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Article

Multi-Level Governance Through Public-Sector Intermediaries: Integration Versus Disintegration

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Abstract

This study investigates how public-sector intermediaries integrate their goals and functions across macro, meso, and micro system levels to support industry development, using the Swedish tourism sector as an empirical context. Drawing on the Three-Cycle Model of Innovation Efforts and a stakeholder–goal–function–outcome lens, the research conceptualizes public-sector intermediation as a dynamic, multi-scalar process shaped by institutional mandates, stakeholder expectations, and contextual constraints. Based on 15 semi-structured interviews, agenda-setting meetings, and document analysis across seven Swedish regions, the findings show that while intermediary goals often center on resource mobilization, networking, and development, their enacted functions are fluid and highly context-dependent. Integration across levels is frequently challenged by misaligned information structures, regulatory rigidity, fragmented digital infrastructures, and competing institutional logics, yet is enabled by adaptive mechanisms such as cross-sectoral networking, bidirectional translation work, and reflexive governance practices. The study contributes to theory by offering an extended conceptual model of goal–function integration, positioning public-sector intermediaries as boundary-spanning actors engaged in both downward policy translation and the upward articulation of situated knowledge. This refines multilevel understandings of public-sector intermediation and deepens insights into how intermediaries shape industry development within complex, evolving governance arrangements.

Keywords: public-sector intermediaries; integration; disintegration; system-level perspective; innovation efforts; industry development
JEL: J14, L38, O38

1. Introduction

Industry support and development represent a key strategy for policymaking to achieve regional economic growth (cf. Ajide, 2022; McCauley and Stephens, 2012; Singh, 2022). It aims at boosting a competitive advantage for businesses within an industry and generating spill-over effects for the creation of start-up businesses and the attraction of incumbent businesses to the industry (Deutz and Gibbs, 2008; Pret and Cogan, 2019). The establishment of a collaborative environment commonly involves public support to attract various types of businesses, support employee training, create new jobs, and cultivate entrepreneurial breadth (Bramwell, 2020; Landoni, 2020; Martin and Sunley, 2003). This public support can be undertaken via intermediary activity, which opens interesting perspectives and casts new light on the nature of the public sector (Estrada-Robles, 2018; Urban and Dlamini, 2020). *Public-sector intermediaries* represent either a project or an organisation assisting other stakeholders connected to an industry in performing certain functions; these intermediaries link different stakeholders, articulate a strategic vision, provide financial support, inform or interpret governmental regulations, and facilitate learning (Asencio et al., 2022; Aziz and Norhashim, 2008; Spillan et al., 2018). Some examples of public-sector intermediary organisations are regulatory agencies, professional organisations, research institutions, centres of excellence, and science parks. Drawing on the niche-management perspective, which explicitly conceptualises such organisations as key intermediaries in the formation of innovation niches, these actors often act as *process managers* who, rather than leading innovation themselves, facilitate learning processes, align expectations, and coordinate stakeholders within emerging innovation spaces. As this article postulates, facilitation is a core contribution of public-sector intermediaries for niche-management (Hargreaves et al., 2013). These intermediaries communicate information and ensure the formation of a shared set of organisational norms and routines among businesses; they are also vital providers of knowledge from both direct and indirect relationships (Gretzinger et al., 2010). They operate across multiple system levels (micro, meso, and macro) and serve diverse audiences, including businesses, networks, and public agencies (Bramwell, 2020; Kanda et al., 2020; Kivimaa, 2014). Research has highlighted that sectoral and regional organisations depend on how effectively information is filtered and transmitted across macro, meso, and micro levels, a task often delegated to intermediaries (Boisot and Sanchez, 2010). As Boisot and Sánchez

(2010) argue, intermediaries play a crucial role in reducing information complexity by codifying and diffusing knowledge across organisational boundaries. Intermediaries need to adapt to distinct expectations of organisations through multi-sided functions and goals (Chandler and Vargo, 2011; Parag and Janda, 2014; Singh, 2022). However, they navigate these expectations within a landscape of competing institutional logics involving tensions (e.g., community-oriented and bureaucratic-administrative logics), which can make coordination across system levels inherently fragile (Scherer and Palazzo, 2012). Their functions are largely described and classified in the literature, such as linking stakeholders, articulating strategic visions, interpreting policy, and enabling learning (Kivimaa et al., 2019a; Stewart and Hyysalo, 2008). Likewise, their goals, ranging from regional growth, resource leveraging to inter-organisational connectivity, are widely acknowledged (Beirão et al., 2017; Klofsten et al., 2015).

However, despite this clarity, recent research reveals a persistent misalignment between functions and goals, often manifesting as overlaps, redundancies, and even contradictions (Elola et al., 2012; Laur and Mignon, 2021). This fragmentation undermines the effectiveness of public-sector intermediation and can lead to stakeholder dissatisfaction across system levels. Moreover, the involvement of intermediaries in this process is accompanied by the risk of losing specific knowledge to the business environment; therefore, intermediaries are rarely utilized compared to direct customer and supplier contacts. In particular, a low degree of utilization of the public-sector intermediaries is reported for Germany, compared to the Scandinavian countries (Gretzinger et al., 2010). Partly, this misalignment arises because administrative logics, embedded in routines and reporting systems, can crowd out mission-oriented work (Akingbola et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, the challenge is not merely to define the functions and goals of public-sector intermediaries, but to clarify their respective functions and integrate them meaningfully within goals embracing both into a coherent system-level framework. Such integration is essential not only to reflect the dynamic, multi-scalar nature of industry development, but also to ensure that intermediary efforts are strategically aligned and contribute effectively to broader innovation policy objectives (Xu and Dobson, 2019). Niche-management research examines how emerging innovation niches depend on intermediaries who must navigate and reconcile divergent logics (Hargreaves et al., 2013). Boisot and Sánchez (2010) note that misalignments often arise when actors operate with different information structures, making goal–function integration a challenge for public-sector intermediaries. These tensions also produce unintended consequences, often visible in multi-level governance, which public actors attempt to mitigate through reflexive dialogue and feedback mechanisms (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). This paper therefore argues that a system-level perspective is essential for understanding and improving the integration between goals and functions of public-sector intermediaries. By examining how these elements interact across different system levels and how public-sector intermediaries adapt to shifting industry conditions and stakeholder expectations (Landoni, 2018; Smedlund, 2006), this work uncovers the mechanisms through which public-sector intermediation can more effectively support industry development.

In this context, *functions* are understood as concrete organisational actions undertaken to achieve specific goals (Lennon and Seaton, 1998; Locke and Bryan, 1969). By contrast, *goals*, the formally established organisational decisions striving for an expected state of the future, evolve in response to changing policy landscapes and industry needs which intermediary functions must also match (Slocum, 2023; Smedlund, 2006; Urban and Dlamini, 2020). For example, public-sector intermediaries on a regional level (a macro-level), as financiers of initiatives or projects, may strive for broad regional development goals. By contrast, public-sector intermediaries on a meso-level, such as associations and innovation networks, may rather aim at the establishment of interorganisational linkages in the industry. This dynamic interplay creates a situation-dependent complexity that requires strategic integration to ensure coherence and relevance (Bohlin et al., 2018; Svensson and Larsson, 2018). Ultimately, this integration is not merely a managerial concern. It is central to value creation of public-sector intermediaries and their legitimacy within innovation systems (Sultana and Turkina, 2023; Watkins et al., 2015; Östberg et al., 2026). By aligning their multi-level functions with evolving goals and broader innovation policy objectives, intermediaries can better fulfil their role as connectors, facilitators, and enablers of industry transformation (Asencio et al., 2022). This need for alignment echoes findings from cluster initiative research, where role clarity, trust-building, and transparent communication are identified as core success factors for effective intermediary work (Klofsten et al., 2015).

Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine how goals and functions of public-sector intermediaries are integrated across different system levels. Thus, the research question guiding the article is:

How are goals and functions of public-sector intermediaries integrated across different system levels?

From a niche-management perspective, effective industry transformation depends on how well intermediaries nurture protected spaces while simultaneously connecting them to broader landscape dynamics (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Smedlund, 2006). Intermediaries can become valuable sources for businesses, enabling innovation-driven strategies that help new knowledge circulate and strengthen both organisational and regional innovative capacity (Gretzinger et al., 2010; Molthan-Hill et al., 2020).

The empirical focus of this article is on public-sector intermediaries in the tourism industry in Sweden, which has undergone a major transition (Jugend et al., 2020; Svensson, 2019). For this industry, policy goals, such as new cluster establishment, strategic regional prioritisation, the re-formation of tourism as independent sector, and the intensification of new business establishments, represent some key trends impacting its functioning (Ferreira and Estevao, 2009; Hall, 2005; Novelli et al., 2006; Simão and Môsso, 2013). The Swedish tourism industry is, moreover, considered a highly sustainable sector in global comparison (Euromonitor, 2023). Theoretically, this article draws from the "Three-Cycle Model of Innovation Efforts", which conceptualizes innovation activities across macro-, meso-, and micro- levels (Beirão et al., 2017). Such a multi-level framework provides a useful lens for examining how public-sector intermediaries integrate their goals and functions within and across different system levels (Lazzeretti et al., 2019; Molina-Morales, 2002; O'Kane et al., 2021; van Wijk et al., 2019).

Conceptually, this study firstly contributes to a better understanding of public-sector intermediaries with a focus on the alignment of their internal strategic goals and operational functions in an industry context (Kivimaa, 2014). Secondly, it provides a useful framework to study intermediary work in contexts undergoing transformation when emerging innovation niches interact with and attempt to influence established socio-technical regimes (Braun, 1993; Hargreaves et al., 2013; Kanda et al., 2020), embedded in high levels of complexity and multi-stakeholder interaction. This study positions public-sector intermediaries as boundary-spanning actors operating across, rather than within, fixed system levels; their roles are shaped by the need to translate policy goals downward and convey situated knowledge upward, thereby enriching existing multi-scalar perspectives in institutional and transition research (De Vries et al., 2016). Thirdly, by drawing on Boisot and Sánchez's (2010) view of organisations as nexus of rules, this article highlights that effective intermediation depends on how well information is codified and diffused across system levels, clarifying that goal–function misalignments stem from underlying information-structure incompatibilities rather than purely organisational issues. Incorporating this information-structure sensitivity strengthens understanding of why intermediaries may be bypassed in favour of direct network ties (Gretzinger et al., 2010) and how cross-level translation mechanisms support or constrain learning (Smets et al., 2012). With the multiple-level framework proposed, the present study offers a more nuanced understanding of public-sector intermediation and its role in shaping innovation outcomes in such contexts by showing how integration and fragmentation emerge through interactions across macro, meso, and micro levels rather than through predefined functional categories.

