Article

Meetings as an Arena for Coordination in Crisis: The County Governor's Contingency Coordination through the County Emergency Council in Norway

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Abstract: This article aims to study how Norwegian county governors (CGs) performed their coordination tasks shortly after the lockdown in March by emphasizing the use of the County Emergency Council (CEC) as a meeting arena for coordination in times of crisis management more generally and the challenges the CGs had to face in this particular situation. We ask (1) what kind of meeting arena is the CEC and (2) how does the CEC as a meeting arena facilitate coordination at this level of government? In order to analyze the dynamics of the CEC meetings, we will refer to two theoretical approaches, i.e., meetings science and coordination. The present study is based upon an exploratory research strategy to analyze how the CGs responded to the challenges and performed coordination through the CEC. We found that the CEC meetings could be seen as hybrids of organization, institution and network, and even a network of networks, where several CG offices established thematic networks. These smaller networks have the advantage of establishing personal relationships more easily than the larger networks; however, they may lack the comprehensive overview that is necessary in a crisis that cuts across sectors.

Keywords: contingency coordination; county governor; meetings; organization; institution; networks; network of networks

1. Introduction

This article analyzes meetings as a phenomenon for contingency coordination and crisis management by studying the Norwegian county governors (CGs) and how coordination took place through meetings in the County Emergency Council (CEC)[1], potentially the most prominent meeting arena for collaboration and coordination at the regional level.

Coordination may take place in meetings; meetings are commonly referred to as part of various kinds of processes, e.g., policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. According to the classical literature on organization studies, meetings have been seen as an instrument for achieving specific tasks and for division of labor (see, for instance, Simon 1997 or Scott et al. 2015). Furthermore, this might reflect a tendency towards centralization of power and hierarchical command structures, as recommended by many prominent organization experts (Kettl 2003; Peters 2005). On the other hand, meetings can serve an important role by framing public problems and highlighting policy alternatives (Tepper 2004). Furthermore, attention has been paid to how organizational structures, and thus meetings, are patterned to handle uncertainty the organization faces, including in its environment (Turner 1976).

In current meeting science literature, the context of meetings and the way they are organized have been studied in empirical projects, where the focus has been on strategic orientations and what people actually do when organizing and conducting meetings. Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) discuss how a turn in strategy research to "practice-based theorizing" contributes to organization theory by emphasizing the importance of different meeting modes, particularly when studying the role of meetings in shaping stability and

change in organization strategies. In their conclusions, they find that the way meetings are organized have different consequences due to the mode of the meeting and demonstrate how strategic meetings lead to stability and change in complex processes.

Standaert et al. (2021) discuss how meeting modes are important by studying whether and how differences in virtual meeting mode effectiveness can be explained by the differing functional capabilities. They conclude their study, based upon a comprehensive survey of business meeting organizers, by stating that using shared computer screens and/or workspaces, and experiencing co-location are fundamental modes for achieving any of the business meeting objectives (p. 7). These findings are further elaborated in a discussion of when and how to meet virtually in a post-pandemic world. Here, important points are matching the appropriate communication capabilities with various meeting objectives and taking into account meeting size and duration (Standaert et al. 2022).

Handling crises is handling complexity and crises can be understood as wicked problems (Lægreid and Rykkja 2015; Rittel and Webber 1973). Wicked problems involve the difficulty of having no clear standards for how they are to be solved. The COVID-19 crisis is described as a wicked problem due to its complexity, the unclear understanding of the challenges the pandemic would pose to society and the difficulty to draw on experience from previous pandemics (Schiefloe 2021; van den Oord et al. 2020). Wicked problems therefore put static organizational frameworks under pressure. The solution usually outlined for such problems is extensive use of cooperation between different actors and flexible organizational frameworks that facilitate coordination (Head and Alford 2015).

Using the County Emergency Council (CEC) as a meeting arena may be regarded as a more or less explicitly formulated strategy to overcome the challenges of wicked problems (Ferlie et al. 2011; Head and Alford 2015; Blondin and Boin 2020) resting on recommendations and mutual information processes which may foster knowledge uptake and develop networks (Tepper 2004). Research has shown that networks, to some extent, should be able to handle both the scale and complexity of wicked problems, here pandemics (van den Oord et al. 2020).

This article aims at studying how the CGs performed their coordination task shortly after the lockdown in March 2020—the COVID-19 pandemic stretching the coordination role to its limits, by emphasizing using the County Emergency Council (CEC) as a meeting arena for coordination at times of crisis management more generally and the challenges the CGs had to face in this respect. We ask (1) what kind of meeting arena is the CEC and (2) how does the CEC as a meeting arena facilitate coordination at this level of government?

