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# Street-level priority-setting: The role of discretion in implementation of RDI priorities

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# The objective and the context of the study

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- How do research administrators develop and perform discretionary activities in implementing RDI priorities?
- Explores the issue through a case study of the Swedish Energy Agency (SEA) - the main funding agency of energy relevant RDI in Sweden



# Strategic priority-setting at SEA

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- Operates under the Ministry of the Environment and Energy
  - Responsible for preparing the National Energy Bill
- Vision 2050: secure, sustainable and resource effective energy supply, no net omission of greenhouse gas in the atmosphere. Global role model etc.
- Priority-setting: stakeholder process, focusing on a number of areas in the energy sector, and specific technological fields (transport, biofuels, buildings, energy systems, power systems and energy intensive industry)
- Thematic areas are intersected with four cross-cutting themes: general energy systems, sustainable society, business development and commercialization, and international cooperation.



# Possible framework/literature review

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- Priority-setting
  - Top-down/bottom-up
  - Thematic/functional
- Systemic/Process perspective on priority-setting (e.g. *Bosin 1992, Stewart 1995, Salo & Liesö 2006, Hellström et al 2017*)
- Policy implementation
  - Street-level bureaucracy (*Lipsky 1980*)



# Study design & Data

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- Inductive design
- Units of observation: research administrators at SEA
- Unit of analysis: the discretionary strategies employed by the administrators
- Main source of data: 16 semi-structured interviews
- A general inductive approach was applied to analyse the interviews



# Results – overview I

Discretionary dimension	Activity	Examples
<b>Scope</b> (Regulating the inflow of new knowledge and ideas to the agency)	<i>Broadening scope</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing researchers to inform the agency by new, interesting ideas/knowledge fields</li> <li>• Expanding the agency's/program's base of research performers</li> </ul>
	<i>Narrowing scope</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining or decreasing epistemic investments based on routine assessments of the market's internal capacity to stimulate certain fields/applications</li> <li>• Identifying RDI niches of potential national relevance and steering research/epistemic competencies towards such new niches</li> </ul>
<b>Programming</b> (Interpreting the relationship between strategy and program design)	<i>Downward programming</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dictating the work process of how strategic priorities translate into RDI programs</li> <li>• Formulating the content of RDI programs on the basis of strategic priorities</li> </ul>
	<i>Upward programming</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Starting from the base of RDI projects when designing programs</li> <li>• Build new RDI programs by collapsing existing portfolios</li> </ul>



# Results – overview II

Discretionary dimension	Activity	Examples
<b>Criteria</b> (Tweak and apply criteria as devices to support programming)	<i>Flexibility in use</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relaxing the use of criteria</li> <li>Making subjective but adequate interpretations of criteria</li> <li>Legitimizing choice, ex post, by referring to criteria</li> </ul>
	<i>Selectivity in use</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formulating criteria that support assumptions of what benefits the RDI program</li> <li>Tweaking general criteria to support the administrators personal interest/field</li> <li>De-selecting/removing criteria when perceived as obstacles</li> </ul>
<b>Epistemic trade-offs</b> (Determining the portfolio's balance)	<i>Steering towards basic science</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating new funding structures/categories in order to steer funds away from innovation and demonstration towards basic science</li> <li>Change the direction of ongoing programs by formulating new requirements, to the benefit of basic science projects</li> </ul>
	<i>Steering towards application and innovation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reversing the direction of programs from basic to applied sciences by creating new conditions for the researchers</li> <li>Modifying the governance structures of projects in order to re-orient direction from basic science towards application</li> </ul>



# Preliminary reflections

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- A central insight: ‘street’ priorities concern both content (epistemic aspect) and form/organization (social aspect)
- Discretionary activities involved in RDI priority implementation can generate both thematic and functional ‘street’ priorities





## Next steps/key outstanding questions

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- Relation between organizational conditions and discretions in RDI funding agencies
- Relation between discretions and epistemic outputs
- Continuation of priority-setting as process of translation



# Thanks!

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