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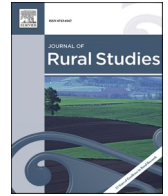
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# Navigating spatial justice: Exploring municipal planners' logics in differentiated village planning

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## ABSTRACT

An amendment to the Danish Planning Act in 2019 mandated municipalities to incorporate strategies for the differentiated development of viable villages. This marks the first national initiative in Denmark requiring strategic village development within statutory municipal planning. While municipalities have considerable freedom to adapt these strategies to local conditions, existing plans, and ongoing projects, this new requirement has led to diverse approaches to strategic planning across the country.

Drawing on data from 37 qualitative interviews with planners in Danish rural municipalities, we analyse how planners differentiate between villages at the municipal level, basing their decisions on both institutional and structural factors. We introduce a spatial justice matrix, encompassing dimensions of procedural and distributive justice alongside principles of equality and equity, to illustrate how municipalities' strategies for village development embody distinct interpretations of spatial justice. Some municipalities adopt a participatory, demand-driven approach, akin to a "first come, first served" principle, while others prioritize local service provision to distribute resources more equitably in line with targeted development objectives. Although each approach aligns with a different interpretation of spatial justice, these variations raise critical questions about the meaning and attainment of spatial justice in practice. As municipalities navigate these interpretations, disparities in development outcomes emerge across municipalities, highlighting a need for further discussion on inter-municipal equity and cooperation.

## 1. Introduction

Spatial justice has mainly been studied in an urban context (Lefebvre, 1996; Soja, 2010) focusing on injustice in segregation (e.g. Lehman-Frisch, 2011), distribution of resources (e.g. Pereira et al., 2017) or involvement of citizens in decisions related to their neighbourhoods (e.g. Medved, 2018). An emerging literature on rural spatial justice is, however, also on the rise (e.g. Banerjee and Schuitema, 2023; Johansen et al., 2021). Rural communities face challenges related to urbanization, aging population, economic decline, changing agricultural production, and climate transition. While efforts have been made to analyse rural development in terms of a rural spatial justice on a macro level, such as regions in an EU context (Shucksmith et al., 2021), and on a micro level considering approaches for a place-based spatial justice in terms of individual rural villages (Nordberg, 2020), there is still a need to analyse initiatives on a nation level. Woods (2023) have recently called for a discussion of the different views on spatial justice to be articulated and debated to ensure fair policy decisions. This article

contributes with such an analysis by investigating spatial justice mechanisms behind the decisions made in Danish rural municipalities for strategies to combat the rural spatial justice challenges in Denmark and provides a framework to analyse interpretations of spatial justice in the planning for rural areas.

The article is based on a unique situation where, for the first time ever in Denmark, legislation has been passed that includes an obligation for municipalities to strategically plan for the viability of villages. A special commission was set down in 2017, tasked with providing recommendations for the future viability of villages in Denmark, as economic growth was centralised around the bigger towns and cities. The commission stated that this had left rural areas wanting in terms of service provision and development, resulting in an 'unbalanced' Denmark (Udvalget for levedygtige landsbyer, 2018a, 2018b). As a consequence of the commission's work, an addition to the Danish Planning Act was adopted in 2019. Now municipalities had to ensure strategic planning for viable villages incorporating a "differentiated and targeted development of villages" (Erhvervsministeriet, 2020, §5d).

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This article investigates how the aspect of *differentiation* between villages as part of a requirement for strategic planning for viable villages in Denmark is approached by municipal planners, with a specific intent to discuss the spatial justice aspects of the logics guiding the differentiation. Differentiation in this context means the selection and distinction between villages. The criteria of the selection are not limited to physical features or socioeconomics, but also based on imagined potentials or civic engagement in villages. Differentiation can ultimately affect, for example, in which local areas municipal service institutions are placed and where services are discontinued. Strategic spatial planning can be a useful tool, but according to Albrechts et al. (2019), a focus on legitimacy and socio-spatial justice is required for it to be successful. By definition, being strategic is to choose some(thing) over others, and therefore the lack of a preliminary effort to ensure social justice and legitimacy in the processes may result in an outcome that is skewed towards certain interests, or demographically or geographically unbalanced (Brookfield, 2017; Thuesen et al., 2023).

The questions answered in this article are: 1) How do the municipalities' planners approach the differentiation of villages in their strategic village planning? 2) What spatial justice consequences arise, both intra-municipal and inter-municipal, when seeking to differentiate between villages in the strategic village planning for viable villages?

The data consist of qualitative interviews with planners from 37 rural municipalities, and they inquire how the planners are working, or intend to work, with the strategic village planning, and not least their thoughts on how to differentiate between villages. The data allows an analysis of the thoughts behind the strategies, in the initial phase of the implementation process, as most of the municipalities were only in the beginning of the planning phase when interviewed.

First, we will address theory on spatial justice to construct the theoretical framework used for the analysis. Secondly, the case is further described as are the methodology and data. This is followed by a results section presenting the logics of differentiation, and an analysis of the implications of this on spatial justice. Finally, the article ends with a discussion of the implications of the findings and a conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical approaches to spatial justice

### 2.1. Dimensions of spatial justice

The justice discourse in general is varied, and terminology of equality, equity and justice is often used interchangeably in policy and public discourse (Espinoza, 2007). In the spatial justice literature, consensus is that physical space has a social dimension, and therefore distribution of and access to spaces are matters of social inclusion and exclusion. This section offers an overview of 4 central and interrelated components of and interpretations related to spatial justice. Two of these are interpretations of what the main issues are in achieving spatial justice: distributive justice with emphasis on the distribution of goods and access to services in an area; and procedural justice which focuses on the inclusion of locals. The two other components are virtues related to how spatial justice is acquired/achieved: equality, and equity. The theoretical spatial justice literature mainly discusses distributive or procedural justice (see: Albrechts et al., 2019; Dikeç, 2001; Fainstein, 2014; Harvey, 2009; Iveson, 2011; Madanipour et al., 2021; Soja, 2010), while the equality/equity element is often invisible or merely implied, requiring the reader to deduct it themselves.

