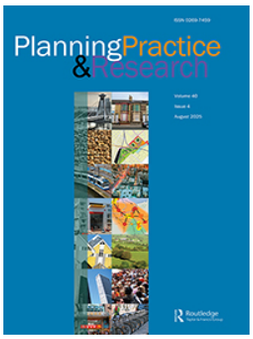

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Place-based resources as a means for local economic development – local planning in shrinking rural areas

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how local planning in shrinking rural areas navigates emerging global economic demands that are integral to sustainable transformation. By applying Beauregard's four analytical activities of planning, we contribute to the literature on new-materialist planning, reconceptualizing local planning as a proactive and socio-materially distributed practice, rather than merely a reactive response to external global pressures. Using the municipality of Pajala in northern Sweden as a case, we illustrate how local planning played a decisive role in the establishment of an iron-ore mine, engaging through a socio-materially distributed agency that shaped both spatial and economic development.

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Local planning; shrinking rural areas; local economic development; place-based resources; new-materialist planning

Introduction

Place-based resources are essential for fostering local economic development in rural areas because they can be leveraged to gain a competitive advantage. These resources are the unique geographical and cultural conditions of a place that are difficult or impossible to replicate elsewhere and that often attract external markets, integrating rural economies into broader economic networks. Utilizing these unique local resources encourages investment in the community and often leads to infrastructure development, such as roads, schools, and healthcare facilities. One important type of place-based resource is raw materials, such as minerals, which have recently received a major boost on the international market due to their essential role in driving sustainable transformation. Amid the urgent climate crisis, the Global North is racing to secure metal ores, ensuring a critical supply of the raw materials needed for sustainable transformation while also reigniting land-use conflicts (Del Mármol & Vaccaro, 2020; Stiernström, 2023).

In that vein, researchers have studied the transformative power of place-based resources in rural areas, and we know therefore much about how place-based resources are deployed to tackle rural challenges such as social and economic restructuring in rural areas from an economic perspective (e.g. Sørensen, 2018; Cerquetti *et al.*, 2022; Salvatore & Chiodo, 2024). Many studies have also focused on rural localities with declining industries to study the effects of economic decline in rural industrial areas (e.g. Rhodes, 1986; Jarvis *et al.*, 2001; Weeks, 2019). Other researchers have investigated

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the capacity of planners and municipalities to deal with pressing rural challenges such as depopulation and aging (Hanlon & Halseth, 2005; Tietjen & Jørgensen, 2016; Syssner & Meijer, 2017; Grundel & Magnusson, 2023). In this sense, we know much about economic decline and economic restructuring in rural areas on the one hand and planning to deal with the effects of shrinkage in rural municipalities on the other, but these two streams of literature are traditionally often studied separately.

This divide in economic and planning perspectives may stem in part from a long-standing concern among planning scholars about the diminishing influence of public planning on actual development outcomes (Zakhour & Metzger, 2018). The limited agency attributed to planning is highlighted by the perception that planning's traditionally regulatory role is more obstructive than constructive (Haughton *et al*., 2010; Hayter & Nieweler, 2018) and planning is described as possessing *'powers to prevent rather than powers to initiate'* development (Pickvance, 1982:70 in Zakhour & Metzger, 2018). Even though a new stream of literature on agency in planning is emerging, more empirical research is needed to explore planning agency across various contexts and settings since there is a shortage of case-study driven analyses that provide concrete evidence of how planning agency operates in practice.

This article addresses the existing research gap by examining how local planning in shrinking rural areas responds to emerging global economic demands crucial for sustainable transformation. Specifically, we analyze how minerals, as place-based resources, are promoted through planning practices to achieve local economic development in these areas. By doing so, we contribute to planning research and answer Hayter and Nieweler's (2018) call to reconcile local planning and economic development, thereby helping to bridge the planning-economics divide. Local planning creates legally mandated plans that establish the framework for local economic activities. These activities then influence the local socioeconomic prerequisites that determine the municipality's future development trajectory. We use the establishment of a mine in the municipality of Pajala in northern Sweden as a case to analyze how local economic development requires, not only engagement with local planning, but also how local planning helps shape the socio-material conditions necessary to for economic development.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: First, we introduce Beauregard's (2020) four analytical activities of planning as our theoretical foundation. Next, we provide background on the Pajala municipality, then describe our methods and data analysis. Part 4 consists of our analysis, in which we use Beauregard's four activities to study Pajala's economic and planning processes. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our general findings.

Four analytical activities of planning

This article builds upon new-materialist planning scholarship (Rydin, 2013, 2014; Beauregard, 2015, 2020), which conceptualizes planning agency as socially and materially distributed. This means that the interrelations between social actors – such as planners and entrepreneurs – and material entities, such as technologies and geographical conditions, are central for understanding how agency of planning operates. New-materialist planning approaches thus challenge conventional notions of planning as solely social,

reactive or technocratic, instead framing it as a relational practice shaped by both human and non-human components.

