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Humble Government: How to Realize Ambitious Reforms Prudently

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1.0 Introduction: A complex operating environment demands a new approach to governance

The current Government of Finland is determined to address some of the most complex problems of our time. As stated in its Government Programme, Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government is committed to building a sustainable economy, taking substantial steps towards carbon neutrality, and reforming the country's health and social services. In today's increasingly complex operating environment, familiar policy approaches often have unpredictable outcomes, which hamper the achievement of transformative political goals.ⁱ To achieve its goals, the government has therefore pledged itself to reform its decision-making by promoting continuous learning, new forms of interaction with stakeholders and long-term policy-making through improved collaboration with parliament.ⁱⁱ

In this report we argue that a so-called **humble approach to policy-making** based on experimentalist governance could help the government in living up to its pledges. In this context **humility** means that policy-making begins with an acknowledgement of the prevailing uncertainty and is thus built as a continuously iterative process, in which actors are willing to (and allowed to) change their mind as new information arises.

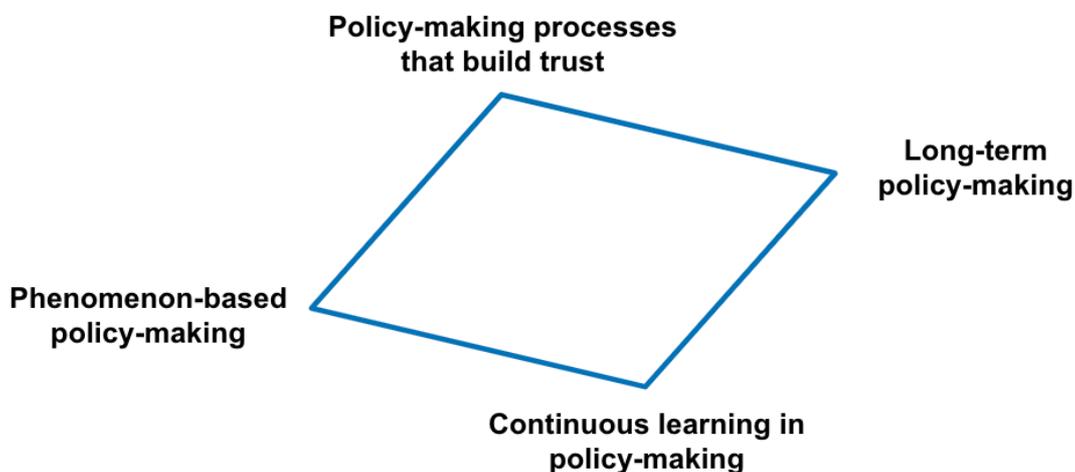


Figure 1: The four pillars of a humble approach to policy-making

The Steering2020 project is commissioned as a part of the Finnish Government's Analysis, Assessment and Research Activities. The aim of the Steering2020 -project is to support the government moving towards more fit-for-purpose steering by providing a multi-faceted analysis of the history, current state and future of steering in Finland, as well as best practices from abroad. This third report of the Steering2020 -project is a study of what the future of steering in Finland could look like in order for ambitious reforms to be realized.

The concept of **steering** can be defined as the relationships within the political-administrative system, and the political goals set within those relationships to be met by the public administration. Steering can be studied from the perspective of **governance**, when referring broadly to the processes, structures and institutions that give direction to the act of governing. Governance anticipates that decision-making may be deliberative, within roughly bounded networks, not hierarchical, within closed institutions, and that civil society actors may take part in the formulation and execution of official decisions. Governance can be studied from the perspective of **policy-making**, when referring more specifically to the process of setting policy-goals, designing policy-instruments, formulating policies, implementing them and evaluating their outcome.

Previous parts of the project have identified substantial challenges in the current governance system and policy-making processes in Finland, such as a lack of systemicity, institutional short-termism, silos and a dispersed knowledge-base. According to the previous analysis by Vartiainen *et al.* (2020), traditional top-down steering works well for maintaining operative and routine functions of the state, but the current governance system is often incapable of successfully solving complex societal problems. This report is therefore narrowed down to analysing how governance and policy-making should be conducted in order to enable ambitious societal reforms that are needed to address issues such as changes in economic structures or climate change.

1.1 The current state of governance in Finland

The first report in the Steering2020 -series provides an overview of how the context and characteristics of steering in Finland have developed from the times of Old Public Administration and New Public Management towards a form of governance that recognizes the increasing complexity of our world. A complex operating environment is characterised by unpredictable interdependencies and self-organising systems. These characteristics yield so-called wicked problems such as long-term slowing of economic growth and climate change. While the gravity of these problems is apparent, there is great uncertainty in how policy-makers should address them. Finding solutions is often further encumbered by the controversy and polarization around these issues. Thus, the report concludes by stating that solving the gravest problems of the 21st century calls for a form of governance that is phenomenon-based, encourages smart specialisation, and is highly deliberative.ⁱⁱⁱ

The second report produced for the Steering2020 -project is an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of current steering practices within the Finnish public administration. The findings indicate that the government's capacity to solve complex problems is hampered by, for example, the inherent short-termism of political steering, structural and cultural silos leading to policy incoherence and a dispersed knowledge base. While there are successful examples of more phenomenon-based and innovative approaches to governance and policy-

making, new practices seldom become mainstreamed across government. The analysis opens up a hypothesis stating that “...*the degree of experimentation required is dependent on the degree of systems characteristics of the policy objective: the more systems-driven the goal, the more experimentation is required to promote it.*”^{iv} Lähteenmäki-Smith *et al.* (2020) conceptualise the term systemic as an approach that takes into account the complex interdependencies of societal issues and therefore emphasises phenomena, rather than particularities within a phenomenon. Their hypothesis will be further developed in this third part of the Steering2020 -project.