The two interpretations, distributive and procedural justice, can be seen as either outcome or process oriented. One of the early conveyors of distributive justice, John Rawls, to whom later interpretations of distributive justices are often closely related, defined social justice as a situation where: "*All social values – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage*" (Rawls, 1971, p. 54). This form of distributive justice is concerned with the social injustice in space, and Rawls argues that the

distribution of both resources and opportunities should be equally distributed in the society, unless unequal distribution is beneficial to all. Despite its use of words related to equality, multiple scholars agree that what is really strived for in Rawls' conception of justice is equitable distribution (Buchholtz et al., 2020; Espinoza, 2007). Achieving a society with equality on a socioeconomic level, by distributing resources and opportunities based on need.

Rawls' definition relates to the dimension of distributive justice, which is outcome-oriented, while scholars such as Iris Young advocates for procedural justice which is process-oriented (Young, 1990). Young wanted to focus not on the outcome but on the institutions instead and on how differences were reproduced and accepted in society (Soja, 2010). Differences in themselves are not an issue, but achieving justice in society requires "*institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression*" (Young, 1990, p. 47). According to Young, the structural bias in the present institutions is seen as interfering with justice in society. Procedural justice thus focuses on the processes that lead to a just society. Young's definition leans toward an equity approach for the people involved, for example in planning, because everyone should be able to participate on an equal footing, and the people who are affected should have a voice, similar to the principles of participatory planning by Arnstein (1969) and Healey (2003).

Madanipour et al. (2021) use a definition of spatial justice that considers both the procedural and distributive orientations as well as the social, spatial and temporal elements of spatial justice in their analysis of the European Union's territorial cohesion policies. Their concept of spatial justice is defined as "*... the democratic process of equitably distributing social and environmental benefits and burdens within and between groups, territories, and generations*" (Madanipour et al., 2021). This illustrates that spatial justice doesn't operate as a dichotomy but rather as a spectrum with approaches concerning different aspects of the whole.

In all three approaches to spatial justice mentioned above, equity can be paraphrased as the goal of reaching equality, whereas the goal of equality would be for all to be treated the same. To some extent, this shorthand definition simplifies years of debate and differences in approaches. Nonetheless, it is the simplest form to consider, since all conceptualizations of different forms of justice deal with one of these two virtues, equality and equity.

While it seems that equitable justice is preferred by scholars, the equality approach may also have its merits. Espinoza (2007) models out six distinctions of equality/equity when he considers five dimensions related to justice in the access to education: financial, cultural, social, outcomes regarding educational achievements, and occupational status. While Espinoza's five dimensions are set in an educational context, similar dimensions are related to the discussion of spatial planning, since multiple factors are interrelated when it comes to striving for social justice. He argues that equal treatment in one dimension may be beneficial for society, while an equitable distribution may be necessary in other dimensions. Hence, it is not beneficial to negate the importance of either, since society operates with both distinctions, and balance is needed to achieve justice.

Transferring the spatial justice literature to a rural context has its difficulties, since it has primarily been developed in urban and regional settings. Recent years have though seen a rise in studies assessing rural spatial justice focusing mainly on the procedural aspects (Johansen et al., 2021; Mahon et al., 2023; Nordberg, 2020, 2021; Shucksmith et al., 2021) as well as the more multilayered aspects by involving distribution as well (Banerjee and Schuitema, 2023; Woods, 2023). Referencing the works of Henri Lefebvre on the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996), Barraclough (2013) rightfully poses the question whether there is a right to the countryside. Barraclough (2013) asks if justice in terms of self-determination and recognition should only be focused on the urban environment, cities, in the academic discussions, or if the call for justice is just as much related to the rural environment. In terms of Danish spatial planning, focus and discussions on the urban and

rural areas have historically focused on culture and population, and agriculture, respectively (Galland, 2012). The circumstances of lived everyday life thus seem to have a higher priority in spatial planning in urban areas compared to the rural areas, but with the new law on strategic planning for viable villages in Denmark the rural planning seems to be shifting towards an increased focus on the rural everyday life as well. This lends credibility to Barracough's call for a right to the rural and to the need for an increased focus on justice in participatory and inclusive rural planning.

## 2.2. A framework for comparison of logics

In this paper, the planners' logics are understood in terms of the classical conception of institutional logics (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton, 2002), developed on the basis of Max Weber's (2009) work on value spheres. Here, logics are understood as systems of rationality which actors produce and reproduce based on practices, values, beliefs and rules which fit institutional functions (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). This paper will focus on the logics of the planners because they draw on both a professional set of values and on a cultural contextual influence from the surrounding society, not least the two other types of key actors – politicians and the surrounding civil society. The issue of justice and pursuit of equality is a value aspect of the planners' logics which is both compiled of and conflicting with the professional rationality in planning practices and the societal norms and values of Scandinavian welfare states. As such, the institutional logics framework will not be applied in its full form but rather as a framework of how the planners' differentiation approaches can be seen as logics conflicting with values of both professional and societal norms.

The further analytical framework can be visualized as a matrix for the implications of the logics on the spatial justice aspect (Fig. 1). On the horizontal axis we find a distinction between a virtue of equality and a virtue of equity. This is, in its essence, a question of whether the intention is for all villages to have or be given access to the "same", as a virtue of equality, for instance through equal distribution of resources or through a platform for interaction during the processes; or whether there is a need for equity resulting in differing strategies allowing for support of the varied needs and potentials to varying degrees in such a way that in the end all end up being "equal".

On the vertical axis of the matrix, we find the two theoretical

dimensions from the literature related to not *what justice is* but rather by *what means* justice is measured: distributive justice (mainly Rawls) and procedural justice (mainly Young). As described earlier, this primarily concerns the distribution of opportunities and resources as well as the procedural and structural inclusion of the citizens. Because they represent two different approaches and understandings of the focus areas necessary to achieve socio-spatial justice they are placed on a spectrum. Combining the two axis results in a theoretical matrix with 4 quadrants each expressing their own conceptualization of spatial justice. Since both axes are imagined as continua, the positioning of a conceptualization of spatial justice becomes fluid. While theoretically this is a hindrance, analytically it is a strength, since the analysis shows municipalities operating with varied and mixed sets of spatial justice logics in the planning.