To analytically examine how local planning functions within this socio-materially distributed agency, we apply Beauregard's (2020) four analytical activities of planning: prescribing, knowing, engaging, and executing. While Beauregard underscores the highly interconnected nature of these activities, employing them as analytical lenses necessitates temporarily treating them as distinct categories. This approach enables a more precise examination of the socio-material processes that underpin planning in rural areas.

Planning as a prescribing activity

As a prescribing activity, planning seeks to coordinate and reconcile the diverse and often fragmented interests present within a given socio-material environment, ultimately framing them as a unified conception of a public interest (Beauregard, 2020). Alexander (2002 p. 230) defines a public interest as *'a collective moral imperative that transcends particular or private interests.'* However, this comprehensive notion of the public interest has been widely criticized within planning scholarship for its exclusionary and homogenizing tendencies, raising concerns regarding which interests are prioritized, and which are marginalized throughout planning processes (Campbell & Marshall, 2002; Moroni, 2004; Sandercock, 2004; Dadashpoor & Sheydayi, 2021; Searle & Legacy, 2021).

Within post-structuralist planning scholarship, scholars emphasize how the plurality and often conflicting nature of individual and collective interests complicate efforts to establish a shared foundation for collective action (Allmendinger, 2017). Moroni (2018, p. 70) notably argues that *'it is therefore impossible for public action to operate to exhibit any significant area in common.'* While this position is largely based on empirical observations, the notion of a unified public interest remains a legitimizing concept within local spatial planning practices, despite its contested status (Moroni, 2018). Given the continued prominence of the public interest in planning practice, contemporary planning scholarship calls for a critical reevaluation of the concept (Moroni, 2018; Inch, 2023). A new materialist perspective offers a productive reframing by shifting the focus away from debates about the ontological validity of the public interest to conceptualizing the public interest as a temporary stabilization of socio-material relations – relations that are actively shaped and maintained through plannings' prioritization of specific interests and the allocation of land uses throughout the planning process (Beauregard, 2020; see also Hillier, 2023). Thus, we position planning as a prescribing activity as the work of identification and prioritization of specific interests and uses of land throughout the planning process.

Planning as a knowing activity

As a knowing activity, planning entails both the production and dissemination of knowledge regarding the socio-material environment it seeks to influence (Beauregard, 2020). Rydin (2023, p. 346) underscores the role of planning as a regulatory practice, emphasizing that *'knowledge framed as evidence is centrally important to this process.'* The process of knowing is inherently persuasive, as planning seeks to convince decision-makers and the public that one land use is preferable over another (Beauregard, 2020). To achieve this, the complexity of socio-material environments must be distilled into knowledge expressions deemed valid and

accepted as evidence (cf. Inch, 2023). However, what constitutes *valid knowledge* or *evidence* is subject to interpretation across different theoretical perspectives in planning (Mattila *et al.*, 2022). For instance, within rational planning theory, technical knowledge – such as quantification or statistical modeling – is often privileged as reliable. In contrast, communicative planning theories recognize subjective and informal forms of knowledge, including emotional expressions and narratives, as equally valid sources of knowledge (Innes *et al.*, 2007).

Rydin (2023, p. 347) argues that technical knowledge is frequently leveraged as evidence in land-use assessments, where land is categorized to facilitate its institutional recognition as evidence. These categories form new planning elements, which in turn structure the process of knowledge production (Beauregard, 2015). Consequently, the creation and dissemination of technical knowledge serve as a foundational mechanism for planning to interpret, influence, and shape socio-material environments. As Rydin (2023, p. 349) asserts, *'the classificatory artifact becomes a governmental technology, shaping interactions and outcomes in certain directions.'*

By critically examining the socio-material work embedded within the process of knowing, we can deepen our understanding of how *valid knowledge* and *evidence* are constructed, legitimized, and sustained within planning processes.

Planning as an engaging activity

Spatial planning scholarship has established that planning engages with the socio-material environment through both formal and informal forms of engagement (Allmendinger, 2017). Today, multilevel governance is recognized as a central dimension of spatial planning, involving coordination and collaboration across multiple scales – from supranational to local levels – through both formal and informal planning practices (Mäntysalo *et al.*, 2015; Purkarthofer, 2018; Meijer, 2019; Olesen, 2023).

Formal planning engagement occurs within legally established frameworks, including land-use plans, masterplans, and mandated consultation processes. These mechanisms are typically rigid and structured, intended to provide long-term strategic direction while ensuring compliance with institutional and regulatory standards (cf. Rydin, 2023). Conversely, informal planning engagement is more adaptive and self-organizing, characterized by a lower degree of formalization and greater flexibility (Innes *et al.*, 2007; Roy, 2009). Operating outside institutionalized procedures, informal planning often relies on soft steering mechanisms, such as visioning practices, to shape planning discourse and influence decision-making (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009; Healey, 2010; Purkarthofer, 2018).

