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# Sensing from the middle: middle managers' sensemaking of change process in public organizations

Feim Blakçori<sup>a</sup> and Alexandros Psychogios<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Senior Lecturer in Business and Management, AFG College with the University of Aberdeen, Doha, Qatar;

<sup>b</sup>Professor of International Human Resource Management, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK

## ABSTRACT

At the core of sense-making is its fundamental function of creating discursive order to equivocal occurrences. Although researchers have emphasized the organizational and managerial factors that trigger sense-making in settings, fewer things are known on how middle managers' discursive sensemaking is constructed during the process of change in the public sector. In this empirical study, we explore middle managers' sense-making in public organizations, that constrain the flow of change in reforming public governance. The research draws on qualitative data garnered from 31 interviews with middle managers in three public organizations in two periods of time (2016 and 2017). We illustrate *managing divergences* and *strategizing sensemaking* of the change process as intricate and multidimensional means of middle managers' sense-making framework of ensuring change in the public sector. We argue that middle managers intensify their commitment to learning from change and therefore live the organizational life that sometimes demands commiserating the lack of exerting structural power by highlighting the contextual myopic circumstances of institutional dependence. Theoretical and practical implications are also elaborated.

## KEYWORDS

Change; middle managers; public organizations; sense-making

## Introduction

“There is more to sense-making than Karl Weick but it doesn't make much sense without him” (Colville, Pye, and Brown 2016, 11). Indeed, Colville and his colleagues are very true; almost every progress made in the sense-making literature is a contribution derived from Weick's research. Intrigued by the development of the Weickian conceptualization of sense-making in organizational studies, researchers have recently intensified their efforts to explore middle managers' sense-making in organizations (Balogun and Johnson 2005; Beck and Plowman 2009; Huy 2011; Rouleau and Balogun 2011; Smith, Plowman, and Duchon 2010; Teulier and Rouleau 2013). These studies critically examine how middle managers construct knowledge regarding organizational processes and nurture learning in the settings by following a structuralist/hierarchical perspective. Nonetheless, the pressure of the fast-changing business environment depicted by an unprecedented level of complexity manifested into ambiguity between organizational front lines and industry boundaries urged researchers to increase their interests to better understand middle managers' sense-making of organizational change (Frow, Marginson, and Ogden 2005;

**CONTACT** Feim Blakçori  [feim.blakcori@afg-aberdeen.edu.qa](mailto:feim.blakcori@afg-aberdeen.edu.qa)  Senior Lecturer in Business and Management, AFG College with the University of Aberdeen, Doha, Qatar.

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Ghorbal-Blal 2011; Vough and Caza 2017; Introna 2019). Extensive studies have therefore emphasized different approaches that middle managers employ when they create, negotiate or even diffuse meaning in organizations (Hoon 2007; Thomas, Nelson, and Silverman 2005). Scholars prioritized sense-making toward the bottom level or functional level (Nielsen 2009; Teulier and Rouleau 2013). Others focused on upward sense-making, where middle managers were not only considered as recipients but also as influencers of change (Heyden, Sidhu, and Volberda 2018; Vickers and Fox 2010). Finally, others integrated both approaches (Heyden et al. 2017; Raes et al. 2011).

Middle managers' sense-making is recognized as a social means in organizational settings (Balogun and Johnson 2005). For example, when Huy (2002) referred to the emotional balance of organizational continuity and radical change, he described middle managers as lynchpins, acting as mediators between executives and front line (Strike and Rerup 2016) or "between the operating and the apex" (Minzberg 1989, 98), which shapes the theoretical position taken on this article as well. Knowing that organizational change is crucial for short-term competitiveness and long-term survival, Labianca, Gray, and Brass (2000) found that employees observe middle managers' commitment to change. Locating managers in the genuine middle of practically implementing change is an indication of replacing organizations as the key analytical category with organizing, so shifting the attention from entities to processes (Langley and Tsoukas 2017). Shifting the focus toward organizing, and following a process perspective concomitantly purports the need for organizations to continuously disintegrate processes, such as organizational structure, reviewing decision-making processes, and shifting organizational boundaries, which legitimizes the role of middle managers as sense-makers of change (Ghorbal-Blal 2011) or as Balogun and Johnson (2005) call them 'agents of change'. Therefore, change creates an interesting context whereby middle managers are key to preventing oscillation and failure (de Rond, Holeman, and Howard-Grenville 2019; Weick 1995) either in volatile or crises situations (Antonacopoulou and Shaffer 2014), by giving meaning to cues and frames that requires engaging in social processes (Maitlis 2005).

Although the literature on middle managers has provided interesting developments on sense-making, nonetheless, only a few studies have explicitly scrutinized sensemaking in the public sector. With a few exceptions (Fernandez and Rainey 2006; Robertson and Seneviratne 1995; Teulier and Rouleau 2013), the rest of the literature remains silent in emphasizing the cruciality of sense-making during the change process in public organizations (Stewart and Kringas 2003). For instance, Teulier and Rouleau (2013) focus on interorganizational sense-making work and how it is handled with issues of industry-wide significance. The authors embrace an internal landscape by drawing on the translation model, which aims to investigate how ideas flow from one context to another and are transformed from one language to another through a set of editing rules. This research distinct itself in nature, scope and context from Teulier and Rouleau, whereby we are more interested in middle managers' sense-making as a process that creates order in times when disorder emerges as long as actors do not move toward processes of cognition (Maitlis 2005). We conceptualize change, in the public sector, as a social process that demands complying with legislation that determines even how sense-makers make sense of structural development, structural integration and departmental changes. Very little knowledge exists in the sense-making literature regarding middle managers' sense-making in transition economies where the public sector operates on different terms and priorities, which brings more challenges into the system. In particular, the theoretical dispositions on middle managers' sense-making exclude the criticality of turbulent and transitional contexts that might produce conducive theoretical and practical knowledge regarding sense-making and change far away from processes of cognition. Although we acknowledge the contribution of Balogun and Johnson (2005), nevertheless, we do not see the change process from the perspective of top-down change plans of recipient cognition and the emergent, unpredictable nature of strategic change. We concomitantly purport that change is a social and discursive process that constitutes an effective collaboration among actors, rather than

