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The Responsibility Principle in Nordic Crisis Management

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Introduction

The responsibility principle has been a cornerstone of crisis management in the Nordic countries for decades (1, 2). This principle dictates that the entity responsible in normal times retains that responsibility during crises. It has traditionally been seen as a means of ensuring accountability, leveraging sector-specific expertise, and maintaining decentralized governance. However, experiences from past crises, including the 2004 tsunami, the 2011 terror attack in Norway, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have pointed to challenges associated with this model (3-5). Evaluations suggest that fragmentation of responsibilities and difficulties in balancing decentralization with national coordination can lead to inefficiencies, delayed responses, and complications in crisis management (6, 7). Many of these issues arise in crises that extend across geographical, policy, cultural, public-private, and legal boundaries, complicating coordination efforts (8).

Given these challenges, there is a need to assess whether and how the responsibility principle can be adapted to the evolving nature of crises. This policy brief presents key insights based on research from the NordForsk-funded research project RESECTOR, which investigates how the principle played out in Sweden, Norway and Denmark before, during and after COVID-19. Findings from a literature review and policy analysis were discussed with senior professionals and policymakers at a workshop in December 2024. As the workshop included representatives only from Sweden and Denmark, the examples presented in this brief are drawn from these two countries with some exceptions. However, the insights and conclusions are considered relevant and applicable to the broader Nordic context. The aim is to provide an overview of the current debate on the responsibility principle and its role in crisis management to advice policymakers on implementing lessons identified from COVID-19.

Identified Challenges

While the responsibility principle has long supported sectoral expertise and decentralized crisis management in the Nordic countries, it can become a source of difficulty during large-scale or trans-boundary crises that cut across multiple sectors, regions, and policy areas. These types of crises tend to challenge the assumption that responsibilities can be clearly divided and managed within existing institutional boundaries. A key issue is the tension between localized, sector-based decision-making and the need for coherent national coordination. This became particularly visible during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Denmark and Norway, political leaders stepped in when sector-led responses were seen as insufficient to manage the broader societal impacts of the crisis. In Sweden, however, where the system relies more heavily on the independence of administrative agencies, early attempts to create a unified national response faced institutional and legal obstacles. The result was a fragmented Swedish approach in which agencies acted within their mandates, but sometimes without a shared understanding of the overall crisis picture, while Danish crisis management during COVID-19 became highly centralized. Norway, with a stronger tradition for local autonomy, positioned itself between Denmark and Sweden.

The responsibility principle challenged attempts to align crisis responses across societal sectors. Even when coordination was attempted, it often had to navigate through a mixture of responsibilities and overlapping mandates. For example, central coordinating agencies like the Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB)¹ in Sweden or the police in Denmark could *facilitate* collaboration, but their authority to *steer* decision-making was limited. This sometimes led to parallel coordination efforts, confusion over who should take the lead, and delayed responses when rapid alignment was needed. The COVID-19 experience thus raises a fundamental question for Nordic crisis management: how can decentralized decision-making be preserved, while still enabling effective coordination when crises exceed the boundaries of individual sectors or agencies? Finding this balance remains one of the most important structural challenges for implementing the responsibility principle in the context of today's complex and often unpredictable crises.

A further challenge is that the responsibility principle shapes not only *who* manages a crisis, but also *how* the crisis is understood and interpreted. In practice, the agency or sector closest to the event often ends up defining what the crisis is about — which, in turn, shapes the entire response. During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden, for example, the public health sector became the central actor. As a result, the crisis was largely framed through a public health lens, focusing on virus control and epidemiological risk. In Denmark, however, crisis management moved from the health sector to the cross-sectorial departmental level with strong direction-setting from the Prime Minister's Office in the first phase of COVID-19. This ensured a more holistic approach, but at the same time sidetracked well-established coordinating fora in the existing crisis management organization.

