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The politics of speed – local and regional actors' views on speed limits, traffic safety and mobility in Sweden

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Abstract

Background and aim In most European countries, the often difficult policy process of setting and implementing speed limits on specific roads is delegated to public administration on local and regional levels. The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze the perspectives and priorities of regional actors, specifically planners and elected officials within public administration, concerning their everyday work in setting speed limits within a Swedish county.
Result and discussion The analysis indicates significant conflicts among actors with regard to the priorities, politics and goals that should guide the setting of speed limits on regional and local roads. Some groups of actors support a mobility perspective that gives priority to relatively high speed limits in the interests of accessibility and mobility. This perspective is, however, in sharp contrast to the views of other actors, who share a commitment to improve traffic safety through lower speed limits, thereby adopting what can be called a traffic safety perspective. The paper concludes with a discussion of the politics and power relations among actors and their implications for our understanding of decision-making on the issue of speed limits.

Keywords Speed limits · Traffic safety · Mobility · Decision making

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1 Introduction

It is widely recognized by policy makers, civil servants and traffic safety researchers that one of the most effective measures for reducing deaths in traffic accidents would be to lower speed limits on specific roads, combined with an effective surveillance of such speed limits [1, 2]. While national governments are often responsible for setting policy goals that can provide a general framework for setting speed limits, the often difficult task of setting and implementing such limits on specific roads is, however, delegated to regional and local authorities in most European countries [3]. Generally speaking, it is thus the responsibility of public administration on local and regional levels to decide what speed limits should be applicable on specific roads in their areas of jurisdiction. This means that local and regional authorities have significant degrees of freedom to decide what speed limits will be applied—decisions that can often be situated in political frameworks in which high-speed transport is viewed as a prerequisite for reaching political aspirations of high mobility, accessibility and economic growth.

Although there clearly is a potential conflict between on the one hand, setting *lower* speed limits on specific road as a means to reduce traffic accidents and their consequences, and on the other hand, setting (or maintaining) *higher* speed limits as a means to promote high-speed mobility, there has been very little research on the ways in which this conflict manifests itself on local and regional levels. How do local and regional actors within public administration—e.g. elected officials, municipal planners, traffic engineers, strategic planners and others—view the challenge of balancing interests of safety and mobility with regard to speed limits? What interpretations, perspectives and priorities provide the basis for their everyday practices and negotiations with other relevant actors when setting speed limits? What are the implications for our understanding of

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the politics by which regional and local priorities with regard to speed limits affect the possibilities to reach international and national goals for road safety?

The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze the perspectives, priorities and positions of specific local and regional actors within public administration who in various ways deal with issues related to speed limits within a Swedish region. The perspectives of these actors are particularly interesting when viewed against the backdrop of the ambitious Swedish national goal known as "Vision Zero", passed by Swedish Parliament in 1997, whereby the long term goal of Swedish road safety policy is that no one shall be killed or seriously injured in road traffic accidents [4]. Within Swedish public administration, however, the actual decisions about speed limits that could affect road accident development are primarily made on local and regional levels where a number of actors with different points of departure interact and influence decision making.

The paper is organized as follows. First we will describe the concept of *arena* as a theoretical and methodological tool that provides the analytical framework for the current study. We then briefly describe the formal organization for handling speed limits within Swedish public administration, as well as provide relevant information about the Swedish region that is the focus of the current study and the methodology that forms the basis for the case study. Based on empirical results, the paper will identify the local and regional actors who have responsibility to assess, implement or monitor speed limits within this region. We will analyze the perspectives and positions of these actors, as well as identify alliances and power relations that have a bearing on how the regional policy agenda concerning speed limits is formulated, negotiated and managed. The paper will conclude with a brief analysis of these dynamics from an arena perspective.