accentuating the need to move toward processes of cognition. And the respond to the change process does not arise, at least in the public sector, from lateral, informal social process of interaction between middle managers as claimed by (Balogun and Johnson 2005), but the respond to change process arises from formal, constructive forms of discussions between middle managers and employees. We however do not aim to research middle managers discussions or discursive abilities per se, including how their discourse is manifested and which activities when engaged in tasks prompt change as mentioned by (Rouleau and Balogun 2011). Because it could be considered highly unlikely that middle managers are influencers, at any stage, of the change process including activities across multiple stakeholders, upwards, downwards, and horizontally in the public sector. Therefore, this research seeks to explore the role of middle managers in the change process, and how they make sense of various cues, frames and accounts, which entail making order of complex processes of change. It is intended to provide a new theoretical development from another context, where the public sector faces constant external interference from different stakeholders that might even influence the way middle managers construct sense-making during challenging times, such as change. This moreover is in line with Balogun and Johnson (2005) who suggest more research about how middle managers, given their role in change, make sense of and therefore contribute to change outcomes in different change contexts. Acknowledging the silence of the literature of sense-making in the public sector alongside researching sense-making in more formalized workplaces such as public organizations in a transition context motivates this research that explores the following research question: how do middle managers make sense of the process of ensuring change in public organizations?

## Literature review

The literature review is organized around three themes: middle managers' change process in the public sector, middle managers' sense-making of change process in the public sector and middle managers sense-making and change in public organizations

### *Middle managers' change process in the public sector*

The public management literature recognizes the need for middle managers to implement changes (Abramson and Lawrence 2001), as well as to persuasively communicate change through an ongoing process of sharing ideas with important actors and stakeholders in organizations (Rossotti 2005). Change in the public sector is associated with the inclination to modernize operation processes, change schemas, add new roles and modify tasks, which triggers middle managers to persuade employees of the need for change (Bingham and Wise 1996). Moreover, change in public organizations is subjected to environmental characteristics, such as the intensity of political influence, complex structures, and avoiding bureaucracy (Rainey 1997). In this respect, middle managers in public organizations follow a very standardized form of change where the influence of various stakeholders might constrain or delegitimize their efforts in establishing a systemic change (Stensaker and Falkenberg 2007) which, as other researchers point out, in times of political influence this may diminish middle managers' self-motivation and actions (Buchanan and Badham 2008). To illustrate this, Wollmann (2000) accentuates the inconsistencies of middle managers in convincing both audiences about the implementation of reforms in the public sector in Germany, and the stories told used to position middle managers in the "sandwiched middle" being attacked from above and below (Gjerde and Alvesson 2020). Such challenges were indicated in industry sectors, such as healthcare (Modell 2001) and education (De Boer, Enders, and Leisyte 2007), which expose the effects of change in some other sectors as well (Teulier and Rouleau 2013).

The literature on public management emphasizes two important areas that middle managers need to consider during the change process, namely, the clarity of the strategy for change and the level to which this strategy is supported by other stakeholders in public organizations (Bingham and Wise 1996). The reason is that change in public organizations demands broader support from upper management in times when structural transformation, downsizing and merging occur, as it creates a new environmental situation where social fragmentation and polarization emerges. Bingham and Wise (1996) emphasize that specific objectives correspond with the formal policy when middle managers actively contribute to implementing the strategy of change, which enhances their role, importance and accountability for displaying skills to deliver change in specific departments or sectors. Although middle managers in public organizations demonstrate structural responsibility in leading major changes, however, they also emphasize a specific policy objective and coherent thinking regarding the linkage between the initiative of change and the support received from upper management to accomplish the desired outcomes (Grizzle and Carol 2002). Attaining organizational and/or structural support involves serious challenges as a result of the constraints that might be imposed by the environmental context in which public organizations operate (Golembiewski 1985). The environmental context might interfere in the discursive sense-making by discouraging effective collaboration among actors during change (Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant 2005). Therefore, middle managers in cross-structural and sector collaborations articulate, negotiate and enact new meaning through interactions with internal and external stakeholders in public organizations (Teulier and Rouleau 2013). Thus, Sahlin and Wedlin (2008) emphasize that middle managers who are implementing changes in public organizations must display skills in attaining structural support from powerful actors. Moving this debate toward middle managers' sense-making of change in public organizations is another key point to better understand this sector as far as the academic literature is concerned, which will be discussed in the following section.

### ***Middle managers' sense-making of change process in the public sector***

That middle managers handle the change process including making an effort to clearly articulate the strategy of change, as well as the level to which the strategy is supported by other stakeholders in the public sector, has not been unnoticed (Bingham and Wise 1996). Middle managers demonstrate formal responsibility in leading major changes. The failure to deliver change –will create policy ambiguity, which can sow confusion that calls upon middle managers to ruminate the situation and bring about the change that policy-makers intended (Grizzle and Carol 2002; Meyers and Dillon 1999). As demonstrated by Rossotti's (2005) research at Internal Revenue Service where middle managers attained support from governmental authorities and political actors that was manifested with a clear, well-conceived, well-organized and -implemented change process in the public sector.

