2012). In contrast to Anglo-Saxon countries, only a small portion of Swedish CSOs have traditionally worked with welfare service provision (Reuter et al., 2012). Historically, there has been a social contract between Sweden's state and civil society. Extremely simplified, while the state has managed welfare-related issues, civil society has given a voice to the needs of vulnerable groups, arranged leisure activities, and fostered democratic values (Wijkström, 2000, 2007; von Essen, 2019). Yet, since 2010, there has been a shift to more contract-dependent relations between the state and CSOs in Sweden, such as MA, even if there is a long way to go before it is possible to talk about a 'contract state' (Reuter et al., 2012).

This article describes a Swedish case, mainly resting on Ansell and Gash's (2007, 2018; Ansell & Miura, 2020) theories of collaborative governance and collaborative platforms, as well as MA as a collaborative platform. After presenting the method, including the motivations for the empirical focus of MA, selection of respondents and description of the analytical approach, the results and analysis are provided. Finally, the implications of the main findings and further research directions are described.

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE AND PLATFORMS

Collaborative governance has been conceptualised in many ways (Batory & Svensson, 2019). Whereas some emphasise formal and informal collaboration between various stakeholders (Emerson et al., 2011), others argue that collaborative governance consists exclusively of formal collaborations between a GO and CSOs (Ansell & Gash, 2007). Herein, Ansell and Gash's (2007; 2018) definition of collaborative governance is used: (i) the collaboration initiative has to originate from a GO; (ii) it should include participation from non-governmental organisations (here mentioned as CSOs); (iii) the platform has to be formally organised; (iv) participants meet regularly; (v) CSOs have to be directly active in the decision-making process that aims to make decisions by consensus; (vi) the focus is on public policy or public management. Even if compact(s) can be viewed as guidelines for collaboration between CSOs and LGOs, this article's empirical case, MA, has been formally organised and is more of a collaborative platform than a guideline. In other words, MA is 'a governance platform [...] strategically deploys its architecture to leverage, catalyse, and harness distributed social action for the purpose of achieving certain governance objectives' (Ansell & Miura, 2020, p. 264).

The model begins with several essential starting conditions that affect the collaboration. Ansell and Gash (2007) highlight three critical aspects as starting conditions for collaboration: *power and resource imbalances, history of conflicts among participants and incentives to participate*. Others (Emerson et al., 2011) have presented similar, overlapping conditions. When Ansell and Gash (2007) presented the three aspects, they were initially only viewed as starting conditions. However, after empirically studying how CSOs discussed collaborative platforms, Ansell and colleagues found that the starting conditions influenced their initial decision to participate and the entire process (Ansell & Miura, 2020).

Power and resource imbalances

The first condition relates to *power and resource imbalances* between actors, negatively affecting collaboration. Still, even if collaborative governance aims to be inclusive, previous research shows that CSOs are underrepresented in platforms and collaborations not exclusively designed to include them (Carboni et al., 2017). Overcoming imbalances will require a 'positive strategy of empowerment and representation of weaker or disadvantaged stakeholders' (Ansell & Gash, 2007, pp. 551–552). Otherwise, minority CSOs might feel forgotten or excluded (Craig et al., 2005).

An essential arena for power in collaborative governance concerns the content, that is, what issues are addressed and pursued (Purdy, 2012). For example, Norfeldt (2012) argues that GOs adjust the contents of compacts to fit the present political agenda. Therefore, GOs can limit funding to activities they do not politically support. Consequently, the content depends on the political leadership currently in power (for other contexts, see Alcock, 2016).