This framework enables us to typologize the strategies for differentiation of the villages. An abductive approach is employed: The study starts empirically with how planners differentiate in order to observe ideal types of the logics of differentiation, and finally to analyse these types in terms of their implications for spatial justice.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Case background

The Danish Planning Act on strategic planning for viable villages is not precise on what villages to include. This enables municipalities to continue their current hierarchical differentiation between villages, towns, and cities, even though a suggestion has been made, by the national planning authority, to follow the definitions used by Statistics Denmark and focus on villages between 200 and 1000 inhabitants (Bølg- og Planstyrelsen, 2021). Further, the law does not detail the required objectives, instruments and differentiation, providing the planners with a freedom of methodology in these aspects, which enables planners to create new strategies or build upon current plans and projects.

The strategic planning for viable villages is to be included in the municipal plans. These plans are made for a 12-year period but revised every four years in continuation of the general planning strategy. The municipal plans cover the planning of infrastructure and general development on a strategic level, encompassing almost all areas of the spatial layout of the municipalities (Miljøministeriet & By- og Landskabsstyrelsen, 2008).

The methodological freedom concerning the differentiation of villages is arguably needed, since both social and geographical differences are unavoidable on both national and municipal levels, even though Denmark is thought of as a homogenous country. The geography of Denmark mainly consists of relatively flat arable land and plenty of coastal features, and rural areas are affected by their distance to important infrastructure and urban centres. This results in some villages fighting more than others to keep essential services in their area or even creating their own solutions to cover their needs. Some villages are located close to highways and big cities and resemble suburban neighbourhoods, while others are profiting from beautiful scenery to attract tourists, and yet others have neither of these advantages. Common for all is that they are places where people live their everyday lives. Thus, the administrative and political differentiation of villages and the distribution of resources are impacting spatial justice.

In 2007, the equality-oriented Scandinavian welfare state Denmark went through a centrally determined amalgamation reform of its municipalities (Douglas, 2016). This implicated a drastic reduction in the number of municipalities from 271 to 98 as a one-shot operation (Christoffersen and Klausen, 2012). Nationally, the number of elected municipal politicians shrunk and was nearly halved from 4647 to 2436. The larger size of the political and administrative municipal units meant that politicians and planners were distanced from the experience of the rural inhabitants, which enlarged the social and cultural gap between

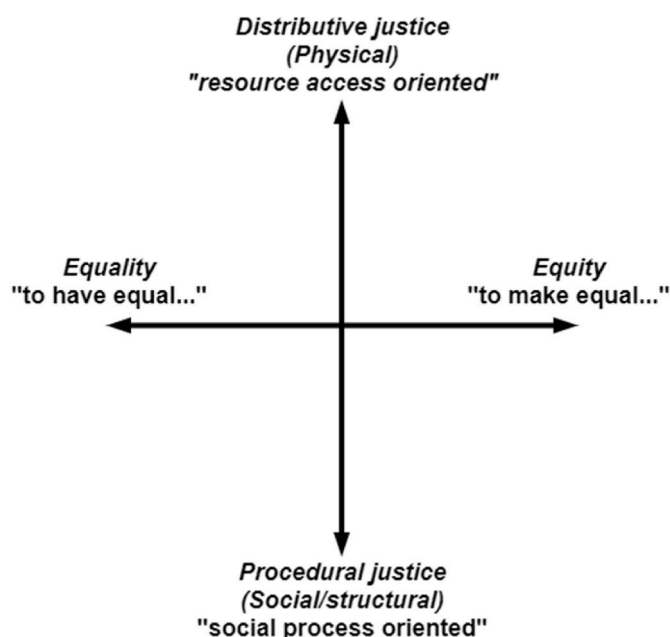


Fig. 1. Spatial justice matrix.

officials and citizens regarding how the rural should be defined (Johansen and Nielsen, 2012). Villages that were previously relatively large in their former municipality may now, after the reform, simply be considered ‘yet another village’. Further centralisation and austerity initiatives after the 2007 amalgamations have resulted in added distance to services (Pedersen, 2011), especially noticeable to the rural population (Thuesen et al., 2022).

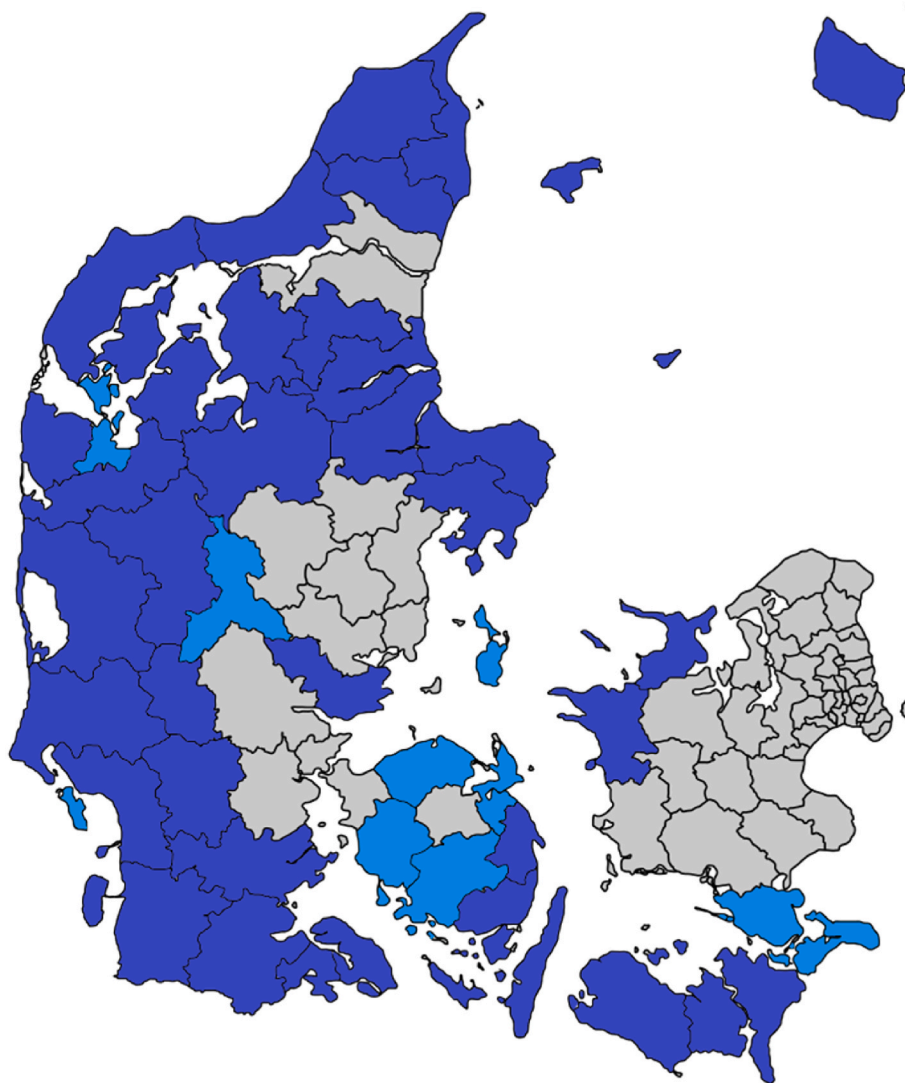
Efforts to counteract some of these emerging issues were already promoted in the years up to the reform, such as initiatives to develop specific rural policies in the municipalities, initiatives to target specific villages, and efforts to support local democratic formations (Local Government Denmark, 2004, Tænketanken om Nærdemokrati, 2005). In the years that have passed since the reform, development of new semi-formal governance structures, such as local village councils, have to a certain extent dealt with some of the local political distance and service provision challenges (Douglas, 2016; Thuesen et al., 2022).

