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Characterising the Ultimate Ends of Municipal Land Policy: An Analysis of Land Policy Aim Setting in Finnish Municipalities

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ABSTRACT

Municipalities engage in solving local to global policy problems. Yet it remains poorly understood how they reconcile and prioritize policy problems when formulating sectoral policies such as municipal land policy. This article develops conceptual understanding of sectoral policy aim setting and investigates the land policy aim setting of Finnish municipalities. The analysis draws on interviews with municipal representatives and key policy documents. The results highlight ambiguities and potential conflicts and paradoxes in land policy aim setting as municipalities pursue incoherent and vaguely expressed aims. Locally embedded issues dominate over the global sustainability agenda in land policy aim setting.

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Introduction

Municipal land policy— defined here as the implementation of political-legal measures to intervene in the land market to advance different spatial development objectives (Gerber et al., 2018; Hartmann & Spit, 2015) – plays an important role in the development and prosperity of cities and regions (Vandermeer & Halleux, 2017). By employing land policy instruments such as economic incentives and strategic land banking, municipalities can intentionally advance desired policy ends, including increased housing production and affordability (Jonkman et al., 2022; Lönnroth et al., 2024), climate adaptivity (Křištofová et al., 2022), residential densification (Puustinen et al., 2022), and the accumulation of local tax revenues (Götze & Hartmann, 2021). Despite the evident potential of municipal land policy to advance various sectoral and cross-sectoral policy objectives (Puustinen et al., 2024), the formulation of land policy aims (i.e., land policy aim setting) remains undertheorised.

As for all public policies, determining the government intervention in the land market can be a process that causes controversy and tensions between the public and private (Woestenburg et al., 2019). Since municipalities are increasingly expected to address myriad crises and societal challenges such as biodiversity (Scott et al., 2024) and housing affordability (Debrunner & Hartmann, 2020) through their land use and planning practices, and to simultaneously find pragmatic responses to ease their financial stress (Davidson, 2020), such tensions are likely to

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persist. To date, however, there has been limited attention on how municipalities reconcile and prioritize policy problems when formulating land market interventions. To advance such understanding, this article asks: what are municipalities seeking to achieve with their land policy, and how do they frame and express their aims?

As expressions of the ultimate ends of a policy, policy aims form an intrinsic part of any public policy (Hofstad et al., 2021). However, studies have recorded lack of clarity over sectoral policy aims, and even noted situations in which seemingly complementary but contradictory or conflicting aims are pursued at the same time (Joas et al., 2016; Puustinen et al., 2024). This article combines insights from theories of policy dynamics (Cashore & Howlett, 2007; Howlett & Cashore, 2009) and goal setting (Edvardsson & Hansson, 2005) to examine policy aim setting of sectoral policies such as municipal land policy. More specifically, I propose a conceptualisation of policy aims that distinguishes the abstract goals, formal objectives, and specific requirements of policies as distinct analytical units with different desired qualitative characteristics. Such a conceptualisation should support a detailed analysis of, first, the substantive contents of sectoral policy aims and, second, the practices of framing and expressing policy aims. Both perspectives are relevant in assessing how well the policy aim setting supports land policy-making and, ultimately, the delivery of effective, efficient, fair, and democratically legitimate municipal land policy (Hartmann & Spit, 2015).

Empirically, I study the land policy aim setting of local authorities with a sample of 30 Finnish municipalities. Finnish municipalities have strong local autonomy and broad responsibilities to provide public services (Vakkala et al., 2021). Contrary to many other land use and planning contexts, in Finland municipalities often engage in public land development (PLD) activities and act in the dual role of planning authority and landowner-developer (Valtonen et al., 2017). The analysis draws on rich empirical material, including key policy documents and interviews with municipal representatives. I find that although the global sustainability agenda is acknowledged by municipalities, locally embedded motives tied to PLD activities ultimately dominate in land policy aim setting. The results highlight ambiguities and potential conflicts and paradoxes in land policy aim setting as municipalities pursue incoherent and often vaguely expressed aims.

The contributions to the land use and planning research are threefold. First, the article advances the scientific capacity to understand sectoral policy aim setting by combining theoretical insights on policy aim setting with rigorous empirical analysis. Second, by producing detailed empirical knowledge of the de facto practices of land policy aim setting, the article contributes to the scholarly works on integrating supra-national and national policy targets into sectoral policies and planning practices (Fox & Macleod, 2023; Jonkman et al., 2022; Wittwer et al., 2023) and on the potential conflicts and contradictions in the objectives of land policy interventions (Puustinen et al., 2024). Third, the article adds to discussions about determining the government intervention in the land market (Vejchodská et al., 2022; Woestenburg et al., 2019), particularly in contexts with high municipal autonomy on land use and planning (Hytönen & Ahlqvist, 2019; Krigsholm et al., 2022; Valtonen et al., 2017).

