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Responsibility as Principle: Crisis Management in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark Before COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Following COVID-19, the responsibility principle guiding emergency preparedness and crisis management in Scandinavian countries has once again faced criticism. In order to make sense of the current discussions surrounding this principle, this study uses Bacchi's framework of "What's the problem represented to be" to explore its development and perceived problems and effects in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The study examines how policy documents have problematized the responsibility principle and the historical contexts that prompted the adoption of the principle, tracing its evolution from 1989 to 2019, before the outbreak of COVID-19. It scrutinizes the role of key institutions, legislative changes, and historical events, such as crises and geopolitical shifts, in shaping crisis management practices. The analysis identifies several recurring issues in crisis management, highlighting two overarching problems: fragmented responsibilities and difficulties in balancing decentralization with centralization, both of which result in insufficient coordination. By comparing the experiences of these countries, this study provides valuable insights into the historical foundations and organization of crisis management systems in Scandinavia prior to COVID-19.

1 | Introduction

Following COVID-19, policy debates have problematized a fundamental notion in Scandinavian crisis management known as the *responsibility principle* (Wigell et al. 2022, 64; Christensen and Lægreid 2023b; NordForsk 2024). This principle emphasizes that whoever is responsible for an activity under normal conditions should maintain the corresponding responsibility during major crises, which also means being responsible for preparedness planning and crisis management (DEMA 2021; JD (Justis-og beredskapsdepartementet) 2020; MSB (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap) (2018). Founded on the fundamental premise of coordination across multiple administrative tiers (municipal, regional, national), and among diverse societal sectors (health, energy, transportation, etc.), the responsibility principle suggests that during crises, authority and accountability are dispersed among the various sectors and actors constituting the normal societal organizational framework (Berling and Petersen 2021; Torgerson 2018). Accordingly, expertise is decentralized within these administrative levels, advocating for decisions to be made near affected communities, while diverse actors with distinct tasks, objectives, and organizational setups maintain the responsibility for decentralized coordination and collaboration.

It has been demonstrated several times that this principle has functioned inadequately during crises, especially transboundary crises, or crises that transcend geographical, policy, cultural, public–private, and legal boundaries (Boin 2019, 94). For instance, the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia where Scandinavians were on holiday, the 2011 terror attack in Norway, and the forest fires in Sweden in 2014 and 2018 all prompted criticism of the responsibility principle (Asp et al. 2015; Christensen et al. 2015, 2023; SOU 2005). Similarly, the recent COVID-19 pandemic also generated criticism of this principle. While several Scandinavian commentators argued for the complete disbanding of the principle in the aftermath of the pandemic (Hovgaard 2024), others proposed reformation and reinterpretation (Struwe and Bondesen 2020; Danielsson et al. 2023; NOU 2023, 141; Smidt 2024; SOU 2022).

To better understand the current policy discussions on crisis management in the Nordic countries, this article examines the constitution of the responsibility principle through an analysis of how policy papers have problematized the principle in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark in the three decades from the end of the Cold War to the outbreak of COVID-19. It fills a gap in the literature by conducting a comparative historical analysis of the same fundamental principle in three different, but comparable to Nordic countries.

Using Bacchi's framework of "What's the problem represented to be?" (Bacchi 2014, xii), we focus on how problematizations in policy documents have shaped and transformed the responsibility principle over time, and we also point to possible effects of these transformations in the form of institutional change. In this way, we can better understand the problems and long-term development of preparedness planning and crisis management in Scandinavia. Accordingly, the main research questions are as follows:

- What key problematizations of the responsibility principle in policy discussions can be found in preparedness planning and crisis management in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark between 1989 and 2019?
- How is the development of the responsibility principle reflected in, and shaped by, the institutional and organizational transformations that emerged in these countries during the same period?

We choose 1989 as the starting point for our analysis because the Scandinavian security discourse began to shift after the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. What followed was the refocusing of national security discourse in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark from territorial defense to identifying vulnerabilities and risks during peacetime (Larsson and Rhinard 2021). As part of a larger project on crisis management in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark before, during, and after COVID-19, this paper focuses on the pre-pandemic phase. The analysis ends in 2019 to provide a basis for understanding how the three countries later handled the pandemic.[1]

2 | Institutional Context

The Nordic countries are frequently distinguished in comparative politics as unitary yet decentralized parliamentary democracies (Lijphart 2012). They are known for their blend of transparency, citizen accessibility, meritocratic professionalism, and a high level of bureaucratic autonomy (Lægreid 2017; Sandberg 2023). While this reputation is rooted in the shared values of public accountability and open governance, significant institutional and procedural differences persist across these countries.

Nordic administrative traditions are often divided into two distinct models: the West Nordic model, encompassing Denmark, Iceland, and Norway, and the East Nordic model, represented by Sweden and Finland. The divergence between these models centers on the principle of undivided power. Ministers in the West Nordic model have the authority to directly intervene in the operations of agencies within their jurisdictions. This approach reflects the tradition of ministerial oversight and centralized responsiveness. In contrast, the East Nordic model imposes strict limits on ministerial interference, upholding agency autonomy as a core principle, and reinforcing the separation of administrative and political functions (Ahlbäck and Wockelberg 2016; Wenander 2019).