Adhering to the responsibility principle is appropriate in many ways, but risks narrowing the perspective, especially when a sector-specific crisis expands into a broader societal emergency as in the

1) As of 1 January 2026, the authority formerly known as MSB has changed its name to the Swedish Civil Defence and Resilience Agency.

case of COVID-19. Other critical dimensions—such as continuity of the labor market, protection of vital societal functions, and implications for public transportation—were slower to enter the core of the response in Sweden than in Denmark. This phenomenon is not unique to pandemics. It reflects a structural feature of the responsibility principle: the actor with formal responsibilities closest to the core of the crises often also shapes how the crisis is defined. When that actor focuses on its own area of expertise (which is natural and expected), there is a risk that broader or long-term societal impacts may be overlooked.

Policy Implications

The experiences from recent crises have made it clear that the responsibility principle remains valuable, but also comes with limitations—especially in complex, long-lasting, or cross-sectoral crises. Below, we outline some implications that may help address the key challenges identified, while still respecting the core values of the Nordic crisis management systems.

1. Improving Coordination Without Losing Sectoral Strengths Challenge: Balancing decentralization and national coordination

Many actors emphasize the importance of sector-specific knowledge and experience. At the same time, coordination across sectors often proved challenging during COVID-19. Existing fora for cross-sector collaboration could be strengthened—ideally through more permanent crisis management structures that are not merely activated during major crises, but rather scaled up from their everyday function. These could help agencies coordinate more effectively, while still allowing each sector to lead in its own area.

It could also help to make roles and expectations around coordination clearer—for example, what it means to “facilitate coordination” rather than lead it. Doing so could reduce misunderstandings and tensions between agencies and support a smoother overall response. In both Sweden and Denmark, central agencies like the Civil Contingencies Agency in Sweden or the police in Denmark had key roles in facilitating coordination. But sometimes it was unclear whether they were supporting or directing others—and this created friction. In Sweden, for example, the Civil Contingencies Agency’s coordination role was at times overlapping with the responsibilities of other agencies. In Denmark the police introduced a new crisis management structure during COVID-19, known as NOST+, alongside the establishment of a cross-sectoral coordination group at the ministerial level. This led to confusion regarding roles, responsibilities, and mandates across the involved actors.

To improve this, agencies’ roles should be clarified in advance and coordination responsibilities formalized. Ensuring that coordination is understood as a shared effort—not a takeover—could build trust and avoid confusion among the involved actors. Supporting this work with shared platforms for communication and joint planning could also make responses more coherent.

2. Clarifying When Political Leadership Should Step In Challenge: Uncertainty concerning the role of government in crisis management

Different views across the Nordic countries about how and when political leaders should assume a more active role during crises emerged during COVID-19. In Denmark, there was strong political involvement, sometimes even directing operational matters. In Sweden, agencies continued to lead most decisions, with limited direct political intervention. This variation suggests a need to clarify when and how political leadership should become involved in crisis management, especially when coordination across multiple sectors is required.

A way forward could be to develop shared expectations or guidelines for political involvement that do not undermine the principle of responsibility, but rather support it, by ensuring that leadership is timely, coordinated, and appropriate to the scale of the crisis. For example, political leadership might be expected to take a more active role when:

- Several sectors are affected and cannot resolve priorities on their own.
- A decision is needed that goes beyond the mandate or legal authority of any single agency.
- There is a need to ensure national coherence—for instance, in the distribution of scarce resources or in managing communication with the public.

Ultimately, the aim is not to centralize control, but to ensure that political leadership can offer strategic guidance when it is most needed, while continuing to respect the value of decentralized expertise. By making this part of the system more transparent and predictable, Nordic countries may be better prepared to meet future crises with both decisiveness and legitimacy.

Conclusion

The responsibility principle remains a fundamental aspect of crisis management in the Nordic countries, offering a structure that promotes sectoral expertise and decentralized decision-making. However, recent crises have highlighted areas where its application may need to be refined to address coordination challenges, clarify the conditions for political intervention, and ensure effective strategic decision-making (1). We therefore suggest that policymakers consider how best to balance these factors to enhance the resilience of crisis management systems. Ongoing discussions and evaluations will be important in shaping future adaptations of the principle, ensuring that it remains a viable framework in an increasingly complex crisis landscape.

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