The next section develops theoretical and conceptual understanding of sectoral policy aim setting by reviewing the literature on policy dynamics and rational policy aim requirements. Then I describe the research context and methods and present empirical findings on the characteristics of land policy aim setting in the Finnish context. The article concludes by discussing the substantive contents of land policy aims and the broader implications of land policy aim setting practices to the legitimacy of municipal land policy.

Dismantling Policy Aim Setting: Theoretical and Conceptual Positioning

The literature on public policy design and analysis often describes the policy cycle as a chronological process of agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation (Werner et al., 2006, p. 43). Although this way of portraying the policy cycle has been criticized for underlying assumptions regarding the linearity and controllability of the stages of the cycle (Janssen et al., 2024), it has proven value as a heuristic that provides structure and direction to analyse certain policymaking themes (Werner et al., 2006). The policy formulation stage presupposes that policy problems and issues to be addressed have already been identified; the tasks that remain are to define the objectives and consider what means to apply to advance those objectives. This section reviews the literature on policy dynamics and rational policy aim requirements to gain theoretical insights into how municipalities are expected to formulate and express what they want to achieve through their sectoral policies.

Elements of Policy Aims

Studies on policy change and policy dynamics have highlighted the need to understand the elements of policy that undergo change rather than compressing those elements into one dependent variable (Hall, 1993). Hall (1993) distinguishes between first, second, and third order changes of policy based on the magnitude of the changes involved and their consequences for overall policy dynamics. First and second order changes are meant to explain incremental changes in policies from ‘endogenous activities’ within a policy subsystem. In practice, first order changes refer to changes in the calibrations of policy instruments (e.g., increasing the requirements of a standard), and second order changes refer to changes in instruments within a policy regime (e.g., switching from coercive to incentive-based policy instruments) (Cashore & Howlett, 2007). Third order changes, then, occur following exogenous events and should be categorized as significant and comprehensive changes that alter institutional arrangements and subsystem goals (Hall, 1993). These kinds of paradigmatic changes have been seen as abnormal and atypical and have often been linked to changes in policy aims rather than in policy means (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991).

Cashore and Howlett (2007) recalibrated Hall’s framework and increased the number of conceptual elements from three to six to allow for an explicit distinction between ‘ends’ and ‘means’ related elements of policy contents (see Table 1). The taxonomy distinguishes levels of abstraction: high level abstraction (expressed through elements called goals and instrument logic), programme level operationalization (connected to objectives and instrument mechanisms),

Table 1. Cashore and Howlett’s policy taxonomy (adapted from Howlett & Cashore, 2009, p. 39).

		Policy content		
		Higher level of abstraction	Programme level operationalization	Specific on-the-ground measures
Policy focus	Policy ends or aims	Goals What general type of ideas govern policy development?	Objectives What does policy formally aim to address?	Settings What are the specific requirements of policy?
	Policy means or tools	Instrument logic What general norms guide implementation preferences?	Mechanisms What specific type of instruments are utilized?	Calibrations What are the specific ways in which the instrument is used?

and specific on-the-ground measures (connected to settings and instrument calibrations) (Howlett & Cashore, 2009).

Marsden and Reardon (2017, p. 242) note that the taxonomy proposed by Howlett and Cashore (2009) helps to understand 'different aspects of policy in and of itself.' Focusing on the policy ends dimension, the taxonomy shows that policy changes and stability can stem from the long-term ends that underpin policymaking (i.e., goals) or, more incrementally, through fine-tuning of the specific requirements of a policy (i.e., settings). The taxonomy can also help to recognize and disentangle opportunities provided by the levels for understanding the course of policy change(s). Levin et al. (2012) note that the role played by government officials varies between the three levels. Echoing the ideas of Hall (1993), they state that officials have more discretion in fine-tuning specific settings of a policy rather than affecting overarching goals. Goals are presumably defined in political processes and reinforced by the surrounding societal norms (Levin et al., 2012).

