

## In Search of the Relevant Other Collaborative Governance in Denmark

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### Abstract

The paper argues that the emergence and evolution of the semantics of collaborative governance form the basis of modern planning and policy making. The semantics of collaborative governance has a rationality of its own, where the differences between the relevant stakeholders in relation to power and specific interests are diminished in favour of equality-based dialogues and consensus making in order to produce longstanding, innovative solutions to the wicked problems of modern society. The paper will show how the semantics of collaborative governance are structured around the absence of a stable and affirmative concept of equality. Taking its outset in a reform of the Danish housing association sector, the paper investigates equality as an empty concept, which compels stakeholder expectations about an imagined “equal other.” The paper shows how the reform produces unintended and continuous disappointment among the relevant stakeholders, because their search for an equal other continues to slip, yet remains ambiguous. The lesson to be learned from this critical case study is that instead of serving as an aspirational ideal, the quest for equality risks undermining the very success of collaborative governance.

### Introduction

Keywords:  
Collaborative governance  
Equality  
Housing associations  
Wicked problems

The idea of New Public Management (NPM) relies on the government’s ability to outsource the delivery of goods and services. This has given rise to a large number of studies on the government’s capacity to monitor contracts, which is crucial to its ability to outsource taxpayer-funded goods and services to non-profit and for-profit organizations (Brown & Potoski 2003; Cooper 2003; Kelman 2002; Milward & Provan 2003). According to a growing literature, however, NPM seems to have lost its momentum. New forms of complex problems have arisen that challenge NPM’s emphasis on central management and management operating through contracts as representing modern solutions to modern problems (Head & Alford 2015).

The literature now takes its point of departure in what are known as wicked problems, which are problems where both the definition of and the solutions to the problem are uncertain and controversial. This means that not only does public policy need to invite relevant stakeholders into processes of negotiation about how to define the problem at hand, it also faces the challenge that the definition of the problem resulting from these negotiations requires the collaboration of several actors, typically across public, private and voluntary sectors, in order to reach a solution. Wicked problems in this sense require a high degree of flexibility, reflexivity, learning and meaningful stakeholder involvement (Durant & Legge 2006; Reinicke, Benner & Witte 2001).

Over the last few decades, therefore, a new governance strategy has emerged to replace the traditional New Public Management and its emphasis on management

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and contracts. A growing body of literature on specific governance efforts are promoting what is referred to as collaborative governance. This mode of governance brings multiple stakeholders together in common forums with public agencies to engage in equal consensus-oriented decision making in order to define existing challenges and to develop initiatives necessary for addressing them. Collaborative governance presents itself as a reaction to previous NPM failures of downstream implementation and politicisation of regulation. The argument is that the hierarchical modes of thought inherent in modern NPM stand in the way of thinking expansively about policy issues. Instead of NPM's emphasis on central management, efficiency and control, collaborative governance introduces the need for horizontal structures that work through collaboration, dialogue and equality in order to meet the challenges of "wicked problems" (Hartmann 2012; Hendricks 2008; Bryson et al. 2006; Provan & Kenis 2008; Silvia & McGuire 2010, Johnson et al. 2011).

The aim of this paper is to question the normative imperative of "equality" that dominates collaboration governance theory. The paper uses the reform of the Danish housing associations as a critical test of how the quest for equality confuses stakeholders to the point of undermining the ambitions of the reform. The line of the paper's argument proceeds through the following six arguments: First I argue that the research field of Collaborative Governance is structured around an empty category of "equality" that lacks any stable definition. Instead we see a raft of different propositions that refer to interests, representations or resources, but most often the concept remains undefined as a romantic dream of political unity. The second line of argument discusses a new reform by the Danish housing associations, which adopts the semantics of Collaborative Governance and thereby inherits the lack of clarity in its definition of what equality means. Third, I argue that because of the absence of a definition of the concept of equality, the different reform stakeholders operate with a broad swath of different ideas about "the other" with whom they imagine being in an "equal" dialogue. In other words, "the other" can readily be ascribed a number of different expectations. Fourth, I will show how the proceeding meetings cause a lot of disappointment and how the otherness of "the other" fails to live up to the different stakeholder expectations. In other words, the various stakeholders are never able to fully identify "the other" as a relevant other with whom to be in dialogue. There is always something that prevents "the other" from living up to the expectations. Fifth, I will show how these disappointments have created a demand for ever-new forms of meetings. However, these meetings only produce further disappointment regarding the otherness of the other, and four years after the implementation of the ambitious reform, results are still very poor. The paper concludes with the sixth and final argument, which is that the semantics of collaborative governance creates confusion among stakeholders to such an extent that it becomes non-performative and sends stakeholders on a search for their relevant "other" only to be caught in a vicious cycle of disappointments.