As it can be seen, the literature of sense-making acknowledges middle managers' initiative of change in the public sector (Glaser, Stam, and Takeuchi 2016; Introna 2019). The structural engagement of leading initiatives of organization-broad change drives middle managers to utilize their structural power to create synergies across divisions, and demonstrate their courage and ability to fulfill strategic tasks, which are vital for internal career expansion, mobility, advancement and learning from failure (Mom, Van Den Bosch, and Volberda 2007; Vough and Caza 2017). This structural engagement was a matter of stringent observation where Christianson et al. (2009) looked at how leaders/managers did make sense when reacting to the unexpected collapse of a museum, which provided plenty of learning evidence as it required efforts to reduce the ambiguity created, as well as informing members about the organization's unfulfilled potential. At the same time, Catino and Patriotta (2013) studied sense-making in the Italian Air Force, where they found that the meaning "Air Force Pilots" is essential in increasing learning, and enables

actors to detect, report and correct future mistakes. In addition, Ron, Lipshitz, and Popper (2006) pinpoint the relevance of sense-making that orients toward giving meaning to issues rather than individuals in post-flight revision, and continuing to focus on psychological safety that promotes team learning and cooperation. Thus Kayes (2004) contextualizes sense-making in a breakdown in managerial learning during the 1996 Everest catastrophe whereby eight climbers lost their lives. Dwelling on the main causes of this catastrophe, he found that this disaster occurred as an upshot that climbers failed to appreciate the equivocality of the situation, and they continued to work based on their previous beliefs rather than engaging in sense-making on the premise of information and learning (Ivanova-Gongne and Törnroos 2017). This perspective created a means of limiting sense-making and allowed for nonreflective behavior. The climbers were able to recognize the equivocality of the situation, but limited sense-making by denying the seriousness of the fatality associated with the disruption (Dougherty and Drumheller 2006). Therefore, the above-mentioned events exemplify that the mediating position of middle managers in public organizations is complex, since their creation and interpretation of sense-making is constructed around different internal and external actors/boundaries that determine the nature of making sense of crisis (Hardy and Maguire 2010).

### ***Middle managers sense-making and change in public organizations***

Middle managers' sense-making and organizational change in public organizations are important in creating an immense story in which the latter is context dependent, unpredictable and a non-linear process (Balogun and Johnson 2005). Sense-making in creating this story is perceived as a spatial logical rationalization of an emerging situation that accentuates time to structurally confront discrepancies. Isabella (1990) recognized the central role of middle managers' sense-making in the process of change, and coupled sense-making and change as a phenomenon of time whereby paraphrasing Ford and Ford (1994), people usually speak about the events in which something emerges to become, or turn into, something else such as a result or outcome. The issue here is that sense-making in processual change makes sense for the time being, where a significant attention is given to situational-processual thinking. Therefore, Colville, Brown, and Pye (2012) emphasize the importance of sense-making by developing it from processes of organizing. Their interesting argument—that we live not in times of continuous change but continuous discontinuous change—emphasizes the difficulty in recognizing how to act in a complex world that very often is not just equivocal but unpredictably equivocal. They imply that in times of ongoing structural development, structural transformation or even disintegration, the past no longer is reliable to building a compelling narrative of the future. This because, sense-makers face perplexity as natural upshot of heterogeneous cognitive abilities to make sense of equivocal occurrences. And, constructing the past thinking in the present time action, from a processual perspective, it is considered as a practical fallacy. Because the past events largely prompt memory to ignore any kind of retrospective sense made due to new permutations that delegitimize orthodoxical resolution in favor of new pragmatic resolution. Therefore, in situations when equivocality prevails during the change and discontinues change process, sense-making is primarily observed as a conversational and narrative process (Brown 2000; Holt and Cornelissen 2014; Maitlis and Lawrence 2007; Malhotra and Peterson 2001), which seeks to comprehend how people react toward the current dynamic and chaotic development, and how they appropriately cope with enacting a new reality (Brown, Colville, and Pye 2015; Maitlis and Christianson 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015). The discursive facet of middle managers' sense-making is an issue that might constrain the level of collaboration imposed by the environmental context in which public organizations operate (Golembiewski 1985). As a consequence, middle managers in cross structural and sector collaborations have to articulate, negotiate and enact new meaning through different interactions with internal and external stakeholders (Teulier and Rouleau 2013). Therefore, it is considered

imperative that middle managers aiming to implement changes in public organizations must display managerial skills in attaining structural support from powerful actors (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008).

Furthermore, developing the debate on sense-making in public organizations opens new avenues in the middle managers' sense-making and change literature. It accentuates the criticality of discussing sense-making process in environments that are more "bureaucratic," where change provides various opportunities for sense-makers to stimulate learning and demystify the importance of other sectors in comparison to the public sector. Acknowledging the lack of exploratory studies of ensuring change in the public sector motivates this research to address this topic in public organizations that operate under volatile, fragile and tumultuous pressure of initiating reforms. The process of initiating changes in public organizations might, therefore, be understood as a reflection of the challenges and peculiarities, which increase the need for transforming internal policies and practices to maintain the level of effectiveness when providing public services (Floyd and Wooldridge 1992, Floyd and Wooldridge 1996). Striving to become more effective and efficient is a vivid indication of shaping the mindset behind the decision for change whereby middle managers play a significant role in the entire processual story of change. Recognizing these peculiarities embellished with a need to extend the knowledge from a less researched sector on the current developed literature of sense-making enhances this research's importance in creating the meaning of complexity, ambiguity and equivocality of change (Hope 2010; Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Because change as a complex process demands a shift in roles when internal transformation, structural disintegration and horizontal engineering occur (Psychogios et al. 2019).