In sum, studies on policy dynamics highlight the necessity of analytically distinguishing the three levels of abstraction in policy contents and recognising that all levels – the abstract goals, formal objectives, and specific requirements – have their own role and purpose from the perspective of the full policy cycle. Thus, even though the prior literature has sometimes used terms such as 'goals,' 'objectives,' 'aims,' and 'targets' interchangeably (Dunn, 2007; Joas et al., 2016), this study argues for clear distinctions in policy aim types. Furthermore, the three policy aim types should be formulated and expressed differently, and should not be assessed with similar criteria. The next section discusses what prior research has said about the qualities of policy aims.

Rationality Criteria for Policy Aims

Several studies have theorized on what makes a policy aim achievement-inducing or rational (Edvardsson Björnberg, 2009, 2013; Joas et al., 2016; Rosencrantz et al., 2007). While policy-making and politics can hardly ever be free from aims that are used as a means to achieve some other aim, such as securing votes in forthcoming elections (Edvardsson Björnberg, 2009), in every policy sector the relevant actors should have an interest in formulating the type of aims that relate to desired future states and that form the basis for subsequent stages of the policy cycle. Policy aims have often been assessed using the so-called SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timebound) framework (Van Herten & Gunning-Schepers, 2000; Wood, 2011). Drawing on the SMART criteria, Edvardsson Björnberg (2009, 2013) says that precision, evaluability, approachability, motivity, and coherence stand out as important criteria for individual policy aims. This study concentrates on these criteria.

The requirement of precision has been widely discussed in the academic literature (Locke & Latham, 2002; Van Herten & Gunning-Schepers, 2000). It can be further divided into directional precision (a policy aim tells in what direction to go in order to reach the aim) and complete and temporal precision (a policy aim specifies to what extent and in what time the aim should be reached) (Edvardsson Björnberg, 2009). Formulating policy aims that meet the different dimensions of precision criteria and which are at once perceived as understandable by the wider public can be challenging. Particularly in the case of cross-cutting problems that are addressed by several governance subsystems through policy aims with varying temporal frames (short-, medium-, long-term), determining the policy aims precisely and in an integrated manner is difficult (Candel & Biesbroek, 2016).

The second criterion for the rationality of a policy aim is evaluability. Strategies to reach the set aims can best be improved when information is available about the status quo in relation to the aims. In addition, evaluating progress can increase motivation and commitment to achieving the aims (Wood, 2011). When progress is reported publicly, public demand for further advances might also increase (Wood, 2011). One approach to evaluation is to measure progress using selected indicators. However, the choice of indicator(s) often implies “a political standpoint on what means to employ to reach the goal at issue” (Edvardsson Björnberg, 2009, p. 1013). Especially in the context of planning and land use, indicators might sometimes oversimplify the issue (Decoville, 2018). In the case of policy aims related to land consumption and the amount of land cover change (e.g., European Union’s No net land take by 2050 target), for example, indicators could relate to increasing the efficiency of land use, or alternatively, to reducing the loss of agricultural land (Meyer et al., 2021). Various indicators frame the issue differently.

Approachability can be described as an ability-related property that concerns what actors can do (Edvardsson & Hansson, 2005). Scholars of management and organization theory have tended to divide management goals into two categories: realistic and unrealistic goals (Wood, 2011). Edvardsson Björnberg (2009) argues that this division can be misleading, pointing out that a policy aim can be rational even if it is not fully attainable. Instead, due to their capacity to motivate action, aims that are only partially attainable can in some instances be more successful than fully realistic ones (Edvardsson & Hansson, 2005). Edvardsson and Hansson (2005) elaborate that one means to assess the requirement of approachability is to view it through three dimensions that are non-binary by nature: the dimensions of closeness, certainty, and cost. These dimensions are, however, closely interconnected, making it difficult to provide a full description of the approachability of a particular goal.

Ideally, the action-guiding properties of precision, evaluability, and approachability should be complemented with motivity to advance action towards goal-achievement. However, it can be difficult to disentangle the criterion of motivity from other rationality criteria. Locke and Latham (2002) note that precise and challenging policy aims tend to produce a higher level of goal performance than imprecise and ambiguous aims. Furthermore, as Edvardsson (2007) points out, other sources of motivation exist besides the policy aims themselves, such as encouragement and participation in the formulation of policy aims. Motivation towards policy aims can also vary over time, making motivity as a requirement for a policy aim open to criticism.