Despite the shared characteristic of "decentralized centralization," the degree and nature of autonomy granted to municipalities, regional bodies, and national agencies vary to some degree within these countries. For instance, while Denmark and Norway have long emphasized regional authority, the level of agency independence is generally more pronounced in Sweden and Finland, where legal frameworks explicitly shield agencies from ministerial intervention, reflecting a distinct cultural approach to public administration. In the Nordic tradition, with degrees of variation, ministry departments guide their subordinate authorities, who retain executive and professional responsibility. These approaches emphasize how institutional structures influence crisis response and highlight the constitutional and cultural factors underpinning policy decisions.

In Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, the responsibility principle is a foundational element of public administration, although its interpretation and application vary across the three countries. There is a distinction between the specific concept of sector responsibility and the broader responsibility principle. In Norway, sector responsibility typically refers to the ministerial domain, whereas the responsibility principle applies to crisis management. Similarly, in Sweden, the responsibility principle designates actors' roles during crises, but sector responsibility historically implied vague accountability for loosely defined societal areas. The 2022 reform clarified this by establishing preparedness sectors and assigning specific authorities the responsibility to lead the work of coordinating measures, both in preparation for and during peacetime crises, and in heightened states of readiness (SOU 2021). Meanwhile, sector responsibility in Denmark serves as an overarching concept, defining both the scope of ministerial authority, and the specific responsibilities of individual actors during crises. This analysis uses the term *responsibility principle* as a unifying concept underscoring the idea that entities responsible in normal times retain their roles during crises in all three nations.

3 | Methodology

To investigate the responsibility principle in Scandinavian countries, we apply Bacchi's (2014) concept of problematization as our analytical framework. Bacchi proceeds from the assumption that policymakers are concerned with fixing problems but questions the assumption that these problems exist objectively and detached from the process of policymaking. Rather, Bacchi (2014) emphasizes how policy problems are constructed through political discourse that gives shape to both the understanding of these problems and how they are addressed. This perspective is particularly well-suited for our study, which seeks to understand how the responsibility principle has been framed, institutionalized, and operationalized over time in Scandinavian crisis management systems. By treating the responsibility principle as a problematized object rather than a fixed concept, Bacchi's approach allows us to critically interrogate the logics, assumptions, and governing effects embedded in policy texts. By examining the framing and representation of problems, we gain insights into the assumptions, historical factors, and institutional forces that shape the governing practices and structures associated with the responsibility principle in each country. Our analysis draws on a diverse set of materials, including laws, regulations, policy documents, reports, public records, and archived online content, collected uniformly across cases through a structured mapping protocol.

By offering a step-by-step analysis of "What's the problem represented to be (WPR)," Bacchi's (2014) framework guided our analysis, allowing us to examine each country's historical approach to the responsibility principle. Bacchi's WPR approach consists of six questions. The first question is simply; What is the "problem, whilst the second question moves further asking what presumptions or assumptions underline this representation of the problem" (Bacchi 2014, 2). The third question asks how this representation of the "problem" came about, while the fourth question focuses on what is taken for granted or excluded. The fifth question asks what effects are produced by this representation of the problem, and the sixth question asks how or where this representation of the "problem" has been produced, disseminated, and defended and how could it be questioned, disrupted, or replaced.

Of Bacchi's (2014) six questions, four were central to our analysis. The first three, concerning the problem representation, its underlying assumptions, and its historical emergence, guided our examination of how the responsibility principle developed in each country. In the final comparative analysis, we applied the fifth question to explore the institutional and organizational effects produced by these representations. While all six of Bacchi's questions offer valuable analytical insights, our focus is specifically on how the responsibility principle has been problematized in policy discourse and how these representations have influenced the development of preparedness planning and crisis management. We are particularly interested in tracing the transformations that have followed from these representations. For this reason, we do not engage directly with question four, which examines what is taken for granted or excluded, nor with question six, which considers how the problem framing has been stabilized or might be contested. These dimensions, while important, fall outside the scope of our empirical and analytical focus.

3.1 | Materials and Methods

To provide a coherent analytical framework, a mapping protocol was devised and implemented to ensure uniform data collection across all countries. Data were collected from various sources, including laws and regulations, policy documents, reports, and public records (Table 1). Public websites were also used as supplementary resources.[2]

Applying a common framework and consistent concepts is challenging because each country has its own unique mix of hazards, vulnerabilities, and national frameworks for crisis management. To ensure equivalence and high validity in the analysis, we deemed it essential that the researchers conducting the study were from all three countries. This approach ensured that we were well-acquainted with each respective crisis management system. We collaboratively planned the study and maintained continuous discussions throughout the process to refine the results. Our analysis does not imply any emblematic value transferable to other country cases, but the method applied could be useful in other contexts to investigate the development of fundamental principles for crisis management.