This study also contributes to management practice by providing a better understanding of governance structures that facilitate the strategic use of public resources through integrated innovation efforts, helping industries navigate transition challenges (Urban and Dlamini, 2020). It highlights the role of alternative forms of intermediary support in tourism-industry development, showing how multi-level innovation efforts can guide business reorientation and operational change (Hurtado-Palomino et al., 2022; Williams and Doyon, 2019; Xu and Dobson, 2019). Additionally, it sheds light on the complex nature of public-sector intermediaries as seedbeds for innovation, beyond their traditional roles as funders and regulators, offering insights applicable to other industry contexts (Aqueveque and Bianchi, 2017; Bramwell, 2020; Estrada-Robles, 2018).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature, including the "Three-Cycle Model of Innovation Efforts" (micro, meso, macro) (2.1), public-sector intermediaries (2.2), and a conceptual synthesis (2.3). Section 3 outlines the methodology, including research design, data collection, and analysis. Section 4 presents empirical findings, followed by their analysis and discussion in Sections 5 and 6. Finally, chapter 7 concludes with a summary of contributions, implications, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Three-Cycle Model of Innovation Efforts

Innovation efforts are inherently agentic, relational, and situated within complex, multi-level systems of interaction and transformation (Chandler and Vargo, 2011; Korabik et al., 2003). Within the broader institutional and social innovation literature, these efforts are understood as emerging from dynamic relationships between stakeholders positioned across different structural levels, such as entities, networks, and governing bodies, whose interactions shape the trajectory of industry development (Meuer et al., 2015; van Wijk et al., 2019; Vargo and Lusch, 2017). The "Three-Cycle Model of Innovation Efforts" provides a useful lens to analyse these interactions, not as isolated activities within fixed levels (micro, meso, macro), but as fluid exchanges between actors embedded in overlapping and evolving relational spaces (van Wijk et al., 2019). The model aligns with Boisot and Sánchez's (2010), who underline the effectiveness of cross-level interactions as depending on how well information is codified and diffused across organisations. Their work highlights that misalignments often emerge when stakeholders operate with incompatible information structures, making the coordination of innovation efforts inherently fragile. Misalignments are intensified when intermediaries must navigate multiple, and at times competing, institutional logics, particularly clashing community-oriented expectations and bureaucratic-administrative demands (Scherer and Palazzo, 2012). Similar tensions appear in studies on value creation, where actors interpret rules, processes, and priorities differently despite shared organisational goals, which illustrates how heterogeneous value logics produce friction in coordination efforts (Chatain and Zemsky, 2011; Korabik et al., 2003).

Public-sector intermediaries play a central role in these exchanges, acting simultaneously as connectors, facilitators, and interpreters of innovation policy. Their interactions with businesses (micro-level), networks and clusters (meso-level), and policy actors (macro-level) are shaped by both strategic intent and emergent conditions. Further, intermediaries have to constantly translate learning across multiple local projects, turning context-specific insights into more generalizable knowledge that can circulate across levels (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Spillan et al., 2018). Recent work on co-creation dynamics reinforces this argument, showing that successful cross-level learning depends on facilitation structures, trust-building, and sustained engagement, as observed in rural development ecosystems (Östberg et al., 2026). In contrast, transition research demonstrates that translation fails or is largely limited when intermediaries lack context-sensitive engagement strategies, resulting in distorted feedback or non-usable support at lower levels (Hofer et al., 2025). These interactions generate outcomes, seen as the observable consequences of innovation efforts, ranging from capability development, institutional adjustments and value creation or, on the opposite, mismatch, lock-ins, redundancy and repetitions (Beirão et al., 2017; Spillan et al., 2018). As is argued here, outcomes emerge from integrated or disintegrated goals and functions of intermediaries, which enable or constrain how functions translate into results, corresponding with the organisational administrative, community logics (van Wijk et al., 2019). Such effects align with Akingbola et al. (2019)'s argument that administrative routines can inadvertently displace mission-oriented goals, causing functional drift that weakens intended value creation.

Micro-level interactions typically reflect on problems met and provide intermediaries with alternative suggestions for solutions (Hurtado-Palomino et al., 2022). In contrast, meso-level interactions are constrained by the need to align pre-scribed commercial and social goals, but they also may re-structure micro-level interactions according to existing patterns (Molthan-Hill et al., 2020). In case of joint interaction of stakeholders belonging to micro- and meso-levels, there is a certain likelihood for cracks, duplicity, and conflicts (Smets et al., 2012). Finally, macro-level stakeholders, such as governmental bodies and policy instructors, define both the micro- and meso-levels but also act as key drivers for value creation. Such a defining role of macro-level interactions can fuel, but also constrain their own nature through re-defining their internal goals and functions (Beirão et al., 2017). This often affects the goals and functions on other levels and results in lower contributions of these stakeholders to industry development (Huq, 2019). Table 1 summarizes the logic of the "Three-Cycle Innovation Model" with system-level prerequisites, stakeholders involved on different levels, and outcomes.

The relationship between goals, functions, and outcomes of public-sector intermediaries can be understood as a process of integration across system levels. Positive outcomes suggest that functions are reinforcing the intended goals, for example when resource targeting and leveraging or cross-sectoral networking translate into regional development or firm-level capability building (Fig. 1, Appendix Table 5) (De Vries et al., 2016; Kanda et al., 2020; Spillan et al., 2018). Negative outcomes, by contrast, reflect disintegration, where intermediary functions generate rigidity, lock-ins, or conflicts that undermine strategic intent (Beirão et al., 2017; Howlett, 2014; Smets et al., 2012). Outcomes therefore serve as diagnostic indicators of whether the interplay between goals and functions enhances systemic coherence or produces tensions and trade-offs across macro-, meso-, and micro-levels (cf. Korabik et al., 2003). Crucially, following Beirão et al. (2017), the outcomes at each level should not be seen as static, but as relational consequences emerging from the interplay of goals, functions—either enabling, when integrated, or constraining, when disintegrated. Hence, the same functions can produce divergent outcomes, for instance collaboration or conflict, scaling or lock-in, depending on how system-level goals are integrated into practice.

However, cross-level interactions are often marked by misalignments either between prescribed goals and enacted functions, or strategic ambitions and operational realities, and even both, which can result in tensions due to fragmentation, conflict, and systemic disequilibrium (Huq, 2019; Smets et al., 2012). Such tensions are particularly visible, for instance, when macro-level actors impose innovation agendas that lack responsiveness to the situated needs and reflexive capacities of business and intermediary organisations (Boisot and Sanchez, 2010; Hyytinen and Toivanen, 2005) in their roles as public investor and financiers.

2.2 Public-Sector Intermediaries

Public-sector intermediary organisations can be quasi-autonomous governmental agencies, government-owned companies, or government-initiated foundation (Braun, 1993; Kivimaa, 2014). These stakeholders mediate in-between public-sector and private-sector stakeholders by providing alternative solutions or policy instruments whose purpose is not profit-oriented (Bogers et al., 2017; Turnheim and Geels, 2012). Public-sector intermediaries are sometimes called "dual intermediaries" between the formal institutional governance and its wider political constituency of citizens, service users, and stakeholders (Munro et al., 2008). These can be innovation offices, geographical planners, such as urban and regional planners, employment agencies, science parks, and public business consultants and business development offices, which can belong to mu-

Table 1. System levels operations of public-sector intermediaries.

Administrative system levels	Key stakeholders	Description of the system level	Context of the system level	Outcomes for the system level
Macro	National institutions and organisations	Macroeconomic aspects: institutional arrangements, patterns of industrial specialization, general innovation processes, the use of generic production and management technologies (Roelandt and Den Hertog, 1999; Sørensen and Balsby, 2021).	Local industrial specific, geographic characteristics (monetary, foreign exchange, commercial, and competition policies)	Institutional reforms, resource concentration, alignment with EU/national strategies, rigidity, reduced responsiveness (e.g., Ajide, 2022; Singh, 2022)
Meso	Regional and cluster-related stakeholders (private and public ones)	Supporting structures: resource components and stakeholders' joint actions (Arthurs et al., 2009; Smedlund, 2006)	Regional value chains, local market, cluster initiatives and their best practices/benchmarking, technology adoption and innovation processes, infrastructure and communication, R&D	Sectoral adjustments, stronger collaboration networks, lock-ins, conflicts (e.g., Bramwell, 2020; Pret and Cogan, 2019)
Micro	Businesses and individual levels (such as managers, groups of individuals)	Capability of businesses, output of the businesses planned activities and projects (Stam and Van de Ven, 2021)	Start-up businesses, business development programmes, competitive offers, cost efficiency	Incremental improvements in business capabilities, experimentation, scaling, re-structuring, conflicts (e.g., Klofsten et al., 2015)

EU, European Union; R&D, Research and Development.

nicipal levels or regional levels, or both (cf. Gretzinger et al., 2010). Governmental and regional/municipal stakeholders acting as public-sector intermediaries are sometimes described as key players focused on innovation, for instance, in regional eco-systems (Cherikh and Karagiannis, 2019; Laur et al., 2012; Olarinde and Yahaya, 2018). They reshape existing structures and initiate new compositions of stakeholders' groups operating for achieving innovation goals (Molina-Morales, 2002; Smedlund, 2006). From a cognitive–institutional perspective, intermediaries navigate differing information flows to keep rules, expectations, and routines coherent as they move across system levels (cf. Korabik et al., 2003), since goal–function misalignments often stem from divergences in underlying information structures (Boisot and Sanchez, 2010). This challenge is compounded by the tendency of well-intended coordination practices to generate unintended consequences, requiring continuous reflexivity from intermediaries as they attempt to align rules and practices across levels (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013).

Despite growing attention to intermediation, existing literature has largely overlooked the internal coherence between their goals and functions. Most studies tend to describe intermediary activities or classify their roles, without critically examining how strategic objectives are translated into operational practices across levels (Hernberg and Hyysalo, 2024; Hyysalo et al., 2022; Kivimaa et al., 2019b). This gap is problematic, as misalignment can lead to inefficiencies, stakeholder dissatisfaction, and reduced legitimacy of public-sector intermediation (Beirão et al., 2017; Smets et al., 2012). Moreover, the absence of integration may hinder intermediaries' ability to adapt to changing industry conditions and policy expectations, thereby weakening their contribution to long-term industry development. Research on niche-management highlights that intermediaries frequently struggle to aggregate diverse local experiences into shared frameworks, especially when project contexts vary substantially (Hargreaves et al., 2013). This underscores why public-sector intermediaries face persistent difficulties in forming stable roles across levels. Even where structures exist to support alignment, intermediaries struggle with fragmented engagement, time constraints, and mismatched expectations across actors, leading to unstable or inconsistent roles (Hofer et al., 2025; Östberg et al., 2026).

2.2.1 Goals of Public-Sector Intermediaries in System-Level Contexts

Goal alignment among regional stakeholders, shaped by regional scope and stakeholder negotiation, is essential for strategic coherence and operational efficacy (Nihal Padmasiri, 2012; Provan and Kenis, 2008). European cluster initiatives exemplify this, where funding incentives foster goal convergence (Kuhlmann and Edler, 2003), particularly

