

## City-Regionalisation, Local Democracy and Civic Participation

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### INTRODUCTION

City regions have grown into important sites of economic development and policy initiatives. Their overall importance in shaping and framing societies has grown remarkably since the 1970s, and increasingly so over the past three decades (Davoudi, 2003; Harrison, 2012; Jonas & Moisio, 2016; Parr, 2005; Rodríguez-Pose, 2008). As evolving new spaces for governing, policymaking and planning, city regions in Finland and other Nordic countries grow in between, within and beyond the territorial organisation of the state, through relational connections and disruptions, following largely economic logics but also involving sociocultural elements and political steering and often linking with aims towards

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sustainable urban development (Davoudi et al., 2021; Haughton & Allmendinger, 2015; Metzger, 2013).

A significant element in the rise of the city region is urban and land-use planning, where the focus has gradually shifted from individual cities and municipalities to agglomerate city regions. While the power relations between municipalities, the state and city regions involve notable geographical variation, this shift has generated some fundamental effects on democratic societies—the role of citizens in urban development being one of them (Soja, 2015; Tomàs, 2015). As they are institutionally malleable (see Chap. 9), city regions can be adapted to various spatial shapes and scopes in response to local drivers of city-regionalisation, such as traffic infrastructure development. While this makes them strategically ‘agile’ and capable of accommodating various informal, ad hoc and contract-based forms of governing and planning, important questions have arisen about democratic accountability (Kübler, 2018; Lidström & Schaap, 2018; Mattila & Heinilä, 2022).

In the Nordic countries, Finland included, city regions have gained a foothold as contexts of governance that are actively promoted as part of state–governmental strategies to foster economic development and municipal co-operation within urban agglomerations. Complementing the traditional state-based public space, organised as a territorially layered system of municipalities, regions and the state, city regions are weakly institutionalised and thus lack both legislative guarantees and administrative routines and practices for the provision of participatory avenues and possibilities (Häkli et al., 2020).

This chapter discusses city-regionalisation as a challenge for local democracy and participation in Finland and other Nordic countries. With an empirical focus on the case of Tampere’s city-regional tramway (aka light rail transit or LRT) project (see Chap. 17 for further developments), we discuss how citizen participation can be understood in a relational city-regional framework and why traditional participatory means are prone to failing to invite and involve people in city-regional planning processes. We begin by describing the context of city-regionalisation in Finland and then move on to discuss Tampere tramway as a traffic infrastructure project with a city-regional scope. Next, we consider the challenges that this project presents to civic participation and local democracy, paying particular attention to how strategic city-regional goals and decisions risk becoming detached from citizens’ democratic control. We conclude by probing into

the challenge of redressing the democratic deficit of city-regionalisation in the context of weakly institutionalised city regions.

## CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND CITY-REGIONALISATION IN FINLAND

The city region is a concept, the meaning of which varies depending on academic and practical contexts. According to Rodríguez-Pose (2008), a common way to identify a city region is through the core city being connected to its surroundings with functional ties, such as economic, housing market, travel-to-work and retail catchment factors. As continuous regionalisation processes with a changing shape and scope, city regions rarely match existing administrative boundaries (Metzger, 2013). However, in terms of concrete planning practices, they are commonly considered fixed areas (Davoudi, 2003; Healey, 2006), and research focusing on city regions can set out to compare them as measurable units (Lidström & Schaap, 2018).

These interpretations reflect the popular use of the concept as referring to areal units consisting of specific municipalities and nested within a hierarchical scalar structure ‘above’ the city and ‘below’ the state. In contrast to this, Haughton and Allmendinger (2015, p. 860) propose that city regions are best understood ‘as bounded and porous, territorial and relational’, thus acknowledging the continuing relevance of territorial organisation but also paying attention to the processes and connectivities involved in regionalisation (Jonas & Moiso, 2016). Thus understood, city regions are not so much a new ‘layer’ in the state-based spatial system, but rather an emergent space of governance in between, within and beyond the territorial organisation of the state (Wu, 2016).