### 3.2. Methods and data

The empirical data in this paper consists of 37 semi-structured interviews conducted during the winter 2020/2021 with planners working in Danish local government planning departments. The interviews

were conducted as part of general study on the ‘first round’ implementation of the strategic planning for villages. The interviews were made at a time when the addition to the Planning Act had been in function for one year, but also at a time when no guideline on how to proceed had yet been made by the ministry responsible (general guidelines came out about a year later). Since the interviews all took place in the preliminary phases of the planning, they reflect the planning departments’ initial approach to the strategic village planning and not necessarily the final version of the strategies implemented. These specific circumstances provide interesting insight into the logics used by planners and the dilemmas they face when balancing the rationalities and values of their profession, the political aims of the intervention and the overall values of an equality-oriented welfare state.

The interviewees represented 37 out of 46 municipalities in Denmark that are formally classified as rural or outskirt municipalities (see Fig. 2), in the classification range encompassing urban, intermediate, rural, and outskirt municipalities (Kristensen et al., 2007). This classification is based on parameters of both population density, distance, agricultural coverage and socioeconomic factors (ibid.). The remaining nine municipalities do not differ significantly from those represented. Rural and outskirt municipalities are expected to have the greatest pressure in relation to village differentiation – because they experience increased



**Fig. 2.** Map of Denmark with municipality borders. Dark blue are interviewed rural and outskirt municipalities. Light blue are non-participating rural and outskirt municipalities. Grey are intermediate and urban municipalities that are not part of the study. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)



structural challenges with, for example, aging demographics – and village populations make for a higher proportion of these municipalities' populations.

The interviews were made via telephone or online video meetings to accommodate the interviewees preferences. The municipalities' differentiation approach, which is the focus of this article, was just one among other themes of the interviews. COVID-19 was a factor mentioned by almost all interviewees, but the pandemic mostly influenced the extent to which citizen involvement was possible in the planning process and did not substantially affect the municipalities and the municipal planners' view on differentiation. As a result, the strategies discussed in the interviews are results of the planners' work with limited involvement of local citizens.

The interviews were coded in NVivo12 in two rounds to aid in organising the data and synthesising the results: First thematically in relation to the focus of the general study of the implementation; and second by use of 'coding-on' (Kristiansen, 2015) in a data-driven and inductive manner on the code named 'differentiation', central to this article, in order to synthesize the logics of the values and rationalities attached to the differentiation aspect of the strategic village planning. Furthermore, to discuss the issue of spatial justice, codes were made on the equality dimension, covering whether the approaches aimed to ensure "becoming equal ..." (equity) or "having equal ..." (equality), covering aspects related to both resources and opportunities. Memos were used to capture important reflections appearing during the coding process, and matrix queries helped substantiate the results of the analysis. Attributes were added to check for correlation finding no substantial correlations between the differentiation logics and the variables of type of municipality (rural/outskirt), coastal proximity, and political party majority.

Through this process, 18 variations were condensed to 6, which were separated into 3 overarching logics. These emerging logics were then analysed using the spatial justice matrix to enable a discussion of the differentiation strategies utilised in strategic planning for villages.

#### 4. Results: the logics of differentiation

In this section, the three logics of differentiation will be presented. They should be considered as ideal types of differentiation logics and are expressions of the argumentation and rationale that the municipalities apply in the differentiation of villages. The logics are intrinsically exclusive, but in practical application they coexist with the others. Not a single municipality have been found to adhere to only a single ideal logic. Mixed approaches exist, though one logic is usually dominant over others in the individual cases in terms of resource allocation and focus on development of viable villages. This discrepancy of ideal typical logics that coexist also reflects the ongoing discussion of the interlinking and flawed conceptualization of institutional logics based on opposing forces of external rationalities (actions) and subjective values (Friedland, 2013).

##### 4.1. Differentiation by function

The first logic is a differentiation by function. This logic of differentiation is characterised by hierarchical division and/or division by existing functions. The first subtype in this logic denotes a hierarchical distinction made among areas in the municipality, where demarcation of zones provides a framework for the development rules and regulations, such as marking spaces for industry and housing, accommodating the regulation of noise and type of traffic. For example, such a hierarchical division might include: main city, local towns, villages, and clusters of houses in the open land as done in a municipality in western Jutland. Typically, as is also the case here, the size of the population constitutes the factor of division: Instead of following the guidelines of strategizing for the villages with 200–1000 inhabitants, a differentiation is made in terms of zoning regulations and opportunities for development for each

population bracket. Fewer than 100 people and 50 houses constitutes open land, more than 500 people and 250 houses are local towns, and in between these two are the villages. The functionality aspect is thus found in the differences in regulations for towns and villages that set the frame for what functions can exist in the area concerned. This results, for instance, in residents of the villages having less intrusive regulations concerning domestic animals and light industry, whereas the denser populated areas have zones for heavy industry and shopping. The population threshold of the hierarchy is decided by the municipality; thus, deciding the threshold becomes a strategy that may enable or disable the functions of the places categorised as villages, which then guides the trajectory of further development. The rationality behind these decisions in this municipality was on the one hand to "go all the way back to basics" and on the other hand that the planners did not want any political or value-based differentiation approach, due to differences in the previous definitions of the three former municipalities (before 2007) that constitute the current municipality. All rural villages and dwellings thus become equal to others in their own category, because the distribution of opportunities is limited to the hierarchical division.