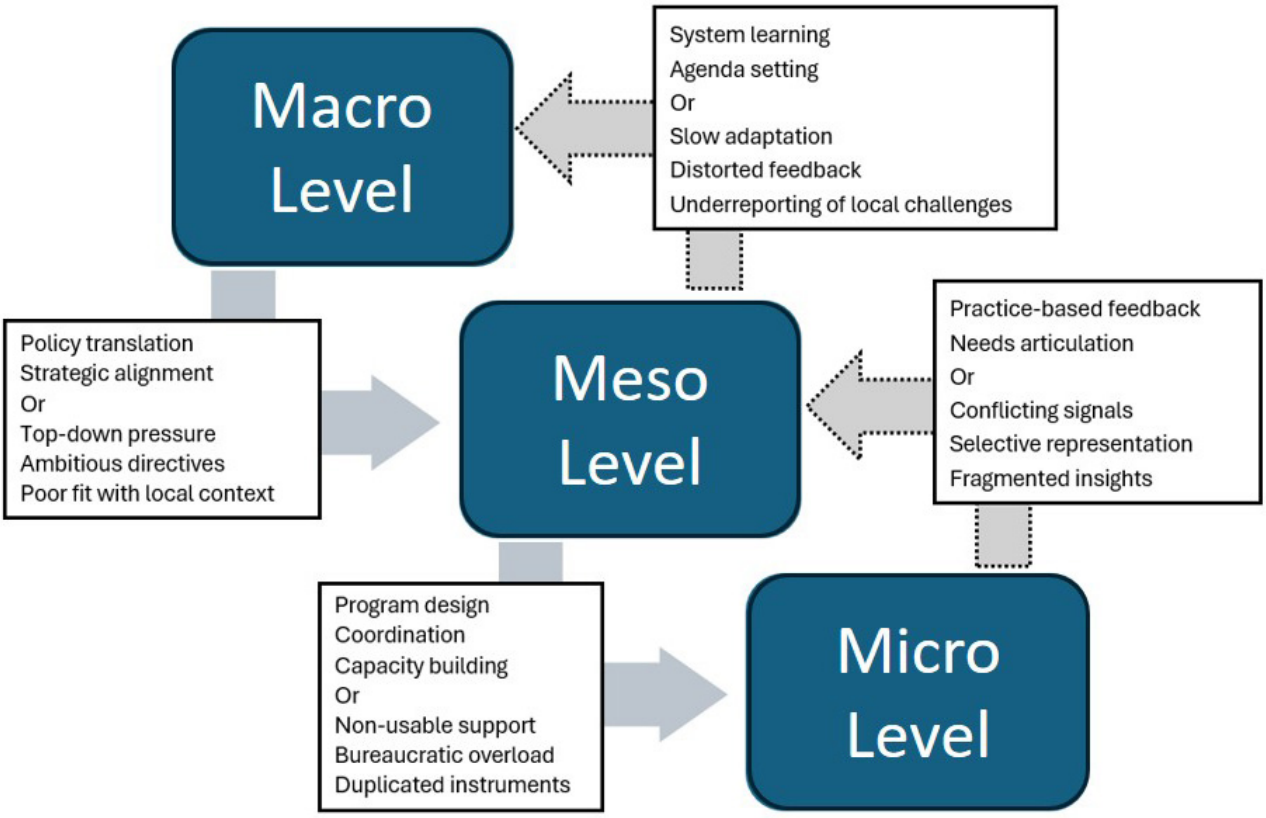

Fig. 1. Macro-meso-micro levels of integration/disintegration of public-sector intermediaries.

among public-sector intermediaries focused on *regional economic growth* (Hermanson et al., 2018; Kim and Wicks, 2010). However, predefined regional goals may hinder organic industry evolution. Public-sector intermediaries frequently lead *cluster establishment and development*, reflecting their broader regional development mandate (Asencio et al., 2022). Cluster initiatives are widely regarded by policymakers as strategic networking platforms for deploying public resources to foster innovation and industrial growth (Bathelt, 2009; McCauley and Stephens, 2012; Nihal Padmasiri, 2012). This role underscores a resource-centric orientation, where public-sector goals are framed as *resource targeting*, identifying priority sectors, and *resource leveraging*, enhancing impact through synergies and business support (Estrada-Robles, 2018; Jugend et al., 2020). Yet, these macro-level priorities are shaped by institutional multiplicity, where economic development ambitions intersect with administrative accountability structures, often producing tensions that intermediaries must reconcile in goal-setting (Scherer and Palazzo, 2012). The resources in question typically encompass knowledge assets, such as research capabilities, technological expertise, and innovation infrastructure, and human resources, including entrepreneurial talent, skilled labour, and institutional capacity. By concentrating these resources within clusters, intermediaries aim to catalyse regional competitiveness and systemic innovation (Vnuk and O'Connor, 2021; Weidenfeld et al., 2010). These goals reflect a *macro-level* approach to industry development often overlooking relational and stakeholder-specific objectives (James and Halkier, 2016; Sørensen and Balsby, 2021). Hence, while macro-level goals are clearly articulated, micro- and meso-level goals, as presented below, may require more clarity (Ketels and Protsiv, 2021).

At the *meso*-level, intermediary goals often mirror macro-level ambitions but are translated into operational terms, for example, sectoral development, infrastructure enhancement (e.g., cultural infrastructure), resource targeting and leveraging (i.e., immigrants and youth employment), and cross-sectoral networking (personal and via digitalization) (Abbott et al., 2017; Albats et al., 2022). Such goals are intended to facilitate regional strategies through municipal or sectoral initiatives. However, the mechanisms to align these meso-level objectives with overarching policy frameworks are often ambiguous, leading to fragmented implementation. This observation aligns with Howlett's (2014) multi-level model of policy design, which emphasizes that policy goals and instruments exist at different levels of abstraction and application. Unclear meso-level goals frequently weaken collaborative capacity, as actors struggle to coordinate each other when expectations and incentives are only partially aligned (Östberg et al., 2026).

Misalignment across levels, e.g., between macro-level and meso-level, can lead to incoherent or fragmented outcomes (De Haas et al., 2000; Howlett, 2014; O'Kane et al., 2021). Furthermore, the delegation of responsibilities to intermediary actors without clear coordination mechanisms further contributes to implementation gaps (Sonday and Wilson-Prangley, 2018).

At the *micro*-level, public-sector intermediaries tend to focus on targeted support for small and medium-sized enterprises, emphasizing competence development, sectoral specialization, and localized networking. These goals are typically narrower in scope and tailored to the specific needs of individual businesses. While they may reflect broader strategic intentions, their execution is often disconnected from macro-level planning and meso-level coordination. For instance, Bali and Halpin (2021) describe micro-level goals as the need of adaptation and fine-tuning to fit specific operational environments and cross-level coordination. This results in disjointed implementation, where the intended synergies between strategic objectives and localized action are lost, and intermediary functions risk becoming reactive rather than integrative (Bali and Halpin, 2021; Viederyte, 2013). In line with this, Gretzinger et al. (2010) note that small businesses often under-utilize public-sector intermediaries because direct customer and supplier ties are perceived as more valuable sources of innovation knowledge. This means that macro-level goals tied to public support may fail to be translated to meaningful engagement at the business level, which reinforces the difficulty of aligning goals across system levels (Gretzinger et al., 2010). Likewise, strong underutilization of intermediary support, when local actors perceive goals as externally driven or insufficiently anchored in local realities, reinforces the upward drift of macro-level priorities (Hofer et al., 2025). Despite the presence of goals at all levels, regional development systems often suffer from multi-level misalignment when clearly articulated macro-level objectives contrast with fragmented and ambiguous goals at meso- and micro-levels (De Vries et al., 2016; Howlett, 2014; Zahra et al., 2020). This fragmentation undermines the functional logic of public-sector intermediaries, whose effectiveness depends on their capacity to mediate between strategic policy aims and the operational realities of regional and local actors (Kivimaa, 2014; Smedlund, 2006; van Wijk et al., 2019).

2.2.2 Functions of Public-Sector Intermediaries in System-Level Contexts

Functions are concrete organisational actions undertaken for the achievement of an organisation's goals (Abbott et al., 2017; Bramwell, 2020). The functions of public-sector intermediaries carry a hybrid nature due to a duality about public-sector intermediaries–being both organisation and intermediary between different parties (Arthurs et al., 2009; Hill and Jones, 1992; Soosay and Sloan, 2005). Therefore, public-sector intermediaries become multi-functional on various system levels (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Hakkarainen and Hyysalo, 2016; Nihal Padmasiri, 2012), which results in a complex interplay of policy (macro), interorganisational (meso), and business (micro) levels (Ketels and Protsiv, 2021; Molina-Morales, 2002; Singh, 2022; Smedlund, 2006). Regarding the specific functions, Geels and Johnson (2018) define three main macro-level functions of public-sector intermediaries (Geels and Johnson, 2018): an *aggregator* function assumes the aggregation of knowledge and experiences across numerous local projects to make this knowledge adjustable to other industries and regions. Through the function of *infrastructure creators*, intermediaries provide a storage and exchange platforms of knowledge, for example, within forums in which stakeholders interact, or as physical infrastructure, e.g., transport facilities and markets (Cherikh and Karagiannis, 2019). Finally, the *reverser function* of public-sector intermediaries may include a redesign of local projects via advice, guidelines, and templates of development trajectories. However, such template-based redesign often creates friction when standardized instruments lack contextual sensitivity, diminishing the practical usability of intermediary functions for local actors (Hofer et al., 2025; Korabik et al., 2003).

The functions by public-sector intermediaries on a meso- (industry-specific) level can embrace: *an inputters* function is that public-sector intermediaries make an input and apply pressure to important industry concerns, such as pollution and infrastructure. Moreover, in their function as *extractors*, public-sector intermediaries may search benefits for their own purposes, such as service packages. As *regulators*, public-sector intermediaries furthermore carry out legislative competency and often govern extractors (Boyes and Elliott, 2014). They also act as *beneficiaries*, who receive services provided by the industry, get provision on services, or even take advantage by reducing their costs due to industry development. In addition, as *affectees*, public-sector intermediaries are affected by regulators managing and steering the industry. Finally, they are also the *influencers*, who play a part in managing industry development (Newton and Elliott, 2016).

In a micro-level context encompassing the individual businesses, scholars highlight the primary goals of public-sector intermediaries to create agglomerations and clustering (Boari et al., 2003; Guercini et al., 2020). The micro-level functions are they are *marketers* securing access to local markets, often representing a key client, and they are *promoters* disseminating technical and managerial knowledge or stimulating new businesses. Furthermore, public-sector intermediaries on a micro-level are *supporters* ensuring a stable exchange of products and services, and *developers* disseminating information and good practice throughout local network stakeholders (Cherikh and Karagiannis, 2019; Conway and Cawley, 2012; Howells, 2006). Further, they adopt *the function of modelers* prompting the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and new projects (Bakici et al., 2013) and are *agents of change* leading the innovation edge and transfer of knowledge among businesses (Van Lente et al., 2003; Zulkhibri et al., 2015). Such micro-level functions are most effective when intermediaries maintain clarity of purpose, build trust, and establish transparent communication routines, while these conditions are not always present in practice (Klofsten et al., 2015). Therefore, public-sector intermediaries possess one or several of the above-mentioned multi-level functions, depending on their level of engagement and expertise.

Despite the richness of these functional typologies, their integration across levels remains under-theorized. Literature tends to treat macro, meso, and micro functions as discrete categories, paying limited attention to how these roles interact, overlap, or evolve in practice (De Haas et al., 2000). This fragmentation obscures the mechanisms through which public-sector intermediaries navigate their dual identity and balance self-guidance with stakeholder interdependence (Kivimaa, 2014). Consequently, this creates difficulties in capturing the dynamic interplay between system levels, for instance, how macro-level policy objectives translate to meso-level industry interventions and micro-level business support. The absence of such integrative perspectives hinders a comprehensive understanding of the strategic positioning and systemic impact of public-sector intermediaries. Collaborative improvement studies further underscore that functional coherence depends on facilitation quality, credibility, and the availability of time for interaction, illustrating why intermediary functions often lose integrative strength across system levels (cf. Korabik et al., 2003; Östberg et al., 2026). Kanda et al. (2020) introduce a system-level perspective of intermediation represented as a network embedded within overlapping institutional structures, emphasizing their role in enabling eco-innovation through institutional capacity. This work highlights how intermediaries operate not only as facilitators of innovation but also as structurally positioned actors capable of influencing and navigating multi-level governance arrangements. However, while this framework provides a promising starting point, further research is needed to explore how intermediaries dynamically align their functions across system levels, particularly in contexts of industry transformation.

2.3 Synthesis: Public-Sector Intermediaries—Integration/Disintegration Framework

Fig. 1 illustrates the integrative framework used with public-sector intermediation as a cross-level translation and coordination process. Building on the Three-Cycle Model of Innovation Efforts, it is shown how goals and functions of public-sector intermediaries are continuously moved, reshaped, and reinterpreted as they circulate between macro, meso, and micro system levels (see also Appendix Table 5). In fact, public-sector intermediaries operate within multiple institutional rule systems, what Boisot and Sánchez (2010) describe as a "nexus of rules" that structures how information is codified, interpreted, and enacted across levels (Boisot and Sanchez, 2010, p. 396). The model portrays integration not as a smooth, hierarchical cascade but as a recursive negotiation process across multiple institutional logics. The downward arrows depict the codification of rules through how strategic intentions and policy frames are translated into operational guidance. The upward arrows depict the counterflow of situated knowledge constituting de-codification of how local experiences challenge higher-level expectations. Friction points across levels emerge precisely when these different rule systems intersect or come into tension, generating misalignments, delays, or distortions, as captured by "Or" or disintegration conditions. This may result in reduced engagement and diminished perceived value of intermediary support.