Based on the findings presented in the previous phases of the Steering2020 -project, it can be concluded that the most pressing obstacle for addressing wicked problems is not a lack of effective policy instruments, but insufficient policy-making processes that lead to unsatisfactory policy outcomes. The current approach to governance suffers from political short-termism and a siloed institutional structure, which feeds into a culture of infallibility and a lack of systemic understanding of societal phenomena. While it is apparent that the most pressing societal issues like climate change, pandemics and economic uncertainty are global in their nature, national governments have a responsibility to address these at the national level. For the government to formulate policies that address the most pressing questions of the 21st century at the national level, it must first address the structural and cultural problems of its policy-making processes. In short, solving wicked problems requires policy-making that moves away from the illusion of top-down steering into a networked policy-making model. The next section describes how a humble approach to policy-making help answer these issues.

2.0 Complex issues require a humble approach

In line with the hypothesis presented in the report by Lähteenmäki-Smith et al., this report argues that when the government sets out to address complex problems that require systems-level reforms, it is beneficial to use a humble approach to policy-making. The notion of **humble policy-making** is based on professor Charles F. Sabel's theory of **experimentalist governance**^v, which looks at experimentalism not only as the use of policy experiments, but more broadly as a form of governance that is based on continuous iteration and learning.

Experimentalist governance assumes that in a context characterised by complexity, nonlinearity and uncertainty, it is impossible to arrive at an adequate, let alone optimal solution to a problem without comparing the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches in the contexts where they are applied. By inviting a broad and open-ended group of stakeholders to join a deliberative problem-solving process, experimentalism finds policy-solutions that are effective and implementable. Here **stakeholders** are understood as those people with first-hand knowledge of a particular problem. Examples include front-line employees such as police, classroom teachers or social welfare workers, and their respective managers in the public sector. Another example is companies, subject to regulation, whose operations have negative externalities for the environment or could generate, with appropriate incentives, positive externalities. Top-down steering is replaced by a continuous and repeated or iterative circle in which policy goals set at the political level are amended in light of new information arising from the "ground", where a policy is to have effect. Experimentalism thus requires a **humble approach to policy-making**, as actors must be ready (and allowed) to change their mind as new information arises.

A humble approach is fundamentally a process for building trust. As illustrated by the international case studies within the Steering2020 -project, trust is often a prerequisite for substantial societal reforms to yield long-term outcomes^{vi}. While conventional policy-making requires a robust consensus on the *means or starting point* of achieving a particular goal, a humble approach allows actors to begin solving a problem as soon as they have reached a **thin consensus** on a *common direction* and initial, exploratory approaches.

A thin consensus can be defined as a shared understanding leading to agreement on the urgency of a problem in a particular domain, the broad framework goals to be pursued in its solution, and, circumstances permitting, core values that underpin them. Further, it is a commitment to continue to pursue a reform despite uncertainty or disagreement about its ultimate configuration and the means of achieving it. A humble policy-making process creates a thicker consensus over time, as inclusive collaboration based on deliberation makes it possible for goals and metrics to be redirected and further specified as new information arises. Actors can begin working together even in situations where trust is fragile, as trust accumulates when participants prove mutual reliability over time.

This does not mean that every political issue can be addressed through a humble approach. There are policy-issues where ideological or interest-based differences are so grave that a thin consensus cannot be reached. Still a deliberative humble approach can make it possible for actors to find common ground on certain issues within a policy-domain, thus making it possible to work together despite disagreements.

Experimentalist governance theory and its humble approach is chosen as the foundation for this analysis for two reasons. First, experimentalist governance is highly suitable for Finland's consensus-seeking political culture and relatively decentralized governance structure; and recent developments — such as an aim at increasingly strategic political steering, use of policy experiments and strengthening of deliberative institutions like parliamentary committees and citizen participation — can also be seen as steps towards increasingly experimentalist governance. Second, the experimentalist governance theory allows us to derive a process that fulfils the government's pledges regarding a new kind of decision-making. Complexity theory, which forms the foundation of the Steering2020 -project, is useful when analysing today's operating environment, but it does not in itself prescribe solutions.^{vii} Experimentalist governance theory shares key assumptions with complexity theory but develops these, and others to suggest types of institutional responses effective under the conditions it addresses. In this sense, experimentalist governance theory is prescriptive as well as descriptive.

2.1 Comparing conventional and humble policy-making

The distinctiveness of humble policy-making emerges in contrast to the conventional approach to policy-making.

Conventional policy-making assumes that effective policies can be designed ex ante in a linear process. The aim is to create policies that are complete and definitive as they enter into force. Enforcement of policies takes place by comparing actual behaviour to requirements, and then sanctioning divergence. Conventional policy-making is built on confidence in the government's ability to sufficiently learn from the past in order to successfully anticipate and steer the future.

Humble policy-making departs from an opposite assumption: an acknowledgement of the government's fallibility. It assumes that when dealing with complex problems that are characterized by uncertainty, we cannot ex ante know how different policy-solutions will play out in the real world. Therefore, a policy-making process must be a continuous investigation of different options that are tested in the contexts where they will be implemented. Policy goals must be revised after, not before enactment—and the enactment must make provision for this ongoing revision and ensure that it occurs accountably, under public oversight.