Resource imbalance has been discussed in relation to time, as participation often is time-consuming (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Craig et al., 2005; Johansson, 2011; Klockmo & Bostedt, 2015). In Sweden, smaller CSOs without employed staff generally find it challenging to participate in compact meetings during the daytime due to work conflicts (Johansson, 2011; see also Craig et al., 2005 for an international context). Even if representatives can participate during the daytime, their travel costs are not covered (Klockmo & Bostedt, 2015). As most small CSOs do not have the budget to cover these costs, it indirectly forces representatives from smaller CSOs to use private money or refrain from participating. Consequently, collaborative governance risks becoming a matter for a small group of large CSOs or umbrella organisations (Johansson, 2011), reproducing already strong voices (Fyfe, 2005; Laforest & Orsini, 2005; Nordfeldt, 2012). If imbalances in power and resources are high, important actors are limited from participating in a meaningful way (Ansell & Gash, 2007), and the collaborative platform risks becoming irrelevant.

History of (political) conflicts

The incentives for participation are also affected by the potential *history of conflicts* between involved actors, which is closely related to trust among stakeholders (Ansell & Gash, 2007). The feeling of us versus them might limit the incentives for initiating collaboration. If conflicts are high, stakeholders are highly interdependent, and a deadlock needs to be solved; nevertheless, researchers in resource management have shown that previous conflicts are not a barrier to collaborative governance (Futrell, 2003; Weber, 2003). In other words, low levels of trust and previous conflicts might be overcome if the positive aspects of solving the problem are high. Still, the positive aspects might be difficult to grasp when the goals and potential gains from participating are unclear, like in many compact collaborations (Brock, 2020; Morison, 2000; Zimmeck, 2010). Instead, if a CSO has politically and ideologically solid opinions, they might be less likely to participate in collaboration platforms with a GO (Jönsson & Scaramuzzino, 2016). Consequently, the political environment might create conflict and a barrier to participation (Craig et al., 2005) as compacts rest on political–ideological values. On the other hand, some CSOs will always stand on the side (Morison, 2000).

Incentives for participation

Even if participation in platforms such as compacts is voluntary (Ansell & Miura, 2020; Ansell & Gash, 2007, 2018; Emerson et al., 2011; Morison, 2000; Reuter et al., 2012), the incentives for participating depend on many factors. The expectations CSOs have on potential effects or gains (Ansell & Miura, 2020) and whether the collaboration is workable and worthwhile (Gash, 2016) need to be determined. If the goals are overly broad or open-ended, which is typical of collaborative platforms (Ansell & Gash, 2018), it might be difficult for CSOs to know what they have to gain (Ansell & Gash, 2007) and how (Morison, 2000; Zimmeck, 2010). If CSOs have an alternative venue that they think is better suited for their goals, incentives might be reduced (Ansell & Gash, 2007).

The incentive might also depend on how CSOs understand their potential to affect the platform's content. Some CSOs interpret collaborative governance through compacts as a governing tool rather than collaborative governance (Klockmo & Bostedt, 2015), making it harder to involve CSOs as they resist the idea of being governed. When negotiating for a national compact in Sweden, some CSOs argued that the compact's framework was already fixed by the government, making it difficult to affect the final agreement. Others argued that pre-framing was vital for the negotiation and discussion (Johansson, 2011).

To conclude, collaborative platforms and collaborative governance can solve complex societal situations (Gash, 2016), but many obstacles must be addressed to succeed. Still, few studies offer evidence that collaborative governance works well to avoid top-down approaches to governance (Gash, 2016).

MA AS A COLLABORATIVE PLATFORM

In 2010, a commission was assigned by the city of Malmö to investigate and find solutions to Malmö's long history of social and economic inequalities (Stigendal & Östergren, 2013). The commission argued that broad changes were needed to be effective over time and to contribute to healthy and sustainable development (Stigendal & Östergren, 2013, pp. 3, 9). One of the recommendations was to 'create a new form of cooperation between the private and public sectors and civil society based on alliances of knowledge that can contribute to change the relationship between economic growth and welfare' (Stigendal & Östergren, 2013, goal 3.1.3, author's translation). The recommendation can be understood as part of an overall societal trend to strengthen the bonds between civil society and public authorities. It can be viewed as a starting point for MA that, after negotiations, was approved by the local government and CSO representatives in Malmö in 2017.