The criterion of coherence is often assumed to be met by default in the context of public policy, but in practice finding completely coherent policy aim systems where higher-level aims are consistently operationalized to lower governance levels is extremely rare (Edvardsson Björnberg, 2009). Since many policy problems are inherently cross-sectional (Reber et al., 2022), coherence can also refer to the horizontal management of sectoral policies. Thus, successful sectoral policies need to consider the policy aims and activities of other policy sectors (Nilsson et al., 2012; Tosun & Peters, 2018). Horizontal coherence between policy sectors can be hindered by the divergent worldviews and specific objectives of different administrative sectors, for example (Kivimaa, 2022). Furthermore, coherence should be viewed not as a permanent state, but rather as something that can improve or weaken over time (Candel & Biesbroek, 2016).

As Edvardsson Björnberg (2013) concluded, a policy aim does not need to satisfy each of the above criteria to be achievement-inducing. In particular, the literature stresses that policy aim setting is always a balancing act among precise, evaluable, and approachable targets that

provide a guide for future action and more ambiguous policy aims that have the potential to stimulate and motivate action from a broad set of actors (Hofstad et al., 2021). The context of policy aims plays a particular role in determining the extent to which the criteria should be met to further the achievement of policy aims.

Methodology

The study builds on semi-structured interviews of municipal land policy officials and a key policy document analysis to examine the land policy aim setting of Finnish municipalities. The interviews allowed access to tacit knowledge of land policy formulation held by the officials, while the policy documents illuminate how policy aims were expressed and communicated to the public. This section describes the empirical context and elaborates on the methods of data collection and analysis.

Research Context

Finland is considered one of the most decentralized countries in the world. Finnish municipalities have wide responsibilities, including education (up to upper secondary level and vocational education), land use planning, water and energy supply, waste management, environmental protection, and infrastructure maintenance. Municipalities have also been responsible for health care and social services, but as of 2023 these responsibilities have been transferred to a new administrative level referred to as wellbeing services counties. Municipalities in Finland have considerable revenue autonomy. Their main source of income is the municipal income tax, a flat rate tax determined annually by the municipal council (OECD, 2023). Most Finnish municipalities have structured their operations in theme-based sectors. Organizational structures vary, but municipalities often have separate departments for land policy, land use planning, housing, environmental issues, and transport, for example.

The Finnish land use planning system provides strong planning autonomy to municipalities. An essential feature of the system is that official plans can only be drafted and approved by municipalities (Hytönen & Ahlqvist, 2019). In addition, Finnish municipalities have autonomy in land development and a comprehensive public land development (PLD) strategy in which the municipality acts as a land developer that acquires land, builds the needed infrastructure, and allocates the developable plots to builders is widely practiced (Valtonen et al., 2017; Van der Krabben et al., 2023). The PLD strategy gives the municipality an alternative route to regulate development and to advance many broader planning goals such as provision of social housing, but it can provide an additional source of income for the municipality (Valtonen et al., 2017). In the case of private-led land development, the infrastructure provision responsibilities and land use fees are freely negotiated between the municipality and the landowner. If voluntary agreement is not reached, municipalities can collect compulsory land development fees (up to 60 per cent of the land value appreciation) from landowners to cover the costs of plan implementation (Krigsholm et al., 2022).

The Land Use and Building Act (132/1999) lists the conduct of land policy among the responsibilities of Finnish municipalities, but no legally binding goals for land policy exist. However, the largest urban regions (currently seven urban regions) and the associated municipalities conclude so-called MAL agreements with central government, where M=land use, A=housing, and L=transportation (Mattila & Heinilä, 2022). With these agreements,

municipalities commit to certain planning goals and principles (e.g., the volume of housing production in the coming years) in exchange for central government funding for transportation infrastructure (Mattila et al., 2024). The related planning outcomes are monitored but the measures are not binding (Bäcklund et al., 2017).

Data Collection and Analysis

My study draws upon a sample of 30 of the 31 most populated municipalities in Finland. The sample includes municipalities from different parts of the country with varying demographic trajectories (i.e., both shrinking and growing municipalities). The sample municipalities account for 61% of the Finnish population. Currently, 14 of the 30 municipalities have signed a MAL agreement with central government.

An extensive interview data set collected in March–August 2020 was used as primary material. Two-part semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal land policy officials to collect information about municipalities' land policy decision-making and current practices. Thus, in total 60 interviews were carried out. The interviewees, often holding the title of head of a land surveying and land use unit, represent the highest level of land policy expertise in each municipality. The interviews followed a similar thematic structure, lasted from 60 to 120 min, and were recorded with the interviewees' permission. One section of the interviews focused on the policy aims of municipal land policy. The interviewees were asked, for example, what kind of land policy aims they recognize for their municipality, and how they evaluate their policy outcomes in relation to set policy aims. The recorded interviews were transcribed for content analysis.