This study contributes to the literature on coordination as coordination is about meetings. Our theoretical approach draws on meeting science literature and organizational theory. Following the presentation of the county governor office and the CEC, we elaborate on the theoretical framework, research design and methods in further detail before we present the results. The article ends with a discussion and concluding remarks.

1.1. The County Governor Office and the County Emergency Council

In all Scandinavian countries, the county governors are an historic, well-established part of the governance system with roots from the late Middle Ages as the King's representatives in the regions (Flo 2014). As state representatives, they supervise municipalities with due respect to their autonomy. During the democratization of the governance system, and in particular the post-WW2 establishment of the modern welfare states in these countries, the county governor lost political support (Flo 2014). However, in 1982 the CGs obtained another, potentially central, role in the governance system: they were placed in charge of coordinating national policies at regional and local levels (Flo 2014). The delegated responsibility in emergency preparedness issues and crisis management has increasingly been directed at the coordination of regional resources. In Norway, as in other western countries (e.g., Brattberg 2012; Kettl 2003; Mascio et al. 2020; Petridou 2020), challenges in public safety and emergency preparedness have increased in recent years while national authorities only to a limited extent manage to coordinate across sectors and organizations,

given fragmented public administration and public services (Boin 2019; Christensen and Lægreid 2011).

Following extensive mergers in local government in January 2019, there are now ten county governor offices with a total of about 2500 employees. There are large regional variations in size; the largest CG office covers about one-third of the population of Norway and fifty-two municipalities, while the smallest serve a few hundred thousand inhabitants and about forty municipalities.

The regulations state that the aim of the CEC is to facilitate collaboration on emergency preparedness and crisis management in all regions. CGs manage and convene meetings in the CEC, and decide who will take part, which enables the composition of the CEC to be adjusted to a particular crisis or emergency situation. The work of the CEC is described in the instructions as follows:

- To discuss relevant civil protection and contingency issues and provide general overviews and mutual orientation on these;
- To provide a general description of risk and vulnerability and a common platform for planning civil protection and contingency in the county;
- To be prepared to assist the county governor in coordinating crisis management.

In practice, following the lockdown in Norway in March 2020, all CEC meetings were held online.

1.2. Theoretical Approaches

In order to analyze the dynamics of CEC meetings, we will refer to two theoretical approaches, i.e., meetings science and coordination.

1.2.1. Meetings

Freeman (2008) discusses meetings by asking what we learn from (attending) meetings. Drawing on learning and organization sociology, he approaches this apparently simple question from three perspectives: the "rational", the "institutional" and "constructionist" understanding of meetings. Freeman (2008) focuses upon meetings as processes of introduction, presentation, recognition, confusion, socialization, communication and reporting. These micro-processes will enhance understanding of the dynamics of learning involved in attending meetings. Further, with reference to meetings in social movements and protest mobilization, Haug (2013) discusses how the complex configuration of meeting arenas constitutes an infrastructure that synchronizes the various activities of social movement actors in time and space. He maintains that this infrastructure is not an entirely emergent phenomenon but is also the result of conscious decisions by organizers. Drawing on Ahrne and Brunsson (2011), Haug (2013, p. 709) develops the concept of "meeting arena" as a hybrid of three principles of social order: organization, institution and network. By "organisation", Haug (2013, pp. 714–15) refers to planned actions, formally organized for the purpose of instrumentality, in order to achieve a goal, generally through some kind of hierarchical structure with a formal leader. By "institution", he refers to meetings as routine events. In this perspective, a meeting is an event where latent agreement is actualized and affirmed through rituals and routines. According to Haug (2013, p. 717), "Expressed disagreements are considered superficial and will eventually be resolved 'naturally' as the participants develop a deeper sense of community". Hence, formal structure and explicitly formulated goals are not key aspects of the dynamics of the meeting. Finally, "Network" implies that meetings are considered as *hubs*. From the network perspective, a meeting is an event where personal ties are created and fostered; it is a friendly setting, and sometimes a creative and transformative site of mutual learning. However, network meetings contain inherent limits, for instance the difficulty of acting collectively (Haug 2013, p. 719).

For our purpose, these forms imply that meeting arenas are not understood in terms of hierarchical, vertical coordination and decisions, but rather that there are tensions between these forms, and that one should focus upon decisions rather than hierarchy when studying the organization of meetings. This seems relevant to the analysis of the CEC as a meeting

arena, as these meetings are organized as encounters without a clear-cut structure or a fixed group of participants. The exception to this is the mandatory participation by a number of regional leaders from public and private services, and the CG as the chair of the meetings. At the time of our study, these meetings were digital, implying a large number of participants with no predefined limits, as participants might invite colleagues to join meetings.

