THE AMBITIOUS, THE EVOLVING, AND THE LIMITED

A study of Swedish municipalities' risk communication efforts from the sensemaking perspective

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Abstract

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This study aims to make sense of Swedish municipalities' risk communication efforts. In recent years, influenced by the national risk information brochure *If crisis of war comes* (in Swedish: *Om krisen eller kriget kommer*) produced by MSB, a fraction of Swedish municipalities, regions, and other organizations have chosen to follow MSBs path and develop their own, local version of the national brochure. In this study, the increasing development of local brochures is used as a starting point, to further examine the reasoning and processes behind Swedish municipalities' risk communication efforts by posing the following questions: How do Swedish municipalities make sense of risk communication? Which factors could explain the varying processes of risk communication in Swedish municipalities? How can we understand these factors from the sensemaking perspective?

Based on previous research, potential factors are presumed to be the size of the municipality, as an indicator of resources, competencies within the municipality and individuals' impact, and the perception of risk, possibly influenced by previous crisis experience, the general perception of risk within the organization, and within the municipality at large (due to local operations, geographic position, and environmental challenges).

This is done by conducting in-depth interviews with Swedish municipality employees working strategically with risk communication. Through the theoretical perspective of sensemaking, the findings from the interviews portray the complex multi-level system and the different actors' responsibilities as a focus. An analysis is conducted, structured by the potential explanatory factors and it is then concluded that the potential factors identify initially, can explain the Swedish municipalities to some extent, whereas the size seems to be the focal aspect. However, as sensemaking suggests, much also depends on plausibility rather than accuracy. Finally, based on the finding from this study, I suggest that it is possible to identify three different kinds of municipalities in Sweden when it comes to risk communication, *the ambitious*, *the evolving*, and *the limited*.

"How can I know what I think until I know what I say?"

\- Karl E. Weick
(Sensemaking in organizations, 1995: 17).

Table of contents

Introduction

Back in 2018, Sweden made the political decision to once again, establish a total defense. Before that, the Swedish total defense had slowly been on route to being abolished, a development that began after the Cold War. One effort that resources were invested in was to strengthen Swedes' crisis preparedness (Brommesson & Bengtsson, 2019). This was done, among other things, by producing the national information campaign *If crisis or war comes* (in Swedish; *Om krisen eller kriget kommer*) developed by the *Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency* (in Swedish; *Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, MSB*) in the form of a paper brochure (MSB, 2018). Perhaps surprising during the rise of the digital age (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014), but not a new idea as the first version of this type of brochure was created in 1943, during WWII (Johansson & Vigsø, 2016).

In recent years, since the last version of the national campaign in 2018, a fraction of Swedish municipalities, regions, and other organizations have chosen to follow MSBs path and develop their own, local version of the crisis preparedness brochure (MSB, 2023a). Of those published, most of the local versions have been produced by Swedish municipalities. Swedish municipalities, which, by law, are responsible for crisis preparedness and crisis communication in each municipality (SKR, 2022). However, at first glance, no other prominent similarity joins these actors together, which sparks a question. Why do some come to the conclusion to develop their own local versions of a crisis preparedness brochure, and why not others? What is clear is that Swedish municipalities to a great extent operate by autonomy and function within different contexts with different structures (Regeringskansliet, 2020; Asplund & Hamrefors, 2008; Fredriksson, Färdigh & Törnberg, 2018) as Sweden consists of a complex governmental system and multi-level risk management system (Lin, 2018). Finding different solutions to the same challenge, namely informing citizens about risk, is therefore natural. But it is interesting to further investigate and possibly understand the background and reasoning in reaching different decisions within a decentralized system when making sense of uncertain surroundings.

Of course, choosing to invest time and resources in something in an organization, can entail that you forsake something else, or that it simply does not seem relevant for the organization to invest time and resources into the project. This applies to all decisions that are made in an organizational setting, which all have different reasons and processes behind them. Reasonable

assumptions on how a Swedish municipality structure and focus its risk communication can be the size of the municipality, which generally is possible to connect to access to resources (Lin, 2018), previous crisis experience, the general perception of risk within the organization, or within the municipality (due to local operations, geographical position, or environmental challenges) (Rothstein, Huber & Gaskell, 2006), or maybe even individual employee experience and background (Perkins & Arvinen-Muondo, 2013) i.e. access to various competencies. Moreover, individual employees' degree of impact could also depend on the size and structure of the organization. But, since all municipalities face different challenges and exist in various settings, could that then possibly be their greatest strength?

Decentralization does however put pressure on the coordination and networking between actors. Furthermore, it also puts pressure on municipalities to obtain the qualifications and competencies necessary to complete these tasks and balance the relationship at the national level. Taking a closer look at the reasoning and process behind decisions, or lack of decisions, can tell us much about the state of, and factors, of risk communication in Swedish municipalities.

Societal and academic relevance

From an organizational perspective, the process of making sense of, and identifying concrete aspects of an uncertain situation, such as a risk, to develop suitable actions, should be central (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005) as uncertainty is one of the fundamental challenges (Milliken, 1987; 133). However, it is equally important to be able to determine what information needs to be distributed, to what extent, and by which means (Weick, 1995). When communicating, specifically in connection to risks and crises, the aspect of timing (Coombs, 2015; Seeger & Sellnow, 2013; Lim, 2019) is of great importance for the organization's work to be perceived as credible, well-prepared, legitimate, and effective (Boholm, 2019c). In other words, risk and crisis communication is not only about acting rapidly, even though studies have shown that it is also a crucial aspect in an active crisis situation, but it is also crucial to communicate risks with the right focus and address relevant information at the right time (Seeger & Sellnow, 2013; Beldad, Van Laar & Hegner, 2018).

Following these ideas would be seen as *best practice* (Seeger & Sellnow, 2019), but reality is rarely as simple as that. Looking at Swedish municipalities, they all have different histories, competencies within the organization, demography as well as varying risk analyses, which in turn is seen to require different approaches, in order to *make sense* of the situation in each area. Gaining insight into the reasoning, and timing of decisions, could possibly explain why, and how they develop risk communication differently.

For a well-functioning public administration, both from a democracy and efficiency perspective, a clear distribution of responsibilities and a functioning collaboration vertically is a necessity (Brorström and Löfström, 2021). However, the local risk information brochures possibly indicate that there is some variance in different actors' perspectives of their, and others, responsibilities. Therefore, taking a closer look at risk management in the Swedish multi-level system, aiming to make sense of the processes behind reaching decisions regarding communication within Swedish municipalities is of interest.

To obtain well-functioning management, a fair level of resources is required (Brorström & Löfström, 2021). During this spring, the trade union ST (in Swedish: *Fackförbundet ST*) together with nine Swedish management researchers, questioned the development within the Swedish system as it has suffered from high demands of efficiency and resource allocation, drawing money from local levels of public administration budgets but simultaneously increasing the result requirements (Ahlbäck Öberg, Bornemark, Bringselius, Hall, Ivarsson Westerberg, Lejon, Packendorff, Pierre, Sundström & Svensson, 2023). Suggesting that the researchers conclude that lack of resources complicates the municipalities' ability to complete their task to serve citizens. In other words, examining an organization's risk communication efforts, in this case, Swedish municipalities, circles back to the image and function of the organization, since, in theory, one reflects the other.

Beyond that, previous research conducted by Månsson, Abrahamsson, Hassel, and Tehler (2015), Brorström and Löfström (2021), and Johansson (2022) shows us that both municipalities and government agencies sometimes struggle with the multi-level governance system, as they all have different tasks, but competence might be lacking in the local level. Possibly creating confusion, both internally, and externally together with the communication.

Aim and research questions

This study aims to examine, and possibly *make sense* of Swedish municipality's risk communication efforts from the perspective of *sensemaking*, a theoretical perspective that will be discussed further on. Swedish municipalities' task is to inform citizens of potential risks and crises to fulfill their task to provide citizens with vital information, in everyday life and in crisis (SKR, 2022). Therefore, the study has its starting point in the national campaign, *If crisis or war comes* (MSB, 2018), and some Swedish municipalities' recent efforts to develop local versions of the national risk information brochure. Previous research has been conducted on the development and impact of the national brochure (Brommesson & Bengtsson, 2019). However, with an upswing in the production of local versions (often produced on the municipal level) of risk information brochures being relatively new and unobserved, it is relevant to examine the reasoning behind producing a local brochure, or not producing a local brochure and the municipalities relationship to the national information brochure as it possibly could say something about the general perception of risk communication in the organization.

Only a fraction of municipalities in Sweden have produced their own local version of the national brochure, but it seems to be increasing in recent years. This setting enables the possibility to both explore the reasoning and decisions to produce a local brochure, or lack of reasoning and, or, decisions, not to produce a local brochure, and all this in connection to the municipalities' general reasoning regarding other risk communication efforts and organizations limitation from a *sensemaking* perspective. As Milliken (1987) stated, "focusing attention on determinants of effect uncertainty or its converse, effect certainty, could further our knowledge of organizational differences in strategic effectiveness" (Milliken, 1987: 141). As mentioned, reasonable assumptions that affect Swedish municipalities' risk communication efforts can be the size of the municipality, which serves as an indicator for access to resources (Lin, 2018), the general risk perception, possibly influenced by previous crisis experience, the perception of risk within the municipality and the organization (Rothstein, Huber & Gaskell, 2006), or individual employees experience and background (Perkins & Arvinen-Muondo, 2013) which will be used as a foundation when examining previous research within the field.

The development, or lack of development, of local risk information brochures, will be used as a tool to examine the current state of risk communication in Sweden. Hopefully offering a

further understanding of how the sphere of public administration in Sweden reasons when developing and maintaining their risk communication towards citizens, by using the risk information brochures as a tool, and possibly identifying the factors that can affect the process. Of course, other aspects than the local brochures could be used as a starting point as many aspects differentiate Swedish municipalities. However, here, the local brochure has been chosen and explored as a possible trigger for how risk communication processes are structured and looked upon. The aim is that this is achieved by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Swedish municipalities make sense of risk communication?

RQ2: Which factors could explain the varying processes of risk communication in Swedish municipalities?

RQ3: How can we understand these factors from the sensemaking perspective?

Disposition

The following study will be structured into eight main parts, starting here in **the first part**, with a general overview of the topic of risk communication, the Swedish context, as well as the research aim. **The second part** is devoted to background, presenting the key concepts of risk communication, as well as the Swedish administration model which is a fundamental aspect of this study as it describes the relationship between the different actors in the system. The aim is to offer a foundation on both citizens' relationship with the public authorities in Sweden, as well as a overview of the risk information brochures that have been produced so far. Then, **the third part** will consist of an overview of previous research within the field of risk, communication, and their role in organizations. This is then **followed by the fourth part** consisting of an overview of the *sensemaking perspective* which will be used as a lens to analyze the findings from the interviews later on. This is then **followed by the fifth part,** this study's method and methodology when gathering the empirical material which consists of in-depth interviews with municipality employees. During the next and **sixth part,** findings, the material from the interviews conducted within the scope of this study will be presented structured by the steps of sensemaking, **followed by the seventh part**, the analysis, which takes its starting point in the empirical findings from the interviews, connected to the previous research and the *sensemaking perspective* structured by the potential explanatory factors. **Finally, the eighth and last part** will be devoted to summarizing and concluding the findings as well as identifying knowledge gaps and suggestions for future research.

Risk communication and the Swedish context

The following section will offer a background on the topic of risk communication and the Swedish context in order to create a starting point to later answer the research questions regarding Swedish municipalities' reasoning in connection to risk communication efforts. To place this study in its proper context, it is important to define what risk communication is, how Swedish municipalities and the Swedish government operate, as well as introduce the published (and identified) risk communication information brochures, in Sweden, both on a national and local level, as well as international examples.

What is risk communication?

First and foremost, we first need to touch upon the discussion on how the term *risk* should be defined, which differs depending on whom you ask and in which context (Boholm, 2019a; Heath & O'Hair, 2009; Rothstein, Huber & Gaskell, 2006; Power, 2007). Scholars such as Power (2007) conclude that having difficulties defining exactly what risk is might not be the focus, nor a necessary discussion, as empirically; "risk in its raw form has acquired social, political and organizational significance as never before, and this needs explanation even if, as seems likely, risk itself is an essentially contested concept" (Power, 2007: 3).

The concept of risk can be applied to all levels of your everyday life, something that has become central in our society in recent years. Many choices you make on an everyday basis are many times described as a type of risk calculation, both in professional and private settings. This is applied to the extent that some state that we live in a *risk society*, where we apply risk management to everything, not only organizations and businesses as done previously (Rothstein, Huber & Gaskell, 2006). However, here, we will further explore the definition within the sphere of organizations rather than from the individual perspective since that is of relevance to this study where the aim is to get an insight into the organizations' strategies and reasoning regarding risks and communication. Definitions such as "threats to outcomes that we value" (Fischhoff & Kadvany, 2011: 22), and "the probability of occurrence and intensity or magnitude of harm" (Heath & O'Hair, 2009: 10) are reoccurring ones to explain risk as a term and concept. Furthermore, risks can also be divided into societal and institutional risks. Whereas a societal risk can be defined as a threat to society, both its member and the environment, and an institutional risk is a threat of organizational nature (Rothstein, Huber & Gaskell, 2006).

Discussing risk communication in this setting, the risk in question refers to societal risks, with society and its members as a target group i.e., the citizens.

If a risk is poorly managed, it can turn into a crisis (Heath & O'Hair, 2009). Therefore, the research field of risk communication is often intertwined with crisis communication. However, a clear distinction is that risk communication focuses on possible future crises, often with a focus on the general public (Petridou, Danielsson, Olofsson, Lundgren & Große, 2019). A crisis is often defined as a complex event creating disorder, disruption, and harm (Seeger & Sellnow, 2013), as well as unexpected, non-routine events that create uncertainty and threat (Olsson, 2014; Ulmer, 2012). A crisis is often an unexpected event, even though risk and crisis management are present. However, having an institutionalized structure for the organization to operate around during unexpected events can be crucial for the development and resolution of the situation (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

Initially, the field of risk communication arose from the idea that risks needed to be defined and could benefit from being compared (Heath & O'Hair, 2009). Now, it is more commonly defined as "the information provided by different levels of government to citizens regarding possible future crises to which the general public might be subjected" (Petridou et al., 2019: 207). In other words, if we want to differentiate crisis from risk, the latter is the *potential* threats and *possible* crises. Whereas a crisis is an *ongoing* event and most likely a risk that has been poorly managed or underestimated, and therefore developed into an ongoing crisis.

Generally, risk communication suffers from a great communicative challenge, as it entails affecting and influencing citizens based on future, possible situations that may never occur (Johansson, Sandstig, Vigsø, 2017). Even though we have established that communication is the key in many situations, minimizing the potential threat, and or damage to citizens, it is often something that we, as individuals perceive, is created in social groups, so the context and timing are crucial for interest to arise (Eriksson, 2021). Thus, timing is key for information to break through, and for information to be perceived as relevant, otherwise it risks being overlooked.

