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Rural Risk and Disaster Management from a Relational Approach

Insights from Northern Sweden

ABSTRACT This article emphasizes the significance of relational concepts in understanding Disaster Management (DM) in rural areas. Specifically, we turn to the concepts of relational place and peripheralization to illustrate how places derive meaning from their relationships with other places and argue for a deeper understanding of how these dynamics influence DM professionals' experiences of their work and of peripheralization. Despite extensive research on DM, place is often treated as a neutral backdrop rather than as an active agent that shapes professionals' work. To explore the role of place in DM, we draw on interviews with professionals from four municipalities in northern Sweden, characterized by expansive geographies, declining populations, and a decreasing tax base. By employing the concept of relational place, we show how DM professionals perceive laws and regulations as ill-adapted to their contexts and their work as diverging from broader societal norms. We also illustrate how feelings of peripheralization, understood as a process rather than a static condition, are linked to the political, financial, and social dimensions of DM. Through this article, we aim to broaden the discourse on DM by providing insights into the unique challenges faced in rural contexts, emphasizing how these intersect with professionals' understandings of place.

KEYWORDS Disaster Management, relational place, peripheralization, rurality, Sweden

Introduction

Researchers in the field of Disaster Management (DM) have long emphasized the specific challenges faced by DM professionals (Dynes 1994; Kapucu & Hu 2016; Kusumasari, Alam & Siddiqui 2010), the impact of disasters on vulnerable groups (Orru et al. 2022; Howard et al. 2017), the critical role of local knowledge in crisis management (Hirono & Nurdin 2024), and how access to resources, such as financial capital, influences the ability to address DM-related issues (Kapucu, Hawkins & Rivera 2013; Sadri et al. 2018). This research includes both rural and urban areas in the Global North and Global South.

In this study, we adopt a broad understanding of DM as encompassing the strategies and initiatives implemented by governmental bodies and various professionals to manage, proactively address and recover from catastrophic events and emergencies. These efforts encompass a broad spectrum of activities, from preparing for and planning for severe events to effectively managing and recovering from those that occur (Sparf 2014).

However, while this body of research has greatly advanced our understanding of DM, it has often treated place as a neutral or secondary factor, even if some conclude that DM needs to be embedded in local knowledge on how to best cope with hazards and risk in the specific local context (De Majo & Olsson 2019). Further, studies commonly view the context in which disasters occur primarily as an empirical backdrop for analyzing the physical and social impacts of disasters (e.g., Cox & Hamlen 2015; Haase et al. 2021). Put differently, place is often framed simply as the location of events such as floods (Bosoni, Tempels & Hartmann 2021), wildfires (Johansson et al. 2018), or terrorist attacks (Kendra & Wachtendorf 2016), without deeper integration of how place itself shapes DM efforts (see Kvarnlöf & Eriksson 2024 for one exception). These approaches overlook the complex ways in which the understanding of place, including local histories, spatial inequalities, and power relations, influences DM professionals' understanding of DM practice.

The lack of place perspectives is puzzling given that studies on community resilience (McElduff & Ritchie 2018), voluntary work (Nilsson 2021) and community attachment (Yarker, Doran & Buffel 2023) often include how the given place shapes these aspects. Previous research, which has mainly viewed place merely as a site for collecting empirical data or as a neutral backdrop, thereby limits our understanding of DM and provides an oversimplified view of how the real world operates (Fuller & Löw 2017). Following others who have emphasized the importance of understanding the relational aspects of place (e.g., Massey 2005; Kolmodin 2025b), we argue that place should be understood as more than an empirical backdrop and should be explicitly included in studies of DM. Hence, in this article, we set a relational perspective at the forefront. This includes understanding place as a relational construction (Massey 2005); that is, as constituted through its relations to other entities, such as other places, networks, events, individuals, politics, and the social relations that exist within and extend beyond places (Guma et al. 2019; Heley & Jones 2012; Massey 2005; Pierce, Martin & Murphy 2011). Consequently, the meaning of a given place might differ for individuals (Kolmodin 2025a). Following a relational perspective, we also build on Kühn's (2015) understanding of peripheries as relational, as something experienced

and continuously in process, that is, peripheralization to use Kühn's term. In short, we argue that DM work is never experienced or conducted in isolation but rather shaped by its interaction with the unique characteristics of different places, including the feelings and subjective understandings associated with them. Theoretically, that means we do not view the included places as ontological stances or empirical backgrounds, but rather as social agents actively influencing DM professionals' work. As argued by Martin (2004), it is crucial to research how places appear in the discourse of organizing and why. Therefore, we want to contribute to the understanding of challenges that DM professionals face and experience.

Based on the above argument concerning the importance of place as something more than an empirical background, we aim to *develop a deeper understanding of how place shapes DM professionals' understanding of DM practices*. We pursue this aim through two research questions:

- How does place influence the professional experience and practice of DM in rural areas?
- How does peripheralization shape the way DM is constructed and done?

We demonstrate the value of this theoretical approach through a study of DM in four municipalities in rural northern Sweden. These municipalities are among the most sparsely populated regions in Europe, making them suitable empirical examples for studying different expressions of place in rural DM. Furthermore, these municipalities have historically been subjected to what others have called chronic crisis (Kvarnlöf 2022; Stienstra 2015) with longstanding economic cuts in welfare-related services. The rest of the paper is structured accordingly. Next, we discuss previous research on DM, including the limitations of earlier studies. We then present the research context, where we also motivate our selection of municipalities and describe those included in the study. This is followed by the theoretical framework and methods section. We subsequently present our main findings, followed by a broader discussion and a conclusion.