Both Freeman (2008) and Haug (2013) focus on the dynamics of face-to-face meetings. When meetings are organized as digital encounters, opportunities for informal talk and "backstage" communication are usually prevented, which leads us to expect that the meetings will provide limited space for meso-level influence among the actors. However, the overall understanding of meeting spaces from three perspectives as organization, institution and network offers theoretical assumptions to aid our understanding of CEC meetings.

1.2.2. Coordination

The basic strategy in dealing with national crises is various forms of coordination (Lango and Lægreid 2014). Coordination concerns the adaptation of actions and decisions among interdependent actors to achieve specific goals (Christensen et al. 2016), which involves both structures and processes (Axelsson and Axelsson 2014), and thus informal values and cultural norms (Egeberg 2012). Structure deals with how to organize information channels or how to organize arenas for coordination. Process is about how to arrive at a goal and how to coordinate an effort. These factors should be adapted to each other if effective coordination is to be achieved. Without suitable common arenas, it can be difficult to achieve a satisfactory coordination process. This is considered to be important even in crisis situations and underlines that formal and informal structures as well as procedures and processes are key elements in crisis management (Christensen et al. 2016).

Coordination can be both vertical and horizontal (Peters 2018). Vertical coordination implies that the CG has a central role in coordinating the state and the municipalities. Horizontal coordination implies that the CG could facilitate coordination among different regional actors.

Horizontal networks can provide solutions where hierarchical coordination does not capture challenges and potential solutions in a complex wicked problem (Head and Alford 2015). Such networks can draw on the fact that the participants have different information and competencies and can contribute different approaches to how the problem should be handled (Ferlie et al. 2011). The aim is to reach a common solution through discussion and joint analysis. This requires that the participants have a common understanding of the challenges they face, that they are able to agree on a common goal, and that they have mutual trust in each other. In order to realize this, actors need arenas where they can collaborate (Head and Alford 2015).

2. Materials and Methods

The present study is based upon an exploratory research strategy to analyze how the CGs responded to the challenges when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Norway. The study focused on the generic role of the CGs as coordinators at local and regional levels of government and included experiences from dealing with coordination issues between regional actors at county and local government levels. Although the CGs had largely the same role and tasks in handling the pandemic, there were differences in how they solved the tasks and designed their role. Individual interviews were chosen to be able to capture such variations and each person's reasons for choices and actions (Danermark et al. 2003). Sixty-four interviews with CGs and managers of the county offices (e.g., contingency office, medical office, and education office) were conducted during the spring and summer of 2020. Approximately half of the interviews were conducted by one or more representatives from the research team visiting the informant's office and conducting face-to-face interviews, while the other half were conducted digitally via video calls. This mixture provided

flexibility for local matters to be elaborated or matters informants wanted to mention to be addressed. The interview guide was semi-structured and we asked questions about experiences from the first months of COVID-19: how prepared was the CG office for such a crisis, how fare did the regulations provide clear guidelines on division of labor and responsibilities, how did different professional departments cooperate and interact during crisis management and finally, how did the CG and the office cooperate and interact with national, regional, and local authorities, including what were the main challenges. This included themes such as experiences with the dimensions of the pandemic situation at the time, experiences of vertical coordination as the role between municipalities and national ministries, horizontal coordination within the CG offices and with the CEC and communication between the CG and its collaborative partners. In order to perform their role of generic coordinator of national policy at regional/local levels of government, the CGs firstly had to ensure that the coordinating organization itself (i.e., the CG agency) was internally coordinated to act in a consistent way, and secondly, to find a role as coordinator in relation to local and regional actors by communicating externally in accordance with national policies. One would expect the first point to be a prerequisite for the second one. Both of these represented challenges, especially because the CGs had recently been reorganized, primarily through mergers, starting on 1 January 2020. The CG's coordination role embedded in the new institutionalized strengthening of its powers still was (and is) in the making, with formal guidelines being introduced in 2017.

Documents were provided by interviewees as supplementary background information. In addition, three situation reports from each CG were analyzed. The situation reports summed up the local government's reporting to national authorities, systematized by the CG office.

It was not possible to collect data through observations of meetings and what took place in them. Due both to the COVID-19 situation and the fact that the study started after a number of CEC meetings had already been held, we were unable to participate in the meetings. However, we received multiple accounts of the meetings from different staff of the CG office.