The second subtype of differentiation of functions, in contrast, is a differentiation of the functions that already exist in the area concerned. The differentiation of villages is based on the services available, such as schools, groceries, day-care, care homes and health services. Mapping of these places provides a strategic view on where there is a need for or coverage of such services. This then implies a need for certain services in some areas, which may subsequently be negotiated politically. Planners from a municipality in northern Jutland exemplify this subtype of division by existing services in the logic of differentiation by function: They mapped services and villages, subsequently clustering the villages in groups of three in order to distribute the services available to achieve an equal distribution covering the municipality. These are values based on a reasoning of decentralization as illustrated in the following quote: *"but we need to remember it all, when we develop, land and city is each other's prerequisites. (...) We look at areas which need to develop together (...). So that we are sure that there are facilities in the entire municipality (...) so it becomes a decentralized structure."*

Differentiation by function can be summed up as a strategy of physicality where either the number of population or the services available define the needs and prospects of resource distribution. The strategic village planning thus becomes a matter of mapping the current villages to assess at which locations which functions are needed or can be cut back. The reasons for using this strategy, according to interviewees, include: scarcity of resources, business as usual, political indifference or political influence. For example, one planner in a municipality in central Jutland describes the process of the strategic village planning as being a manoeuvre to meet the minimum requirements of the law. Despite having collected data through questionnaires for villagers on matters of local identity, meeting places and challenges, the strategy aimed for, being backed up by the local politicians, would instead be *"... some general ones [guidelines], which can frame all of our villages"*. The argument for not differentiating on anything except functionality is that it is presumed that some villages might feel offended and might demand resources if they found out that another village had received funding for a new kindergarten, for instance. Likewise, political indifference is present since, according to the planners, the local politicians do not want special treatment of some villages, and by not engaging in radical forms of differentiation it is being interpreted by the planners of keeping a content voter base. In that way, it was not an option to strategize based on potentials, since the goal of the planning is perceived as distributing equally rather than achieving equality or focused development by differentiating.

On the virtue dimension we find these subtypes on either end. The first, hierarchical division, as equality oriented since everyone is to be treated the same, subject to the same framework for the development of viable villages. And the other, existing services differentiation, towards an equity focus, as no one is equal but by bringing them together or

clustering them they are able to support each other.

#### 4.2. Differentiation by potential

The second logic is a differentiation by potential. Here, the differentiation between villages is based on the potentials that the villages possess. The term potential is used loosely to refer to both the present traits of a village and the traits in the surrounding environment which may be used as a means for the village to become a viable village. Common aspects of these potentials, according to the municipal planners, are tourism, nature, a good life for children, culture, art and strength of civil society. In addition, a potential for growth is another trait mentioned, which differs somewhat from the other potentials because even though it relates to the functionality, services, and population, it is not functionally differentiated per se but is rather seen in light of the potential of selected villages to attain growth versus others which do not have this potential. Overall, the potentials thus differentiate villages in terms of which ones have something that others do not. These potentials can be separated into tangible and intangible (Svendsen and Sørensen, 2007) subtypes of potentials, distinguished by a focus on material features versus a focus on the intangible potentials derived from the community or identity of a certain place.

While some of these aspects are thus related to material 'features', such as the beach for the tourism or the art galleries for the cultural potential, the focus is not on services or functions but rather on the areas of opportunities that these villages have, which are used in directing their development. This constitutes the difference between the logic of potential and the logic of function. The strategic focus is on the specific potentials of the villages, either centred on singular villages with different potentials, or on clusters of villages or extended areas that are developing the same or similar potentials.

A municipality in eastern Jutland decided to divide the municipality into 6 geographical areas, the main town being one of them. Each area, named after characteristics of the local landscape, are in some way characterized by specific features and strengths which are defined as potentials in terms of the future development of the areas. These qualities are mainly centred around nature and potentials for settling, addressing that some villages are located close to the fjord, some near forests and lakes, and others near the highway, ideal for commuting to the urban metropolises of either Aarhus or Aalborg. While still considering the functional aspects of local development planning and zoning, the "meta-story", as it is called by the interviewee, will also guide the direction of the different areas when the planners collaborate with locals in the future development and planning for the villages, since "all areas can do something, but no areas can do everything".

Another municipality, located on the western coast of Jutland, targeted the local 'prides' as explained in the quote: "We needed to start with the place-bound potentials out there. Whatever it was, these prides? It came through our dialogue on town-patterns and how we could work with it and make it more dynamic". With the planners utilising existing tools of town patterns, as well as parameters of jobs and businesses, the added dimensions of asking locals what made them proud of their local area made the planning more dynamic. It also added an extra element of intangible potentials related to local identities, formulated as "beacons", which might or might not be anchored in something physical.

Whether tangible or intangible potentials are targeted in the differentiation, the differentiation integrates a virtue of equity. All villages are not equal, and they should not be treated equally in terms of the process towards viable villages. Each village is being evaluated by its strengths (and weaknesses) and is compared to the other villages in terms of the potentials either in the village or in the surrounding area. On the justice dimension, the two subtypes vary in their approach. The intangible subtype is closer to the procedural justice perspective in terms of the need to work with the locals to be able to strategize around the local identity and other intangible potentials. The tangible subtype, on the other hand, is trying to combine the distributive and procedural

perspectives. It is distributive in the sense that physical characteristics are the differentiating factor of resource allocation, which is determined by relevance, and the unequal distribution will be beneficial for all, as in John Rawls' definition. On the other hand, the involvement of locals is necessary to determine at least some of the potentials anchored in the tangible resources, though not all of them. Tangible potentials such as nature, commuting routes, business growth and demographic changes can all be assessed through data to which the municipality already has access. However, the decision regarding these potentials is often negotiated to some extent with locals, which points to a procedural dimension. The locals may not necessarily be involved in the initial phase of the differentiation process, but their participation is required to some extent in the further development of the potentials. Elements of both procedural and distributive justice are present in the development of viable villages through this type of logic. In both examples, potentials are essentially formulated by the municipalities to differentiate between villages, either by means of exclusion or inclusion.