	Conventional policy-making	Humble policy-making
Goal of deliberation	To resolve problems	To create a (thin) consensus on the framing of a problem
Policy goals	Definitive and linear	Framework goals in which a common direction is agreed upon, and mandate is given to a humble policy-making approach
Knowledge-base	Knowledge acquired <i>ex ante</i> and can be transferred from one context to another	Knowledge acquired throughout the process and after enactment
Goal of enforcement	To detect deviations from and compliance to fixed policies	To detect gaps and ambiguities in current policies and practices to enable revision of them
Method of enforcement	Sanctions to induce proscribed behaviour	Incentives are designed to induce continuous development through peer learning

Table 1: Main differences between conventional and humble policy-making

There are multiple Finnish examples of policy domains in which a humble approach to policy-making has helped solve substantial societal problems. In fact, it can be argued that one of the greatest Finnish success stories - the country's education system - is so successful exactly because it follows the conditions of humble policy-making. Broad framework goals for primary education are set in the national curriculum, but teachers and schools are trusted with high autonomy to implement the curriculum as they see fit. The teacher's first-hand knowledge is then used to revise the national curriculum when needed. Another recent example of an organically emerging humble approach to problem-solving can be seen in the Finnish government's response to the COVID-19 (see case example in box 1).

While decentralized approaches like these lead to locally sensitive solutions, they can also lead to inequality, if the quality of public services varies between different municipalities. Autonomy must therefore come with accountability through a commitment to continuous dialogue that creates feedback-loops and ensures learning and improvement when needed. The differentiation and customization of government services that makes them effective in responding to wicked problems makes it hard to apply the familiar maximum of equal treatment for all. This makes it all the more important that citizens can be confident that administration, through continued learning from ground-level experience, strives to be equally responsive to their particular needs.

Case-example: Elements of humble policy-making in the case of the COVID-19 response

The Finnish government's response to the COVID-19 crisis is an extreme, yet concrete example of how certain parts of humble policy-making can play out in practice. While no response is flawless, some key elements of the humble approach can be identified by analysing the response, illustrating how humility is the intuitive response when dealing with complex policy issues.

First, the rapid response was backed by a historically broad **consensus** among political actors as well as society at large. The consensus was built out of an extraordinary sense of urgency, which is hard to recreate in policy-issues that do not constitute a crisis. Still, the example illustrates how broad acceptance of a policy-goal can contribute to the government's mandate to act and ensures long-term commitment to these actions among opposition as well as government. Presenting their corona strategy in May 2020, the government openly admitted its fallibility, stating that "*we are dealing with a global pandemic, and there are a lot of things that we simply do not know*". Already in the beginning of March, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health contended that COVID-19 places the ministry in uncharted territory. Whether or not this humble acknowledgement of the government's fallibility was deliberate or forced upon the context, it represents a **humble approach** that allowed for continuous iterations of ways to handle the crisis.

Second, while the government sets the normative **framework goals** of the response, such as preventing the spread of the virus in society; ensuring sufficient healthcare capacity; and protecting those who belong to risk groups, finding workable solutions to the crisis was in many cases devolved to actors with expertise and first-hand experience. For example, municipalities were given autonomy in deciding how to organise education. However, such strong local autonomy can also be regarded as one of the factors that increases inequality in Finnish public healthcare, where the regional variations of both quality and accessibility of healthcare have become a particularly urgent matter during the COVID-19 crisis.

Third, the government attempted to create a shared understanding of how the situation was developing. **Feedback-loops** between actors such as teachers and healthcare workers, private companies, government agencies and the centre of government were established through various working groups. As one key source of feedback, the government turned to field representatives. For example, a working group of field representatives from university hospitals and intensive care units, operating under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, ensured that critical information regarding the current capacity of healthcare reached the government and could serve as a basis for decision-making. The government also invited social partners - the trade union confederations STTK, SAK and Akava, as well as employers' associations EK and KT - to deliberate on further emergency measures to support the economy of companies experiencing liquidity problems due to the crisis. These later resulted in a package of initiatives with the aim of securing jobs and companies. Simultaneously, many of the main points of critique towards the response is rooted in gaps in feedback mechanisms between agencies and members of the cabinet – a point further underlining the importance of flows of information.

The government's response to the COVID-19 crisis has also exposed the adverse effects of the existing strong local autonomy in the absence of sufficient feedback loops. As an example, by issuing financial support for municipalities' elderly care through central government transfer to local government as a general revenue item, the central government's capacity to oversee and support local implementation is at times compromised, which may limit the prospect of achieving desired outcomes and broader political goals. While autonomy is necessary to allow for local particularities to be taken into account, successful local autonomy builds upon iterative feedback loops between central and local governmental entities in order to ensure both flows of information and accountability.

Fourth, the government continuously **revised its framework goals** and restrictions as new information arose. For example, the government's initial goals were based on the assumption that it would be possible to prevent COVID-19 from spreading in society. Perceiving the risk of contamination in Finland as insignificant, and the symptoms of the virus as mild, the government emphasised the necessity of avoiding excessive action in its initial COVID-19 response strategy. When the virus started to spread within the country, the government reconsidered; they presented a list of 19 restrictions to limit social contact, which included e.g. closing down schools and public spaces and supervising travel both within the country and across national borders. These measures were later re-evaluated in the light of new information, whereby both geographical borders and schools opened again.