MA is a collaborative platform where actors meet, discuss problems in general terms, and establish areas of priority based on perceived mutual needs (Malmöandan, 2017, 2020). Like collaborative platforms, MA works as an umbrella concept facilitating a space for establishing collaboration between various partners (Ansell & Gash, 2018). MA has been active since 2017 and is financially supported by the LGO to ensure that MA is a stable platform over time (Ansell & Gash, 2018). In 2021, the collaborative plan of MA was renegotiated for a second term.

In line with the literature on collaborative platforms (Ansell & Miura, 2020; Ansell & Gash, 2018; Emerson et al., 2011), MA has dedicated competencies, institutions and resources to facilitate the creation of collaborative projects and networks. MA's institutional design consists of a steering group of political leaders in Malmö, representatives from CSOs, and a full-time employee coordinator. Meetings (apart from seminar series and similar events) are dialogue meetings that occur at least twice a year. These are open to all who believe their organisation could benefit from increased dialogue between different sectors. They consist of organised 'idea workshops' based on mutual creativity, aiming to develop ideas that might lead to future partnerships (Malmöandan, n.d.).

MA does not include any specific agreements. However, interaction around specific areas could lead to a civil society public partnership (CSPP) between an LGO and a CSO. The CSPP is an agreement in which an LGO finances an activity that CSOs perform. In theory, the establishment of MA should allow CSOs to establish a CSPP in specific matters, independent of whether a CSO is a partner of MA or not. By understanding MA as a collaborative platform, it is possible to pay attention to how 'present' conditions for participation encourage collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2018).

METHODOLOGY AND SELECTED CSOS

This article focuses on how CSOs in Malmö relate to the collaborative platform MA, which was initiated to increase collaboration between the LGO in Malmö and CSOs. MA as a collaborative platform is an interesting case. Importantly, MA is well known to the respondents, has been active for several years, and its collaborative guidelines were recently renegotiated. Malmö is also known for its vibrant civil society and activist scene (Hansen, 2019). The analysis is based on two types of empirical data: interviews and referral documents. The referral documents are the result of a consultative procedure whereby the LGO consulted governmental bodies and CSOs on a specific matter. Here, the referral documents concern the renegotiation of MA's collaborative plan in 2020. Additionally, all available documents published by MA concerning its structure and collaboration plan were used to obtain an overall understanding of MA.

The interviews are part of more extensive empirical material highlighting the collaboration between CSOs supporting refugees and the LGO in Malmö. The interviews of discussions concerning MA were selected for this article. Some of the CSOs included are members of MA, whereas others are not. Supporting refugees is generally a field without consensus (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018), and various actors have different views on what should be done and how. Moreover, CSOs are often guided by ideological and moral values (Åberg, 2015), making political and ideological opinions essential for navigating the individual organisation, including membership in platforms.

Interviews

In total, six interviews with representatives from CSOs supporting refugees in Malmö are included (Table 1). Some CSOs started to support refugees during the increased influx of refugees in 2015–2016 and began actively supporting refugees. Others have supported refugees for a more extended period, often with the primary aim of helping vulnerable groups, including refugees (Karlsson & Vamstad, 2020).

The included CSOs can be viewed primarily as two distinct groups of organisations. Some CSOs work on *human and social rights* (HSR), meaning that they regularly assist with different requirements, such as food and shelter, language training, legal advice and job coaching, and are involved in refugee rights issues. Another group of CSOs work to *educate, help and enable* (EHE) other CSOs that support refugees. The work of EHE CSOs includes support for starting new programs for or by refugees or providing other CSOs with methods to welcome refugees in their already-established activities. Two CSOs (CSO 1 and 6) exclusively work with refugee/immigrant communities. The others organise support and activities for multiple groups in society.

Of the six CSOs, three were identified from a book (Sjöberg, 2018) describing the experiences of various CSOs from the acute situation in 2015–2016; two were traced through a network organisation for CSOs supporting immigrants and refugees in Malmö; and one was identified using snowball sampling (Bryman, 2016).