2 Arena perspective – an analytical tool

The analytical point of departure for this study is that those actors within public administration who have responsibility for handling issues relating to speed limits constitute an *arena* around these issues. The arena perspective as used here has its intellectual roots in social worlds theory within symbolic interactionism as developed by Strauss and Becker as well as others in the so called Chicago school of sociology starting in the 1920s (for an overview, see [5]). These researchers sought to develop methods to identify and understand perspectives, values and ideologies among individuals, groups and organizations within a specific geographic place, for example a housing area, an urban district or a region. Although this approach originally focused on specific geographic locations, it later expanded to an interest in interactions or discursive exchanges within

particular kinds of professions, sectors and organizations that were not bound to a particular place.

As further developed by the American sociologist Clarke, an arena is formed by diverse actors who are "active" around a specific technology, related technologies or related social issues [5–7]. An arena perspective seeks to represent the understandings of multiple actors within the arena, thereby "to view the world in the actors' own terms" [7]. These actors typically do not share the same values, ideologies and organizational goals with regard to the issue at hand, which means that an arena is often characterized by a lack of consensus, implicit conflict or open controversy [5].

By identifying *all* relevant actors and their positions, an arena perspective thus draws forth actors' divergent interpretations of an issue as well as conflicts and possible resistances among these actors. Significantly, one of the important analytical contributions of this perspective is its insistence of the importance of studying not only those groups of actors who are active, articulate and powerful, but also those actors and groups who are *implicated* by an issue but are not active in the arena. Clarke and Montini argue that the researcher has a particular responsibility to identify and draw forth those groups who are affected in various ways but perhaps lack the resources to be active in the arena. Thus the researcher should work to "turn up the volume on the quiet, the silent and the silenced" [7].

How can an arena perspective be used to understand the perspectives and positions of actors in public administration who are engaged with issues related to speed limits in a Swedish region? Methodologically the arena perspective means first identifying the actors, i.e. all the individuals, groups and organizations that are active in relation to issues of speed limits in the region. For the purposes of this paper, however, we will focus only on certain key actors within public administration, specifically actors within four central organizations, whose everyday work entails planning and decision-making concerning speed limits. These actors' interpretations, perspectives and positions will be described and analyzed. Also, while an arena perspective underscores that there are never just "two sides" of an issue [7], we will seek to identify possible interpretative alliances among actors who have similar perspectives. The analysis will also consider the ways in which dynamics within the arena contribute to shaping power relations with regard to the handling of speed limits, while also addressing the question of whether there are actors who are implicated by this issue but "silent" or not present in the arena.

3 Formal handling of speed limits in Swedish public administration – a quick guide

In Sweden, the institutional framework for formally setting and changing speed limits within the road network consists of three types of regulatory guidelines. These are the Highway

Code [8], specific regulations developed by the Swedish Transport Administration, and local traffic regulations issued by county administrations and municipalities. Specifically, municipalities have formal responsibility for setting speed limits within urban areas, while the Swedish Transport Administration has formal authority for setting speed limits on longer stretches for other roads such as rural roads and highways.

Most importantly for our purposes, this institutional framework allows for a flexible and differentiated procedure for setting speed limits by local traffic regulations in ways that give considerable decision-making jurisdiction specifically to local and regional authorities. In Sweden, *municipalities* and *counties* are thus relevant as units of analysis for studying the handling of speed limit issues. Municipalities invoke local traffic regulations for roads within urban areas, as well as roads in areas where the municipality is responsible for road maintenance. For all other national roads that are located outside of urban areas, local traffic regulations are decided by the responsible county administration, i.e. the County Administrative Board. Decisions on what speed limits should apply on specific stretches of road are also made in connection with new investments in the road network, in which speed becomes part of broader strategies and resources for changing the network. Major investments of this type are often viewed as highly important for regional development.

4 Empirical focus and material

The empirical focus of this paper is the county of Östergötland, which is located in southeastern Sweden approximately 200 km south of Stockholm. The county is the country's fourth largest with approximately 430,000 inhabitants. Altogether the region encompasses thirteen municipalities with considerable variation with regard to size, industrial activity and urban density. More than half of all inhabitants live in the two largest cities of Linköping and Norrköping, while several of the smaller municipalities have problems with declining populations, resulting in increasing dependencies on the ability of residents to commute to employment opportunities in the larger cities.