The case explicates how complex issues characterized by uncertainty are difficult to steer from the top. The COVID-19 crisis led the government to organically land at certain humble elements, as it was the intuitive way to navigate when information was scarce, but action was required. By analysing how the governance system around the COVID-19 response was configured, the best practices as well as key learnings can be transferred to other politically prioritized policy-domains, where substantial reforms and long-term commitment are needed.

Box 1: Analysis of the COVID-19 response from the perspective of Humble Policy-Making

3. Humble policy-making as a process for the Finnish context

Examples like the Finnish educational system and the government's response to COVID-19 have, in their own struggles for improvement, arrived at a humble approach organically, without articulating it in any general way. Hence, although we can identify sporadically occurring elements of experimentalist governance in Finland, the country lacks a systematic approach for utilising the approach which has proven successful in many cases. Unlocking the full potential of a humble approach requires that its core principles are institutionalised within the government. Further, the core principles ought to be connected to relevant functions and processes within the political-administrative system.

Table 3 summarizes the conditions that must be fulfilled for a government to practice humble policy-making, and suggestions for how these conditions can be fulfilled in the Finnish context. These conditions will be further analysed in the following section.

Conditions	How to fulfil the condition?
<p>1. Thin consensus around framework goals means that there is an agreement on the broad goals in a particular political domain and the values that underpin a particular policy agenda.</p>	When addressing complex societal problems, deliberation - not just participation, in the sense of wide-ranging representation of interests- should be placed at the core of policy-making.
	The Government should aim at focusing on strategic - rather than detail-oriented - political steering when solving complex societal problems.
	Thin consensus around framework goals should be built between Government and opposition to ensure long-term policy-making that lasts beyond mandate periods.
<p>2. Accountable autonomy means that while decision-makers set the broad framework goals, stakeholders within and outside of government should be given autonomy to pursue these goals as they see fit, provided there are well-designed incentives and feedback loops that support the process.</p>	As humble policy-making differs from conventional policy-making, there must be capabilities and clear responsibilities in order for the public administration to conduct successful humble policy-making.
	Humble policy-making should begin with a launch plan that 1) makes a complex issue tangible and 2) identifies a preliminary group of key stakeholders. This plan should be a living document that is revised throughout the process.
	Creating commitment to humble processes among key stakeholders requires a systematic design of incentives for participation. This requires that participation should always pay off and staying outside participation should be costly.
<p>3. Feedback loops to ensure learning are critical for learning. In exchange for autonomy, stakeholders must commit to peer learning structures that enable accumulation of knowledge and</p>	Instead of conventional reporting from lower parts of a system to a central actor, feedback loops can be created through structured dialogue and peer learning among the stakeholders, in which knowledge is accumulated and actions corrected in light of information from other parts of the system.

continuous learning under continuing public oversight	
4. Revision of framework goals in light of new information must be made politically possible.	Revision of framework goals when presented with new information should be made into a normal practice within decision-making regarding complex issues. This requires a new kind of culture within the political-administrative system.

Table 2: Humble policy-making in practice

Condition 1: Thin consensus around framework goals

For the government to fulfil its pledge to long-term policy-making, it must find new pathways for building political and societal consensus around pivotal challenges. Without a thin consensus around the broad framework goals and directions of reform, the unfinished solutions created during one government are likely to be abandoned or repudiated by the next one. Or, in a vain effort to avoid this outcome, reforms will be rushed to a conclusion, and so narrowed in the process that they fail their purpose. Either way, the result will be a familiar culture of political short-termism described by Lähteenmäki et al.

A thin consensus is an agreement on the broad framework goals in a particular domain and the relevant values that underpin them (though sometimes clarification of the values will proceed together with pursuit of the framework goals). Its essence is commitment to continue to pursue a reform despite uncertainty or disagreement about its ultimate configuration and the means of achieving it. A thin consensus should be built through deliberation—joint reasoning sparked by exposure to contrasting ideas—based on a shared knowledge-base. Without a shared knowledge base, something that may appear as a thin consensus may in fact be a superficial agreement on for example the wording of a goal, rather than a shared understanding of the assumptions and (some of the) values that underpin a consensus.

Political steering in Finland has already taken substantial steps towards being more strategic and systemic, and less centred around details regarding how to reach a particular goal. In 2014, the Prime Minister's Office commissioned a working group to identify the main developments needed in the government's political steering. A key recommendation of the working group's OHRA -report was to move towards more strategic political steering to enable more impactful policymaking across silos.^{viii} Following the recommendations of the OHRA -report, the 2015 government formation negotiations resulted in a strategic government programme that pinned down the broad framework goals of the government instead of focusing on how to reach these goals. The more specific metrics for following the accomplishment of these goals were specified after the negotiations in the Government's action plan.

While the strategic government program managed to move the focus from means to strategic framework goals, the government did not manage to create broad commitment to all of these goals outside the government. To truly enable long-term policy-making, a broad consensus could in the Finnish context be fostered through the following pathways: 1) by placing deliberation at the core of policy-making, 2) by Governmental commitment to strategic steering and humility and 3) by creating a thin consensus through new forms of collaboration with Parliament.