The CSOs were approached by e-mail and informed about the research aim. After showing interest in participating, they received information about ethical considerations and informed consent. Ethical aspects were raised again at the interviews, partly to guarantee that the respondents had read the information and to offer the opportunity to raise questions or concerns. All respondents provided verbal and written consent to participate. Following ethical standards, the identities of the respondents and the CSOs remain confidential in this article to protect their integrity and efforts.

Tab. 1: CSOs included in the interviews

CSO identification number	Organizational focus ^a	Member of Malmöandan?	Number of respondents
l1	EHE	Yes	1
l2	HSR	Yes	1
l3	HSR	No	3
l4	HSR	No	1
l5	EHE	No (previously, Yes)	1
l6	HSR	No	1

^a EHE = Educate, help and enable; HSR = Human and social rights

The interviews with top managers or operative managers were conducted at two different times. The first round, in 2019, was conducted in Malmö. The second round of interviews in 2020 was conducted via video calls owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews were semi-structured with five broad and general thematic approaches (related to the primary research project): the organisation's structure and activities, relations and interactions with other CSOs and LGOs (including MA), flows of information and knowledge, roles and changes since the increased influx of refugees in 2015. The interviews lasted 53–95 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. All interviews were conducted before the renegotiation process for MA. Consequently, there was no discussion of the new collaboration plan.

Referral documents

Before the new collaboration plan for MA was accepted at the beginning of 2021, the proposed plan was sent to CSOs and the local state administrators for a referral round. As the interviews were conducted before the renegotiation in 2021, the submitted referral documents were included to complement the interviews and to capture the views of the CSOs on the new plan. The referral documents are included in the Swedish accessibility principle (a law giving individuals, including media and researchers, the right to

access information about governmental work). All submitted referral documents were downloaded from Malmö's online citizen portal (Table 2). In total, five large and well-established CSOs in Malmö submitted documents, including two individual organisations and three umbrella organisations. All umbrella organisations support and/or include CSOs that care for refugees.

Tab. 2:. CSOs included in the referral documents

CSO identification number	Member of Malmöandan?	Organisation type	Supports new collaboration plan?	Number of pages
R1	Yes	Individual	Yes	1
R2	Yes	Individual	Yes	2
R3	Yes	Umbrella	No	4
R4	Yes	Umbrella	Yes	3
R5	Yes	Umbrella	Yes	2

The CSOs that submitted referral documents are active partners in MA and suggested what they think needs to be rewritten, removed or renegotiated. One CSO wrote indirectly that it does not stand behind the new plan in its present shape.

Analytical approach

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used and, initially, only included interviews. After reading the transcripts and interview notes, all texts related to MA were selected. Two broad themes, views on MA and starting conditions, were identified based on the theoretical point of departure. Second, the interviews were recoded to identify wrongly coded or uncoded parts. Third, the two themes were separately coded into identified sub-themes. The views of MA were organised according to various opinions of MA. The starting conditions were organised based on theoretical starting conditions. However, history does not strictly predict past conflicts; rather, the views of CSOs need to be understood as a way for them to anticipate the potential future(s) with MA. Also, there was no sub-theme related to incentives to participate, as suggested by Ansell and Gash (2007). Instead, the incentives in all sub-themes are discussed throughout this article.

Finally, the referral documents were added to the empirical data and analysed based on the identified themes. In these documents, the CSOs exhibited a more positive attitude towards MA, possibly because they are active partners and are not anonymous in the referral documents. Still, potential problems noted in the interviews were identified in the referral documents. Thus, they supported the analysis, confirmed the interview findings and provided this study with a more comprehensive range of CSO voices.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

As a collaborative platform and tool, MA creates intense feelings among responding CSOs, both positive and sceptical. This scepticism might be related to the fact that the city of Malmö is traditionally regarded as belonging to a social–democratic civil society regime, with fewer contracts and commissions for CSOs than the national average (Arvidson et al., 2018), thus making this type of arrangement an ‘odd bird’.

This section draws attention to several aspects related to how CSO respondents discuss the starting conditions with MA, the positive and more problematic objectives of MA, power and resource imbalances and history. Incentives and lack of incentives to participate are presented throughout all parts of the result and analysis section.

