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# Democratising local values and priorities in regional landscape planning: a Danish strategy-making case

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses and discusses how to develop contemporary methods to conduct democratic and sustainable planning in rural landscapes based on place-making, collaborative planning and strategy-making. The analysis is based on a Danish regional strategy-making case, the Nørreådal river valley (NRV), which is used to explore how to democratically incorporate local values and establish sustainable development priorities. The NRV case highlights the significance of cultivating a shared frame of reference to foster inclusive and informed landscape strategies, which underscores the importance of understanding diverse values and their holders in landscape governance. Collaborative strategy-making may serve as a powerful method for addressing complex challenges and fostering sustainable development in rural landscapes provided it is tailored to the specific contextual considerations and nurtures a comprehensive understanding of shared landscape values.


## KEYWORDS

Collaborative planning;  
local values; regional  
landscape;  
democratisation;  
prioritisation;  
strategy-making

## Introduction

Rural landscapes both in Denmark and globally are facing significant pressure from various sources, leading to conflicts over resources and territories (Primdahl, 2014). Clashes over values are particularly evident in debates concerning nature and sustainable development (Smith, 2003; Owens & Cowell, 2011). The biodiversity and climate crises, which are adversely affecting rural areas, are considered 'wicked problems' due to disagreements between stakeholders about their nature and the principles that guide any potential solutions (Head, 2022).

In Denmark, river valleys are an example of landscapes which are increasingly being faced with wicked problems. Historic river valleys have been reclaimed and cultivated for agricultural purposes resulting in loss of habitats and environmental problems such as pollution from nutrient leaching. During the last three decades, however, agricultural utilisation has been declining due to structural changes in agriculture and more waterlogged soils (increasing precipitation), but also various governmental regulations and subsidy schemes imposed to encourage farmland owners to take land out of production for environmental reasons. This has contributed

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to the extensification of land use and resulted in many meadows becoming overgrown. Recently, measures for taking land out of production to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through the re-wetting of carbon-rich wetlands have been implemented (Regeringen, 2021). Simultaneously, energy companies are looking for land to locate renewable energy plants, which is intensifying competition over land use as they are offering farmland owners much more money than they can get through compensation payments for taking land out of production. Furthermore, users and citizens are demanding accessible and attractive valleys that safeguard both culture and nature including open meadow landscapes. As river valleys are often large-scale landscapes that cross administrative borders, their governance is complex and multilevel.

Most projects initiated in rural areas, which also apply to many river valleys, are relatively local (Kristensen, Primdahl, & Vejre, 2015; Mannberg & Wihlborg, 2008). From a planning perspective, the regional scale has been largely neglected or inadequately addressed, which has resulted in difficulties in terms of prioritising the various interests and local projects and establishing comprehensive natural and societal connections (Kristensen et al., 2015). Additionally, the assumption of planning and management responsibilities for rural areas by municipalities as part of the Danish structural reform in 2007 has naturally heightened interest in local projects. However, the lack of a tradition for geographically large projects has resulted in regional landscapes, such as large river valleys and extensive coastal areas that traverse multiple local communities and often cross municipal boundaries, being overlooked in the planning and management process (Kristensen & Primdahl, 2020).

It has been often suggested that 'wicked problems' should be tackled by collaborative processes (Innes & Booher, 2010; Head, 2022). However, collaborative processes that deal with scales larger than the local can be a challenge because the participants do not feel ownership or commitment to an entire river valley. The literature that discusses methods and frameworks for tackling wicked problems from a collaborative approach has, for the majority of the research, been within the fields of public administration and politics (van Bueren et al., 2003; Torfing, Peters, Pierre, & Sørensen, 2012) and focuses on appropriate criteria for assessing effective collaborative planning (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021). Further, there seems to be a lack of interest in researching the 'big' challenges, especially the wicked problem of climate change, or engaging comprehensively with non-academic stakeholders (Head, 2022; Pollitt, 2015).

For these reasons, there is a need to develop new methods for carrying out integrative and democratic planning at the regional scale, which seeks to tackle the wicked problems unfolding in rural landscapes today.

Against this background, the following research question has been formulated: How can landscape planning include local values, while also making the priorities necessary to ensure the sustainable development of regional landscapes?

The article answers the research question by fulfilling the following two aims:

- i. To determine how a collaborative planning process should be designed in order to include various actors' values and create a forum for discussion about the river valley's future.
- ii. To determine how possible new futures are negotiated and prioritised in a collaborative planning process.

These questions are investigated in an empirical case study in which researchers from the University of Copenhagen, including the author of this paper, were engaged as action researchers. The case study is a regional collaborative and strategic planning project which is located in Nørreådal river valley (NRV). The collaborative process strives to reflect the values, diversity, and conflicts within the regional landscape on a democratic foundation. The NRV project cuts across local communities and municipal borders and involves a large number of actors who

are involved in designing a landscape strategy for the future development of the entire river valley. The NRV project is experimenting with the development of new methods for carrying out deliberative processes that give the participants an opportunity to unfold and include the values that they associate with the landscape. At the same time, the aim of the strategy-making approach is to develop an overall regional landscape strategy to guide the future development of the landscape.

