



# Understanding Temporal Governance in Activation: A Municipal Swedish Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Swedish municipalities have assumed an increasingly vital role in labor market inclusion, particularly for individuals distant from employment. This article examines how municipal labor market units (MLMUs) enact activation policies through a temporal lens. From a mediated discourse analysis perspective, the study explores how frontline staff manage, negotiate, and resist temporal aspects embedded in national active labor market policies. Based on qualitative interviews and focus groups with 71 MLMU frontline staff across eight municipalities, three overarching themes were found: time perspective, time processes, and time friction. The findings reveal a fundamental tension between the individualized, flexible temporalities developed by MLMU staff, and the standardized, efficiency-driven timescales imposed by national activation policy, a tension that staff actively manage and negotiate. This temporal mismatch risks reinforcing exclusion for vulnerable groups and calls for a rethinking of activation policies aimed at better aligning timescales across levels toward more participant-centered and temporally responsive approaches.

## KEYWORDS

*activation policy / labor market inclusion / municipal labor market units / qualitative methods / Sweden*

## Introduction

In recent decades, Swedish municipalities have assumed greater responsibility for labor market inclusion, particularly for individuals distant from employment, by linking financial assistance more closely to activation requirements and making participation

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in local measures a condition for support. This strategy is intended to reduce municipal expenditure by encouraging, or compelling, recipients to reach ‘self-sufficiency’ (Starke & Hollertz 2023, Ulmestig & Waernbaum 2023). A central instrument in this local activation governance is the municipal labor market unit (MLMU), where frontline staff provide activation measures and support initiatives primarily targeting social assistance recipients. Despite MLMUs’ growing role in the local delivery of active labor market policy (ALMP), research on how these units is organized, experienced in practice, and what outcomes they produce remains limited (Panican & Ulmestig 2019).

Activation scholars have also warned that individualization and decentralization can prioritize formal compliance over substantive support, risking renewed exclusion and marginalization among vulnerable groups (Nybom 2012; Panican & Ulmestig 2019). Municipal labor market projects, often run with other welfare actors, may be shaped by ambiguous goals and conflicting methods. Employers, despite being crucial for labor market integration, are rarely engaged as active partners (Strindlund 2020; Strindlund et al. 2022).

Given the strong top-down influence of national ALMP on local practice, it is essential to understand how frontline workers navigate these complex institutional demands. This article addresses how activation policy is enacted in the everyday practices of MLMU staff and asks how do frontline workers interpret and implement activation measures in their work with individuals receiving financial assistance? How is time understood, managed, and negotiated by staff within local activation processes? And how do policy-driven temporal expectations shape staff practices and decision-making, particularly in relation to clients considered distant from the labor market?

Drawing on timescales (Lemke 2000) and pace (Scollon & Scollon 2004), the study analyzes how staff position themselves between long-term political intentions and clients’ lived realities, and how institutional expectations shape perceptions of ‘appropriate’ speed through activation pathways. This is especially relevant as activation increasingly targets groups far from employment whose situations often clash with standardized timelines (Clasen & Mascaro 2022). The study explores how temporal assumptions embedded in national ALMP and activation policies, such as how quickly individuals are expected to become employable, differ from the time frames that staff must navigate when working with individuals facing significant barriers to labor market inclusion.

## The Nordic welfare context

ALMPs have, since the early 1990s, increasingly linked income support to labor market participation and become central to employment strategies across Europe, including in the Nordic welfare states. Access to financial benefits is often made conditional on participation in activation measures to improve employability and support labor market or social inclusion (Andersen & Larsen 2024). Although activation policies vary across welfare regimes, they share the aim of promoting participation, easing rapid reintegration into employment, and reducing long-term reliance on welfare benefits (Eichhorst et al. 2008; van Berkel et al. 2017). Across contexts, they combine incentives with participation requirements that encourage or compel unemployed individuals to enter employment or engage in education and training (van Berkel et al. 2017).

Historically, ALMPs emphasized skill development and job-search aid. Since the 1990s, activation has incorporated stronger conditionality and behavioral requirements. These developments reflect shifts in welfare governance shaped by neoliberal policy ideas and new public management reforms, introducing standardized monitoring, mandatory job-search activities, and work-related obligations for benefit recipients (Andersen & Larsen 2024; Boulus-Rødje 2019).

The Nordic countries illustrate these shifts. Traditionally characterized by generous welfare provision and strong state responsibility for employment, Nordic systems have gradually strengthened activation requirements that emphasize labor market participation as a condition for receiving benefits (Johansson & Hornemann Møller 2009). Activation has evolved from labor market measures into a broader organizing principle of welfare governance. While national differences remain, unemployment is increasingly framed as a condition to be addressed through individual activity and responsibility, and recipients are portrayed as jobseekers with obligations rather than passive beneficiaries (Kildal 2001).

Research also highlights limitations. Programs may prioritize those considered closest to employment, while individuals facing complex or multiple barriers risk fragmented or insufficient support (Cronert 2022; Hansen 2020). Critics argue that strong conditionality can individualize structural labor market problems and reinforce stigma among welfare recipients (Andersen & Larsen 2024; Boulus-Rødje 2019). Although conditionality remains dominant, prior work points to the need for more inclusive approaches that address structural inequalities and better support vulnerable groups.