#### 4.3. Differentiation by engagement

The third logic is differentiation by engagement, focusing on villagers rather than the villages. Two subtypes are present: differentiation by civil society strength and differentiation by engaged commitment.

The first subtype, differentiating villages by the strength or capacity of the civil societies, has similarities with the second subtype of differentiation by potential, that is, intangible potential; however, its overarching focus is on civil society as a resource rather than a potential. Different models are implemented within this approach, but the basic notion is an analysis of villagers' engagement in civil society activities, such as the number of associations and their members, of events held in the village, or of projects and project proposals in the village. In essence, this is a quantitative measure of engagement in terms of an analysis conducted by the planners or a consultant, though it is supported in some models by questionnaires to the villagers or local councils with open questions and items of self-evaluation. This subtype of differentiating by engagement results in a mapping of the villages according to the strength or capacity of their civil society and is used either to actively seek out and help develop the 'weaker' villages because they need municipal support, or to support the already 'strong' villages to further enhance their development, because the limited resources often stretch longer when the villagers already have passion and are mostly self-reliant. In either case, the strategy for development entails activating the civil societies: supporting them in making village plans (Thuesen and Andersen, 2021), providing support by consultants to develop such plans or specific projects, or helping with fundraising.

A municipality in southern Jutland gathered extensive data as part of their methodology to differentiate, as did many others. This municipality was part of a pilot project (Realdania, 2020) to develop a method for strategic village planning and differentiation. One aspect of the project focused on the civil society, and based on measurements of different parameters of engagement the villages were separated into 4 categories: Very active, active, less active, and quiet civil societies. But as the planner said in the interview: "... the categories didn't quite fit the perception we had of the villages. Especially some of the smaller villages turned out less active and quiet, but which we know are super active local communities." While the planners in this municipality found the categorisation a bit harsh and dismissed it as a deciding factor for the differentiation, other municipalities intended to follow the methodology provided by the pilot project. The official ministerial guidelines published in 2021 even include a recommendation to view this methodology as a source of inspiration (Bilog- og Planstyrelsen, 2021). Instead of the categorisation developed in the pilot project, the planners in the above municipality were inspired to differentiate the villages based on villagers' engagement in associations, planning to offer support to less engaged communities in terms of expertise and help to network with neighbouring communities. The issue of rating communities based on

the strength of their civil society is described by several interviewees as detrimental to local identities both morally and politically. One planner finds categorising civil society strengths difficult: “... we think that it would be wrong to brand them, since here the civil society has a great strength and another place it doesn't have, because (...) it's such a fleeting parameter”. One of the challenges of measuring the strength of the civil society in this way is that it seems very dependent on individuals and timing. Some planners struggle with the wording of the categorisations while others find other ways to measure and to phrase the differences in order to appease both locals and local politicians. “... you need to be very aware of how you speak about this. A growth zone, and a recession zone, it is not very funny for those living in the recession zone. (...) of course it needs to be fitting, but it also needs to be constructive, so the villages can see themselves in it and don't feel branded in an unfortunate way”.

The second approach concerns differentiation by engaged commitment, which tackles the challenges of the first approach: Instead of an explicit analysis of the civil societies, the strategy is to enable a framework where the villagers' engagement is channelled into development of the villages. This means that villages who start projects or approach the municipality with requests for a village plan, applications for funding, project proposals, etc. will be granted support to some extent, whereas villages who do not show any initiative will not receive such support as a matter of self-exclusion. This results in a more organic strategy where support is granted on a case-to-case basis, with prospects of continuous change dependent on citizens' engagement. The communities themselves become responsible for local development instead of the municipality, as a form of governmentality (Woods et al., 2006) where the citizens are ‘set free’ to pursue their own version of development and their own interpretation of a viable village.

The planner in a municipality in northern Jutland outlines this approach by describing a rational approach to the scarcity of resources: “... they care about the development in their own village. We believe (...) we'll get most for the money and the biggest development and the best utilisation of resources (...) by saying, that we can't come and hold your hand, or run the projects for you, but we can definitely come and help you with counselling, sparring, and facilitation of what you are working with.”

Another example of the second approach is a municipality in western Jutland. For several years, they have had a special foundation which specifically supports the development of projects in the villages. The local communities are encouraged to submit project proposals. The foundation may provide up to 50 % of the funding required, which enables applicants to apply for further funding elsewhere with the benefit of having acquired existing support to strengthen their application. Help to develop village plans is also offered on a continuous basis to villages who approach the municipality. As such, the development is based on a principle of engaged commitment where the villages are tasked with being the proactive actors, and the municipality provides support. As the planner points out: “It is, what do you say, a voluntary arrangement, which rely on people out in the villages, which inputs some energy to bring something to life. We make an effort to point out that this is not the plans of the municipality. It is the plan of the village in terms of what they want.” The planner continues by mentioning that this gives the communities empowerment and a stronger will to finish the projects, since they are started from within rather than controlled top-down. Doubts regarding the equality aspect are considered, since only the active villages get resources, but it is mentioned that even some quiet communities engage in applying for one or the other project, though the interval is considerably longer than for some of the more active communities, and that “the equality aspect is in some way that all have the same opportunities ...”.