The article begins with a theoretical reflection on the inclusion of local values in landscape planning and how contemporary democratic landscape planning should be understood. Subsequently, it presents the NRV case and the strategy-making approach, which is followed by an analysis of the participatory and co-creative activities undertaken during the NRV strategy-making process. Building on this foundation, the discussion focuses on how strategic collaborative planning can facilitate sustainable landscape transformation while recognising and incorporating the local values associated with the landscape.

Overall, the paper contributes with methodological developments rooted in a collaborative strategy-making experiment, directed towards tackling major 'wicked problems' by developing value orientation and landscape democracy in the contemporary science and practice of landscape planning.

## Theoretical framework

### *Values in relation to landscape and landscape democracy*

'Values' can be expressed in various ways and have different meanings attached depending on the context (IPBES, 2022). Consequently, it can be difficult to identify a general definition of "values in relation to landscape". However, within the disciplines of environmental science and landscape planning, several categorisations have been developed (Dietz, Fitzgerald, & Shwom, 2005; IPBES, 2022; Stahlschmidt, Swaffield, Primdahl, & Nellemann, 2017) which can improve understanding. Values may, therefore, be divided into at least three broad categories: worth, preference/opinion, and morality (Stahlschmidt et al., 2017). Overall, values can be understood as representations of what people and society care about and what they consider important in relation to landscapes (IPBES, 2022). IPBES (2022) has developed a more nuanced 'operational topology of the values of nature', which may also be useful in a landscape context.

The typology encompasses different value dimensions and types, including overlapping layers of worldviews (and their underpinning knowledge systems, languages and cultures); broad values (i.e. life-guiding principles) and specific values (i.e. instrumental, intrinsic and relational values); and value indicators (i.e. bio-physical, economic and socio-cultural indicators) and preferences (IPBES, 2022, 9).

The above typology is used as an analytical lens, which can be used to unfold and discuss the diversity of values in relation to landscape in the NRV case.

However, to fully comprehend 'values in relation to landscape', one also needs to know what 'landscape' refers to. Like 'values', the definition of 'landscape' varies significantly depending on the worldview of the holder (Stephenson, 2008). The landscape can, therefore, be considered both as a system of ecosystems that is defined by its physical-biological structure, processes and change (Forman & Godron, 1986), as 'a way of seeing' (Cosgrove, 1984) something visual that can be represented in, e.g. images or text, or as an area where the same set of rules apply, which in a Dutch-German-Nordic context is clearly the oldest view (Olwig, 1996; Kristensen, Primdahl, & Hansen Møller, 2019). In 2000, the authors of the European Landscape Convention suggested the following definition of 'landscape', which incorporated the above three aspects of landscape: 'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action of natural and/or human factors' (Council of Europe, 2000, Article 1). The formulation 'perceived by people' encompasses a visual aspect, but also a social and democratic dimension. Further,

the authors of the Convention write that landscape development is 'the concern of all and lends itself to democratic treatment, particularly at the local and regional level' (Council of Europe, 2000, ER par. 23). According to the definition of a landscape and the notion of landscape development in the Convention, people – understood as *everyone* – have the right to define their landscape. This places a high demand on the democratic institutions that must carry out such planning.

The NRV case has had a special focus on including local values in the regional collaborative process; something which is emphasised in the Convention. 'For a locally rooted population, landscapes are not just physical areas, but places that contain memories and experiences and thus to a large extent values' (Kristensen et al., 2015). Therefore, in order to understand what 'local values' entail, we must understand the meaning of the place. At the same time, when working at the regional scale, it is essential to also consider the places in their landscape context, as in the NRV case.

Places blend into the landscapes. The words 'landscape' and 'place' can help us understand this interaction. Both words have roots in the Old English and Old Norse languages and concepts (Kristensen et al., 2015). The word 'landscape' refers to the arrangement, creation and changeability of a given land or land area, and it refers to the way in which that land is experienced and perceived (Olwig, 1996). The word 'place', on the other hand, refers to something unchanging, immovable and constant (Kristensen et al., 2015) and is associated with the words 'property' and 'knowing one's place' (Olwig, 1996). Human consciousness often encompasses and maintains 'place' as a mental category containing emotions and defending against change (Casey, 2009). Thus, landscape change, no matter how generative it may be, challenges the values attached to the landscape (Appleton, 2014). By understanding the meaning of these words, we can better understand the feelings and reactions associated with changes to landscapes and places. 'Local values' thus encompass both the physical attributes of a place and the subjective viewpoints and values people associate with it.

Landscape planning then becomes an exercise in effectively addressing the interplay between maintaining and developing a sense of place and creating landscape change.

The NRV case presented below represents an experiment in conducting such holistic planning, wherein places are perceived within their landscape context, and people's perspectives and values in connection to the landscape are taken into careful consideration. Further, the case clearly shows the relationship between the place and the landscape, where it is the regional landscape that influences and changes the places and the associated values as much as it is the places that give the regional landscape substance.