Structural Challenges for Rural Disaster Management

The fact that rural areas pose distinct challenges compared to their urban counterparts is well-established, particularly in fields such as regional development, welfare provision, and public service delivery (Carson, Carson & Argent 2022; Große 2024; Huskey 2005). These differences are not merely demographic or geographic; they are structural, institutional, and discursive (Lundgren 2020). In the context of DM, such distinctions become especially salient, as rural areas are often characterized by sparse populations, vast territories, long response times, and limited access to critical infrastructure (Adam-Hernández & Harteisen 2020; Kapucu, Hawkins & Rivera 2013; Kvarnlöf 2022). These features shape both the risks rural communities face and their capacity to respond. In general, the rural–urban divide in DM has been discussed in terms of resource asymmetries, rural municipalities often are described as having fewer financial and human resources, which constrain their ability to engage in proactive risk reduction or fulfil formal preparedness requirements (Kapucu, Hawkins & Rivera 2013; Oscarsson et al., forthcoming). These challenges are compounded by

the ongoing decline of public services in rural areas. While local communities are increasingly expected to take on broader responsibilities for DM and public safety, they are doing so without any corresponding increase in resources, and often with significantly reduced capacity (Kvarnlöf & Eriksson 2024).

At the same time, rural areas should not be seen as incomplete or less developed versions of cities. They exhibit unique strengths and vulnerabilities shaped by their spatial, social, and institutional contexts. Rural DM is often rooted in informal networks, voluntary engagement, and strong local knowledge, which serve as vital resources during crises (Kvarnlöf 2022; Kvarnlöf & Eriksson 2024; Kelman, Mercer & Gaillard 2012; Oscarsson et al. forthcoming). However, such strengths are rarely recognized in national policy frameworks, which tend to be designed with urban systems in mind (Cutter, Ash & Emrich 2016). As a result, rural communities frequently find themselves navigating preparedness and response within a governance model that does not fully align with their lived realities.

Moreover, many rural areas, particularly those considered peripheral, are affected by long-term structural changes, such as depopulation, welfare retrenchment, and limited political influence (Nilsson 2021). These dynamics not only impact local risk profiles but also shape how disasters are experienced and governed. The assumption that national crisis management systems can be uniformly applied across space overlooks the situated nature of DM and the importance of place in shaping governance practices (Cutter, Ash & Emrich 2016).

Thus, to understand DM in rural areas, it is not sufficient to treat rurality as a background condition. Instead, it must be seen as a defining feature for how tasks related to DM are constructed and enacted. This requires theoretical and empirical attention to the relational dimensions of place and the processes through which certain areas are rendered marginal or "peripheral" in both discourse and institutional practice.

Theoretical Departure

In this article, we shift the focus from how DM professionals describe their work and motivations to how the places they inhabit influence and shape their understanding of DM practices, including their challenges. To do so, we adopt a theoretical lens that conceptualizes place and peripheries as relational and processual in line with previous work on relational place (Cretney & Bond 2017; Kolmodin 2025a; Kolmodin 2025b; Moore 2025) and peripheralization (Kühn 2015). The relational perspective allows us to move beyond a static view of place and peripheries and instead recognize place as an active social agent and peripheries as relational. In other words, it allows us to analyze how place-specific characteristics shape the ways professionals perceive and approach their work, and it emphasizes the importance of considering DM practices in relation to diverse spatial contexts (Fuller & Löw 2017). By employing this approach, we deepen our understanding of DM beyond the general focus on predefined strategies for engaging in DM within rural settings.

A key aspect of understanding place as relational is how individuals, in this case DM professionals, interpret and understand a given place emerges from its connections to broader spatial, social, and institutional entities, such as other places, networks, events, and individuals (Heley & Jones 2012; Massey 2005; Moore 2025). The

significance of these attributions is essential, since places serve as arenas for collaborative efforts (Gieryn 2000). For example, to conduct DM in accordance with the law, municipal actors must collaborate with both private and civil society actors within and outside their geographical area. From this perspective, the concept of relational place is particularly useful for understanding how respondents perceive their surroundings and how these places derive significance from their interactions with other places (Moore 2025; Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel 2020).

Rural areas, then, are not static entities but are actively shaped by social processes surrounding them. However, they are often understood as static entities and viewed as binary opposites (Kühn 2015), as policy norms and frameworks are typically shaped by urban perspectives and priorities (Rönnblom 2014). This is particularly evident in Sweden, where DM-related laws and regulations are commonly interpreted as being designed for urban contexts but are applied uniformly across all municipalities, regardless of local conditions. Ignoring the significance of place—or treating it as a neutral backdrop—risks oversimplifying real-world dynamics (Fuller & Löw 2017), as it fails to fully account for how individuals experience a place and how places shape our actions. Recognizing this, relational perspectives do not imply a dichotomy between territorial and relational views of place. Instead, both frameworks can coexist, acknowledging places as simultaneously local and global, fixed and dynamic (Yarker, Doran & Buffel 2023). For our study, this means that although we examine specific geographical areas in terms of municipalities, that is, fixed territorial places, we emphasize that the meanings professionals ascribe to these places, and the ways they influence DM work, are inherently relational.

The relational approach also needs to be applied to other key concepts analyzing place's influence on DM, such as distance and periphery. In this paper, we distinguish between geographical and relational distance, acknowledging that distances, like place, are a product of structural and relational factors, including how people experience and talk about distance (Heldt Cassel & Stenbacka 2020). While geographical distance refers to physical separation measured in spatial terms, either in a straight line or by travel routes, relational distance refers to the perceived separation that individuals experience. In this paper, we argue that it is not only the geographical distance that matters when DM professionals frame their work, but also how they understand distance, that is, its relational aspects.

A similar distinction needs to be made regarding the centre–periphery dynamic, often understood as an urban–rural continuum (Kühn 2015; Kolmodin 2025a) used to highlight hierarchical spatial relationships. Our included places are often framed as peripheral, a marginal space relative to something perceived as more developed, prosperous, or resource-rich (Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel 2020), for example, larger towns in the south of Sweden. However, much like absolute distance, these concepts fail to account for individual subjective understandings of place (Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel 2020), as the concept of periphery tends to emphasize static, predefined characteristics such as proximity to the centre, remoteness, and low population density (Kühn, 2015), aspects often used to describe our included municipalities. To address these limitations, we adopt the concept of peripheralization (Kühn 2015; Kolmodin 2025a; see also Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel 2020, who frame periphery as a process), which describes how peripheries are socially constructed through institutional, economic,

and political relations, rather than existing as naturally occurring spaces (Kühn 2015: 367). Put differently, they are relational. Applying peripheralization as an analytical framework allows us to highlight the interplay between multiple factors that shape DM professionals' understanding of their work, including political, economic, and social dimensions, and how these contribute to both the material conditions and perceptions of peripheralization (Kühn 2015; Pugh & Dubois 2021).