## The semantics of collaborative governance

In contrast to NPM, new forms of collaboratively driven innovation and interactive forms of steering are being put on the agenda to facilitate the development of new ideas, mutual learning and common ownership of new and creative solutions (Osborne 2010; Torfing et al. 2012). The challenge is not so much the perspectives of the NPM paradigm, e.g. the public monopoly on welfare provision, but the growing complexity of the issues that public administration has to deal with. The solution to this challenge is not to create new forms of contractual relationships, but rather to facilitate collaboration among various relevant stakeholders across public, private and voluntary sectors.

Because cooperation about and coordination of objectives, interests and initiatives among different stakeholders do not occur on its own, it becomes necessary for the state to institutionalize the interaction in a variety of policy games. This form of governance is also called collaborative governance (Jessop 1998, 2000, 2002; Kickert et al. 1997; Kooiman & Jentoft 2009; Peters 2010, Torfing et al. 2012; Provan & Kenis 2005; Sørensen & Torfing 2009).

Ansell and Gash's widely cited article on collaborative governance defines collaborative governance as:

A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets (2007:544).

The issue of modern governance is not whether or not the various actors should collaborate but how. Collaborative governance seems to be the answer because it represents the state's attempt to create a space wherein the different actors can interact with one another in new and collaborative ways. Both policy and the scientific research are heavily guided by a normative vision for a better society and argue in favour of developing a plural democracy in which all policy actors respect each other's right to have an opinion and receive a proper political response based on agnostic respect (Caroly 2009; Innes & Booher 2003; Kooiman & Jentoft 2009; Sørensen og Torfing 2009). The idea is that the various actors, in spite of their many differences, share preferences and interests, mutually listen and propose solutions, and that dialogue can ensure universally acceptable solutions.

One of the key concepts of collaborative governance is its emphasize on equality among the participants of the collaboration: "Members of the group are equal in the process ... the integrity of the institutions is important in keeping the ball on top of the hill" (Hartmann 2012). Hendricks discusses the need to change established power relations "to improve the equality and inclusivity of the networks" (2008). Others note that, "It may be wise for collaborators to use their resources to put all participants on a more equal footing" (Bryson, Crosby &

Stone 2006), while still others state that, “Only by having all network members participate, on an equal basis, will participants be committed to the goals of the network” (Provan & Kenis 2008), and that “When operating in a governance context it’s about treating others as equals” (Silvia & McGuire 2010). Or as it is generally put: the stakeholders cooperate on a nonhierarchical basis in the making of public policies, enjoying equal status although the distribution of financial, material, or ideational resources may be unequal (Börzel & Panke, 2007). It is therefore not surprising that the researchers come to the conclusion that:

Successful collaborative governance, however, is very difficult to achieve. It depends on creating a deliberative climate... Stakeholders must be convinced that the process is free from behind the scenes manipulation and that safeguards are in place to check the disproportionate influence of powerful stakeholders. In short, stakeholders must feel secure that all involved in the process have equal opportunity to influence the decisions made (Johnson et. al. 2011:700).

The concept of equality occupies a central position within the semantic of collaborative governance. However, the concept remains undefined. It is not clear in what respect the participants are expected to be “on an equal footing”. Is it a question of equal access to the scene of discussions, of deciding what should be discussed, of defining solutions or of putting the solutions into practice? Or does the idea of equality instead refer to more abstract aspects such as knowledge, authority, resources, human capital, etc.? The literature fails on both levels to provide any precise definition of what equality means. Instead it remains an open metaphor for what every stakeholder should strive for, without any specification about what the equal other looks like. In other words; equality never achieves a definitive foundation because the semantic of collaborative governance never succeeds in explaining what equality really means.