At the macro-level, public-sector intermediaries operate under institutional logics emphasizing stability, policy coherence, and long-term strategic alignment. Their functions such as policy translation, agenda setting, and infrastructure creation represent attempts to codify these abstract institutional expectations into implementable guidance for lower system levels. The "Or" conditions in relation to the macro-level box (e.g., top-down pressure, slow adaptation) illustrate what happens when a macro-level logic collides with mismatched information structures at meso- or micro-levels. In nexus-of-rules terms, misalignment occurs when rigid, top-down codification schemes fail to resonate with the more situational logics governing regional and business contexts (Boisot and Sanchez, 2010). Thus, friction emerges not because functions are poorly implemented, but because they are grounded in different rule systems that travel downwards imperfectly.

At the meso-level, public-sector intermediaries operate within hybrid logics which are simultaneously administrative, collaborative, and sector-specific. Because they must both interpret macro directives and aggregate business-level feedback, meso-level intermediaries are confronted with different rule systems which often collide or become renegotiated. This explains the presence of friction points such as slow adaptation, duplicated instruments, or distorted feedback at a meso-level, which reflects situations when meso-level actors must reconcile incompatible logics: standardized national templates versus context-sensitive local practice; accountability routines versus network-based coordination; long-term regional plans versus short-term operational needs. When these rule systems are not coherent, meso-level translation breaks down and generates visible tensions both upward through distorted or selectively filtered feedback, and downward, where poor alignment with local conditions results in support that is difficult to use in practice. Such failures often arise when administrative logics and compliance routines override mission-oriented practices, limiting the responsiveness of intermediaries to local needs (Akingbola et al., 2019).

At the micro-level, institutional logics are dominated by resource constraints and situated problem-solving. Here, public-sector intermediary functions such as capability development, experimentation support, and business-level upgrading operate within logics of adaptation rather than policy abstraction. The friction points in the micro-level box (e.g., non-usable support, bureaucratic overload, selective representation) come into play when macro- or meso-level rule systems impose structures such as reporting routines or internationalization templates that do not fit the micro-level logic. Failure occurs because support instruments are encoded in one institutional logic but must be enacted within another that operates on different assumptions (Scherer and Palazzo, 2012).

The "Or" conditions in each box are therefore not merely negative outcomes; they represent specific friction points generated when cross-level translations fail due to incompatible rule systems (cf. Chatain and Zemsky, 2011; Hofer et al., 2025). These tensions explain why public-sector intermediaries must constantly mediate between divergent logics rather than simply implement predefined roles. This resonates with broader scholarship on institutional multiplicity, which highlights that actors embedded in overlapping rule systems must engage in ongoing negotiation of values and priorities (Scherer and Palazzo, 2012). This explicit link between the model's friction points and logics strengthens the theoretical continuity between Fig. 1 and the later discussion.

3. Research Context and Method

3.1 The Tourism Sector in Sweden as Research Context

Sweden is a main focus of this empirical study due to major efforts of local policymakers and businesses to develop their country as a touristic brand via both real-life experiences and digital platforms (Hurtado-Palomino et al., 2022; Lindström and Larson, 2016; Pearce, 1998). Sweden can be seen as an inspiring example—it has straightened its destination awareness ("Swedishness") with its national art, culture, and design starting from 2011 (Rodrigues, 2018, p. 62). Just recently, tourism in Sweden has started to experience a boom, attracting more of the tourists in recent years than any other Nordic country (Höpken et al., 2019). It is one of the pioneering countries in the world promoting sustainability in tourism (Coles, 2021). The Swedish tourism industry consists of complementary businesses spanning multiple sectors, benefiting from local and cross-industry networks (Weidenfeld et al., 2010), shaping the industry's cooperative climate (Jackson and Murphy, 2006; James and Halkier, 2016; Michael, 2003). Tourism cluster initiatives in Sweden aim to unify destinations and strengthen the country as a sustainable, competitive tourism location (Novelli et al., 2006). Yet, these goals of different industry stakeholders do not always align and sometimes even contrast tourism-sector priorities (Cunha and Cunha, 2005). Between 2016 and 2019, the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth invested 40 million SEK (Swedish Krona, $4,130,450 United States dollars (USD)) in seven Swedish regions to develop their destinations with a focus on promoting nature, culture, and sustainable use of these touristic places (https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/circabc-ewpp/rest/download/12f33d24-336a-4c7b-beb8-812809c6a1af; https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-tourism-trends-and-policies-2026_3fd3cd75-en/full-report/sweden_3f7237ea.html). The results of this project were rather advanced and led towards beneficial industry transitions, which raised interest in this study.

3.2 Study Design and Data Collection

This study is building on an interactive qualitative research approach to illustrate goals and functions of public-sector intermediaries in an integrative way, using the seven Swedish regions as empirical sources in collaboration with the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth. These regions represent less developed tourist destinations in comparison with the northern part of Sweden, were actively involved in the development of their touristic destinations and formally declared such ambition. This study uses multiple data sources describing touristic sector development, in general, and in the Swedish context.

3.2.1 Data Sources

3.2.1.1 Document Analysis. The data were gathered from a broad range of sources, including organisational documents, annual reports, national and regional strategies, municipal development plans, and industry reports, complemented by research literature. Some of these sources were accessed via academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science) while others were obtained from institutional databases (e.g., The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, municipalities, industry branch organisations). The search strategy combined keywords such as "tourism development/tourism cluster", "functions", "vision", "entrepreneurship", or "innovation strategy". This search resulted in more than 400 scientific works and 100 working papers and reports, which formed the basis for the study's theoretical framework. Industry reports and municipal steering documents were examined to grasp the overarching policy direction and to capture how support priorities and future development trajectories were defined. These sources also offered insights into the formally stated goals and functions of regional and municipal intermediaries—the study participants, as articulated in official strategies and policy documents.

3.2.1.2 Agenda Setting Meetings. The research team participated in three agenda-setting seminars organized by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth. These meetings, held biannually and lasting between 8 and 14 hours, brought together regional representatives to align national tourism strategies with region-specific priorities. Notes taken during these sessions captured the collaborative development of goals and functions, contributing to interactive research setting that fostered openness and trust among participants. It allowed mapping the range of explicitly named goals and functions attributed to stakeholders within the study regions. These meetings served as a key site for negotiating goals, distributing resources, and fostering cross-sectoral collaboration.

3.2.1.3 Personal Interviews. This study further builds on fifteen in-depth interviews conducted with strategically positioned informants across municipalities in seven Swedish regions: Dalarna, Uppsala, Blekinge, Skåne, Östergötland, West Sweden, and Småland. These regions were identified in collaboration with the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, which provided guidance on selecting municipalities with relevant experience in tourism development. Interviews with formal experts and strategists within tourism development were conducted between March 2018 and May 2019, with additional follow-up conversations held in September and October 2024 to validate and refine earlier findings. This source added new information about goals and functions by interviewees and highlighted the integration or disintegration between these two notions.

Using multiple data sources enabled triangulation (Nunes et al., 2019). Organisational goals extracted from policy documents, strategic plans, and industry reports were systematically cross verified against the perspectives of interviewees, ensuring consistency and revealing potential gaps between formal visions and practical implementation. This cross-checking process strengthened the validity of the findings by aligning declared objectives with lived practices (Ihantola and Kihn, 2011). Moreover, the reliance on single respondents per region was mitigated through the integration of extensive secondary data and insights from participatory observation in agenda-setting seminars. The researchers' involvement in three meetings of the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth provided a unique opportunity to observe how regional stakeholders collaboratively interpreted national tourism strategies and negotiated region-specific priorities. These sessions offered direct access to the formulation of intermediary goals and functions, which were later used to contextualize and interpret interview data. By comparing the documented strategies and seminar outcomes with interview outcome, the study was able to assess whether stated goals and functions were supported, contradicted, or nuanced in practice. This layered approach reduced the risk of over-reliance on individual perspectives and enhanced the analytical depth of the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

3.2.2 Study Design and Sampling Logic

The interview data collection (Table 2) followed a maximum variation approach, using purposive sampling with a focus on key respondents (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). The sampling strategy behind the choice was guided by the need to capture variation across regions and municipalities in terms of size, tourism experience, and access to attractions, while still ensuring analytical depth (Patton, 2002). A purposive sampling approach was employed, designed to maximize variation across regions rather than depth within single cases. This logic is particularly suitable when the aim is to capture the breadth of system-level differences and comparative patterns, rather than to provide thick descriptions of a few isolated cases (Yin, 2009). Hence, this study did not follow such a single- or multiple-case study design in the strict sense (Eisenhardt, 1989), but rather examines the variation of public-sector intermediaries' goals and functions across different level contexts. For this purpose, a maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was considered more appropriate, combining depth and breadth. Specifically, by including 9 municipalities across seven Swedish regions, the study sought to identify recurring cross-level patterns and contrasts and thereby provide a broader understanding of intermediation in tourism development.

The interviewees selected for this study represent three categories within the study locations (Table 2): regional and municipal politicians, which are macro-level initiators of tourism cluster initiatives and development, leaders of meso-level intermediary organisations (intermediaries within committees, e.g., health care, culture), and micro-level business development organisations (e.g., hotel, restaurant, and event organizers). All respondents hold full-time positions within their organisations, have been working in the organisations for at least a year, and have an explicit role for tourism and destination management.

A key respondent approach (i.e., targeting leaders and directors) was considered most appropriate due to respondents' decision-making power and long-term involvement in tourism and destination development (Heckathorn, 1997). Selected interviewees hold formal responsibility for strategy-setting and therefore possess deep insight into institutional practices, goals, and functions within their regions. Sampling thus aimed at capturing relevant positions, expertise, and decision-making capacity instead of accounting for representativeness. In each region, the selected interviewees represented the one or, in some cases, two key organisations with a formal mandate for tourism development. At the same time, we recognize that drawing primarily on strategically positioned informants naturally foregrounds higher-level perspectives and may not fully capture the day-to-day experiences of frontline or administrative actors. While this approach offered broad comparative insight across regions, future studies that weave in voices from additional organisational layers could enrich understanding of

Table 2. Overview of study participants.

Region/Municipality	Size (number of inhabitants)	Respondents' focus	System-level placement	Interview respondents
1. Blekinge	160,000	Strategic development focus/regional level	Macro	1. Regional strategist and planner (also follow up interview)
2. Karlskrona (Blekinge)	67,000	Operational development focus/municipal level	Meso	2. Municipal network manager (also follow up interview)
3. Olofström (Blekinge)	14,000	Strategic development focus/local level	Micro	3. Medium size tourism company owner (also follow up interview)
4. Dalarna	288,000	Operational development focus/regional level	Macro	4. National tourism agency representative (also follow up interview)
5. Smedjebacken (Dalarna)	6000	Strategic development focus/municipal level	Meso	5. Municipal network manager
6. West Sweden	2,100,000	Business developer/regional level	Macro	6. Regional strategist and planner
7. Falköping (West Sweden)	17,000	Strategic development focus/local level	Micro	7. Small size tourism company owner
8. Gislaved (Småland)	11,000	Business developer/municipal level	Meso	8. Municipal network manager
9. Skåne	1,350,000	Strategic development focus/regional level	Macro	9. Regional strategist and planner (also follow up interview)
10. Simrishamn (Skåne)	7000	Operational development focus/municipal level	Meso	10. Municipal network manager
11. Östergötland	451,000	Strategic development focus/Regional level	Macro	11. National tourism agency representative (also follow up interview)
12. Söderköping (Östergötland)	7000	Operational development focus/local level	Micro	12. Medium size tourism company owner
13. Vadstena (Östergötland)	6000	Business leader/local level	Micro	13. Medium size tourism company owner (also follow up interview)
14. Uppsala	178,000	Business developer/regional level	Macro	14. Regional strategist and planner
15. Östhammar (Uppsala)	5000	Strategic development focus/municipal level	Meso	15. Municipal tourism network manager

how goals and functions are enacted, interpreted, and occasionally negotiated across different levels.