However, centralization and peripheralization should not be seen as a fixed dichotomy but rather as relational processes occurring along a continuum. For example, a place that is politically centralized may not necessarily hold a central position in economic terms (Kühn 2015). Nonetheless, these dimensions often overlap, reinforcing patterns of peripheralization or centralization. Crucially, the concept of peripheralization also incorporates a dynamic, temporal dimension, recognizing that peripheralization is not static but rather subject to ongoing transformation, allowing for processes of de-peripheralization or re-centralization (Kühn 2015). This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding DM professionals' perceptions of their work, where evolving policy frameworks, demographic shifts, and economic investments can either entrench or disrupt peripheralization processes.

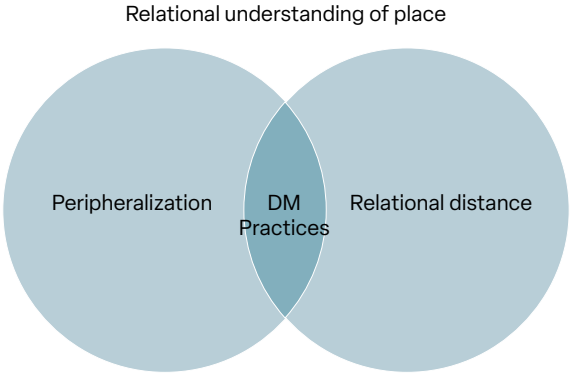

Fig. 1. Our theoretical understanding of the intersection of relational place, distance and peripheralization and their influence on DM practices.

In summary, adopting a relational perspective on place enables us to conceptualize place as an active agent in DM professionals' understanding of their practices, meaning that a relational understanding of place influences how we, throughout the article, interpret the narratives of our informants. The conceptual model presented (see Fig. 1) offers a framework for understanding this complexity. It illustrates how places gain meaning through connections with other places and actors, how perceived distance affects access and influence, and how marginalization is produced through broader institutional and political processes. Together, these concepts offer a framework for analyzing rural DM not as isolated or static, but as embedded within relational and processual spatial configurations.

Research Context

In a Swedish context, responsibility for DM-related questions is distributed across national, regional, and local levels. However, because of laws and regulations in the

DM area, DM is mainly decentralized, with municipalities playing a central role (Oscarsson et al. forthcoming). In peacetime, municipalities' DM practice should include preparations and operations for extraordinary events such as pandemics, forest fires, storms and snowstorms, flooding, etc., as well as establishing a crisis management committee, overseeing its activities, assigning responsibility for specific geographic areas, conducting training and exercises, and ensuring proper reporting. This work is partly funded by the government and partly through local tax allocations. As we are interested in how places, as relational constructions, are experienced at the local level when organising DM, we take municipalities as our point of departure. In line with the theory, we view these municipalities as territories where administrative tasks are carried out. As argued by, for example, Yarker, Doran and Buffel (2023), it is possible to discuss places as territorial—such as the four municipalities used as criteria for selection in this study—while still recognising the importance of relational aspects. This means acknowledging that relations and connections with other places, including political processes (Heley & Jones 2012; Pierce, Martin & Murphy 2011), are crucial for understanding informants' views of place, which we argue will influence how DM practitioners discuss their work.

The four included municipalities are located in what is often, carelessly and simplistically, referred to as Norrland. A more accurate description is that they belong to the inland municipalities of Västerbotten County, meaning they are located along the Norwegian border. The included municipalities are chosen for several reasons. First, as of 2022, their combined population was 17,000—spread across 25,500 square kilometers, an area similar to Belgium. However, with only 0.67 inhabitants per square kilometer, these municipalities rank among the most remote and sparsely populated regions in Europe (SCB 2022). Second, since 2020, they have faced a 20 per cent decline in population, creating demographic challenges with tax revenue, the working population, and, in the end, their ability to find and retain staff knowledgeable about DM work. Third, while many municipalities in Sweden, and elsewhere, are described and categorized as rural, the included municipalities are primarily forested rather than arable land. Additionally, people live across almost the entire municipality, a clear difference from other large rural municipalities in Sweden. The spatial distribution becomes evident in the map below (see Fig. 2), where the included municipalities are marked in red. In total, the included municipalities make an interesting and relevant section of cases to analyze how understandings of place influence DM professionals' understanding of DM practices.

Historically, municipalities in northern Sweden were, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, seen as the "land of the future" for their natural resources, contributing to Sweden's industrialization (Sörlin 2022). Today, this perception has shifted towards "green energy projects" like battery factories and windmills (Sörlin 2022), often in so-called mega projects. While these initiatives are frequently framed as regional development, they tend to be concentrated in or near the larger urban centres of northern Sweden. As a result, the municipalities under study do not experience tangible benefits from these projects. Instead, they are confronted with what others have called "chronic crises" (Kvarnlöf 2022; Stienstra 2015) including long-term public sector cuts, lack of welfare services (e.g., maternity wards, hospitals, police), and the closure and centralization of rural services like supermarkets and post offices