The interviews lasted between 40 min and two hours, and all those invited agreed to participate. The interviews dealt with the above-mentioned questions, but interviewees were eager to offer personal points of view to supplement the strict interview guide, including generic issues relating to the role of the CG in the governance system. All quotations are anonymized, and each interviewee has been given a random number from 1 to 64. Additionally, the first two randomly chosen numbers refer to the CG office where the interviewee was employed (e.g., 0205: CG office No. 2, interviewee No. 5).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and a thematic analysis was performed (Braun and Clarke 2006). We first took an inductive approach, and the interviews were read, synthesized and analyzed by pairs of authors, before being discussed by the authors and the research team in several meetings. The purpose was to reduce the risk of misinterpretations of the data due to the researchers' pre-understanding (Malterud 2001). We organized the codes into a data coding structure based on our experience of the research topic. In this sense, we anticipated certain core concepts or codes in the data set. In order to understand the particular characteristics of actors from different agencies, the interviews were also analyzed with the participant's department in the CG organization in mind, considering potential specific sectoral challenges. Second, we took a more deductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). This implied taking the instructions for the CEC as our starting point and how the CGs have interpreted and adapted them, also drawing on theories of meeting science and coordination. The code structure was first tested on parts of the dataset, and then on the entire dataset. Finally, we refined and restructured the codes and code structure and developed main themes. A few examples are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Examples of codes and main themes.

Data Extract	Codes	Main Theme
It is true to say that we have spent a lot of time cleaning up the flow of information and ensuring that correct and clear information is always sent out to each sector	Cleaning up information	
We get regular information from the government about any cases we need to deal with—including this one. We then automatically pass on the information to municipalities and CECs when it's natural to do so, to make sure they also have the same information	Passing on information	Sharing information
We communicated everything we knew, often before things were completely ready. We said, "Now there'll probably be some new stuff about this and that". And then the municipalities could prepare for it	Communicating	
We're buried in an avalanche of communication—in both directions. A huge amount of data collected from national authorities, particularly in healthcare	A large amount of information	
The county municipality was invited because it is in charge of upper secondary schools	Meeting with representatives of sectoral interests	
I know that if two or three of us are in close contact, we deal with things much faster and more efficiently	Few participants—quick decisions	Splitting the CEC meeting into smaller meetings
The pandemic is more of a civil protection challenge than an emergency rescue challenge, and there were therefore a wider range of actors involved in the incident management	A range of relevant actors	
We used a more limited selection from the CEC in a number of meetings. So that meant healthcare, police, the home guard, civil defense—we had a more limited group that we worked more closely with than the big CEC	Working closely with a smaller selection	

In the following, the results are presented according to the following four main themes: (1) taking different approaches to the CEC, (2) sharing information, (3) discussing challenges and coordination and (4) splitting the CEC meetings into smaller meetings.

3. Results

At regional level, a large number of actors, both private and public, were invited to participate in the meetings. The formal structure of coordination took place in the online meetings chaired by the CG. Before the pandemic, the CEC met about two or three times a year. Participation in CEC meetings was relatively open; here, leaders from the municipalities, county municipality, health enterprises, welfare agencies, defense/civil defense, religious leaders, key actors from the transportation sector and large private businesses were represented. The municipalities were formally invited, but their participation was not mandatory.

When the pandemic struck, some CGs continued to hold two to four meetings during the first six months, while others invited the CEC to hold virtual meetings once a week. The CGs had different opinions on the frequency of CEC meetings; particularly those agencies with the most participants thought it better to separate actors in different parts of the region to make the meetings more suitable for dialogue between the actors. The agenda of the CEC meetings mainly dealt with issues relating to regional problems when national policies were decided, how to understand the implications at regional level, and to identify specific issues that the CGs could communicate to national authorities. In addition to health issues and the consequences of the lockdown strategy, welfare concerns such as compensation to people laid off and other economic problems were mentioned as important to inform about at the meetings.

3.1. Taking Different Approaches to the CEC

Our informants described considerable variation in how tasks were solved and emphasized. One reason may have been that the various CGs had very different attitudes and

approaches to the CECs. Some of them found that CEC meetings were too expensive in relation to their usefulness. One of them explained:

> What you'll find when you interview people in the other counties is that they probably had CEC meetings more often than us. One of the differences you'll find is that here we try to reduce the frequency of meetings in different areas. (1001)

This statement suggests a desire to limit meetings. Others also tended towards this approach and several clearly stated that setting aside time for meetings could not be a priority when resources were to be used for ongoing crisis management. Such statements suggest not only concern about their own use of time, but also about the extent to which key actors such as municipalities could participate in meetings.