In addition, two document types were systematically collected: municipal strategies and land policy agendas. A municipal (city) strategy is a public policy document prepared and implemented by the municipal council, setting out the main policies and goals for the four-year council term (Ahvenniemi & Huovila, 2021). The Local Government Act (410/2015) stipulates that a municipal strategy should determine the long-term objectives for the municipality's operations and finances. Moreover, the strategy should specify the objectives for developing the living environment and regional vitality. The strategies of all participating municipalities were collected. The land policy agenda is a council-approved, non-binding document that details the municipality's land policy principles (Krigsholm et al., 2022). One of the main purposes of a land policy agenda is to communicate to residents the municipality's land policy aims and means of policy implementation. Twenty-six municipalities in the sample have drafted and approved a land policy agenda. The available land policy agendas were collected.

The interview materials and policy documents were analysed following a mixed deductive-inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Materials were coded with Atlas.ti software. The coding process was 'theory-driven' in a sense that the aim was to test if the data aligns with theoretical insights emerging from the literature. To that end, a framework that combines the idea of three levels of abstraction in policy ends (Cashore & Howlett, 2007) with propositions on rational policy aim criteria (Edvardsson Björnberg, 2009, 2013) was developed to provide the initial coding scheme (Table 2). The coding scheme instructed in identifying the segments of the policy documents and interview transcripts where policy aims and their formulation were described. To ensure that all relevant information in materials was captured in the analysis, codes not included in the initial coding scheme were identified during the analysis process. Both semantic and latent coding was used depending

Table 2. Framework for analysing land policy aim setting at municipal level.

Level	Description	Formulated by	Proposition of key points of emphasis in expressing policy aims
Land policy goals	What general types of ideas govern land policy, e.g., carbon-neutral land use, stabilization of municipal finances	Locally elected politicians (city councils); municipal officials across different sectors; civil servants, regulators, etc.	Particularly coherence and motivity of land policy goals matter. Precision and evaluability not very meaningful assessment criteria for land policy goals.
Land policy objectives	What does land policy formally aim to address, e.g., reduction in housing prices, produce more climate-conscious housing	Locally elected politicians; land policy municipal officials	Approachability, but precision and evaluability also matter. Critical level as it acts as a link between goals and settings.
Land policy settings	What are the specific on-the-ground requirements of policy, e.g., increase land sales by x per cent	Land policy municipal officials; locally elected politicians	Precision and evaluability key criteria for land policy requirements

on the type of information. Each segment of the data was coded and six themes that represent broader topics in the data were developed: Origin and communication of policy aims; Nature and precision of policy aims; Substantive content of policy aims; Coherence of policy aims; Evaluability of policy aims; Cross-cutting challenges (Table 3). As a final step, the materials were structured under the three abstraction levels (goals, objectives, settings) and key insights for the six themes were developed for each level. To ensure anonymity, the results are reported without referring to a specific municipality.

Results

Land Policy Goals

Most municipal representatives recognized that land policy is grounded upon wider general ideas and ambitions that form outside the sectoral scope of land policy. They noted that the land policy goals stem particularly from municipal strategies, MAL agreements, and local master plans. Other document types such as municipal housing documents and environmental agendas were mentioned as origins of land policy goals. Some interviewees pointed out that the fragmentation of sources increases goal ambiguity, even for the officials themselves. Municipalities facing a declining population trend deviate from the rest of the sample as they define their role to cope as best they can rather than to seek to advance certain land policy goals.

Land policy goals can be of qualitative or quantitative nature. Some variation in the substantive contents occur across municipalities. Larger municipalities (by population count) are more likely to refer to global sustainability-related measures. However, the sustainability-related goals expressed in public documents tend to be abstract and poorly localised. Municipalities that have signed a MAL agreement often perceive the numerical targets set for housing production as their prioritized land policy goals. Those elements of MAL agreements that concern the volume of affordable housing development for the coming years are recognized as a particularly important land policy goal. Municipalities not part of the MAL agreement scheme often prioritize the land policy goal of 'local vitality.' This refers especially to a municipality's or a city-region's support for entrepreneurship and population growth related aspects. Despite

Table 3. Themes developed in the analysis process.