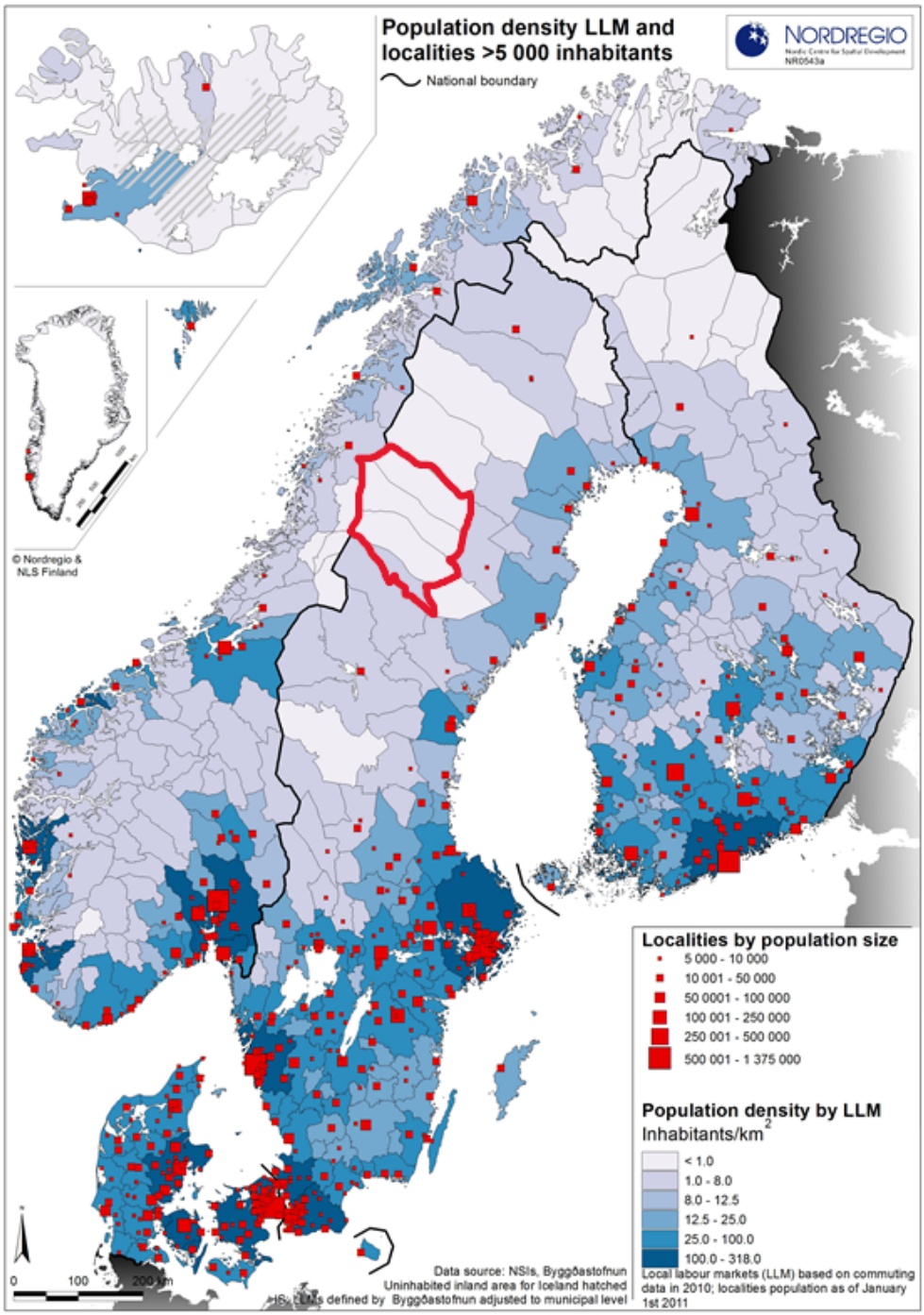

Fig. 2. Population density and location of the included municipalities (our own editing marked in red). Source: Johanna Roto, Nordregio at www.nordregio.org.

(Enlund 2020; Larsson 2021; de Fine Licht, Karlsson & Skoog 2024). At the same time, these areas attract increasing numbers of tourists, particularly from continental Europe, drawn by the region's relatively "untouched" nature and landscapes. This growing tourism sector further highlights the paradox of visibility and neglect: while

the region is marketed and consumed as an intact wilderness, its permanent residents face ongoing infrastructural decline.

In relation to the aim of this article, the developments in rural communities can be connected to the Swedish political agenda, which often employs the urban as the norm for organising society (Rönnblom 2014). This is also the case in political debates (Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel 2020) and news reports (Eriksson 2008), where rural areas, such as those included here, are ascribed structural problems, including depopulation, low levels of services, and poor municipal finances (see also Vallström 2014). Despite these challenges, rural communities display strong voluntary engagement and strong networks compensating for the loss of services and maintaining community life (Lundgren 2020; von Essen & Ydremark 2020).

Given these circumstances and the broad scope of responsibilities connected to Swedish DM law, the studied municipalities must adopt a structured approach to effectively handle crises that impact residents, businesses, and visitors. In the following section, we focus on previous research concerning DM in rural areas.

Materials and Methods

The paper builds on interviews with municipal representatives who, in various ways, are engaged in DM practice in their respective municipalities. In this section, we aim to describe the process of selecting and finding informants, as well as our analytical approaches.

Selection of Respondents

The paper builds on nine interviews conducted in 2022 with individuals who, in various ways, work with DM questions and tasks at the municipal level in the previously described area. In the four included municipalities, we have interviewed two or three DM professionals per municipality. However, many respondents work part-time with questions related to DM. For example, respondents divided their employment tasks between different roles. To reflect each interviewee's situated experience, we refer to them in the results section by the professional role with which they identified. These include: Environmental Health Officer, Emergency Preparedness Coordinator and Rescue Chief, Head of Environmental Department, Municipal Manager, Emergency Preparedness and Environmental Health Officer, and Emergency Preparedness Officer. While these titles may not always correspond to formal or exclusive DM positions, they highlight the hybrid, often overlapping character of civil protection work in rural settings. This also reflects the relatively small number of respondents included in the study, which stems from the challenges of recruitment within a very limited pool of potential interviewees. While nine respondents are insufficient to make any generalizations to other places, there are still interesting analytical generalizations (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014) to be drawn from the results of the interviews, offering insights that contribute to broader conceptual understandings.