4 | Evolving Crisis Management

4.1 | Sweden

Applying Bacchi's (2014, 2) approach to policy analysis, the first question—"What is the problem represented to be?"—helps to illuminate how Sweden's security discourse evolved in the early 1990s. During this period, Sweden's security discourse underwent a notable shift, increasingly framing the inadequacy of existing preparedness system for emerging, nonmilitary threats as a central problem. The foundation for this shift was based on the conclusions of the "Threat and Risk Investigation" conducted between 1992 and 1995. The investigation identified emerging threats such as large-scale migration, critical infrastructure disruptions, urban accidents, and "gray area" threats between war and crime (Larsson 2021; SOU 1995). Significant efforts toward addressing this problematization began only in the late 1990s, when a commission was appointed to enhance civil defense by prioritizing peacetime crisis management (SOU 2001). The commission highlighted gaps in civilian preparedness for nonmilitary crises, and recommended extending the responsibility principle to peacetime emphasizing the structural continuity between peacetime and wartime operations.

In line with Bacchi's (2014, 4) second questions—"What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?"—several key assumptions underpin the Swedish policy response to the perceived inadequacy of existing preparedness system. Central among these was the belief that clear and uniformly applied crisis responsibilities would reduce confusion and ensure an effective response in both civilian and

TABLE 1 | Overview of documents used in the analysis from each country.

Country	Legislation and regulations	Reports and preparatory works	Others
Sweden	General Administration Procedure Act (2017), Total Defence Law (1992), Civil Contingencies Ordinance (2002, 2015)	On the Leadership of the Civilian Parts of Total Defence, etc. (1984), Continued Renewal of Total Defence (2001), Societal Security and Preparedness (2001), Strengthened Crisis Preparedness – for Safety's Sake (2007), Defense and Societal Crisis Preparedness (2016), Security in a New Era. Report by the Vulnerability and Security Investigation (2001), Sweden and the Tsunami – Review and Proposals (2005), The Establishment of a National Crisis Management Function in the Government Offices (2007), The Forest Fires of Summer 2018 (2019)	Conditions for Crisis Preparedness and Total Defence in Sweden (2019)
Norway	Instructions for the Ministries' work with civil protection and emergency preparedness (2017)	"The Future Civil Preparedness" (1992/93), Long-Term Civil Protection Plan (1993/94), The tsunami disaster in South Asia and central crisis management (2004/05), Societal Security (2011/12), "A Vulnerable Society – Challenges for Security and Preparedness Work in Society" (2000), the authorities' handling of the corona pandemic – Part 2. Report from The Corona Commission (2022), Now it's serious. Prepared for an uncertain future (2023)	Guidelines for the Instructions for the Ministries' work with civil protection and emergency preparedness (2019)
Denmark	Emergency Management Act (1992, 2005, 2011)	Political Agreements on Preparedness (1996–2016), and Defence (1989–2018), Government Policies on Terrorism (2005), All-Hazards approach guidelines for preparedness planning (2008), Preparedness (2005); National Vulnerability Assessments & Reports (2004–2010), National Risk Assessment (2013, 2017), State Auditors' Report (2014)	Guidelines for Incident Command (1999–2018), Crisis Management (2015, 2019, 2021), Crisis Management Exercise Evaluations (2003–2019)

Note: Some documents created either before 1989 or after 2019 have been included if they contain valuable knowledge about topics deemed relevant for the period of scrutiny.

wartime crises. To understand how this representation of the problem has come about (Bacchi 2014, 10) it is necessary to consider both shifting threat perceptions and evolving institutional priorities in the post-Cold War era. As traditional notions of national defense lost urgency, new challenges such as IT failures, terrorism, and infrastructure breakdowns began to dominate the security discourse (SOU 2001). Military assistance was redefined to support civilian agencies, assuming that cross-sector civilian preparedness was critical for addressing a broader range of crises (Larsson 2021, 57). A key assumption at the time was that a holistic approach incorporating routine peacetime activities was essential for building resilience. Preparedness was viewed as beginning with everyday operations and gradually building the capacity to address severe crises (Government of Sweden 2002). Additional assumptions emphasized the need for comprehensive crisis management, integrating resources from all sectors of society. The three principles of *responsibility*, *similarity* (managing crises with existing procedures and organizations), and *proximity* (solving problems at the lowest possible administrative level) were introduced in 2002 to address the problem of maintaining coherence across multiple levels of government, suggesting that local crisis management could be more effective if aligned with national systems (Deverell et al. 2019).

The 2002 implementation of these principles also introduced geographical and sector responsibilities to clarify authority at the local, regional, and national levels (Government of Sweden 2002). The problem representation at the forefront of this assumed that ambiguity in crisis roles would lead to inefficiency and disorganization. It presupposed that defining vertical (sector-specific) and horizontal (cross-sector) responsibilities would facilitate smoother cooperation across sectors and prevent conflicts over jurisdiction. This representation developed as policymakers sought to prevent the perceived vulnerabilities of poorly defined roles, aiming to create a well-structured and integrated system for crisis response.