The interviews followed a triple pilot-tested and structured interview guide, divided into three blocks: (1) Destination management and governance—questions explored power distribution, stakeholder networks, collaborations, and governance structures, providing insights into how strategic goals are operationalized across macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. (2) Management practices and integration—questions focused on methods used to manage destinations in relation to other tasks, examining how goals and functions are coordinated internally and across organisations. (3) Influences, possibilities, outcomes, and limitations in industry development—questions addressed both enabling and constraining factors for tourism development, highlighting the dynamic interplay between formally stated goals and the functions enacted by intermediaries. In cases where goals previously identified from secondary sources were not spontaneously mentioned by respondents, specific follow-up questions were posed to explore their existence, relevance, and how they relate to the functions enacted by the intermediaries. This approach ensured that the interviews captured not only the goals actively pursued in practice but also their connections to organisational functions, allowing for a more complete understanding of goal–function alignment across system levels and exclusion of outdated or just formally stated goals/functions. These questions were designed to facilitate reflective and analytical responses, encouraging respondents to elaborate on both organisational strategies and practical implementations. This approach enabled the study to capture how goals are interpreted, prioritized, and enacted in practice, rather than only documenting formal statements. Respondents were given opportunities for free reflection, provid-

Table 3. Approach to data analysis.

Research areas	Analysis focus
Level of operation	Macro, meso, and micro levels
Type of stakeholder	Public-sector intermediaries and business developers
Goals	Multiple levels: relevant goals performed on each level
Functions	Multiple levels: relevant functions performed on each level
Outcome	Integrative indicator showing the match or mismatch of the goals and functions

ing insights into the mechanisms through which goals and functions are aligned or misaligned across levels. All interviews lasted approximately 40–50 minutes, were recorded and transcribed immediately, ensuring that the data could be systematically coded and analysed to investigate the integration of goals and functions as perceived by the intermediaries.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a qualitative content analysis and a cross-case approach (Khan and VanWynsberghe, 2008), which aims to underline a diversity of functions and goals and their integration on different system levels within the Swedish tourism industry. The main perspectives in the analysis were system level belonging, stakeholder type, goals, functions and outcomes (Table 3).

The analysis was conducted in two steps. First, a document analysis identified the articulated goals of stakeholders as expressed in strategies and reports and enriched by insights from active participation in strategic goal-setting meetings. Documents (policy documents, strategic plans, annual reports, and statistical databases) were examined to identify formal goals and stated functions of intermediary organisations in tourism development. Documents were also used as reference points against which empirical insights from the interviews were compared.

Second, interviews and analysis examined whether these goals were enacted through functions in practice. Coding was guided by the Three-Cycle Model of Innovation Efforts (Beirão et al., 2017; van Wijk et al., 2019), which structures cross-level data analysis. As part of the multi-level examination, agenda-setting meetings were analysed to understand how intermediary actors coordinated priorities and aligned strategic intentions with operational functions. The alignment of goals and functions was subsequently examined in relation to their outcomes, interpreted as diagnostic indicators of integration or disintegration across system levels. Positive outcomes reflected coherence, for example, when intermediary functions reinforced intended goals through resource targeting and leveraging or cross-sectoral networking, while negative outcomes indicated tensions, such as rigidity or lock-in. To ensure validity and consistency, the three researchers involved in the analysis jointly discussed and compared extracted insights to ensure quality (Creswell and Poth, 2016). These interpretations were finally situated within the broader literature on public-sector intermediaries. Each response was categorized according to the respondent's system level, allowing, for example, goals and functions related to tourism entrepreneurs to be treated as micro-level specificities of public-sector intermediaries. Confirmed facts from single cases were then synthesized and compared with the wider dataset to ensure coherence.

The data analysis takes a starting point from Fig. 1 (see also Appendix Table 5). In terms of analytical logic, the study applied an abductive approach, moving back and forth between theoretical concepts (functions, goals, outcomes) and empirical material (documents, meeting notes, interview transcripts). A coding process was applied to the interview and agenda-setting meeting transcripts, focusing on themes of goals, functions, practices, and perceived outcomes. Interviewees and meetings participants' accounts were used to check whether expressed goals were recognized, operationalized, or challenged by practitioners at different system levels. This enabled the study to apply a goal–function–outcome logic: If respondents' functions aligned with the goals, this was interpreted as a match, indicating functional coherence and reflect through the positive organisational outcomes. If discrepancies emerged, this was coded as a mismatch, indicating tensions, conflicting priorities, or gaps between strategy and practice, which is also clearly visible in outcomes column.

4. Empirical Findings

4.1 Macro-Level Goals and Functions

As shown in Table 4, macro-level goals such as regional development, resource targeting, and international networking were pursued through functions like aggregation, infrastructure creation, reversers, and regulation. Aggregation helped embed tourism into broader strategies, but funding remained limited, and tourism was often seen as secondary to dominant sectors (Interview 5). Infrastructure creation through platforms like Archipelago improved collaboration, yet competence programs were too generic for small businesses' needs (Interview 13). Internationalization was a central goal, supported by large-scale campaigns, but local actors struggled to align with these ambitions, focusing instead on seasonal survival (Interview 10). Reverser functions meant to support long-term planning were often delegated or activated reactively. Regulatory functions, especially in transport and land use, struc-

Table 4. Illustrative summary of empirical findings.

Macro-level goals and functions	Meso-level goals and functions	Micro-level goals and functions
"We constantly need to show why tourism matters, otherwise health, transport or energy sectors get priority. Tourism is a smaller brother in relation to car and petrol industry–in other words–a profound branch. Our role is to argue that tourism is not just entertainment but a development engine." (Interview 5, meso-level representative)	*"Our festivals bring people into the municipality, not only for tourism but also for restaurants, construction, and transport. That's where we see the spill-over."* (Interview 11, meso-level representative)	*"Our role is to connect the small B&B with the regional booking system. For them, it's a big step, and it makes them more visible."* (Interview 8, meso-level representative)
"We managed to get culture and history into the regional strategy, but when it comes to funding, tourism is still seen as a hobby sector." (Interview 14, macro-level representative)	*"We talk about airports, railways, and fast internet, but with our budget, it's impossible. We end up promising more than we can deliver."* (Interview 9, macro-level representative)	*"We know not every course leads to growth, but even getting businesses together in the same room builds confidence and new contacts."* (Interview 12, micro-level representative)
"The Archipelago platform is finally helping us to share information across organisations. It has created a real sense of working together, which was missing before." (Interview 11, meso-level representative)	"*We try to inspire young people into tourism careers, but without proper funding, it becomes more talk than practice."* (Interview 2, meso-level representative)	*"They invite us to projects, but it feels like filling forms, not building tourism. We need practical help, not paperwork."* (Interview 13, micro-level representative)
"*The competence development is well meant, but too generic. A small business doesn't need Excel seminars; they need help with online booking systems."* (Interview 13, micro-level representative)	*"We've started to bring tourism entrepreneurs together with property owners and retailers. That mix creates energy and new ideas."* (Interview 11, meso-level representative)	*"We try to join their projects, but every step turns into a nightmare. I run a tourism business, not an office desk. Some weeks I spend more time filling in forms than guiding guests. If that's development, I must be missing something."* (Interview 13, micro-level representative)
"We talk about bringing in international visitors, but most of our firms are not ready for that—they want to survive the next summer season." (Interview 10, meso-level representative)	*"The top wants a digital platform, and we also want one, but a different one. But in the end, we confuse businesses. It looks uncoordinated."* (Interview 13, micro-level representative)	*"Policies come and go, but we're still here fixing cabins, answering phones, and trying to survive another winter."* (Interview 12, micro-level representative)
"Development and initiative are in our strategy but performed when the storm hits. We normally find someone else who is good at this." (Interview 2, meso-level representative)	"*We can gather businesses and create momentum, but without stable funding the ideas evaporate before they turn into real initiatives."* (Interview 11, meso-level representative)	*"They talk about internationalization, but our guests are Swedes on summer vacation. We can't just flip a switch and become international.*" (Interview 7, micro-level representative)
"Sometimes these have to decide for us and others where we are allowed to do and not, which is actually the governors responsibility." (Interview 1, macro-level representative)	*"Our job is to translate regional ambitions into something workable, but we're constantly stuck between expectations from above and frustration from the firms below."* (Interview 5, meso-level representative)	*"They keep talking about long-term strategies, but we live from season to season. One rainy month brings losses to us more than any strategy."* (Interview 7, micro-level representative)
		"We apply for proposed project initiatives, but the process is so long and complicated that we lose momentum. By the time funding arrives, the season is already over. The high season is gone, finished good times. We need help when the guests are here, not six months later." (Interview 12, micro-level representative)

B&B, Bed and Breakfasts.

tured implementation but sometimes constrained regional autonomy.

At the macro-level, regional intermediaries sought to align goals such as regional development, resource targeting, and international networking with operational functions like aggregation, infrastructure creation, reversers, and regulation. When these functions were clearly connected to goals, outcomes supported broader frameworks like EU cohesion policies and national agendas. For instance, digital platforms facilitated cross-municipal collaboration, and aggregation helped embed tourism and culture into regional strategies. However, misalignments were common. Aggregation efforts often lacked financial backing, infrastructure initiatives did not always meet small businesses' needs, and internationalization goals clashed with local businesses' limited capacity (Interviews 2, 13). Regulatory functions, while providing structure, sometimes replaced more adaptive mechanisms like reversers, leading to fragmented implementation (Interview 1). Transport regulation emerged as a key integrator across levels, translating sustainability and networking goals into actionable frameworks. These tensions underscore the challenge of translating broad policy visions into responsive regional practices.

Empirical data revealed persistent challenges in integrating tourism into broader macro-level development agendas. There is a need to continuously justify tourism's relevance, noting that sectors like health, transport, and energy often receive priority. Tourism was portrayed as a "smaller brother" to dominant industries, requiring advocacy to be recognized as a legitimate driver of regional development (Interview 5). Macro-level actors acknowledged some progress, such as the inclusion of cultural and historical dimensions in regional strategies and the emergence of collaborative platforms like the Archipelago initiative, which improved inter-organisational coordination (Interviews 11, 12). However, they also pointed to structural limitations, including governance constraints that restrict regional autonomy in decision-making.

4.2 Meso-Level Goals and Functions

Empirical data show that meso-level goals such as local economic development, sectoral collaboration, and capacity-building were pursued through functions like inputters, influencers and affectees (Table 4). Municipalities translated broader strategies into concrete priorities, including growth through events, heritage promotion, and leisure infrastructure. For example, cultural festivals were used to stimulate spill-over effects into sectors like hospitality and transport (Interview 11). In practice, several municipalities reported that these festivals also attracted additional commercial activity, such as temporary construction work, catering services, and retail footfall, reinforcing their belief that events generate broad local economic spill-over. Inputter functions were active, especially in promoting tourism careers and skill development, but often lacked funding, limiting their effectiveness (Interview 2). As it was explained, initiatives to inspire young people into tourism careers frequently remained symbolic because staffing and training resources were insufficient to move from "talk" to actual implementation—making these ambitions difficult to sustain throughout the year.