When it comes to the democratic dimensions of city-regionalisation occurring in Nordic countries, it is pertinent to ask if civic participation can be included in city-regional planning. They are liberal democracies, with civil society in a central role in steering societal development. In Finland, citizens are entitled to participate in planning and decision-making that concerns them, either through representative or direct forms of participation, at all levels of government (Salminen, 2008). Citizen participation, hence, is a fundamental right that the members of political communities may practice and claim, if necessary (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010). The public provision for participatory possibilities is particularly

strong in the case of planning for land use and major infrastructure projects. Rights to citizen participation are safeguarded by legal provisions, especially through the Finnish Land Use and Building Act (132/1999) that obligates municipalities to prepare for and organise possibilities for participation for all of those potentially affected by any particular local land-use planning process (Bäcklund et al., 2014).

Individuals and groups can, therefore, express their views on planned changes in land use, housing and traffic that affect their living environments, and they are also entitled to civic participation in ways and forms that they find accessible and relevant, within the provisions of existing legislation (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). In Finland and other Nordic countries, municipalities are particularly important providers for civic participation because they constitute a strong and relatively autonomous level of local government (with the right to levy taxes, for instance) (Giersig, 2008).

As a Nordic welfare state with municipalities holding monopolies over local spatial planning, Finland is a relative newcomer to city-regionalisation processes (Hytönen et al., 2016; Mattila & Heinilä, 2022). City-regional collaboration has increased in Finland only during the past two decades, mainly reflecting the need to co-ordinate land-use planning across municipalities or devise strategic planning on the supra-local scale. The state has increasingly conceived of the four largest city regions (surrounding the Helsinki metropolitan area, Tampere, Turku and Oulu) as major generators of growth and innovativeness, which, therefore, should be planned as supra-municipal functional regional entities (Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019).

The state's city-regionalisation policies have been motivated by the fact that municipalities within a given city region have tended to find themselves competing for the same growth impulses and resources. Hence, it has been common for them to end up optimising land-use and planning goals from a municipal rather than a city-regional perspective. Simply put, the interests of an individual municipality have not easily aligned with the strategic goals set on the city-regional scale (Hytönen et al., 2016).

Hence, to steer municipalities away from sub-optimising city-regional goals, the state has devised specific policies to encourage municipalities to engage in deeper and more strategic collaboration on the city-regional scale. Most of these initiatives align with international trends with development policies aimed at endogenous growth and neoliberal competitiveness (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021). In parallel, attention has begun to move away from nationally embedded regions to globally competitive city

regions as the preferred scale of innovation and political-economic regulation. Scholars, such as Davoudi (2019) and Haughton and Allmendinger (2015), have depicted this transition in terms of new regionalism that leans on a particular *imaginary* of city regions as ‘engines’ of economic growth and the only competent and capable players in global competition for capital, innovativeness and growth (in the Finnish context, see Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019).

To improve the effectiveness of joint planning in city regions, the MAL agreement was introduced in 2011 as a tool to boost inter-municipal co-operation on land-use planning (M), housing (A) and transport (L) strategies. Since its launch, it has worked through a contractual arrangement between the state and municipalities by which the state agrees to part-fund major infrastructure projects, such as the Tampere tramway, but only if municipalities agree to create city-regional institutional frameworks and co-operation (Bäcklund et al., 2018; Mäntysalo et al., 2015; Mattila & Heinilä, 2022). Hence, with MAL agreements, the state has aimed to better co-ordinate municipalities’ strategic development from a city-regional land-use planning perspective. In this sense, they are non-statutory plans that document the goals and land-use outlines transgressing the borders of individual municipalities, through which the state seeks to achieve nationally set goals, such as the densification of the urban fabric or balanced social housing. The agreements aim to overcome individual municipalities’ sub-optimisation in their planning and development activities by committing municipalities to city-regional goals and projects. Importantly, the MAL agreements are predominantly expert-led forms of planning, with only an indirect connection to representative decision-making processes in the municipalities’ political bodies.

Only the four largest city regions were first offered the opportunity to sign a MAL agreement, which paved the way to expanding the practice to other urban agglomerations in 2021 (Jyväskylä, Kuopio, Lahti). Of these, the Tampere city region is among the fastest growing, with an estimated population of 480,000 in 2040 (Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2014). By signing the MAL agreement, they secured funding for the construction of a city-regional tramway, which we now turn to as an example of the problems that this novel but weakly institutionalised and loosely regulated scale of governance has created for local democracy and citizen participation.