Planning, as an engaging activity, therefore, reflects spatial dynamics within a complex relational network of formal and informal connections that extend across multiple spatial conditions and governance spaces, frequently conceptualized as *soft spaces*. The concrete socio-material work of planning as an engaging activity encompasses the interconnection of formal and informal forms of planning.

Planning as an executing activity

Planning theorists have long emphasized that communicative action and collaboration are essential for enabling planning to effectively implement and realize development

(Innes *et al.*, 2007; Healey, 2010). While rational and communicative planning theories recognize the transformative potential of established planning practices, they often overlook planning's socio-materially distributed agency in shaping and materializing prescribed development (Rydin, 2014).

Planning cannot independently construct physical infrastructure or ecological projects; its effectiveness depends on the mobilization of material resources, institutional frameworks, and stakeholder engagement (Beauregard, 2020). Viewing local planning as a socially and materially distributed process thus highlights the intricate work involved in translating prescribed development into tangible outcomes (cf. Dovey & Ristic, 2017). For instance, to prevent opposition for a planning proposal, planning must form alliances with influential actors – such as politicians, developers, or technical experts – to ensure that necessary resources are allocated for the realization of prescribed developments (Beauregard, 2020).

Beyond forming alliances, planning also delegate responsibility for the implementation of proposed developments (Beauregard, 2020). This delegation of responsibility can occur formally, through the structured division of tasks within public administrations, or informally, by stimulating interest among specific groups to mobilize support for a particular development (Purkarthofer, 2018; Meijer, 2019).

Understanding execution as an integral planning activity highlights local planning as a proactive activity, actively involved in strategic alliance-building to facilitate the realization of prescribed development objectives. This underscores the relational and negotiated nature of planning, demonstrating that its effectiveness lies not only in regulatory frameworks but also in its ability to mediate and coordinate socio-material relations.

Planning as a socio-materially distributed, proactive activity

The four interrelated planning activities encompass the tangible, socio-material work through which planning operates. These activities include prioritizing certain interests, creating and disseminating technical knowledge, capturing informal knowledge, navigating formal and informal engagement, and forming alliances (see Table 1). By foregrounding the social and material distribution of planning work, we argue that local planning plays a central role in

Table 1. Planning as a proactive and socio-materially distributed activity with four analytical dimensions.

	Prescribing	Knowing	Engaging	Executing
Definition	The identification and prioritization of disparate interests into a unified public interest.	The practices of producing and disseminating knowledge about the socio-material environment planning seek to steer.	The interrelation between formal and informal planning through which planning seeks to steer the development.	The dynamic work that planning undertakes to implement and thus realize a prescribed development.
Socio-material work	Involves the work of *identification* and *prioritizing* certain interests and land uses throughout the planning process.	Involves the work of both *creating* technical knowledge through categorization and *capturing* of informal forms of knowledge.	Involves the work of *interconnecting* formal and informal ways of planning.	Involves the work of *forming alliances* through *persuasion* and *delegation*.

enabling economic development. It does so not only by managing spatial and regulatory frameworks but by actively constructing socio-material relations that facilitated the mine.

Method

This paper is based on a qualitative research design because of its ability to provide in-depth insights into social processes (Miles *et al.*, 2014). The qualitative approach is suitable for analyzing different socio-material work and interconnected planning activities. The data collection aimed to capture the local planning process connected to the establishment of the iron ore mine in Pajala, which began in 2008. We therefore use Pajala as an *exploratory, extreme case* (Flyvbjerg, 2006) since proactive, distributed planning is particularly prominent in such extreme cases. The case of Pajala is well-studied. Therefore, we engaged previous research as empirical material in the study to provide context and rigor (see Table 2 for a list of all empirical material).

A systematic document analysis was undertaken to investigate the Pajala mining establishment, utilizing a broad range of publicly available materials. Approximately seventy documents were reviewed, encompassing both formal and informal sources such as detailed plans, comprehensive planning documents, reports, and housing provision strategies. The selection of documents was guided

Table 2. List of empirical sources.