A substantial body of research examines frontline delivery, focusing on implementation and everyday welfare encounters. Workers responsible for activation, often termed frontline workers, street-level bureaucrats, or activation workers, constitute a heterogeneous occupational group with diverse educational backgrounds and competencies (Dall & Brauer 2024; van Berkel 2022; van Berkel et al. 2010). Activation is not implemented uniformly; it is interpreted, negotiated, and adapted within organizational contexts, shaping how requirements, support, and sanctions are applied (Caswell & Høybye-Mortensen 2015; van Berkel et al. 2017). In translating policy into practice, frontline workers exercise discretion, balancing supportive functions with controlling functions linked to monitoring, assessment, and enforcement of participation requirements (van Berkel et al. 2022).

Managerial and new public management inspired reforms have further governed frontline work through performance measurement and standardized procedures. While such reforms may constrain autonomy, research shows that frontline workers continue to exercise discretion and keep influence over how social and activation policies are implemented (Brodkin 2011; Evans 2011).

## The sociopolitical context in Sweden

In Sweden, the work principle forms a central underlying assumption within active labor market policy (Johansson & Hornemann Møller 2009; Junestav 2009). Its scope has expanded beyond unemployment: activation now also targets people on sickness absence, living with ill health, or facing marginalization (Eichhorst et al. 2008; Ståhl & Seing 2018). Since the early 2000s, time has become a key governance principle,

promoting return to work through standardized temporal logics rather than individualized rehabilitation processes (Seing 2014; Ståhl & Seing 2018).

Governance is distributed across national, regional, and local levels. Nationally, sickness and unemployment insurance are administered by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) and the Swedish Public Employment Service (SPES), whose frameworks are characterized by time limits and progressively tightened requirements. Temporal standardization is especially clear in sickness insurance. With the rehabilitation chain introduced in 2008, fixed assessment points were set up at 90, 180, and 365 days for entitlement to benefits. This reform shifted the SSIA's role toward checking timelines and assessing work capacity rather than coordinating support measures (Bengtsson & Jacobsson 2018). Entitlement is assessed at predetermined points, and requirements gradually move from returning to the individual's regular job to assessment against the entire labor market.

Similar logic is visible within the SPES, where participation, benefit levels, and interventions are commonly organized according to duration of unemployment. Benefit levels typically decrease over time, and, after set periods, individuals are referred to labor market programs. Research suggests these temporal frameworks do not always correspond to activity content or to individuals' needs (Bengtsson et al. 2024; Egebark et al. 2024). Since 2014, SPES restructuring has strengthened digitalization and coordination while reducing direct service provision and individualized support (Egebark et al. 2024; Nord & Bengtsson 2022). Overall, activation increasingly measures when something occurs rather than what occurs; individuals are expected to adjust to policy-generated tempos regardless of readiness.

Regionally governed healthcare provides treatment, rehabilitation, diagnostic assessments, and medical certificates central to SSIA decisions; these assessments may also be needed for subsidized employment or other support offered by the SPES.

Locally, municipalities manage social services, including means-tested financial social assistance and MLMUs. Social assistance functions as the welfare system's ultimate safety net when state-administered benefits are unavailable, for example, when individuals do not qualify for sickness or unemployment insurance. Since 1998, social services have been allowed to impose requirements for participation in competence-enhancing activities as a condition for receiving social assistance (Social Services Act 2001:453). The legislator's intention has been to strengthen skills and improve prospects for regular employment (Regeringskansliet 2011). Most municipalities have established MLMUs, yet their activities stay largely unregulated, leaving municipalities to decide organization and content and producing substantial local variation (Vikman & Westerberg 2017).

The state's time-regulated activation logic has redistributed responsibility in welfare practice. As state benefits have tightened and time limits become more central, individuals with complex needs have increasingly been redirected to municipal social services and social assistance (Panican & Ulmestig 2019). Municipalities have no legal obligation to provide labor market programs (Vikman & Westerberg 2017), yet financial incentives within social assistance encourage activation measures (Broström 2015; Panican & Ulmestig 2019). MLMUs thus become key actors for people excluded from, or not meeting eligibility criteria within, state-administered systems (Karlsson 2019).

Unlike the SSIA and SPES, MLMUs can impose activity requirements without fixed time limits (Broström 2015; SFS 2001:453), enabling longer-term and tailored work with complex barriers such as ill health, substance abuse, neuropsychiatric difficulties,

language barriers, or other social obstacles (Thorén 2014; Tjulin et al. 2024). This creates tension between the state's standardized temporal logic and a more negotiated, relational temporality at the local level: the state governs scheduled progression and control points, while MLMUs can work from individual circumstances and the client's life situation (Bengtsson et al. 2024).

In summary, Swedish activation governance is increasingly temporalized. State authorities regulate access to benefits and interventions through fixed time frames and progression requirements, while municipal labor market measures rely more on flexibility and individual adaptation. This divergence helps explain uneven implementation and why governance through time creates different conditions for participants depending on their position within the welfare system (Tjulin et al. 2024).

## Theoretical underpinnings

To interpret and discuss the empirical material, this study draws on MDA as both a methodological and theoretical framework. MDA focuses on how social action is mediated through discourse, tools, and social practices embedded in institutional and historical contexts (Scollon 2002). In this framework, actions are not seen as isolated but as part of a nexus of practice, that is, the combination of several recurring patterns of social action shaped by, and contributing to, broader social structures. For example, taking part in a municipal activation program can be seen as a nexus of practice involving repeated social actions such as signing attendance sheets, attending workshops, and reading feedback from coordinators. These actions are mediated through different tools and other discursive (i.e., linguistic or artefact) resources (cf. Scollon 2001). Municipal activation programs may include resources such as institutional routines, digital reporting tools, and discourses that position the participant as either 'motivated' or 'passive'.