In particular, transition economies, such as Kosovo provide opportunities for sense-making accounts after various situations require to interpret equivocality and unpredictability that could escalate into managerial disruption (Colville, Brown, and Pye 2012; Weick 2012). Although sense-making has been conceptualized as a social dynamic process, nevertheless, this dynamic process might be challenged by managerial unrest when the public sector is in transition. The sense-making process might be challenged particularly when there is a need for implementing public reforms that intend to create disproportionately structural reforms among public organizations. Therefore, the internal ambiguity created during the process of structural reforms or even change demands employing social means to understand what is going on, and then deploy the sense to restore order that alleviates the pain of unknown (Weick 1995). Moreover, transition and turbulent economies provide an attractive context for sense-makers in giving meaning to equivocal frames and cues that ensure a better understanding of retrospective occasions and therefore set the stage for constructing the reality prospectively (Weick 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005). Studying middle managers' sense-making in unstable and, perhaps, tumultuous business environments enhances the credibility of scholar's endeavors to challenge the conceptualization of sense-making in less developed contexts. Thus, this research in the overall analysis aims to provide a vivid indication of the importance of sense-making in analyzing, understanding, framing and interpreting processes in the public sector in less researched contexts, such as Kosovo. More specifically, this research aims to explore how do middle managers make sense of the process of ensuring change in public organizations?

## Methods

### Settings

This research was conducted at Network Kosovo, Kosovo Managing Resources and Financial Trust, three public organizations in Kosovo, between May 2016 and April 2017.

*Network Kosovo* celebrated the 49th anniversary of its foundation as a public organization in Kosovo. For nearly four decades NK worked under the Yugoslavian rules, regulations and

procedures of operation of network integration. And, in 1999 different foreign bodies were engaged directly bringing NK back to its previous functionality. Although plenty of steps were implemented to reactivate the importance of NK in the country, however, different barriers were still in place such as the postal office which was unfeasible, telephony as well as the telegraphy were not functioning yet, and international connections were almost always inoperative. The path toward re-functionalization was nevertheless not an easy journey. NK managed, after six long working years, to establish three separate units: post services, telecom and mobile network operations. These three commercial units established within NK were obviously licensed by Kosovo's telecommunication regulatory authority. Therefore, establishing these commercial operations helped NK to become profitable by occupying nearly 60 per cent of the market share in the country. In the past three years, Network Kosovo has undertaken a massive change process in the main headquarters. The change process emerged as a result of new alternative telecommunication companies joining the telecommunication industry that reduced NK's profit significantly. NK's management was left with no other choice besides deciding to restructure different processes within existing departments, including creating new departments, such as total quality management, merging the sales and promotion departments into a marketing department and merging the telecoms unit and the mobile network operations. These processes were organized, managed and implemented by middle management.

*Kosovo Managing Resources* was founded, based on the United Nation Mission in Kosovo regulations, as a successor of the KTA (Kosovo Trust Agency) and awarded with all the assets and liabilities of the KTA which must be the assets and the liabilities of KMR. The purpose of KMR is to prepare and monitor the process of privatization of the public-owned enterprises in Kosovo. Kosovo Managing Resources is established as an independent public organization that should continue its tasks, duties, functions and responsibilities with full autonomy and compliance to the Kosovo law. Kosovo Managing Resources has also undertaken changes in the past two years. For instance, the privatizing process is an issue that urged KMR to restructure their units or departments. When a unit's mission might come to an end, and it becomes the middle managers' responsibility to integrate the tasks of that unit or department to another unit or department within the setting. Specifically, the human resources department and, in particular, the units within this department faced numerous restructuring stages, including the information technology unit and archives unit. During this research KMR was in the process of establishing a new regional department for evaluating, accounting and monitoring the process of one of the most important public assets in the country called Batra. Middle managers were responsible for establishing these changes and making decisions to harmonize and integrate the units that for procedural reasons could not operate anymore.

*Financial Trust* was founded as a not for profit organization, and its main responsibility is to administer and manage the pension contribution of Kosovo's contributors until retirement. Financial Trust is also investing in different financial stock markets' pension contributions, which are saved by employees during their active working life. Financial Trust pursues a strategy of investing the assets in different classes, stock markets and industries in order to diminish the investment risk which gives them more leverage in increasing savers' asset values. Nevertheless, Financial Trust decided to restructure the employee and employer departments by merging them. This came about as a decision because plenty of the operational processes and services being provided were merged. This made plenty of operations and processes redundant, but at the same time it introduced new ideas, such as I-Trust, where contributors could view their saving accounts online. Moreover, the new system, established by the central bank as the closest institutions which Financial Trust cooperates, changed the transaction recording system, a move that provoked immediate action within the finance department of recording transactions coming out of the central bank. The third change that pushed FT toward changing its processes was the issue of unreconciled funds. Financial Trust had for many years received money from their customers



without identifying the source of who it belonged to. This was a major issue that provoked internal restructuring of processes in cooperation with the national tax administration and the central bank. These processes created the opportunity to seek new knowledge regarding middle managers' sense-making in dealing with cues and frames.