Official documents	Interviewees	News articles
Geological Survey of Sweden (SGU) (1980): *Pellivuoma iron ore deposit. Report on the results of SGU investigations during the years 1964–1971. Exploration report.*	Municipal housing corporation (2) Municipal strategist (1) Municipal planners (2) Municipal project leader (2) Mining company representative (1) Tourism industry organization (1) Local entrepreneur (2) Municipal administrator (1) County Administrative Board (3) Region of Norrbotten (1)	*Norrländska Socialdemokraten*: Samuelsson (2011). Få vågar ifrågasätta ljus framtidsprognos.
Pajala municipality (2009): *Detailed development plan for planned mining operations at Kaunisvaara. Tapuli mine.*		Sundqvist (2011). Bengt Niska siktar högt. 10 000 invånare I Pajala inom åtta år.
Pajala municipality (2010a): *Comprehensive plan*		*Norrbottens-Kuriren*: Lathi (2011). Pajala får bakläxa med detaljplanen.
Pajala municipality (2010b): *Land-use plan for Tapuli mine*		Lahti (2010). Oro I samebyn för inverkan på renskötseln I området.
Pajala municipality (2011): *Request for appeal to the National Government. Minutes of the Municipal Executive Board*		*Affärsvärlden*: Elofsson (2011): Det har alltid känts som en utopi.
County government Norrbotten (2011): *Decision and appeal against the decision of the Municipal Council of Pajala Municipality on September 20, 2010, § 43, Dnr KS 2010.380, regarding the adoption of a land-use plan for the Tapuli mine.*		*Dagens samhälle*: Eriksson (2015): Här är gruvan en fråga om liv och död. *Dagens arbete*
Pajala municipality (2013): *Housing supply program for Pajala municipality.*		*Dagens Nyheter*: Forsberg (2015). En vansinnesfärd mot avgrunden.
Larsen, Boström & Mounio Sámi village. SEI working paper (2021): 'De kör över en ändå . . . '. Konsekvenser av gruvan i Kaunisvaara för Mounio Sameby.		*Svenska Dagbladet*: Fagerlind and Sundkvist (2015). Pajala körde över ministern. Malmborg (2016). Invid en avgrund. Edström (2023): Gruvans återkomst.

by their relevance to understanding the development and planning processes associated with the mining establishment, ensuring a focused and purposeful approach. Additionally, a substantial body of media coverage – comprising 100 news articles – was analyzed to explore public discourse and media representations of the Pajala mining initiative. Ultimately, nine documents and nine articles were selected for inclusion in this article based on their analytical value and relevance.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 participants to gain in-depth knowledge of the socio-material work which shaped the establishment of the Pajala mine, as well as the interviewees' underlying rationales for actions relevant to the Pajala mining establishment. The participants were selected based on their relation to the mine establishment and included of planners, strategists and project managers from Pajala municipality, but also public officials from the county administrative board, strategists from the region as well as representatives from the mining company and local entrepreneurs living and working in Pajala.

In the article we seek to examine how local planning practices actively forge socio-material conditions that enable local economic development. Since the establishment of the mine in Pajala was relatively undisputed within the local community (cf. Anshelm & Haikola, 2018), we sought to understand the role of professional actors shaping and maintaining socio-material relations manifesting the mine. While citizens are undoubtedly affected by and participate in these processes, including them would have provided nuanced perspectives, but was beyond the scope of this study.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted in-person or virtually. An interview guide was developed to steer the interview while allowing flexibility for participants to express their thoughts freely. The guide focused on key themes including public-private partnerships, the role of the mining sector within the local community, and the municipality's efforts to address both challenges and opportunities presented by the mining operation. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis. The documents and media archive material, as well as the interviews, were translated from Spanish to English by the authors of this article.

Data analysis is crucial in qualitative research because it determines the outcome of the study (Flick, 2013). However, it is also the most demanding and least codified process (Eisenhardt, 1989). In line with Zietsma and Lawrence's (2010) recommendations for process research, we developed several analytical stages. First, using document analysis, digital media archive searches and interviews, we created a chronological list of events related to the mining establishment and planning activities in the Pajala municipality. Next, we examined the relationships between these events and the actors involved to determine how local planning activities use the mining establishment to promote sustainable local economic development in their declining municipality. Finally, we summarized the narrative to highlight the underlying rationales, thereby completing the analytical process. We enhanced the validity of the data through triangulation of various data sources.

We used a matrix technique for comparative analysis to identify patterns. In this matrix, we organized exemplary quotes and other research findings by topic. Key quotes from documents, interviews and the media archive will keep this discussion grounded in the specific case.

Introduction to Pajala: Pajala in a Swedish context

Sweden has a long-standing mining tradition, particularly in the iron ore deposits of Norrbotten County, where LKAB is a dominant industry. Economic challenges in the 1990s led to the liberalisation of mineral laws, reducing state royalties from 50% to 0.05%, and opening up state-controlled geological databases. This enabled foreign prospecting at minimal cost and accelerated international investment in the sector (Anshelm & Haikola, 2018; Envall, 2018).

Iron ore deposits in the municipality of Pajala, located in the northeastern Swedish county of Norrbotten bordering Finland, have been recognized since the early 1900s (Kummu, 1997). These deposits have fostered local hopes for economic revival (Anshelm & Haikola, 2018). During the 1960s and 1970s, LKAB studied the deposits (SGU, 1980); however, economic and technical challenges made state mining unfeasible. Since the mid-1900s, Pajala has experienced a long-term population decline, dropping from 15,000 in the 1950s to 6,000 today. This decline was driven by economic restructuring in the forestry sector during the 1960s and 1970s, leading residents to migrate in search of employment, particularly to state-owned mines in Kiruna and Gällivare.