The function of risk and crisis communication within public administration can be divided into two parts, the citizens' perspective, and the organizational perspective. The citizens' perspective

revolves around one question - What do the citizens need to know? – with a focus on *survival*, gaining information to practically handle the situation, *democratic rights*, to be able to evaluate the crisis management and demand responsibility, and *recovery*, how to process the situation afterward, and what support systems are available (Johansson, 2022). While on the other hand, the organization's perspective circles around trust and reputation. Risk communication is not only about disseminating information. It is also reputation management, by appearing credible and trustworthy (Johansson, 2022). These two parts are aspects that we will get back to later during the results of the study.

The Swedish administration model

To acknowledge the whole picture when later discussing Swedish municipalities' risk communication in practice, it is important to look closer at the Swedish public administration system and how it functions. Sweden is a representative democracy that is governed on four levels, EU, national, regional, and local - which are presented below. All of them have representatives that are decided by the people in free, secret, and direct elections (Regeringskansliet, 2020). The four levels all have different areas of responsibility, and the principle of subsidiarity which is laid down in *the Treaty of the European Union* (European Parliament, 2022; Sveriges Riksdag, 2013), as well as the principles of Swedish crisis management (Krisinformation, 2022), is to ensure that political decisions are taken on an appropriate level, as close to the citizens as possible (European Parliament, 2022; Sveriges Riksdag, 2013; Krisinformation, 2022).

The EU level

Since Sweden is a member of the European Union (since 1995) some legislative power has been handed over to the EU. In the EU, it is the government that makes Sweden's case, but the Swedish parliament also has an opportunity to influence the outcome. Before discussions on the EU level, the government must have a dialog with the parliament about Sweden's position and come to a joint agreement (Regeringskansliet, 2020).

The national level

Sweden's parliament *Riksdagen* has the power to pass legislation. The government is appointed by the parliament and has the executive power and initiates new laws. This is done with the

support of the Government Offices and government agencies which can differ depending on the current government in power (Regeringskansliet, 2020). Important to note here is also *the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions* (in Swedish: *Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner*, SKR), a membership organization that represents and advocates for Sweden's local and regional authorities. Its mission is to promote and support local self-government, and to work towards the provision of high-quality services for citizens across the country, playing an important role in representing Sweden's local and regional interests at the European level (SKR, 2023a).

The regional level

Sweden is divided into 21 regions, which all are responsible for tasks such as healthcare, public transport, and regional development within a certain geographical area (SKR, 2022). All regions also have a county and a county administrative board that consists of elected officials. Many political decisions are made on the national level; however, Swedish counties also rule by autonomy to a great extent (Regeringskansliet, 2020). In short, the counties can be described as the extended arm of the national government but on the regional level.

The local level

Sweden also consists of 290 municipalities. All of them have several mandatory missions, such as education, waste management, rescue service, water and sewer access, and crisis preparedness and civil defense (including risk and crisis communication), only to name a few (SKR, 2022). As with the regional level, Swedish municipalities rule by autonomy to a great extent. Moreover, the aim and area of responsibility of a Swedish municipality are in many cases comparable across the country. However, depending on the municipality, the area of operation can differ, whereas in some cases, the regional and local levels are intertwined as one organization (Regeringskansliet, 2020). Beyond that, since municipalities, as well as counties, operate by autonomy to a great extent, the organizational structure, and the methods to uphold their purpose and reach their aim often vary largely between each municipality.

Risk communication in Sweden

Many aspects have affected risk communication in Sweden during the last few years. The security situation in the world has been ruptured to a great extent, due to events such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Politico, 2021), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Politico, 2022) which in turn have led to increasing amounts of cyber-attacks (European Parliament, 2022), and increasing natural disasters, as well as extreme weather conditions due to climate change (Olsson, 2014) which are all affecting the sphere of risk and crisis management and communication around the globe. Sweden has in many of the situations mentioned above been a central actor, with a controversial Covid-19 strategy (Murray, 2020) and a shifting attitude toward NATO membership (Alberque & Schreer, 2022). Quite unusual, as Sweden previously has tended to keep a low profile in international settings with the aim to stay neutral (Möller & Bjereld, 2010).

Moreover, due to the rise of the digital age, an increasing amount of both external and internal communication among Swedish municipalities is done through digital platforms and methods such as websites, social media platforms, email, chats, and other internal IT systems (Eriksson, 2021). Nevertheless, research conducted in 2019 shows that information about crisis preparedness on Swedish municipalities' websites, at that time, was inadequate (Landenmark, 2019). For example, it tended to be of a generic character rather than specific for the local area in question, and it was not unusual that basic information that can be deemed necessary was missing (Landenmark, 2019). However, since 2015 when another similar study was conducted, based on the results, improvements had occurred in 2019. But, important to note is that it still seems to differ greatly depending on the municipality (Landenmark, 2019). Not only is it possible to draw the conclusion that external communication is somewhat insufficient, but the lack of standardization within the Swedish system greatly affects risk assessment management as well, creating diversity across the country. Prominent is also the concern that sharing too much information regarding the risk assessment could lead to unwanted knowledge about the flaws of the system among inappropriate actors which could be used to their benefit (Lin, 2018). An issue that possibly has increased in the last few years in connection to the world situation.

The principles of Swedish crisis management

In times of crisis, after the risk developed into an ongoing crisis, it is perceived as important that crisis management is operated by those who are familiar with the affected part of the organization in a normal setting, beyond the crisis. Therefore, Sweden's crisis management is centered around three principles. First, **the principle of responsibility**, which entails that whoever is responsible for an operation under normal, everyday, conditions, must also be responsible during a crisis. This means that it is the regular functions of society that take care of each situation. For example, a health-related crisis should be taken care of by the health system, and so on. Second, **the equality principle**, meaning that as far as possible, the organizations must function in a similar way during a crisis as during normal conditions. Third, **the proximity principle**, states that a crisis must be handled where it occurs and by those who are most closely affected and responsible. Only if the local resources are not sufficient does it become relevant for others to assist and intervene (Krisinformation, 2022).

The Swedish Civil Contingency Agency

One of Sweden's current (founded in 2009) governmental agencies is the *Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency* (in Swedish; *Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, MSB*). On behalf of the Swedish government, the government agencies mission is to execute what has been politically decided within their area of operation (Regeringskansliet, 2020; MSB, 2023b). Moreover, each authority must also provide information, guidance, advice, and other such assistance to individuals in matters relating to the authority's area of operation (Förvaltningslagen, 1986: 223).

MSB is responsible for preventing and managing accidents, crises, and the consequences of war. In practice, that entails developing and supporting Sweden's work with civil defense as well as the Swedish society's preparedness for accidents and crises. Another key element is coordination between relevant actors, such as social actors to prevent and manage accidents, crises, and consequences of war and the threat of war. Moreover, their area of operation includes coordinating the Swedish municipalities and supporting them with advice and information in their activities within the scope of civil defense and crisis preparedness. Overall, MSB is responsible for these measures before, during, and after an accident, crisis, war, or threat of war (Förordning med instruktion för Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, 2008: 1002).

All four levels in the Swedish administration model that are mentioned above are by law (Förordning om krisberedskap och höjd beredskap, 2006: 942) obligated to conduct a *risk and vulnerability assessment (RVA)* (in Swedish*: Risk- och sårbarhetsanalys*) to ensure that the function in question is prepared and aware of risks. This is done with the guidance of MSB as a part of the task to contribute to strengthening society's crisis preparedness (MSB, 2011).

One concrete event to fulfill this mission is the annual (since 2017) *Preparedness Week* (in Swedish; Beredskapsveckan), previously Crisis Preparedness Week (in Swedish: Krisberedskapsveckan), with the aim to further knowledge and enhance the possibility for Swedes to be well prepared for possible future crises. The week calls on other governmental agencies, municipalities, and organizations to raise the topic of crisis preparedness through information and a yearly theme to focus on in order to break down the information with the aim to make it accessible. Moreover, in-person events for employees and citizens are organized in connection to the week, arranged by different civil, public, and business actors to educate and spread awareness regarding preparedness in connection to different crisis situations (MSB, 2023c).

In some contexts, it has become clear that MSB must balance the need to optimize other public authorities without using coercive means as the law supports the autonomy and decentralization of regional and local levels. Both government agency employees and municipal employees testify that the balance between the levels sometimes is difficult to obtain. As MSB is the national level's foremost representative regarding risk and crisis, they are occasionally in contact with regional and local level actors that demand more support than traditionally provided, that technically is approved by law due to a lack of competence within the organization (Månsson, Abrahamsson, Hassel, & Tehler, 2015; Brorström & Löfström, 2021; Johansson, 2022).

The structure of risk and crisis management in Swedish municipalities

Swedish municipalities are required by law to enforce and develop crisis preparedness and civil defense (including risk and crisis communication) in the local operational area (SKR, 2022). A unique aspect of public organizations, such as Swedish municipalities, is that they often have dual missions during a crisis. As an authority, they are both tasked with mitigating the crisis for people's health and protecting material values through crisis management and communication,

but at the same time, their actions may affect their reputation because things possibly have been called into question (Johansson, 2022).

Since Swedish municipalities have a mandate to structure their own organizations, it naturally varies across the country. Research regarding the different choices and communication principles framing the municipalities' communication processes as a whole is few (Fredriksson, Färdigh & Törnberg, 2018). Generally, all Swedish municipalities are structured around the political decision made on the local level, based on the political decisions, departments, and employees work and develop the municipality on an everyday basis (SKR, 2022).

Based on the municipalities' own documents and finding from Fredriksson, Färdigh, and Törnberg (2018), Swedish municipalities generally structure their work around seven principles, some of which are more present than others depending on the municipality. (1) Organize and create structures for communication work. (2) Position the organization in relation to other municipalities. (3) Create and maintain routines to be able to alert, inform and communicate in connection with crises and extraordinary events. (4) Standardize the business to ensure that the municipality presents itself consistently and coherently. (5) Interact with other actors to capture opinions about the operation at an early stage. (6) Use websites and other digital services to serve citizens and other stakeholders. (7) Interact with journalists and other media representatives to convey information to actors in the outside world (Fredriksson, Färdigh & Törnberg, 2018: 5).

To achieve this, central communications departments are common, and in larger municipalities, some, or each department have its own communicator on site as a complement to the central department. While smaller municipalities have the central communications department alone. Another obvious consequence of being a smaller municipality is that various types of municipal cooperation have been developed and formalized. Municipalities sign cooperation agreements in various areas of activity and share employment with each other. Commonly, there are collaboration agreements within the rescue service, within environmental and health protection, and within administrative functions (Brorström & Löfström, 2021).

Furthermore, many municipalities have a security department or function, or similar, and or a security coordinator/s that is responsible for the development of the RVA. Both the names of the departments, and the titles of the positions themselves vary and can occur as *security coordinator* (in Swedish: *Säkerhetssamordnare*), *preparedness coordinator* (in Swedish: *Beredskapssamordnare*), *crisis preparedness coordinator* (in Swedish: *Krisberedskapssamordnare*), and *preparedness and security coordinator* (in Swedish: *Beredskaps- och säkerhetssamordnare*) (Boholm, Boholm & Prutzer, 2016). Further on in this text, all these possible terms will be referred to as *security department*, or *function*, and *security coordinators* even though in reality, the terms differ depending on the municipality.

Swedish risk communication examples

In Sweden, risk communication from different levels of public administration often occurs thematically in the form of campaigns, either connecting to current risks, local, national, or international, or as mentioned initially, correlating with political decisions made in parliament (Johansson, Sandstig, Vigsø, 2017) which is in turn based on the identification of needs on the national level. For example, due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, intensifying risk management was required as it enlightened a worldwide risk directly affecting citizens, society, and its systems (Bengtsson & Brommesson, 2021) preparing for future, similar crises.

Furthermore, another example initiated based on political aims and guidance to invest resources on a national level is the campaign *Active against fire* (in Swedish: *Aktiv mot brand*). Whereas the political aim was to decrease the number of fatal outcomes in connection to fires as it was identified to be strongly associated with citizens' actions (Johansson, Sandstig, Vigsø, 2017). The results of these types of campaigns have once again proven to vary depending on the level of trust among the receivers, as citizens with low trust in authorities tend to address and comply with the information to a lesser extent (Johansson, Sandstig, Vigsø, 2017). In other words, Swedish risk communication campaigns both tend to be targeted toward the general public, as well as specific groups or organizations in society identified to be especially affected by the risk.

Risk information brochures

Risk communication can be produced in different forms. One example is information campaigns regarding a well-identified risk, as presented above through a few Swedish examples. Beyond that, other larger-scale, national crisis preparedness information campaigns such as the previously mentioned *If war or crisis comes* (in Swedish: *Om krisen eller kriget kommer*). As these brochures are used as a starting point; an overview of national Swedish brochures, local Swedish brochures, and other international examples will follow.

National brochures

The first version of a Swedish national information brochure about crisis preparedness was produced and sent out by the former government agency *the Swedish National Board of Information* (in Swedish: *Statens Informationsstyrelse*) in 1943 and was at that time called *If war comes* (in Swedish: *Om kriget kommer*). Since then, updated versions with the same title, or similar, have been created by various government agencies (Johansson & Vigsø, 2016). Then, in 2018, 4,8 million households in Sweden received the latest copy of the national crisis preparedness information campaign, now called *If crisis or war comes* (in Swedish; *Om krisen eller kriget kommer*) in the mail. After that, the brochure can now be found and downloaded for free on the Swedish Civil Contingency Agency's' website *msb.se* in 14 different languages (MSB, 2018).

Placing this in its context, during the rise of the digital age, whereas having an account on various social media became the norm and, for many citizens, an endless amount of information is at hand at any time (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014), it can both been seen as both a reason to and a reason not to develop a psychical paper brochure. Since many citizens retrieve information digitally it can be seen as a contemporary adapted way of distributing information with a high possibility to reach a larger amount of the population. However, this exact reason is also why producing a brochure on paper and sending it out to each household refers back to tradition och authority, and to true and trustworthy information (Brommesson & Bengtsson, 2019). Moreover, when in a crisis, it is not granted that all digital services are available. And, after evaluation, this strategy seems to have had a positive impact, and the brochure has been deemed a success in raising crisis awareness among Swedish residents (Brommesson & Bengtsson, 2019; Riksdagstryckeriet, 2015).

International brochures

Not only Sweden has chosen to produce this type of information campaign, but other examples are also other European countries. For example, **Germany** (Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance, 2022), **Latvia** (Ministry of Defense of Latvia, 2022), **Lithuania** (Ministry of National Defence of Lithuania, 2015), **Switzerland** (Federal Office for National Economic Supply of Switzerland, 2020) and possibly several more yet to be identified.