Theme	Code
Origin and communication of policy aims	Origin/ the instance responsible for policy aim formulation Communication of policy aims Occurrence of land policy aims in policy documents Connecting policy aims and land policy principles
Nature and precision of policy aims	Qualitative aims Quantitative aims Instrument linked aims Instrument mix linked aims Project related aims
Substantive content of policy aims	PLD related policy aims Environmental policy aims Housing development related aims Population growth aims Local and regional vitality related aims Densification related aims
Coherence of policy aims	National and regional aims Horizontal policy aim (in)coherence Cross-sectoral policy agenda Sectoral interrelations Vertical policy aim (in)coherence Operationalization of policy aims Sequencing of policy aims
Evaluability of policy aims	Time horizon in policy aim setting Re-evaluation of policy aims Efficiency evaluation Effectiveness evaluation Evaluation and monitoring challenges Monitoring practices
Cross-cutting challenges	Dual role of municipality as a planning authority and a land developer Ambiguity of policy aims Outcome contradictions

their prominence, local vitality related goals, like sustainability related goals, appear as all-encompassing and ambiguous in public documents. Other goals brought up in interviews or found in documents included population growth related goals and the goals of stabilizing municipal finances.

Land policy goals are more cross-sectoral than uni-sectoral by their nature, which should increase the horizontal policy aim coherence. Many interviewees stressed that their municipality has a cross-sectoral policy agenda that guides the policy design of individual sectors. The perspective of vertical policy aim coherence was rarely articulated. Only one interviewee stressed that they differentiate the goals stemming from national level (i.e., targets set in MAL agreement) from the municipality's self-determined goals. The evaluation challenges related to land policy goals were often raised during interviews. In particular, many interviewees noted the difficulty of finding the 'right' monitoring perspectives and measures for abstract and cross-sectoral goals.

Land Policy Objectives

Formal objectives for land policy are often expressed in the municipal land policy agenda. As the agenda is approved by the municipal council but usually prepared jointly by locally elected politicians and municipal officials, both groups likely contribute to the formulation of land policy objectives. However, the official's role can be unclear at times. As one interviewee stated:

“Sometimes I wish the steering would be more direct, but perhaps the political opinions are different, and they don’t have a collective view on what should be done.”

Like the land policy goals, the objectives can be of qualitative or quantitative in nature. Substance-wise, the land policy objectives often relate to a municipality’s PLD strategy. Two PLD-related objectives appear regularly in municipalities’ land policy agendas. The first one – ‘to provide an adequate amount of land for different development purposes at an affordable price’ – relates to the strong market position of a municipality as the main, or even as a monopolistic supplier of developable land, while the second one – ‘to secure the sustainable and responsible use of land resources through PLD’ – is more value-based and linked to the broader land use agenda. The municipal representatives stressed during interviews that although the aim is to generate economic revenue through the PLD activities, another aim is to advance the common good more widely. They particularly see that high municipal land ownership and PLD engagement will allow the municipality to better facilitate when, where, and what kind of building development takes place and thereby advance environmental and social sustainability related goals more effectively.

Indeed, the environmental and social sustainability aspects are visible to some extent in land policy agendas. For example, some large municipalities state in their agendas that they are committed to annually deliver a certain volume of housing production and have formulated objectives related to housing tenure types, apartment sizes, and types of new building development. Land policy objectives with a direct environmental focus are less common. In the policy documents, many municipalities frame the objectives to promote densification and to direct new development within the existing urban structure as environmental sustainability related objectives. In the interviews, however, the potential savings from lower infrastructure building costs and costs of providing (mandatory) municipal services were often mentioned as the *raison d’être* for including densification among the municipality’s land policy objectives.

Policy aim coherence and the need to acknowledge sectoral interrelations when formulating land policy objectives was underlined by some interviewees. For example, one interviewee noted that “carbon neutrality targets and similar that practically every municipality has, they are implemented through land policy and specific land policy instruments.” However, the connections between the abstract type of goals and formal objectives are rarely articulated in land policy agendas. Monitoring challenges pertain to this level as well. Many interviewees said their municipality does not have indicators that would measure progress related to the formal objectives. Instead, continuous qualitative assessments are done about the policy progress.