The 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, where many Swedes were on holiday, exposed delays and coordination issues in Sweden's crisis management system. The problem, following Bacchi, was represented to be delays in action and lack of coordination, rooted in system complexity and bureaucratic inertia. A 2005 commission recommended streamlined decision-making and proposed two new principles: simplicity (a crisis organization should be simple and transparent) and caution (take action first and adjust as new information emerges) (SOU 2005). The assumption was that centralized and simplified procedures would enhance responsiveness, whereas caution would enable proactive adjustments. These proposals responded to flaws in the principles of responsibility, similarity, and proximity, highlighting the challenges of multilayered responsibility. However, these suggestions were not adopted, leaving the established principles in place despite ongoing critiques.

Although evaluations of responses to the 2004 tsunami did not result in any alterations of the principles, in 2008, the cooperation obligation (also called the extended responsibility principle) was added to clarify the expectation that actors must "... initiate and conduct cross-sector cooperation" (Government of Sweden 2008, 37). Here, the problem was redefined as insufficient interagency collaboration, with the assumption that simply clarifying the need for cooperation would overcome these issues. In other words, the addition of the principle presupposed that responsibility alone could ensure collaboration and that clearer guidelines on cooperation would prevent passivity or miscommunication. To further increase collaboration and coordination, the Swedish Crisis Management Agency (KBM), Rescue Services Agency (SRV), and Psychological Defence Board (SPF) were replaced in 2008 by the current Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), aiming to enhance and coordinate societal crisis management in collaboration with responsible organizations (Larsson 2021). However, it was believed that the responsibility principle should remain intact, ensuring that the establishment of the new agency did not alter authorities' responsibilities or tasks in crisis management.

Following the 2014 forest fire in Västmanland, the three crisis management principles were criticized again, following a similar representation of the problem after the 2004 tsunami. An evaluation noted that during the fire's most intense days, solving tasks should have mattered more than which actor or function carried them out (Asp et al. 2015, 139). Similarly, an MSB investigation found the crisis management principles to have hindered effective crisis management, causing uncertainty, passivity, and misinterpretation among actors (MSB (Myndigheten för samhälssskydd och beredskap) 2016). MSB identified two key issues: collaboration embedded in the principle of responsibility was ineffective and responsible actors delayed action. As such, MSB proposed replacing the principles of similarity and proximity with collaboration (requiring actors to cooperate for coordination and efficient resource use) and action (mandating proactive measures despite uncertainty), while retaining responsibility. Although these changes were not formally adopted, the government acknowledged the importance of collaboration and action as integral to the principle of responsibility (Government of Sweden 2017, 82–83).

In the autumn of 2015, a large influx of people sought refuge in Sweden, sparking a renewed debate on the principle of responsibility. A 2017 investigation by the Swedish National Audit Office (NAO (Swedish National Audit Office) 2017) further examined issues related to this principle. The investigation revealed that ambiguity and lack of clarity around the principle of responsibility created friction among authorities. Some interpreted the principle narrowly, focusing only on their specific duties and hesitating to act outside their defined roles. Others took a broader view, seeing cooperation as integral to the principle, particularly under its extended interpretation. Ultimately, the investigation did not result in any changes.

4.2 | Norway

Applying Bacchi's (2014, 2) first question—"What is the problem represented to be?"—to the development of crisis preparedness in Norway, we see that in the early 1990s, the problem was increasingly represented as one of fragmentation and inadequate coordination. The "Buvik" Committee, established by the Norwegian government in 1990 to evaluate civil preparedness, identified the issues of unclear division of labor and insufficient coordination as challenges (NOU (Government of Norway) 2023, 51). This framing of the problem laid the groundwork for recommendations that called for centralizing responsibility by assigning overall coordination authority to the Ministry of Justice and Police (now the Ministry of Justice and Public Security) (St. Meld. 24 1993). These recommendations were elaborated on the white papers The Future Civil Preparedness (1993–1994), and Long-Term Plan for Civil Protection 1995–1998 (St. Meld. 14. 1993), which highlighted the fragmented nature of civil protection and the need for strong coordination. The Civil Preparedness Council was hence established to assist the Ministry in its coordination role.

The 2002 white paper on societal security (St. Meld. 17 2002) is usually credited for formally introducing the principles for societal safety and preparedness (see St. Meld. 29 2012): the *principle of responsibility*, meaning that whoever has responsibility in a normal situation also has responsibility in the event of extraordinary incidents; *the principle of similarity*, meaning that the organization one operates with on a daily basis should be as similar as possible to the organization in place during crises, and; the *principle of proximity*, meaning that crises should be dealt with at the lowest possible level (St. Meld. 17 2002, 39). In 2012, Norway added a fourth *principle of cooperation*, under which authorities, enterprises, and agencies have an independent responsibility to ensure the best possible cooperation with

relevant actors and enterprises in the work of prevention, preparedness, and crisis management (St. Meld. 29 2012).