Some of the CGs may have had a general negative attitude towards CECs, but there also seems to be a connection to the number of municipalities in the region. The largest regions were more critical of the CEC than the smaller regions. Nevertheless, several informants pointed out that COVID-19 meant that they had to hold online meetings and they came to realize the benefit of this because participants did not have to spend time travelling to the meetings. This was a great advantage since many of the participants could spend more than one day on the return trip due to the long distances in many of the regions.

Those CGs who had a positive attitude to the CEC placed great emphasis on the fact that it could make decisions on actions that concerned the entire region. It also seems that positive attitudes corresponded with previous positive experiences. Clearly, many of the CG offices have extensive experience of using the CEC in connection with various local and regional crises throughout the year related to severe weather and natural events. Here, the use of the CEC had almost become routine as seen in the following quote:

> . . . we hold meetings in our County Emergency Council much more often during incidents, which makes it not really a formal body, but only a body that meets when things happen and we solve things together. (0503)

This experience made them see the need to hold CEC meetings as soon as COVID-19 threatened the country. In several regions, the CEC held meetings as early as January. In addition, several regions had regular weekly meetings of the CEC, at least in the period from the lockdown until the summer vacation of 2020.

This indicates that the CEC is primarily perceived as a meeting arena where problems can be solved.

3.2. Sharing Information

The extent to which the CEC could be used as an information channel was naturally affected by the frequency of meetings. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that there were also alternative information channels, including online tools, directly to various actors. It is thus clear that those who emphasized limiting the number of meetings had other satisfactory ways of accessing information. From the very beginning, a written information channel was established where the central government via the CGs requested status reports from municipalities. Both the questions from the government and the reports from the municipalities were to some extent processed by the CGs before being sent on. In addition, several CGs established their own systems where their staff answered questions from the municipalities via e-mail and telephone. However, many of them found this inadequate and during the first period of the lockdown several municipalities complained that they were better informed through online newspapers than through formal communication channels.

Those who chose to use the CEC actively nevertheless emphasized their positive experiences. There is a difference between formal written information on decisions taken and informal information about what is being discussed. One of the informants elaborated on this:

> We get regular information from the government about any cases we need to deal with—including this one. We then automatically pass on the information

to municipalities and the CEC when it's natural to do so, to make sure they also have the same information. (0103)

Since January 2020, county medical officers had been in close contact with the government, but many of the issues and discussions did not end in formal decisions or recommendations. It was therefore important for the municipalities to know about the parts of these discussions that were not confidential and to be able to adapt to any measures they expected to be introduced. The following statement illustrates how some CG offices emphasized the communication of this information:

We communicated everything we knew, often before things were completely ready. We said, "Now there'll probably be some new stuff about this and that". And then the municipalities could prepare for it. (0201)

It is also interesting to hear descriptions of the practicalities of conducting meetings with over a hundred participants without major problems. Admittedly, it was difficult to involve a large number of people in a discussion, but several informants pointed out that they solved this by allowing those involved to submit written questions before and during the meeting. These questions were then answered by the county governors and in some cases also by other regional actors that participated in the meeting.

3.3. Discussing Challenges and Coordination

Some of those with a positive view of the CEC emphasized that it could be a strategic forum where participants could discuss challenges and different solutions. Some of the CGs made it clear that they had already used the CEC early on in the process, as described in the following quote:

So, we started the work quite early on. We had a meeting with the CEC in February, so I'd say that we were quite quick to start to create a common understanding of the situation in our office. What it would mean for us. (0206)

In February, there was great uncertainty about what the pandemic would mean for society. A meeting of the CEC was seen as highly beneficial to clarify current knowledge and what could and should be done to prepare for COVID-19.

There were clearly difficulties in running a meeting with so many participants, but generally the meetings were organized in such a way that all participants who wished to speak could do so. One of the CGs tried to arrange a round table meeting where everyone would provide information in turn. This later turned out to be difficult, but with meetings at least once a week, it did not take long before everyone was able to provide input.

Allowing everyone to speak provided a good general idea of the situation in the various municipalities and the services in general. A further advantage was that frequent meetings and active participation by everyone present meant that the participants got to know each other. The following statement illustrates this:

We really get to know each other. Everyone shares some of their experiences, and especially their challenges. I think it has worked very well. I think they say that too. (0402)

This approach enabled discussions of problems and solutions involving a variety of perspectives. One of the informants therefore concluded that the participants in the CEC meetings had been good discussion partners. This suggests that the discussions provided new perspectives on how situations should be handled.