The empirical material that forms the basis for the analysis consists of written materials and interviews. First, the written materials encompasses public planning documents, policy papers, annual reports, internal memos, petitions and letters relating to issues of speed limit, as well as research reports and other documents from the various organizations that are included in the study. In addition, the written material includes a total of 87 cases in which private persons filed formal applications to the County Administration Board with requests for lowering the speed limits on specific stretches of road during 2005–2008.

Second, the empirical material also consists of 28 interviews with local and regional politicians, town planners, traffic planners, administrators, experts and other public officials in various parts of the public administration within the county. The interviewed officials have been identified in two ways. First, we have identified the public administrators, experts and other public officials who have leading decision-making roles and responsibilities within the specific organizations that have formal mandates to oversee and handle issues about speed limits in the county. These actors included representatives from regional development boards and county administrative boards, municipal planners and political decision makers, municipal traffic engineers, and representatives of the Swedish Road Administration, which has subsequently been integrated into the National Transport Administration. Second, these informants were then asked to indicate other key actors in the arena, both within their organizations and in other organizations, who are engaged in handling issues related to speed limits in the county. This "snowball approach" was thus used as a method to successively identify new informants to the study [9].

The interviews took place at the workplaces of the respective informants and typically took between 60 and 90 min. The interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, were semi-structured. Thus an interview guide provided a basis for partially structuring the issues that were discussed, while allowing flexibility in follow-up questions and in-depth exchanges in specific areas that were particularly relevant to the informant. Examples of questions that were discussed were: What are your perspectives and priorities with regard to the criteria that should guide the setting of speed limits in the region? What priorities guide your everyday practices in working with various issues related to speed limits? How do you view the role of speed limits in prioritizing between various goals for transport policy? What importance, if any, do speed limits have for regional development in the county? How would you describe the perspectives and positions of the various actors who are engaged in issues related to speed limits in this region? What is your view of the power relations that characterize the arena, i.e. whose word "carries weight" in on-going negotiations about speed limits?

4.1 Analytical process and generalizability

The different kinds of materials have been used in an iterative process to identify the priorities, interpretations and perspectives of the various actors in their everyday work in managing issues related to speed limits. The method is inspired by the grounded-theory approach where the process of labeling properties and identifying categories/perspectives is known as coding [10]. We identified relevant perspectives by looking for patterns, themes and regularities in the empirical material. In a second step we clustered these themes as a means of identifying the core perspectives that characterized the actors' interpretations and positions These core perspectives, and the power relations between the informants that represented them, will

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in the result part (chapter 5) be presented as the two dominant—and largely opposing—perspectives that can clearly be discerned in the empirical material. No normative considerations have guided this work (e.g. deeming whether specific perspectives and decisions on speed limits are "right or wrong"), rather the ambition has been to gain an understanding of the informants' own perspectives and to analyze their views on power relations among actors in on-going negotiations about speed limits.

One limitation of the method is that the empirical material concerning the perspectives and priorities of individual interviewees does not lend itself to any form of statistical generalizations. However, the ability to generalize instead lies in the fact that the results can be subject to analytical generalizations [11, 12]. The conceptual perspectives we identify can thus serve as the basis for discussions of general analytical relevance that can be used to formulate hypotheses about conditions in other arenas. There is also no reason to think that conditions in Östergötland differ significantly from those in other Swedish counties or that the material constitutes a unique case in terms of the issues addressed in the paper. We will elaborate on this in the conclusion.

5 Results

The results of the interviews and analysis of written materials indicated that there were actors within multiple parts of public administration that were "active" through their various responsibilities in the arena that is formed by to the handling of speed limits in the county. Here we will focus on actors within four of these organizations as follows:

- *Traffic engineers, traffic safety engineers and strategic planners within the regional office of the Swedish Road Administration, SRA* (now part of the National Transport Administration). Traffic engineers are responsible for handling possible changes in speed limits on specific stretches of roads, while traffic safety engineers work in the broad field of road safety and strategic infrastructure planners are involved in planning the development of the region's road networks with the focus on new investments.
- *Politicians and strategic planners in the Regional Development Council*. The Council is a cooperative organization that consists of the county's municipalities and the county council. Its purpose is to create a common arena for regional development and cooperation. The municipalities and the county council appoint members to the indirectly elected regional council, which represents the highest decision-making body. The Council has also been charged by the national government with developing regional growth strategies.