Although often viewed as a starting point, this representation of the problem actually emerged from earlier assessments—most notably the work of the Committee on Vulnerability, appointed in 1999 to assess the vulnerability and preparedness of Norwegian society (NOU 2000). The committee pointed to the three principles already established within Norwegian security and preparedness work (NOU 2000, 24) and to the importance of the responsibility principle being made statutory in the newly introduced Act on Health and Social Preparedness (commenced in 2001). In its conclusion, the Committee on Vulnerability argued for maintaining the general principle of responsibility, but also for the need to centralize responsibility for important control and preparedness functions to maintain coordination and political emphasis on civil protection.

Addressing Bacchi's (2014, 10) third question—"How has this representation of the problem come about?"—we see similarities with Sweden where an increased societal vulnerability emerged from a shifting risk landscape in the post-Cold War period. Despite an improved security position since the late 1980s due to reduced regional conflict risks, the white paper by the Committee on Vulnerability highlighted increased societal vulnerability due to challenges such as technological advances, growing complexity, cost pressures, organizational downsizing, and public service outsourcing (NOU 2000, 8). The Y2K computer problem is one of the vulnerabilities discussed. Though described as "a crisis that never occurred" (NOU 2000, 5), Y2K preparedness efforts underscored society's dependence on and vulnerability to technological failures.

While noting that many of these new vulnerabilities have been addressed in individual ways, the white paper problematizes that the necessary changes are largely due to unforeseen events rather than comprehensive analysis and the setting of common overarching goals. Accordingly, the key problem constructed in the white paper is the fragmented organization of responsibilities in relation to civil preparedness and the lack of an overarching authority to oversee key functions and ensure political attention to important civil protection matters. While maintaining the prevailing principle of responsibility, the white paper presumes that these vulnerabilities can be addressed through cooperation and coordination, but also that this requires oversight and control by a central authority acting independently of the interests of individual sectors.

This representation of the problem led to concrete institutional outcomes. The committee's proposals were followed up through the establishment of the Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection (DSB) and the Norwegian National Security Authority (NSM), as well as the key role in coordination given to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security (see NOU (Government of Norway) 2023), all of which entail the centralization of key functions. Nevertheless, the white paper on societal security from 1999 also firmly established the principle of responsibility, both horizontally in the division of sectoral responsibility, and vertically in the division of responsibility through different levels (see St. Meld. 17 2002, 112).

The validity of the principles was reaffirmed in 2005, when a white paper following the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia confirmed commitment to the principles, while also proposing measures to strengthen the handling of emergencies abroad, including the government's Crisis Support Unit (implemented in 2006), providing support to the lead ministry and the government's Crisis Council during crises (St. Meld. 37 2005). The presumption in the white paper "The tsunami disaster in South Asia and central crisis management" (St. Meld. 37 2005) is that Norwegian authorities need to strengthen their ability to aid Norwegian citizens in crises abroad and that this can be done by strengthening crisis preparedness at foreign missions and in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Similarly, a subsequent white paper introduced in 2008 declared that "the government emphasizes that the principle of responsibility shall continue to be the fundamental principle for the practical distribution of responsibilities among the various actors in the overall preparedness of society" (St. Meld. 22 2008, 10). In line with Bacchi's (2014, 4) second question—"What assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?"—it is once again displayed that operational failures could be resolved by enhancing preparedness structures, not by revisiting foundational principles.

The white paper "Report from the 22nd of July commission" (NOU 2012) reviews the devastating 2011 terror attack in Norway, aiming to understand how 77 persons were killed and numerous wounded. According to the report, the tragedy revealed several weaknesses in crisis management, mainly related to the ability to coordinate, cooperate, and clarify responsibility across different sectors and actors. Hence, the terror attack prompted a significant change to the principles of crisis preparedness and social security. In a subsequent white paper, the government introduced the 4th principle of *cooperation*, meant to ensure cooperation between actors, and emphasize the government's overall responsibility for societal security and preparedness across sectoral boundaries (St. Meld. 29 2012, 5). The paper justifies the 4th principle partly through terror experiences, and partly through general tendencies toward increased societal complexity and increased cross-sectoral dependencies that necessitate an emphasis on cooperation. Importantly, the report clarifies that introducing cooperation as a principle does not interfere with other principles and that the principle of responsibility is still the main principle for dividing responsibility (St. Meld. 29 2012, 40). The addition of cooperation entails responsibility for ensuring the best possible cooperation, mapping interdependence, and necessary partners in both the preparedness and handling of emergencies.