The similarities, both between the international examples, and the Swedish brochure are prominent. But differences can be found, much based on differences in administration and political system, culture, and history. However, both Germany and Sweden, despite their difference in the state's role in society, highlight the citizens' own responsibility to take control of their own crisis management, both in the brochure and in risk communication overall (Petridou et al., 2019). Moreover, as with Swedish municipalities, the countries all face different challenges due to administrative and geographic differences, which is evident in the variance between countries (as well as Swedish municipalities). Furthermore, another international comparison is the structure of online risk communication through government websites. For example, both France (Tourenq, Boustras & Gutteling, 2017) and Sweden (Krisinformation, 2022) have separate websites for risk and crisis information whereas the norm generally is an integrated site as part of other ministries (Tourenq, Boustras & Gutteling, 2017).

Local brochures

Within Sweden, others have chosen to produce their own local variants. As of now, 18 local brochures have been identified by MSB and 15 of those are currently presented on their official website (MSB, 2023a). The brochures are mainly produced by Swedish municipalities, cooperation between municipalities, or local rescue services. The ones currently published on the website are **Alvesta** municipality (Alvesta kommun, n.d.), **Borlänge** municipality (Borlänge kommun, 2022), **Borås** municipality (Borås kommun, 2020), **Botkyrka** municipality (Botkyrka kommun, 2022), **Enköping** municipality (Enköpings kommun, 2022), Municipality of **Flen** (Flens kommun, 2022), **Grums** municipality (Grums kommun, 2021), Municipality of **Gotland** (Region Gotland, 2015), **Lidingö** municipality (Lidingö stad, 2017), **Linköping** municipality (Linköpings kommun, 2020), **Norrköping** municipality (Norrköpings kommun, 2022), **Vellinge** municipality (Vellinge kommun, n.d.), **Västerås** municipality

(Västerås kommun, 2022), **Ystad** municipality (Ystads kommun, 2016) and, one brochure produced in cooperation between **Härnosand** municipality, **Kramfors** municipality, **Sollefteå** municipality and **Höga kusten Ådalen** rescue service (in Swedish: *Räddningstjänsten Höga kusten Ådalen*) (Kramfors kommun, 2009).

Beyond that, **Göteborg** municipality (Göteborgs stad, 2016), **Ljusdal** municipality (Ljusdals kommun, n.d.), and **Västra Blekinge** rescue service (in Swedish: *Räddningstjänsten Västra Blekinge*) in cooperation with **Karlshamn** municipality, **Sölvesborg** municipality and **Olofström** municipality (Olofströms kommun, 2009) have also produced brochures that are not published on the MSBs website (as of now).

Figure 1. Map of the Swedish municipalities that have developed a local risk information brochure.
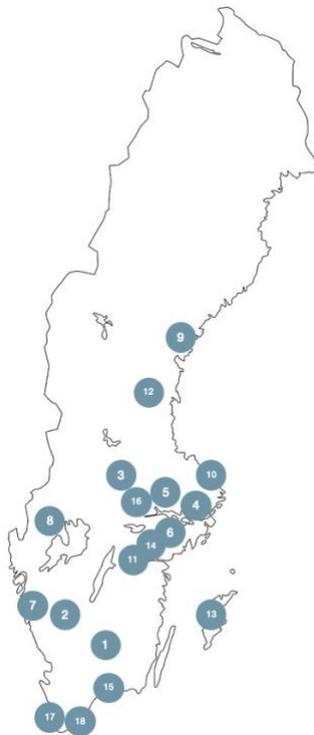
Note: Graphic map outlining which Swedish municipalities that have been identified to have developed a local risk information brochure. Numbered as follows. (1) Alvesta municipality, (2) Borås municipality, (3) Borlänge municipality, (4) Botkyrka municipality, (5) Enköping municipality, (6) Flen municipality, (7) Göteborg municipality, (8) Grums municipality, (9) Höga kusten Ådalen rescue service (and Härnosand municipality, Kramfors municipality and Sollefteå municipality), (10) Lidingö municipality, (11) Linköping municipality, (12) Ljusdal municipality, (13) Gotland municipality, (14) Norrköping municipality, (15) Västra Blekinge rescue service (and Karlshamn municipality, Sölvesborg municipality and Olofström municipality, (16) Västerås municipality, (17) Vellinge municipality, (18) Ystad municipality.

However, important to note here is that further brochures can exist. As mentioned, the summary above is based on MSBs own presentation of identified local brochures (MSB, 2023a), contact

with MSB employees, as well as searches in previous academic literature and online in general. But new brochures can seem to be developed currently, and older ones might not appear to the same extent as new and updated information is published.

Moreover, the definition of *what* a risk communication brochure *is* can be further discussed. The majority of these listed here are noticeably similar in both design and content, both to each other, and the national brochure that was sent out by MSB, as well as the other international examples. Generally, the brochures consist of a front page, important contact information such as telephone numbers, checklists for food and supplies to keep at home, locations of shelters, and meeting points/information points (in Swedish: trygghetspunkter/informationspunkter) presented in varying detail and order. The meeting points are in general the major aspect that differentiates the national brochure and the local brochures. Recurring titles of the local brochures are for example *Are you prepared?*, *How long can you last?*, *If crisis comes*, *For your safety,* and *Together when crisis comes* in different combinations (MSB, 2023a).

Figure 2. Examples of Swedish local risk information brochures (front page), MSB (2023).

Note: Random selection of eight local risk information brochures of those that have been identified.

Risk, organizations, and risk communication

The following section will touch upon the topics of risk, organization, and citizens, and their relation to communication, and to each other. This is done by examining previous research regarding communication and its role in organizations in connection to risks.

The presence of risk

Risk management as an organizational activity naturally involves sensemaking, learning from previous experiences to establish work practices that answer to organizational constructions of collectively agreed-upon frames of interpretation and modes of action (Boholm, 2019b). Therefore, previous experience with crises can be seen as crucial when a municipality is developing its risk communication. However, framing events as emergencies or potential emergencies has, in general, become more prominent within today's narrative. It can be seen as a way of conceptualizing problematic events (Petridou et al., 2019). In other words, it can sometimes be perceived as emergencies increase in numbers, however, the developing narrative can also influence what is chosen to be framed as a risk or crisis. Nevertheless, when an organization is perceiving the environment as unpredictable the process and strategic planning are most likely affected in either one of two ways. First, intensifying the undertaking of analyzing the surroundings, and increasing the resources, unlike an organization that perceives its environment as stable (Milliken, 1987). Second, it is possible that the decision-making process is affected. Possible towards a *garbage can approach*, in which the decision-making process is muddled and non-linear (Milliken, 1987).

The importance of communication

The public sector is in many ways in charge of preparing, communicating, and managing crises in society (Olsson, 2014) which in turn includes risk communication. In general, the main differences between the private sector and the public sector can be described by their environmental characteristics, transactions between the organization and environment, and the structures and processes of organizations (Kuipers et al., 2014).

Previous research shows us that communication, especially in connection to a pressed situation such as a crisis, strongly links to citizens' trust in the state as well as citizens' compliance with

recommendations and limitations from authorities (Brommesson & Bengtsson, 2019; Heath & O'Hair, 2009). Moreover, public authorities affect ''who gets what, when, and how'' in decision-making processes, making them key actors in the communication process (Bach, Niklasson, & Painter, 2012). Communicating in a pressed setting, such as a crisis situation, or in connection to a situation that could evolve into a crisis, i.e., risk communication, can be seen as *maintaining* the organization (Fredriksson, 2014), which in turn makes it crucial to include. Even though this is the case, and a communicator often has something to do with all information that is published by a Swedish municipality, many communicators perceive it as that their work is separate from the other processes in the organization (Deverell, 2021).

According to previous studies, how a Swedish municipality structure its work with external communication, specifically risk communication seems to vary majorly across the country (Boholm, Boholm & Prutzer, 2016). But, depending on how you frame it, inconsistency between, and within an organization's actions can be seen as both a pro and a con. As, by nature, not all organizations require to communicate and function in exactly the same way, having the feasibility to adapt to the current situation (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2017) and the geographical area is crucial. Moreover, as power is decentralized, networking between actors is key in solving larger communicative efforts in order to gain correct and comprehensive information to base the communication on, as risks and crises frequently affect citizens, areas, and systems across human-made borders. For example, during the recent pandemic, it was possible to distinguish a great variety of solutions both internationally between countries and nationally within Sweden (Pierre, 2020).

Since effective risk management can minimize, or completely terminate the damage of a crisis, investing time and resources into identifying, and communicating, the risks can repay itself to the organization (Regester & Larkin, 2008) both regarding the operation and functions of the organization itself, but also in connection to trust. Hence, what resources are invested into communication and therefore risk management can also greatly affect the organization's effectiveness and overall function. Previously in this text, the concept of risk was discussed and explained from different perspectives as it differs depending on the scholar (Boholm, 2019a; Heath & O'Hair, 2009; Rothstein, Huber & Gaskell, 2006; Power, 2007). However, Power (2007) also raises the discussion that the nature of the social and economic institutions which

shape and frame our knowledge of, and management strategies for, risk, including the definition of specific *risk objects* are possibly more important to investigate (Power, 2007). Furthermore, as society and today's media landscape are changing, risk communication, in turn, needs to develop in order to make an impact, looking closer at the decision process rather than anything else (Arvai, 2014).

The position of organizations

Strategies and later communication efforts depart from pre-existing social norms and behaviors, which tend to vary depending on the country as well as smaller geographical areas within countries (Pierre, 2020) such as municipalities. Furthermore, for an organization to be perceived as a credible source of information, value similarity or shared values are crucial (Siegrist & Zingg, 2013), in other words, being able to identify with each other. The aspect of identification fosters a bond between the sender of the information, and the receiver, both by increasing the chance of understanding the message and by the increasing chance that the message will make an impact and be registered by the reader (Campbell & Im, 2015). Moreover, if a proficient communicates advice directly to a citizen, the chance of the citizen complying with the guidance is larger than only with an organizational or institutional recommendation (Siegrist & Zingg, 2013). Possibly since the connection and identification are greater, and therefore more enticed to base decisions on. Successful risk and crisis communication, and therefore successful meaning-making, reflects legitimacy and capacity back towards the organization and indicates well-functioning management (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020) and can in turn lead to a higher level of public trust. Both organizations and communication are abstract constructs, but equally important, and with a strong relation to each other (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009).

Citizens and trust

Previous research suggests that an organization with a great reputation, high levels of identification, and compliance will not need to act in the same emergency in times of crisis (Coombs, 2015; Olsson, 2014, Seeger & Sellnow, 2013; Holmström, 2009). Hence, if the organizations have high trust, maintaining this understanding of the organization is of great importance. But how is this perceived the other way around? If we instead look from the organizations' perspective, the citizens are far more complex to evaluate in terms of crisis preparedness and response.

First, it is important to note that, sharing or not sharing information can be based on several reasons whereas belief in citizens is one of them. Sharing too much information in an uncertain time has fact in some cases been confirmed to be counterproductive. Confusing citizens rather than informing and calming. Secondly, another important aspect is to examine the possible security threats toward the actor if the information ends up in the wrong hands (Boholm, 2019c). Risk communication and crisis communication often aim to alter social behavior and therefore must depart from the pre-existing patterns of behavior in order to reach compliance. In order words, it is key to understand the target group. Both in terms of the information itself, and when developing any sanctions possibly necessary for those who ignore the guidelines. In Sweden, Pierre (2020) states that quite subtle means tend to suffice, and the government can rely on using quite subtle means, but other settings sometimes require stronger measures. For example, this idea became clear during the recent pandemic, when Sweden adopted a liberal strategy to contain the spread of the virus, in comparison to its European neighbors (Murray, 2020; Bengtsson & Brommesson, 2021).

When discussing risk, and crisis communication, citizens' perception of themselves are also an important aspect in relation to understanding the information that is communicated to them, as well as complying with any recommendations to follow, or adaptations to apply to everyday life. Generally, it is possible to connect citizens' perception of their own abilities in emergencies with socioeconomic factors, age, and country of origin compared to the country of residency. Whereas living in the same country as you were born in can increase the belief in managing crises, living elsewhere tends to generate the opposite perception. The younger, the higher the confidence in one's own abilities, decreasing the older you become (Sandstig & Ivanoff, 2020). Once again showing that knowing your target group is crucial when developing risk and crisis communication. A study conducted by Olofsson (2007) concluded that Swedish municipalities did not seem to adapt their communication towards target groups to a great extent (Olofsson, 2007).

Connecting the factors

After examining previous research regarding risk, organization, and citizens, and their relation to communication, and to each other, we can draw the conclusion that risk communication

efforts and communication efforts in municipalities' everyday operations should correlate to a great extent. As organizations in general, and especially Swedish municipalities are structured to function in a similar manner, no matter the situation or the aim of the communication, previous findings regarding communication should be applicable to risk communication as well. Moreover, risk communication as a concept is key to conducting and operating well-functioning public organizations as it is an important part of the crisis management system and to uphold the public organizations' purpose of being democratic, effective, and transparent. However, the factor of the receiver could also possibly affect the origin and initiation process of risk communication as it determines the level and content of the information to be communicated. Here, the importance of timing is also key, as risk communication at the wrong time, or framed in the wrong way could have the opposite effect.

Making sense of sensemaking

In the following section, the sensemaking perspective will be presented. As sensemaking will be used later in the process to analyze the findings from the interviews, an overview of the concept and its position in organizational theory will be presented.

The concept of sensemaking

Sensemaking can be described as "a developing set of ideas with explanatory possibilities, rather than a body of knowledge" (Weick, 1995: xi). The concept itself reflects the name since it literally means "the making of sense". Therefore, when encountering something unexpected, or at that time deemed *impossible*, sensemaking as a concept is challenged to its greatest extent (Weick, 1995). The concept of sensemaking in organizational studies was introduced by Weick (1995) and later became an important part of research (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Since a risk rarely portrays itself as expected, and a crisis is, by definition, something that is unexpected and creates disruption, applying the perspective of sensemaking to the reasoning of Swedish municipalities' work with risk communication will offer a structure to understand the processes.

Furthermore, important to acknowledge is that interpretation and sensemaking are not the same. While it can appear so on the surface, implying that the two are the same simplifies what makes sensemaking important. In short, sensemaking is both about the process of composing a message, how it is structured, as well as the process when consuming the information. Interpretation on the other hand can be described as a form of translation, or explanation that requires imagination and, or knowledge (Weick, 1995), mostly referring to the reader and their abilities. Often, sensemaking is related to action, but sensemaking can also result in no action at all as the conclusion could be that no action is the most effective in the context (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking can be more, or less present in an organization depending on the level of uncertainty. Generally, sensemaking is initiated when 'shocks interrupt an ongoing flow' (Wright & Manning, 2004), which in the context of this study is when a risk is identified.