## Methodology

### ***Case presentation: the collaborative landscape strategy-making process in Nørreådal***

In 2018, the municipalities of Viborg, Randers and Favrskov in collaboration with the University of Copenhagen agreed to develop a landscape strategy for Nørreådal. The Nørreådal river valley is a highly multifunctional landscape with intersecting interests concerning nature conservation, agriculture, river management, rural residence, outdoor recreation and cultural history. The Nørreå river is 40 kilometres in length and flows through the three participating municipalities, connecting the two cities of Viborg and Randers. The landscape is characterised by expansive wetlands (meadows and bogs) that border the banks of the river. For several generations, these wetlands have been traditionally utilised for grazing, mowing, and crop cultivation. Nørreådal, like numerous other river valleys, has been affected by agricultural expansion in the form of drainage and the reclamation of wetlands. In recent years, land use conflicts have increased due to disagreements over drainage, flooding and water course management, and new policy aims concerning habitat management, environmental protection of downstream

coastal waters, and climate change. Consequently, the municipalities have harboured a long-standing desire to foster enhanced collaboration that spans municipal borders and includes landowners, residents, and other stakeholders. Through a joint effort, the aim was to formulate a visionary strategy for the sustainable development of Nørreådal.

The landscape strategy-making process in Nørreådal is placed between national policy initiatives the community's visions and landowners' management and acts as a supplement to traditional land use planning, which often takes place at the municipal level (Kristensen & Primdahl, 2020). Figure 1 presents the institutional setting for the strategy-making process.

A team of researchers (including the author of this paper) from the University of Copenhagen participated as action researchers during the process. Action research is based on active collaboration between researchers and practitioners and strives to create change together (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003). As action researchers, the involved academics played various roles during the project. We, the action researchers, have brought our insights and competencies associated with landscape planning theory and methods into the process and have subsequently reviewed the experiences gained, all in line with the tradition of action research (Bradbury, 2015). As action researchers we did the initial landscape analysis of the valley and the interview survey of the 194 landowners and have been the leading partner in the overall process design. During the process, we have participated as facilitators of meetings, workshops, lectures, etc., and contributed to writing up the final strategy.

The vast majority of the activities listed in Table 1 have been recorded, and in cases where they have not, a detailed report has been compiled. All inputs and data have been continuously analysed by the participating action researchers and regularly presented to participants during subsequent activities. Additionally, all data and analyses have been shared with and disseminated to members of the strategy group.

The strategy-making process took place from the winter of 2018 to the autumn of 2021. The participatory process and final landscape strategy were developed in a collaboration between the three municipalities through which the river runs, the Danish Nature Agency, local and

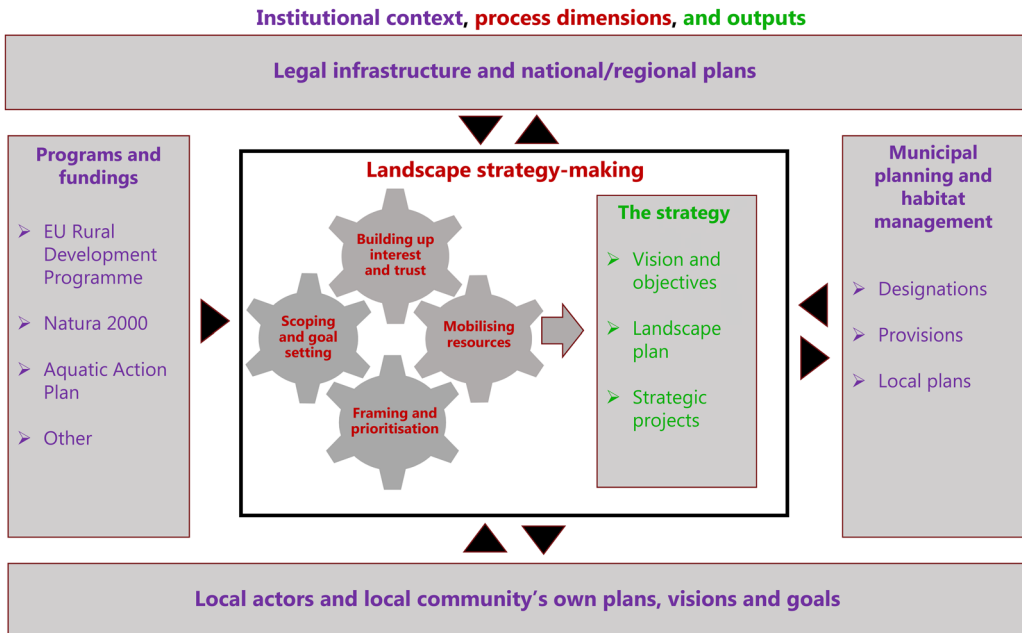
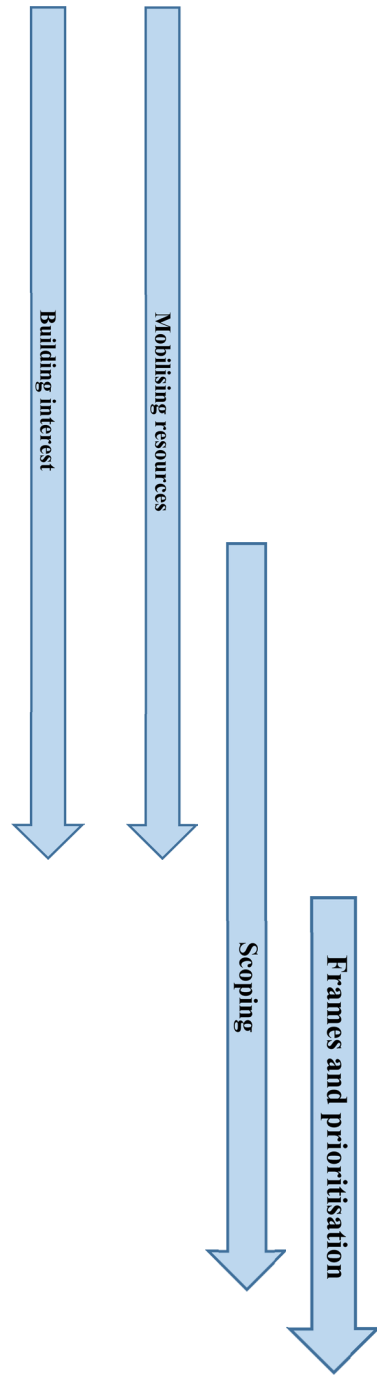