Land Policy Settings

The specific on-the-ground requirements linked to individual policy instruments or instrument combination are rarely communicated to the wider public in policy documents. The document analysis shows that only one municipality clearly spells out the requirements related to individual land policy instruments, such as public land allocations, or the use of infill development incentives, in its agenda. However, nearly all municipal representatives noted in the interviews that their municipality has such requirements. The representatives furthermore explained how their expertise is crucial in specifying the settings, but policy environment factors such as population growth trajectory or municipal finances create the (realistic) range for the settings.

Land policy settings are usually of a quantitative nature. As with land policy objectives, settings often relate to the municipality's PLD strategy. The most common setting is the volume of public land allocations, measured in euros or sometimes in the number of individual plots sold. Since proceeds from public land allocations are one of the few possible ways to quickly generate extra municipal income, some interviewees said that the requirement might be substantially changed in the case of a sudden need to strengthen municipal finances. Some municipalities have in addition introduced non-economic requirements for their land allocations. For example, they may have set stricter than legal requirements for energy efficiency ratings in a new housing development.

Another common land policy setting is the volume of public land acquisitions, often expressed in euros or hectares (annual purchases per year). Some interviewees did, however, stress that due to the uncertainties related to the acquisition negotiations, formulating a precise numeric requirement for the volume of public land acquisitions is not meaningful. Nevertheless, nearly all municipalities actively acquire land for development purposes. Land acquisitions are mainly targeted in areas with development potential, although some interviewees noted that the municipality accumulates land reserves for land-for-land exchanges.

Some of the municipal representatives confessed that they struggle to see the connection between the abstract goals and the on-the-ground requirements that guide their daily work. Indeed, the document analysis similarly points towards poor operationalization of the higher-level policy aims. Monitoring of the land policy settings is systematic compared to the more abstract policy aim types. Monitoring is often done as part of annual budgeting, but in some municipalities the frequency is higher (biannual or quarterly). Most interviewees, however, stressed that the economic requirements are not binding in the sense that no specified consequences result from either achieving or missing them. Some expressed the concern that due to lack of proper monitoring and evaluation criteria, land policy requirements tend to be vague and unrealistic. Municipalities with shrinking populations in particular have struggled to find the type of requirements that are relevant and motivating for them, whilst simultaneously admitting that the traditional assumption of constant growth no longer applies to their land policy environment.

Discussion

Previous studies have shown that municipalities tend to avoid prioritizing certain land policy aims over others, which may mean that not all aims are pursued with equal vigour (Jonkman et al., 2022). My analysis suggests that lack of prioritization is not the only issue in land policy aim setting. Municipalities tend to formulate vertically incoherent and vaguely expressed land policy aims, creating potential conflicts and paradoxes in policy aim setting. The evaluation perspective is integrated only into formulation of the specific requirements of policies (land policy settings). As indicated by previous studies (Edvardsson, 2007), this has created monitoring challenges for local authorities. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the desired policy ends are not always visible in public documents, and that discovering what (public) values the policy promotes can be difficult. The lack of clarity hinders open evaluation of policies by different stakeholders (Hanberger, 2001).

The Finnish municipalities clearly prioritize policy problems stemming from local, but also regional and national levels (i.e., local and regional vitality, municipal fiscal stability, housing production targets set in MAL agreements) over global ambitions in their land policy aim

setting. The results thus reinforce the view that integrating supra-national policy targets into sectoral policies and planning practices while simultaneously tailoring them to local priorities can be seen as burdensome by local authorities (Fox & Macleod, 2023). Environmental sustainability related land policy aims are rarely pursued, and some pressing policy problems with clear links to urban development and land policies, such as biodiversity preservation, are yet to emerge onto local authorities' wider policy agenda. Studies on environmental protection explain the difficulty to engage local-level actors to solve transboundary problems by the apparent incentives to free ride (Krause et al., 2019). According to this logic, only mandates and binding targets imposed by higher authorities would be able to force municipalities to change their course of action. However, the opponents have pointed out that municipalities have certain motives to make independent choices that contribute to addressing transboundary problems. For example, higher environmental quality and environmental amenities can serve as assets in attracting businesses and residents (Mondal & Nath Das, 2018) and cost savings can be gained, as in the case of cities' energy efficiency initiatives (Arentsen & Bellekom, 2014).