First, processes that invite the broader society to deliberate are crucial for ensuring a long-term commitment to policy goals. If there is societal consensus around the importance of a reform agenda, the political domain is likely to follow. In the Finnish context there are multiple established platforms for citizen participation, such as the “share your views with us” -website (otakantaa.fi), and stakeholder deliberation, such as stakeholder consultation in regulatory drafting and deliberation in parliamentary committees. Yet, only a few steps have been taken towards platforms where stratified representative groups of citizens are invited to deliberate - to form views in discussion with others who disagree—as opposed to registering more or less fixed views through participation.^{ix} New forms of deliberation should be experimented with in order to ensure that decisions are based on a broad normative consensus around a common direction. It is easier to create deliberative arrangements at local levels of government where entities are small in scale and policy-issues are closely linked to the daily lives of people. One way to enable deliberation at the national level could be to experiment with deliberative assemblies that are representative of the population and tied to each strategic goal that the government is advancing.

Second, the government must commit to setting strategic rather than detail-oriented goals, and to advance these goals through a humble approach. The Government should identify a set of complex and important phenomena, that due to their uncertain nature require an alternative approach to policy-making. Each phenomenon should be addressed by setting strategic and broad framework goals that state a direction, rather than a definite goal or way of reaching this goal. If the Government uses detailed political steering that states how particular goals should be reached, it restricts its own room to manoeuvre and makes it difficult to collaborate with those who agree on a direction but disagree on the means.

For example, Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s government has set a carbon neutrality target for Finland for 2035, and openly stated that the complexity of the domain demands broad commitment. Yet, based on the current trajectory, the government’s concrete climate actions may remain scarce, as preparatory work is time consuming and focused on detailed steering. A more action-oriented approach would be for the government to commit to building climate policies in key, high emissions sectors, such as energy and industry, through a humble

approach that allows climate actions to be taken and revised, even when there is high uncertainty and discord over how to reach the carbon neutrality target.

Third, a thin consensus should be created through new forms of collaboration with parliament. Without the overarching support of the opposition, large reforms agendas are unlikely to last after a mandate period. The Government should therefore strive for building broad framework goals that are shared by the society at large and the opposition. A thin consensus within the political domain requires that actors share the same knowledge-base, and that there are institutionalised settings for genuine - not performative - deliberation based on this knowledge.

For example, the Government of Prime Minister Marin has addressed this issue by establishing five temporary parliamentary committees to prepare large societal reforms. The committees consist of representatives from all political parties as well as researchers, civil servants and permanent experts. The renaissance of the committee structure, which is built around specific reforms, is a step forward in building a precondition for political consensus among opposition and government, as well as more systemic preparation of reforms. Yet, the committees' mandate is limited, and there is a risk of substantial information asymmetry between the government and parliament, which hampers deliberation. Complex goals like the Government's carbon neutrality target require coherent and long-term policy-making that approaches the issue as a phenomenon. One way to increase collaboration could be phenomenon-based parliamentary committees built around each strategic framework goal, that oversee the humble policy-making processes. This would ensure that the Government and Parliament have access to the same information - allowing them to share the same reality. Simultaneously it would move decision-making towards a more systemic approach.

Condition 2: Accountable autonomy by devolving problem-solving to key stakeholders

Once the broad framework goals and a direction related to the prioritized policy agendas have been decided upon at the political level, finding solutions should be devolved to those stakeholders who have first-hand knowledge or experience of a particular issue.

The term **stakeholder** refers to actors that can contribute to solving a particular problem due to their experience or domain of expertise. Examples include front-line employees such as police, classroom teachers or social welfare workers, and their respective managers in the public sector. Another example is companies, subject to regulation, whose operations have negative externalities for the environment or could generate, with appropriate incentives, positive externalities.

The Finnish governance structure is characterized by a relatively high degree of decentralization, as municipalities have great autonomy in issues related to taxation and

public service provision. The financial steering of municipalities is to a large extent built around framework goals. Municipalities are given framework goals and targets and broad autonomy in the use of the central government transfers to local government. This two-level structure creates a tension between national uniformity and local particularity, which has its advantages and disadvantages. In the best cases - as in the case of education - decentralisation means that there is a high degree of autonomy which, when supported by well-educated and respected professionals, has led to acknowledged outcomes in which nationally set goals meet local particularities. On the other side, decentralized systems may lead to disparities in the quality of public services, which has consequences for the equal treatment of citizens. Achieving centrally (nationally) set standards in a way that guarantees equality, requires sophisticated and well-defined roles and clear responsibilities for each actor involved, as well as knowledge accumulation and continuous learning. This chapter addresses the division of responsibilities, while the following chapter addresses feedback-loops.

To ensure a clear division of responsibilities and commitment, three aspects must be taken into account: 1) ensuring clear ownership and responsibility of humble policy-making, 2) beginning the humble policy-making by creating a launch plan, and 3) designing new forms of incentives to get stakeholders (both from the public and private sectors) to participate.

First, there must be capabilities and clear responsibilities in order for the public administration to conduct successful humble policy-making. As illustrated in table 3, humble policy-making differs in many ways from conventional policy-making processes. Different processes need distinct institutional setups. Humble policy-making is a process of managing broad networks and facilitating flows of information vertically as well as horizontally. This requires that there is assigned a clear mandate, ownership and responsibility to those who facilitate the process. Without clear institutional ownership, there will be no point to knowledge accumulation and development of capabilities related to the humble approach within the public administration.

Second, the humble policy-making process should begin with a launch plan that serves two purposes: 1) dividing a complex issue into tangible sub-issues and 2) identifying a preliminary set of key stakeholders for each sub-issue. This is a simplification of reality that is necessary for complexity to be turned into something that can be acted upon, and for the key stakeholders to be identified. Once an initial launch plan has been created, more specific metrics, targets and schedules can be set together with the stakeholders and revised throughout the process.