We based our selection of respondents on two strategies: (i) identifying respondents through municipal web pages, and (ii) employing a snowball sampling method (Bryman 2016). The purpose of the latter was to ensure that we did not overlook relevant individuals who, while not formally assigned to work with DM-related issues, nonetheless occupy positions that provide valuable insights into the organization's DM practices.

Respondents were scheduled for interviews and given information about ethical considerations and informed consent. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, the interviews were conducted via video call using Teams, recorded with a dictaphone, and later transcribed. The interviews averaged 60 minutes in length. We used a semi-structured interview guide to allow respondents to speak freely and enable follow-up questions. The interviews covered five main themes: organizational details, roles, knowledge and learning, changes over time, and relations. In approaching these themes, our interest was not in establishing an objective or definitive account of DM, but rather in understanding how the practitioners themselves experienced, interpreted, and made sense of their work. This emphasis reflects our focus on situated knowledge and the subjective perspectives through which DM practices are enacted in everyday professional contexts.

In addition to the nine municipal interviews, we conducted two supplementary interviews with representatives from the County Administrative Board in the region of the municipalities. These interviews were not included in the main analytical sample but served to deepen our understanding of the institutional context and the formal responsibilities that frame municipal DM work. The interviews offered insights into regional-level expectations, support structures, and coordination practices, which helped us better interpret the practitioners' situated accounts. While our primary focus remained on how municipal professionals experienced and understood their work, the supplementary interviews provided important contextual clarification of the conditions under which this work is carried out.

Analytical Approach

Given our focus and theoretical foundation, our analytical approach is best characterized as a thematic deductive analysis (Bryman 2016). By focusing on place as relational and examining how this understanding influences place, distance, and peripheralization impacts DM practice, we conducted the analysis in three steps. First, using NVivo, we coded all text that was related to respondents' descriptions of the place where they were situated. This includes both when respondents discuss their own place directly or in relation to other places. In the second step, we analyzed the selected material based on the understanding of distance and peripheralization. Lastly, we examined the entire material to understand how place influences DM practice.

We have not used the words *latent* and *manifest* in the results and analysis section; however, in our aim to create a greater understanding of the phenomenon from the respondents' perspectives (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas 2013), the latent themes are essential for understanding the underlying meanings of the respondent's narratives concerning place. Here, informants do not always clearly discuss places, but it is somewhat latent in their narratives. Still, the manifested themes are also important, as they "describe the obvious," which is essential for describing the situation in various ways, such as distances. The great advantage of thematic analysis is that it allows for analyses of both manifest and latent themes and combine them (Boyatzis 1998), contributing to a more complete understanding of the phenomenon. This means that while our primary focus has been on what professionals explicitly articulate, we have also paid attention to what remains unsaid, as well as to the implicit meanings that

Table 1. Analytical themes

Main theme	Sub-theme	Example of codes
Relational distance	Internal spatial dynamics	Decentralized resource allocation Operational fragmentation
	Distance to others	Perceived remoteness Disconnection from central authorities Comparison with other municipalities
Experiences of peripheralization	Political	Policies designed for urban areas Mismatch between law and local context
	Financial	Perceived financial disadvantage Shrinking tax base
	Social	Workforce scarcity Resilient rural identity

emerge when one reads between the lines (Vaismoradi et al. 2016; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas 2013). However, we do not intend to make generalizable assumptions but rather to understand and describe complexities (see, for example, Creswell 2013).

Results and Analysis

In this section, we illustrate how place actively shapes professionals' understanding and experience of DM practices in rural northern Sweden. Drawing on the concept of relational place, we examine how DM professionals make sense of and respond to the specific characteristics of their municipalities, not as static backdrops but as dynamic agents that influence organizational practices. Our analysis is organized around two interrelated themes: (i) expressions of relational distance and (ii) experiences of peripheralization (see Table 1). Together, these themes illustrate how DM professionals navigate, negotiate, and sometimes resist dominant norms embedded in centralized governance frameworks surrounding DM practice.

Expressions of Relational Distance

DM in the studied municipalities is affected by the large distances and extensive geographical areas they are legally responsible for under Swedish law (SFS 2006:544). However, DM is also shaped by how professionals experience and articulate relational distance, that is, how they relate their geographical place to other places. While vast territories and low population density create tangible logistical challenges, our informants describe distance as more than a question of kilometers; it is also about disconnection from institutions, infrastructures, and decision-making processes centred elsewhere.

One prominent example of how place and size need to be understood as both territorial and relational is when professionals discuss how their municipalities differ from other large, geographically expansive areas in Sweden. As one respondent put it:

> These really small municipalities [concerning population size] are an anomaly in themselves because Sweden is planned based on having a lot of people in a limited space, and I usually say that we are the exact opposite in every possible way. (Head of Environmental Department)

Importantly, our respondents not only distinguish between urban areas with high population density and their own rural settings, but also between different types of rural municipalities. They emphasize that not all rural areas are alike; some are marked by vast uninhabited land, while others, like their own, are populated throughout, creating different demands and governance challenges. While many rural municipalities are characterized by sparse settlement concentrated in isolated pockets, our case municipalities are populated throughout, requiring a decentralized resource strategy. One respondent explains:

> What sets the five largest municipalities in terms of area apart from us is that we have people everywhere. We have two valleys that connect to Norway, we have home care staff who drive 300 kilometers a day. In the event of a power outage across the whole municipality, the task here is much tougher … In Jokkmokk, you know, people live in a very limited area of the municipality, and the rest is untouched mountains. That is not the case here. Therefore, we need to be prepared … It's like the fire service: the fire truck cannot be too far away because then the house will have burned down before it arrives. We need to spread resources over the area so we can take action quickly. (Municipal Manager)

These quotes highlight the need for professionals to adjust logistical and infrastructural assumptions to meet the demands of the national preparedness system. Distance is not just a matter of travel time for them, it structures how DM must be organized on a daily basis, particularly in relation to access to critical infrastructure, response speed, and built-in redundancies.