After Sweden liberalized its mineral law, Northland Resources, a firm registered in Canada, received a prospecting license and a mining permit in 2008 to extract iron ore in the municipality of Pajala (Pajala municipality, 2010a). The mine attracted national political attention, with the media dubbing it an *'industrial miracle'* (Malmborg, 2016, p. 19). Production began in 2012 but was followed by economic restructuring. By December 2014, Northland Resources had filed for bankruptcy, further deepening the uncertainty in Pajala (Edström, 2023). However, the community maintained the site, enabling its revival by Kaunis Iron in 2018. Kaunis Iron continues to operate the mine today.

Analysis

This paper examines how local planning in Pajala, a shrinking municipality in northern Sweden, addresses global economic demands in iron-ore, minerals essential for sustainable transformation. In the following section, we highlight the socially and materially distributed work through which an iron ore mine is manifested as a local economic development opportunity throughout Pajala's local planning process. We conceptualize local planning as a broader socio-material practice, encompassing planners, strategists, project managers, politicians and local entrepreneurs as well as material entities such as geographical conditions and technical reports. To structure the analysis, we apply Beauregard's four analytical activities, offering a lens through which to explore the dynamics of planning in this context.

Prescribing

Activities on the national level, such as the liberalization of the Swedish mineral law and the open access of the Swedish mining data bases, resulted in the emergence of a strong interest to extract ore in Pajala (Anshelm & Haikola, 2018). One could argue that prescribing is dictated from above due to the strong national interest to export minerals, but in Pajala's case national and local public interests coincide with each other

(Sundqvist, 2011). Pajala as a municipality with a long history of depopulation, the mining establishment is seen as a potential source of income for many which might attract back inhabitants that left Pajala to find work in the mines around Kiruna and Gällivare due to the decline in traditional industries such as the forestry industry: 'My father and my uncle were forestry workers and logging and these things, so I saw when heavy machinery replaced manual labour' (Municipal Strategist). Hence, due to the coincide of interests, there seems to be little local opposition to the mining establishment as one of the planners stated:

> Take Kallak, for example. There are huge protests against the mine, but we don't have any in Pajala. The mining industry is much more widely accepted and understood here. I don't feel any particular resistance. Of course there is. But it's not at the same level as in Kallak. (Municipal planner a)

To construct the buildings and infrastructure necessary to mine ore, a land use plan must be approved. The detailed development plan from 2009 describes how there are areas of national interest for reindeer husbandry within the planning area for mining signalizing for a potential contradiction of interests. Upon the public release of Northland's concession application to the Geological Survey of Sweden (SGU), the Mounio Sámi village expressed concerns about the potential impact of the mine on reindeer herding, especially regarding the loss of essential summer grazing areas (Larsen *et al.*, 2021). Despite these concerns, the village avoided open confrontation and instead opted to engage as cooperative stakeholders, which required significant compromises for the sámi village (Lahti, 2010).

The land-use plan later describes the land where the mining area is to be established as *'untouched'* land (Pajala municipality, 2010b, pp. 8–9), signalizing that the land is of no particular importance, and that the establishment of the mine will not interfere with other claims. At the same time, this area is used for reindeer herding, tourism, and outdoor recreation. Here, reindeer herding holds legal status as a national interest. In the case of mining, two national interests are thus in conflict. The municipality later justifies the fact that reindeer husbandry has to 'sacrifice' (Pajala municipality, 2010a; cf. Stiernström, 2023) its interests on the grounds of time and the limited size of the mining area ultimately prioritizing the mining interest:

> To minimize the impact on national interests and the landscape, the plan area has been restricted as much as possible to the west, east, and north. The plan stipulates that the area must be surrounded by fences or other clear boundaries. An overall assessment of the plan and its regulated activities is that they will have a significant local environmental impact on watercourses, the landscape, flora and fauna, reindeer husbandry, and hunting during the mining activities' operating period. It is expected that the impact will diminish over time as mining ceases and the area becomes accessible again to people and animals. (Pajala municipality, 2010a, pp. 10, 35)

The time aspect and fences are used by the municipality to create a clear order separating different interests from each other by arguing that possible impacts of ore extraction are manageable. At the same time, Bengt Niska, the social-democratic municipal councilor, describes the area as undesirable land:

> What a load of rubbish. Nobody sets foot in that swamp. It's a mosquito hell and there's so much land left. Laws have to be obeyed, but the spirit of the people here doesn't like laws that threaten jobs. (Niska cited in Eriksson, 2015, p. 17)

The conceptualization of land as *'undesirable'* functions as a strategic mechanism to reconfigure its perceived value, thereby facilitating its transformation into an economically productive asset – not only through ore extraction but also via synergistic spillover effects across other sectors. For instance, a local entrepreneur noted in an interview that the tourism industry benefits indirectly from mining. This is because consultants and workers generate increased demand for accommodation, thereby boosting hotel occupancy rates.