CSOs views of MA

In every referral document, MA is described as ‘positive’ (R1) and an ‘arena for collaboration [...] that should be further developed’ (R2). Supporting refugees is a subject surrounded by different political views and opinions concerning who should be able to apply for asylum, what support refugees should receive from the official reception system and what the role of CSOs should be. Therefore, close relations between active CSOs and the LGO are crucial (cf., Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018).

Some respondents argued that the LGO in Malmö has a history of not collaborating with civil society and that MA might be a way to ‘overcome their fear of collaboration with civil society’ (I3). Even if this specific CSO representative was highly critical of the LGO and MA, the collaborative platform might contribute to a better relationship even if the CSO did not participate in MA.

Another positive aspect raised was that MA might be one of the few venues in which participation is not forced into a specific shape, but instead, collaboration may take different forms:

‘We [society] try to fit everything into a system, and that is not sustainable over time [...] When we take all the commitment and try to squeeze it into a pipe, well, it dies. Malmöandan may be an example of when we do not do that’ (I1).

Thus, from the perspective of CSOs, MA can increase collaboration and include various types of collaboration. In theory, participating in collaborative platforms should be beneficial for CSOs because it would benefit relations with the LGO and other CSOs (Ansell & Gash, 2007, 2018; Emerson et al., 2011; Gash, 2016), resulting in equal power distribution and horizontal relations (Ansell & Miura, 2020). Participating in compacts allows CSOs to affect change from within (Johansson, 2011) and be a part of the ‘official’ arena. Changing from within might be essential for CSOs, since ‘the political climate is becoming harsher, with some CSOs subjected to threats directed at their organisation and activities’ (I1, I6). Participation could be a way for CSOs to raise their voices, affect the political agenda and collaborate to solve complex problems. Furthermore, participation could show the LGO that the CSO is a legitimate partner for collaboration and agree to the game’s rules. As a result, some CSOs participate despite raising critical concerns regarding MA.

The central problem and scepticism raised are that it is difficult for CSOs to understand what they have to gain from participating (cf., Ansell & Gash, 2007, 2018). In this empirical case, the vagueness was related to the formulations in the plan that are the foundation of the collaborative platform and how actual outcomes are (not) presented.

‘It [Malmöandan] is just a bunch of words; it does not mean anything in reality [...] We have not seen any results from it yet’ (I2).

Even if the CSOs generally were less sceptical in their referral documents compared to interviewed CSOs, they were highly doubtful concerning the content and results.

‘I cannot find any communication about what MA has done, in what type of collaboration. But of course, if nothing concrete has been done, it is not possible to present any type of results’ (R1).

‘The suggested collaboration plan is very inexplicit [...] MA must be easy to understand and must contribute with value and content’ (R3).

‘There is a huge need to communicate what type of collaboration Malmöandan has already resulted in’ (R4).

Compacts as governing tools are often criticised and described as a ‘handsome face with not much behind it’ (Zimmeck, 2010, p. 131). When potential gains and results are clear, CSOs are more likely to find collaborative platforms valuable and spend time, energy and resources to participate (Ansell & Gash, 2018). Still, according to the empirical data, only CSOs that are active partners raised concerns about the results of MA. Non-participating CSOs did not consider the possible effects produced by MA. Instead, they decided not to participate based on other values.

Power and resource asymmetry

The vague formulations do not only concern what the collaborative platforms achieve but they also make it difficult for participants to see how they can influence the content, that is, how power is distributed. Put differently, they make CSOs question for whom and by whom the collaborative platform is constructed.

‘It is not clear how CSOs can participate and affect the content of Malmöandan [...] without relevance for and connection between CSOs, there is a risk that MA will be irrelevant and useless’ (R2).

