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**OPENNESS AND TRANSPARENCY  
IN POLITICAL DECISION MAKING PRACTISE –  
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY THROUGH AN INSTITUTIONAL LENS**

FIRST DRAFT – Please do not quote!

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## 1. Introduction

In the nexus of globalization, urbanization and the networked information and knowledge economy introducing new ways of interacting, creating, producing and distributing knowledge and information (ex. Benkler, 2006, Rifkin, 2014), the notions of 'open' and 'openness' have come to play an important role, we might even call it a buzzword. Although frequently used and applied in different contexts; open source, open education, open innovation, open society, open government and so forth, it is not always clear what we actually mean by open and what the policy implications are.

One aspect, or quality of openness that has received increased attention the last decades is transparency mainly in normative discussions relating to the public sector and to good governance and accountability, but also in the business sector labeled as corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Basu and Palazzo, 2008). With roots in democracy, increased transparency and accessibility to information is often taken for granted as something positive (Flyverbom, 2015). However in practice the relation between transparency, openness and information remain quite vague and how to put it into practice is not always clear, not least in complex societies of multi-level and networked based governance structures. And in the end, also the most transparent organization has to make delimitations of what information is to be made transparent and in what format (original or processed information) and what is to be disclosed. Christensen and Cornelissen (2015) claim that transparency has reached the status of a myth and a metaphor, and that too little attention is brought to the negative sides and unintended consequences (Hansen, Christensen and Flyverbom, 2015). One way to go forward is to look at transparency as an ideal, a concern that all organizations have to deal with and a matter of management or governance, "...a matter of managing visibilities in ways that contribute to organizational control and societal governance." (Flyverbom, 2015, p.180)

The aim of this project is to study how openness and transparency is interpreted and enacted in political decision making practice. The research of which this paper is a part, is aiming at contributing with an analytical tool to understand and analyze openness in different cultural, territorial and organizational contexts. The relevance of it goes to researchers wishing to increase their understanding of global shifts (can we talk of paradigm shifts?) and their implications, and policy makers having to deal with openness and transparency in theory and in policy making practice.

## 2. Earlier research and theoretical framework

In this research we mainly draw from the theoretical framework of new institutional theory which helps us with the task of understanding social and political behavior and to understand and analyze openness. To frame our understanding of openness and transparency in a political decision making context, we will lean on theoretical frameworks for the analysis of democratic practices, government and governance.

Political thinking but also law, history and other parts of social sciences have roots in the analysis and design of institutions, all the way back to Aristotle and later in the era of creating nation states. During the 1950-1960ies this old institutionalism was challenged by alternative explanatory models rooted in a behavioral and rational tradition. Structural functionalism focusing on psychological, social or economic explanatory factors to explain social phenomena became more common. New institutionalism emerged as a reaction to this rational and behavioral turn, focusing on the influence of norms and formal and informal rules in shaping human social, economic and political behavior. Although highlighted by economists such as Friedrich von Hayek and Gunnar Myrdal, it was not until the 1990ies and the works of Douglass North (1990) that the role of institutions was gaining full acknowledgement also in economics, and since then is broadly accepted in social sciences.

What the different strands of institutionalism share in common is that they start with the institutions rather than the individuals and that institutions create structures to create regularities and determine behavior and outcomes of political processes, although terminology and focus may vary across different subfields such as rational choice institutionalism, normative institutionalism, historical institutionalism and empirical institutionalism. One major difference between the different strands of new institutional theory is the view of constraints and preferences; rational choice institutionalism focus on exogenous rules and incentives, normative institutionalism focus on endogenous values and norms (Peters, 2005). In this paper we will mainly draw from new institutional theory as it is understood in economics where institutions are a set of formal and informal rules creating stability within society and increasing trust among social and economic actors and thereby reducing costs of production and transaction costs (North 1990, Ostrom 2005, Williamson, 2000). But we will also draw from normative institutional theory, and the March and Olsen theory of logic of appropriateness shaping individual behavior (March and Olsen, 1989). In new institutional theory there is often a common understanding that interaction between institutions and organizations mutually influence each other in both directions (ex North, 1990). A similar understanding which is frequently discussed in planning, is the relation between process and value (Campbell, 2006, Fainstein, 2009).