Relational distance is also expressed when discussing *distance in relation to other objects,* or more precisely, accessible training opportunities for voluntary crisis actors. National frameworks, such as those required to establish Voluntary Resource Groups (*Frivillig resursgrupp*, FRG), are a collaboration between the municipality and the voluntary defence organisations with support from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (*Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap*, MSB). They are structured around centralized models of training and certification that assume proximity to urban centers. While the training and certification are central for the formation and participation of FRGs, one respondent highlights how the structure of organizing is limiting for them:

> A big problem when it comes to applying for grants and similar things via the FRG and MSB is that you have to attend a lot of training. And these trainings are in Stockholm [the capital of Sweden]. […] In a municipality like ours, sending people to Stockholm is … even if financially possible, logistically it would never attract anyone to join on a voluntary basis. It's just not possible. (Emergency Preparedness and Environmental Health Officer)

According to the respondent, the issue here is not simply one of budgetary constraints, but rather an organizational logic that fails to consider northern rural realities. What also needs to be considered is that the included municipalities experience a lack of

infrastructure for communication by train or plane. For example, getting from Sorsele (the main town) to Stockholm would require 16 hours and two changes by bus; 10 hours of driving; or driving followed by a flight from one of the smaller airports in the region with few departures. Put differently, it is not the actual distance that is the main concern, but rather the relationship and combination of different aspects that influence the possibility of participation. Therefore, distance contributes to the marginalization of rural actors and municipalities, whose participation becomes structurally constrained despite formal inclusion. In that way, distance is also experienced emotionally and discursively.

Collectively, these examples illustrate that both territorial and relational distances shape how DM is organized and experienced by DM professionals in rural areas. Centralized approaches to training, regulation, and planning often lead to exclusionary effects that hinder broader participation, even when intended to be developed for all. Understanding these dynamics calls for a shift away from purely spatial metrics toward an appreciation of how distance is socially and institutionally constructed and influences DM professionals' understanding and practices of DM. A unifying theme across the narratives is professionals' awareness of normative expectations defining "proper" DM. Rather than simply conforming, they actively reinterpret and, at times, resist these frameworks, as will be further illustrated in the next section. In doing so, they develop alternative forms of legitimacy rooted in local knowledge and community embeddedness (cf. Cook 2015). These responses are not acts of resistance, but rather adaptive governance strategies attuned to the specific spatial, social, and institutional contexts of rural environments.

In the following section, we identify how the relational view of place enables an understanding of various spatial processes of peripheralization that influence DM professionals' views on their work.

Experiences of Peripheralization

In the empirical material, several types of peripheralizations are expressed by DM professionals. While these forms of peripheralization frequently intersect in practice, we analytically distinguish between political, financial, and social dimensions in this section. This separation serves to clarify their specific characteristics and dynamics.

While territorial and relational aspects of distance influence the everyday work of DM, our informants also describe a deeper, structural form of marginalization, a type of peripheralization that operates through laws, regulations, and institutional expectations. This peripheralization is not solely about territorial or relational remoteness. Rather, it is discursive and institutional, grounded in the urban as a normative standard for how DM should be organized and assessed. In this context, rural municipalities are positioned as outliers, not because they are viewed as less capable, but because their practices diverge from an urban-centric model embedded in national frameworks and understandings of what and how DM should be carried out.

While generally associated with a lack of political influence (Kühn 2015). In this section, we understand "political peripheralization" as those aspects associated with law and policy regulation that DM professionals do not experience as taking rural reality into account. Put differently, how respondents describe what others have called "urban as norm" (Rönnblom 2014). An intimate connection to an understanding of

places as relational is when respondents discuss how well laws and regulations are adopted for their territorial area of responsibility, and how that shifts over time. Several of the respondents, in somewhat different ways, describe national policies and regulations as designed by people who have taken little consideration of rural contexts:

> It is not easy to write a general law that works for both rural and urban areas, of course. But sometimes, it is so poorly thought out that you wonder what they were thinking. You instinctively imagine them sitting in the capital, writing a law without ever having set foot in a rural area. (Emergency Preparedness and Environmental Health Officer)

While acknowledging that general laws for all 290 municipalities in Sweden are challenging to write, the quotation above expresses feelings of political peripheralization, where exclusion is felt not only in terms of physical remoteness but also through a lack of understanding and contextual awareness of the realities and conditions in rural municipalities in the north. DM professionals often experience a relational distance from the policymaking processes, which in turn impacts their work, despite the existence of formal channels of coordination and the fact that legal frameworks are intended to be universal.

The process and how political peripheralization is being played out also becomes evident in how oversight and evaluations are conducted by supervisory authorities, such as the County Administrative Board in the region. Despite fulfilling legal obligations and demonstrating practical capacity, rural municipalities often experience that they receive criticism for lacking formal routines or documentation. At the same time, they highlight how the inspections carried out reflect a lack of contextual understanding. Two respondents independently discuss their experience:

> A typical situation is when people (inspectors) come to these small municipalities. [They say] 'Yes, you are very skilled in practice, but you have no routine for this, and you do not have a plan … How do you ensure quality?' They become very stressed … But we have a culture … Yes, if we need to have a plan, we make one, and there are written routines, but we do not place emphasis on that. (Head of Environmental Department)

> When people from the County Administrative Board come to conduct inspections, they are often from Umeå [the county capital of Västerbotten]. They miss the mark, lack knowledge, and sometimes do not fully understand the difficulties [of organizing DM here]. (Emergency Preparedness and Environmental Health Officer)

The quotes illustrate that political peripheralization emerges through the ways in which these laws are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in practice. Rural professionals experience that they are often judged against standardized benchmarks that assume the presence of formalized structures, benchmarks rooted in urban assumptions of scale, specialization, and administrative capacity. These expectations clash

with local modes of organizing, which are often more flexible, embedded, and person dependent.