## CITY-REGIONALISATION IN ACTION: THE CASE OF THE TAMPERE TRAMWAY

In many countries, Finland included, the institutionalisation of city regions remains weak. As progressing spaces of governance, policy and planning, city regions traverse and, to some extent, bypass the territorial organisation of the state, engaging with translocal and transnational networks through new kinds of connections. Directed mainly by economic logics, in connection with loose and non-transparent political steering, they adapt to changing spatial shapes and scopes in response to varying drivers of city-regionalisation. In our case, sustainable traffic infrastructure development can be identified as the most relevant driver. The somewhat elastic character of city regions makes them at once strategically agile—accommodating various informal, ad hoc and contract-based forms of governing and planning—and democratically vague.

A case in point is the ongoing planning and construction of a tramway in Tampere, the largest inland city in Finland, with some 240,000 inhabitants in the core city and a further 157,000 inhabitants in the surrounding municipalities. Dubbed as the ‘Manchester of Finland’—referring to its previous role in Nordic industrialisation—Tampere is imagined as the engine of growth in the region, in the same way that Manchester assumes a pre-eminent position in the northwest of England (Haughton et al., 2016). The city’s size and economic weight often manifests in its role in taking the lead in, and sometimes dominating, decision-making concerning the city region. The tramway is no exception. Its construction began in the core city of Tampere, even though the project was financially facilitated by the MAL contract between the state and the city region’s eight municipalities.

Tampere city’s aspiration to build a tramway can be traced back to as far as the early 1900s; an urbanist idea revived in 2001 with a focus on the railroad network, ‘tramtrain’ (*pikaratikka*). In 2004, attention was turned to a modern tramway, and in 2007, the city carried out a comparative analysis of alternative public transport solutions. This was followed by an updated transport plan programme and the launch of the planning process for a light rail system in 2010 (Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2010). In December 2011, the final plan—at this stage—was approved by Tampere City Council (Tampereen kaupunki, 2011). However, the actual decision to build the tramway had not yet been made.

In February 2013, the first MAL agreement was signed by eight Tampere city region municipalities, two government ministries, two state regional administrative offices and the Finnish Transport Agency. As part of this agreement, the construction of a city-regional tramway was proposed, of which 30% was to be funded by the national government (Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2013). Although the contract was between the state and the signatory municipalities, important decisions about the tramway have taken place in less formal and non-transparent arenas, of which the Tramway Alliance is the most influential.

The Alliance was established in the summer of 2015 to carry out the planning and construction of the tramway. It is composed of a number of public and private sector actors, with the city of Tampere as the main client and three large commercial companies as the major service providers. The use of ‘public–private partnerships’ for the delivery of public services is widely seen as an indication of an emerging mode of governance (e.g. Goldstein & Mele, 2016; Haughton & McManus, 2012). Located in a corporate office building, the Alliance acts as the main negotiator and organiser of the tramway construction process. Importantly, apart from Tampere, none of the other signatory municipalities of the MAL agreement are represented in the Alliance. Their exclusion has been justified on the grounds that the first stages of the tramway construction are in Tampere. However, as we discuss below, plans for the second and third stages stretch beyond its territory, which raises critical questions about the composition of this key actor.

In May 2016, the MAL agreement was updated, extending the signatories to a new ministry and confirming the state’s subsidy of 71 million euros (Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2017). On 7 November 2016, Tampere City Council made a decision on a majority vote to build a modern tramway system in two phases. The first phase would connect the city centre to the University Hospital area, as well as to the three Tampere University campuses in the centre, east and south of the city. The second phase would link these to an existing business area and to a new housing development in western Tampere (Raitiotieallianssi, 2017). As with many other railway-based urban development projects, both phases align with plans to concentrate new housing, retail and business development, and public services along tramway lines. In this regard, the project is promoted as a sound, sustainable urban development initiative justified on the basis of the need for carbon reduction, urban densification and improved mobility for a growing urban population (e.g. Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2014).

The construction of the tramway, with a total estimated cost of 313 million euros, began in 2018 from the Tampere city centre towards the east and south (Raitiotieallianssi, 2017). In November 2018, Tampere City Council announced its plan for the westbound extension of the tram to be built immediately after the completion of the first phase, which was envisaged to be in 2021. In April 2019, the City Council announced another southbound extension of the tramway to include destinations in the three neighbouring municipalities of Pirkkala, Kangasala and Ylöjärvi (Tampereen kaupunki, 2019)—all signatories of the MAL agreement and involved in the Joint Authority of Tampere City Region (JATCR, *Tampereen kaupunkiseudun kuntayhtymä*), a co-operative arrangement with Tampere.