In this paper I will join these theoretical perspectives into an institutional model that may be used to analyze openness and transparency in decision making practice. The basis for this model comes from Williamson's (2000) model explaining how institutions evolve and affect individual and social behavior over time. This framework has been used in two previous studies for the analysis of openness (Lundgren and Westlund, 2016 and Lundgren, 2016, both forthcoming). Williamson identifies four interrelated institutional levels:

Level 1 Embeddedness: This level refers to culture, traditions, religion and social norms. The pace of change is very slow, 100-1000 years.

Level 2 Basic institutional environment: This level refers to what is often called the formal rules of the game; constitution and basic legal, political and economic systems. The pace of change at this level is slow, 10-100 years.

Level 3 Institutions of governance: This level refers to the play of the game and is where governance structures and policy is being developed. The pace of change is 1-10 years.

Level 4 Short time resource allocation: This level refers to the daily operations within the framework of the other three levels and the pace of change is continuous (Williamson, 2000; Joskow, 2008).

The second institutional perspective that seems highly relevant to take into account when analyzing openness and transparency in decision making practice, is that of March and Olsen (1984, 1989) who put a focus on norms, rules and routines as shaping individual behavior, as opposed to the rational choice institutionalism. Normative institutionalism was created as a counterforce to rational choice perspectives on institutions focusing on incentives for rational/ maximizing behavior with models such as principal-agent, game theoretic and rules based models. *“The rational choice version of change is good at identifying why conscious change may occur in a world of stable preferences and institutional failures. March and Olsen, on the other hand, think of change as occurring more through the reshaping of preferences and adaption of preferences and possibilities within the institution.”* (Peters, 2005, p 62). March and Olsen introduced the term logic of appropriateness which signifies appropriated behavior to a role, a situation or a group. In this perspective, rules and routines is what make up institutions, and to March and Olsen *“Politics is organized by a logic of appropriateness”* (March and Olsen, 1989, p.160) where the elaboration of meaning, interpreting history and anticipating the future play a crucial role.

### 3. Aim, research questions and method

The aim of this paper is to analyse how openness is interpreted and enacted in political decision making practice. The research questions thus are:

1. How is openness interpreted?
2. How is openness enacted in political decision making practice?

This will be done by conducting an empirical study through an institutional lens and the model of four institutional levels based on Williamsson’s (2000), containing four qualities of openness based on Lundgren and Westlund (2016 forthcoming) complemented with the logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen, 1989) to expand on and further explain the influence of the arrows in the model, and the notions of value and process (Fainstein, 2009, Campbell, 2006) to further develop the interdependence between the different institutional levels.

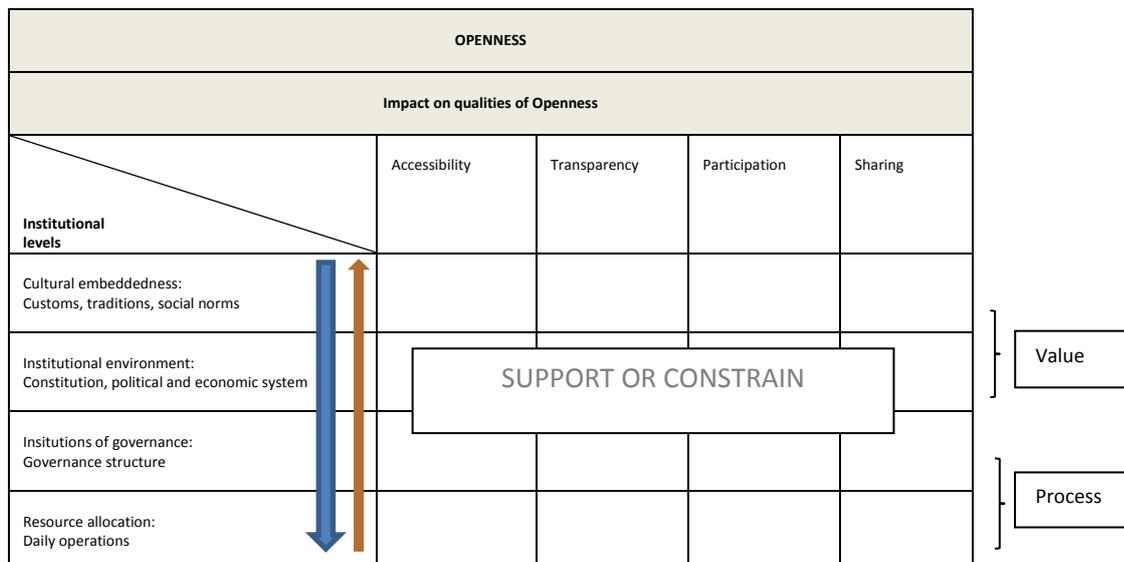


Figure 1.