One of several key analytical dimensions in MDA is the temporal constructions people make related to their actions and in their statements (Scollon & Scollon 2004: 168–170). In this study, we focus on the concepts of 'timescales' (Lemke 2000) and 'pace' (Scollon & Scollon 2004), which together provide a lens for analyzing how time functions as both structure and experience in activation policy. Lemke (2000) introduces the concept of timescales to understand how social actions and meanings unfold across different temporal layers. A policy decision, for instance, may run on a long timescale (months or years), while a face-to-face interaction unfolds over seconds or minutes. Actions at different timescales interact: Short-term decisions are often shaped by longer historical trends, while long-term policies are enacted through everyday micro-level practices. In our study, ALMP is conceptualized as a long-term timescale that shapes, and is shaped by, institutional routines and frontline practices.

Complementing this, Scollon and Scollon (2004) and Scollon (2005) introduce the concept of pace: the rhythm, speed, and sequencing of social action. Pace highlights how actions are temporally 'entrained', aligned with, or out of step with, other temporal cycles such as institutional schedules, bureaucratic procedures, or cultural norms. An action may be perceived as happening too quickly or too slowly in relation to expected tempos, causing friction, misalignment, or breakdown in communication and coordination.

While timescales offer a framework for analyzing the hierarchical layering of temporal processes, pace focuses on the lived experience of time within those structures.

As Scollon and Scollon (2004) emphasize, social actions do not occur in isolation but are embedded within, and synchronized with, other temporal patterns, such as daily routines, institutional calendars, or policy cycles. These rhythms interact across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, linking individual moments (e.g., an interaction) with broader organizational or societal temporalities (e.g., policy implementation cycles).

Importantly, Lemke's and Scollon & Scollon's contributions are not separate but interconnected. The pace of action can be understood as the micro-level manifestation of timescales. For example, a conversation between a caseworker and a jobseeker may be paced in a way that either aligns with or diverges from the long-term policy timescales that govern activation programs. Mismatches in pace and timescale, such as when institutional expectations for 'job-readiness' are accelerated beyond what is realistic for an individual, can create tensions or undermine coherence in practice (cf. Lemke 2000; cf. Scollon & Scollon 2004).

These concepts of time, which constitute only one of several dimensions within the broader framework of MDA, are useful for analyzing the temporal governance of activation policy, where state actors impose standardized timelines for progression (e.g., eligibility periods, assessment checkpoints), while local actors, such as MLMUs, may operate within different temporal logics. Timescales help us understand how long-term policy intentions are embedded in institutional routines, while pace allows us to examine how staff and clients navigate these expectations in day-to-day interactions.

Our analysis uses this temporal lens to investigate how frontline staff interpret and implement activation policy within MLMUs. We ask: How do staff manage temporal expectations in their work with individuals receiving income support? How is time understood, negotiated, and resisted within activation processes? And how do mismatches in timescale and pace, between national policy frameworks and local practice, shape the everyday enactment of ALMP?

By attending to both timescales and pace, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how time functions as a structuring, mediating, and contested element in welfare governance. By using the concepts of timescales and pace from the framework of mediated discourse analysis, we can trace how temporal expectations are constructed, enacted, and challenged in local welfare practices. Thus, we explore how activation policy is not simply implemented but temporally mediated and negotiated in everyday work at the municipal level.

## Methods

Next, we outline the methodological approach used to investigate these temporal dynamics in practice, focusing on how MLMU staff experience and respond to the temporal regimes of activation policy. A qualitative explorative study was designed, using inductive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021).

## Setting, participants, and data collection

This study is based on a selection of MLMUs in two Swedish regions, including four municipalities in each region (Tjulin et al. 2024). As labor market measures are non-mandatory

and unregulated at the municipal level, each MLMU operates with considerable autonomy organizing its activities (Vikman & Westerberg 2017). While there are notable differences in how the units approach participants, ranging from individually tailored interventions to more standardized, employment-focused measures (Bergström et al. 2023), this study focuses on the common features and practices across the selected MLMUs.

Data was collected through 11 focus group interviews and 8 individual interviews (71 frontline staff in the eight municipalities). The data collection was conducted between January 2023 and June 2024, each interview averaging approximately 90 minutes. Participants constituted a heterogeneous group across MLMUs, depending on how each unit was internally organized. Each municipality in Sweden organizes its own MLMU and decides how it collaborates with participants, creating local variations across the nation (Bergström et al. 2023, Ulmestig 2020). In general, the staff work with investigation, planning, and job search activities, and practical tutoring of labor market interventions, while others coach individuals within the MLMU interventions. Some staff work solely on employer contacts or combine with other tasks. Five MLMU managers were interviewed.

The data collection was conducted at the workplaces of the MLMU staff, and the groups were organized by professional roles: for example, managers were not in the same group as staff working with the target group. The focus group interviews were undertaken by three female researchers (the first three authors), all experienced in qualitative methods. The individual interviews by one female researcher (the second author) occurred at the respective workplaces. An interview guide based on overarching themes was used to ease conversation within the focus groups. The focus was to understand what the staff do in their daily work, how they describe their workdays and tasks, how work is organized, how they describe and work with the individuals in the MLMU interventions, and how collaboration with significant others works. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed immediately after each interview. Each researcher made field notes during the interviews.