- *Regional planners and other public officials within the County Administrative Board*. The Board is a national authority with formal responsibility for decision-making for changes in local traffic regulations, i.e. specifically with regard to deviations from the "base level speed limit" on specific stretches of road, often in response to requests from private persons to lower the existing speed limits (e.g. on roads in direct proximity to areas with children at play).
- *Politicians, town and traffic planners and traffic engineers in municipalities*. Municipalities have responsibility for implementing spatial plans, traffic safety strategies and local traffic regulations. In small municipalities, the leading politician (chief operating officer) often has direct responsibility for issues related to communications, infrastructure and investment in road transport, while in large municipalities, the responsibility for these issues is shared among two or more politicians. The municipalities' ongoing work on speed and speed limits is implemented on a day-by-day basis by traffic engineers and town planners, where traffic engineers in managerial positions often have decision-making power as delegated by the municipality's political leadership.

It is important to note that these organizations thus encompass heterogeneous actors—e.g. town planners, traffic engineers, traffic safety engineers, politicians and others—who typically have different professional backgrounds, different roles with regard to the setting and implementing of speed limits, and different knowledge in relation to these issues. Also, differences in professional profiles do not always follow organizational lines, i.e. traffic safety engineers are situated in both the former SRA and in municipalities, while strategic/town/regional planners are found in the Regional Development Council, the County Administrative Board and all municipalities.

5.1 Actors in the regional arena - two main positions

What characterizes these actors' perspectives and positions with regard to handling issues related to speed limits in their region, how are possible conflicts expressed and what are the implications of such conflicts for planning and decision making? The analysis indicates that the actors' interpretations can to a great extent be grouped into two broad perspectives that reflect the central interpretive meaning of speed limits for each group. These two perspectives imply two distinct and essentially conflicting views on speed limits and their role in configuring and developing the regional road network. We call these two perspectives of speed limits the *mobility perspective* and the *road safety perspective*. In the following we will discuss these perspectives and the priorities, interests and values that characterize each perspective.

5.1.1 The mobility perspective

The basic tenet of the mobility perspective is that the road transport system should be developed through improvements and investments that serve to *increase mobility and reduce travel time (particularly commuting time) between the municipalities and towns in the region.* In the mobility perspective, individuals' commuting propensities and regional political ambitions to develop the region as an integrated labor market are closely interwoven. The mobility perspective is represented in a clear way by four groups of actors: municipal politicians, politicians and strategic planners in the Regional Development Council, officials in the County Administrative Board, and the former SRA's traffic engineers and strategic planners.

Politicians and strategic planners in the Regional Development Council emphasized that the most important dimension of their work is promoting the region's economic development, which is influenced by factors such as mobility, individuals' commuting propensities and the region's role as an integrated labor market. Speed limits are thus a concrete tool that significantly affects the everyday mobility of both residents and professionals in businesses, where the well-being of the latter in particular is viewed as being essential to the long-term economic development of the region. High speeds on the roads facilitate commuting within the region and help to connect the urban areas. *On the basis of a strong priority to promote the region's economic growth, increases in speed limits on the roads are therefore regarded as favorable.*

Strategic planners at the Council also noted that an important part of their work is to illustrate and visualize different functional connections in the region, primarily commuting flows and travel times, through the use of map, images and metaphors. One such metaphor is that the regional road network is the "region's bloodstream" where blockages or bottlenecks must be eliminated in order to strengthen functional linkages. The "normal" condition associated with the metaphor of the road transport network as a circulatory system is clearly free-flowing traffic.