Municipalities also contributed to infrastructure goals, but resource constraints made delivery difficult, leading to gaps between ambition and implementation (Interview 9). Several representatives noted that discussions about airports, railways, and high-speed internet rarely translated into tangible local outcomes, creating tension between long-term strategic visions and the financial realities of municipal budgets. Influencer functions supported cross-sectoral collaboration, such as linking tourism entrepreneurs with property owners and retailers, which generated new ideas and energy (Interview 11).

Networking goals supported collaboration across levels, helping to localize top-level strategies. However, disintegration occurred when ambitions exceeded available resources or when functional roles overlapped with macro-level initiatives. Municipalities frequently articulated goals around infrastructure and digitalization but lacked the financial and institutional capacity to implement them effectively (Interview 9). Overlaps with national-level initiatives particularly around digital platforms led to duplication and confusion, highlighting tensions between meso- and macro-level functions (Interview 13). Meso-level actors often found themselves "stuck in between", trying to satisfy regional authorities while simultaneously responding to frustration from local business who faced multiple, sometimes incompatible digital systems. Regulatory and extractor functions were largely absent at the meso-level, while the beneficiary role was nominal and often compensated for by active inputter contributions. These mismatches revealed the fragility of resource-focused goals and underscored the need for clearer integration mechanisms to ensure coherent implementation across governance levels.

Integration was most successful when meso-level actors adapted top-level goals to local contexts and mobilized functions through collaboration. Municipal representatives highlighted that they could generate momentum by gathering businesses and facilitating dialogue, but without stable long-term funding, promising ideas rarely matured into sustained initiatives (Interviews 5, 9, 11). Yet misalignments due to limited resources and unclear role distribution revealed the fragility of resource-focused goals and the need for better coordination across governance levels. The core task is to "translate" regional ambitions into locally appropriate activities, but this translation is frequently undermined by external or macro-level expectations and practical frustrations from micro-level businesses. This illustrates the structural tension embedded in meso-level intermediation.

4.3 Micro-Level Goals and Functions

Empirical data show further (Table 4) that micro-level goals such as small business development, competence building, and survival support were pursued through functions like developers, supporters, promoters, modelers, and change agents. Public-sector intermediaries focused on helping businesses adapt to market demands and maintain operations. Positive outcomes occurred when developer functions aligned with business needs, such as connecting small Bed and Breakfasts to regional booking systems to increase visibility (Interview 8). Supporter functions, particularly through competence-building initiatives, fostered confidence and peer learning, even when growth outcomes were limited (Interview 12). However, disintegration was frequent. Many businesses viewed change agent functions as overly bureaucratic, with project participation feeling more like administrative compliance than meaningful development (Interview 13). For several firms, the administrative demands of participation competed directly with core tourism work, as owners found themselves spending valuable peak-season hours completing reporting templates instead of guiding guests or maintaining facilities.

Modeler functions also struggled to align with local realities. Internationalization goals were seen as disconnected from the seasonal and domestic nature of most business operations (Interview 7). Several businesses, indeed, emphasized that they operate in a context where visitor flows depend heavily on seasonality and local weather conditions, making broad strategic ambitions detached from their daily pressures to secure bookings and manage unpredictable seasonal demand. Promoter functions, such as public campaigns, were often undermined by slow and complex funding processes, which reduced their relevance and impact (Interview 12). In practice, many businesses described losing momentum because approvals arrived only after the high season had passed, leaving them with missed opportunities and no timely support.

At the micro-level, integration of goals and functions led to targeted support for small businesses, particularly when developer and supporter roles aligned with survival and adaptation needs. Public-sector intermediaries translated broader ambitions into specific initiatives, such as connecting businesses to booking systems or facilitating peer learning (Interviews 8, 12). However, disintegration was common when intermediary functions became overly bureaucratic or misaligned with everyday realities. Project participation often felt administrative rather than developmental (Interview 13), and internationalization goals lacked contextual fit for businesses focused on domestic, seasonal markets (Interview 7). Promoter functions were further weakened by slow funding processes, which undermined momentum and impact (Interview 12). These challenges were compounded by the rhythm of tourism work itself. Many businesses operated "from season to season", juggling cabin repairs, guest communication, and weather-related risks while navigating policy cycles designed around longer-term administrative routines (Interview 12). These mismatches revealed fragile integration and underscored the need for more responsive mechanisms that reflect the operational constraints and priorities of micro-level actors.

5. Analysis

Based on the empirical findings (Section 4), the analysis and discussion take a point of departure in the complex interplay of goals and functions that was found related to public-sector intermediaries from a system-level perspective.

5.1 Integration of Goals and Functions on Multiple Levels

5.1.1 Macro-Level Integration

At the macro-level, public-sector intermediaries operate within national and EU frameworks, pursuing goals such as regional development, resource leveraging and targeting, and international competitiveness (Asencio, 2022; Kuhlmann and Edler, 2003). These goals are enacted through functions like aggregation, infrastructure creation, and reversion, positioning intermediaries as both strategic actors and facilitators of broader policy agendas (Munro et al., 2008). Their roles are not only operational but symbolic, shaping legitimacy and coherence across governance levels (Geels and Johnson, 2018; Hakkarainen and Hyysalo, 2016). From a "nexus-of-rules" perspective, macro-level actors also codify and diffuse the overarching information structures that guide how rules, expectations, and routines cascade downward (Boisot and Sanchez, 2010, p. 396). This, however, makes a coherence of these structures essential for ensuring that lower-level actors can interpret and enact policy in ways that support system-wide alignment because macro-level policy framings are embedded in competing institutional logics (including bureaucratic-administrative and societal-community logics), which intermediaries must reconcile when translating policies downward (Scherer and Palazzo, 2012).

Integration is most effective when macro-level functions are adapted to regional contexts. An example is digital platforms enabling cross-municipal collaboration and embedding tourism into development strategies. However, rigid or abstract goals often result in fragmented implementation and functional lock-ins (De Vries et al., 2016; Howlett, 2014), weakening coherence across levels and reinforcing institutional inertia (Kivimaa et al., 2019a). When macro-level goals remain abstract, local actors experience fragmentation and reduced engagement, as coordination platforms fail to translate high-level ambitions into usable practices (Östberg et al., 2026). Macro-level actors frequently delegate functions like reversion while retaining control through evaluation and regulation (Sonday and Wilson-Prangley, 2018). Regulatory dominance can limit responsiveness and reinforce power asymmetries (Vallance et al., 2020), creating hierarchical imbalances in goal-function integration. This rigidity undermines adaptive capacity and leads to fragmented implementation at meso- and micro-levels (Beirão et al., 2017). From a Three-Cycle Model perspective, macro-level integration is not only strategic but relational, which requires intermediaries to navigate between institutional mandates and stakeholder needs (Aqueveque and Bianchi, 2017). This aligns with niche-management research showing that macro-level intermediaries act as process managers who align expectations and coordinate learning across diverse stakeholder groups (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Spillan et al., 2018). As the results show, this task is overly complicated due to formalized and abstract goals on a macro-level. In some cases, adaptive functions like infrastructure creation and aggregation have improved alignment with regional contexts. However, without mechanisms for reflexivity and feedback, macro-level goals risk becoming disconnected from the functions to enact them, reducing the systemic impact of public-sector intermediation (cf. Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). Disconnection is further reinforced when regional businesses underutilize formal macro-initiated support structures, often preferring direct network ties over institutional mechanisms (Gretzinger et al., 2010). This limits the reach of macro-level intentions and weakens vertical coherence in the system (cf. Korabik et al., 2003; van Wijk et al., 2019). This further reinforces cross-level disconnection (Hofer et al., 2025).

These patterns demonstrate that macro-level disintegration reflects structural tensions embedded in the broader governance system. This pattern reflects what Korabik et al. (2003, p. 4), describe as turbulence where organisations must navigate simultaneous and often incompatible demands from multiple societal systems, amplifying cross-level misalignments and making integration structurally fragile. When high-level goals and rigid policy instruments are insufficiently aligned to local contingencies, they reinforce institutional inertia instead of enabling adaptive change (Howlett, 2014; Kivimaa et al., 2019a). Beyond setting priorities, macro-level public-sector intermediaries also construct the overarching knowledge structures that inform lower-level intermediaries about how they interpret and organise their work. Misalignments between these frameworks and the situated knowledge held at regional levels constrain intermediaries' capacity to adapt and respond effectively (Smedlund, 2006). At the same time, macro-level preferences for stability and continuity (Molthan-Hill et al., 2020) reduce the reflexive capabilities needed for adjustment which also reflects the difficulty of anticipating unintended consequences in complex governance settings when ongoing reflexive adjustment is required rather than one-time policy design (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). Consequently, macro-level goals become increasingly decoupled from operational functions, producing persistent disintegration that cascades downward into meso- and micro-level implementation.

5.1.2 Meso-Level Integration

At the meso-level, municipalities translate macro-level goals into locally grounded priorities such as economic growth through events, heritage, and leisure infrastructure. Their functions such as inputters, influencers, and affectees are central to operationalizing regional strategies (Geels and Johnson, 2018; Howlett, 2014). Meso-level intermediaries have a hybrid role, acting both as policy implementers and autonomous strategists. In addition, they function as bidirectional intermediaries, not only translating policy downward but also aggregating and communicating local insights upward. Empirical data show that integration is most effective when meso-level functions are embedded in cross-sectoral collaboration, generating spillover effects into retail, transport, and construction (Bals et al., 2023). However, tourism is often deprioritized, limiting resources and constraining functions (Weidenfeld et al., 2010). Inputter and influencer functions are active but frequently restricted by macro-level regulatory dominance, which imposes rigid frameworks and reduces responsiveness. Such rigidity echoes findings in nonprofit settings for which administrative and compliance logics override mission-oriented work, reducing the capacity of meso-level intermediaries to respond adaptively to local needs (Akingbola et al., 2019). Similarly, in niche-development research, intermediaries often operate within complex expectation structures that limit their room for manoeuvre (Hargreaves et al., 2013). Overlaps between macro- and meso-level initiatives, for example, through competing digital platforms, create duplication and confusion, undermining legitimacy and coordination (Zulkhibri et al., 2015). This also reflects incompatibilities in the underlying information structures that guide macro- and meso-level action; as Boisot and Sánchez (2010) argue, such incompatibilities can produce inconsistency, reinforcing coordination failures across levels. In such constellations, meso-level intermediaries are confronted with overlapping political, economic, and administrative demands that cannot be reconciled within a single logic, producing turbulence in cross-level coordination (Korabik et al., 2003).

Regulatory and beneficiary roles remain minor, with municipalities compensating through active inputter functions. This imbalance reflects a top-down configuration where meso-level actors are expected to deliver without sufficient autonomy or support (Viederyte, 2013). This minimizes the uptake of meso-level intermediation and further widens the gap between strategic intent and operational impact (cf. Gretzinger et al., 2010). Such gap can erode the coherence of sectoral categories, generating new forms of systemic friction as actors must simultaneously respond to incompatible institutional expectations (Korabik et al., 2003). From the Three-Cycle Model perspective (Beirão et al., 2017; Molina-Morales, 2002), meso-level integration is a relational process, requiring intermediaries to navigate between top-down mandates and bottom-up needs. Their effectiveness depends on translating strategic goals into flexible, context-sensitive practices. Equally important is their upward role: consolidating practice-based feedback, articulating local constraints, and signalling emerging needs to macro-level actors to enable timely adjustment of overarching strategies (cf. Hofer et al., 2025). When meso-level actors are empowered by local legitimacy and resources, upward feedback becomes more accurate and improves strategic recalibration (Östberg et al., 2026). Their effectiveness depends not only on translating strategic goals into flexible, context-sensitive practices downward, but also on carrying practice-based insights upward, ensuring that local experiences and emerging needs inform macro-level change.