These assessments, as Kühn (2015) argues, exemplify the external and internal constructions of peripheralization. External as rural places are framed through normative ideals developed elsewhere rather than through their own embedded logics and practices. The dissonance between urban-oriented governance frameworks and rural realities produces friction, misunderstanding, and what many respondents describe as misrecognition. In this view, centralization is not just about institutional control, it is about whose realities count in the formulation of laws and regulations. The urban is not just the norm but is normatively used as a blueprint for what proper DM organization looks like. On the other hand, it is also internal, as DM professionals recreate themselves and their municipalities as rural actors and rural places, set apart from the urbanized norm.

This understanding is mirrored in other interviews, where the consequences of applying the same legal frameworks to radically different contexts are made visible. In the quotation below, the respondent discusses how regulations—here in having a back-up water supply in case of a societal crisis—are understood as designed with the urban city in mind rather than rural municipalities in Northern Sweden:

> You can't apply … And this is evident … in all the areas I work in, there is this urban perspective that is applied to all municipalities. It is so misguided in many ways because it just doesn't work in practice. […] A rather amusing example is drinking water. The same requirements are placed on us regarding drinking water as on Stockholm City. […] But the water going into our treatment plant is cleaner than the water coming out of theirs. It's almost ridiculous that we are being inspected on the same points when the issue is essentially a non-issue. (Emergency Preparedness and Environmental Health Officer)

Here, professionals experience a mismatch between regulation and context. Professionals further experience that this is not just inconvenient, it undermines the legitimacy of rural governance practices and burdens municipalities with requirements that are irrelevant to their actual risk landscape. Importantly, rural DM professionals are not merely passive recipients of this peripheral status, many actively reframe their ways of working as pragmatic and adaptive, not deficient. They see their informal methods and embedded networks as strengths in responding to crises and in DM in general.

Professionals also discuss a type of *financial peripheralization,* often understood as referring to areas where individuals face poorer economic conditions for coping with their everyday lives or regions with less qualified workforces (Kühn 2015). We utilize this concept to understand how they discuss a financial peripheralization of their municipalities in relation to DM practice.

This financial peripheralization can be understood in terms of the gap between the obligations placed on municipalities and the resources available to meet them (Kvarnlöf 2022; Kvarnlöf & Eriksson 2024). The interviewees describe a pronounced sense of imbalance, particularly in rural municipalities where limited and declining populations result in reduced tax revenues and, consequently, fewer resources for DM-related work.

> What has been important, at least for me, is to highlight the demands from the national authorities, but also that we do not receive … or have the opportunity, because we do not have the same resources as they do down in Umeå, I mean, they are four or five people working with DM. And here, I'm doing it on barely a half-time position. So, the conditions are a bit different. (Preparedness Coordinator and Rescue Chief)

While resources are typically viewed as a challenge in all municipalities in Sweden, in these municipalities, it boils down to practical questions. One DM professional describes how it sometimes is a matter of everyday strategies to maintain basic service to the citizens:

> It is a constant challenge and lack of resources, and we do not have the money to maintain the roads. It's more like, "can we afford to keep the streetlights on, and have a functioning snowplow to clear the snow?" Of course, it's a challenge, but we just have to deal with it. (Emergency Preparedness Officer)

This quote clarifies how the lack of tax revenue, which should partly finance preventive DM work, affects the possibilities of DM professionals. It simply becomes difficult to justify greater resource allocation to DM work if it is set against other services. The financial peripheralization discussed above also affects what we refer to as *social peripheralization*. We utilize this concept to illustrate how specific locations and political and financial peripheralization can create challenges. One of the most prominent challenges through the interviews is related to how place-specific conditions create problems for hiring personnel to work with DM-related questions. This, on the one hand, is related to a general problem where respondents describe how they have been short-staffed for over a year. On the other hand, the problems are also related to these municipalities being viewed as less desirable places and having fewer opportunities than other places. In previous research, this is often discussed in terms of rural areas being viewed as less desirable places for young people (Hjort 2023); however, it is also linked to the municipality's financial capacity to attract potential employees to move there.

> As soon as it becomes about university and university credits, we do not have the capacity. In terms of salary, there are not that many who, I mean, those who have moved … those who continue their studies and are from here, they move on somewhere else in the world. They do not come back. Because there are so few jobs, so few positions. (Emergency Preparedness Officer)

While some who have moved away to study do come back when they decide to settle down, what is problematized is the municipalities' inability to pay a decent salary. Another problem that arises is when two people, often in a couple relationship, move back to these areas. As there are generally fewer positions available, it also becomes more difficult for both partners to find suitable jobs to apply for.

While social peripheralization creates problems, it is also a reality that rural DM professionals are used to because "rural areas are skilled at making the most of limited resources" (Emergency Preparedness Officer) and acknowledge that "We are different

… but that's part of the charm. You have to enjoy this kind of challenge" (Head of Environmental Department).

In summary, the citations illustrate that peripheralization is not merely imposed; it is also negotiated, resisted, and reinterpreted through everyday practices by DM professionals, who construct rural governance not as a failed version of the urban but as a distinct model with its own internal logic and legitimacy. Peripheralization in this context operates through the imposition of urban-centric norms that fail to account for the lived realities of rural DM and the interplay between political, financial and social peripheralization. DM professionals experience the mismatch between law and context, in place-based adaptation, and in the need to translate local knowledge into forms that are legible to external authorities on a constant basis. Yet, it also generates resistance and creativity, demonstrating that governance at the margins is not a sign of weakness but a site of innovation and local rationality.

Discussion. The Implications of Treating Places as Static in DM Practice

In this section, we explore how a relational understanding of place influences the practice of DM professionals in rural municipalities in Northern Sweden. Our findings suggest that it is not merely the geographical size of these municipalities that shapes DM work, but rather the relational distances—how individuals and communities are experienced and constructed in relation to other places (Massey 2005; Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel 2020). In other words, the subjective experiences of place held by DM professionals significantly influence how they interpret and carry out their responsibilities (Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel 2020).