Through strategic reframing, local planning repositioned the area from 'untouched' and *'undesirable'* land to one of national and local significance, where environmental impacts were presented as manageable and reversible post-mining. This process played a pivotal role in securing conditions for mining, as planning actively identified and prioritized specific interests, constructing the project as a unifying public interests. This illustrates how soft forms of steering through narratives of undesirable land – alongside appeals to synergy effects – reinforce the mining establishment as a unified public interest in Pajala (cf. Purkarthofer, 2018). This aligns with Moroni's (2018) assertion that the public interest remains a central legitimizing framework in spatial planning.

Knowing

There has long been a collective hope in Pajala for the establishment of a mine. As stated in the interview with the manager of the mining company, *'last man out of Pajala turn of the light'* was a prevailing saying in the late 1970s signalizing the decline of hope in the municipality. When Northland officials spoke to Pajala residents in the People's House in 2007 during the early stages of the mine's establishment, the officials managed to reactivate the hope in the community of Pajala with hope for the future (Forsberg, 2015).

In 2009, a population forecast of the expected increase in population due to the mine was circulated (Ejdemo & Söderholm, 2009), further boosting local hopes and in the iron ore. To support the prescribed development, local planning in Pajala draws upon the population forecast, which assessed the long-term economic impact of the iron ore mine in Pajala municipality, to be an average population of 9077 people during the mine's production phase. At the same time, the researchers of the forecast state that their calculation should be seen *'as an indication of the potential for local development'* (Ejdemo & Söderholm, 2009, p. 9). In parallel, Pajala municipality produces own demographic forecasts, pointing at even larger figures then the forecast produced by the researcher, pointing towards 10, 000 inhabitants in Pajala in just four years' time (Pajala municipality, 2010a). The dissemination and production of technical knowledge sparked a reversed migration movement to Pajala:

> We had returnees come back to the municipality. They had been working in other parts of the region, primarily in mining and in the southern areas. They saw their chance to really go back to Pajala. Now, a mine is opening, and we want to be part of that journey. (Municipal Strategist)

At the local level, however, not everyone shared deep confidence in the population forecast. In 2011, the head of education in Pajala municipality painted an alternative picture to the optimistic forecasts of Pajala municipality's development. She expressed how the community would fall into a *'collective depression'* if the forecasts did not come true. The worst scenario for Pajala would be that *'the market turns and Northland packs up'* (Samuelsson, 2011, p. 18).

However, while not everyone was deeply confident, favorable voices prevailed. One local planner remembers how the exaggerated numbers in the population forecast generated an optimistic atmosphere in the local planning office:

> There was suddenly a lot of confidence in the future, and you can see that in the plans that were made then. The comprehensive plan was made in 2010, and it was really strong. The plan said that the Pajala municipality would grow to 30,000 people. These are figures that are quite amazing today. The plan said, 'now we will grow and become huge.' It was very visionary and forward-looking. (Municipal planner a)

The quantifiable knowledge embedded in population forecasts and scenario was readily disseminated by local planning, serving as persuasive evidence for individuals considering relocation or return to Pajala (cf. Inch, 2023; Rydin, 2023). This technical knowledge reinforced a long-standing local expectation that mining operations would generate substantial population growth within the municipality.

The persuasive effect of the population forecast was not merely technical but deeply intertwined with the local collective emotional connection to iron ore. Without the historical anticipation that the mineral would eventually be extracted – bringing economic revitalization – the forecast may not have wielded the same performative influence nor been as readily accepted as compelling evidence of future population growth. This highlights how population forecasts function as a 'governmental technology' (Rydin, 2023, p. 349), wherein both the production and dissemination of technical knowledge sustain local optimism surrounding mining, while simultaneously aligning with broader national-political interests.

Engaging

Before ore extraction could begin in Pajala, many different elements had to be in place. Things were set in motion through a series of informal meetings to win the favor of the municipality and residents alike. The top executives of Northland Resources requested a meeting with the municipality to discuss the mining establishment, and it turned into an informal meeting where the top executives first needed to prove their worthiness before further steps could be taken:

> When the water hit the hot stones of Pajala municipality's timber-framed sauna, the steam burned the faces of the bathers. In 2006, a group of English-speaking entrepreneurs competed against their host, municipal councillor Bengt Niska (S). In true Tornedalian spirit, the last one out alive won and the top executives of the exploration company Northland Resources could claim the victory. (Forsberg, 2015, p. 20)

After their worthiness had been established, Northland Resources addressed the residents in the People's House. Pajala municipality was represented at this meeting displaying a blossoming new alliance. Both the municipality and the residents *'felt courted'* and new hope replaced the gloomy prospects of the future (Municipal planner b). The success of

these informal meetings resulted in the initiation of formal plans needed before ore extraction could take place.