### **Data collection**

We adopted a multi-case study methodology; we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with middle managers in the three above-mentioned public organizations. The rational viewpoint of conducting this research with middle managers was entirely based on the argument that middle managers recognize the importance of sense-making in the change process (Floyd and Wooldridge 2000; Psychogios, Wilkinson, and Szamosi 2009). The interviewing process provides a reliable method of exploring participant's views, behaviors, attitudes and perceptions and is supposed to reduce the distance and abstruseness amid the researcher and participants (Johns and Ross-Lee 1998). A non-purposive sampling was used where the selected organizations were contacted regarding selecting middle managers that expressed the willingness to contribute as interviewees. Middle managers have been contacted by the researchers via email, phone calls and in some exceptional cases face to face to acquire their consent to participate in this research.

The majority of the interviews have been conducted in manager's offices, nevertheless, the researchers were granted permission to conduct further interviews in the organization's plush meeting rooms that were designed to welcome and accommodate outsiders. A semi-structured questionnaire was used as guidance to facilitate the endeavor, and at the same time, to ensure that all the important issues were covered. The semi-structured questionnaire was built according to the researchers study interests, and comprised questions, such as (1) personal data regarding middle managers' current workplace; (2) questions related to middle managers' roles in change; (3) middle managers' sense-making of change within organizations; (4) the interrelation between middle managers' sense-making and change; (5) middle managers' routines during the change process. Throughout the interviews, the researchers kept notes regarding the questions that needed further discussion that did make an impact in the process (Creswell 2015).

The interviews were conducted within a period of 11 months, and were split in two stages (May–December 2016 and January–April 2017). All middle managers were fluent English speakers due to their western education or linguistic professional development. In the first stage of this research, we have interviewed 20 middle managers whereby all had at least a university degree (see more in [Table A1](#) in the [Appendix](#)). In the second stage, we re-contacted all the participants that contributed to the first stage; however, we only got the chance to re-interview 11 participants out of 20 (see more in [Table A2](#) in the [Appendix](#)). The rationale behind the second round of interviews was to create a broader scope of knowledge regarding middle managers' sense-making of change, recalling issues being discussed in the first round of interviews, such as new ideas established, challenges faced and engaging in sense-making accounts over that period (Seidman 1998), and to fulfill the longitudinal aspect of a multi-case study research. We have recorded approximately 26 hours of interviews which, when transcribed, generated 216 pages of data and approximately 140,000 words.

Our research shows that the organogram of the public organizations was as such that the role of middle managers was more consultative rather than challenging the status quo. This because all public organizations in this sample were governed by the board of directors which is usually appointed either by the government or the parliament. The board had the competency and authority to appoint the CEOs and other deputy CEOs or directors in their hierarchical structure that were responsible for initiating changes according to the platform and vision shared by the governing board. This diminished the role of middle managers in the process of decision-making process, but the majority of managers accepted that their input had been taken into account in

the initial consultations stage of the proposed changes. Nevertheless, this research does not argue that middle managers were passive consumers of generic proposals of change. In different stages, they provided their analysis of the change process in a form of reporting or feedback to the general director due to the challenges or even technical difficulties that emerged throughout the change process.

### **Data analysis**

The interpretation mode is crucial when analyzing qualitative data. In justifying the interpretation mode there is an increasing tendency for qualitative researchers to systematically code data (Gjerde and Alvesson 2020). This process is however seen as reductionist and mechanistic, a process that increases the likelihood to detach the pieces of data from a wider understanding, constrains the context and undermines the credibility of interview statements (Potter and Wetherell 1987). This study engages with the data material as a whole where the pre-theoretical and practical understanding that the researchers bring to the current study is excessively used, and in different stages challenged and developed during the research process (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). In line with Gjerde and Alvesson (2020), rather than employing an easy mode of codifying the data, the empirical data is treated as text where we did go beyond the visible material to search for something less visible, or more complex in a coding process where the text is thoroughly read and reread, which means that variation and contradiction are taken very seriously.

We have particularly focused on discourse as the primary factor of social change and power (Fairclough 1989). This approach is consistent with many authors who increasingly conceptualize organizations as discursive constructions and emphasizing discourse as the cornerstone upon which organizational life is built (Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar 2008; Fairhurst and Putnam 2004). Discourse analysis provides the means to interpret middle managers' texts, words, talk, conversation and emotions by developing a logical and rational analysis. Moreover, discourse analysis enabled constructing knowledge regarding middle managers' daily work and how middle managers make sense of the micro-interactions during the change process in public organizations.

The analysis of middle managers' micro interactions was conducted in three main stages. In the first stage, by taking a bottom-up approach, all the themes were extracted from reading and rereading the whole data of the empirical study. This process was repeated twice in different stages. First, we proceeded with this mode during the data collection process to extract cues, frames, and events that needed to be further discussed during the ongoing interviewing process. This allowed the researchers to develop knowledge regarding the problems identified during the change process including how middle managers enacted sense-making on equivocal events of change. After the second round of interviews, the researchers brought into analysis the themes developed from the first round of interviews, which were then discussed with middle managers. However, the data coming out of the second round of interviews enabled the researchers to bring new insights into analysis regarding constructing sense-making during the process of change. This highlighted the importance of discursive analysis that allows researchers to observe the language and conversation continuously to create a chronological story.