## Data analysis

The interview material (transcripts and field notes) was analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). The familiarization with the data and the initial coding were performed iteratively by the first three authors. The transcripts were read multiple times, undergoing several rounds of reviewing and analyzing the initial codes across the dataset to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the material. Subsequently, the initial codes were categorized into themes when similar patterns were detected in the material and discussed among the authors. During this iterative process, adjustments based on insights gained from each reflective discussion round led to further refinement of the analysis. This resulted in the identification of three overarching themes: time perspective, time process, and time friction in relation to others. These themes are analytically distinct but empirically interconnected. *Time perspective* captures how time is articulated and negotiated in frontline interactions with participants, focusing on how pace and progress are assessed in relation to individual life situations (micro level). *Time as a process* refers to how time is organized through routines, phased interventions, and follow-ups within MLMUs, according to the staff, enabling organizational coordination

and decision-making (meso level). *Time friction in relation to other actors* addresses reported situations where these locally organized temporalities encounter standardized and externally imposed timelines governing other welfare institutions and policy frameworks (macro level). Within the theme of time process, one sub-theme was added, *the internal organization of time*, and within the theme time friction in relation to other actors the subtheme *political time frames and legitimacy*, due to ongoing comparisons and discussions among all authors regarding the hierarchical positioning of the initial three themes. Ultimately, the analysis revealed that the notion of time was a dominant and recurring concept throughout the data, serving as the central theme underpinning the findings. This evolving understanding highlights the dynamic nature of the thematic analysis process in capturing the essence of data. As data was collected, it was iteratively reflected upon to determine when new data no longer contributed to the development of novel codes or themes. The research team continuously discussed the richness and diversity of the data and its alignment with the study objectives.

To interpret the thematic analysis, selected concepts from mediated discourse analysis, that is, pace and timescales, were used as an analytical lens (Lemke 2000; Scollon & Scollon 2004). Following Timmermans and Tavory (2012), an abductive approach guided the analysis, enabling connections and patterns related to temporality to be shown beyond an exclusively inductive reading of the data. Mediated discourse analysis was thus applied in a deliberately delimited way, focusing on how time functions as a mediating resource across organizational and policy contexts rather than through a full discourse or nexus ethnography.

### Ethical considerations

The methodological and ethical considerations made in the study follow guidelines for good research practice based on the Ethical Review Act (Lag 2019:504), for example, on participant consent, voluntary participation, and protection of personal integrity measures. The study also has ethical approval for the project Local labor market programs: Challenges of and for an inclusive labor market (LOKA) Dnr 2022-05582-02.

### Results

The results section is structured around three inductively derived themes, with time emerging as the central organizing dimension of MLMU practice. Rather than treating time as a neutral background condition, the analysis approaches time as a constructed practical and organizational resource that shapes how activation work is conducted at different analytical levels.

To guide the reader, each theme corresponds primarily to a distinct level of analysis. *Time perspective* captures the micro level, focusing on how frontline staff adjust the pace of activation to participants' individual life situations and perceived readiness for work. *Time as a process* addresses the meso level, examining how time is organized within MLMUs through reported internal routines, phased interventions, follow-ups, and local priorities that structure progression over time. Finally, *Time friction in relation to other actors* reflects the macro level, as shown in the stated conceptions of how

municipal practices meet standardized, time-bound frameworks imposed by national agencies and welfare institutions.

Across these levels, the concept of pace is used as an analytical lens to examine how the rhythm and sequencing of activation work are aligned, or misaligned, between participants, organizational practices, and policy-driven timelines. While analytically separated, the themes are empirically interconnected: macro-level temporal demands shape organizational time processes at the meso level, which in turn condition how pace is negotiated in everyday frontline interactions. In this way, the analysis addresses time as experienced in everyday interactions (micro), organized through municipal routines and processes (meso), and constructed through institutional and political frameworks that define legitimate timelines and expectations (macro).

### **Time perspective (micro)**

At the micro level, MLMU staff describe their work as shaped by an understanding that participants' needs and capacities have changed over time. The participants they work with face a broad and complex set of challenges, including unemployment, mental and physical health problems, cognitive difficulties, limited social networks, and insufficient Swedish language skills. The group is described as heterogeneous and includes individuals with criminal backgrounds, substance use problems, mental ill health, neuropsychiatric disabilities, language barriers, and young adults who have not completed their education. According to frontline staff, participants need support from multiple actors, such as healthcare services, housing support, or adult education, before labor market-oriented measures become meaningful.

Staff describe an increasing experience that participants they currently work with require more time, both to stabilize life circumstances and to rebuild motivation and confidence after repeated experiences of exclusion and failure. A recurring challenge concerns individuals with limited Swedish language skills, particularly when combined with illiteracy, who need extensive and tailored support before employment or studies can be considered. In this context, staff often emphasize that they meet participants with negative self-image and repeated experiences of failure: 'It always goes wrong ... Why should I bother with this? I have tried it three times, and it fails every single time'. (FG 8)

This quotation illustrates a central temporal tension at the micro level: participants' lived experiences of repeated failure collide with expectations of forward movement and progress. The tension manifests in hesitation, withdrawal, and resistance to new activation measures. As a result, conventional, time-pressured activation risks reinforcing feelings of inadequacy rather than fostering engagement. Staff describe navigating this tension by deliberately slowing the pace of intervention, focusing first on restoring trust and confidence before introducing more demanding activities.

The analysis shows that staff articulate the primary goal of their work as supporting participants toward sustainable self-sufficiency rather than simply reducing dependence on financial assistance. Because the participants are described as distant from the labor market, principles associated with a work-first approach are often downplayed in favor of what staff describe as a rehabilitative or even 'pre-rehabilitative' focus. This reflects another micro-level tension: between policy ideals of rapid activation and staff assessments that participants first need time to rebuild basic capacities and motivation.