Figure 1. The institutional setting of the landscape strategy-making process. Moderated from Kristensen and Primdahl (2020) p. 1120.

**Table 1.** The different activities carried out during the three-year-long collaborative landscape strategy-making process in Nørreådal and their outcomes.

Time	Activity	Outcome
Winter 2018–2019	Cooperation agreement between the municipalities of Viborg, Favrskov and Randers and the University of Copenhagen. Desktop analysis.	Preparing selection of landowners for interview survey and obtaining knowledge about the development of the river valley.
Spring 2019	Three orientation meetings.	Orientation to landowners about the project and the interview survey.
Spring 2019 and spring 2020	Interview survey with 194 landowners.	Knowledge about the management of the river valley and the landowners' landscape practices, values and wishes for the future in all three municipalities.
Autumn 2019 and spring 2020	Two orientation meetings for the landowners in the Viborg-part and two 'orientation videos' for the landowners in Randers and Favrskov (due to coronavirus).	Orientation for landowners about the interview survey and discussion of its results. Participant input on process and issues.
Spring, summer and autumn 2020	Three morning coffee meetings involving a broad range of actors (representing outdoor recreation, agriculture, cultural history, nature conservation, local citizens and communities).	Creating interest in and commitment to the future of the river valley. Inputs to the strategy. Bringing together a broad group of stakeholders for the strategy group (35 members).
Summer and autumn 2020	Four public lectures on agriculture, nature, cultural history and the landscape in Nørreådal – each one followed by extensive discussions.	Obtaining expert knowledge about the river valley, creating interest in the future of the valley as well as input for the strategy. Involving a broad range of actors.
Autumn 2020	Conflict management workshop about the water in Nørreådal.	25 key stakeholders developing a common understanding of the water and first formulations of objectives for future water management.
Winter 2020, spring and summer 2021	Five workshops (three online due to coronavirus) and an excursion with the 35 members of the strategy group.	Discussions and joint development of the content of the strategy. Development of the strategy's vision, objectives and strategic projects.
Spring and summer 2021	Development of local strategy for the Ørum-Ø area in the centre of the valley.	Local supplement to the regional strategy and as a framework for multifunctional land distribution.
Summer and autumn 2021	Compilation and presentation of the final landscape strategy.	Public presentation of the final landscape strategy and briefing on the further implementation work.

The subsequent municipal process – the public hearing and political approval – is not shown.



regional stakeholders and researchers from the University of Copenhagen. More than 400 actors were involved in one or more of the activities held during the process.

The primary practical objective of the landscape strategy (besides the research perspective) was to establish a broadly shared plan for the future development and management of Nørreådal, which included the following aims:

1. To garner widespread involvement in and a sense of ownership of the strategy from the municipalities, local communities, landowners, and other stakeholders.
2. To define a vision and key developmental objectives for the river valley, encompassing aspects such as landscape management, water level and watercourse regulation, agriculture, nature conservation, outdoor recreation, tourism, and rural development.
3. To prepare a prioritised list of projects to be implemented in the coming years.

The formulation of the strategy-making framework in the NRV case drew inspiration from Patsy Healey's work on spatial strategy-making (Healey, 2009; Kristensen & Primdahl, 2020). In particular, Healey's emphasis on place- and strategically-oriented planning served as a significant influence in the design and implementation of the process in Nørreådal.

The framework involved four interacting dimensions, which are presented in Figure 1: (1) *increasing interest* in the future of the landscape in question and trust and confidence in the process; (2) *mobilising resources* (including knowledge and ideas); (3) *scoping* (clarifying the situation) and formulating visions and goals, and; (4) *formulating frames* and identifying and *prioritising* actions to be carried out.