Four hypotheses based on earlier research, have been formulated:

- 1) Openness and transparency is expected to be discussed on all four institutional levels of the model; I. Culture, norms and values, II. Institutional structures, III. Governance/policy and IV. Day to day practice.
- 2) Openness and transparency are expected to be considered as important values, that however are difficult to fully enact in political decision making in complex matters (Flyverbom, 2015).
- 3) Openness is mainly interpreted as two major strands; openness towards people and openness towards information, knowledge and ideas (Lundgren 2016 forthcoming).
- 4) The qualities of openness discussed, are mainly accessibility, transparency and participation (Lundgren and Westlund, 2016 forthcoming).

In this paper the institutional levels have been operationalized by attaching key words to the institutional levels, expressing factors that may support or constrain openness.

Institutional level	Key words
I. CULTURE, NORMS AND VALUES 100 years-	Freedom, democracy, equality, justice, knowledge, truth
II. INSTITUTIONS 10-100 years	Local authorities, county councils, political parties, media
III. GOVERNANCE 1-10 years	Legislation, regulations, government rules permitting or restraining
IV. PRACTISE 0-10 years	Economic, political, social and cultural practises.

Figure 2.

To test the hypotheses and the relevance of the analytical model presented, an empirical qualitative case study has been conducted in the Stockholm region, a region where the researcher has previous knowledge. 10 political representatives from 7 different political parties have been interviewed in structured open-ended interviews conducted in May-June 2016. All the interviewees are holding leading position, i.e. being local or regional leaders for their party in Stockholm or the Stockholm region. The interviews covered four themes; how openness is interpreted, how important openness is considered to be, how change with regard to openness is perceived and how openness and transparency is enacted in political decision making. It was assumed that openness and transparency are becoming more difficult to deal with in practice if the political issue is more complex. As case study of a complex political issue, the issue of establishing an administrative region in Stockholm county was chosen. A government committee has put forward a proposal to merge county councils into larger regions in Sweden as from 2019, a complex political issue that involve many actors and cut across organizations and political parties.<sup>1</sup> It is also an issue that is expected to come to a decision the next coming years. Presently some parts of Sweden are divided into regions with responsibility for regional development matters, whereas in some parts of Sweden the county councils remain and the regional development responsibility is assumed by the County administrative board which is a state authority. The proposal contains two parts; changing the responsibility for regional development issues from the County administrative board to the county council, and merging the Stockholm region with the island of Gotland.

In this study of how openness and transparency is interpreted and enacted, 10 interviews have been conducted.

<sup>1</sup> Further ref: See Anders Lidström Antologi i regionfrågan, Svegfors utredning, Tallberg, Stegman McCallion.

Any potential differences between the political parties will not be commented upon in this study since the sample is regarded to be too small, however this will be further explored in the upcoming study containing a larger sample.

The methodological perspective of this study is abductive, where the empirics delve into the theoretical understanding and contribute to the development of theory. New institutional theory has often been criticized for measuring problems, but also for having problems with the explanans and explanandum, i.e. what is explaining what. However by using an operationalization of the theoretical model here suggested and by being specific (Voigt, 2013) in a limited case study, I trust at least some of these problems to be avoided.

#### 4. Results

In this section, results are presented with reference to the hypotheses presented in the methods section.

In total 10 persons from 7 different political parties were interviewed. An overview show that three of the hypothesis were confirmed and one was partly confirmed.

Hypothesis	Confirmed	Not confirmed	Partly confirmed
1) Openness and transparency is expected to be discussed on all four institutional levels of the model; I. Culture, norms and values, II. Institutional structures, III. Governance/policy and IV. Day to day practice	x		
2) Openness and transparency are expected to be considered as important values, however difficult to fully enact in political decision making in complex matters.			x
3) Openness is mainly interpreted as two major strands; openness towards people and openness towards information, knowledge and ideas	x		
4) The qualities of openness discussed, are mainly accessibility, transparency and participation.	x		

Figure 3.

Whereas the three hypotheses that refer to the research question ‘How is openness interpreted’ (1, 3 and 4) were confirmed, the hypothesis that refers to the research question ‘How is openness enacted in decision making practice?’ was only partly confirmed. Each of the hypotheses is further displayed and discussed below.