Collaborative governance must be driven by demand (Gash, 2016). The respondents mainly argued that there is a lack of communication regarding possibilities to influence. There is a risk that CSOs interpret the platform as a top-down project (cf., Klockmo & Bostedt, 2015) without horizontal collaborative dimensions, which are essential for collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Ansell & Miura, 2020). According to Ansell and Gash’s (2007) model for collaborative governance, the vague content should affect the incentives for participation (see also Klockmo & Bostedt, 2015, for an empirical example in Sweden). Still, for CSOs participating, the unclear power distribution was insufficient to terminate their participation. For CSOs that are non-members of MA, their decision to participate was instead based on financial and personal resource asymmetry.

Representatives from the LGO often participate in collaborative governance as part of their job. For CSOs, conditions are often different (Craig et al., 2005; Johansson, 2011; Klockmo & Bostedt, 2015; Purdy, 2012). Many CSOs struggle to cover basic costs; therefore, participating in collaborative platforms is challenging, especially for smaller CSOs struggling financially. If a CSO’s future is unclear, entering new platforms is not prioritised.

‘Well, it [MA] started when we struggled financially, and our future was uncertain. And it is hard to find a kind of spirit [as in the English translation of MA, “The Malmö Spirit”] when you do not know what is happening. Sometimes, it is just hard to enter [a collaborative platform] with enthusiasm, and [...] you just do not have the energy to add something else’ (I4).

Even if participation in MA can be beneficial in the long run due to increased collaboration and project funding, most CSOs have to participate in their spare time, which CSO representatives criticise.

‘In the proposal, there is nothing about resources [...] CSOs want to contribute to achieving the goals and visions but often lack the resources to do so. There must be guidelines concerning financial support. Without guidelines and an understanding of this, the collaboration plan is nothing more than a document with limited possibilities for implementation’ (R5).

Understanding collaborative platforms’ power and resource imbalances is essential (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Purdy, 2012). When CSOs lack the necessary means to participate in a meaningful way and perceive an unwillingness from the LGO to work actively to include them, CSOs might risk becoming underrepresented (Carboni et al., 2017). In this empirical case, limited time and resources made it challenging for CSOs to participate. Therefore, unequal access to participation might result in already strong voices reproduction (Morison, 2000). Consequently, there is a risk that ‘less heard voices’ will be lost in setting the agenda and discussing how to solve complex societal challenges.

History as a tool to anticipate the potential future(s) with MA

A history of conflicts might limit CSOs’ incentives to actively participate in collaborative platforms (Ansell & Gash, 2007). Discussions concerning previous conflicts were not evident in this specific material or discussed as limiting incentives. Instead, how CSOs relate to previous collaboration experiences with the LGO and their understanding of MA were important. The problematisation of participating relates to two intertwined dimensions: (i) political values to distinguish themselves from a specific political agenda and (ii) ideological values and ideas of how society should be organised.

Political agenda

MA is a collaborative platform that aims to support negotiation and discussion for future collaboration. Thus, in theory, collaboration platforms and collaborative governance should facilitate equality of power and horizontal relations (Ansell & Gash, 2007, 2018; Purdy, 2012). However, several CSOs interpreted MA as a way for the LGO to control and govern their actions. Other CSOs reflect on how they might be governed by participating in MA:

‘If they [LGO] promote a policy you disagree with, and you must adjust your activities, you might not be able to do what you want to do.... [And] you must do what someone else thinks is needed’ (I3).

Even if MA does not govern CSOs to act in a specific way, this was the fear of CSOs. When asking if collaboration, including funding, would restrict them as an organisation from supporting refugees, the answer seemed obvious:

‘Yes, most definitely [...] [F]or us, it is much easier to go outside the box and follow the needs of the target group, and we would not be able to do that [...] [W]e want to be able to do what we want to, and our work frequently entails activism’ (I6).

Because MA aims to create LGO–CSO collaboration, legitimisation and exhibiting a willingness to participate by the rules are not considered necessary; therefore, participation is unnecessary (cf., Morison, 2000). As the CSOs in this study aimed to help and support refugees, how they discussed MA addressed the worries of being governed, the potential effects MA will have and the values and ideological dimensions behind the platform.