These dimensions were addressed through various inclusive activities such as interviews, meetings, workshops, and lectures.

According to Healey, a critical task for planning is to make sense of the multiplicity of values and claims for attention that each potential and actual participant brings to the deliberative arena (Healey, 2006). Against this background, the majority of the process was dedicated to *increasing interest* and *mobilising resources* both of which constitute important sense-making dimensions. Therefore, the inclusive activities were selected on the basis that they had to arouse the interest of a broad group of actors so as to include a wide selection of values, contribute to sharing and increasing knowledge about the landscape and the process, and enable the participants ultimately to reach a consensus about the future of the landscape.

When engaging in landscape strategy-making, it is vital to negotiate and reconcile various values and actions as stakeholders hold diverse perspectives (Albrechts, 2004). The process requires the building of collective capacity to prioritise and make decisions regarding the river valley's future. A significant challenge at the regional level is comprehending the river valley landscape as a cohesive entity while considering the multitude of associated values and interests. As no public agency or private organisation saw the NRV as 'their' place, a key principle challenge was to create a commitment to and ownership of the entire valley landscape. So, besides creating room for inclusion and the discussion of many values, the strategic dimension within the strategy-making process entailed the intellectual challenge of imagining the region planned for as an 'entity' or a 'whole', and thus mobilising attention around this entity (Healey, 2009).

Getting to the point where the participants could make prioritisations together about the river valley as an entity proved to be a long journey to find common ground. In the following section, this journey is presented and analysed with a particular focus on the values that were brought to the deliberative arena.



### ***Inclusive activities in the NRV process***

The initial actors who were involved in the strategy-making process were the 194 landowners, who were interviewed by the participating researchers. All interviews took place at the respondents' own homes and were prepared as semi-structured interviews, each lasting one hour. Landowners are one of the primary landscape managers in NRV, and the purpose of the interviews was partly to gather information about their management, partly to gain knowledge about their views on the development, values and future of the river valley. Together, the 194 landowners own 247 properties covering 8,499 ha. All the interviewed landowners own land that borders the stream. Landowners with less than 5 hectares of land were not included in the interview survey. The 194 landowners interviewed equates to a participation rate of 71%, which is very satisfactory for this type of survey.

As can be seen in Table 2, leisure farmers and pensioners make up the two largest groups. At the same time, the full-time farmers own the largest share of the total area and, therefore, also have, on average, much larger properties than the leisure farmers and pensioners.

Overall, the table shows that there are many different types of landowner in Nørreådal, and they are economically dependent on their agricultural production to varying degrees. According to Primdahl (2014), this diversity among the landowners is also reflected in their actions and values associated with the landscape.

One approach to gaining insight into the landowner's values associated with the river valley was through the interview survey, which asked the landowners to identify 'specific valuable places' within the river valley and explain the reasoning behind the selections (See Figure 2). The landowners often selected places because they were good locations to visit and practice outdoor recreation. It was also observed that a significant number of respondents particularly valued their own property or local area, and had little regard for the broader context of the entire valley. This sentiment was often explained by their personal attachment and affinity towards their own specific place of residence. Similarly, an equal number of respondents recognised the inherent value of the river itself, but they also highlighted the need for improved design to cater for outdoor activities. They expressed concerns about the various challenges posed by increased water levels, particularly for landowners with properties adjacent to the stream.

In addition to identifying specific valuable places, the landowners also identified areas where they believed there were values that had disappeared and values that had been improved. These findings were important for understanding the landowners' relation to the landscape.

The interview survey revealed that the majority of landowners prefer an open river valley with grazing or mowing. Additionally, the survey found a high level of interest among participants in engaging in collaborative projects and multifunctional land distribution processes. These findings served as a crucial foundation for advancing a shared strategy.

**Table 2.** Farmers' occupational status.

	Number	Area hectare	% area	Average property size hectare
Full-time farmer	31	3541	42	114
Part-time farmer	12	514	6	43
Leisure farmer	83	2103	25	25
Pensioner	62	1642	19	26
Other/lack of information	6	699	8	117
<b>In total</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>8499</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>44</b>

A 'full-time farmer' is defined here as an owner of an agricultural property where he or she has no income outside agriculture, while a 'leisure farmer' has a greater income outside agriculture than inside. A 'part-time farmer' also has outside income, but it is less than that from agriculture. In the survey, a 'pensioner' is a person over 67 and all other recipients of a pension, regardless of how active one is in agricultural production.



**Figure 2.** Particular valuable places outlined by 194 interviewed landowners in Nørreådal. The respondents explained during the interview why they found the marked places particularly valuable. All this information – as well as the rest of the input from the initial engagement process – was passed on to the strategy group.

The interviews with the 194 landowners gathered important knowledge for the further process in which the values, attitudes and practices of the landowners in relation to the landscape were used as a starting point for further discussions with and involvement of a broad range of other actors.