##### *Hypothesis 1*

The hypothesis was that openness and transparency were expected to be discussed on all four institutional levels of the model; in terms of culture, norms and values (level 1), institutional structures (level 2), governance and policy (level 3) and day to day practice (level 4). This was also confirmed by the interviews. The interviewees perceived digitalization being a strong driving force for increased openness and transparency and that these are processes going at a rather quick pace. At the same time there was a general understanding that organizational structures, bureaucracy, legislation and party cultures are counter forces holding back and striving for a status quo or more moderate development. When it comes to openness towards people, issues such as migration, terrorism, refugees and the difficult housing situation in Stockholm, were brought up. With respect to these issues openness was perceived as being a more stable value connected to culture, ideology and personal values, and thus likely to change at a slower pace. Driving forces for increased openness towards people were to a large extent ideological, i.e. the idea of openness towards people of different kinds or the idea of equality. Forces brought up working in the opposite direction, restraining openness towards people, were worry and fear.

	Openness towards information/ knowledge/ ideas	Openness towards people
Level I	Frequent	Very frequent
Level II	Very frequent	Frequent
Level III	Very frequent	Frequent
Level IV	Frequent	Very frequent

Figure 4.

As we can see from the table above, it is thus a difference at what level openness is discussed depending on whether openness towards information/knowledge and ideas are discussed, or whether openness towards people is at focus. Whereas openness towards information/knowledge and ideas, which is also where we find transparency, is mainly discussed with regard to institutions (level 2) and governance (level 3), openness towards people is mainly discussed with regard to culture, norms and values (level 1) and day to day practice (level 4).

### *Hypothesis 2*

The first part of the second hypothesis that openness and transparency were expected to be considered as important values was confirmed by the interviews. All the respondents considered openness being an important value, although the motivations might differ. However the second part of the hypothesis, that openness was difficult to fully enact in political decision making in complex matters was only partly confirmed. The political issue brought up as a case in the study was the issue of establishing a region in Stockholm county. 8 of the 10 respondents considered this issue being a complex issue, 1 interviewee answered yes and no and 1 answered a clear no. Many of the interviewees also regretted that the issue was mainly a political issue, of little interest to the citizens.

	Yes	No	Yes and No
Do you agree that the issue of establishing a region in Stockholm county is complex?	8	1	1

Figure 5.

When asked if they generally saw a problem concerning openness and transparency in political decision making practice in complex issues, four answered yes, five yes and no and one no.

	Yes	No	Yes and No
Would you generally say there is a problem when it comes to openness and transparency in decision making practice in politically complex issues?	4	1	5

Figure 6.

A variety of difficulties was perceived by the interviewees and the motivations for considering this being a problem focused on many different aspects, such as multi-level governance, decision-making rules and processes, being in majority or opposition, being part of a coalition, the role of public opinion and media, citizens' rights and influence. These aspects are further discussed in the Discussion section.

### *Hypothesis 3*

The hypothesis that openness is mainly interpreted as two major strands; openness towards people and openness towards information, knowledge and ideas was confirmed but also further nuanced by the interviews. It seems

that the complex of ‘openness towards information, knowledge and ideas’ can be discussed in terms of two dimensions; in the sense of bring out, disseminate or make information accessible, which is the association to which transparency is most frequently made, and in the sense of bring in or let in new information, knowledge and ideas as in the notion of openmindedness. Another distinction that was made clear during the interviews was between requirements for society and societal functions (such as the political role) of being open vs requirement for individuals to be open.

*Hypothesis 4*

The hypothesis that the qualities of openness discussed are mainly accessibility, transparency and participation was confirmed. (To further investigate the frequency of the use of the different qualities of openness Nvivo could be used, not decided whether this is important to do?)

**5. Discussion**

In this section we will be go back to the two research questions: How is openness interpreted and how is openness enacted in political decision making practice? Through an institutional lens, an analytical model based on new institutional theory containing different institutional levels and an empirical qualitative study we have tried to grasp how openness is interpreted and enacted in decision making practice, and in this part I will discuss the results.

It seems that the major two strands for interpretation of openness; openness towards people and openness towards knowledge, information and ideas, which came out as two major strands in a study of regional development strategies (Lundgren, 2016 forthcoming) was confirmed also in this study. It is thus plausible to think that these two major strands are relevant also in other contexts. However the two dimensions of openness towards knowledge, information and ideas, that were highlighted during the interviews, seems to be an important clarification that should be taken into consideration in future studies.