For example, several respondents were critical of how the municipality supported refugees during the refugee situation in 2015/2016 and argued that the LGO was not doing enough, that is, they opposed their politics. In this context, being governed by political actors with the ‘wrong’ political agenda is unwelcome, and it creates a feeling of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (cf., Nordfeldt, 2012). Others pointed out that since Sweden Democrats, a right-wing party in Malmö that seeks to ‘pause’ immigration and establish ‘return centres’ for all residents not born in Sweden, signed the document, there is clear evidence that the document only consists of beautiful words with little meaning (cf., Morison, 2000; Zimmeck, 2010). For CSOs working exclusively with refugees, this is of great importance as political leaders are a part of the steering group. To summarise, the ideological and political values that MA is based on are essential to understand the relations of CSOs to MA. The CSOs feared that active participation could limit their ability to work as they wished.

Anticipated future(s) – organisation of society

Another essential aspect of the viewpoint of CSOs to MA is related to how CSOs think society should be organised and what relationship CSOs in Malmö should have with the LGO. Some CSOs believed that MA had replaced previous ways to initiate partnership discussions. When discussing different types of collaboration between Malmö and CSOs and whether MA had replaced many of the previously established relations, one CSO representative said:

‘Yes, at least, it seems like it. When I asked for a meeting regarding a CSPP [with the LGO], I got the answer “MA [already] exists”. So, what you can say is that, at least in Malmö, it is like that’ (I2).

By comparing the past ways of initiating collaborations with their understanding of the present with MA, the CSOs were critical of how MA, against its aims, seemed to limit the possibility of CSOs forming a CSPP. The respondents’ statements could be understood from two perspectives. One understanding is that MA has replaced CSPPs, that is, limited the possibilities of CSOs to collaborate with the LGO. Another interpretation is that MA, as a collaborative platform serves as a gatekeeper for the LGO and that all types of new collaborations should pass through MA. Consequently, if CSOs do not participate in MA, they have no opportunity to form a CSPP. Either way, the incentives for CSOs to participate might have increased.

Nevertheless, the incentives are not based on voluntary participation (cf., Ansell & Gash, 2007, 2018). Rather, participating is indirectly forced as it might be the only way to form a CSPP. The combined narratives of the CSOs indicate that they understand the collaborative platform as a top-down project, attempting to govern the actions of CSOs and organise society by LGO political ideology.

In the interviews, members and non-members discussed how they anticipate the future, what challenges there are, and how they think complex societal challenges should be solved. Generally, they recognised that social problems are increasing. CSOs meet more individuals in acute need of support struggling with homelessness, drug use and mental instability. In the opinion of CSOs, this has to do with GOs at national, regional and local levels withdrawing from the market and LGOs trying to shift their responsibility to CSOs. When the market (here CSOs) takes greater responsibility for vulnerable groups, collaborative platforms like MA fit well as a governing tool. Therefore, the traditional role of CSOs in Sweden as the voice for vulnerable groups rather than a service provider is challenged (Wijkström, 2000, 2007; von Essen, 2019). The question raised is what role voluntary actions should have in a society and if it is reasonable for an LGO to hand over greater responsibility to CSOs. As one respondent argues, ‘there is a risk that MA bites its tail if voluntary action becomes a kind of must’ (I2).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION: INCENTIVES FOR (NON)PARTICIPATION

This article aimed to analyse how CSOs relate to collaborative platforms and collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2007, 2018) using the local compact MA as an empirical example. In line with the theoretical framework (Ansell & Gash, 2007, 2018; Ansell & Miura, 2020; Gash, 2016; Purdy, 2012), power and resource imbalances significantly contribute to the (lack of) incentives to participate. Still, in the empirical data, problems concerning power imbalances were raised by active participants. Even if most participating CSOs were critical about the possibility of participating on equal conditions and collaborative platforms had low barriers for exiting (Gash, 2016), power imbalances were not reason enough for terminating participation. For non-participating CSOs, on the other hand, resource imbalances were one of the main reasons not to participate (Johansson, 2011). They recognised that participating would mean taking time from something that they find more acute and vital, such as working in the field and supporting refugees. The analysis shows that the respondents found the framework for MA weak and unclear, and they struggled to see how and why participation would benefit them.