Three 'coffee morning meetings' and four public lectures were subsequently arranged to engage actors more broadly. Asking about values connected to the landscape was generally key during these events to create space to unfold values, stimulate dialogue and discuss issues and connections across the valley. During the first public lecture on the geography of the Nørreådal river valley, the participants were asked the following question: 'Imagine a distant relative from Copenhagen is calling you regarding a family matter and remarks: "By the way, I've never been to Nørreådal, where you live. What's it like? What's the nature and landscape like?" How would you answer him/her?'. 35 answers were collected (some answered in pairs) from the 50 participants. The answers provided a broad range of descriptions of values and experiences connected to the river valley.

One of the participants, a citizen living in the city of Viborg close to Nørreådal answered: 'It will take many hours, many days to tell you about it. Moraine landscape, hilly, exciting, Ice Age landscape, different landscapes in one'. This answer expresses a nature-oriented worldview, deeply fascinated by the landscape and nature itself with a special emphasis on the biophysical elements as indicators of value. Another citizen, living in Ø in the central part of the valley wrote: 'Unlimited view. Detached from neighbours at a distance. Nørreådal is a wonderful place with lots of nature, but unfortunately almost no grazing cattle anymore'. This statement includes several value dimensions. The unlimited view, the large-scale scenery, is a value that was often expressed during the process. It says something about preference, indicating a specific visual and biophysical expression of the landscape, but it also illustrates a relational value between humans and nature. Whether the valley contains 'lots of nature' is an issue which has

been raised several times during the process. The resident in Ø also emphasises that there is 'almost no grazing cattle anymore'. For many generations, grazing cattle were a regular sight in the valley. Grazing cattle is a value that touches upon deep and broad values such as belonging and identity, but also instrumental values as the cattle have served (and for some still serve) as important components in the agricultural system. Finally, the grazing cattle are closely connected to the preference for 'unlimited view'.

At the first public lecture, the participants were asked whether they had been interviewed previously during the landowner interviews. The results revealed that the vast majority had not been interviewed before, indicating success in engaging voices beyond those of the landowners.

The examples above show that the various activities mobilised interest in the project and the future of the river valley and functioned as a forum for the exchange and building of knowledge about the landscape. Nevertheless, mobilising an understanding of the landscape *as a whole* proved to be difficult.

Initially, many participants were only concerned about local issues and issues relating to themselves and their own property. Various forms of change affected these issues and the values attached to the landscape. Especially current changes in the water table and floodings and the strategy-making process itself challenged the values and identities connected to the local places. A farmer who owns and lives on land near the river in the central part of the valley felt overwhelmed by current changes and demands from 'the outside' and expressed her concern about the farmer's role when interviewed: 'It is us farmers (...) who have to manage it all – with climate, CO<sub>2</sub>, biodiversity and so on' (Eiby, 2021). Regarding the strategy-making process itself, she said:

After all, many of us are farmers, who usually sit on a tractor and manage our own everyday life all alone out in the fields. Now we are sitting together with people who are used to working strategically and politically with nature and biology. We have met people who look at the world in completely different ways to the way we do (Eiby, 2021).

In the above, the farmer talks about the way in which different worldviews are suddenly pitted against each other in a strategic process in the Nørreådal case. Such a situation inevitably brings with it conflicts and clashes, but it also reveals great potential for more long-term and robust decisions that have greater legitimacy (Hügel & Davies, 2020; Sprain, 2016).

In a subsequent interview, a leisure farmer talked about the way in which the process had gradually transformed her perception of nature and culture, and that it had created the mental challenge of viewing one's own areas within a broader context: 'Our 50 hectares are not actually nature. It's culture. On the one hand, we are really happy with our nature. But we may have to come to terms with the fact that it is no longer just "our nature". So, it's a huge job!' (Leisure Farmer, personal interview, 2020).

The leisure farmer's statement highlights the way in which the process has confronted diverse worldviews in a shared endeavour, prompting a shift in the participants' perceptions of ownership and locality, both at the local and regional levels.

During the initial coffee morning meetings and lectures, many participants expressed frustration that discussions about the development of the river valley focused too much on negative water-related issues and floods. They felt that themes such as outdoor recreation, settlement, cultural history, and tourism had been overlooked. On the other hand, those advocating the preservation of meadow-related values along the river believed they needed to voice their concerns loudly to be heard as they felt that they had been ignored in the past.

Thus, a key task was to identify common ground and move the participants forward in a shared direction.

### ***Developing a common value: the river as a unifying entity***

Even though the water in the valley was the cause of many deep conflicts, which were connected to contradicting values, it proved central in being able to move forward in a common direction. What became evident during the integrative process was that the water, especially the river as a natural *entity*, had great potential in increasing attention to interconnectivities, common issues, and opportunities.

The recognition of the river as a naturally unifying force led to adjustments being made to the collaborative process. It was collectively decided by the municipalities and the participating researchers that the river and water should have a stronger voice in the deliberative process. In recognition of the fact that a single individual could not fully represent the river and water, multiple representatives were included to present diverse perspectives and values associated with the water, both locally and regionally.