The new extensions—all of which start from Tampere and move outwards—represent significant steps towards concrete city-regionalisation, with endorsement by the above-mentioned three municipalities, whereas other smaller and more remote municipalities of the Tampere city region are yet to be connected to the tramway planning scheme. Hence, what began as a Tampere city ‘tramtrain’ in 2001 became a city-regional development project when boosted by state funding linked to the MAL agreement. The project has pulled a few larger municipalities together through better and faster connections while leaving other areas (mostly rural municipalities) disconnected.

## THE TRAMWAY PROJECT AS A CHALLENGE TO LOCAL DEMOCRACY

The Tampere tramway is an important step towards a more sustainable mode of transport in Finland. Yet, its construction makes visible certain gaps in democratic decision-making and citizen participation in a city-regional context, pertinent to many Nordic contexts. As municipalities in Finland are in charge of much of the local decision-making and the provision for citizen participation—included strongly in the formal land-use planning system—the transition of politico-administrative powers to the city-regional scale requires the removal of certain powers from them. Moreover, in the case of Tampere tramway, this upward rescaling has pulled some private actors (companies, consulting organisations) to centre stage at the cost of citizen participation and democratic steering (Hytönen



& Ahlqvist, 2019). Three aspects are critical in understanding how this process has unfolded in the context of city-regionalisation in Tampere.

First, the practices of contractual planning have *rescaled decision-making upward to largely unaccountable city-regional governance bodies and thereby away from the direct democratic control of locally elected municipalities and their residents* (Beel et al., 2018). Decisions related to tramway planning and building are carried out by public-private partnerships, driven largely by sustainable growth and competitiveness goals, with little or no forms of representative or direct citizen participation (for city-regional citizen participation, see Häkli et al., 2020). This is evident, for instance, from decisions regarding the routing of the tramway in the westbound areas of the project, where the route largely caters to undeveloped land and skirts existing built-up areas with a high population density (Koivuniemi, 2013). Citizens' existing needs for sustainable transportation are clearly not at the heart of this development.

The upward rescaling from municipal to city-regional governance is also consequential in terms of the public participation required by the Finnish Land Use and Building Act (132/1999) for major planning and infrastructure projects, such as the Tampere tramway and its related construction projects (Bäcklund et al., 2014). Whereas established procedures for public participation, with a clear system of rights and responsibilities, exist in municipal planning, these procedures are less evident in the planning machinery erected by weakly institutionalised city-regional governing institutions (Mattila & Heinilä, 2022). In this regard, the relationship between municipal and city-regional planning (see Chap. 17 on regional planning) is democratically unclear and potentially problematic (see also Bäcklund et al., 2018; Puustinen et al., 2017). Rescaling means that city-regional governance can set the agenda for municipal planning decisions without democratic scrutiny. In the case of the Tampere tramway, the opportunities to influence planning decisions have been reduced for citizens and increased for commercial service providers acting as significant players in the market-oriented and opaque functioning of the Tramway Alliance.

Second, with the city of Tampere as the client of the Tramway Alliance, key steps in tramway planning and construction are being carried out under the control of Tampere, *emphasising the power of the regional centre*. For example, Tampere City Council oversaw the procurement of the preliminary planning (Tampereen kaupunki, 2011), held a central role in drafting the structural schemes for MAL agreements (Tampereen

kaupunkiseutu, 2010, 2014, 2017) and acted as the driving force and leader in the general planning project group. While other municipalities of the city region participated in negotiating the structural schemes and MAL agreements, they have not had explicit roles in designing the general tramway plan, nor have they been included in the Alliance. At the early stages of this complicated inter-municipal process, it became clear that the premises of the project had been set and steered by the Tampere-led planning and building scheme. As a result, a number of fundamental decisions have been made by the city of Tampere alone, including not only the tramway routes but also many practical choices related to, for example, the realisation of the tracks, the supplier of the tramcars and the traffic operator. Such a fundamental *reconfiguration of powers and responsibilities has occurred without wider public discussion and explicit democratic processes at various levels of governance.*