These patterns indicate that meso-level disintegration is a symptom of deeper structural tensions within the governance architecture. As highlighted in research, meso-level intermediaries operate at the intersection of multiple, sometimes competing logics, which requires continuous reconciliation between economic, administrative, and community-oriented expectations (van Wijk et al., 2019). In such environments, intermediaries often face problems in both downward and upward cross-level coordination: everyday practices required to implement abstract policy from upper system-levels (Smets et al., 2012). When rigid policy instruments and broad strategic goals are not sufficiently adapted to local contingencies, the result is operational incoherence (Howlett, 2014). As Smedlund (2006) argues, intermediaries in such situation may revert to narrow, procedural routines rather than adaptive practices. This dynamic resonates with outcomes on each level (Beirão et al., 2017), which suggest that the same functions can yield collaboration, conflict, or lock-in depending on how well they are embedded in local context. Therefore, meso-level intermediaries must translate not only goals but also knowledge structures both downward to sectoral routines and upward to macro-level strategic deliberations to smoothen process and outcome. Finally, the tendency of meso-level actors to reproduce established structures, what Molthan-Hill et al. (2020) describe as path consolidation, reduces their capacity for reflexive adjustment. This explains why disintegration persists; as a result, meso-level intermediaries bear responsibility for mediation but lack structural autonomy, informational alignment, and feedback loops required to enact integration in practice.

5.1.3 Micro-Level Integration

At the micro-level, public-sector intermediaries pursue context-specific goals such as small business development, competence building, and visibility. These are enacted through relational functions such as promoters, supporters, developers, modelers, and change agents, focused on helping businesses survive and adapt (Bali and Halpin, 2021; Smedlund, 2006). Micro-level intermediaries operate as embedded boundary actors, directly engaging with entrepreneurs while responding to broader agendas (Kivimaa, 2014). Integration is effective when functions are tailored to operational realities, such as connecting businesses to booking systems and facilitating peer learning. These efforts support innovation and local capacity building (Smets et al., 2012; Spillan et al., 2018). These findings also resonate with research on successful cluster initiative management, where micro-level learning environments thrive when intermediaries establish trust-based routines and clear communication structures (Klofsten et al., 2015). In service-dominant terms, value is co-created through situated interactions (Chandler and Vargo, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2017). When micro-level support matches the business cycle (e.g., timely booking integration, peer learning), businesses convert support into tangible gains rather than compliance work.

However, disintegration occurs when functions become bureaucratic or misaligned with seasonal and resource-limited business contexts. Empirically, this became apparent as peak-season reporting that displaced core work (e.g., guest handling), internationalization templates which ignored domestic seasonality, and slow approvals eroding campaign momentum (Interviews 7, 8, 12, 13). Modeler and promoter roles often fail to reflect local constraints, limiting impact on profitability and resilience. Slow funding processes further weaken promoter functions and reduce responsiveness. Micro-level intermediaries experience goal-function mismatches directly, making their feedback vital for system-wide adjustment (Smets et al., 2012). From the Three-Cycle Model perspective (Beirão et al., 2017; Molina-Morales, 2002), micro-level integration is a bottom-up process of experimentation and learning, requiring flexible instruments and coordination aligned with local priorities. Such bottom-up learning is often hindered by the temporal and material constraints under which micro-level actors operate: survival-driven routines leave limited slack for engaging with abstract policy instruments or delayed support mechanisms. Moreover, because micro-level value creation occurs in situated practice, even well-designed functions lose traction when they fail to resonate with businesses' operational rhythms, reducing the emergence of cumulative learning (Spillan et al., 2018). Cumulative learning breaks down when support lacks usability, leading businesses to disengage or revert to informal peer networks (Östberg et al., 2026). In this sense, micro-level integration does not only depend on functional design but also on continued negotiation between policy intent and lived realities of business operations, with micro-level intermediaries often contributing more upward feedback than receiving usable support from above. This asymmetry is found in the study because micro-level public-sector intermediaries often share actionable, context-rich feedback while receiving generic tools that do not fit their temporal realities, reinforcing downward misalignment (cf. Hofer et al., 2025).

The micro-level evidence shows that disintegration is not incidental but rooted in how the goals and functions are communicated downward and experienced in practice. When macro- and meso-level goals are insufficiently adapted to local temporalities (e.g., short summer seasons of tourism operations), micro-level actors rather engage in pragmatic accommodations and prioritize survival tasks over compliance, which decouples intended functions from actual routines. Upper-level goals in this case lead rather to value friction then value gain for micro-level representatives (Korabik et al., 2003; Vargo and Lusch, 2017). Repeated mismatches gradually turn into business routines and intermediary procedures, reducing reflexive space and hindering adaptive adjustment. Hence, bottom-up learning processes central to the Three-Cycle Model become interrupted (Beirão et al., 2017), limiting the emergence of learning and weakening cross-level integration. Importantly, because micro-level actors primarily interact through upward signalling, offering situated feedback, identifying operational constraints, and voicing emerging needs, the absence of mechanisms to process and respond to this feedback further constrains integration. As a result, restoring integration depends on instruments that are time-sensitive, context-aligned, and co-developed with the practical rhythms of micro-level work.

5.2 Cross-Level Integration

Public-sector intermediaries operate within a multi-level governance structure in which each level contributes distinct goals and functions, yet, as study underlines, depends on alignment and coordination to achieve systemic coherence. This outcome goes along with research highlighting a complex interplay of strategic intent, operational capacity, and contextual responsiveness needed for the cross-level integration of goals and functions (De Vries et al., 2016). In our data, effective integration depended on a *temporal* fit with business cycles and seasonal windows; a *cognitive* fit between policy frames and local practices; and a *relational* fit that sustained cross-level trust and feedback. Where any of these forms of fit were absent, the Three-Cycle Model's learning dynamics weakened: micro-level experimentation failed to consolidate into meso-level adjustment, and macro-level recalibration remained procedural rather than adaptive (Beirão et al., 2017; van Wijk et al., 2019).

The macro-level often acts as an implicit stakeholder, delegating functions while controlling outcomes through evaluation. Meso-level seeks legitimacy by delivering high-quality and variation of functions, while micro-level actors reflect and respond to the consequences of goal operationalization. Macro-level goals often cascade into meso-level agendas and are anchored in existing business needs, but the intensity and effectiveness of these functions vary depending on stakeholder engagement and resource availability. Empirically, generic digital platforms and standardised internationalization templates proved difficult for micro-level actors to fit seasonal domestic realities, producing duplication, role ambiguity, and delayed feedback cycles. These are signs of misfit between the tools and contexts in multi-level governance (cf. Howlett, 2014; Laur, 2015), where policy abstraction collides with situated practice. As a result, the multi-level learning in the Three-Cycle Model becomes partial, limiting the system's ability to change in reflexive and adaptive ways (Howlett, 2014; Smets et al., 2012). This reflects the broader challenge of managing unintended consequences in multi-level governance structures, where even reflexive mechanisms can produce new tensions that require attentiveness (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013).

Networking goals serve as a connecting thread across levels, but also create overlaps and duplication, which highlights the need for better coordination. Conceptually, networking goals can be seen as co-presence of competing logics (e.g., policy versus administrative versus place-based logics) that should be reconciled (van Wijk et al., 2019). In our cases, reconciliation of competing logics worked best when meso-level intermediaries had resources to co-design instruments in collaboration with businesses (e.g., booking-system onboarding including pre-seasonal periods), rather than merely implementing pre-specified tools. Effective integration requires reflexivity, dialogue, and adaptive mechanisms that allow micro-level insights to inform macro- and meso-level strategies (cf. Urban and Dlamini, 2020; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). Cross-level alignment improves when procedures are co-developed with practitioners and grounded in their routines, rather than imposed through administrative templates (Klofsten et al., 2015).

Stakeholders' engagement on multiple system levels influences the intensity of the functions adopted by the intermediaries (Aqueveque and Bianchi, 2017). Some municipalities mention that the development of tourism is not always a primary strategic agenda for the region. In these cases, resources allocated to tourism might be limited due to minimal proactiveness of meso-level stakeholders, for example, in that the inputter and influencer functions would only be run to a minor extent. Such a configuration reinforces a regulative function of macro-level intermediaries, which will dominate meso-level interests. It also creates a certain mismatch in the priorities on the macro-level and meso-level perspectives, establishing hierarchies among the functions performed on different levels. Hierarchies among functions and uneven legitimacy across levels can lead to gaps in implementation, leaving the needs of some target groups unmet (Laur and Mignon, 2021; Xu and Dobson, 2019). This dynamic also clarifies why tourism was often deprioritized in municipal agendas. When the sector is not framed as a strategic priority, inputter and influencer functions remain of low intensity and marginal, placing meso-level actors in the position of reactive brokers rather than proactive shapers of system dynamism. Over time, this form of path consolidation (Molthan-Hill et al., 2020) narrows reflexive capacity and reduces the likelihood that micro-level signals, such as seasonality, weather sensitivity, or staffing slack, will be communicated upward to inform regional or national system levels.

Moreover, macro-level intermediaries actively seek to minimize unintended consequences arising from functional limitations and multi-level complexity, often relying on negotiation and dialogue to adjust their approaches (cf. Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). This responsiveness reflects the importance of feedback originating from the micro-level on which actors directly experience the outcomes of goal operationalisation and therefore detect tensions first (cf. Smets et al., 2012). Micro-level goals and functions may thus both influence, and be influenced by, actions taken at other system-levels, underscoring the reciprocal nature of cross-level dynamics (Molthan-Hill et al., 2020; Vargo and Lusch, 2017). Restoring coherence therefore requires instruments that are co-produced with local actors and aligned with situational and temporal realities, so that they become actionable forms of practice-based knowledge rather than generic procedural requirements (Urban and Dlamini, 2020).

6. Discussion

This study examines how goals and functions of public-sector intermediaries are integrated across macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. A key finding of the study is that the goals of public-sector intermediaries converge around three main areas: resources, networking, and development, reflecting both the intermediaries' organisational ambitions and broader industry objectives. The goals relate to two overarching standpoints which are growth and control. By contrast, the functions of public-sector intermediaries are associated with change, coordination, and innovation. The portfolio of intermediary functions is multi-sided and often operationalizes organisational goals. However, a broader and flexible variety of functions appears to be a prerequisite for supporting strategic goal orientation of public-sector intermediation across different system-levels (Molina-Morales, 2002; Slocum, 2023; Xu and Dobson, 2019). Yet, intermediaries pursue these goals while navigating competing institutional logics, which can reinforce tensions between growth-oriented and control-oriented mandates (Scherer and Palazzo, 2012).

Therefore, the study reveals two overarching patterns: *integration*, where goal-function alignment enables responsiveness and innovation, and *disintegration*, where misalignment leads to fragmentation and reduced impact. In detail, integration occurs when intermediary functions are relationally aligned with stakeholder goals and adapted to contextual realities. This alignment enables intermediaries to act not only as implementers of policy but as facilitators of innovation and learning (Braun, 1993). Integration is characterized by flexibility, responsiveness, and the capacity to recalibrate strategies in response to emergent needs (Aqueveque and Bianchi, 2017). This is consistent with research on successful cluster initiative management, where integration is strengthened when intermediaries cultivate trust, role clarity, and transparent communication routines that enable stakeholders to align around shared goals (Klofsten et al., 2015). Functions such as networking, aggregation, and developer roles connect different system levels, allowing for cross-sectoral coordination, local adaptation, upward signalling, and bottom-up experimentation. This resonates with niche-management research that highlights that intermediaries act as process managers who translate learning across projects and institutional levels (Hargreaves et al., 2013). In this sense, integration reflects a dynamic process of relational governance in which public-sector intermediaries mediate between institutional mandates and stakeholder expectations through collaborative and context-sensitive practices. Such practices strengthen integration when intermediaries facilitate trust, ensure transparency, and actively co-produce solutions with stakeholders (Östberg et al., 2026).