It is possible to state that "an organization that expects change may find itself puzzled when something does not" (Weick, 1995: 5). Whereas sensemaking then is "the reciprocal interaction of information seeking" (Weick, 1995: 5).

As of now, the concept of sensemaking is still quite undefined. Therefore, with a starting point in Weick (1995) further research has aimed to concretize the assumptions made at the early age of sensemaking as a concept, making it more applicable to reality as it also needs to consider the power levels and the general context that the organization in question relate to. For example, Mills, Thurlow, and Mills (2010) raise the discussion of differentiating between the different actors, as (almost) no organization only has individuals that hold the same power. In the context of Swedish municipalities, as mentioned, the organizations themselves also have varying areas of operation (Lin, 2018) which strongly affects overall communication efforts. However, since Swedish municipalities, within their functions, rule by autonomy to a great extent (Regeringskansliet, 2020), and the crisis management principle of proximity (Krisinformation, 2022), the internal structure should affect the communication processes the most. Naturally, as in most organizations, the organizational structure within a Swedish municipality consists of different levels of authority, between departments, and within departments.

Throughout its development, the sensemaking perspective has been referred to in many different terms within research. For example, framework, theory, and lens, among others (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). For the sake of simplicity and clarity, this study will further refer to the process in the same manner as Weick (1995), by the original term *sensemaking perspective* or simply only *sensemaking* throughout the text.

The process of sensemaking

The initial reaction when something unexpected occurs is to make sense of the information that reaches you (Boin, Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2017). Since sensemaking is just that, making sense of our environment, and formulating the circumstances into words and possible actions it can be described as a process that starts in a setting surrounded by the unknown, noticing and categorizing to strategies the information and moving forward (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005; Weick, 1995). Communication can, in turn, be described as a continuous process to make sense of our surroundings (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Therefore, once again it becomes clear that sensemaking, meaning-making, and interpretation are not the same, as interpretation suggests that there is a reality to interpret (Hernes, 2008).

Hence, sensemaking as a process generally has its starting point in a specific organization event (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010), here is the production of the national brochure *If war or crisis comes*, and the Swedish municipalities' process of making sense and relating to the change of the setting that they operate within.

Sensemaking step by step - and its characteristics

Weick (1995) divides the process of sensemaking into six steps and seven characteristics. First, the six steps can be described as follows. (1) *Openness*, something occurs that disturbs or threatens to disturb the organization and requires an explanation. Therefore, it is necessary for the organization to open up, and collect relevant data and information about the situation or event. (2) *Classification*, the next step is to sort and categorize the information to make it more accessible and easier to process. Identifying which information is most relevant and significant, and sorting it to help increase the chance of obtaining an understandable overall picture. (3) *Identification*, with a foundation in the previous step, a search for possible connections and patterns within this information is initiated. Trying to find explanations for what is occurring, and which factors that influence the situation. (4) *Examining*, creating hypotheses about what may have caused the situation using the information that has been collected in previous steps to create different, possible, explanations. (5) *Testing*, evaluating the hypotheses by examining how they agree with the information and existing knowledge. In other words, evaluating the hypotheses based on the evidence and available information, and closing in on the one that best explains the situation. (6) *Meaning-making*, creating an overall picture of the situation. Developing a coherent and comprehensible narrative that explains what has happened by compiling the information, evaluating the hypotheses, and creating a meaningful understanding of the situation (Weick, 1995; Brorström, 2010; Westlund, 2011).

Beyond these steps, Weick concludes that three foundational concepts together shape the sensemaking process, namely *commitment*, *capacity*, and *expectations*. *Commitment*, refers to the importance of having a strong and shared commitment to a particular course of action or set of beliefs. It is presumed that commitment helps individuals and groups make sense of ambiguous situations by providing a framework for interpreting events and making decisions. *Capacity*, refers to the ability to process information and make sense of it. Individuals and groups with greater cognitive and emotional capacity are better able to engage in sensemaking

activities. *Expectations*, refer to the assumptions and beliefs that individuals and groups bring to sensemaking activities. Weick suggests that expectations can influence how individuals perceive and interpret events, and can shape the outcomes of sensemaking processes (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Furthermore, Weick (1995) states that sensemaking as a process (according to the steps above) is also permeated by seven characteristics. (1) *Grounded in identity construction*, it is motivated by individuals' need to understand how events relate to their sense of self, their values, and their beliefs. (2) *Retrospective*, the process involves looking back at events that have already occurred and trying to make sense of them. (3) *Enactive of sensible environments*, sensemaking is a process, even in complex and uncertain situations where the outcome is uncertain, and where information may be ambiguous or contradictory. (4) *Social*, sensemaking starts with a sensemaker. However, a sensemaker is rarely only one individual, but a group of individuals. Therefore, as it is a collective process, it involves multiple individuals sharing their perspectives and knowledge to construct a shared understanding of events. (5) *Ongoing*, sensemaking is a continuous process that occurs as events unfold and new information becomes available. (6) *Focused on and by extracted cues*, it involves using cues such as symbols, stories, and past experiences to construct meaning. (7) *Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy*, it is not about finding the one true explanation of events, but rather constructing a plausible narrative that helps to make sense of what has happened (Weick, 1995: 17).

Moreover, before we move further, it is of importance to differentiate between sensemaking on the individual level, and sensemaking in organizations as they do not function in the same way. Here, since Swedish municipalities are the object of study, organizations are in focus. A common definition of an organization is "a collective of individuals that all aim to pursue specific goals within structured forms" (Weick, 1995: 69-70). In context to what is presented above, this study will have its foundation in the idea of sensemaking perspective introduced by Weick (1995) with additives from later adaptations by Mills, Thurlow, and Mills (2010). Above that, something that scholars also tend to emphasize is the meaning-making processes that surround identity, interpretation, and action (Weick, 2005; Westlund, 2011), similar to other scholars that identify scanning, interpretation, and action (Thomas, Clark & Gioia, 1993) as

being in focus. Both, which to some extent, connect to the three foundational concepts of commitment, capacity, and expectations.

Connecting sensemaking, risk communication, and organizations

As mentioned, an organization's focus, especially in connection to risk communication efforts is presumed, due to previous research to partially be explained by three factors. Namely, *the size of the municipality*, as an indicator to access to resources, *employees' competence*, and professional background, *the perception of risk*, possibly influenced by previous crisis experience within the organization, the general perception of risk within the organization and within the municipality at large (such as local operations, and geographical position and environmental challenges).

Size is proven to have a strong connection to *resources*, as the size of the municipality affects the organizational structure. This could then, in turn, affect the number of employees, and to which degree these employees are able to spend time (Lin, 2018) on making sense of risks and developing communication efforts accordingly. And as Weick (1995) states, the sensemaking process is, among others, shaped by *capacity* and ability for *action*.

Hand in hand with the structure of the organizations, we also have the factor of *the general perception of risk*, influenced by *previous crisis experience* as well as *the general prescription of risk within the municipality* and *within the organization,* which have a strong connection to each other as well as the efforts of an organization. Previous experience with risk could foster the will to develop risk communication (Rothstein, Huber & Gaskell, 2006), however, presumably only to a certain extent. Since, as Weick (1995) states, sensemaking can be more, or less present in an organization depending on the level of uncertainty, and sensemaking as a process is affected by *commitment* and *expectations*, they are plausible factors of explanation.

Moreover, *employee experience and background* naturally affect the efficiency of the organization, and the ability of the process to make sense of uncertainty, as confirmed by Månsson et al. (2015), Brorström and Löfström (2021), Perkins and Arvinen-Muondo (2013) and Johansson (2022), Swedish municipalities are not unfamiliar with a lack of competence within certain areas, connecting to the *capacity* of the organization.

Methodology and method

In the following section, the methodology and method will be presented. For this study, to further examine how Swedish municipalities make sense of risks, and reason when developing risk communication, both previous research regarding risk and crisis are examined, and empirical material is gathered by conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with communication practitioners in Swedish municipalities.

Research design: Interviews

Since the study aims to gain an overview of Swedish municipalities' reasoning behind risk communication efforts and make sense of their risk communication, a qualitative method is relevant. A qualitative method, or more precisely an *interpretive* method, has the aim to interpret events and actions and their meaning for people (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). However, here the sensemaking perspective will play a crucial part (Weick, 1995). Since the aim is to gather and analyze information regarding the selected municipalities' risk communication strategies and gain a deep understanding of the attempted agenda it is necessary to examine the arguments and processes behind the decision rather than only the decisions themselves.

This is done by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015) with a strategically selected (Aspers, 2011) group of municipality employees practicing risk and crisis communication with a strategic focus. Since the aim is to understand the reasoning and decision-making processes, someone closely involved, but with a strategic perspective, rather than a practical position will be more beneficial. Moreover, conducting semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, rather than strict questionaries, offers a perspective that is shaped by the interviewee to a higher extent, rather than the researcher. Semi-structured entails that an interview guide (see appendix) has been developed and is used as a framework when conducting the interviews, but maintaining the interview setting is quite informal and aims to be portrayed as a hybrid between an interview and a conversation. This type of interview style also evokes storytelling rather than short answers (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015) which is relevant to the aim of this study to answer the research questions reaching to understand how and why processes and decisions occur is key.

Moreover, meaning-making is an activity that we as humans center our lives around which is based on personality and culture. Based on our background, we understand different contexts in different ways (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). Therefore, it of importance to highlight the fact that qualitative research is a complex result of this exact setting. A slightly different selection of municipalities, and or municipality employees can in turn general other results and conclusions. But, as the aim is to study how municipalities reason when developing communication efforts in relation to risks, an ethnomethodological approach, i.e., how people create social order (Brinkmann, 2016) is the clear choice as no other method would produce as relevant results in connection to the aim.

Identification and selection of municipalities

Beginning this selection, the official classification of Swedish municipalities published by *the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions* (in Swedish: *Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner*, *SKR*) was used to ensure that the study include different sizes of municipalities, and therefore ensure to include municipalities with different levels of resources in comparison to each other. This is done since resources can, for natural reasons, be a key factor for an organization to carry out communication efforts. Each year, SKR publishes an updated version of the classification of Swedish municipalities (SKR, 2023b) whereas the latest available when this study was conducted was used.

Moreover, to identify which Swedish municipalities this study would process; the first step was to analyze the identified local brochures and conduct a selection. As mentioned, 18 brochures have been identified, and 15 of them are published on the MSB website so far (MSB, 2022). In the second step, the classification of Swedish municipalities (SKR, 2023b) was used as a starting point, and by analyzing the already selected municipalities which have produced a brochure (MSB, 2022), a counterpart consisting of a municipality that has chosen not to produce a brochure (so far) was identified and selected. In other words, the end goal was to identify and contact five different categories of municipalities. These were categorized based on two starting points. First, the size of the municipality, which is presumed to be closely related to resources, which has been concluded to be a key factor in structuring communication efforts (Lin, 2019; Perkins & Arvinen-Muondo, 2013; Weick, 1995). Secondly, possibly important characteristics

such as environmental or operational, could lead to a higher possibility to prioritize preparing for and identifying risks (Rothstein, Huber & Gaskell, 2006; Weick, 1995).

The selected municipalities can therefore be described as follows; (1) Large municipality with 110 000 - 170 000 inhabitants, (2) Large municipality (with government authority presence) with 90 000 - 170 000 inhabitants, (3) Smaller municipality (with exposed geographical position) with 25 000 - 65 000 inhabitants, (4) Small municipality (junction for trains) with 20 000 - 55 000 inhabitants and (5) Small municipality with 15 000 - 45 000 inhabitants. The aim was to interview two representatives from each category, one that has produced a local brochure, and one that has not. However, due to different obstacles that occurred when attempting to book interviews, all but one category is represented through the, in total, 11 conducted interviews.

Table 1. Respondent gallery: Selected and interviewed municipalities.

	Large municipality 110 000 - 170 000 inhabitants	Large municipality (with government authority presence) 90 000 - 170 000 inhabitants	Smaller municipality (with exposed geographical position) 25 000 - 65 000 inhabitants	Small municipality (with exposed infrastructure: junction for trains) 20 000 - 55 000 inhabitants	Small municipality 15 000 - 45 000 inhabitants
Developed a local brochure	Respondent 11	Respondent 8	Respondent 6	Respondent 4	
	Respondent 10				
No local brochure	Respondent 9	Respondent 7	Respondent 5	Respondent 3	Respondent 2
					Respondent 1

Note: Summary of the identified and selected municipalities based on their size and possible characteristics, marked with the assigned respondent number used later in findings and analysis if an interview was able to be conducted.

Since the aim is to examine and possibly understand how Swedish municipalities reason regarding risk communication the decision was made to conduct one interview with one employee per municipality in order to include as many municipalities as possible in the study. Being able to compare the different municipalities, with different characteristics is crucial, but

equally important is it to get a qualitative insight to possibly identify determinants in reaching decisions related to risk communication. However, the choice of one interviewee in each municipality also has some major weaknesses. The most important of which involves failure to account for agreement within the organization, as personal perspectives could affect the results of only one participant from each organization (municipality). But, since the starting point of the selection is the local information brochures, a variety of municipalities were deemed to be prioritized over several interviewees in each municipality.

Identification and selection of interview participants

After identifying the municipalities to be included in the study, the next step was to identify employees with relevant positions at the municipality to complete the selection and the preparatory work for the interviews. Since the purpose of the study is to examine the reasoning behind the selected municipalities' risk communication, this was a crucial step to obtaining fruitful answers to analyze later in the process. With the goal of possibly identifying factors that affect the process, and limitations in the organization in relation to risk and crisis communication, a representative from the communications department was concluded as relevant. And as mentioned, the interviewee should be involved in risk communication within the municipality. Moreover, it was deemed important the chosen interviewee had a strategic role, rather than a practical role in order to get an insight into the process of *making sense* of risks.

Thereby, it was decided that employees should hold titles such as *communication manager* (in Swedish: *Kommunikationschef*), *communication strategist* (in Swedish: *Kommunikationsstrateg*), *communications* coordinator (in Swedish: *Kommunikationssamordnare*), or similar, all located in the municipality's central communication department. The selected employee at the selected municipality was then contacted via email with a short introduction to the study, and a request for a meeting/interview. In some cases, the request was redirected within the communications department whereas all municipalities have a slightly different division of duties among the employees, and thereby the title of the interviewees differ to some extent.

In total, 22 municipalities/municipality employees were contacted. However, not all contacted municipalities/employees have had the opportunity to participate. As a whole, five requests were answered whereas the employee was unable to attend due to lack of time, vacation, or similar, and six requests were not answered at all.

Creating the interview guide

To examine the reasoning behind risk communication efforts, the interviews were deemed to be outlined as semi-structured, with large, open-ended questions, only to guide the interviewee in the right direction but with the aim of not contaminating their answers by proposing preferred values or strict guidelines (Aspers, 2011; Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). Furthermore, to enhance the chance of reaching the different steps in the risk communication process, the interview guide was structured around the following four themes, inspired by Boholm's (2019c) study researching risk and crises management within governmental agencies through interviews with security coordinators. Boholm's (2019c) structure was used as a foundation, and adapted to the sphere of risk communication, as well as connected to the theoretical perspective of sensemaking.