For municipal politicians as well, speeds and speed limits are part of a wider context of promoting commuting and economic growth, where the economic development of their own municipality is a core political issue. A favorable economic development for one's own municipality is thus perceived as directly dependent on the opportunities for local residents to commute between homes and workplaces. Therefore, it is very important that the region's road network should be configured and maintained in a way that ensures high mobility between cities through smooth, fast travel. As one local politician noted:

> The roads are not there for the sake of traffic safety, but rather to enable that people can move themselves between various activities and places. It is important to have a comprehensive view where you consider more

than traffic safety. One must also look at the concrete possibilities for people to commute to and from work in a reasonable, timely fashion (interview, municipal politician).

Several interviewed actors expressed a shared understanding of politicians' priorities, as illustrated by the following:

> Politicians want to have as high speeds on the roads as possible, particularly due to [the importance of] commuting distances. Someone has arrived at the conclusion of 45–50 min' commuting time for a regional labor market, so we pay attention to that, particularly for places on the margins of such markets. Politicians really want to have high speeds (interview traffic engineer SRA).

This quantification of limits to the "willingness to commute" clearly illustrates the logic of the mobility perspective: individuals' commuting propensities decrease significantly when the travel time between home and workplace is viewed as too long, and such decreased propensities to commute have clear negative impacts on the long-term economic development of the region as an integrated labor market.

Numerous planners within the Regional Development Council, municipal politicians, and traffic engineers at the former SRA emphasized that they prioritized mobility on the major roads, as well as that they strongly supported municipal politicians' arguments on this issue. Some traffic engineers maintained in interviews that other colleagues, specifically traffic safety engineers, occasionally "run road safety issues too hard" and do not take sufficient account of the mobility-promoting dimensions of high speed limits.

Thus for actors representing the mobility perspective, there is an obvious *resistance* to efforts to lower speeds and speed limits in the region. For example, the former SRA's strategic planners referred to lowering speeds to improve road safety as "a measure of last resort" that they are forced to use when there are no other resources to build safer roads while also maintaining or increasing mobility. Consequently, lower speed limits should be used only when the road safety situation is very serious. Several of the interviewed actors were more or less openly critical of the national "Vision Zero" initiative, as well as the on-going policy debate on road safety as a national priority. Vision Zero is perceived negatively and speed reductions is seen as having a negative effect on economic growth. For example, all of the interviewed municipal politicians expressed critical perspectives on Vision Zero on the grounds that there is a clear risk that road safety is prioritized too strongly in relation to mobility. One politician noted:

> Vision Zero has become something that is simply referred to, and it is supposed to take priority over everything else. So then I guess one doesn't care if Vision Zero leads to zero employment (interview with municipal politician).

To summarize, representatives of the mobility perspective emphasize that it is their responsibility to try to achieve as high mobility as possible, which translates into maintaining or increasing existing speed limits. Thus the mobility perspective is in clear conflict with national road safety goals of promoting traffic safety. This perspective also stands in stark contrast to the other main perspective on speed limits among actors within the regional arena, namely the "traffic safety perspective", which we will now discuss.

5.1.2 The traffic safety perspective

The second main perspective among actors in this study can be referred to as the "traffic safety perspective". Here the basic tenet is that *speed limits are a crucial component in on-going efforts to improve traffic safety on local and regional roads.* Speed limits thus represent a concrete means of implementing Vision Zero and promoting road safety. This perspective is represented by two groups of actors, namely traffic planners in municipalities and traffic safety engineers at the former SRA (now National Transport Administration). According to these actors, speed limits should clearly be lowered in the interest of reducing traffic accidents.

Municipal traffic planners' perspectives on speed limits and their perceived importance for municipal residents contrast strongly to the perspectives expressed by municipal politicians within the mobility perspective described above. All of these planners emphasize the significance of Vision Zero as the guiding principle for their work in shaping speed limits. This work includes making decisions about what speed limits should apply on both municipal roads and state roads in urban areas, as well as writing responses to private citizens and organizations who have requested that the speed limits be lowered on specific stretches of roads. The interviewed planners thus assert that they have direct contact with many citizens who express a commitment to strong standards of traffic safety for particularly vulnerable travelers such as children, bicyclists and pedestrians. According to the planners, these citizens cannot be viewed as being opposed to "reduced mobility" but rather in firm support of measures to improve traffic safety, specifically including lower speed limits.