A dedicated full-day conflict management workshop, which was attended, amongst others, by a hydrology expert who talked about water pathways and the natural conditions of the river valley, was arranged to explore the theme of water. The municipalities, local river associations, landowners, the Danish Nature Agency, and biodiversity organisations (a total of 25 participants) shared their perspectives on the water. Despite varying levels of knowledge and differing values and interests related to the water, the substantial focus given to water in the negotiations proved crucial in fostering a shared direction for a comprehensive strategy encompassing the entire river valley.

As participants expressed their understanding of the situation, including their knowledge, needs, and desires concerning the water, they came to recognise their interdependence. This shared perception of interdependence on water issues prompted a willingness to seek collaborative solutions as they recognised that no one can solve the challenges related to water alone. The participants began developing shared understandings of the landscape as a whole, thereby grasping the numerous positive effects of working together in a new direction for the river valley's development. Here, the river itself played a central role – both as a naturally unifying landscape element, but also as a metaphor for the fact that we have to work together. The workshop concluded with the formulation of future water management objectives, which were subsequently handed over to the landscape strategy group.

The conflict management workshop served as a pivotal starting point for the strategy group, comprising 30 members tasked with formulating the final landscape strategy. Interested individuals attending the 'coffee morning meetings', which were open to the public, had the option of signing up as strategy group members. In order to ensure a diverse representation of voices, participants were encouraged to invite others if they felt any perspectives were missing. As a result, the group was composed of a broad spectrum of actors including representatives from outdoor recreation, agriculture, nature conservation, municipal management, water management, village communities, and culture. It is worth noting that some participants belonged to multiple categories. As action researchers from the University of Copenhagen, we participated as facilitators in the strategy group's meetings, offering professional expertise and ideas while presenting insights and data from the previous engagement process.

After 5 meetings in the strategy group and an excursion around the river valley with the group members, the final strategy was completed. The strategy group decided that it was necessary to collect more knowledge, particularly concerning the development of a more integrated approach to water management. The final landscape strategy document for the future development of Nørreådal states: 'Not everyone agrees with everything that is in the strategy, but everyone has accepted the strategy as a whole' (Regional Landskabsstrategi, 2021).

This assertion is reflected by the landowner who previously expressed great concern about both the role of farmers and the strategy-making process itself in her answer to the following question: 'Do you think it makes a difference to gather actors around making common plans

for the river valley?’ to which she replied: ‘I almost want to say yes, because how else are we going to do it? It must be possible to succeed together. But it requires understanding from both one and the other and the third side’ (Eiby, 2021). The landowner’s statement highlights the enormous step towards being able to shape a common future that has been taken thanks to joint work with the landscape strategy for Nørreådal.

The Head of the Department from Viborg Municipality was generally positive about the outcome of the process and also identified knowledge as an important element:

We have come further than I expected. (...) Our prior knowledge wasn’t really that great. We are going to manage these river valleys based on some common considerations because it does not make sense the way we do it today. Neither one way nor the other. In other words, they must be managed based on some overall considerations (Head of Department, personal interview, April 26, 2021).

The result of referring to the river as a unifying regional entity in the cooperation-driven process was extremely positive and paved the way for new solutions for water management and land use and the formulation of a common landscape strategy covering diverse values. During the process, the river became a common value establishing a unified starting point for landscape transformation.

## Results and outcomes of the NRV case

### *The regional landscape strategy*

The final landscape strategy for Nørreådal consists of a common vision, general and specific objectives and priority projects. Due to restrictions on the length of this article, only the strategy’s vision is presented here. Objectives and prioritised projects can be found in the final strategy document on Viborg Municipality’s website (Regional Landskabsstrategi, 2021).

The vision reads as follows: ‘Together, we will protect the varied and magnificent nature and cultural landscape of Nørreådal. The river valley is to be developed into a coherent area of national and international importance. This must be achieved via the collaborative management of the values with the Nørreå [the river, red.] as our common waterway from Viborg to Randers. A nice place to be’ (Regional Landskabsstrategi, 2021).

### *Improved landscape qualities*

- The regional strategy process has helped set in motion a multifunctional land consolidation process, covering 600 hectares, driven by the Danish Nature Agency, Ministry of Environment. The regional strategy serves as a unifying factor in relation to ongoing and future wetland and lowland projects.
- The process has led to the establishment of a collection of smaller meadows for common grazing and the development of new paths for outdoor recreation.
- The strategy process has proceeded concurrently and exchanged experiences with the LIFE IP project ‘Natureman - The Farmer as Nature Manager’.
- The strategy process and its findings have given rise to and supported the design of a local strategy for the Ørum-Ø area (also facilitated by researchers from the University of Copenhagen), which is located in the centre of Nørreådal. Local proposals have been put forward for how the Ørum-Ø area should be developed and how they could work with the objectives of the overall regional strategy.