(1) *General information*, covering information such as title, experience from the organization in question, and overall work with risk communication, including a discussion regarding the definition of the terms risk communication and crisis communication and the presence of these terms in internal processes. (2) *Identification*, shifting focus to the identification of risks and communicative needs as well as the internal assessment of the organization and the image of the municipality. (3) *Communication*, moving to the implementation phase of the communication, with the aim of following the processes, the involved actors, and the reasoning behind decisions made in connection to risk communication efforts. (4) *Evaluation*, and finally, the topic of evaluating the communications efforts that have been carried out and discussing possible feedback from citizens and how possible improvements are assessed.

These categories in turn circle back to the three aspects of identity, interpretation, and action, which are, as previously mentioned, aspects that scholars also tend to emphasize in connection to meaning-making processes (Weick, 2005; Westlund, 2011). First, the questions of general character aim to understand the organization and its identity. Secondly, the questions regarding

the identification of risks hope to explore the interpretive aspects of the organization, and how situations and events tend to be perceived. Finally, the communicative and evaluating questions, with the aim to gain insight into the processes, the active phase, as well as the assessment of the action. Moreover, the categories also relate to the three fundamental concepts of sensemaking, commitment, capacity, and expectation (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). For instance, commitment and identity can be presumed to be strongly related, having the ability and process information, i.e., capacity and identification can be connected, and expectations and assumptions suggest the future, upcoming phase, as well as action.

Conducting the interviews

The selected municipalities are spread across the whole of Sweden. Therefore, the interviews were conducted digitally via video calls as it would not have been possible to complete them otherwise due to the scope of the study and lack of access to resources. The majority of the interviews were conducted one-on-one, with some exceptions where two or three participants from the municipality in question were present. This occurred when the municipality internally decided that, in order to present the whole picture, it was necessary for several employees to be present. In such cases, when reviewing the material in analysis, in the case of several employees participating from the same municipality, they are seen as one respondent, as they, even as multiple individuals, represent the same organization.

All interviews were conducted with the interview guide as a foundation, but with room for adaptation depending on the situation. Since the interviews were semi-structured, follow-up questions, reformulations, and relevant adaptations occurred in each interview. All interviews ranged between 45 minutes to one hour. Every interview was recorded, and then later transcribed and the material have been processed according to confidentiality. The transcribed material was then the empirical material used in the upcoming findings and analysis.

Conducting the interviews digitally rather than in person could affect the answers' outcome. Generally, issues that have been previously identified in connection to conducting interviews digitally can be sensitive topics overall, as well as the interviewees' connection to the topic (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). However, as mentioned, due to the scope of the study, traveling for in-person meetings with each interviewee would not have been possible. Since the aim of the

study was to capture Swedish municipalities in general, the geographic position of the selected municipalities was spread across the whole country. It was therefore deemed adequate, and sustainable, to be able to conduct all interviews from the same location, digitally. Moreover, Aspers (2011) states that sensitive topics or a participant's complex relationship to the topic could affect the result, and how the interview should be conducted. For example, a sensitive topic could benefit from having physical in-person interviews. But, neither the topic itself nor the interviewee's position as a professional rather than a private individual can be seen as particularly sensitive to adopt more measures than confidentiality.

Preparing the material

As mentioned, the interviewees have been promised confidentiality, and no municipality will be named, nor described in detail throughout the findings and analysis. Instead, the different interviewees can be identified by numbers. The higher the number of the respondent, the "larger" the municipality as shown in the respondent gallery (*table 1*), and vice versa. In general, the interviewees' working experience within the municipality ranged between 5-8 years, and in total, all interviewees' working experience within the municipality ranged between <1 year-10 years. The interviewees have held the titles *communication manager* (in Swedish: *Kommunikationschef*), *communication strategist* (in Swedish: *Kommunikationsstrateg*), *communications coordinator* (in Swedish: *Kommunikationssamordnare*), and press communicator (in Swedish: *Presskommunikatör*).

In terms of language, all interviews were conducted in Swedish, which naturally implies that all materials that were included in this text were translated by the author. The aim has been to carefully translate the material in order to maintain the same meaning to the greatest extent possible. However, it is important to note that this could to some extent affect the final version. In the case of a specific word that was deemed difficult to translate and still obtain the same meaning, the Swedish term is also included in brackets.

Material and sources

The literature sampled for this study has mainly been retrieved through literature searches, both on Gothenburg University's database as well as on Google Scholar. Generally, the sources have been gathered from well-known peer-reviewed journals and scientific reports, with some

additions in the form of textbook chapters and news media outlets when relevant. All literature included in the review has been published in either English or Swedish. Keywords used in the literature search were terms such as risk communication, crisis communication, Swedish municipalities, "Om krisen eller kriget kommer", sensemaking, and organizational theory in different combinations and in both English and Swedish. After the initial search, the results were then scanned through, and texts that were deemed relevant to answer the research questions were selected to be examined in the literature review at the beginning of the study.

The local and international risk information brochures have been identified through the MSBs website (MSB, 2023a), a contact person at MSB, as well as through searches online and searches in scientific research.

Reflections regarding the method

The largest challenge of this study is the factor of partiality since only one employee from each municipality is interviewed (with some exceptions). But, as mentioned, since the aim is to examine and possibly understand how Swedish municipalities make sense of risks to inform citizens, the decision was made to conduct one interview with one employee per municipality to include as many municipalities as possible. Being able to compare the different municipalities, with different characteristics is crucial for the result, even though this choice also comes with some weaknesses, as individual perspectives could provide a slightly subjective perspective. Therefore, this study's main limitation is that even though the interviewees participate on behalf of the municipality, there's still a possibility that personal aspects affect the outcome. However, the results gathered here are not seen as final, but as a starting point to further research on the topic, with other numerous interviewees.

In general, when conducting qualitative research, the level of reliability is affected (Aspers, 2011). Since this is a study based on semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews each interview's reliability is, by nature, affected. As the aim is to generate a structured, but flexible conversation, it is natural that both the researcher and the interviewee strongly affect each interview. However, since the aim is to generate an understanding and insight into the reasoning in processes in several different organizations, it is also the strength of the method as it is adaptable to the situation, the interviewee, and the organizations in question. This in turn affects

the results in the findings being partially affected by the researcher's own ability to formulate similar environments for each interview as is practically impossible due to different personalities, organizations, and depending on other factors during the time of the interview.

But at the same time, if many interviewees portray the same processes and decisions, the reason to doubt the information is due to the small sample and qualitative method decrease (Ekström & Johansson, 2019). Therefore, if the results drawn from the material gathered here are valid, the possibility to generate similar results through other interviewees and with another researcher is possible.

In order for all interviewees to comfortably and freely describe their perspectives and processes all the interviewees' identities are, as mentioned, kept confidential. In connection to the interviews, all participants have agreed upon participating and sharing information without their names or the specific municipality being disclosed. At the same time, the interviewees were also informed that, due to the information shared during the interviews, it could still be possible to trace it back to the municipality or the individual even though measures are taken to reduce the risk. Keeping the name of the employee and the municipality also decreases the risk of sharing unfitted information regarding specific organizations as nothing regarding the municipality in question is portrayed in detail.

Findings

The following section will offer an overview of the findings from the interviews conducted with the municipality employees for the purpose of this study. The empirical overview has been thematically divided into six sections, based on the interview guide, as well as findings from previous research, and are as follows.

(1) *Defining risk and crisis communication*, as the terms risk and crisis communication are defined differently in research and in practice, questions and discussions regarding the specific municipality employee's experience and usage of the terms are presented here to serve as a foundation for future analysis. (2) *Identifying the risk*, the initial phase of identifying, and understanding the potential risk. (3) *Formulating the aim*, after identifying and deciding that something requires a communication effort formulating how and what should be communicated, beginning the process of making sense of the identified situation. (4) *Defining the organization's position*, as Swedish municipalities are one actor in a multi-level risk management system, their role can sometimes be a bit unclear. Having the knowledge regarding the different roles internally is crucial to generate well-structured communication towards citizens from the right actors in the system. (5) *Communicating the message*, after making sense of what has occurred, it is then time to define it and develop concrete messages to communicate and which method is best suited. (6) *Evaluating the process*, after a completed communication effort, or during an ongoing process it is generally of interest to understand what has worked, and what can be improved, and these measures can differ to a great extent but can be immensely important for the development of future efforts.

Defining risk communication

Generally, the overwhelming response to risk communication as a concept is that the term itself is not used in practice within the interview municipalities. Crisis communication is used as a comprehensive term, including preparatory communication work, as well as ongoing communication during a developing crisis. Even though risk communication nowadays is an established term within academia, the practitioners, at least within Swedish municipalities do not seem to use the same terminology. For some interviewees, such as *respondent 1*, risk communication is a completely new term that they have never used in practice, or even heard

of before. However, many others conclude that they have encountered the term and are familiar, or even very familiar with the concept even though they do not apply it to their organizations.

Others, such as *Respondent 5* describe risk communication as difficult, or complex, to define. In contrast to crisis communication, which is seen as very concrete, something happens, and you react. Risk communication is described as an unconscious part of the organization, as almost everything is centered around identifying, and forecasting what is to come next even though it may not be addressed.

> *Respondent 2*
> *"I would say that we often refer to it as crisis communication, although it is risk communication that we do. Because I think, for example, when we focus on MSB's campaigns, it is actually risk communication, I would say. Preparations for... But we call it crisis communication, maybe a little carelessly."*

> *Respondent 3*
> *"So, I can say we… We talk fairly little about risk communication specifically because it is all embedded in crisis communication."*

Others, such as *Respondent 6* describe it as being an organizational reason, as the strategic, preparatory part of the municipality is limited. The work surrounding uncertainties, risks, and crises is described to be reactive rather than preparative. Working preventively is pointed out as part of the aim of the organization, but that is not the focus. In contrast, both *Respondent 7* and *Respondent 9* describe the preparatory work to be a large part of the organization and its processes, and that it is increasing. *Respondent 7* specifically describes how it is a developing structure, and how their individual presence and efforts have influenced the position of risk communication in the municipality's communication efforts.

> *Respondent 7*
> *"We have used both (risk and crisis) or rather, I think I introduced risk when I started here and realized that we needed to work more with risk, which had not been done to a large extent before."*

Moreover, the factor of internal competencies throughout the organization is a larger part of risk communication and preparatory efforts. A prepared organization is believed to generate a

more efficient organization in practice, as well as facilitate communication to process during uncertain developments.

> *Respondent 9*
> *"It is a lot about proactive communication, working with education internally so that you think about what resources you would need to cope with different scenarios. For example, related to, the increasing, climate changes, landslide risk, and flood risk and things like that."*

So, it is clear that the *concept* of risk communication occurs in all municipalities included in the study, although to various extents. This tends to be strongly related to the size of the municipality, which in turn is related to access to resources. Larger municipalities both have a central communications department, as well as communicators out in each, or some departments. Here, the strategy efforts are more developed, and the possibility to work in a preparatory manner is higher. Small, or smaller municipalities on the other hand tend to only consist of a central communications department, which then supports all other departments in communication needs. If you were to summarize municipalities' risk and crisis communication work, there is an extremely large focus on preparations in everyday life to get everything in place, because once something happens, the time to develop the process is simply not there.

Identifying the risk

The majority of the Swedish municipalities included in the study state that risks and crises are often identified by the security coordinator within the municipality or the county administrative board. Sometimes, however, the communications department identifies a lack of information, and they, therefore, initiate a new process to develop communication material to fill the gap.

Following the principle of proximity (Krisinformation, 2022), larger municipalities, with overall larger organizations and a central communication department as well as communicators stationed at each department conclude that each department is responsible for communication, in an everyday setting as well as in regard to risk and crisis. However, the central communication department offers its expertise if necessary.

> *Respondent 1*
> *"Every municipality must develop a risk and vulnerability analysis (RVA) where you investigate and evaluate what risks you could end up in. But we do not communicate it*

very much and say, "Now we have identified this and this, and this is a risk that we see could occur", that sort of thing."

Respondent 3
"Just like in everyday life, the communication responsibility is divided between the different departments, so if you have an operational responsibility, if you are the manager, you have, just as you are responsible for the finances, you also have responsibility for that department's communication and in accordance with the principle of equality, the principle of responsibility and the principle of proximity."

As touched upon, most municipalities have a security department, and or, a security coordinator/s (Boholm, Boholm & Prutzer, 2016) which tends to serve as identifiers of new risks and initiators of new processes for further communications efforts. Many efforts are therefore developed in coordination between the security coordinator and the communications department.

Respondent 1
"We get signals from the security coordinator, or we go through something together and see that "yes, we have to communicate this", and then I get to take the initiative. And then we usually get together with the security coordinator and communicators and lay out some form of communication plan - What do we want to do?"

Respondent 7
"It's probably mainly with us at the central (communications) department, as we work closely with our security department, which works with preparedness issues, so it will probably be us who initiates because we see a need, a knowledge gap or whatever it may be. If nothing else, I think that if another department notices something, they would raise it with us, and we will do it together."

External surveillance (in Swedish: *omvärldbevakning*) is also something that is a large part of all communicators' work as this is a concrete way of identifying new needs in the municipalities as well as within their own organization. This includes both the many networks that both communications, as well as security, are a part of on an everyday basis, but also consuming news, and being updated on the world situation, seasons, and environmental changes.

Respondent 4
"I would say that it is quite a lot of us communicators who do it (identify risks and initiates communication efforts), through the various networks (in the local area) and then also together with our preparedness and security function."

> *Respondent 3*
> *"For example, we are now approaching summer eventually and if we look ahead to the summer, we always try to think through OK, but what are the questions and situations that usually come up."*

Some challenges are more present and reoccurring than others. What is often mentioned are increasing extreme weather conditions and fake news from foreign powers which are reported to be increasing since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

> *Respondent 6*
> *"Some of the major issues, and challenges that we identify are the influence of information from foreign powers, but also from extremism groups within the country that undermine democracy."*

When discussing the risk assessment within the organizations, the conditions within the municipalities, such as environmental conditions and businesses within the geographical areas affect the overall perception of possible risks and possible targets of disruption.

> *Respondent 10*
> *"In the municipality we have businesses, it is not the municipality's, but which are in the area, which could involve risks, so, how would we have to work then? Moreover, if there is a major telephone or power outage and everything is down, how do we work with alternative channels of communication? But regardless of the event, the focus has been on making sure to work in the same way internally."*

Formulating the aim

When having identified the risk to be communicated, it is time to make sense of the situation and create a message. When it comes to risk and crisis communication identification and formulation are, as mentioned, often done in collaboration with the security coordinator, or similar titles available at the municipality. Balancing the appropriate amount and detail of information to be distributed, and at what time.