For example, if the framework goal is to reach carbon neutrality, the launch plan should divide the goal into sub-issues based on for example sectoral emissions, after which the stakeholders include the actors like companies who produce these emissions. What differentiates this launch plan from conventional roadmaps is that it is a living document that

departs from the assumption that setting rigid goals at the top before a process has begun can have detrimental effects on the process itself. Specific metrics, targets and schedules must be set together with the actors who will partake in the process and revised throughout the process.

Third, once a set of key stakeholders has been identified, incentive mechanisms for participation in problem solving should be designed by designing so-called smart incentives. Smart incentives mean that participation in problem solving should pay off and be rewarding, while staying outside of a collaboration should, by default, be costly. Smart incentives are directed to two kinds of actors. The first, highly capable, are innovators or reluctant innovators, wondering whether it is worthwhile to attempt to change the status quo. Setting a bold goal, such as reducing emissions of a certain type by a target date and committing the regulator to adjust the goal as the range of actually feasible solutions becomes clearer, can powerfully incentivise participation. Actors already determined to innovate will race each other to be first and have the benefit of shaping the standards; those who were hesitating will join in for fear of being left out. Similarly, smart incentives can address much less capable actors — those who persistently prove incapable of learning techniques that are proven feasible. If these actors persistently fail to improve, despite public support for adjustment to the new, more demanding requirements they could face exclusion from the market, as a menace, for example to public health or a threat to the reputation of a whole branch of industry.

Examples of the smart incentive -logic are presented in Table 4. It is important to note that incentives can look very different in different policy contexts. Furthermore, even within the same policy context different types of actors, for example private and public sector actors, will need varying incentives to participate. This is why creating incentives is not a mechanical process, but rather a negotiation process between the facilitating unit and the key stakeholders to whom problem-solving has been devolved.

Incentive mechanism	Reward for participation	Cost if no participation
Learning	An actor gets access to learn	An actor does not learn, while others do
“Stamp of excellence”	A stamp of excellence, for example a certificate, is given to those who successfully participate	Lacking a stamp of excellence is disadvantageous for an actor in the eyes of for example consumers
Influence	An actor gets to influence for example the design of the regulation that will substantially affect oneself	Other actors get to influence for example the design of the regulation on behalf of the actors that do not participate

Economic	Actors receive economic benefits from participating	An actor does not receive the economic benefit, but other actors do
Voluntary actions	Actors gain autonomy in pursuing goals, as long as they reach certain targets	A risk of regulation if voluntary actions prove to be insufficient
Default	Actors that participate get to state their opinions on the policy objective and related regulation	Actors that do not participate are automatically interpreted as supporting a predefined opinion on the policy objective and related regulation

Table 3: Examples of Smart Incentive mechanisms

Condition 3: Creating feedback loops

From a humble approach, knowledge-based decision-making means that knowledge is acquired throughout the process, as we cannot in advance have full knowledge of what works and what does not. While it is important that knowledge flows vertically from the key stakeholders up to the political level, it is equally important that knowledge moves horizontally between key stakeholders, as this is the best way to ensure learning.

Particularly in the case of public service provision, high autonomy may lead to a situation in which local particularity comes at the expense of equal treatment of all citizens. For example, in the case of education where autonomy is high, concerns have come up related to a perceived inequality of evaluation of students.

In the Finnish decentralized governance model, the institutionalization of horizontal and vertical feedback loops is often weak. Central government transfers to local government are often general in nature, which hampers evaluation of the outcome of use of resources. The central government has tools to intervene if municipalities face economic problems, but the use of tools for intervening in the quality of public service provision is scarce. To ensure equality and learning, autonomy must come with accountability, and a commitment to continuous feedback loops. While it is pivotal from the perspective of equality that knowledge of local solutions travels across municipalities arranging public services, it is also important that private enterprises and the civil society get to engage in learning, as they partake in the process of humble policy-making.

Peer learning structures can help address the issue of feedback-loops. Peer learning means that in exchange for autonomy, key stakeholders commit to comparing their own advances to their peers' experiences. Peer learning differs from traditional reporting in which results are reported from the bottom up to a central unit. Through peer learning, the strengths

of one approach reveal the weaknesses of others, and all participants benefit from this mutual clarification, as it reveals the possible trade-offs they may face.

Condition 4: Revision of framework goals

Currently, the evaluation of strategic political goals and their metrics is done in a yearly assessment of the government's action plan. Even though there are institutional possibilities to revise political goals, a revision of overly rigid political statements may prove politically costly. For political actors, being open to revision of framework goals can come with substantial advantages. First, being humbly open about one's fallibility gives an actor more room to manoeuvre than a claim to absolute solutions. In a culture of infallibility, politicians are often forced to make decisions that are incoherent with their previous statements. A political practice where claims to absolute truths are later revised in the light of new circumstances erodes public trust in politicians. This can be addressed by a humble approach to complex issues, in which politicians commit to strive for a goal but openly state that the path to this goal will be experimented with. Second, being open to revisions opens the door to new forms of collaboration, as it gives the opposition an incentive to participate in the humble processes.

To normalize the revision of normatively founded political goals in the light of new information, political actors should move towards a more humble approach to problem-solving. In practice this requires that key steering documents are formulated in an open-ended way, and that communications regarding the setting and revision of goals are transparent throughout the humble process. The humble approach needs to be communicated openly from the very beginning. Further, the learning curve of the government should be opened for public scrutiny so that revision can be seen as continuous learning in government. A humble approach does not permit decision makers to act capriciously or aimlessly, changing courses at every surprise or disappointment. Rather, it requires politicians in government, together with key actors in civil society, to be responsible for achieving and acting on the basis of a thin consensus.