In the second stage we identified themes coming out of the individual texts from the interviews. These individual texts were collated into a one-integrated database in order to have a better perspective when identifying the similarities or differences between discursive practices of sense-making either linguistically or on daily practicing tasks and routines. The analysis was moreover focused on finding similar behaviors, methods and manners of engaging in sense-making, including approaches, talks, social practices, managerial activities that shape internal communication and language similarities. This approach created a better understanding of the social context, factors that trigger sensemaking, situations that restrict sense-making and issues that

make middle managers reflect upon their sense-making during the change process. The analysis showed that middle managers' sense-making is pretty much influenced by an order of discourse followed by political influence and ideological beliefs in the selected public organizations.

In the third stage we analyzed of the differences between the themes identified during the analysis that demonstrate the differences in the linguistic approach and social practices of sense-making of change. This might be inferred from organizational cases where, based on the situation and ongoing changes, it produced moments where middle managers faced internal problems that circumscribed their sense-making when implementing changes. Even though these differences emerged, we presented/aggregated them into themes, which display another approach of middle managers' sense-making in the change process (Table 1).

We found that interviews are a linguistically complex process in which researchers are required to be reflexively conscious that interviewees might be extensively engaged not only in sharing organizational facts or personal experiences, but also in political action and management impression (Alvesson 2003). This reaffirms the notion that we design our writings to have a specific effect on our readership (Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar 2008) and that the data we employ is the result of numerous processes of mediation between the research participants and our own perceptions. Therefore, the findings derived from the large amount of data were grouped into the two major dimensions of Managing divergences and Strategizing sensemaking.

## Findings

The findings demonstrate not only that sense-making is an instrumental social means of impacting change in public organizations, but also that the way managers across our sample employ sense-making impacts the distinctive trajectory that, longterm, could lead to creating a sustainable change process. We present middle managers sense-making as an individual process in the change process. Specifically, our findings indicate that middle managers use two specific activities, when they refer to sense-making as a means of change in the public sector: *Managing divergences of the change process* which comprises two phases, such as collective approach of change and social facet of change, and *Strategizing sense-making during the change process*, which includes the two phases also of structural action of sense-making construction and reflexivity as a means of reconstructing sense-making. We identified these activities, as they typically reflected the practice of middle managers across the sample, although the performance of these two dimensions did not follow the same sequence in all cases. We present each of these activities, as key dimensions of sense-making, as a practice to explicate the specific focus of the activities and actions taken by middle managers in the change process in the public sector.

### *Managing divergences of the change process*

#### *First phase- collective approach of change*

Our findings reveal that middle managers elucidate their seniors' plans by engaging in structural dialogue, whereby they make sense of the actual situation, as a preamble to persuading employees of the bottom level that joining collective participation eliminates any dissonance. Middle managers understand that a mutual approach to conducting change is demanded in making sense of processes occurring in their workplace. This collective participation is perceived as an instrumental means/effort of modernizing operational processes in the public sector. For instance, Albani was very careful in creating a working atmosphere among the staff members by being a good model of synchronizing language and actions. He employed a discursive narrative by emphasizing the dysfunctionality of working practices that increase rationalization as well as facilitate the collective persuasion on the structural changes that need to be enacted. In his discursive approach toward making the case for change a

Table 1. Coding.

Coding	First order codes	Coding2	Second order codes	Overarching dimension
I need to observe the environment when deciding to involve people in a change process	<i>Collectivistic approach of change</i>	I use the elements of their ego to build divergent teams in my efforts to create a better social cohesion among employees	<i>Social facet of change</i>	Managing divergences of the change process
There are plenty of obstacles since you are in an institution that there are a lot of people connected to different political interests		Every person should be consulted and their opinions need to be collectively discussed		
We set our benchmark that we want to be the leading public institution in terms of services, operations ...		In public institutions, you need to review the leadership approach which most probably being a social driven leader makes the difference.		
There are plenty of tasks that require approvals of different levels of the institution about the changes that have to be implemented	<i>Structural action of sensemaking construction</i>	I knew that I am talking to people that were affected directly by the implemented changes in employee and employer divisions and therefore this made me think about the steps we conducted	<i>Reflexivity as a means of reconstructing sensemaking</i>	Strategising sensemaking during the change process
In the public institution all the procedures must be completed		After the first stage of merging the units people came and asked about whether I can rethink their allocation in the HR division. I told them that I am very open to find a better unconventional solution		
We have implemented changes in our institution and not necessary driven by our own decisions		We had merged the sales and technical department where I had to recommunicate the decisions being taken and update staff due to any changes made during the change process		

retrospective sense-making or a retention of sense-making is identified. In particular, the phrase “*in a way to reach an agreement that everybody knows*” is an example of Albani’s attempt for common sense about ongoing transformation and change processes. This, in other words, demonstrates a strong proclivity toward cultivating forward thinking or prospective sense-making narrative that opens the door for understanding the intentions of change ahead of any action taken, as well as increases the odds for coordinating the actions that ultimately intends meeting the objectives of change.

Well, we need to initiate a talk due to the current dysfunctional processes and say that this is not working, we need to come up with an efficient operational practice. The request from upper management is that we need to have better performance; we cannot achieve the targets with this speed, rhythm, and commitment. I do so in a way to reach an agreement that everybody knows that in order to get the change done, we need to establish new operation and practices. (Albani, June 2016, Network Kosovo)

From Albani’s testimony it is understood that change is not a separate interval or sporadic event disconnected from previous events and experiences, but as managerial effort that comprise unsurpassed perplexity factors that determine the path of reconsidering the platform toward success. Contextualizing this discussion further and drawing on other manager’s views, Nori has been working in public organizations since 2008 in several different roles. Nori mentioned that in every process of his working activity an inclusive approach to bringing people together during the change process was required. He understood inclusiveness/collectiveness as a benefit of avoiding any possible tensions because employees were intended to be kept in the loop due to the work being conducted and processes being implemented.