> *Respondent 3*
> *"One of the great difficulties at the beginning is to know what will become of this. What are the different outcomes we can get from this, and how do we act fast enough? The nature of a crisis is that we don't know what it is, what it will be like."*

> *Respondent 7*
> *"Communication is very much about creating preparatory knowledge both within our organization, but also with the citizens. What is around us, what might happen, and how*

can you best prepare to deal with it - So that we in the public sphere can dedicate ourselves to solving the issue?"

A turning point that is identified by all the study's interview participants, is the recent pandemic. An event that pressured the crisis communication within each municipality and enlightened the importance of coordination between the different parts of the organization.

Previously, before the pandemic, it is stated that many worked a lot with risks and preparedness by practicing more common events such as for example, major accidents, power outages, and similar. Nobody really gave a pandemic a thought until now. Of course, all municipalities had a pandemic plan, but it is described as very distant. As it would be almost impossible for something like that to occur. Now, after living through a pandemic, the perspective has changed, and everyday life is taken for granted to a lesser extent, as the feeling as if *anything could happen* is more present.

Respondent 1
"When we had the pandemic... We had daily meetings with security coordinators and heads of administration, when it calmed down, they (the meetings) became a little less frequent, but then came Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and then it was also through cooperation (in Swedish: samverkan/samordning) that we evaluated how we would handle it."

Respondent 2
"Crisis and risk communication have been very present now for approximately three years, well since the pandemic started, things have not calmed down at all and it can be a bit stressful in the long run when you do not increase in number of people. Since we also carry out the other daily tasks that need to be done to support the organization and communicate with the citizens."

Formulating the message regarding the situation that has been identified can differ greatly depending on the size of the municipality, as well as the competencies within the staff. Starting with size, smaller municipalities might not have communicators at each department as larger municipalities tend to, and therefore the processes vary depending on how close the communicators are stationed to the operations. Internal competencies affect the focus of the organization and the concrete processes. This aspect becomes clear when many of the communication employees have a similar previous work background, such as other public organizations, journalism, or others.

Respondent 9
"I believe that it is important that all communication projects are based on the municipality specifically, basing them on concrete proposals, ideas, and actions."

Respondent 10
"We have tried to... we are glad to be involved and try to break it down (the information) so that our citizens feel affected. How does this affect me and what do I need to know? What support is there for citizens to receive? Yes, that's pretty much how we think."

Another central aspect that is mentioned is the level of citizens' knowledge, and how the perception of citizens' knowledge affects the reasoning regarding different communication efforts. The questions regarding knowledge of the citizens' crisis preparedness are redirected and concluded that it is the security coordinator's area of knowledge.

Respondent 8
"I think the level of knowledge (among citizens) can depend a lot on interest and news consumption. But also socio-economic conditions, as well as resources, since more and more media have paywalls. Where do you actually get your information from? For example, maybe it is (the social media platform) TikTok, and how much can you trust that information? Yes, it is a big challenge."

Defining the organization's position

What has become clear during the interviews is that many municipalities often struggle with defining their role in each communicative effort. This tends to appear in two ways. First, is the citizens' perspective, whereas citizens can be identified as confused regarding whom is in charge. Secondly, the municipalities themselves when balancing and identifying which information is theirs to communicate.

An identified risk that all municipality employees mentioned, which has not been present for a very long period of time in Sweden, is the electricity supply. Several interviewees described how it was perceived as quite sudden, and that the question *How can it be this way?* (in Swedish: *Hur kan bli på det viset?*) was posed. It was concluded that it is not the municipalities' main responsibility, but the will to help, and to share information was generally present within many municipalities. This was done by supporting other public authorities in their communication by sharing their messages on municipal platforms. But it is also enlightened that it also risks sparking uncertainty regarding who is in charge. During the interviews, parallels are drawn

between the current communicative challenges and the recent pandemic, where this topic of balancing the responsibilities, also became top of mind.

> *Respondent 1*
> *"Many different public authorities were, involved and would communicate about how to behave and what it is, well, everything... It was very…. A question that we then raised with, among other things, the county administrative board, is the problem that there are so many different messages from many different organizations. Who is actually responsible for what?"*

> *Respondent 9*
> *"I would say that it is our politicians (who are responsible), as well as municipal councilors who are ultimately responsible, otherwise also the municipal manager. They ensure that we have the right resources and staffing to succeed."*

The emphasis on the citizens' own responsibility is also raised, whereas *Respondent 2*, among others, suspects that the pandemic once again changed the field. Since the recent pandemic, the general response is that citizens' own crisis preparedness has increased and that it functioned like a wake-up call "I actually also have to be a bit prepared here", and that you cannot expect the municipality to solve everything. Presumably making risk communication easier to grasp as a whole going forward.

> *Respondent 5*
> *"So, I think that it is very much the citizens' own responsibility to be well-read and prepared, but of course, it is also the municipality's responsibility. After all, we have the geographical area responsibility that our residents are prepared and can handle things because it will also facilitate our work, so it is really in our interest as well."*

Many interviewees agree on the fact that defining their position is complex and that it, in some cases, is a bit confusing even for them as municipality employees. Knowing and owning the information is highlighted as important to not get lost.

> *Respondent 6*
> *"We must also have the mandate to be able to stand for the information we provide, so we cannot grasp too big."*

However, some have a clearer picture of what the limit of the municipality is. *Respondent 7* describes it as the municipality, of course, having the ultimate responsibility for those who are in the geographical area, at least regarding the responsibility for information. But, since there

are a lot of employees and actors who must work together, such as associations, the county administrative board, as well as government agencies, and others that exist in the area. But the key is that all mentioned above are responsible for different risks. Generally, prioritizing strategically, and making do with limited resources is a common narrative amongst the interviewees. However, *Respondent 8* also mentions another perspective, that external actors sometimes question the communication resources.

Respondent 8
"In society at large, I would say that the benefit of communication, including both risk communication and crisis communication, is realized by those in the highest positions. Sometimes organizations receive criticism from journalists for having too large communications departments. But there I still feel that there is an analysis to be done, there are many parameters that have come into play that have caused us to be in the situation we are in right now."

The citizen perspective

Citizens often reach out to the municipality regarding various cases with the aim of being presented with more information, or a solution to a problem. Reasonable, however, many times the questions and thoughts are not all under the realm of a municipality. This points to two aspects. **First**, citizens sometimes lack the knowledge of who is responsible for different tasks in Swedish society. It is declared by many municipalities though out the interview that they feel as much blame is put on the municipality, even though the topic in question is not within the scope of the municipalities' responsibilities. "Sometimes it seems like everything is the municipality's fault". **Second**, municipalities might need to enhance their communication making the roles within the system clearer. "What is it that we are up against? What does the state want, and what does the municipality want? What is the message?" It has become quite clear that it can be difficult to define. Therefore, municipality employees seem to agree that it is very difficult for the citizens to know the boundaries of certain actors.

Respondent 3
"We exist both as a communication function in everyday life, but as part of the crisis management, both as support, but also to coordinate crisis communication throughout the municipality, because there may be several actors involved and then it becomes extra important that we communicate as a municipality as well as individual businesses and/or organizations and above all to reduce the risk of recalcitrant or conflicting messages and lack of clarity."

Respondent 11
"Last year when Russia invaded Ukraine, during the first month we had to adapt our communication work to a large extent. However, the most requested, or the thing that the public asked about the most, was something that they needed to worry about the least in that situation. "Where is my nearest shelter?". In this thing with risks and such... Fear is so much psychology... And in that case, it was also a question that is not administrated by the municipality, but we were still expected to be able to answer it."

To ensure that the municipalities' processes function, both on an everyday basis, when making sense of risks, and when communication crisis, different networks, and the maintenance of these are raised as key aspects.

The organizational perspective

Many interviewees have a clear idea of what their tasks entail and that as much as possible should be resolved and communicated in the different departments of the municipality, as all the interviews were a part of the central communications departments, they main had an strategic or consulting role. Larger municipalities all have communicators on sight at each department, while smaller only have a central communications department and some have a solution in the middle.

Coordinating between actors can also be a challenge when the area of responsibility is difficult to define. The local country administrative board is a common collaborator within the area of risks.

Respondent 1
"After all, we collaborate a lot with the local county administrative board when it comes to crisis and crisis communication. We usually have regular meetings... and I'm thinking, if there's someone who should oversee this with risk communication, it's probably the county administrative board... Since their task is to coordinate the municipalities and yes, support us."

Respondent 6
"What is little... Or like this, we try to call in what our responsibility is and what the county administrative board's responsibility is or what other government authorities' responsibilities or the business community's responsibilities are. We are just the municipality... We can't take on the whole burden of communicating everything."

Moreover, several interviewees describe some kind of recent re-organization which is concluded to affect the organization and its processes. It is stated that this has been

implemented, both, as a result of the recent Swedish election in 2022, but also in general because of the intensifying world situation and revision of internal structure. The majority mention the recent pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine as large events that have affected the organization's work, but also the citizen's behavior.

> *Respondent 4*
> *"We are developing our website currently, with a new standard. Then we will have better information about crisis, risk, and crisis communication (on the website)."*

> *Respondent 6*
> *"We updated our organization recently and we felt that it has worked very well, but we really had to put it to the test when the pandemic came. Then risk and crisis communication, cooperation, and communication as a tool to achieve success in a crisis got a real boost."*

In general, it is also possible to notice a centralization aspect. Even though many efforts are centered around the proximity principle, aspects of centralization are also present. For example, as of now, all 11 municipalities have a central phone and email address to a central reception or *contact center* (in Swedish: *Kontaktcenter*). They answer the questions that come in or distribute them to other employees within the municipality more fit to answer. This has not always been the case, and in some municipalities, it was quite recently that the only way for citizens to make contact was to locate and contact each employee separately.

Communicating the message

The municipalities' websites are used as a hub for information. All municipalities stated that the website was central to all types of communication with citizens. Other platforms, such as social media platforms, mainly Facebook and Instagram, were mentioned as a complement and gateway to further information on the website which is used as a hub for all communication.

Resources within an organization are never unlimited, but several interviewees state that resources sometimes even are sacred. However, the interest in communication, especially risk and crisis communication has increased during the last years.

> *Respondent 3*
> *"I feel that we have a great deal of freedom, and we also feel that we have a great deal of trust in these matters. But the resources are scarce. As I mentioned we are a rather*

small communication unit... And yes, but it does affect the resources and what we can do, and what we need to prioritize."

Respondent 1
"I also want to mention that crisis communication has always been, I think, an area that has been a low priority in some ways, because you are so involved in everyday life and everything that is happening… In a smaller municipality, you do not have as many resources, and you might work a little differently systematically. We are constantly working and trying to improve our way of working."

On the other hand, an occasional interviewee also declares that the recent development has increased the budget for risk and crisis communication as the strength of both has been seen first-hand in the last few years.

Respondent 10
"There has also been a great understanding and increased interest among our political leadership in working with crisis preparedness issues in recent years. For example, we have received increased resources allocated by the municipal board to strengthen crisis preparedness in the municipality."

Many municipalities have implemented the method of an *On-Call communicator* (in Swedish: *Kommunikatör i Beredskap, KiB*) as preparation for effective communication during a crisis. The predecessor to this function is the *On-Call Duty Office* (in Swedish: *Tjänsteperson i Beredskap*), which all municipalities that use standby communicators have also implemented at an earlier stage. A *standby communicator* refers to a person who is ready to take care of communication in any crisis or in a situation that requires fast and effective communication. Regardless of the time, the current communicator on standby is responsible for communicating with various stakeholders, such as employees, the public, the media, and other organizations as well as developing a communication strategy.

Respondent 7
"We work with the standby communicator function, which we (at the communications department) also have as our area of responsibility to coordinate. So, we have several employees who are part of a 24/7 standby function."

Respondent 10
"The employee who currently holds the KiB function works together (in Swedish: samverkar) and coordinates (in Swedish: samarbetar) initial communication measures regarding the event that has occurred."

In later years the challenge and discussion regarding transparency have become present in public administration. *Respondent 2* concludes it as the former transparent public organization which no longer should be so public. Due to security reasons, some parts of the former public files are now confidential. For example, maps of water treatment plants or other facilities in the municipality, i.e., things that people previously have been able to easily request and receive a few years ago are simply no longer available.

Furthermore, the discussion regarding timing, regarding when information is suitable to share, is also an ongoing process. Since risk communication is communicating potential situations, there is a constant balance between when to communicate versus when not to communicate.

> *Respondent 4*
> *"We also have a role to be calm. I do not think we should… you should not exaggerate... Because it could go wrong, I think. Then you create anxiety that you absolutely do not want. So even though we might have a plan for crisis or war, sometimes we might be a little cautious about going out with that information if it is not needed, so to speak. There is a need for balance I would say."*

With the recent world events, the interviewees have noticed an increasing interest in crisis preparedness amongst citizens. An insight that has been present now during the recent turbulent time with the pandemic and the war, is that Sweden and Swedes are quite unaccustomed to crisis events of these measures, which actually sets demands to adapt and communicate accordingly.

> *Respondent 11*
> *"The foundational idea of risk and crisis communication idea is to protect health, life, and property. So, we have to communicate so that people can protect their lives, their health, and their property. And there can be difficulties to implement for us Swedes who have not been at war in over 200 years."*

> *Respondent 5*
> *"I think the pandemic, and now the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis... I think people think more about things like this today than they did just a few years ago. Unfortunately, they have been forced to do so. In a way positive, because in the beginning when I worked on such issues it was quite difficult to reach out and when you talk about people, I often felt that it was only elderly people and those who live in the countryside (who were prepared)."*

Now, as the world situation has changed and has been challenged, mainly due to the recent pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many described an increased interest from the citizens.

Respondent 1
"We Respondent that it was very good, but maybe it felt a little, far away, then (2018) I would say, to have one take it seriously. But it has been different lately. It was especially noticeable when the war started, as we experienced an increasing demand from the citizens (for the brochure)."

Respondent 5
"However, there was great interest last spring when Russia invaded Ukraine. Then we had people, quite a lot of people, who got in touch, both to the contact center and by email, saying that they wanted this brochure because they had thrown it away."

Regarding the question about target groups, how to make sense of the information and target the message to different groups in society, the result varies. But the general response is that risk communication tends to be directed toward the general public rather than specific groups. One group that was raised as a focal point was however youths. Mainly by using schools as a platform for communication. In general, the factor of engagement and not only information is seen as a key to reaching the public and generating a difference and compliance.

Respondent 5
"We have not really worked so focused on any particular target group. We have focused a bit on young people in some of our efforts, by, for example, visiting schools to talk about it (risks and crises) from their perspective."