Such ambiguousness notwithstanding, however, collaborative governance has been applied within several different policy contexts, which has led to a stream of case studies (see Ansell and Gash 2007, Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh 2012). Many of these studies explicitly emphasize the lack of equality and the imbalance of power between stakeholders as an explanation for why the collaborations often do not succeed in practice, (Flyvbjerg 1998; Gray 1989; McGuirk 2001; Pløger 2001; Short & Winter 1999; Tett, Crowther & O’hara 2003; Tewdwr-Jones & Thomas 1998; Newman, Barnes; Sullivan and Knops 2004; Warner 2006). These studies criticize collaborative governance for being prone to manipulation by stronger actors, causing the goal of having consensus-oriented collaborative governance for policy making to fail.

The risk that an imbalance in the power relationship will undermine the prospects of collaborative governance has caused proponents of collaboration to identify a number of strategies that can be used to empower stakeholders who seem to lack the power necessary to be fully part of the dialogue process (Faw-

cett et al 1995; Lasker & Weis 2003; Mitchell 2005; Schuckman 2001; Choi and Roberts 2014). A critical issue in these studies is that if significant power imbalances exist between stakeholders, a commitment to a positive strategy of empowerment and representation of the weaker or disadvantaged stakeholders is necessary for collaborative governance to be successful (Ansell & Gash 2007:551-551). Others mention the same cure:

The selective empowerment of weak and marginalized network actors – for example, by helping them to organize themselves, enhancing their knowledge and resources and granting them some kind of veto-power – can help promote equality in the process of deliberation and decision making (Sørensen & Torfing 2009).

This article does not criticize collaborative governance for being unable to put the relevant stakeholders on an equal footing, but investigates how the rhetoric of collaborative governance and its quest for equality lack any positive definition, and therefore has significant consequences for practice and risks undermining the ambitions of dialogue-based collaboration. In the following case study, I will therefore not focus on the lack of equality between the various participants, but instead investigate how a specific policy adopts the absence of a positive definition of what equality means, and as a consequence leaves it up to the participants themselves to establish all sorts of expectations about how their equal other should look. In other words, the ideals of collaborative governance do not only represent a nice and aspirational ideal for modern governance but also have serious and critical consequences for the possibility of actually establishing a dialogue between the various stakeholders.

Collaborative governance does not in itself represent a concrete and certain policy, but it represent a specific cultivated form of semantics, which produces available patterns that can be used to facilitate selections and therefore become repeatable in varying contexts. The semantic does not determine how different governing bodies should adopt to it. In this sense there will always exist a plurality of possible adaptations. But the semantic of collaborative governance helps to guide the government's attempt to manage the experience and action among the various stakeholders in order to cope with the increasing complexity that everyone faces. The semantic of collaborative governance thus produces descriptions of "others" that allow the stakeholders to identify how to engage each other by saying: Only as your equal can "the other" be the one you can be engaged in successful collaboration with. In the following I will present the case of the Danish housing sector.

### **The Danish reform of the housing association sector**

In an international context, an important feature of Danish housing associations is their financial autonomy, which is controlled by the tenants. The local authorities, however, have the obligation and the power to intervene if tenants refuse to

endorse prudent budgets. Danish housing associations have thus often formed confederations to improve their efficiency compared to the delivery of central services while maintaining their relatively small scale and autonomy.

Consequently, Danish housing associations are relatively independent of the central government and serve the purpose of building and administering housing as cheaply as possible. The idea behind this system is for Danish housing associations to be economically self-contained and for public funds allocated to social housing to stay within the system and, eventually, support the construction of new housing. As a result, all housing associations maintain a building fund. A key feature of Danish housing associations is also the high degree of tenant involvement. Each housing estate has its own Estate Board, which is responsible for decisions on maintenance, budget approval, improvements, repairs, house rules, common rooms, social initiatives and leisure activities. Some of the larger housing estates operate with sub-area boards and also have a central board that has budgetary control of the whole estate.