Similarly, traffic safety engineers within the former SRA note that Vision Zero is a clear point of departure for their daily practice, where improved traffic safety is the overriding, prioritized goal. An important part of this work is thus to develop a safety-oriented policy for determining speed limits. In contrast to their municipal colleagues, however, these engineers detect a generalized societal support for higher speed limits which restricts their ability to suggest or impose reductions in speed limits.

These traffic safety engineers also argue that road safety is not sufficiently prioritized by others actors, either within their own organization or in other organizations. They observe that road safety is an argument that is often used to motivate specific road improvement measures that are implemented primarily to increase accessibility:

> There is a lot of talk about traffic safety....and one thing that is prioritized now is 2+1 lane roads with median barriers. These roads are motivated by improved traffic safety, but at the same time it has been demonstrated that they also improve the flow of traffic—and I believe that this argument is at least as important as the traffic safety argument (interview, traffic safety engineer).

For traffic safety engineers, it is thus clear that mobility is the top priority for many actors, while road safety is not. The actors promoting the road safety perspective feel strongly that their priorities have been marginalized by the dominance of the mobility perspective. For example, one interviewed official asserted that powerful interest groups with ties to e.g. private industry and specifically freight companies work actively to improve accessibility and mobility on the roads while expressing a strong opposition to lower speed limits as a means to increase traffic safety. The traffic safety engineers note that this activity contributes to what they view as a diffuse resistance to their efforts to lower speed limits. One engineer describes this resistance as a form of "taboo":

> It almost feels like there is a taboo against talking about (lower) speed limits. Kind of like it's not really politically correct. Instead it's important to drive fast (interview traffic safety engineer).

Representatives of the road safety perspective also express how they are marginalized in the decision-making procedures that guide the planning of major new infrastructural investments, which include setting speed limits for newly built roads. For example, several of the municipal planners feel that they have limited influence over setting speed limits in the context of major new road projects. Such major projects are not part of the "normal activity" of everyday practice and are often organized as unique projects beyond the jurisdiction of ordinary municipal planning activities—and therefore beyond the control of municipal planners.

Table 1 Overview of local and regional actors' perspectives on speed limits

	The mobility perspective	The road safety perspective
Goals	Economic growth	Road safety
Means	Mobility and high speed	Low speeds
Assessment of national road safety goals	Criticism of national road safety goals	Strong support of national road safety goals

To summarize, the perspectives of the two groups of actors can be characterized as follows (Table 1):

5.2 Power over speed limits in the regional arena

Our material suggests that actors representing the mobility perspective constitute an informal alliance that has significantly more power than actors representing the road safety perspective with regard to defining regional priorities and goals, both generally with regard to road transport design and development and specifically in relation to policies for speed control. As previously noted, this *mobility alliance* consists of several important actors who have strong mandates in influential organizations: municipal executives who are the municipalities' leading politicians, politicians and strategic planners in the Regional Development Council, and the former SRA's traffic engineers and strategic planners. These actors share a common goal of promoting high accessibility and mobility on the regional road network, which entails a shared commitment to setting speed limits in ways that are viewed as strengthening both commuting opportunities, fast traffic flows and regional growth.

The *traffic safety alliance,* in turn, consists of fewer actors who often have more limited mandates and less formal influence, namely municipal traffic engineers as well as traffic planners and traffic safety engineers in the former SRA. These actors describe how their everyday maneuverability to propose road safety as the guiding principle when setting speed limits is strongly circumvented by the strong target of high mobility as put forth by representatives of the mobility alliance. Actors within the road safety alliance have also indicated how they perceive that issues surrounding speed limits are interpreted and managed in specific decision-making procedures within the region. Specifically, they argue that when higher mobility can be *combined with* higher road safety, it is possible to put forward substantive proposals on road safety. If prioritizing traffic safety implies, however, that mobility must be given weaker priority, it is much harder to gain support for measures to increase road safety. Resistance to such measures is expressed by the actors who give mobility a high priority, and the more the measures are in conflict with mobility, the greater the resistance. This pattern suggests that in decision-making situations in which the priorities of mobility and traffic safety stand in opposition to each other mobility is prioritized in the regional arena.