Respondent 11
"It is a big challenge today, that there is a large group of people who have very high demands on individually adapted information, "How close to me is there a water tank? Then, on the other hand, we also have a group of municipal residents of a different ethnicity with a different mother tongues and background. There we need to adapt."

The importance of effective internal communication

The aspect of effective internal communication is raised, especially in connection with recently identified risks, or ongoing crises. As municipality employees often live close by, in the same municipality or nearby, they naturally become an information outlet that informs many citizens informally, at home outside the workplace, and their professional position. Working efficiently

with internal communication can therefore be an effective tool for spreading the right information at a fast pace.

> *Respondent 4*
> *"I think the internal processes are very, very important, and there we have the Intranet, which we use a lot. And then it is also important that the contact center have the information they need."*

> *Respondent 6*
> *"The internal communication is very important for the external (communication). We always try to prioritize the internal communication first before going external, as far as we have time, so to speak. It is so incredibly important, our employees should not have to read about their own organization in the newspaper and the power of internal communication should absolutely not be underestimated."*

> *Respondent 8*
> *"When it comes to certain types of situations, we communicate a lot with our employees. That they are a good channel, if we get all our employees to understand what it is about, they can talk about it at home with their families. Then we might be able to reach more people than if, for example, we would only publish posts on social media or write it on our website."*

In general, the local connection is raised as crucial, and there is a need to concretely connect the message to the receiver. In general, there is skepticism towards national risk information campaigns and a strong sense that locally adapted information generates an interest to a larger extent. There is also skepticism towards information campaigns as a method since they can suffer from being filled with very general, and not connected to the current situation. Both the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the pandemic are mentioned as clear examples of when it became clear that local information had large advantages over national, and it was realized that it is not enough to just pass on national information.

> *Respondent 5*
> *"We feel that national campaigns do not work particularly well. We have noticed that when we have evaluated how they have performed and seen the engagement (from the citizens). So, we try to work more with finding local angles so that it becomes more relevant for our citizens."*

> *Respondent 9*
> *"Rather than information campaigns, I think it is better to work on this (risk communication) continuously. Sometimes it (campaigns) can have an effect, but there is too much competition around these "weeks". It can probably be more effective to pick up relevant communication during the year, when suitable."*

Communicating the national brochure

Generally, the municipalities tend to communicate the national brochure on their website, as well as have them on hand for anyone that requests a paper version. Due to practical reasons, the majority of them do not directly link to the PDF file with the actual brochure. However, the national brochure's presence in the municipalities' everyday work varies to a great extent. Some stated that they regularly use them as a starting point in the municipality's risk information campaigns, while others have very limited information about the brochure on the website and have limited insight into what information is in the national brochure.

Respondent 3
"Already at the time when it was sent out, we had some (physical) copies that our security function received that have been available for citizens. For example, in connection to activities during the Crisis Preparedness Week, or overtime at the reception at the town hall. When it was sent out, we also informed (citizens) that it was underway and we also inform about it on an ongoing basis connected to your preparedness, there is a lot of good information to be found in it."

Respondent 4
"I think it is a good product and there is good information in it. So, I think it was great that it was sent out. When it is Crisis Preparedness Week, we usually have some activities and then we usually distribute them (the national brochure)."

Furthermore, the challenge of conducting successful risk communication is raised. Preparing for something that possibly does not occur, is a challenge, especially when it comes to challenges that require large adaptations and are far from reality as perceived by the large crowd.

Respondent 10
"The greater challenge of the two, risk communication, is, well... more difficult than crisis communication. I usually say, risk communication, no one listens to. Crisis communication on the other hand, then everyone listens."

Respondent 5
"It was a big deal when it was sent out. I remember that there was a lot of preparatory work done through our county network. I remember we received it a little in advance and were able to look at it, so we were familiar with the content in case any citizens were

worried or felt uncomfortable. But then, I do not remember that made any particular impression on the citizens."

Developing a local brochure

The municipalities that have not developed a local brochure relate to the question in different ways. A few, conclude that they are unaware, or quite unfamiliar with the concept of local risk information brochures. Smaller municipalities describe a tendency to avoid working with printed material, both for economic, and environmental reasons. The aspect of printed information turning old is also enlightened, as digital is easier, and more efficient to update when necessary.

> *Respondent 2*
> *"We have not made our own variant and we are not planning to as of now. But we have previously made a compilation of municipalities' vulnerabilities. Then we are also developing and establishing meeting points in the municipality."*

> *Respondent 5*
> *"No, it has not been relevant (in Swedish: aktuellt) for us (to develop a local brochure). It's nothing that I have heard at least. But we have done a lot of preparatory work with communication around water. Conducted a scenario, and published information about what you can get water, how to boil the water when you need to, and similar."*

> *Respondent 2*
> *"From the communications (department), we have almost exclusively done digital campaigns (to communicate about risks). However, during Preparedness Week, we have, on the other hand, made plans together with, for example, the security department to organize physical meetings and activities with citizens."*

The municipalities that have developed their own brochure push for the factor of local engagement and locally adapted information. The national brochure is generally perceived as a positive and great initiative, but the own local brochure gains its strength in the local and adapted features.

> *Respondent 7*
> *"It's not always that the national stuff works so well because you do not really recognize yourself. You want it to be the municipality that says something or that you have images or a language that is recognizable from communication locally, so usually we must work with a lot of material that comes nationally. The main messages are the same, but we need to put on our municipal mantle on top, so it is easier to recognize."*

Then, we also have the municipality that has not yet developed a local brochure but has ambitions to initiate a process.

> *Respondent 8*
> *"We have the ambition to make our own version that is partly based on it (the national brochure) but more municipality specific. I was asked to initiate the work a while back, but so much else has been going on."*

When developing the brochure some aspects need to be considered. Usually, it has been a collaboration between the communications department and the security department/function. *Respondent 10* describes it as a way of raising both the communicative aspects, graphics, and clear concise language as well as including all important aspects of a potential crisis in the local area. During the process, it is therefore important to question whether everything is necessary for the citizens to know, an information brochure like this can easily derail and become too long.

> *Respondent 11*
> *"It (the local brochure) was sent during the pandemic. And we, the communication (department), were probably a little panicked that it would go out in the middle of everything because we were busy communicating the pandemic. So, it was the security (function) that took the initiative for it, and we kind of came in and fought to include the communicative perspective in it as well. But from a timing perspective, there was a purpose of getting it out there then, because people were so aware."*

Communicating the local brochure

Looking at the municipalities that have developed a local brochure, it varies greatly in how it is incorporated into risk and crisis communication on an everyday basis. Some municipalities, often those that have developed in the latest few years, declare that the brochure is an important part of the risk communication efforts. However, this is not always the case. Some interviewees were quite unaware of the fact that such a local brochure existed.

Evaluating the process

All municipality employees participating in the study began their reasoning regarding evaluation in the same manner. Namely that they all agree on the fact that is it an aspect of the communication process that can and should be improved.

> *Respondent 2*
> *"It is something we should develop more, I would say. Especially evaluation in regard to crisis communication is often very fast, and then you move on to something new simply because something new happens."*

> *Respondent 3*
> *"…it's something of a constant bad conscience… You'd like to say yes, we have planned it (evaluation) this way. We implement and, then we evaluate. Very structured and completely according to the textbook, but unfortunately, we don't have that opportunity in practice."*

Some, on the other hand, seem to have a more developed evaluation process than others. It varies what is evaluated and not, but in connection with larger disruptions or crises, a large-scale evaluation is always conducted. Otherwise, it is mostly evaluated internally – "How did this work?"

> *Respondent 7*
> *"We regularly ask our citizens what they think of us as a municipality in large surveys, our service, our communication. We get some feedback there, but then it is an overall assessment, not specific efforts. So, evaluation looks very different, and I must say, as in all communication work, that, we are not very good at evaluating efforts, but we try."*

However, all 11 interviewed municipalities have reported that citizens do not tend to hesitate in contacting the municipality in different ways if anything ever is unclear. Therefore, many interviewees state that not receiving feedback from citizens often entails that they are satisfied with the situation and the information. "The best evaluation is when we do not receive questions".

> *Respondent 4*
> *"We haven't received massive criticism for anything we've done or haven't done. So, therefore, one still assumes that everything is good somehow."*

Naturally, the citizens' opinion, to some extent, reaches the initiators, which in this case are the communicators. And the result of the general perception of the interest from the citizens varies to a large extent during the interviews.

Respondent 2
"We still perceive (after the pandemic) that citizens have a low interest in risk communication, risk awareness, and preparedness."

Respondent 7
"A lot has happened in recent years, both with the pandemic and being at home and being able to cope but also with the war in Ukraine, that it is actually more tangible now. I perceive the general knowledge and awareness as higher and I don't feel that there is any negative feedback when we communicate about these issues, it is more like *thumbs up*, and that you really take it to heart."

According to all interviewees, social media platforms are used as communications channels to a great extent. It is understood as a natural platform since many citizens and many different groups participate. Social media also generates a possibility for direct dialog, as they are structured to engage with the content and engage with the sender of the information as well as other citizens.

Respondent 10
"You generally want to tell, you want to share (on social media). We see that as a strength and try to use it wisely to increase engagement and make them feel confident both in us and in the common power of society. Engagement on social media thus also becomes a way to evaluate."

Another way of evaluating the level of citizens' compliance is to measure concrete behavioral changes and complying with risk communication has been seen to increase if there is something very concrete to lose at stake. The closer the risk is, temporally, and the larger the presumed impact it could have, the larger the compliance of the citizens. Such as, once again the electricity supply, where it comes very clear that the financial impact on each household could be large, the incitement to adapt is described as higher by the interviewees.

Respondent 3
"Certain concrete behaviors are easier to measure. For example, how many have been vaccinated? Although that was not a municipal issue."

Some interviewees also describe the complex relationship with other public actors as a factor in the evaluation or lack of evaluation. For example, evaluation was discussed in connection to the pandemic, but seen as far too complex in order to read anything from the results. It was therefore deemed that the answers would not be valid, as it would be impossible to detect from which actor the citizen got the information from, whether it is the municipality, the Public Health Agency, MSB, or someone else.

In many cases, evaluating communication efforts is therefore conducted in a quite informal manner, internally within the organization. It occurs a little subconsciously, assessing what is deemed to have been more and less successful, and identifying the strengths to be able to apply those aspects to the next communication effort.

Analysis and discussion

In the seventh section, the findings of this study will be analyzed and discussed in connection to the previous research and theoretical perspective of sensemaking in order to later be able to answer the research questions during the next, and last section of the study.

The analytical process was structured into three main parts based on the presumed explanatory factors as identified through previous research (which the interview guide was based on) as suggested by Aspers (2011). The three parts are therefore as follows. (1) *Size*, which as previously mentioned is closely connected to both resources and organizational structure. (2) *Employees' experience and background* which affect available competencies within the organizations. (3) *Perception of risk*, possibly influence by previous crisis experiences, the general perception of risk within the organization, as some organizations have different structures and processes, and the general prescription of risk within the municipality, such as the presence of local operations, and geographical and environmental challenges.

Moreover, both the three fundamental concepts of *commitment*, *capacity*, and *expectations* (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), as well as the three, emphasized aspects in relation to meaning-making, *identity*, *interpretation*, and *action* (Weick, 2005; Westlund, 2011) are kept close in mind when conducting the analysis.

The factor of size – access to resources and organizational structure

The findings from the interviews suggest that communications departments generally function with limited resources. What is not clear is if that is only applicable to communication departments per se, or if other departments also may operate on similar terms. However, no matter what, limited resources can affect the process of decisions and final efforts. Especially preparatory efforts such as risk communication. As Weick (1995) and Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) suggest, for the process of sensemaking to occur, *commitment* and *capacity* need to be present. Naturally, and as the interviews also suggest, the strategic positions, and efforts, are one of the functions that are affected first when there is a lack of resources. Lack of *capacity* (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), which in turn affects the ability to *action* (Weick, 2005; Westlund, 2011) creates a need for a core organizational structure, so that the organization functions on an everyday basis, and in general, risks and crises are not everyday basis. However,

not only does it affect the processes of the organization, but also the ability to a larger range of competencies which will be discussed further in the next section.

Furthermore, the evaluation process also seems to be affected strongly due to a lack of resources. As several interviewees state that evaluation is not a priority, and often new tasks get in the way of conducting structured surveys, or similar, directed toward the receivers of the information, the citizens, in connection to completed communication efforts. Instead, the efforts are examined internally, by discussing the efforts and what the organization themselves perceived as successful or less successful. This could in turn affect the *expectations* (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) and *interpretation* conducted by the organization for further action (Weick, 2005). However, important to note is that every interview concludes that the evaluation process could improve which shows that they are, to some extent, aware of the limitations of this process.

At its core, the larger structured evaluations seem to entail asking the citizens what the perceived as successful and not, through surveys, phone interviews, or similar. Not receiving input from the citizens, internally investigating what was effective and not could give the conclusion a subjective perspective, as it always will be from the employees' starting point. Even though dialog with some citizens might occur, that as well could be subjective, as voluntarily contacting the municipality points to an interest in society, identifying with the information and the sender of the information. It also points to a certain amount of trust, which in turn generates a specific group of citizens.

The factor of competence

Resources can also entail human resources. The access to competence within an organization. As previous research shows, municipalities tend to suffer from a lack of competence in connection to crises (Månsson, Abrahamsson, Hassel, & Tehler, 2015; Brorström & Löfström, 2021; Johansson, 2022). In general, based on the findings from interviews, what then seems to be affected is the strategic positions. Here, the size of the municipality seems to play an important role, as the communications departments naturally are smaller in smaller municipalities, and therefore the strategic function, the function working preparatory with

communication at large is present to a lesser extent as the general *capacity* (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) is less.

Moreover, when it comes to risk communication, the question regarding the distinction of responsibility is reoccurring throughout the interviews, possibly affecting the *commitment* (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) and *identity* (Weick, 2005). Sometimes, it is the organizations themselves that are confused, and uncertain about where to draw the line of getting involved and sharing information. Sometimes, it is the citizens that seem to think that all activity within the municipality area is the municipalities own responsibility. Many times, due to, and thanks to, the three principles of crisis management, the principle of responsibility, equality, and proximity, this is the case. But where the line can be drawn seems to be unclear as municipalities struggle to make sense of their position.

Presumably, both competence and resources also affect the ability and knowledge to work toward target groups in different ways. Many interviewees stated that risk communication tends to be targeted toward the general public rather than specific groups and that the knowledge and preparedness seem to vary greatly among citizens. Moreover, all seem to agree that citizens themselves have a great individual responsibility when it comes to crisis preparedness.

One concrete aspect that is highlighted, and reoccurring is the focus on youths as a target group, by contact and information in schools and education environments. Presumably, this is a key aspect, not only the reach the youths at an early age and hopefully inspiring them to keep informed later in life, possibly *identifying* (Weick, 2005) with the information. Moreover, it is also a shortcut to all types of families, that might not be informed otherwise, when or if the youths share the information that they have received at home.