<p><b>Openness towards people</b></p>	<p><b>Openness towards knowledge, information and ideas</b>  a) to bring out, disseminate knowledge, information and ideas  b) to bring in knowledge, information and ideas/ openmindedness</p>
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Figure 7.

This is also related to the question of requirements, where it is clearly so that the requirements for openness, both when it comes to openness towards people and openness towards knowledge, information and ideas, may be different for functions and roles, than the requirements on the individual person in private.

As we could see in the empirical study, openness was discussed on all four institutional levels, although to some varying degree. Whereas openness towards information, knowledge and ideas was discussed mainly on level 2 and level 3, i.e. levels where institutional settings and governance are at focus, openness towards people was being more discussed in relation to level 1, culture, norms and values, and level 4, day to day practice.

Politics and political decision making practice in its essence is about enacting democracy, to fulfill the will of the people and to obtain legitimacy. But it is also an issue of storytelling and to give a credible answer to the

questions of where do we come from and where are we going. In this sense it is not surprising that openness, an issue that has received increased attention the last years as a result of globalization, urbanization which implies densification of population, and the networked knowledge and information economy, is being discussed on all four levels. In the operationalization of the institutional levels (figure 2), one may note that the character of the levels differ. At level 1 we deal with ideas, at level 2 with organizations, at level 3 with legislation and rules and at level 4 with day to day practice. In fact, one might say that all politics work to tie all these four levels together into a credible and coherent system. An example of this, is the use of “institutionalization” which means to move an issue up the ladder and perhaps particularly to go from level 3 to level 2. Another way of describing this interaction between different institutional levels is in terms of value and process, which is a common discussion in planning (Campbell, 2006, Fainstein 2009). We could also see from the empirical study that there are forces and counterforces working at the different institutional levels, although we cannot from this study draw conclusions about the relative strength of these forces. An interesting issue for further studies (although presumably complicated methodologically?), would be to study the composition and the strength of these forces in relation to the institutional levels and to be able to identify tipping points.

When it comes to decision making practice, all the interviewees considered openness and transparency being an important value both to themselves, to their party, to their organization and to society. However the motivations were different as to why it was important for the party to be open and transparent in their activities or to society to be open and transparent. This result is consistent with the March and Olsen (1984, 1989) idea of logic of appropriateness which means that a person will act in consistency with their role, the rules and routines of the organization and the situation.

When asked if the interviewees saw a problem concerning openness and transparency in decision making practice, the results were very mixed and half of the interviewees answered ‘yes and no’. From theories in political science we may find different explanations for these diverging answers. In the following I have grouped the answers into four themes; a question of democratic ideal, multi-level and network governance, political situation, and public opinion and political debate.

#### *A question of democratic ideal*

First of all, it should be clarified that the question the interviewees answered to was whether they *considered* openness and transparency being a problem in decision making practice. It is thus a question has to do with expectations, expectations that may be rooted in either the person, or the situation or the structures, and most likely in a mix of all these. For the moment we will leave the person aside, and focus on the situation and the structures when we talk of expectations with regard to openness and transparency and link this to different democratic ideals. Representative democracy, where the electorate (the people) by casting the ballot select their representatives, is perhaps what we think of when we in daily talk speak of democracy. However the relation between the state, society and the citizens and the idea of democracy has been challenged both by participatory initiatives aiming at direct democracy and by deliberative democracy containing networks and partnerships that have evolved to manage a more complex society. In most countries we find a mix of these ideals, although with different emphasis. In comparison to other countries interactive governance is not new but has a long tradition in

Sweden (Hedlund and Montin, 2009). Some of the interviewees note that privatization of publicly funded services for instance within health care and public procurement processes have complicated the relationship between the politicians and the citizens with regard to openness and transparency. It is not far fledged to think that the expectations and requirements for politicians to be open and transparent differ depending on what kind of democratic ideal is prevailing – and again we may talk of the logic of appropriateness where rules and routines is what form individual behavior.