At the same time, the input received by the CGs demonstrated a clear need to coordinate activities, for example in the municipalities. The CGs had different approaches to how to achieve coordination. The simplest way for a CG to achieve this was strong encouragement. One example was the work of the chief municipal medical officer. Small municipalities had only part-time medical officers, many of whom were young and new to the position. Under the Infection Control Act, these officers were given a vital role in local handling of the pandemic. Several CGs therefore used the CEC to encourage municipalities to strengthen this position.

There are also examples of CGs using financial incentives to tempt the participants in the CEC meetings to become involved in actions. This is one of several examples of how coordination was managed by utilizing the position of the county governor. Others also pointed out that the close contact between the CG and the participants in CEC meetings gave CGs more authority than they formally had. It was therefore accepted that the CG interfered and made decisions on behalf of the participants. In these contexts, the CEC became a place where challenges were discussed and where the CG could reinforce decisions related to the entire county, as the following quote illustrates:

> ... every decision and every action need to be coordinated and must be communicated, because it has implications for other functions of society. For every decision, whether it's from transport, the police, the army or the health service, you have to discuss parts of it with other sectors where it's important. And this is where the CEC comes in, this is crucial, where you have a predefined forum that can lead to a good decision on a comprehensive basis. (0803)

This statement also emphasizes another important point, namely that in crises involving several sectors, it is important to have an arena that provides a good overview, where general and cross-sectoral perspectives can be discussed.

3.4. Splitting the CEC Meetings into Smaller Meetings

There were of course also cases that were not suitable to discuss in such a large forum as the CEC. Both those who made active use of the CEC and others explained how they brought together key regional actors in smaller and more operational groups. One of the informants described how this was done:

> ... we used a limited group from the CEC for some meetings. That meant healthcare, police, home guard, civil defense—we had a smaller group that we worked more closely with than the large County Emergency Council, but we also had regular meetings with the CEC. (0101)

A smaller group of this kind, where decisions could be made on what needed to be done and tasks could be distributed quickly, seems to have been a solution used by all CG offices, even those that did not have regular CEC meetings. Nevertheless, it seems that holding regular CEC meetings meant that the entire region was consulted before decisions were made.

One consequence of COVID-19 being a cross-sectoral crisis was that areas not normally included in the CEC were strongly affected by the pandemic. Some of the informants described how they arranged separate meetings with, e.g., business organizations and employee organizations to discuss the problems COVID-19 would cause for parts of the business community.

It must be emphasized that many of our informants pointed out that both those who used the CEC actively and others had extensive contact with municipal and other actors outside the CEC meetings. Sometimes these contacts were organized as small networks connected to the municipalities in a specific area. This clearly shows that the CEC meetings did not take place in a vacuum; however, there appears to have been poorer coordination of emergency preparedness and crisis management in the regions that had frequent and regular CEC meetings than in the other regions.

4. Discussion

As described above, both online and face-to-face meeting arenas can be seen as hybrids of organization, institution, and network (Haug 2013). We will use these terms as a basis for our analysis of how the CGs related to the CEC as a meeting arena. Which element of this hybrid the various actors emphasized can be a way of explaining differences in the CGs' attitude to the CECs.

The first point to note is that some CGs used the CEC only to a very minor extent. Two reasons given were the desire to limit the number of meetings and the difficulty of

holding meetings with many participants. Meeting size and duration have to be taken into account (Standaert et al. 2022). Collaboration is often a resource-intensive activity, and many organizational theorists therefore recommend caution when considering using collaboration as a solution (see, e.g., Peters 2018).

This attitude differs greatly from the attitude of those who have extensive experience of using the CECs. Several of these pointed out that convening the CEC in connection with a crisis is a routine matter that is done more or less automatically. This suggests that the use of the CEC in those regions has become institutionalized.

Further, we see that several informants also emphasized how they considered the CEC as a network where participants contribute information, analyses and distributions of actions, which much of the literature on wicked problems recommends as a solution (Ferlie et al. 2011; Head and Alford 2015). For a summary of meeting arenas as hybrids of organization, see Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of results and discussion.

The CEC as	Organization	Institution	Network	Network of Networks
Taking different approaches to the CEC	Handling risk through formalization	CEC meetings create a way of establishing routines even though the CGs have different conceptions of who should participate and how often they should meet		
Sharing information	CGs' supervisory role: Inform the municipalities about the rules		Allows for exchanging data and updates Cross-sectoral coordination takes place	
Discussing challenges and coordination	CGs chair the meetings and regulate the online meetings		CGs taking the lead Different points of view were presented and analyzed Cross-sectoral coordination takes place	
Splitting the CEC meetings into smaller meetings		A small group of actors who often collaborate in regular crisis situations		Three main types of clusters of interests: (a) a small group of actors with dedicated tasks (b) thematic networks (c) the inclusion of specially appointed actors Cross-sectoral coordination takes place

Below, we discuss in greater depth the CEC as organization, institution and network, and finally as a network of networks.