The factor of risk perception

As all municipalities have different starting points when it comes to risk and crisis, the risk communication efforts naturally can vary. But the general internal focus also affects the perceived understanding of their presence. It is not necessarily only municipalities that have a high presence of risk that perceived them as the most present in terms of investing resources in risk communication. Possibly, the uncertainty pushes for increasing preparations, and

experience from previous crisis increase the will of making sense of the surroundings (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). However, having experience from previous crises, or having identified sensitive aspects within the municipality, such as operations in the area, geographical position, and environmental challenges can also enhance the will of the organization, and therefore affect the resources invested in risk and crisis communication.

The factor of previous crisis experiences

The presumption is that uncertainty creates a need to make sense of the uncertainties and to inform by communicating (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Uncertainty can appear in different ways, and based on the results of the interviews, uncertainty can arise, both from the awareness of previous risks and also the threat of a potential risk being present, with having the actual experience. It seems to be the *expectations* (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) and *interpretation* (Weick, 2005) of the information that determines, rather than reality itself. Moreover, the interviews made it clear that crisis preparedness such as scenario-based education for employees is reoccurring, both in municipalities that show extensive previous experience and those that do not. This suggests that, based on the findings from the interviews, the organization's previous crisis experience might not affect the organizations prioritization as much as expected.

However, previous crisis experience seems to greatly affect the citizens' crisis preparedness, or at least the municipality employees' perception of citizens' crisis preparedness. Once again appears to the aspects of *expectation*s (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) and *interpretation* (Weick, 2005) that affects, as the employees' actions are affected by the input regarding the citizens' interest and knowledge regarding crisis preparedness.

The factor of risk perception within the organization

As all interviewed are practitioners within communication, the understanding that communication can be the difference between a well-contained crisis and the opposite is present. However, as mentioned, the perception of citizens also affects the perspective on what to communicate, how to communicate, and when to communicate.

One aspect that is reoccurring among all interviewees is the aspect of balance. Many interviewees put a lot of weight on the fact of sharing the right information at the right time, to conduct well-timed and strategic *action* (Weick, 2005). As previously stated in research, spreading information that either is not relevant or information that only evokes fear (Coombs, 2015; Seeger & Sellnow, 2013; Lim, 2019) does not benefit anyone. Therefore, risk communication needs to be strongly connected to the current state of society and its citizens. Irrelevant information, or information that is perceived as irrelevant by citizens, risks suppressing the level of trust in the organization. This statement is also confirmed by the interviewees of this study as there is general support for the national information, but, a strong sense that it many times is too broad, and difficult to grasp.

The factor of risk perception within the municipality

Quite contradictory to previous research regarding the national brochure, which results were that the brochure could be deemed a success in raising citizens' crisis preparedness, the municipalities employees seem to have another understanding. When the brochure was published back in 2018, the interest was perceived as low, but with the recent crises, the pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, interest arose and the brochure was sought after, i.e., the current world situation intensified, and the citizen's perception of potential risks increased. The *commitment* (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) to being prepared, as well as *identifying* (Weick, 2005) with the risks seems to be higher.

Generally, as mentioned, Swedish municipalities and the overall Swedish administration system apply the three principles of responsibility, equality, and proximity. Conducting the processes at the lowest level possible, close to the citizens, by employees that handle these areas on an everyday basis. One exception however is the direct contact with citizens. During recent years centralization of contact by developing *Contact Centers* (in Swedish: *Kontaktcenter*) is an aspect that seemingly has increased. The aim is to make it easier for citizens and municipalities to conduct everyday contact and communication with each other. A central contact department that devotes time to direct citizens and inform generally tends to enable citizens to get the right information with easy access, and the employees can continue their work instead of answering questions from the public. It also ensures that all citizens receive the same information, both in regard to quality and details. In contrast, responsibility for the

situation and the communications efforts themselves, are kept decentralized, and each department tends to own and be liable for.

The complex question of transparency

Balancing the relationship between the different actors within the multi-level governance system we have in Sweden and citizens are seemingly seen as a challenge. This aspect is quite contradictory, as the number of local brochures is increasing, but at the same time, the municipalities and governmental agencies are guided to be more cautious with what information they share to be accessible by the public due to the fact that it can portray potential weaknesses by foreign powers. However, this does explain the lack of detailed information on municipalities' websites (Landenmark, 2019) to some extent.

Summary and conclusions

Finally, in the eighth and last section, the findings of this study will be summarized and finally, the research questions will be answered, knowledge gaps regarding risk communication and Swedish municipalities will be reflected upon, as well as suggestions for future research within the field will be raised.

Summary of the findings

Defining risk and crisis communication, within Swedish municipalities, crisis communication is used as a comprehensive term to summarize what is, by academic, divided into risk and crisis communication. The concept of both risk and crisis communication occurs in all municipalities but to different extents. Whereas some state that it is quite limited, and others that it is a large part of the organization. Some state that risk communications are a completely new term that they basically never heard about, but the general understanding is that the term exists, but is not used in practice. The complexity of communicating risks is enlightened, as it refers to future, possible developments. However, due to the current world situation, development within the field is present.

Identifying the risk, the majority of the 11 Swedish municipalities interviewed for the study state that risks and crises are often identified by the security coordinator within the municipality or the county administrative board. In some cases, the communication department identifies an information gap and initiates that process themselves. Moreover, as the law states, every municipality must develop a RVA where you investigate and evaluate what risks you could end up in which also is used as a foundation for future risk communications efforts. It is emphasized that the principles of crisis management, the principle of equality, the principle of responsibility, and the principle of proximity, are applied in all municipalities, implying that each department is responsible for its organization with a central department as support. *External surveillance* (in Swedish: *omvärldbevakning*) is also a large part of all communicators' work, both through the many networks that the municipalities are involved in, but also consuming news, and being updated on the world situation, seasons, and environmental changes.

Formulating the aim, when the municipalities have identified a risk to communicate, it is time to make sense of the situation and create a message. Here, the factor of balancing the appropriate

amount and detail of information to be distributed, and at what time. In order to obtain a unified voice, cooperation and coordination within the organizations, as well as with other actors in the system are emphasized. Before the pandemic, many worked a lot with risks and preparedness on more commonly occurring events, all municipalities had a pandemic plan, but the occurrence of one was seen as distant. The internal process of formulating the message can differ greatly, one factor is size, whereas smaller municipalities might not have communicators at each department as larger municipalities tend to, and therefore the processes vary depending on how close to the operations the communicators are stationed. Another central aspect that is mentioned is the level of citizens' knowledge, and how the perception of citizens' knowledge affects the reasoning regarding different communication efforts.

Defining the organization's position, the multi-level governance system that the municipalities operate within creates a complex setting. Therefore, municipalities sometimes struggle with defining their position. This tends to appear in two ways. First, is the citizens' perspective, whereas citizens can be identified as confused regarding whom is in charge. Which, in turn, points to two aspects. That, citizens sometimes lack the knowledge of who is responsible for different tasks in Swedish society, and municipalities might need to enhance their communication making the roles within the system clearer. "What is it that we are up against? What does the state want, and what does the municipality want? What is the message?" It has become quite clear that it can be difficult to define. Secondly, the municipalities themselves when balancing and identifying which information is theirs to communicate. Moreover, the general emphasis on the citizens' own responsibility is also raised.

Communicating the message, when Swedish municipalities communicate, the websites are used as a central hub for all information. Other digital platforms such as social media are a present aspect of all communication, including risk communication. Access to resources seems to vary, and therefore the ability to communicate, and the methods to communicate vary. On the other hand, the recent developments in the world situation have in general increased the interest and resources for risk and crisis communication as the strength of both has been seen first-hand. One clear example is the *On-Call communicators*, which in some municipalities are a quite new function. The questions of transparency versus confidentiality have become especially present in recent years since the former transparent public organization which no longer should be so

public. The intensifying world situations have generated high preparedness interest from the citizens, as perceived by the municipality employees. When communicating risks, most of the time, the public is the target group. The importance of effective internal communication is raised, as municipality employees naturally become an information outlet that informs many citizens informally, at home. In general, the local connection is raised as crucial, and a general skepticism towards national information, as a concrete connection between the message and receiver is enlightened.

The municipalities that have not developed a local brochure relate to the question in two main ways. A few, conclude that they are unaware, or quite unfamiliar with the concept, while some describe a tendency to avoid working with printed material, both for economic, and environmental reasons. The municipalities that have developed their own brochure push for the factor of local engagement and locally adapted information. The municipalities that have developed a local brochure, communicate it in varying ways. Some, mainly those that have developed in the latest few years, declare that the brochure is an important part of the risk communication efforts, and some were quite unaware of the fact that such a local brochure existed.

Evaluating the process, all municipalities conclude that improvements regarding evaluation could be made. Some have a more developed evaluation process than others. However, all 11 interviewed municipalities reported that citizens do not hesitate to reach out to the municipality if anything is unclear. Therefore, many interviewees state that not receiving feedback from citizens often entails that they have succeeded. One way of evaluating the level of citizens' compliance is to measure concrete behavioral changes and compliance with risk communication. The complex system is seen as a difficulty when conducting evaluations as it is difficult to determine which actor the responder received the information from. In many cases, evaluating communication efforts is therefore conducted internally within the organization, a little subconsciously.

Conclusions

In conclusion, *how do Swedish municipalities make sense of risk communication?* As of today, risk communication as a term is, in general, not a term that is occurring in Swedish municipalities' communications processes, instead crisis communication is used as a collective term. However, the concept of working preparatory to minimize risks, and the occurrence of potential crises i.e., risk communication, is present. It is in many cases seen as a core part of the organizations, and crucial in order to operate smoothly if, or when, a crisis occurs.

Moreover, *which factors could explain the varying processes of risk communication in Swedish municipalities?* Size and resources are identified as the most prominent factor that affects and explains different levels of communications efforts to a large extent. According to the findings in this study, competencies are also strongly related to size and therefore presumably also resources. When it comes to risk perception, it seems to have less of an impact than size (resources), but it is a factor that increases the citizen's and organization's awareness, which in turn could generate a larger impact on the risk communication efforts that you conduct, even though if they might be smaller and not as common as in other municipalities.

The development of local risk information brochures does not always seem to have a large effect or connection to the organization's general risk communication. For example, some municipalities have brochures that they, to a great extent, do not make use of in their communications effort. Some employees are also quite unaware that they exist. However, this can in turn also connect to the individual's impact, as in those cases, the developer and initiator of the local brochure are no longer still at the municipality. Therefore, the concept of local risk information brochures as a method to communicate remains somewhat of a mystery even after this study that applied them as a starting point for examining the reasoning behind Swedish municipalities' risk communication efforts. The presumption was that the brochure could be seen as a common trigger. However, not enough aspects seem to point in that direction. Moreover, their development can be seen as quite contradictory when compared to the discussion of decreasing transparency within public organizations due to security.

And finally, *how can we understand these factors from the sensemaking perspective?* As sensemaking suggests, much is due to plausibility rather than accuracy. Many interviews have

similar experiences, but, more than once, only one interviewee, but not the same, stands out from the rest in the process of reasoning, suggesting that it is many times driven by chance rather can structure. The eternal question seems to be: Who is responsible for what? Going forward, the largest challenge is not only resources but also the balance and coordination between actors in this multi-level system.

However, based on the finding from this study, I suggest that it is possible to identify three different kinds of municipalities when it comes to risk communication. First, *the ambitious*, which is aware and use the term and concept of risk communication and has advanced strategical structures within the organizations and general access to resources and high support within the organization. Second, *the evolving*, which is aware of potential challenges and risks with high aims, but with less access to resources and less familiar with risk communication as a term. Third, *the limited*, which is limited in terms of resources, knowledge, and larger crisis experiences, which generates less support internally, as the demand is deemed lower, but has increased during the recent challenges. In general, the majority of Swedish municipalities are, based on the findings of this study, *the evolving* kind. Possibly much due to the current, uncertain, world situation.

Knowledge gaps and suggestions for future research

In general, only one employee was interviewed from each municipality in this study. For future research, it would therefore be of interest to further investigate the same topic and possibly the same questions but include several participants from each municipality and compare the results. Since the conclusions drawn here were reoccurring in several municipalities, this should be the case. Moreover, as mentioned, the concept of the local risk information brochure is still somewhat of a mystery, therefore, further investigation departing from the brochures would be of interest.

Furthermore, since much had happened regarding access and quality of information about crisis preparedness on Swedish municipalities' websites between 2015 and 2019 (Landenmark, 2019), it would be interesting to revise the websites and examine what type of information can be found once again. Especially since this study points to the fact that the municipality websites are referred to as a central part of all types of information, including risk communication within

Swedish municipalities. On top of this, the factor of transparency versus confidentiality is part of the equation, which offers another layer to the discussion. Should then too much and too detailed information be available, as it is possible for foreign power to use it with other intentions.

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Appendix: Interview guide

All interviews were conducted in Swedish. However, for the purpose of this study, the interview guide has been translated from Swedish to English. Before each interview, a short introduction of the study and practical details, such as how the information will be used, were raised. The following guide was then used as a framework during the interviews in order to gather approximately the same information from each municipality.

General information

1. What is your professional title at the municipality?
2. How long have you worked in this position?
3. Can you briefly describe your tasks within this position?
4. Can you briefly describe your work with risk and crisis communication in your current position?
5. Can you describe the municipality's overall strategic work with risk and crisis communication?
6. Has the work changed over time? If so, can you identify a cause?
7. How would you define the terms crisis communication and risk communication?

Identification

8. What are the major crisis preparedness challenges in your municipality?
9. How does the municipality assess the knowledge of the municipal citizens about local threats and risks?
10. How do you assess the municipal residents' preparedness for local threats and risks?
11. How do you identify target groups for external risk and crisis communication?
12. Where/how do you think citizens find information about the municipality's crisis preparedness?
13. Who is generally the initiator/s of initiatives within the municipality related to risk communication?

14. Who is responsible for ensuring that municipal residents have knowledge of local threats and risks and how these can be prevented or managed?

Communication

15. How does the work process look like when communication about risks/crises is to be designed? Who makes the decisions in the process?

16. *If the municipality developed its own brochure*: Can you describe the process and reasoning regarding the development of your local brochure?
    If the municipality has not developed its own brochure: Is there any reason for not developing a local brochure?

17. In 2018, MSB sent out the brochure *If the crisis or the war is coming* - Do you know of it? If so, how does the municipality reason in connection to it?

18. Does your municipality work with MSB's national preparedness week? If yes, then how? If not, why not?

Evaluation

19. How does the municipality evaluate implemented risk communication efforts?

20. *If the municipality developed its own brochure*: How have the citizens responded to your local brochure?

21. How do the citizens generally respond to the municipality's risk and crisis communication?

22. Do you have something to add, or do you have any questions?