The questions of how actively and independently municipalities pursue policy aims related to transboundary policy problems and what is the role and level of accountability of such aims are gaining relevance due to growing sustainability ambitions of supranational organizations such as the European Union (EU). The EU's No net land take by 2050 target, for example, includes the community and policy objective to halt land consumption within member countries. While France, Germany and some other countries have set legislative targets or policy objectives for net land neutrality (Lacoere et al., 2023), it seems that the operationalization of this target at national and sub-national levels remains rather limited with no binding legislation at the EU level (Cortinovis et al., 2019). My analysis shows that the policy aim setting of Finnish municipalities does not react to supra-national policy targets. However, I find that municipalities in the largest city-regions are highly committed to state-led housing quantity goals set out in MAL agreements. Hence, even though no (legally) binding targets stemming from higher governance levels frame municipal land policies, we cannot conclude that municipal land policy aims are purely a matter of local political decision-making.

Although the MAL policy has advanced sustainability goals in planning (Mattila et al., 2024), the related contractual practices have been criticized for their lack of openness and transparency (Bäcklund et al., 2017) and for sidelining democratic principles (Bäcklund et al., 2023). The housing quantity goals set out in MAL agreements fulfil many rational policy aim criteria—namely precision, coherence, and evaluability— but their transparency is low and their existence and action-guiding role might not be clear to relevant stakeholders. In the Finnish context, therefore, it might be difficult to even recognize the inherent value conflicts between quantitative housing goals and other types of goals brought up by Jonkman et al. (2022), let alone to have an informed debate about alternative desired policy outcomes.

Finally, the results underline how Finnish municipalities' policy aim setting is strongly connected to the public land development strategy. The PLD strategy is often justified with effectiveness and efficiency rationales (Van der Krabben et al., 2023), but the legitimacy dilemmas related to the dual role of the municipality as planning authority and land market actor are increasingly acknowledged (Olsson, 2018). One of Olsson's (2018) concerns is that the dual role erodes the democratic process as many of the conflicts of interest between a municipality and a (building) developer are addressed and solved as contractual matters, instead of treating them as democratic issues of concern to the public. Indeed, failure to clearly express the aims that are advanced using PLD and to identify what kind of trade-offs and conflicts of interest

are involved in municipal-led land development can pose a threat to the democratic legitimacy of municipal land policy. This seems a proper concern in the Finnish context as municipalities do not connect their PLD-related land policy aims to the broader policy agenda and higher-level policy aims (land policy goals). Prior studies have shown how PLD can be employed to create different forms of public value in addition to being a source of revenue for a municipality (Candel, 2022). This study, too, finds that municipalities sometimes seek to advance sustainability-related goals via public land allocations. However, the results also point out that Finnish municipalities often view the prioritization of PLD as a stand-alone policy aim justified by the common good or public interest. Since the concept of public interest can be ambiguous (Puustinen et al., 2017), the public may struggle to recognize the legitimacy of this justification. Moreover, the results verify that municipalities sometimes supplement municipal finances with revenues from public land allocations. This hints that the economic motives behind the PLD strategy are strong and might overrun other motives, such as quality control of plan implementation (Valtonen et al., 2017).

Conclusion

This article has aimed to deepen understanding of the ultimate ends of municipal land policy. By distinguishing three levels of abstraction in policy aim setting, we can build a more nuanced picture of the substantive contents of sectoral policy aims and the practices of framing and expressing the aims. Analysis of the land policy aim setting of Finnish municipalities highlights that municipal autonomy in land use and planning shapes land policies to a form in which the local context and locally embedded challenges dominate in policy aim setting. The Finnish municipalities' role as landowner-developer stands out in policy aim setting as the formal objectives and specific requirements of land policies often relate to public land development activities. Non-binding targets stemming from the supra-national level do not operationalize into land policy aims. However, municipalities in the largest city-regions show commitment to the state-led housing quantity goals by prioritizing them in policy aim setting.

Policy aim setting is always a balancing act between precise, evaluable, and approachable targets and more ambiguous policy aims with the potential to stimulate and motivate action from a broad set of actors (Hofstad et al., 2021). Since land market interventions often are multi-objective interventions (Krigsholm et al., 2022), the coherence of the aims requires specific attention. The results indicate that ensuring the more abstract type of goals that govern municipal land policy convert into formal objectives and specific requirements of policies is critical in land policy aim setting. If this link is missing or poorly communicated, risk increases that land policies become reactive tools rather than (pro)active means of advancing democratically selected land use objectives (Shahab et al., 2021). By contrast, by strengthening the link, policymakers could support their own work in the latter stages of the policy cycle (i.e., policy decision-making, implementation, and evaluation), as well as promote more informed debates about land market interventions. This could result in more broad-based legitimization of municipal land policy.

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