Before Northland, the municipality's commitment was shaped around maintaining a kind of '*minimum planning*' - complying with legal requirements and the exercise of authority (Municipal planner a). After Northland, one municipal plan after another was quickly developed and adopted. Between 2009 and 2013, the municipality produced six municipal plans and programs, e.g. the municipal master plan, land-use plan and the municipal housing supply program, which is in strong contrast to the minimum planning the years before. Without the proper formal plans for the mining area, ore extraction would be impossible, and it was therefore of particular interest to adopt these plans as fast as possible. To be able to maintain the quick production of municipal plans, three planners were employed of which two were funded by the county administrative board.

> The Pajala municipality was facing the establishment of a mine in 2012. They realized that there were too few planning architects and planning officers at the municipality, so they received grants from the county administrative board. I think the county administrative board funded two project positions. I got one of those positions because I was a recent graduate looking for a job. It sounded really exciting because their development was much faster and more significant than any other region at the time. From an urban planner's perspective, it was really exciting. (Municipal planner b)

In 2011, the county administration board decides to overturn the approved land-use plan on the grounds that the conditions for the establishment of the mine had changed to such an extent that the decision to approve the plan was made on false ground (County government Norrbotten, 2011). When this decision was made, the municipality turned to the national government for support (Pajala municipality, 2011). Party liaisons as well as the frequent local visits of high ranked politicians established a strong relationship between Pajala and the Swedish government. The government's approval of Pajala's appeal is described in the newspapers as having the support of the highest authorities (Malmborg, 2016). The formal procedure to overturn the approved land-use plan was opposed by informal relations. Pajala municipality has long been interested in establishing a mine in the municipality; something that has never been materialized. Due to these experienced 'missed' opportunities, the municipality had decided early in the process to make things happen by taking responsibility and by making investments (Anshelm & Haikola, 2018). The all-or-nothing approach is also reflected in the issuance of building permits despite the absence of a legally approved land-use plan. During the time the land-use plan was overturned, the municipality granted building permits for buildings directly related to the mine (Fagerlind & Sundkvist, 2015). This illustrates how Pajala municipality sought to support the establishment of the mine by sidestepping formal planning processes.

This section demonstrates how formal and informal planning processes are deeply interconnected, with informal relationships and actions both challenging and accelerating formal procedures. This interplay highlights how spatial planning span multiple spaces, including both hard and soft spaces (cf. Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009) underscoring its strategic operation across formal and informal arenas, to navigate associated uncertainties to the mining establishment.

Executing

To realize the prescribed development of the iron ore mine, Pajala municipality had to make sure that the mine workers had somewhere to live. To keep the expected population growth within the municipality and prevent Pajala from becoming a fly-in/fly-out community, local planning managed to persuade local politicians to allocate resources for detailed planning and house construction. As a result, the public housing company Pajalabostäder built about two hundred new apartments to accommodate the expected population growth (Lathi, 2011). A former planner who worked in Pajala municipality at the time of the mine's establishment recalls the work of local housing companies:

> Pajalabostäder also built single-story houses that were rental apartments in Tallbacken. Then there was the old school, the big yellow building. A private investor converted it into condominiums, but they did not sell, so they became rental apartments. There was some special agreement there. (Municipal planner b)

To secure resources for detailed planning and subsequent housing development, local planners needed to present the mining project as low-risk. Drawing on persuasive planning practices (cf. Beauregard, 2020; Inch, 2023), they framed the mine as a catalyst for local economic growth. A pivotal moment in the mobilization of this narrative was the 2011 visit by national opposition leader Stefan Löfven, who famously lifted a handful of black iron ore dust and declared, *'It smells like money!'* (Malmborg, 2016, p. 19). This symbolic endorsement helped legitimize the project at the national level, enabling local planners to leverage state support – channeled through the county administrative board – to meet the anticipated demands of mining-led development.

The event of Löfven's visit to the mine site in Pajala in 2011, also shows how local planning perceived the national government as a strong actor with which it was essential to build and alliance to realize the mine (cf. Beauregard, 2020). The importance of the local-national alliance was demonstrated in 2011, when the county government overturned the local political decision to accept the detailed plan for the mine (County government Norrbotten, 2011). The municipality of Pajala then sought support from the national government and appealed the county government's decision (Pajala municipality, 2011). The national government then accepted the municipality's appeal. This illustrates how the local-national alliance was formed around iron ore mining as a coinciding national and local interest. The acceptance of the compelling arguments of the local and national interest in the mine as a win-win situation shaped the strong local alliance with the national government. And without the support of the national government, the mine would most likely not have been established as quickly as it was.