Everyone should be asked, and I think everyone should understand that he is an important employee despite his/her current position. If I am working in programming and I am thinking about the general welfare, I should involve every person in that project to have a direct or indirect access. I think it’s very positive as many people as possible to participate in a single direction. (Nori, May 2016, Kosovo Managing Resources)

From Nori’s testimony it can be seen that middle managers seek collective patterns of change, and aim to prevent any internal disintegration that could eventually lead toward presenting new unexpected issues. Therefore, there is a broad conviction that middle managers face challenges when making sense of cues and frames that might not only restrict sense-making in a particular social situation, but also intend to paralyze sense-making interpretations of emerging equivocality. A good example that illustrates this notion is Ardi that elucidated the structural effort of paralyzing sense-making of equivocal events from a practical stance. He mentioned a decision being taken by the upper management about merging of the sales and promotion departments into a marketing department. He understood that this decision would have an impact on other employees because this change was projected to be implemented as future event into the organization, and almost nothing could be done by middle managers to take it off the upper management’s radar. Knowing the lack of structural power, Ardi’s understanding of the dynamics of the decision for change presents a new interesting issue. Although he engages in dialogue about the implications of change to the staff, however, he does so by interjecting future occurrences into the present construction of sense-making. This approach urged employees to constructively engage in the collective discussion that shaped sense-making through facilitating it.

I presented the decision for change related to sales and promotion departments into marketing department and I opened the floor for thoughts, ideas and proposals because employees were directly affected by that decision, which was officially taken, and that certainly drove them to constructively participate in the opened debate. I know that people appreciate whenever you ask them about how we need to move forward. (Ardi, June 2016, Network Kosovo)

In the same vein, Berati narrated the implementation process of merging the department of employer and employee relations. For many years these were two different departments providing services separately for employers and employees. The operational activities were considered to be

similar, which triggered middle managers to rethink the organizational structure. Therefore, in middle managers' view, it seemed more practical to integrate these departments by creating a client relations department in which they address employers and employees' business concerns. In other words, Berati believes that it makes sense to merge the two departments into a client service department that captures the largest work proportion of their daily task activities.

We had an employer relations department that was dealing with employers only. As you may know, employers are those who withhold contributors' money and also they adopt their part of contributions and they make the total payment to FT and then we distribute to their accounts. On the other hand, we have employee relations department and those were dealing with people who want to know about their account statements. This year, we felt that we do not need to have separate divisions anymore because downstairs 17 employees are dealing with employee and employers. (Berati, September 2016, Financial Trust)

Although middle managers are largely in charge of orchestrating the entire process of change, they actively make efforts to create collective sense, and in pursuing the logic of bargaining sense-making, middle managers also pay close attention to the social facet of change.

### ***Second phase- Social facet of change***

Working in the public sector means that middle managers have to scrutinize their position, authority and power when encountering organizational objectives. Legislation in place, regulations established, bureaucracy and negative selection (nepotism) are challenges that emerge immediately on almost every process that requires a change in tasks, operations and processes. The role of middle managers involves bridging differences that requires recognizing the social environment. This is an issue that emerged during the change process at NK whereby sense-making was used to rationalize the request for additional offices for the marketing department. Beni has been working at Network Kosovo for more than twelve years. He has an in-depth understanding of the NK structure including the people with whom he works on daily basis. In his managerial approach, Beni not only employs sense-making in constructing the meaning regarding the changes proposed, but also makes sense of recognizing the situation, environment and working structures that shape the social perspective on sensemaking itself. In Beni's understanding, discursive sense-making facilitates the process of mobilizing employees to contributing actively during the process of merging of the sales and promotion departments into a marketing department, as well as avoids any intention of negating the upcoming processes. Beni cultivates as well as establishes the rationale for implementing the merging by emphasizing the importance of new processes. In particular, he knowledgeably links the upper echelons efforts with the operational core commitments to shape the congruity of change, which opens up space for social action manifested in sense-making accounts or processes.

... However, some of the employees welcomed positively the changes initiated and they agreed. I knew that I am talking to the people that will be affected directly by the changes proposed because as middle manager, I need to analyze the social environment as well, otherwise, you never know what is going to happen, particularly during the restructuring process. (Beni, January 2017, Network Kosovo)

Rationalizing the change is critical to articulate the path that NK is moving on alongside emphasizing the determination to establish a process that ensures a better picture on the outcome of this process. Additionally, preserving internal coherence by avoiding any possible tension is followed by middle managers at Network Kosovo. This might be illustrated with the notion of instigating a strategy of inclusiveness that allows employees to eliminate any "darkness" or any kind of "rumors" that might open the gate for feeling threatened. Therefore, recognizing the social context and developing broader socio-practical knowledge gives MMs advantages when constructing sense-making that influences the processes of change. This could be seen further in the discussion with Labi. He admitted the complexity of the situation created, and emphasized his efforts in enacting the conversation through sense-making processes to create order,

particularly during the change of his department (Finance) where he experienced resistance from staff members. He adopted a rationale discursive approach to construct the meaning of the departmental changes, something that is known as the interpretation of the change intended.