Even though Danish housing associations have a high degree of autonomy, they are subject to detailed government control, because the local authorities are obliged to guarantee that the housing associations regulate themselves according to the law for non-profit housing associations. This means that they must ensure not only that they are administered in a financially suitable way, but that the local authorities also have the power to decide if a future tenant is eligible to live in social housing based on their income. Likewise, the local authorities have the option of allocating up to 20% of the housing stock for its own waiting list.

Before the reform, the primary task of housing associations was to build and administrate public housings and the local authorities were to ensure that this was properly carried out according to the law. In this way, the sector represented a classic example of a state governing through contractual regulation and central authority, where the differences between the stakeholders was not perceived in terms of equality/inequality, but in terms of differing rights, obligations and duties towards one another.

However the Danish government realized that the traditional administrative model was insufficient to tackle the challenges that many of the local housing associations faced with regard to unemployment, youth gangs and crime. Many housing associations were trapped in a negative spiral, where people with the necessary resources moved out, and with only few possibilities for attracting newcomers with the same capacity for community building. The government realized that in order to turn these developments around, it needed to join all community resources in developing new and innovative solutions to these “wicked problems” of the local housing associations.

In 2010, the Danish government launched a reform to promote collaboration between local authorities and housing associations in Denmark in order to develop new initiatives to challenge these developments. The aim was to break away from traditional forms of government, mediated by legal regulation and contracts, and to foster dialogue-based collaboration between stakeholders. On one hand, local authorities would give up their role as rule-observing bureaucrats in

favour of reshaping themselves as equal partners with housing associations concerning goals, challenges and initiatives. On the other hand, the housing associations would no longer be merely administrators of the law and instead see themselves as active policymakers. It was believed that the institutionalization of inter-organizational collaboration among local authorities and the housing associations would be more effective than the traditional hierarchical form of collaboration. After all, they had the ability to facilitate self-organization and innovation, as well as bring together resources across sectors of society to develop new initiatives that could secure the goal of urban development.

Taking into consideration that approximately one million people, or almost 20% of the population of Denmark, are residents in housing associations, and that more than 20,000 of them are active volunteers in committee work (KAB 2011), the reform provided local authorities with a unique opportunity to expand their network and to reach a high number of their residents through dialogue with the housing associations.

The government saw its role as establishing the necessary conditions and tools for the actors to constitute themselves as equal partners in order to find concrete and local answers to the specific challenges they were facing (Ministry of Welfare 2008:91). According to the Danish reform, the state's task was to generally define this horizon, leaving it up to the different stakeholders to make it concrete and real by adjusting it to local conditions and developing the necessary initiatives to reach the goals (Ministry of Welfare 2008:263).

## Data and methods

The sources of empirical evidence for this article employ two primary data collections: document analyses and interviews. The section on the government semantics rely on a strong tradition for analysing policy documents, where the data is based on a close examination of several policy documents (Freeman & Maybin 2011:155; Smith 1984, 1990:217). As many previous examinations of public documents indicate, policy documents tend to refer to other policy documents. As a result, my focus is on a set of documents that all refer to each other in a network of textual relations (Allen 2000:1).

The documents include the government white paper on the reform (Ministry of Welfare 2008), which presents the government's policy prior to the introduction of the subsequent legislation. I also examine the many official guidelines on how to implement the reform that the ministry, municipalities and national association of housing associations produced to assist the various relevant stakeholders (Ministry of Interior and Social Affairs 2009, Ministry of Social Affairs 2010, Copenhagen Housing Association 2011, and National Association of Municipalities 2009, 2010). I conduct a close examination of a total of six documents<sup>1</sup>, which, combined, create their own network of textual relations, in order to understand how they form a new steering relationship between the municipalities and the housing associations.