When should a humble approach to policy-making be applied in Finland?

Humble policy-making is at its core an approach to solving problems in situations that are characterised by complexity and uncertainty. For a humble approach to work, actors must be able to find at least a thin consensus on a shared direction, and the values that underpin this. This requirement for a thin consensus confines the scope of issues that can be dealt with through a humble approach. There are policy-issues in which the political reality, with its ideological differences and vested interests, make agreement impossible at a given time. Even in these cases, inclusive deliberation can make it possible for agreement to be found on a subdomain of a larger issue. If collaboration can be initiated on a sub-issue, it may generate trust that creates a stronger foundation for building consensus on other, more inflamed policy areas.

As humble policy-making differs from conventional policy-making, an attentive implementation of a humble approach should begin by experimenting with it on a selection of prioritized policy issues. Diagram 2 illustrates an evaluation framework that highlights the situations in which a humble approach is appropriate in the Finnish context. The framework categorizes policy goals based on the degree of uncertainty related to policy-instruments, and the strategic importance that a particular goal has for the Government – and society at large. The more complex and uncertain a policy issue is, the more useful it is to approach it through humility. As humble policy-making requires political capital, the policy-goal must be of high strategic value for the Government and backed by broad societal support.

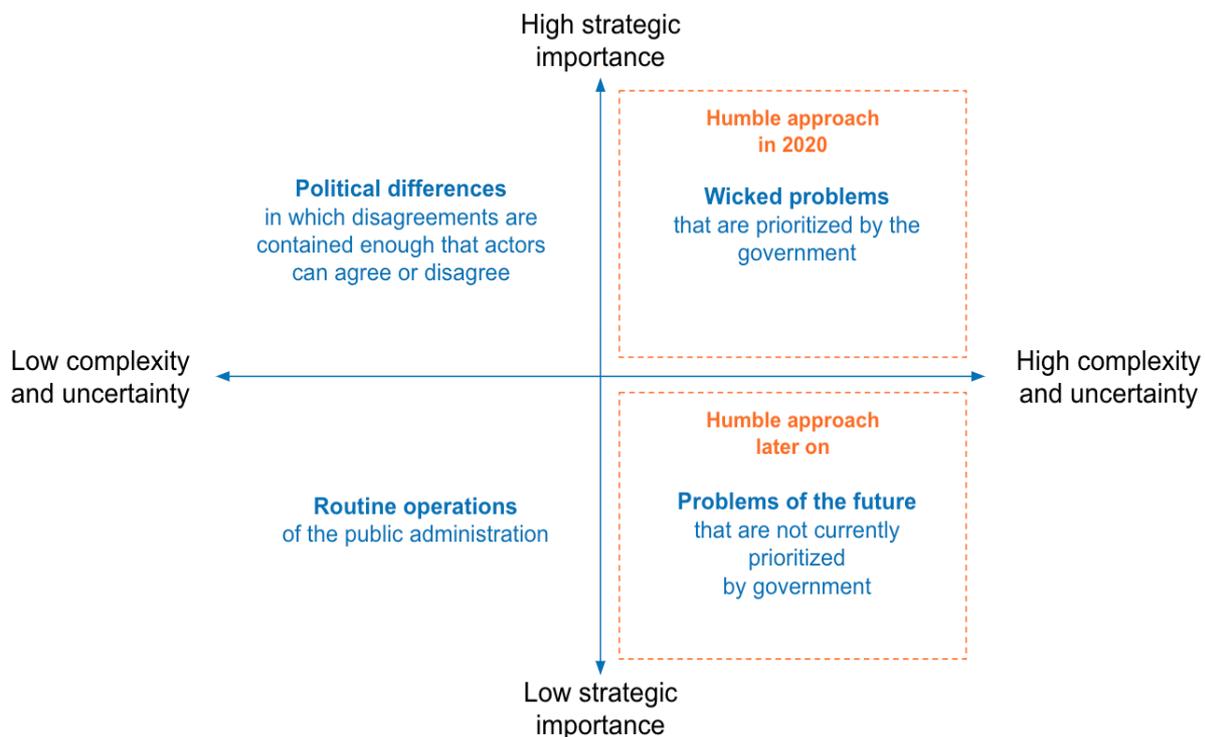


Figure 2: Framework for evaluating when a humble approach could be utilized in the Finnish context

4. Summary

Moving towards a humble approach requires new institutional arrangements as well as changes in processes and cultural aspects. Table 5 summarizes the analysis by illustrating glimpses of humility from the current governance structures in Finland and describes aspects that still need to be developed for the Finnish government to move towards a humble policy-making approach when addressing complex societal issues.