4.1. The CEC as Organization

The CEC has formal instructions (Instructions for the work of the county governors and the Governor of Svalbard involving civil protection, emergency preparedness and crisis management, 2015). The CEC is therefore formally part of the organization of emergency preparedness and crisis management in Norway. Meeting as organization is thus a way of handling risk through formalization (Haug 2013). Although the CECs have no formal

hierarchy, the CG is clearly responsible for chairing the meetings, deciding on the topics to be discussed and setting the agenda. Furthermore, the fact that discussions in online meetings were regulated may be seen as a way to enable the organization to maintain or even create stability in rather unstable situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008).

Our data show that in Norway there was an initial lack of clarity as to the duties and rights of municipalities to implement local measures. A meeting may be an important setting for clarifying an issue, as part of exchanging both routine and nonroutine information (Standaert et al. 2022). In many areas, the CGs have a supervisory role in relation to municipalities and the actions that these implement. The CGs therefore used the CEC to inform municipalities about the rules that existed and how the CGs interpreted these rules. This enabled municipalities to take part in discussions on how actions could be coordinated in the region. The CGs have the legal authority to control the municipalities' decisions. Therefore, if they inform the municipalities of how their office interprets the legislation, the municipalities can be expected to follow their recommendations. This can thus be understood as use of the chain of command demonstrating responsibilities activated by the crisis (Christensen et al. 2016).

The CEC thus in fact appears to govern the municipalities, despite their relatively high degree of autonomy (Baldersheim and Ståhlberg 2002). This is probably one of the reasons why Norway avoided the lack of clarity as to who should do what and who had the authority to decide, as we have pointed out.

4.2. The CEC as Institution

Several of the CGs pointed out that convening the CEC in connection with a crisis is a routine matter that is done more or less automatically. This suggests that the use of the CEC in those regions has become institutionalized (Haug 2013).

The data shows that county governors in Norway relate differently to the CEC. However, there is a common understanding that there are flexible rules for who can participate in CEC meetings and for how often the meetings should take place, which enables the CGs to adapt to the needs of any crisis that arises. Those who actively use the CEC have clearly shown that it can play an important part in dealing with a pandemic. In this sense, the CEC meetings can be understood as a ritualized practice that stabilizes a larger system of which the various actors form part (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008).

The CEC is thus not just a rational bureaucratic instrument but is also an important and well-established forum for sharing information and keeping each other updated. The meetings create a way of establishing routines in order to create a common understanding of national policies and advice, and local measures to be taken accordingly, while relying on multiple interdependent activities (Haug 2013; Scott 1987, 2014). The CEC thus seems to be an institutionalized forum with a coordinating function and not merely a symbolic response (Tepper 2004) or hypocritical behavior (Brunsson 2002).

4.3. The CEC as Network

One of the challenges of wicked problems is variation in access to information (Ferlie et al. 2011). Networking is therefore a solution that allows participants to exchange data and update each other on data status. Our findings show that some of the CGs placed great emphasis on the CEC's communication of information, and the feedback they received suggests that this information was important to the participants.

One feature of the CEC network is that the members do not have the same status. In practice, the CG appears to take on a leadership role. Yet, this is not the same as a hierarchy. One person taking on the role of a leader seems to be a common development in such networks (Head and Alford 2015; Hudson et al. 1997). Furthermore, crises activate the need for clear leadership and a central direction (Christensen et al. 2016). There seems, however, to be considerable variation in how CGs shape their role (Flo 2014), and the extent to which they exercise personal authority through the CEC.

When cross-sectoral crises occur, it is beneficial to establish a multifunctional unit that can coordinate information and actions both vertically and horizontally (Moorkamp et al. 2020). Our data show how those who made full use of the CEC were keen to communicate information from the government and also to give participants the opportunity to report on their situation.

The most important activity of the CEC can be perceived as preparing and implementing coordination. Our data show that where CG offices make active use of the CEC, coordination can take place; in these CECs we find information sharing, joint analysis and agreement on the measures to be implemented. This creates a network to deal with various tasks related to coordination of wicked problems (Ferlie et al. 2011; Head and Alford 2015). The descriptions of the CEC meetings suggest that the participants get to know each other and develop trust in each other, which is seen as vital to effective collaboration (Haug 2013; San Martín-Rodríguez et al. 2005).

An important starting point for collaboration is agreement between the participants on goals and strategies (Head and Alford 2015). The descriptions we received suggest that the CEC meetings were generally used to create a common understanding of measures decided by the government and those that were decided at regional level.