In the next section, the analysis is based on extensive qualitative data gathered over three years of research. The data include thirty-six in-depth interviews with a number of key participants in the implementation of the reform, including politicians and officials from three different municipalities and officials and volunteers from all six housing associations, equally divided between the three municipalities (see appendix). Interviews were conducted with staff from organizations taking active part in the steering dialogues and representatives from government and non-government sectors. It should be noted here that the object of analysis in this network is the organization, not the respondents. I treat the respondents as key informants on their organization, not as individual data points in their own right.

The participants have all been interviewed twice, first in 2011 and then again in 2012, a period which marks increased collaborative activity in order for the various stakeholders to live up to the new reform expectations. The use of a semi-structured interview approach allow respondents to describe their experiences and understandings of integrated policy and service delivery in their own words (Patton 1990; Denzin 1989). Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed to allow subsequent cross-tabulation and identification of common themes and variation in responses. During the interviews, we mainly focused on how the interviewed individuals perceived the collaboration so far, and what he or she found to be lacking and why. In the second round of interviews we posed the same questions in order to be able to observe whether there were any changes in the perception of the collaboration and to deepen our understanding of the answers from the first round of interviews. Ultimately, these interviews were designed to explore how the participant saw the process of collaboration and how they perceived “the other” whom they were expected to collaborate with.

### The ideal of equality and its lack of definition

At the centre of the reform of the Danish housing associations, and as the most important tool for making its political vision of collaborative governance a concrete reality was the steering dialogue, which referred to on-going meetings between local authorities and housing associations. The steering dialogue was thus presented as central for coordination efforts and for sharing information and knowledge about contemporary problems and opportunities, as well as for the definition of future challenges and visions and the initiatives necessary to achieve them. For example, the Federation of Social Housing Organizations in Denmark (BL) and Local Government Denmark (KL) stated: “In the future, cooperation between local authorities and the housing associations shall be founded on the steering dialogue and the following agreements and with fewer detailed approvals” (BL & KL 2009:4), while the Ministry of Social Affairs asserted that: “The new reform creates the partners as equals so they can jointly find long-term solutions and be far-sighted” (2009:3). Finally, subsequent to the reform, the chairman of Local Government Denmark, Erik Nielsen, explained the following: “In a steering dialogue, the partners meet each other at eye level

and as equals.” Thus, the technology of a steering dialogue is already embedded in the semantic of collaborative governance. At the same time, however, we can observe how the semantic has become influential because it leans on these specific technologies.

Here, we find the same idealistic approach to policymaking as the one that guides the research field of collaborative governance, namely that the definition of challenges and the initiatives designed to meet them should be the result of a free, open and deliberative discussion between equal and relevant actors. The reform is designed to ensure that the various actors, in spite of their many divergent preferences and interests, both listen to and propose solutions, and that solutions can be achieved through dialogue, which are acceptable to all the participants.

From the perspective of the housing associations, the agreement ensures that the local authorities see themselves as equal partners and thereby refrain from creating bureaucratic barriers regarding approvals etc. (Ministry of Welfare 2008:96).

The governance design tries to bring the “we” to the fore by creating the idea that the stakeholders “are in it together.” Governance seems to disappear as a collective noun in favour of concepts of equality, consensus, and dialogue. This causes governance to become dispersed across space and time and to blur a clear distinction between who regulates and who is regulated.

However, like the research field of collaborative governance, the reform fails to establish any stable notion of what equality means. Instead it emphasizes the importance of participants observing and acknowledging “the other” as their equal, thereby forcing the participants to develop their own idea of what their “equal other” should look like. In the following I will investigate how the reform’s lack of a stable definition of the “equal other” leaves it up to the different participants to develop their own idea about what their “equal and relevant other” should look like.

### **In search of the other**

The reform of the Danish housing associations and its emphasis on the steering dialogue as the central tool for establishing an equal and consensus seeking dialogue kick-started the search for a partner with which to share a mutual dialogue. This game has produced frustration on both sides of the relationship because, from the observer’s perspective, the counterpart has turned out to not represent the partner who makes this possible. Instead the otherness of the other seems to prevent the stakeholders from becoming engaged in the steering dialogues.