4.3 | Denmark

Like Sweden and Norway, Danish politicians and authorities struggled to adjust the preparedness system built for the war to a new security landscape after Cold War had ended. Applying Bacchi's (2014, 2) first question—"What is the problem represented to be?"—we see that the central problem was "How to cash in on a safer world," which built on the assumption that war would never come to Denmark again. The Emergency Management Act of 1993 simplified the preparedness system and created a unified response organization for peacetime crisis

management and wartime civil defense as proposed by the Disaster Preparedness Committee (UOK (Udvalget om Katastrofeberedskab) 1991). The committee report specifically listed two "main principles" for civil defense planning: the authority or organization responsible during peacetime should also carry out the same tasks in times of war to the furthest extent possible (*responsibility principle*), and planning should be flexible and adaptable to the broader societal development to save resources (UOK (Udvalget om Katastrofeberedskab) 1991, 47). Thus, the Emergency Act reaffirmed sectoral responsibility as a key principle of preparedness and crisis management in Denmark (FMN and DEMA 2011).

Prior to the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, the Danish Emergency Management Agency (DEMA) had already proposed a broader "Civilian Sector Preparedness" concept; however, 9/11 speeded up this process, which pushed responsibility further out into the sectors. Applying Bacchi's (2014, 4) second question—"What assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?"—we see assumptions that resilience could be enhanced not by centralization, but by distributing responsibility across existing institutional lines. This built on a logic of operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness that had emerged in the 1990s, where what dominated was "How to get as much out of every dime as possible by distributing responsibility and cutting budgets at the same time?"

To address Bacchi's (2014, 10) third question—"How has this representation of the problem come about?"—we must consider how both global events and domestic policy discourse shaped the shift toward decentralized, sector-based preparedness. The combination of reduced military threat perceptions after the Cold War, the political focus on public sector efficiency in the 1990s, and the security wake-up call provided by 9/11 all contributed to a rearticulation of crisis preparedness as a matter of sectoral autonomy supported by coordinated frameworks. Legislative changes, national vulnerability assessments, and repeated national crisis management exercises (CMX) institutionalized and normalized this framing, embedding sector responsibility as the default governance logic in Denmark's crisis management system.

Following this broader policy focusing on sector responsibility, a number of key institutional reforms were introduced in the early 2000s. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the Danish government conducted a comprehensive evaluation of its crisis preparedness, leading to strengthened coordination across civil and military sectors. This period saw the establishment of the National Operational Staff (NOST) anchored in the National Police and the International Operative Staff (IOS) based in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both adhering to the principle of sectoral responsibility (Andersson 2002), while providing cross-sectoral coordination during times of crisis. Additionally, a national vulnerability assessment was initiated and the government committed to biannual national CMX beginning in 2003 (FMN 2005).

The 2004 Danish national vulnerability assessment examined both sector-specific and cross-sectoral preparedness, including national crisis management. The distinction between military and civil defense was now fully abandoned in favor of an all-hazards approach to societal preparedness. However, sector responsibility was again emphasized as the foundational principle (DEMA 2004–2010, 9–10; FMN and DEMA 2011, 131–132). In addition to the sector responsibility principle, the 2004 national vulnerability assessment also mentions *similarity* as a guiding principle for civil preparedness planning, even if it is not explicitly mentioned in legislation, stating that a *proximity* or *subsidiarity* principle can be deduced from legislation and policy statements (FMN and DEMA 2011, 20, 21, 83). From this, we postulate that three Danish principles of crisis management existed in the early 2000s: *sector responsibility*, *similarity*, and *subsidiarity*. The fundamental assumption at the beginning of the millennium seems to be that the responsibility principle delivered cost and efficiency targets, but some demarcation and qualification were required to connect it with the broader Danish societal system.

From 2004 onwards, civil preparedness coordination fell under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defense. However, the comments to the 2004 updated Emergency Act stated explicitly that civil preparedness only covers "the duty to plan for crisis or war," not everyday preparedness planning within the specific sectors, with the Ministry of Defense responsible only for preparedness planning in areas falling outside the scope of sectors (FMN and DEMA 2011, 135; DEMA 2008, 11). In other words, the problem was framed as a question of strict sectoral responsibility.

Overall, the change in legislative discourse from "civil preparedness" to "civil sector preparedness" marked a significant decentralization of crisis and wartime planning responsibility in Denmark, reducing the role of the central authority (DEMA) in coordinating between more autonomous societal sectors (energy, health, etc.), while retaining strong sector responsibility (DEMA 2005b, 16). A 2005 policy paper from the Danish government on preparedness again listed *sector responsibility*, *similarity*, and *subsidiarity* as the three foundational principles, while noting that all preparedness activities in society "rests on the balance between sector responsibility and coordination" and that prevention of crises must be prioritized in all sectors to reduce societal vulnerability and increase robustness through sector-specific preparedness planning (Regeringen 2005, 10, 14–18).

The most detailed policy paper on preparedness and crisis management from the first decade of the new millennium was the 2006 version of DEMA's annual vulnerability report. Again, this list includes *sector responsibility*, *similarity*, and *subsidiarity* as the current principles for crisis management in Denmark at that time but also mentions two more general and supplementary principles: *precaution* (it is better to do something than nothing if in doubt) and *efficiency* (resources for preparedness and crisis management should be allocated with care) (DEMA 2006, 39). In the report, DEMA defined crisis management as a "subset of preparedness," and emphasized sector responsibility as the foundational principle. However, the report problematized that a common understanding hereof was lacking (DEMA 2006, 23).