This interpretation is supported by a review of applications to the County Administrative Board 2005–2008 in which private persons requested that speed limits on specific stretches of road be lowered in the interests of traffic safety. These applications were typically submitted by individuals and families who live along heavily travelled roads and who experience insecurity due to what they perceive as high speed on these roads. Among the 87 applications that were received, 79 were not granted (i.e. speed limits were not lowered) while 8 were granted in part, (i.e. speed limits were adjusted but not lowered as much as the application requested that they be lowered [13].

6 Conclusion: the politics of speed

It is clear that the regional arena that is formed by actors "active in" setting speed limits is characterized by conflict and lack of consensus on the approaches, priorities and objectives that should guide public actors when making decisions concerning speed limits within the regional road network. Actors representing a mobility perspective have developed a strong policy discourse in decision and policy processes that centers around the idea that higher speeds and fast movement of goods and people is a fundamental condition for regional and local economic development and competiveness. Actors who instead support a road safety perspective argue that national and local goals of promoting road safety, as particularly expressed in the national policy known as Vision Zero, should be given highest priority.

These lines of argumentation do not follow organizational boundaries, but rather coincide with specific responsibilities and mandates. For example, general traffic planners in the respective organizations tend to prioritize mobility, while traffic safety engineers in various organizations are predominantly concerned with issues of traffic safety. It is, however, somewhat remarkable that public actors who have a mandate to monitor *both* regional and local development and road safety—i.e. leading municipal politicians, officials in the regional development council, and planners in the former SRA—share the strongest commitment to regional development and economic growth, even though these goals might be attained at the expense of a higher rate of road accidents. In other words, the strong commitment to high speeds, as well as the explicit resistance to lowering speed limits in many cases, detracts from other policy efforts to reach national road safety targets at the regional and local level where decisions about speed limits on particular roads are made.

Our results with regard to the role of speed limits in promoting political goals of mobility and/or traffic safety show that the setting of speed limits has a clear political dimension on the regional level. Asserting that speed is political raises the question about the relationships between speed, control and power. As noted earlier, the empirical material indicates that the actors representing the mobility perspective constitute an informal alliance that have more decision-making power than those actors representing the traffic safety perspective in setting speed limits within infrastructural decision making and planning. The political power of various actors who promote considerations of mobility or road safety can be expected to differ between regions and countries, which contributes to variable outcomes of decision making. Regional and local authorities in other

European countries than Sweden are, however, navigating similar issues about how to balance interests of safety and mobility with respect to speed limits. There are indications that the dominant policy discourse that prevents lower speed limits in Östergötland also has links to other decision-making and policy processes in Sweden, such as processes related to sustainability and mobility [14, 15]. This also holds true in other Western countries [16, 17]. If our work indicates a general occurrence of a mobility perspective in Western countries, this policy discourse needs to be taken into consideration when framing national planning goals and legislation, as well as when setting guidelines for the handling of issues related to speed limits in public administration on regional and local levels. In Sweden this imply that if lower speed limits are to be applied in a more ambitious way to reach national and regional road safety goals, both legislation and decision-making at local and region-al levels should be designed to ensure that safety considerations are strengthened at the expense of mobility considerations.

Finally, following the arena perspective, one implication of our results is that it is important to identify individuals and groups who are *implicated* by actions in a specific arena—that is, who are affected by actions or lack of actions in an arena—but who are not active in this arena. In the case of the arena formed by regional planning and decision-making in setting speed limits, our analysis indicates several such individuals and groups. One specific group is formed by the individuals and families who submitted formal applications for lowering the speed limits on specific stretches of road but whose requests were not granted (79 denials of a total of 87 applications). Another, broader group is formed by the many heterogeneous travellers who use the regional roads—as drivers, cyclists, pedestrians, dwellers along roads—and whose mobility and safety in traffic are affected by speed limits on these roads. From a traffic safety perspective, the "silenced" actors are also clearly those victims of traffic fatalities that can be statistically linked to issues of speed limits.

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