Despite organizational variations, staff consistently emphasize working from participants' individual needs, abilities, and interests. Two success factors emerge across interviews: allowing participants sufficient time to develop and evaluate their abilities within supportive and adapted settings and ensuring that they feel seen and acknowledged. Staff use the word 'timeless', which can be regarded as a discursive construction of their conception of the process as not predetermined but dependent on the participant's starting point and life situation. In practice, this means that progress is defined relationally and incrementally rather than through fixed end goals. 'We do not have the same demands here at MLMU ... we receive an assignment that we are to conduct'. (FG 7)

This statement points to a tension between external expectations and local practice. While staff are aware of broader activation demands, they describe navigating these by reframing their mandate in ways that allow for a slower, more individualized pace. Rather than imposing labor market standards from the outset, staff emphasize relational work, building trust, providing a sense of safety, and creating conditions under which participants feel able to engage. The consequence is that time is invested in activities that may not appear directly to be labor market-oriented but are considered necessary foundations for longer-term inclusion.

Staff describe how their role is shaped by being perceived not primarily as authorities, but as fellow human beings. By engaging alongside participants in voluntary activities, such as language practice, walks, crafts, or yoga, they look to reduce resistance and foster collaboration. This approach reflects how staff actively navigate the tension between expectations of progression and participants' need for protection from pressure. Going slowly is not described as passivity but as an intentional strategy to avoid overwhelming participants and support gradual change.

At the micro level, this time perspective is further reflected in the absence of fixed endpoints. Instead, staff work with short-term, adjustable goals calibrated to each participant's capacity, for example, gradually increasing participation from a few hours per week to more demanding activities. Participants' trajectories vary considerably; some may need one or two years to approach a workplace setting, while others progress more quickly. Staff emphasize recognizing and supporting even small steps forward, such as increased attendance or willingness to try new tasks. These small steps function as temporal markers in everyday practice, allowing staff to show movement and continuity over time in situations where rapid progression is neither possible nor meaningful.

The consequence of this approach is that continued participation in MLMU activities is legitimized if some form of progression can be shown, however limited. In this way, staff navigate the tension between stagnation and progress by redefining what counts as development at the micro level. This reflects the implicit logic of social services as a final safety net, where time is treated as a necessary resource for inclusion rather than a constraint to be minimized.

### **Time as a process (meso)**

While staff describe their work with participants as guided by an open-ended and individualized time perspective, this flexibility is translated into organizationally manageable forms through a set of structured time processes within the MLMUs. At the meso level, time is organized through assessment periods, phased interventions, and

recurring follow-ups, which enable individual progression to be followed, discussed, and worked on within the organization. These time processes reflect an ongoing balancing act between long-term, need-based support for participants and organizational demands for direction, purpose, and coherence in activation work.

Across the municipalities, a recurring pattern consists of a first assessment phase, often lasting between four and eight weeks, followed by regular progress reviews, typically every three months, regardless of the participant's overall progress. Several MLMUs describe an increasing emphasis on time-limited interventions to avoid participants staying indefinitely without a clear sense of progression or meaning. Here, a central tension becomes visible: while staff emphasize that participants need time, organizational work also requires markers of movement and direction. This tension is expressed through the discursive resources of fixed review points and time limits, which signal that activity should contribute to some form of development rather than serve as prolonged containment within the MLMU system.

But we have also gotten better at setting time limits for the interventions we offer... an internship cannot go on indefinitely; there must be a clear purpose for extending it. There always needs to be a clear purpose: "Why am I here? What am I supposed to be doing?" Moving away from just storing people... And we do not want them to remain stuck; otherwise, it becomes something else, another intervention. (FG 1)

This quotation illustrates how organizational time functions as a boundary-setting resource in everyday practice. The tension lies in the need to combine individualized pacing with organizational clarity. It takes concrete form in expectations that interventions should have a purpose that can be articulated and revisited over time. The consequence is that time limits are introduced not primarily to speed up participants' transitions to employment, but to avoid organizational drift and to keep a shared understanding among staff and participants alike of why an intervention is ongoing. Staff describe navigating this tension by using review points to renegotiate goals together with participants, reframing time limits as opportunities to pause, reassess, and adjust rather than as signals of failure or pressure to perform.

## The internal organization of time

At the organizational level, time is further structured through phased models of progression. Across the interviews, municipalities are described as organizing their initiatives into graded categories, ranging from low-threshold activities requiring minimal commitment, such as coffee meetups, CV writing, or language practice, to more demanding forms of work training. These phases are intended to support the gradual development of social skills, routines, and work-related capacities, with the longer-term aim of enabling progression toward education, employment, or, where relevant, other forms of long-term support such as disability benefits or supported employment. The phased structure makes individual processes discursively shaped, and thus comparable and communicable within the organization, while still allowing room for variation.

The actual time needed to move through these phases varies considerably and depends on participants' needs, interests, and assessed development rate. Work placements



organized within the MLMU can extend over several years and are subject to continuous evaluation based on staff's professional judgment and experience of what constitutes a reasonable next step. In contrast, external work placements are often more tightly delimited, commonly restricted to three-month periods. This differentiation illustrates how organizational time processes regulate expectations about duration, intensity, and outcomes across diverse types of interventions.

At the same time, staff place an increasing emphasis on explicitly defining the temporal scope and purpose of ongoing interventions:

If the purpose is work training, then that is what it is, and it is period-based. If it is a placement, it should lead to employment. We also set limits so that it does not become placement after placement after placement ... Time limits, with demands. Or without demands, depending on the purpose. (IPH 1)

This account illustrates how organizational time functions as a boundary-setting mechanism in everyday activation work. The emphasis on explicit time limits and discursively articulated purposes reflects an attempt to balance individualized pacing with organizational demands for direction and coherence. Rather than accelerating participants' trajectories, time frames and review points are used to prevent prolonged stagnation and to sustain the legitimacy of interventions as purposeful and goal-oriented.