#### *Multi-level and network governance*

Another set of answers relate to the multi-level and network governance that was referred to earlier, and recent study shows that in a Swedish local and regional context network governance is still increasing (Olausson, Nyhlén, Bolin, 2015). Although this is a phenomenon that has clear advantages, it also inherits disadvantages. “Networks are brilliant constructions to coordinate autonomous actors with different interests, but they are problematic in terms of recruiting, decision making, steering ability and accountability.”<sup>2</sup> (Pierre, 2009, p.50) . The informality of networks may be both an advantage and a disadvantage.<sup>3</sup>

In politics there are a multitude of both formal and informal arenas, examples of the former are and local authorities whose rules are stipulated both in legislation and internal rules and political parties who are governed by their internal rules. Examples of informal arenas are networks, friends, interest groups, media, neighbours or simply “corridor talk”. One may also talk of formal and informal power, where the former mostly has to do with a role or a function, and the latter may have to do with knowledge, influence and networking capacity. In this complexity of actors, where different logics of appropriateness apply to different actors and different situations, in terms of openness and transparency in decision making practise it seems that clear and transparent processes are a key point.

The issue of creating a region in the Stockholm county, is an issue formally is dealt with in many instances; the local authorities, the county council and the national parliament but also within the political parties at local, regional and national level. A surprising result was that to most of the interviewees it was not clear where the final decision on the issue in question was actually to be taken.

#### *Political situation*

Another set of answers relate to the political situation and whether the interviewee was from a political party being in majority or minority, and whether the political party was part of a coalition. In Sweden party politics the right and left wing scale is still very dominant. Party politics is important not only on the national level but also on the local and regional level, and to a large extent you find the same political parties represented in the national parliament as in the county and local parliament (Karlsson and Gilljam, 2014). The party organisations play an important role to coordinate common ground between the levels, and with a tradition of strong local government the influence of the local actors in forming party politics cannot be neglected. According to the

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<sup>2</sup> “Nätverk är geniala konstruktioner för att samordna autonoma aktörer med olika intressen, men de är problematiska i termer av rekrytering, beslutsfattande, styrningsförmåga och ansvarsutkrävande.”

<sup>3</sup> Further ref to Rhodes; Understanding governance (2007), Sörensen och Thorfing, Theories of democratic network governance (2007), Multi-level governance Bache and Flinders (2004)

legislation local authorities apply to local parliamentarianism, although steering by majorities has become very common although with variations in composition. With regard to openness and transparency, it was clearly so that representatives from a political party being part of the governing majority or a coalition, perceived they had access to more information and arenas than representatives from political parties being in minority. Clear and transparent processes were also in this context brought up as a key concern. By those in minority this was both considered being a problem, but also understood to be part of the rules of the game. *“In one way we argue governance to be open and transparent. We want an open political debate, and we want to know what is in the heads of the elected. On the other hand that kind of transparency might lead to a decreased efficiency in governance. If politicians and other leaders have to be open in all they do, that might prevent a solution in delicate issues.”*<sup>4</sup> (Pierre, 2009, p. 53)

#### *Public opinion and political debate*

A fourth set of answers can be grouped into what I call public opinion and political debate, where several of the interviewees brought up the issues of the role of media, social media, public opinion, citizens' rights and influence and debate climate. In this context we may talk of the Habermasian public sphere, transparency in material technology, discourse or relational (Flyverbom, 2015), and openness and disclosure of information practices (what is open and what is closed) in a logic of appropriateness. To be continued...

## **6. Concluding remarks**

The empirical study of openness and transparency in decision making practice on local and regional level in Sweden presented here, gives support to the Flyverbom (2015) idea of managing visibilities, that openness and transparency is an ideal that organizations have to deal with, and it treats about “... *managing visibilities in ways that contribute to organizational control and societal governance.*” (p. 180).

The limitations of the empirical material in this study, restricted to 10 interviews within a Swedish context, should be noted. However, using an institutional lens and the framework of Williamson (2000) of institutional levels and March and Olsen (1984,1989) concept of logic of appropriateness, I think we may have come a bit closer to understand how openness and transparency in decision making process operate in practice, although more empirical studies will be needed.

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Thank you for your comments! Please advise on suitable journals ( Journals of political science and/or regional planning? European Journal of Social Theory? Journal of Institutional Economics?)

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<sup>4</sup> “Å ena sidan kräver vi att governance ska vara öppna och transparent. Vi vill ha en öppen politisk debatt, och vi vill veta vad som rör sig i de folkvaldas huvuden. Å andra sidan kan en sådan transparens leda till att effektiviteten i governance försämrars. Om politiker och andra ledare måste vara öppna med allt de företar sig, kan det förhindra en lösning i känsliga frågor.”

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