From the housing associations’ point of view, the local authorities had not prepared themselves to be potential partners. All housing associations are represented by their professional administration *and* their voluntary politicians, but in

the steering dialogues they only met with the officials from the municipality, without the local politicians present. Central to the reform are expectations about the participants working together to reach agreements, which means that, the housing associations expected their representatives to meet with the municipal politicians, and not only their officials, to reach political agreements about the future. Representatives from the local authorities simply lack the necessary mandate to be an equal other for the representatives from the housing associations. As a tenant from a housing association puts it:

“The officials [from the local authorities] don’t have a mandate to say anything about what can be done in the future; it makes the whole thing very difficult.” In the same vein, the chair of a housing association states: “We only meet with the officials [from the local authorities]. There are no politicians. So when they talk, we don’t know if what they say represents what the politicians think. You know, it’s not the officials who make the decisions.” A voluntary representative of a housing association expresses the same expectation: “I was expecting that we would discuss politics at these meetings, instead it appears to be the same old administration’s items that are on the agenda.” Or as an official from the housing associations formulates it: “at the steering dialogue, we talk about how to secure the development of our area in the future, but soon we are confronted with political issues...and then nothing happens, we can talk but to move forward from there isn’t possible”. A chairman of a housing association comments that, “it’s very superfluous (the steering dialogue ed.)... you are sitting with some people who are not able to make decisions...I have this feeling that they just sit and take notes of what we are saying. Nothing more.” A voluntary representative of a housing association formulates it in this way: “The steering dialogue is about nothing but control, that is what there is to it...that we are expected to report on how we are doing things; it’s not an equal dialogue.” In response to the direct question “do you miss the presence of politicians in the steering dialogue, he answers: “Yes, because they are the only ones who can make the necessary decisions. Not the officials.”

No matter who you ask from the housing associations – the chairman, the officials or the voluntary representatives – they all miss the presence of local politicians. They all use the same argument to explain their disappointment, which is that a political discussion that produces political decisions can only take place if the politicians from the housing associations meet the politicians from the municipalities. Instead they meet the officials who have no authority. This creates a climate where it is difficult to determine what the steering dialogue is really meant to achieve:

We don’t get any clear signals from the local authorities: ‘What do you want? And why?’ This would allow us to find a way to play a role in these plans, but then they just say to us, ‘But what do you want?’ (A housing association official).

The housing associations send their voluntary representatives to engage in political discussions about the development of the local community but are met by a partner who is not geared to take part in such discussions. Instead the housing associations find that the municipalities are represented by officials who do not have the ability to constitute themselves as an equal partner, because they have no mandate to engage in concrete political negotiations about what could be relevant to make agreements about in the future. Therefore, from the perspective of the housing associations, the conditions for an equal dialogue are not present.

The local authorities, on the other hand, find that the housing associations come to the meetings with unrealistic expectation. As one official formulates it: "You can't expect that the politicians (from the municipality ed.) have the time to attend all these meetings, they simply don't have the time for this." Another official puts it this way: "The politicians (from the municipality ed.) are not aware of what is going on at the local level, they simply don't have the knowledge, so I can't see why they should attend these meetings about a lot of local stuff." And yet another official says: "You can't expect our politicians to find the time to take active part in meetings with every single housing association."

Instead of establishing the necessary organisational setting for an equal dialogue about the future of these communities, a peculiar climate was found where everybody was waiting for "the other" to take the initiative. An official from the municipality states: "The housing associations have no idea about what they want. They are still only engaged in technical issues." Another official explains: "I wish they [the housing associations] would come to us and tell us what their visions are for their local environment; instead, they show up with the usual technical issues."

The local authorities are waiting for the housing associations to tell them about their ideas and wishes concerning the future of their local environment, but are confronted with minor technical issues that belong to the past. A municipal official summed up what the steering dialogues had produced so far: "We just talk. It's like they come here, and then we have a nice talk about everything and nothing. But it's not something that produces a lot."