## 5. Analysis: Justifying differentiation

The results can be summed up in 3 main logics of differentiation, each divided into two subtypes. Table 1 presents an overview of these six subtypes of logics, while Fig. 3 shows them in the spatial justice matrix which illustrates the dimensions of justice and virtues. The distinction between the three logics should be seen as a theoretical abstraction, since each municipality does not only resort to one specific logic. The specific approaches described by the planners are often comprised of several different logics. Emphasis is, however, often placed on one particular logic with other initiatives introducing the perspectives found in other logics. The complexity of strategic village planning is shown to

**Table 1**  
Logics of differentiation and their subtypes.

Logics of differentiation	Function		Potential	Engagement		
Subtypes	1) Hierarchical differentiation	2) Existing services differentiation	3) Tangible potentials differentiation	4) Intangible potentials differentiation	5) Differentiation by civil society strength	6) Differentiation by actual activity level.
Short description	Division of zones (population based) to regulate what can exist in areas with different population levels.	Differentiation of villages based on existing services. Distribution will be based on needs.	Differentiation by whether villages have something tangible of value, like nature, art, tourism sector, etc., that hold potentials for development.	Differentiation by whether villages are seen to have potentials in terms of community life or projects, local identity, or a reputation and trajectory of growth.	Prioritisation of villages according to the perceived civil society strength or capacity of villages, often quantitatively measured.	Provision of a framework within which villagers are the ones in charge of initiating development.
Distributive or procedural justice dimension	Strong distributive justice focused on service distribution based on population parameters.	Strong distributive justice focused on geographical spacing of services to cover service needs.	Both. Often has a procedural element in the process of finding the qualitative potentials, but the later part is brought back to the officials in targeted distribution of resources for enabling potentials.	Procedural since intangible potentials, such as identity, require local inputs throughout the process.	Oriented to distributive justice, since resources are prioritised to support weaker villages or further support stronger villages.	Strong procedural justice element. With villages in charge of deciding the pace and needs in local community.
Equality or equity dimension	Equality oriented, since it enables or disables functions in villages according to a scale.	Equity oriented, since the aim is that all needs to become equal in terms of services; but difficult to distribute since distribution needs to be prioritised.	Equity focused, since strengths of each area is played to. Resulting in different targeted measures for development	Equity oriented, since focus is on strengthening the locally present strengths.	Dependent on whether effort is targeted toward weaker villages, if that is the case, it is equity focused.	But there is an argument for the opposite as well since there is an equal distribution of opportunities. Equality focused, since framework and resources are available to all, based on a 'first come, first served' basis



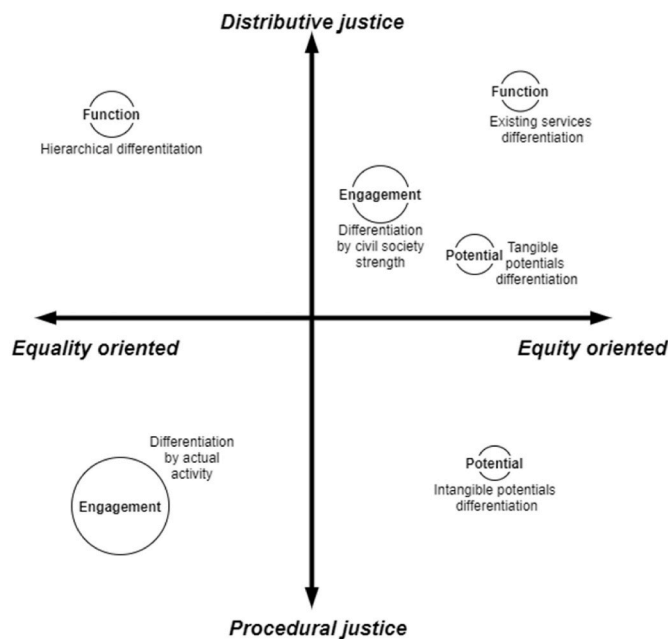


Fig. 3. The positions of the six subtypes of differentiation in the spatial justice matrix. The size of the spheres indicates the relative proportion of the number of municipalities emphasising these logics.

encompass logics which are seen as viable in some instances, but which do not supply the whole solution to the need for creating viable villages, since spatial realities, local needs and political influence are all part of the planning processes.

In the vertical justice dimension, Fig. 3 shows that the logic of functional differentiation is strongly skewed towards a distributive justice perspective focusing on the just distribution of resources in the rural areas of the municipalities through the supply of frameworks for development of functions and services or the supply of said services. But while Rawls' definition of distributive justice is skewed toward that of equity (Buchholtz et al., 2020), only the functional subtype focusing on differentiation of existing services is equity based. The other functional subtype securing a hierarchical differentiation operates on an equality principle instead, where the distribution is not based on needs but rather on position.

In the second logic, that of differentiation by potential, both subtypes are characterized by being equity focused, that is, differentiating villages by their particular strengths and weaknesses (potentials). The two subtypes of potentials can be distinguished by their focus on either tangible or intangible potentials, which also distinguishes them in terms of their position on the justice dimension: The tangible potentials subtype leans toward a distributive justice understanding, since potentials are located and resources are allocated based on these. The intangible potentials subtype leans more towards procedural justice, since locals need to be included in the process of formulating these potentials and must therefore be incorporated more actively in the activation of the local strengths. Categorically placing these two subtypes on the justice dimension scale is difficult as their approaches are more nuanced. The logic of potential was illustrated for instance by the municipality that launched initiatives to include locals in different processes to gain knowledge on the local potentials as mentioned above, and "beacons" which are of importance for the local identity in these areas. This was combined with potentials for development of further settlements due to proximity to infrastructure and job availability. Thus, the planning practice becomes a combination of both potential subtypes, utilising tools associated with both the distributive and procedural justice elements. In terms of the virtue dimension, both varieties of the logic of differentiation of potentials are located on the equity side of the matrix,

since the focus on potentials, tangible or not, necessitates varied approaches to supporting the local development. An equality approach, on the other hand, would hinder the specialised localised efforts.

The third and final logic, differentiation by engagement, is interesting, since the focus on the importance of strong communities is shared but results in two very different strategies and is positioned on opposing quadrants in the spatial justice matrix. In contrast, the variations of the two other logics were positioned in neighbouring quadrants. Despite focusing on citizens' involvement, the subtype of differentiation by strength of civil society is not positioned on the procedural justice side but on the distributive justice side because it is a matter of resource distribution in terms of targeting the strength or capacity of civil society. A weak civil society would, by this logic, have fewer formal memberships than a stronger one. Prioritisation of resources becomes a matter of distribution to generate development based on the resources inherent in the local areas. Focusing this distribution of resources to benefit the weaker societies is equity-oriented, since the data suggest where people would benefit the most from extra help in terms of planning support.

The subtype for differentiation by actual activity level, on the other hand, is bottom-up driven development, since citizens are required to make an effort to receive the resources available. This subtype is situated at the procedural justice end of the scale, because it emphasises creating opportunities for the locals to be involved in the development and planning processes. Resource distribution towards development is anchored on the initiative of locals, all communities having the same opportunity (in terms of availability) to contact the municipalities, which places this subtype in the equality virtue section of the matrix.