A committee on the structure of Denmark's preparedness system stated in 2014 that collaboration between authorities was

guided by "a number of central and fundamental principles deducted from the sector responsibility principle." The report lists five principles, *sector responsibility*, *similarity*, *subsidiarity*, *cooperation*, and *precaution*, referring to the latest edition of the National Preparedness Plan (FMN 2014, 46; DEMA 2015b, 5). Apparently, two additional principles emerged in 2014, and while the details of their origins remain unclear, we find it plausible that the 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway played an important role in this Denmark development. Findings from the Norwegian Commission fed directly into strengthening the Danish preparedness system, and the wording of the fourth principle is almost exactly the same as that introduced in Norway following the 2011 events (DEMA 2015b, 131; NOU 2012, 70). The need for better cooperation among sector-responsible authorities was also mentioned in the evaluation of the 2013 CMX, and this problem was extensively addressed in the 2015 evaluation (DEMA 2013, 3; DEMA 2015a, 31).

The principle of *direction* was added to the list in the late 2010s, following the cross-sectoral evaluation of the 2015 CMX, which found a lack of strategic thinking among the involved staff, leading to potential misaligned managerial practices between the sectors. Some improvements in this area were noted in the evaluation of the 2017 CMX (DEMA 2015a, 7; DEMA 2017, 3–4). At the same time, *flexibility* as a principle was introduced after DEMA found some sectors to be so caught up in plans and procedures that they became paralyzed during crises. The 2017 CMX evaluation noted that "strategic intent must in connection with a specific event continuously be discussed and adapted to the specific situation," while the 2019 CMX evaluation described how predefined strategic intents of NOST were adapted to circumstances during the exercise (DEMA 2017, 4, 26; DEMA 2019). The addition of the last two principles in Denmark represents a remarkable, although subtle, problematization of the responsibility principle, given that *direction* as well as *flexibility*, to some extent, is contrary to the foundational notion of sector responsibility.

5 | Discussion: Comparative Analysis

Our analysis of policy documents from 1989 to 2019 identified several recurring issues in crisis management across Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. This section highlights the problems represented by the responsibility principle, categorized here as *fragmented responsibilities* and difficulties in *balancing decentralization with centralization*. These challenges are discussed through a comparative lens, examining how they manifest in each country. We conclude the discussion by applying Bacchi's (2014, 15) fifth question—"What effects are produced by this representation of the problem(s)?"—to examine the effects of these challenges, particularly their role in contributing to *insufficient coordination*.

A recurring problem in all three countries has been the *fragmentation* of responsibilities, effecting coordination and cooperation among agencies (SOU 2005; NOU 2012; DEMA 2013). Challenges with fragmented responsibility are well discussed in the research literature, both in general (e.g., Nollkaemper 2018) and related to public crisis management (e.g., Christensen et al. 2015). In Sweden, for instance, evaluations following the 2014 forest fire in Västmanland revealed that one effect of the principle of responsibility was that it sometimes led to an unwillingness, as agencies were reluctant to act beyond their narrowly defined roles (Asp et al. 2015; MSB (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap) 2016). Similarly, comparable conclusions were drawn during the 2015 refugee situation in Sweden, highlighting that the principle of responsibility is often interpreted too narrowly. This narrow interpretation risks leading to fragmented responses, where interagency coordination is deprioritized (NAO (Swedish National Audit Office) 2017).

Norway faced similar problems during the 2011 terror attacks, where the effects of the fragmentation of responsibilities led to coordination and collaboration deficiencies, hindering effective crisis management (NOU 2012). Christensen et al. (2015, 367) provide an example of this in their analysis of the terror attack, arguing that the principle of responsibility carries too much weight and causes fragmented structures. They also point to the importance of providing other principles, facilitating collaboration, and ensuring sufficient authority to avoid fragmentation. Denmark also experienced similar issues, as seen in evaluations of national crisis exercises in the 2010s, which pointed to an overly rigid adherence to sector-specific responsibilities and a lack of strategic alignment across agencies (DEMA 2015a, 7; DEMA 2017, 3, 4).

A closely related problem is the persistent *tension between decentralization and centralization*. Balancing these approaches has long been a complex challenge, both in practice and in academic discussions (Dynes 1994; Helsloot and Groenendaal 2023; 't Hart et al. 1993). The principle of responsibility inherently emphasizes decentralized decision-making through differentiation (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967). This approach fosters responsiveness and contextual awareness, ensuring that actions closely align with the unique challenges faced in different settings. However, as crises grow in scale and complexity, this decentralized approach can affect the distribution of responsibilities and lead to inconsistencies, creating a critical need for centralized coordination to ensure accountability, efficient resource allocation, and a unified strategic direction (Boin et al. 2014).