Disintegration, by contrast, emerges when intermediary functions are rigid, overly bureaucratic, or detached from the operational realities of stakeholders. Administrative overloads constrain mission fulfilment and reduce the ability of intermediaries to respond to local needs (Akingbola et al., 2019). This often results from hierarchical control mechanisms through regulatory dominance that constrain the adaptive capacity of actors at lower levels (De Vries et al., 2016; Hill and Jones, 1992). Disintegration manifests in functional overlaps, duplication, and symbolic compliance when goals are formally adopted but not substantively enacted. As a result, a breakdown in systemic coherence can be observed, i.e., strategic intent fails to be translated to meaningful outcomes due to misaligned instruments, insufficient resources, or lack of coordination mechanisms (De Haas et al., 2000; Smets et al., 2012). Such misalignment can occur when macro-, meso- and micro-level intermediaries operate with inconsistent information or codification (Boisot and Sanchez, 2010), and may persist despite reflexive governance efforts intended to recalibrate these structures. Even reflexive recalibration can inadvertently produce tensions, highlighting the inherent unpredictability of multi-actor governance (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013).

A key insight from this study is therefore the unexpectedly integrative role of networking at macro- and meso-levels (Hyysalo et al., 2018). At the macro-level, networking operates as soft infrastructure, enabling public-sector intermediaries to bridge institutional silos and recalibrate goals in response to system-level tensions. It complements formal mechanisms and fosters cross-sectoral alignment. At the meso-level, networking has a more situated and adaptive character. Municipalities use it to build informal coalitions, reinterpret abstract policy goals, and navigate resource constraints. Their work is, however, complicated by the coexistence of multiple institutional logics such as policy, administrative, and community-oriented logics, which must be reconciled through everyday translation work (Scherer and Palazzo, 2012). Relational agility is particularly valuable in fragmented governance contexts when formal mandates lack specificity or support (Irvine and Anderson, 2004). While macro-level networking facilitates structural coordination, meso-level networking enables strategic interpretation in both downward and upward directions. In this sense, networking functions support goal–function integration by enabling public-sector intermediaries to mediate between institutional expectations and local realities (Bals et al., 2023; Hargreaves et al., 2013).

In contrast, regulatory dominance at the macro-level, while intended to ensure coherence, can introduce rigidity. Meanwhile, regulatory ambiguity at the meso-level, which might occasionally open space for experimentation, often results in coordination gaps that complicate goal–function integration. In light of this, multilevel integration depends less on hierarchical alignment and more on cultivating systemic responsiveness (Kuhlmann and Edler, 2003; Smedlund, 2006; Smets et al., 2012). Effective intermediation thus relies on balancing strategic coherence with relational adaptability, allowing functions to evolve in response to emergent needs. At the same time, micro-level intermediaries, as shown in the analysis, occupy a crucial role as boundary participants: they directly experience goal–function mismatches and therefore provide essential upward feedback needed to recalibrate strategies across levels and strengthen systemic responsiveness (Ajide, 2022; Aqueveque and Bianchi, 2017; De Vries et al., 2016).

The integration of goals and functions across macro-, meso-, and micro-levels reveals a complex interplay between strategic intent, operational capacity, and contextual responsiveness. While each level contributes distinct roles, their interdependence often generates tensions, especially when functional overlaps, such as competing digital platforms or duplicated networking initiatives, lead to fragmentation. In regions in which tourism is deprioritized, meso-level functions are weakened, while macro-level regulatory dominance is reinforced, which reduces system responsiveness. Micro-level actors that are directly affected by these misalignments often initiate adaptive responses and offer valuable feedback. Yet, without mechanisms for reflexivity, negotiation, and shared learning, these insights rarely inform upper-level strategies (cf. Zahra et al., 2020). Moreover, without institutionalized mechanisms for processing upward feedback, situated insights remain unused and goal-function integration weakened (Hofer et al., 2025; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). Effective cross-level integration thus requires not only structural alignment but relational agility and iterative action to maintain coherence across diverse governance contexts (cf. Molina-Morales, 2002). Furthermore, the effectiveness of these multi-level routines is shaped by internal dynamics and the clarity of coordination structures, emphasizing trust and communication in these processes (Klofsten et al., 2015). Ultimately, integration hinges on effective cross-level information flows, a condition that is weakened when businesses instead rely on direct network ties (Boisot and Sanchez, 2010; Gretzinger et al., 2010).

7. Conclusion and Implications

This study examines how the goals and functions of public-sector intermediaries are integrated across different system levels, placing this integration at the core of its inquiry. The findings reveal that such integration is not a linear or uniform process, but a dynamic and relational one, shaped by the interplay between institutional mandates and contextual realities. The findings underscore that coherence between goals and functions, both within and across system levels, is essential for stabilizing intermediary roles and enhancing industry development. The analysis demonstrates that public-sector intermediation is inherently multi-scalar, involving dynamic interactions across macro-level policy frameworks, meso-level regional coordination, and micro-level implementation. Macro-level actors often delegate functions while retaining evaluative control; meso-level actors translate and reinterpret strategies in both downward and upward directions; and micro-level actors respond to the consequences of goal operationalization while providing situated feedback that informs cross-level adjustment. Regional intermediaries therefore serve as critical translators, aligning top-down ambitions with localized, context-sensitive functions.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of adaptive governance and co-creative policy processes in enabling public-sector intermediaries to navigate competing demands and deliver value across diverse institutional and territorial contexts (Hofer et al., 2025; Östberg et al., 2026). These findings echo broader institutional research showing that such intermediaries must continuously reconcile competing logics to maintain coherence across governance levels (Scherer and Palazzo, 2012). These patterns reflect broader institutional dynamics identified in niche-management research that portrays intermediaries as facilitators of learning between protected spaces and wider governance structures (Hargreaves et al., 2013). When such cross-level facilitation falters, intermediaries may lose relevance or be replaced by businesses that rely instead on direct and trusted network ties (Gretzinger et al., 2010). This reinforces the need for integrative processes that maintain coherence while accommodating heterogeneous institutional logics (van Wijk et al., 2019).

This study contributes to theory by advancing a multi-scalar understanding of public-sector intermedia-

Table 5. The integration of goals and functions of public-sector intermediaries.

Administrative system levels	Key stakeholders	Goals	Functions	Outcomes for the system level
Macro	National institutions and organisations	Regional development Resource targeting & leveraging Networking	Aggregators Creators of infrastructure Reversers	Institutional reforms, resource concentration, alignment with EU/national strategies, rigidity, reduced responsiveness (e.g., Ajide, 2022; Singh, 2022)
Meso	Regional and cluster-related stakeholders	Municipal development Resource targeting & leveraging Cross-sectoral networking	Inputters Extractors Regulators Beneficiaries Affectees Influencers	Sectoral adjustments, stronger collaboration networks, lock-ins, conflicts (e.g., Bramwell, 2020; Pret and Cogan, 2019)
Micro	Businesses and individual levels (such as managers)	Sectoral specialization Resource leveraging Localization of networks	Marketer Promoter Supporter Developer Modeler Agent of change	Incremental improvements in business capabilities, experimentation, scaling, re-structuring, conflicts (e.g., Klofsten et al., 2015)

tion through a refined stakeholder–goal–function–outcome framework. It reconceptualizes the role of public-sector intermediaries not as static actors operating within predefined system levels, but as dynamic agents navigating overlapping cross-level mandates, stakeholder expectations, and institutional constraints. The framework demonstrates that intermediaries operate simultaneously as downward translators of policy goals and upward carriers of situated knowledge, clarifying their role as boundary-spanning actors in complex governance systems. By applying the Three-Cycle Model of Innovation Efforts to Swedish tourism as research context, the study shows how goal–function alignment is both a structural and relational process, contingent on cross-level coordination, informational compatibility, and mechanisms that enable learning across system-level boundaries (Beirão et al., 2017; Boisot and Sanchez, 2010). The framework developed here captures how public-sector intermediary functions are enacted in relation to evolving goals and stakeholder configurations, and how these interactions shape system-level outcomes such as coherence, lock-ins, or fragmentation. This approach moves beyond typological classifications of intermediary roles (Kivimaa et al., 2019a; Klerkx and Leeuwis, 2008) by offering a processual and integrative perspective. It highlights how public-sector intermediation contributes to industry transformation and enriches niche-management and transition studies by showing how intermediaries engage in upward and downward translation work, thereby connecting local experimentation with macro-level agendas (Hargreaves et al., 2013). In doing so, the study addresses a critical gap in extant literature by theorizing the internal coherence of intermediary practices and their embeddedness in multi-level governance structures. This offers a valuable complement to Kanda et al. (2020), whose work primarily conceptualized the external positioning and systemic roles of intermediaries within sustainability transitions. This internal–external synthesis provides a deeper account of how intermediary outcomes emerge from dynamic cross-level interactions rather than from predefined institutional roles.

As practical implications, public-sector intermediaries should establish mechanisms for reflexivity, coordination, and feedback to avoid macro-level rigidity that marginalizes local priorities and weakens systemic legitimacy (Urban and Dlamini, 2020). At the meso-level, a key implication is to enable horizontal and vertical alignment to prevent municipalities from becoming passive implementers of policy agendas. The micro-level actors may require tailored support which is to be enabled through dialogue and co-creation to ensure their goals are meaningfully enacted through relevant functions of other upper-level stakeholders. Practically, public-sector intermediaries should align their goals and functions across levels to reduce redundancy and enhance responsiveness to stakeholder needs. Strengthening internal competencies and fostering cross-sector collaboration, especially at macro- and meso-levels, can ensure more coherent and impactful intermediation in tourism development (Jugend et al., 2020).

Although developed within a service-oriented industry, the integration–disintegration dichotomy has clear relevance for sectors characterized by tighter regulatory regimes and more formalized information structures. In industrial and high-tech settings, such as energy, mobility, or manufacturing, macro-level rigidity and compliance logics are likely to amplify cross-level tensions, making the alignment of goals and functions even more critical. Here, integration would support the translation of regulatory mandates into workable meso-level coordination mechanisms and innovation-support routines at the micro-level, while disintegration could disrupt value chains through duplicated instruments, incompatible standards, or weakened feedback loops. Thus, the framework helps practitioners diagnose where institutional mismatches occur and how cross-level coordination can be strengthened in sectors where regulatory pressure and technical complexity heighten the risks of systemic fragmentation.

Following this, the integration–disintegration dichotomy could also be empirically tested in other settings such as energy transitions systems (e.g., smart grid platforms) and digital platforms governance (e.g., cybersecurity clusters) to examine how functional turbulence through the simultaneous pressure to satisfy scientific, legal, market, and ethical demands shapes the integration or disintegration of intermediary roles (cf. Korabik et al., 2003). Further empirical validation could focus on how technology intermediaries manage competing system expectations during rapid innovation cycles, and whether increasing multi-functionality amplifies systemic friction or fosters adaptive cross-level alignment.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality and ethical restrictions but may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

IL led the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of the study. WK and BL contributed to the development of the theoretical framework, interpretation of findings, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript. All authors have participated sufficiently in the work and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Conflicts of Interest

Academic Editor SG and author BL have a prior professional collaboration through multiple co-authored publications. Therefore, to avoid any potential conflicts of interest, the Academic Editor was excluded from all editorial decisions related to the handling and review of this manuscript.

Appendix

See Table 5.

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