The logics presented above are not seen as new necessary tools for coping with the increased workload or demand in the strategic planning of villages. Rather, they are logics which have existed in the planning and governing of rural development for at least some time, but this strategic planning requirement has made them more explicit. The interviews were conducted during the initial phase of the first round of implementation, and therefore many interviewees express that this law provides an opportunity to gather and analyse data on the villages and rural settlements; however, the actualisation of this opportunity is slowed down or seldom used, because they resort to business as usual in some cases. This is not necessarily a failed attempt at strategic planning of villages but rather an inevitable outcome of the formulation of the law, namely providing flexibility in planning to accommodate existing measures and tools in the development of viable villages. As shown in the examples above, existing funds and tools are merely reframed to fit the demands of strategic village planning, supported by arguments that existing practices already meet the demands of the law in terms of current planning, budgetary restrictions, and political indifference.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Here we will discuss what further intra- and inter-municipal spatial justice consequences arise, when these logics are mixed on a regional level and villages are evaluated on different parameters in the planning for viable villages. We conclude with remarks on how this article's proposed spatial justice framework is not only of contribution to the literature on rural spatial justice, but can be of use in the further planning and developing of rural areas.

Attaining spatial justice in rural planning and development is riddled with complexity, in particular since interpretations of what is 'just' vary greatly. In the literature, we find that despite similarities, differences are visible in the two main interpretations of justice: distributive and procedural. In fact, they overlap, since the physical and social realms are mutually embedded. Furthermore, fairness in relation to (the virtue of) equality is a matter of discussion as well. In terms of pursuing rural spatial justice in particular, Nordberg (2020) recommends strategies for focusing on procedural and equity aspects of village development in village-to-village context, but the results from the above analysis of the interviews indicate that on municipal planning strategies this quadrant

in the matrix is unfortunately the least used, though all three differentiation logics are represented at the equity end of the continuum. The pursuit of procedural justice is often made on the basis of equality, with a risk of increasing the inequalities of development potentials between villages.

Villages are evaluated by different means, e.g., physical environment, observable data, potentials, engagement. Some municipalities differentiate through methods of participation in development narratives and projects by approaches resembling 'first come, first served' principles. Other municipalities focus strictly on local service provision as a means of distributing resources fairly and targeting localised development goals. Similarly, villages' development may be dependent on what is evaluated as important or as a deciding factor by their municipality: Is the commitment of the locals rewarded, or simply the village's proximity to the highway? This results in imbalanced starting positions for the villages that are dependent on the decisions that are made based on these dominant logics. The strategies oriented to procedural justice seem like a better enabler of local anchorage and engagement from the local communities, but they are in many ways dependent on a structural framework in the municipalities that can handle the variations and cooperation with the locals. The pitfall here is the danger of reproducing social inequality in terms of who is included in decision-making processes on the local level, but also on a municipal level, since some strategies operate with an equality principle where the 'strong' or already organised communities thus gain an advantage. The strategies oriented toward distributive justice instead cater to a 'more manageable' strategy, which limits impacting factors rising from local involvement, working with the local involvement in terms of anchoring projects locally but with scopes managed by the distribution of resources and differentiation through data-driven decisions.

Political influence is yet another issue on several levels. While there is no correlation between political party and majority logics of differentiation, other factors are noticeable in the data. Just as the literature points to the distance from political centres, suggesting that the decrease of broad representation in rural areas limits the chance of village level representation on the municipal boards. The results indicate that local politicians are approving and influencing the municipal planning in terms of the strategies formulated for the village planning, as seen in some examples of attempts to water down the proposed strategies in efforts to maintain a more content voter base. Secondly, on a local democratic level in terms of participation and local decision-making power, the implementation of engagement-driven strategies skews the decision power towards local citizens amping up the participatory development, though on the backdrop of unequal development trajectories since these favours the villages that are already strengthened by committed locals.

On an inter-municipal level, neighbouring villages across municipal borders will find themselves disadvantaged to their counterpart, since logics which define development trajectories and the tools used to get there could be very different. As such, we find that this dissonance in the logics of differentiation, represent a potential problem in terms of rural spatial justice. Some choices made in the differentiation of villages cause a discrimination in terms of processes of inclusion or service provision, dependent on which municipality these villages are located in. One village in a municipality with a guiding logic of functional differentiation by hierarchy is deprived of the procedural justice element which would be granted by another municipality following a logic such as the potential differentiation by intangible potentials; instead, it receives a more clearly defined regulation of zoning, constraints and opportunities, as well as allocated resources. This renders the issue of inter-municipal spatial justice complex, since the strategic planning for villages relies on very different interpretations of what is needed to attain viable development, and by which spatial justice values these goals are defined.

Tying this back to the discussion of equality or equity, the political and societal expectations must be taken into consideration, since spatial justice has many forms. By adding this dimension to the spatial justice

debate, we are better able to distinguish and discuss rural spatial justice, as we get a more nuanced view on the procedural and distributive justice. Visualising this by the spatial justice matrix introduced in this paper, we show that the differentiation logics pursued by the municipalities in their work with strategic village planning ultimately secure an element, or interpretation, of spatial justice. Issues arise however when the justice perspective is elevated to an inter-municipal or national discussion. Here, the differing interpretations may result in unfair and unjust distributions of resources and processes of inclusion.

One practical solution could be a closer cooperation between municipalities on the issue of village development, especially on the borders between municipalities. While some interviewees mentioned the clear benefits of cooperation, resource restraints meant that such municipal planning efforts across municipal borders would probably be neglected. Another solution could be a clearer guidance on the strategies expected, although this would cause conflict with the municipal self-governance and make the local political system redundant when it comes to rural politics, increasing the distance to political power. Nonetheless, the conclusion may be to follow the principle of equity on a governing level, enabling different solutions for different cases. But if both planners and researchers are at least aware of the logics found in this article's rural spatial justice framework that shape the rural landscape, we might, as Woods (2023) suggest, find ourselves on a path to a more just rural future.

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During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to shorten and condense written work by the authors. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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**Kasper Friis Bavnæk:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Annette Aagaard Thuesen:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Data curation.

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## Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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