Problematically, the respondents identified no benefits of participating. However, some of the participating CSOs argued that participation in MA increased their chances of getting a CSPP and that MA gave them access to a network. Still, these aspects were not apparent for non-participating CSOs. Therefore, it might be difficult to foster better relations, initiate collaboration and solve complex societal challenges if CSOs do not understand what they have to gain by participating. To add to the complexity of collaborative platforms, some CSOs will continue to stand on the side (Morison, 2000) and find it undesirable to form partnerships and coalitions with a GO or LGO. Consequently, a ‘whole society approach’ is out of reach already from the start.

Compacts are implemented in a specific political ideology (Craig et al., 2005; Fyfe, 2005; Morison, 2000). This fact is of great importance for CSOs as they position themselves in relation to MA, and political ideology often creates a ‘barrier’ to participation (cf., Craig et al., 2005). The strong emphasis on political values and ideology of the collaborative platform from respondents is an essential contribution to the theoretical development of the starting conditions for collaborative governance. This is the first time a framework for collaborative governance has been adopted to understand how CSOs relate to compacts. The theoretical approach made it possible to see how vital the starting conditions are for CSOs when they decide on potential participation. However, as mentioned by Ansell and Miura (2020), the starting conditions need to be understood as an ongoing aspect that affects the incentives for participating, understanding and criticism of CSOs throughout the entire process. The results also highlighted how the starting conditions were closely related to the institutional design. For example, several of the respondents’ views on MA as a collaborative platform, ways of communicating and criticism about the political ideology and values of MA were closely connected to the platform design (cf., Ansell & Gash, 2007). Moreover, thoughts (and concerns) related to the anticipated future, both at a societal level and with MA, were essential in making their decision not to participate.

Still, the results of this article need to be understood against the contextual background of Sweden, traditionally described as an advanced welfare state. However, the relationship between CSOs and the state is undergoing change from being based on voluntary to more contractual arrangements. Thus, the Swedish case is interesting for both Swedish and international readers as it provides an

example of how collaborative partnerships can be understood, from the perspective of CSOs outside the Anglo-Saxon sphere. While it is a limited context, the study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of how collaborative governance can be understood from the perspective of CSOs. Second, selecting CSOs that support refugees, with a compact as an example of a collaborative platform, might make the results difficult to generalise, especially as the external context creates opportunities and constraints that influence collaborative governance (Emerson et al., 2011).

The choice to include only CSOs that, in various ways, support refugees can be seen as a methodological limitation. The sample of CSOs is relatively narrow as it only consists of a limited group of CSOs and only includes a fraction of CSOs in Malmö. In addition, many CSOs supporting refugees are critical in their basic attitude towards the LGO, as they consider the LGO's work on issues and support for refugees insufficient. On the other hand, the question of support for refugees is highly relevant concerning the expected increased number of refugees around the world as a consequence, owing to climate change, instability and conflict. Therefore, it is these critical voices that need to be raised in order to understand why some CSOs do not choose to participate and what criticism is there towards these types of collaborations. Thereby, this article also contributes significantly to our understanding of how CSOs in Sweden relate to this type of collaborative governance.

Finally, the findings presented herein show a need for more comprehensive research on the perspectives of CSOs on local collaborative governance. Collaborative platforms can contribute to the broader use of collaborative governance (Ansell & Miura, 2020). Nevertheless, suppose research, focusing on other contexts with a traditional strong welfare state, finds limited interest in participation from CSOs. In that case, the following questions remain: Why are compacts and other agreements regarded as essential policy tools in some cities and regions? Who benefits from compacts in this specific context, and in what ways can collaboration become more fruitful for all participants and potential participants?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study forms part of the research project 'Resilience in Sweden: Governance, Social Networks and Learning (RISE)' funded by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency

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