The dissatisfaction with the steering dialogues has created a demand for new types of meetings, where politicians from the housing associations and the municipalities could meet. As a result, the three municipalities have all developed new kinds of meetings. Or as one housing association chair puts it: "The steering dialogue mainly involves general reporting about how we're doing in the association. It's not an equal dialogue, which is why we have discussed using common meetings to develop our collaboration."

The "common meetings" did not replace the "steering dialogues," but functioned as yet another level of interaction. However, the "common meetings" that were developed in all three municipalities similarly failed to live up to the expectations of the different participants. As one representative of the housing associations stated after a meeting: "It was only political talks, pure election speak ... it was obvious that they didn't have much knowledge about the field." A housing

association official said: “The politicians only provided election talk. Blah, blah, blah. Nothing concrete was ever put on the table”. Another official from the housing associations followed up: “The politicians don’t expect us to say much at these meetings; they let us know that they expect us to come with our ears open and our mouths shut.” Another official explained that,

at one of the meetings one of the housing associations was asking about the possibility of getting a new kitchen in the department of the housing associations. But it quickly became clear that this meeting was not meant for the discussion of these kinds of details. And I don’t really understand this, but then again where can we take these discussions with the municipalities?

The housing associations find that the local authorities lack knowledge about central questions and that the politicians talk in a non-committal way about superfluous topics. The municipal politicians, in turn, find that the housing associations are committed to their own narrow issues rather than being engaged in broader topics that could represent the housing association sector and its common interests as a whole. As one municipal official (2011) explained: “The individual housing associations need to see themselves as partners not as competitors,” which a municipal politician corroborates, stating: “The housing associations don’t agree on very much. It’s difficult for us to bring the discussion up to the level where it belongs, because the various housing associations don’t speak as a unit. They only talk about themselves and their needs.” A housing association administrator concurred, stating: “The common meetings aim for consensus, which means the lowest common denominator will always rule. It’s not very ambitious. And if the housing associations don’t agree internally, then the politicians won’t make agreements with us.”

The common meetings, which were meant to address the disappointments arising from the steering dialogues turned out to produce their own frustrations. The politicians from the housing associations did not think that the participants were on an “equal footing” at these meetings. Instead, they were met by politicians who were only engaged in their own talking. The politicians from the municipalities, for their part, were disappointed by the inability of the politicians from the housing associations to constitute themselves as an equal political dialogue partner. In other words, they were not able to constitute themselves as a unit and meet the politicians from the municipality on an equal level.

While the lesson seems to be that it is difficult to establish “equality” on a formal political level, between the municipalities and the housing associations, one of the municipalities came up with what they call “in-between meetings”, which are held with participation from the administration of both the local authorities and the housing associations. The conclusion seems to be that if “equality” cannot be achieved on a political level, it is worth the effort to try to achieve it among the officials from both organisations. However, this setup has

led to conflicts about which topics the different actors are allowed to speak about:

They are only allowed to speak about technical things, and if their discussions are considered to involve policymaking, they are criticised by politicians from both sides” (municipal official). A housing association official stated: “A good example is when the minutes are sent out. The chairperson gets furious if there’s anything in the minutes that he considers to be a political issue and not strictly administrative.

The reform is now five years old and has produced a long series of meetings between the housing associations and the municipalities in their attempt to discover the “equal other” in a consensus based dialogue. The reform was intended to at least ensure “agreements about future agreements with each other” which were to be uploaded to the municipalities’ websites. Unfortunately, the many meetings have produced very limited results. This has created much resignation among stakeholders: “I don’t know what we’re going to use all these meetings for. I think that the time we spend on this stands in sharp contrast to what we get out of it ...” (Municipal official). One housing administrator stated: “I didn’t expect there to be so many meetings ... I don’t think it’s necessary.” A housing association politician follow up: “Until now ... I mean all the effort that has been put into this reform, all the big ideas, and all the many meetings ... well ... it hasn’t really borne fruit, has it?”