There are also notable variations between municipalities in how these time frames are defined and applied. In the material, one municipality stands out by adopting a more standardized and time-bound approach across the entire process, while others describe their timelines as more fluid and adjustable. In this municipality, organizational practice emphasizes individual responsibility and reciprocal expectations throughout the process, with a clear focus on finding a quick route to self-sufficiency through employment. Rather than keeping its own work-training arenas, this MLMU primarily works with participants considered closer to the labor market, while individuals assessed as requiring more extensive or long-term support are referred to other municipal services. This contrast is not presented as a systematic comparison between municipalities, but as an illustration of how activation policies are enacted and temporally organized in diverse ways within a shared institutional framework.

This internal division of labor allows the organization to keep a clearer focus on progression and outcomes, but staff also note that participants may return after unsuccessful transitions and that some individuals stay within the system for extended periods. The consequence is that organizational timelines may appear more efficient without necessarily shortening participants' overall trajectories. Instead, participants' pathways are shaped differently depending on how each MLMU structures and prioritizes its internal time processes. Taken together, these findings show how meso-level organizational arrangements play a significant role in mediating individualized temporal needs and the practical constraints under which activation work is conducted.

### **Time friction in relation to other actors (macro)**

The analysis of time perspective and time processes shows that participants' pathways toward labor market inclusion often require individualized, flexible, and long-term

periods. However, these temporal needs often come into conflict with the standardized and time-bound frameworks governing other welfare actors. At the macro level, such mismatches generate temporal friction in the collaboration between MLMUs and surrounding institutions, shaping both the conditions for activation work and the experiences of participants.

Interviewees consistently emphasize that collaboration between various authorities, such as SPES, SSIA, the healthcare system, and the Swedish Migration Agency, is crucial to ensure that measures address existing needs and support participants' pathways toward labor market inclusion. However, collaboration also generates temporal friction due to the coexistence of different institutional timescales. Many participants are simultaneously connected to MLMUs, SPES, SSIA, and the healthcare system, each operating according to distinct timelines for assessments, decisions, and follow-up. As a result, MLMU staff must coordinate efforts across institutional boundaries where time moves at different speeds.

Due to language barriers, mental health issues, cognitive impairments, or unstable life conditions, participants are reported to often struggle to navigate these parallel timescales on their own. Staff therefore describe taking roles as coordinators, advocates, and informal case managers, supporting individuals far beyond their formal mandate to bridge these unsynchronized time frames. This temporal tension becomes particularly visible in situations where access to healthcare is needed to enable further activation steps. Long waiting times, fragmented services, and staff turnover, especially within psychiatric and addiction care, delay assessments and interrupt continuity. The consequence is that participants' progression toward work or education is postponed, often undermining motivation and hope. Staff describe how such waiting periods risk eroding the fragile sense of forward movement that activation aims to build, leaving individuals caught between institutional timescales over which neither they nor the MLMU has control.

At the same time, national agencies such as SPES and SSIA increasingly place responsibility on participants to manage their own cases through digital reporting systems, applications, and ongoing documentation. For participants with limited Swedish language skills or cognitive difficulties, these demands are said to often reinforce exclusion rather than autonomy. MLMU staff therefore describe taking on the temporal and practical work needed to meet institutional deadlines, aiding participants with benefit applications, reporting obligations, and contacts with authorities to keep processes moving. Here, a clear temporal dissonance appears while MLMUs strive to work at the pace of participants' everyday lives, they must continually adapt to the fixed and accelerated timelines imposed by other institutions. In practice, this means that MLMUs operate within a time structure not only by their own logic, but by the unsynchronized rhythms of the wider welfare system.

Temporal friction is also clear in cases where individuals circulate between interventions for extended periods without meaningful progress. Interviewees describe participants who, over several years, have received multiple forms of activation support without moving closer to employment, yet without receiving formal recognition that their work capacity is limited. The absence of clear regulations on when and how different authorities should assess reduced work capacity and initiate processes such as disability pension applications contributes to this situation. The consequence is that individuals stay 'in motion' within the system, repeatedly referred to new interventions that do not alter their overall trajectory.

And that we can also, at some point, be done with a task, to say, “Yes, but now we actually... we cannot have them for another ten years. It is not the right time... we have done all of this.” We need to be able to show that. (FG 1)

This quotation highlights how staff frame temporal limits as a way of making stagnation discursively visible and thus communicable to other actors. In the analysis, a tension is noticed between institutional expectations of continued activation and professional judgments that further interventions are unlikely to change outcomes. Staff describe navigating this tension by emphasizing the need to document time spent, efforts made, and conclusions reached, both to protect participants from endless cycling and to ease clearer collaboration with other authorities.

From a temporal perspective, collaboration with employers forms another friction within activation. Since MLMUs cannot offer the same monetary incentives as the SPES, collaboration with employers often depends on aligning participants’ readiness with employers’ time horizons, recruitment needs, and administrative capacity. Interviewees describe how wage subsidies and workplace adaptations provided by SPES are crucial for enabling employers to invest time and resources in individuals from the target group. At the same time, employers’ limited time for handling applications and administrative procedures may restrict their willingness to engage, creating added temporal constraints on placement opportunities.

As a result, MLMUs often rely on arguments related to social responsibility and offer non-financial support such as mentoring, training, and ongoing guidance to compensate for these constraints. Interviewees note that collaborations are most successful when employers have a genuine recruitment need, allowing activation timelines to align with business rhythms. Where such alignment is absent, staff describe tensions between the need to move participants forward and concerns about premature placements that risk failure.