The notion that "many heads think better than one" is a basic assumption among those who recommend collaboration and networking as a solution to wicked problems (Head and Alford 2015). This implies a form of discussion where different points of view emerge and are analyzed. There were two elements in our data that suggest that this in fact happened in a number of CEC meetings that emphasized this aspect. Firstly, it was important to get to know each other, which Freeman (2008) emphasizes as an important basis for learning processes during meetings, which then gives people confidence to present their point of view. Secondly, it was pointed out that the CEC was an important discussion forum, which suggests that different views were put forward and considered. It therefore appears that, at least to a limited extent, negotiations were conducted on the measures to be implemented (Schiefloe 2021).

4.4. The CEC as a Network of Networks

The COVID-19 pandemic was seen to be both a wicked problem and a cross-sectoral crisis (Blondin and Boin 2020; Boin 2019; Rittel and Webber 1973; Schiefloe 2021). This created a need for extensive collaboration between a number of bodies. CGs play an important role in a horizontal coordination structure with the CEC as a key element (Axelsson and Axelsson 2014). Part of the horizontal coordination takes place with the help of the CEC, in some regions more than others.

The CEC as a whole is not the only network in which the CG participates in connection with emergency preparedness and crisis management. This is in line with an understanding of organizations as open systems that connect changing coalitions of participants (Scott 2014), which enables a stream of transactions between the organization, actors and stakeholders that come together for various issues. There seem to be three main types of "alternative" networks, as explained below, including networks that originate from the CEC, or networks of networks (van den Oord et al. 2020). These are networks that can be understood as clusters of overlapping interests (Haug 2013).

One is smaller operational networks of actors with dedicated tasks in connection with crises. These networks seem to be relatively institutionalized; here the CGs generally bring together a smaller group of actors who are vital in all emergency preparedness and crisis management. In the regions where there have been regular crisis situations, this kind of network seems more or less institutionalized, involving people who are used to collaborating.

In addition, several CG offices seem to have established thematic networks. One example of this is networks for municipal medical officers. In addition, several CGs have realized that the usual CEC structure does not include participants from sectors normally unaffected by limited local crises. Some CGs therefore decided to create their own networks

with various actors in, e.g., business and industry, education or child welfare. Several staff of CG offices pointed out that they have arranged for each municipality to have the CG as its primary contact. This leads to a form of personal network (Peters 2018). These smaller networks have the advantage of establishing personal relationships more easily than the larger networks and suggest that trust is formed between those involved (San Martín-Rodríguez et al. 2005), as "networks rely on personalized trust" (Haug 2013, p. 714). Furthermore, these meetings may function as mediators of relations between macro and micro processes (Scott et al. 2015).

Smaller networks of this kind may lack the comprehensive overview that is necessary in a crisis that cuts across sectors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Blondin and Boin 2020). At the same time, there is clearly a limit to the number of people and topics that can be included in a CEC meeting that will function as a collaborative process, e.g., where the focus is of interest to all (Innes and Booher 2016). Others have therefore found that networks of networks may be more appropriate (van den Oord et al. 2020). Our data do not clearly explain how the CGs used the various thematic networks, but we understood that the central role of the CG in all these networks meant that the CG was important for horizontal coordination (Peters 2005) and could thus provide coordination in what was obviously a cross-sectoral crisis (Blondin and Boin 2020). Furthermore, participation in networks is often part-time and for the actors it implies a secondary affiliation (Egeberg 2012). The network thus requires some form of coordination and management by hierarchy, here the CGs.

5. Conclusions

The CEC is emphasized as a potential strategic forum for discussing challenges and various solutions. Some CGs stated that early in the process they used the CEC to establish a shared understanding of situations within their office.

At CEC meetings it was possible to discuss both problems and solutions in ways which presented different perspectives and the participants at the meetings functioned as discussion partners. The discussions that took place in meetings provided new perspectives on how certain situations should be handled. At the same time, the input received by the CGs revealed a clear need to coordinate activities in the municipalities.

There are also examples of the county governor using financial incentives in order to tempt the participants at the meetings to take part in various actions. Furthermore, the close contact with participants at CEC meetings gives CGs more authority than they formally have. It is therefore accepted that the CG interferes and makes decisions on behalf of the participants. In these contexts, the CEC became a setting where challenges were discussed and where the CG could bring together stakeholders with an interest in the entire county. In cross-sectoral crises, it is important to have meetings which will provide a general overview, leading to a discussion on holistic perspectives and cross-sectoral coordination.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹　Sometimes also referred to as the Regional Contingency Advisory Board (RCAB).

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