In both Sweden and Norway, this tension became particularly evident during crises such as the tsunami in 2005 and the July 22 terror attack (NOU 2012; SOU 2005). In both countries, the lack of clarity about which entities held the ultimate authority during a national crisis created a disjointed response, prompting critiques of the decentralized application of the responsibility principle. This experience highlights the effects and limitations of relying too heavily on the principle of responsibility in scenarios requiring rapid cross-sectoral coordination and leadership (Christensen et al. 2015).

In Denmark, identifying specific events that contribute to the tension between decentralization and centralization has been more challenging. However, changes since the early 2000s have revealed struggles similar to those in Sweden and Norway. Centralization efforts, such as establishing NOST and ISO, coexist with decentralizing shifts, such as moving from "civil preparedness" to "civil sector preparedness" (FMN 2005). The latter change can be seen as a clear attempt to decentralize by emphasizing strong sectoral responsibility. As in the other

countries, the principle of responsibility seems to have played a central role in these tensions. Despite attempts at centralization, the principle's strong emphasis has limited the authority of central agencies to lead and coordinate during crises.

Examining what effects are produced by this representation of the problems or issues (Bacchi 2014, 15), we contend that they lead to significant coordination deficiencies, particularly in transboundary crises. It is no coincidence that deficiencies in coordination emerge as our primary finding, as the relevant actors and their responsibilities are often unclear. These challenges have been well-documented in the research literature for several decades (Groenendaal et al. 2013; Harrald 2006; McEntire 2002; Moynihan 2009). Groenendaal et al. (2013) critique both hierarchical and network models, pointing out to two problematic assumptions: first, the need for activities to be centrally controlled or coordinated, and second, the difficulty higher hierarchical levels face in exercising control over lower levels in unknown and complex situations, where managers act based on their responsibility. Boin also states that hierarchical models are difficult because no actor today possesses such authority.

As noted earlier, the principle of responsibility fosters an overly decentralized structure that contributes to the coordination of deficiencies highlighted above. While hierarchical models are often critiqued for their limitations in managing complex and uncertain situations (e.g., Groenendaal et al. 2013), we argue that some degree of centralized authority and power is still necessary to effectively address transboundary crises. In line with Christensen et al. (2015, 367), a more centralized approach can help encourage cohesive and coordinated responses during such crises by mitigating the fragmentation that arises from purely decentralized systems.

We can observe attempts made over the years to address the persistent issue of coordination. One such attempt was the introduction of complementary principles. Both Norway and Denmark have adopted a cooperation principle that emphasizes the importance of cross-sector collaboration. Denmark went further by introducing additional principles of flexibility and direction to enhance adaptability and ensure strategic alignment during crises. In contrast, Sweden has retained its original principles, while emphasizing coordination within the framework of the responsibility principle rather than adopting new principles. However, we argue that more needs to be done, especially since the same problems were seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of this analysis, it is evident that decentralized models governed by the principle of responsibility need to be adapted to better handle periodic transboundary crises. One adjustment could be to move toward what is known as hybrid governance models (Nowell and Steelman 2019), which balance decentralization with a degree of centralized oversight, thus ensuring more cohesive and effective responses.

6 | Conclusion

While the responsibility principle remains central to crisis management in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, its limitations are particularly evident in the context of transboundary crises. By using Bacchi's (2014) framework, our analysis revealed several problems, and adaptation attempts in crisis management policy. These are broadly identified as fragmented responsibilities and difficulties in balancing decentralization with centralization. A major consequence of these problems is insufficient coordination.

In addressing this, Norway and Denmark have sought to complement the responsibility principle with additional principles such as cooperation and flexibility, to enhance interagency collaboration and adaptability. These experiences underline the need for crisis management systems to transcend national and sectoral boundaries to ensure that the responsibility principle can effectively address the complexities of interconnected, transboundary crises.

Our analysis offers further insights into why Sweden, Norway, and Denmark approached COVID-19 as they did, and can inform ongoing policy changes in the aftermath of the pandemic. Despite incremental reforms over the years, many of the same problems re-emerged during the pandemic. This recurring pattern suggests that the adaptations made prior to COVID-19 have not fully addressed the structural and organizational weaknesses inherent in these systems. The principle of responsibility appears to both guide and constrain these systems, emphasizing clear roles and accountability, but often at the expense of cross-sector coordination in the face of complex crises.

Future studies should investigate whether new crisis management structures have emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Key questions include whether countries have re-evaluated the balance between decentralization and centralization to enhance coordination and adaptability in handling future crises. Such research could provide valuable lessons for nations worldwide, offering insights into how to balance accountability with the need for agile and coordinated responses in an increasingly interconnected global environment.

Author Contributions

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1]RESECTOR: Reinterpreting Sector Responsibility in Nordic Crisis Management after COVID-19, funded by NordForsk Grant 139946. For more information: www.resector.org.

[2]Historical webpages and old versions of policy papers, and so forth, were retrieved from archived official webpages with WayBack Machine (https://web.archive.org/).

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