This tension is reflected in differing strategies about the sequencing of interventions over time. Some interviewees emphasize the importance of extended periods in internally constructed work environments to prepare participants and reduce the risk of unsuccessful placements with external employers. Others argue that such environments may create lock-in effects, and that skills developed internally can instead be cultivated directly with employers, provided that sufficient support is offered. These contrasting approaches illustrate how decisions about employer collaboration are shaped by temporal considerations concerning readiness, risk, and sustainability, reinforcing time as a central organizing dimension of activation work.

### **Political time frames and legitimacy**

Beyond intra-agency collaboration, temporal friction also arises in relation to local and national political governance. Managers describe increasing difficulties in communicating the time required by the current target group to politicians, particularly as participants’ pathways toward self-sufficiency have become longer and more complex. A central tension appears between political expectations of prompt results and the professional assessment that meaningful progress for this group often unfolds slowly and unevenly.

This tension is expressed in how the ‘work-first’ logic is questioned by staff, in relation to participants with extensive health, language, or social barriers. Managers describe how political representations of the labor market tend to assume that employers can readily absorb individuals who are formally activated, while staff experience a reality where even small steps, such as leaving the home or keeping basic routines, require substantial time and support. The consequence is a recurring struggle to legitimize long-term, low-intensity interventions within political time frames that prioritize visible outcomes.

There is a large, silent group that goes unnoticed. We want to highlight them. A large, silent group that is unseen. And they need all the help they can get. That’s why the labor market departments are needed in this long country. (FG 5)

This quotation illustrates how staff frame temporal slowness not as failure, but as a condition for inclusion for a largely invisible group. However, the lack of political recognition of such temporal needs contributes to a sense of diminished legitimacy of MLMU work. Staff and managers describe navigating this tension by reframing quality in temporal terms, emphasizing direction, appropriateness, and sustainability rather than speed: ‘Quality means helping an individual move forward positively in their life. Even if they ultimately receive disability benefits, that’s still quality... recognizing that everyone has their own journey’. (CFG 2)

Here, quality is articulated as alignment between individual capacity and proper timing, rather than rapid labor market entry. This redefinition functions as a coping strategy within a governance context where political time frames do not easily accommodate long-term trajectories. In this way, political temporal expectations become a source of macro-level friction that shapes how MLMUs justify, organize, and give meaning to their work.

## Discussion

This article set out to explore how activation policy is enacted within MLMUs in Sweden, with a particular focus on how time is constructed, organized, and experienced in everyday work with individuals distant from the labor market. Drawing on MDA and the concepts of pace and timescales (Lemke 2000; Scollon & Scollon 2004), the discussion is structured across three interconnected levels: micro, meso, and macro.

### Micro level: Adapting to individual pace

At the micro level, the findings show that MLMU staff shape their work around participants’ individual time needs. Staff describe a growing, experience-based categorization of certain individuals as ‘in need of time, not only in the sense of requiring prolonged support, but also in terms of needing specific types of interventions. These include trust-building, low-threshold relational support, and gradual labor market-oriented activities that do not necessarily aim for rapid employment. This approach can be understood through the concept of pace, which captures how staff adjust the rhythm and speed of



interventions in relation to participants' readiness, past experiences, and life circumstances. Such practices stand in contrast to the time-restricted and employment-focused measures emphasized in dominant ALMP context. This is especially relevant considering earlier research showing that participants often experience activation programs as ineffective or meaningless when repeated interventions unfold over time without leading to stable employment (Fredriksson 2022; Giritli-Nygren et al. 2022), and that support often lacks temporal continuity and sustained recognition (Govender 2023).

### **Meso level: Organizational strategies and discretionary space**

At the meso level, the results show that MLMUs exercise organizational discretion over time, enabling practices that prioritize long-term and process-oriented support over fixed or accelerated timelines. Staff report that, as long as participants show signs of progress, even if slow, they are allowed to remain in the program and continue receiving support. This contrasts with other welfare state actors, whose access to support is strictly time-bound and contingent on measurable advancement.

However, this flexibility is not without limitations. Staff often say that, despite working with a broad segment of the population, their efforts are not always seen as legitimate or valued. This perceived lack of recognition partly stems from the fact that municipalities have no formal mandate to provide labor market services, making such activities both voluntary and financially insecure. The absence of a formal mandate not only weakens the institutional legitimacy of municipal activation work, but also constrains its temporal legitimacy, as long-term and non-linear processes are more difficult to justify within policy frameworks that privilege short-term and measurable outcomes. Although the Swedish SoL allows municipalities to link income support to competence-enhancing activities, the absence of a statutory obligation limits the institutional weight of this work. National policy actors, including the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), have long advocated for a formalized municipal role in labor market inclusion, one that would also entail stable financial compensation.

The lack of a formal mandate reinforces a policy environment in which the activation conducted by municipal staff stays structurally devalued. Since success is largely defined in terms of rapid transitions to work or education, the time-consuming and process-oriented nature of the work, often grounded in social work principles, is made invisible. As such, what is not easily measured (e.g., trust-building, life stabilization, personal development) is not counted, and the professional competence needed to ease these transformations goes unrecognized. Moreover, this devaluation is compounded by a political discourse that frames long-term recipients of income support as unwilling to work or lacking motivation thereby casting municipal activation work as a simple task of 'getting people into jobs', rather than the complex and relational change process it often is. This perceived lack of recognition reflects a broader debate about how quality is defined within activation work and how social work approaches are often devalued when they do not deliver rapid or quantifiable outcomes. As Ulmestig (2024) argues, the dual structure of Swedish activation policy embeds structural inequality, whereby municipalities are tasked with supporting individuals with long-term and complex needs, yet without formal mandates or resources that would legitimize the time needed for such work.