The analysis of the executing activity underscores how local planning actively enables the realization of the Pajala mine, with persuasive efforts and alliance-building playing a central role. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that local planning extends beyond conventional social and collaborative approaches, strategically mobilizing material resources, institutional frameworks, and diverse stakeholder engagements to advance the mine's development.

Planning as a socio-materially distributed, proactive activity – towards a more integrated economic and planning approach?

The aim of this paper is to explore how local planning in shrinking rural areas addresses emerging global economic demands crucial for sustainable transformation. Place-based resources, such as minerals, have been promoted in planning policies and activities to achieve local economic development in the municipality of Pajala. In this article our ambition was to contribute to bridging the existing research gap between the economic geography literature on economic decline and economic restructuring on the one hand, and the literature on how local planning deals with the effects of shrinkage on the other.

By conceptualizing planning as a socio-materially distributed and proactive practice, we illustrate how local planning was deeply embedded in the execution of the mine through the interconnected activities of prescribing, knowing, and engaging. While these activities were operationalized as distinct analytical categories, they should not be understood as consecutive phases but as interconnected and simultaneous processes. Our study brings attention to the often-overlooked executive function of local planning, demonstrating how the distributed socio-material work in the municipality of Pajala not only enabled the realization of the mine but also played a pivotal role in shaping local economic development. The prescribing work of constructing a unified public interest was contingent upon the executing work of forging a local-national alliance, while the knowing work – disseminating and legitimizing population forecasts – reinforced the engaging work of continuously producing municipal plans.

The analysis highlights how local planning actively facilitates the realization of the Pajala mine through a distributed form of socio-material agency. In this context, local planning operates beyond collaborative ways of planning; it strategically mobilizes a heterogeneous array of elements – including technical reports, spatial imaginaries, legal instruments, and physical conditions – alongside institutional actors and stakeholder networks. By tracing the planning process behind the iron ore mine, the analysis demonstrates that the mine's materialization is not merely a result of administrative decisions, but of enacted socio-material relations that stabilize the mine as a viable development trajectory. This process simultaneously narrows the space for alternative futures, rendering them less visible or feasible. A key mechanism in this is the framing of the mine site as both pristine and undesirable. Local planning constructs and mobilizes spatial imaginaries that portray the land as suitable for mineral extraction, while also obscuring other existing or potential uses. These narratives depict the site as devoid of conflicting interests yet rich in exploitable potential, thereby legitimizing the prioritization of economic imperatives over competing concerns such as environmental sustainability and reindeer husbandry. Such concerns are not merely sidelined – they are actively marginalized or 'sacrificed' within the planning process (cf. Stiernström, 2023). In doing so, local planning plays a central role in shaping what use of land is considered to be of public interest.

Despite uncertainties surrounding the mine's long-term viability and significant economic risks, the local government in Pajala remained firmly committed to its establishment as a solution to counteract sustained population decline. Our analysis shows how local planning strategically mobilized population forecasts as persuasive evidence to mitigate perceived risks and uncertainties related to the project (cf. Inch,

2023; Rydin, 2023), reinforcing claims that mining would stimulate demographic growth. Our analysis shows how the technical legitimacy ascribed to these forecasts functioned to neutralize skepticism, lending credibility to optimistic projections while obscuring their speculative underpinnings. In this way, the forecast operated as a form of 'governmental technology' (cf. Rydin, 2023), actively shaping the trajectory of mining development in Pajala.

Our analysis further demonstrates that local planning played a crucial role in the realization of the iron ore mine, engaging through both formal and informal forms of engagement. Specifically, we highlight how informal engagement was strategically employed by the municipality of Pajala to navigate the economic risks and uncertainties associated with the mine. Here, the formal planning process, was perceived as slow and rigid, and perceived to hinder the development opportunity. To mitigate these challenges, local planning prioritized informal engagement to cultivate trust with the mining company, mediate between national and local interests, and accelerate the mine's implementation. This reliance on informal mechanisms underscores the informal agency of local planning, where procedural flexibility was leveraged to facilitate resource extraction while circumventing administrative bottlenecks. Recognizing planning through this lens highlights how navigating formal and informal forms of engagement works as a strategic planning tool for municipalities facing large-scale industrial developments.

The analysis demonstrates how economic risks were systematically downplayed throughout the planning process to accelerate industrial implementation, reinforcing a sense of urgency around the mining project. This dynamic reveals a broader tension within local planning, where short-term economic imperatives tend to override long-term sustainability goals. By foregrounding these processes, the article emphasizes the need to critically examine the socio-material relations forged through local planning. Land use decisions are not simply reflections of an objective public interest; rather, they are shaped through planning practices that actively construct and stabilize certain uses of land as of public interest. In this context, local planning emerges as a powerful practice – not only in regulating space, but in producing the very socio-material conditions that legitimize extractive development.

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