Condition	Analysis of the current state	What needs to be improved?
1. Thin consensus around framework goals	From the perspective of deliberation , the tradition of stakeholder hearings in legislative drafting is strong, and new forms of citizen participation have been rolled out. Yet, these platforms are more participatory than deliberative in their nature.	New forms of citizen deliberation , like representative deliberative assemblies, could be experimented with to ensure that framework goals around large reforms are built on a broad consensus. A first step could be to experiment with such arenas at local levels of government.
	More strategic Government Programs have been a substantial move towards more strategic political steering. Yet, under pressure Governments often utilise more detailed political steering	More strategic political steering should be combined with a commitment to humble policy-making , as this would provide the Government with a process for

	around means of achieving particular strategic framework goals.	reaching the strategic goals in particular high priority framework goals.
	The Government of Sanna Marin is committed to new forms of collaboration with parliament to ensure long-term commitment. The renaissance of temporary parliamentary committees is a step in the right direction.	Phenomenon-based parliamentary committees around the strategic goals that oversee the processes would have access to the same information as the government, which would reduce information asymmetry and create a shared understanding for the basis of deliberation.
2. Accountable autonomy by devolving problem-solving to stakeholders	Current policy-making structures are built for conventional policy-making. Yet there are cases which have organically landed at a humble approach, like the COVID-19 response and the Finnish education system.	There must be clear institutional ownership, mandate and responsibility to facilitate humble processes if the government wishes to utilise humble policy-making not just sporadically, but as a systematic approach that is suitable for cases where thin consensus exists.
	Strategic policy-goals are often set far into the future and accompanied by heavy and relatively detailed roadmap processes. Ex ante evaluations for detailed roadmaps may hamper effective problem-solving, which in an uncertain context must be flexible, iterative and based on a fallibilist epistemology.	Instead of detailed roadmaps, humble processes begin with a launch plan that serves two purposes: 1) dividing a complex issue into tangible sub-issues and 2) identifying a preliminary set of key stakeholders for each sub-issue.
	A case that illustrates the problems of incentives without a penalty default come from the general central government transfers to local levels of government. The steering mechanisms give the central government tools to intervene if municipalities face economic problems, but the use of tools for ensuring and developing the quality of public service provision is scarce.	Instead of top-down financial steering, smart incentive mechanisms can be created to ensure that stakeholders actively participate in humble processes that ensure mutual learning and development.
3. Feedback loops	In cases of public service provision at the municipal level, there is heightened risk for unequal treatment of citizens, unless there are sufficient feedback and	The lack of feedback loops can be addressed through peer learning , in which the strengths of one approach reveal the weaknesses of others, and all participants gain from a clarification of the

	support mechanisms that ensure learning and development.	possible trade-offs they face as revealed through this kind of mutual clarification.
4. Revision of framework goals	Without a humble approach to problem-solving, the revision of framework goals may prove to be politically costly, leading to incoherent communications and possibly erosion of trust in the political system.	To normalize the revision of political goals in the light of new information, political actors should move towards formulating key steering documents in an open-ended way and ensuring that communications regarding the setting and revision of goals are transparent.

Table 4: Strengths and weaknesses of the Finnish governance system from a humble perspective

Appendix: Key Concepts in Finnish

Concept in English	Finnish translation and definition
Accountable Autonomy	Vastuullinen autonomia viittaa malliin, jossa sidosryhmille annetaan vapaus edistää tavoitteita itselleen parhaalla tavalla, kunhan poliittisesti asetetut reunaehdot täyttyvät.
Broad framework goal	Laaja tavoitteisto määrittää tavoitteen, johon tulee pyrkiä sekä rajat, joiden puitteissa tavoite tulee saavuttaa. Tavoitteisto on laaja, sillä se on tarpeen tullen muokattavissa.
Deliberation	Deliberaatio , eli tasavertaista, eri näkemykset huomioon ottavaa ja parhaiden perustelujen punnitsemiseen pohjautuvaa keskustelua päätöksenteon tueksi.
Experimentalist governance theory	Kokeilevan hallinnan teoria on nöyrän hallinnan mallin teoreettinen lähtökohta.
Feedback loop	Palauteprosessi on se mekanismi, joka varmistaa, että tieto kulkee järjestelmässä.
Governance	Hallinta viittaa laajasti julkisen vallan prosesseihin, rakenteisiin ja instituutioihin, sekä tapoihin ohjata ja tehdä yhteistyötä ympäröivän yhteiskunnan kanssa.
Public administration	Termi julkinen hallinto viittaa ministeriöihin, hallinnon virastoihin ja laitoksiin hallinnon eri tasoilla.
Humble approach	Nöyrä lähestymistapa
Launch plan	Lähtösuunnitelma jakaa avoimen puitetavoitteen alatavoitteisiin sekä tunnistaa jokaisen tavoitteen kannalta keskeiset sidosryhmät.
Peer learning	Vertaisoppiminen on palauteprosessi, jossa sidosryhmät sitoutuvat vertaamaan lähestymistapojaan keskenään.
Policy experiment	Politiikkakokeilu viittaa politiikkatoimien suunnitelmalliseen kokeilemiseen
Policy goal	Politiikkatavoite on poliittisesti asetettu tavoite
Policy-making	Sanalle "policy-making" ei ole suoraa suomennosta. Termi viittaa päätöksentekoprosesseihin, jossa poliittisia tavoitteita asetetaan, politiikkavalmisteluun, implementointiin sekä arviointiin.

Smart incentive	Älykkäät kannustimet suunnitellaan niin, että yhteistyöhön osallistuminen on kannattavaa, kun taas yhteistyön ulkopuolelle jäämisestä koituu selkeitä kustannuksia.
Stakeholder	Sidosryhmä viittaa laajasti niihin toimijoihin, joilla on ensikäden ymmärrystä ja asiantuntijuutta tietyistä ongelmasta, jota pyritään ratkaisemaan.
Steering	Ohjaus
Thin consensus	Perustava konsensus viittaa jaettuun tahtotilaan ja sitoutumiseen avoimen tavoitteiston edistämiseen

Table 5: Key concepts and definitions in Finnish

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