When place is treated as a static, isolated entity rather than a relational and situated construct, several practical challenges emerge. As discussed in our findings and consistent with Lundgren (2020), ignoring the spatial and relational connections between places risks oversimplifying complex realities. In line with Heley and Jones (2012) and Massey (2005), our analysis illustrates how place derives meaning through its connections to other locations—an insight that is crucial for understanding the organization of DM in rural contexts.

Our study highlights that these areas are not only defined as "rural" but are also characterized by sparse populations and large internal distances. Residents often live far from centralized towns, which complicates the organization of locally responsive emergency management structures. This becomes particularly evident when informants reflect on the feasibility of forming voluntary emergency groups. The challenge is not only geographic but relational: even when volunteers are available, they may be unwilling or unable to travel the required time to participate in training or respond to urgent needs.

Another significant theme that emerged from our data concerns the tension between legal mandates and practical realities. DM professionals report a disjuncture between what municipalities are legally required to do and what is feasible in rural practice, a finding aligned with Becker and Bynander (2017), who argue that there is a gap between policy and practice. They highlight how the system often distributes obligations across a wide range of actors, while its operational focus remains largely on public authorities, overlooking contextual variation and practical limitations.

This resonates strongly with our respondents' descriptions of how legal expectations often fail to account for rural realities, thereby constraining the implementation of DM on the ground. Although previous research has addressed the policy-practice gap in emergency contexts (Adam-Hernández & Harteisen 2020; Kapucu, Hawkins & Rivera 2013; Kvarnlöf 2022), few studies have foregrounded *place itself* as an analytic category. By applying a relational perspective—one that views place as dynamic, interconnected, and shaped by social and spatial relations—we show how this gap is deeply embedded in the structural conditions of localities.

These relational disparities emphasize the inadequacy of simply referring to municipalities as "large" or "rural." For instance, access to public services varies significantly even among similarly classified municipalities (Enlund 2020; Larsson 2021; de Fine Licht, Karlsson & Skoog 2024), resulting in divergent DM capacities. As Vallström (2014) aptly put it, "the map does not always correspond to reality."

Moreover, our informants experience and express that laws, regulations, and policies are often constructed with urban contexts in mind, a critique that echoes previous research highlighting how such frameworks often prove impractical when applied to rural settings, due to the significant structural and spatial differences between urban and rural areas (Cutter, Ash & Emrich 2016; Haase et al. 2021). However, our study goes further by illustrating how such urban-centric norms contribute to a sense of *peripheralization* among DM professionals. This feeling is not merely symbolic but is experienced as a material reality through inadequate policy designs, limited financial resources, and persistent difficulties in recruitment and retention. We interpret these as forms of political, financial, and social peripheralization, as conceptualized by Kühn (2015). One concrete example involves regulations around water supply. DM professionals reported that legal expectations, such as having formalized contracts for emergency water access, are impractical in rural settings. As De Majo and Olsson (2019) and McGuire and Silvia (2010) argue, policies must be rooted in practical knowledge and institutional arrangements attuned to the lived conditions of specific contexts.

In sum, place influences not only what DM professionals do, but also how they interpret, justify, and assess their actions. Our findings demonstrate that existing laws and regulations often fail to accommodate the infrastructural and social realities of rural municipalities. We argue that integrating a relational understanding of place into both policy and practice is essential for creating more context-sensitive, equitable, and effective DM systems.

While the empirical case is limited to four municipalities in northern Sweden and only nine respondents, we argue that there are still interesting analytical generalizations (Kvale & Brinkman 2014) to be drawn. The article illustrates how place-based dynamics can shape professionals' sense of responsibility and legitimacy, an important aspect for understanding how rural municipalities carry out their DM work despite challenging conditions such as limited resources (cf. Oscarsson et al. forthcoming). This is a dimension that deserves particular attention in studies of DM, especially in rural contexts. Lastly, the article's focus on relational approaches in DM, contributing to revealing how professionals' experiences are shaped through inter-place relations and ongoing processes of peripheralization. Such insights may inform comparative analyses across rural contexts and enhance theoretical understandings of place-sensitive governance.

Conclusion

This article examines how the concept of place shapes the work of DM professionals. While previous research has acknowledged that large distances within rural regions can complicate DM efforts, few studies have explicitly analyzed the role of *place itself,* as a dynamic and relational construct, in shaping professional practices and experiences. Based on the research questions, our findings show that various understandings of distance need to be taken into account, and that place should be understood both territorially and relationally. While the territorial distance creates challenges, the relational distance is what most often is mentioned by the informants as challenging; that is, how distance is experienced. Therefore, the most challenging "distances" are not always physical but are often embedded in relational and structural configurations. Further, we identify how, for instance, legal frameworks and institutional procedures, designed with urban norms in mind, can amplify feelings of peripheralization among rural DM professionals. These experiences are shaped by political, financial, and social inequalities, as reflected in respondents' narratives about policy application, regulatory oversight, and resource allocation. In this process, the rural areas are created and re-created through both external and internal construction of these places, creating feelings of peripheralization. Taken together, we argue that this article contributes a novel perspective to existing literature on DM by centering the analysis on how *place,* alongside specific actions or events, conditions professional experience and practice. Recognizing place as a relational and socially constructed phenomenon opens up new pathways for understanding spatial justice, policy misalignment, and institutional responsiveness in rural contexts.

By integrating this perspective into DM policy and institutional design, stakeholders can better account for the diverse challenges facing rural municipalities. Such an approach has the potential to foster more equitable, locally adapted, and practically grounded forms of disaster preparedness and response—both in Sweden and beyond.

The lack of studies focusing on relational aspects of DM calls for more research to deepen and broaden our insights. First, future studies could explore how relational place-making operates in other types of municipalities, in other rural and in urban contexts. Comparative research between rural and urban municipalities could also clarify whether these issues stem from broader structural features of governance or are specific to particular institutional or geographic contexts. More attention should be paid to how relational perspectives can be operationalized within policy design, potentially developing tools or frameworks that help institutional actors better account for spatial variability and lived experience. Such work could serve as a bridge between structural reform and grounded, context-sensitive practice in disaster preparedness and response.

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