Third, as the tramway project has been Tampere-led and decision-making concerning its planning and implementation has centred on Tampere City Council, *the provision for citizen participation has also been restricted to the residents of the core city only.* In this regard, the city of Tampere has organised several participatory events and measures, such as workshops, ‘information afternoons’, questionnaires concerning detailed plans, ‘tramway cafes’, seminars and even a ‘tramway day’ where an actual tramcar was brought to the city square for citizens and stakeholders to explore (e.g. Tampereen kaupunki, 2018). These participatory practices gathered citizen feedback concerning the tramway routes in Tampere, backed by two open events where ‘municipal citizens’ had the opportunity to discuss matters related to the tramway system and its wider impacts with planning experts. While these participatory procedures seem to have enabled relatively open participation forums to (at least some) citizens in Tampere, it is noteworthy that, available to the citizens of Tampere only, they typically approached the tramway from a Tampere-centred perspective.

While the citizens in the other municipalities of the Tampere city region may eventually have the opportunity to participate in the land-use planning stage of the tramway through municipal representative bodies, and perhaps also by means of direct participation, such opportunities may come only after the key strategic and practical decisions have been made in and by the city of Tampere (Häkli et al., 2020). This underlines the fact that *the majority of citizens living in the region have no say in the state-led MAL process, which boosts and concretises city-regionalisation in the Tampere*

*region*. Even the elected council members of the eight municipalities were not consulted on the operative decisions regarding the tramway system. In terms of democratic legitimacy and accountability, this means that in deciding on the details of the tramway in individual jurisdictions, municipalities will find their hands have been tied by previously forged decisions, contracts and plans made prior to consultations with the public (see also Buser, 2014; Moulaert et al., 2007).

## CONCLUSION: WHITHER CITY-REGIONAL PARTICIPATION?

In Finland, citizen participation is firmly embedded in the formal land-use planning system regulated by the Finnish Land Use and Building Act (1999), which mandates participation as part of the planning procedures. The planning system has three tiers: the national land-use guidelines provide a general planning frame set by the Finnish government, the guidelines are concretised in regional land-use plans approved by regional councils and the most detailed planning takes the form of local master and detailed plans prepared and approved by municipalities (Ministry of the Environment, 2018). With the municipalities' strong self-governance and planning monopoly over their jurisdictions, the local plans have a major role in shaping the actual urban environment (e.g. Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Hytönen, 2016; Leino & Laine, 2011).

However, alongside the formal planning system, new forms of strategically oriented and more informal and contract-based forms of land-use planning have emerged, especially in regions surrounding important urban centres (Bäcklund et al., 2018). Among the most prominent new city-regional planning practices are the state-orchestrated MAL agreements on land use, housing and traffic. Two kinds of ambiguity result from the dualistic structure of the current planning system in Finland. First, it is not always clear how municipality-based land-use planning relates to city-regional planning that, while being less formal, creates guiding conditions for the former. Second, concerns have been raised about the transparency and legitimacy of city-regional planning that operates on a non-statutory basis and lacks clear procedures for citizen participation that the Finnish Land Use and Building Act (1999) guarantees. This institutional ambiguity allows citizens to be involved in city-regional planning in ways and to an extent that the practitioners deem suitable in each case.

By discussing the case of planning and decision-making related to the construction of the Tampere tramway, we have sought to address some

problematic issues in the democratic elements of strategic land-use planning in Finnish city regions that resonate with city-regional developments in other Nordic countries. In agreement with critical work on city-regionalisation, we deem it important to enhance regional citizen participation in these processes, as, in Finland and elsewhere, they are more or less detached from the formal planning system and thus not subject to democratic control on land-use planning and urban development (Bäcklund & Mäntysalo, 2010; Healey, 2009; Lidström & Schaap, 2018). As city regions have grown into significant sites of economic development, policymaking and for the everyday lives of people in the past 40 years or so, with their import still increasing, it is vital to draw attention to deficiencies in their democratic character and to their potential as arenas for citizen engagement (Davoudi, 2003; Harrison, 2012; Kübler, 2018; Mattila & Heinilä, 2022; Parr, 2005; Tomàs, 2015). With their strong democratic values and institutions, Nordic countries are well positioned to lead the way towards more democratic, sustainable city-regional development where the rights and participatory potential of the ‘regional citizen’ are better recognised.

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