### **Improved relational capacities**

- In December 2022, the regional strategy was approved politically by the three municipalities, where it is currently being implemented in the municipal plans. In this respect, the strategy has given the three signatory municipalities a better foundation for joint management of the entire river valley, and not just within the individual municipal boundaries as previously.
- The collaborative strategy-making process has fostered an awareness among the participating actors that the Nørreådal is a unified landscape encompassing diverse values, functions, and actors. It has underscored the significance of the river as a unifying element that binds both the actors and the landscape together, as emphasised in the vision.
- The three municipalities have decided – and it has been supported financially – to proceed with the significant undertaking of implementing the landscape strategy through the establishment of a landscape council. The landscape council has been tasked with running a unified planning process for the river valley and has been given advisory status in relation to the municipal councils.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

In Nørreådal, the regional landscape strategy was formulated through a collaborative process, guided by a strategy-making approach that was influenced by the work of Patsy Healey (2009). The focus of this discussion is – guided by the research question – to examine the extent to which the completed strategy-making process promotes value-based diversity and landscape democracy, while also making the priorities necessary for guiding sustainable development for the landscape at the regional scale.

The implementation of the strategy-making framework and the various mutually developed and inclusive activities successfully generated a collaborative methodology that mobilised interest in the entire landscape and mobilised valuable resources such as knowledge and ideas. The collaborative methodology proved effective at bringing together different actors for collective learning and challenging various values and perspectives. Furthermore, it was particularly effective at promoting place-making dimensions, which is evident in the collaborative development of a shared vision, objectives, and prioritised projects.

However, despite the intention to incorporate diverse values and actors, the level of inclusion in the NRV project remains a topic of discussion. While landowners and farmers play a crucial role in rural landscapes and should rightfully have a voice in the process, it is legitimate to ask whether their voice dominated the initial stages and thereby shaped the development of collective knowledge. It is important to acknowledge that landowners encompass diverse landscape practices and hold varying values associated with the river valley. Therefore, they do not just represent one voice, as became evident in the case analysis. However, it is also worth noting that the age of the participating landowners was above average, reflecting a broader trend among participants in the overall process. Although the process and its activities managed to involve a wide range of values, represented by different actors, it can be argued that to fully adhere to the democratic ideal outlined in the Landscape Convention (cf. Theoretical Framework), the process should have also prioritised the inclusion of children, young people, and minority groups.

The NRV case shows that changes in the landscape inevitably challenge the values associated with it. However, change is imperative if the aim is to democratically and sustainably develop landscapes. Mobilising attention on the landscape as an entity, specifically the river as a regional entity, proved to be a crucial step in transcending locally entrenched values and conflicts. It

aided in the establishment of a shared frame of reference, a collective value endorsed by all the participating actors. In the NRV case, the river is strategically employed to integrate and, to some degree, harmonise various values. In this way, the river assumes an instrumental value. However, the river also possesses inherent value as a part of nature. The image of the river, which unifies the landscape and naturally seeks widespread presence, helped certain participants to re-evaluate their perceptions of individual ownership, shared resources, and collective natural environment. Consequently, the emphasis on the river, its natural essence, and its inherent right to exist contributed to the development and reinforcement of a relational value between actors in the river valley and nature itself. Considering the imperative of achieving a sustainable transformation of our landscapes, this realisation is extremely significant. Additionally, the case underscores the importance of further refining our understanding of values and their holders.

The process in Nørreådal represents a significant achievement in terms of integrating both place-making and democratic aspects into rural planning in Denmark. Collaborative processes often suffer from being temporary and disconnected from implementation (Kristensen & Primdahl, 2020); however, the NRV project successfully overcame this challenge. Local values were not only acknowledged and incorporated into the decision-making process, but the support of the participating institutions and the 3 municipalities, who integrated the landscape strategy into the municipal plans, was secured. Moreover, the establishment of a robust organisational unit, the landscape council, will ensure the continued implementation of the strategy even once the formal strategy-making process has concluded. This underlines the importance of developing long-term institutional solutions, including funding, to maintain collaboration between the public authorities, local communities and individual stakeholders (Kristensen & Primdahl, 2020). These steps align with the recommendations of the IPBES Assessment on Values (2022), emphasising the importance of such actions in driving transformative change towards sustainability and justice.

A well-organised strategy-making process has the potential to shift stakeholders' perspectives on possible developments and may foster a deeper comprehension and acceptance of existing regulatory frameworks. Consequently, it may aid in the establishment of a more enduring framework for landscape governance (Kristensen & Primdahl, 2020). However, 'landscape strategy-making' cannot replace legal policy measures.

Denmark, with its enduring legacy of decentralised governance and a relatively robust civil society, may represent conducive conditions for collaborative bottom-up approaches. However, the commonality across most rural landscapes lies in their high complexity, leading to wicked problems, which require integrative and collaborative approaches to problem-solving with both institutional and local support. The applied landscape strategy-making approach may prove successful under different political and administrative environments provided that the planning process is thoughtfully tailored to the specific context (Kristensen & Primdahl, 2020), and it is designed so that time and effort is spent on building a unifying frame of reference, a shared value, for common learning and collaboration.

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## Disclosure statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Research ethics and consent

All participants in the activities of the strategy process have been verbally informed that they participated in a research project where the activities were recorded on video, and that information and data from the process would later be published. Written consent was provided by all quoted informants in this article.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, LRP. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

## Notes on contributor

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