## Discussion

The article argues that the complex expectations that the reform partners had of each other were due to an unspecific ideal of “equality,” which derives from the dominant semantic of collaborative governance. The lack of clarity about the specific meaning of the concept of equality produces all sorts of expectation about the otherness of the other. However, these expectations generate a great deal of disappointment among the participants, resulting in a call for new types of meetings, which only seem to generate new kinds of disappointments, undermining the desire to formulate and implement concrete initiatives,

Consequently, this paper indicates that the real challenge facing collaborative governance is not the imbalance of power relations, but that it stems from the basic and yet undefined assumption of equality as the very precondition for consensus making. The semantics of the reform have imposed itself on the different stakeholders, and instead of representing a solution to the many challenges at hand, it becomes a source of social problems – a burden that creates multiple disappointments and an endless array of meetings that only produce more disappointments.

This insight challenges not only the promise of collaborative governance – that it is possible through equality-based dialogue to find solutions to the wicked

problems challenging modern policy-making. It also challenges the very idea that the quest for equality, albeit geared towards something impossible, is worth striving for as an aspirational ideal for all stakeholders of modern governance (see Head 2004). The lessons to be learned from this critical case study is that the very aspirational but empty ideal of equality runs the risk of undermining the possibility for the relevant stakeholders to engage in fruitful collaboration with each other. In other words, the vague concept of equality serves as a poor guiding principle for the involved stakeholders.

Following a similar logic, other researchers have developed a critical eye both for the semantic of the governance literature and how this rhetoric influences collaboration in practice. This has been done in relation to the concepts of regulation (Bora 2014), collaboration (O'flynn 2009; Keast & Mandell 2014) and in respect to the concept of partnership (Andersen 2008). Bora suggests that the concept of regulation within the semantics of governance theory produces a particular habitus among the stakeholders, which contrasts with the concept of political autonomy (Bora 2014). O'flynn, on the other hand, focuses on the lack of clarity regarding the concept of collaboration within governance theories, which makes it very difficult to actually judge whether there is such a thing as collaboration in practice (O'flynn 2009). And Andersen has in his work shown, how the lack of a clear concept on partnership, produce a shifting ground on which agreements must be taken within different governance arrangements (Andersen 2008).

This study is an attempt to contribute to the emerging field of investigation into how the semantics of governance has serious and sometimes unintended practical consequences for collaboration. In this way, the paper hopes to provide a basis for debate about the reality of equality in public policy. Not as a question of the extent to which it exists in reality, but as a question of how and with what consequences the ideal of equality functions as a guiding principle for the orientation of the involved stakeholders.

## Conclusion

The critical case of this paper does not represent yet another example of how concrete processes of collaborative governance lacks equality among its participants. It is an illustration of how the quest for equality, which dominates the semantic of collaborative governance, guides stakeholders' attitudes toward each other. The paper arrives at three different conclusions; First, that in the language of collaborative governance, equality functions as an empty concept. Second, that the stakeholders of a concrete reform process independently translate equality on their own terms. And finally, that stakeholder expectations about their "equal other" continuously produce disappointments that risk undermining the very ambitions of the reform.

This critical case thus produces an important lesson; collaborative governance arrangements are not only unable to guarantee equality among involved stakeholders, the concept also works as a poor guiding principle for the involved

stakeholders' attitudes toward each other to the extent that they might run counter to the normative expectations of the governance literature: that equality-based dialogue will produce longstanding and innovative solutions to the wicked problems of modern society.

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## Appendix

Three municipalities representing very different areas of Denmark were chosen as cases: Lolland, Vejle and Roedovre. From each of these municipalities, two civil servants who both participated in the steering dialogues were interviewed. Two housing associations were chosen from each municipality, for a total of six housing associations; one chairman and one business manager who also participated in the steering dialogues were interviewed. In all six people from each municipality were interviewed, first in 2010 and subsequently in 2012. In summary, a total of 36 interviews were conducted with participants in the reforms

steering dialogues from the municipalities and the local housing associations respectively.

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup>) Three documents are on the level of government departments (Ministry of Welfare 2008, Ministry of Interior and Social Affairs 2009 and Social Affairs 2009). Two documents are on the level of the National Association of Municipalities (2009; 2010). The last document is from the largest housing association in Denmark, Copenhagen Housing Association (2011).