## Macro level: Policy timescales and structural frictions

At the macro level, the findings highlight how the long-term restructuring of Swedish activation policy has institutionalized a temporal logic that prioritizes efficiency, short-term results, and accelerated transitions to employment. State actors such as SPES and SSIA operate under predefined time frames for support eligibility, most clearly through instruments such as the rehabilitation chain introduced in 2008. These time-regulated systems have contributed to an overflow of individuals into municipal support structures (Panican & Ulmestig 2019).

The ongoing government proposal for mandatory activation requirements (Regeringskansliet 2024) continues this policy trajectory but also acknowledges practical concerns, including risks of legal uncertainty, lack of coordination, and the exclusion of individuals unable to engage in full-time activities. Ulmestig and Panican (2021) describe how institutional logics clash in municipal–PES collaboration, with unclear responsibility and fragmented coordination contributing to friction. Municipalities are increasingly responsible for individuals no longer eligible for support given from welfare state agencies governing from national level, yet lack clear policy mandates, leading to frustration and systemic inefficiencies.

Here, the concept of timescales (Lemke 2000) provides an analytical lens for understanding how short-term micro-interactions, organizational routines, and longer-term policy trajectories intersect. Empirically, our material suggests that the macro-level shift toward stricter activation since 2008 has influenced the organization of activation measures on meso-level, with increasing emphasis on measurable progress within predefined time frames. These expectations filter down to the micro level, where MLMU staff must navigate the dissonance between participants' lived time and the system's standardized demands. What appears is a clear *desynchronization* between temporal logics at various levels: participants' personal rhythms and long-term needs (micro), the adaptive routines of municipal actors (meso), and the time-bound efficiency model of national activation policy (macro). In Scollon and Scollon's (2004) terms, actions are no longer temporally *entrained*, they fall out of sync, which produces friction, inefficiency, and risks of marginalization. Concretely, this means that actions that are expected to follow one another in a coordinated temporal sequence such as healthcare assessments, activation measures, and benefit eligibility are governed by incompatible timelines, making it difficult for participants and staff to move coherently through the system.

At the same time, the findings show that MLMU staff actively try to recreate a pace-responsive practice, in which time is treated as a social and relational resource rather than an administrative constraint. These efforts reflect a normative commitment to preserving social work values such as dignity, inclusion, and responsiveness within a system increasingly defined by metrics, output, and speed.

## Methodological and theoretical considerations

A methodological strength of the study has been the application of the theoretical frameworks within MDA, specifically the concepts of pace (Scollon & Scollon 2004) and timescale (Lemke 2000). The MDA analytical framework underscores the complex interplay between timescales, power dynamics, and systemic structures, offering a



nuanced understanding of how activation policies shape the practices of MLMU in relation to time. It offers critical insights into the temporal dimensions of social interaction and the ways participants navigate, negotiate, and resist temporal constraints. Here, the concepts of pace and timescales have highlighted tensions within a nexus of practice, such as mismatches between individual, organizational, and institutional expectations of ALMP, which create tensions on all levels among the actors involved. Also, pace reflects participants' agency in shaping or resisting the temporal structures imposed by the ALMP. For example, slowing down the intervention process for target group needs might be an act of resistance against a fast-paced political and societal environment.

A methodological reflection may concern the definitions and applications of the concepts of pace and timescale, which can be seen as overlapping. Refinement of the concepts may be needed; nevertheless, we claim that the general theoretical perspective of time has been rewarding in this analysis and future research.

## Conclusion

Our findings contribute to ongoing knowledge that calls attention to time as a dimension of welfare governance (cf. Seing 2014). By illustrating how temporal tensions between policy and practice manifest at multiple levels, and how they are negotiated in frontline work, we underscore the need for a more temporally responsive activation policy.

The findings highlight a hierarchical structure where macro-level authorities impose timescales that conflict with the micro-level realities of participants and MLMU staff, that is, how structural timescales conflict with the realities of those implementing and experiencing activation measures. This dynamic may intensify inequalities and reinforce participants' marginalization. The analysis shows that the MLMUs' process for the target group of reaching a position in the labor market simply needs to be allowed to take time. This pace differs from that of other welfare actors. For the MLMU staff, the goal is to integrate MLMU participants into the labor market and support their journey toward self-sufficiency. This goal could have both activation and humanitarian origins. Nonetheless, a central challenge for MLMUs is how to communicate to political decision-makers about the pace and time processes required by their target group. We could also find traits of two conflicting discourses, a discourse of holistic value for excluded individuals versus a reductionist/NPM discourse of activation politics and policy being acted out in the interviews.

The study confirms the results of others and shows that activation policies may both enable and limit labor market inclusion (cf. Nybom 2012; Boulus-Rødje 2019; Panican & Ulmestig 2019). Our findings suggest a risk that prolonged activation trajectories without meaningful progression may contribute to experiences of meaninglessness and to individualized interpretations of failure, particularly when time-consuming efforts do not lead to concrete opportunities. To promote genuine inclusion, a more nuanced understanding of both individual and structural factors is needed, and a re-evaluation of what activation truly entails in policy. Such a policy would recognize the diversity of individual life rhythms and the organizational realities of municipal implementation. Without aligning timescales across levels, the current system risks reinforcing exclusion for those who cannot meet the tempo of policy-driven activation. Instead, we argue for flexible, participant-centered time frames that uphold social work principles and

support sustainable labor market inclusion. While prompt progression is important for participants in precarious situations (cf. Standing 2011), activation policy must balance this urgency with the need for sustainable, dignified, and individually responsive pathways toward work inclusion.

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