... For example, we had a change in our structure, and some people resisted accepting the changes proposed because they had to move from one department to another, which I understand it is not easy at all. This is one of the reasons that to the staff I explain much in simple terms all the changes that are going to happen and it is well known that either you move on with the changes or resistance to change takes time. (Labi, April 2017, Kosovo Managing Resources)

From the above discussions, it can be seen that sense-making helps to create an intersubjective rationalization about the actions being taken, and allows important changes to be carried out during the change process. In addition, sense-making helps actors to localize the problem closely, induce new patterns of actions, facilitate understanding and reduce obstructions. Elaborating this a bit further, middle managers' sense-making exhibits a rationalistic top-down approach which views involvement in actions implemented as a natural process when conducting changes. When Albatrosi referred to these issues, he emphasized the human complexity that creates an argument for internal incohesion between actors who are part of the change directly or indirectly.

You should never apply double standards when you are altering processes within the organization. If you apply double standards then some employees have the credibility to come and say this is f\*cked up this is b\*\*\*shit. However, if you apply the same standards for everyone and you make a very good analysis, then we might have higher chances to protect the social cohesion. (Albatrosi, January 2017, Financial Trust)

Following this rationale, being clear and persistent discursively during the change helps to understand that MMs constantly create an internal cooperation process. Further elaborating on this a bit more and taking Violina's viewpoint, the sense creation on this particular issue is very much linked with other internal operation processes that could be harmed or at least prolonged. In other words, sense-making allows Violina to constantly (re)create a better understanding of the actions that empower interpreting of change through practical patterns. This makes MMs an important source of making sense of various occurrences, emphasizes their role as alleviators of adapting sense by recognizing the social context of the decisions being implemented, and building up a social environment where any decision for change, is a matter of mutual "consideration."

Well, the idea is that the engineering occupation allowed me to capture the logical aspect of any decision for change and how I need to act during the change process. When the decision for restructuring the unit was made, I knew that it will be hard, no doubt about that. I did go to my office and spend a lot of time contemplating how I will communicate that decision to the rest of the staff. What is the logic behind my interpretation, and how people in here would accept that? (Violina, February 2017, Network Kosovo)

### ***Strategizing sense-making during the change process***

#### ***First phase- structural action of sense-making construction***

Middle managers' positions in both private and public organizations is delicate. The structural position provides the opportunity to tackle processes thoroughly and demonstrates the importance of structural power in organizing. Structural position also emphasizes the importance of constructing sense-making in disruptive, ambiguous situations through discursive and performative actions. Goni is a prime example of developing this topic further. He mentioned the importance of structural interaction to ensure that the sense-making construction is unambiguous. Goni also provided a broader illustration of sense construction where the sales staff was projected to have two more offices, and this meant that regional coordinators would be put in an "uncomfortable" position. In other words, the notion behind the change decision was to make regional coordinators more cooperative with their supervisees in an overwhelming effort to

improve the internal communication where sense-making was expected to produce multiple connotations.

When I joined this public organization, I have seen a lack of communication between echelons. Simply the sales people did not have enough space and we took a decision to reorganize the offices after some unit's mission was completed. At the same time, I created a commission where I gave my instructions that a number of offices need to be free for sales staff and other people need to move in sharing offices. (Goni, June 2016, Network Kosovo)

Although the above MM shows that sense-making varies from the situation of performing actions, Gazi distinguishes departmental actions from structural actions. He mentioned that when decisions are addressed toward his department, he consults his staff to evaluate all the options about disputing the relevance of restructuring the department or mobilizing his staff due to the process of implementation of that order coming from upper management. So, middle managers' sense-making might be attributed to performing conversation through social interaction and performing actions as mediators, because the structural position enables MMs' sense-making to decrypting the meaning for change in times when dissonance emerges.

Now it depends whether a particular decision is set for the entire organization or it has an impact only on a particular sector in this case administration. If there is a policy directed towards the administration it is my responsibility that I have to discuss with other officials. If there is something wider that affects other departments it is normal that I sit and discuss with other colleagues and there are occasions we came out together with an idea that this should not be implemented in the current format. (Gazi, June 2016, Kosovo Managing Resources)

A similar situation might be seen in Agoni's case. Agoni narrated the situation of restructuring two units after their core mission came to an end. Although this situation might be understood as pretty unusual, however, in Agoni discourse, de-formalizing the structural actions in such cases might reduce the instability and fear among management and employees. A social approach, where middle managers' sense-making includes social actions and involvement, is driven by the power of structural communication in difficult times

As you know communication is not a static process but a flexible, fluid and dynamic. So, I mentioned how they need to handle the merging between the information technology unit and archive unit by providing specific guidance. It could happen that the changes proposed target only me in the sense that I could do something differently or requires staff involvement which sometimes decisions such as restructuring or merging ask for a broader involvement. (Agoni, July 2016, Kosovo Managing Resources)

Furthermore, Nori emphasized his efforts to contextualize decisions coming from upper management to create better odds for sense-making construction. This implies that sense-makers necessitate a good sense of listening employees within their department before they decide to break the sense made into concrete steps. The second issue that characterizes Nori's argument is linked to the need to influence plans derived from upper management. Although Nori understands that there is scope for a critical discussion of planned changes being proposed, he mentioned that public organizations struggle from bureaucracy that to a large extent impedes middle managers from revising upper management's decisions. Nevertheless, this research reveals that middle managers put efforts to decontextualizing general contemplations of changes approved into organized and deformalized episodes of sense-making during specific periods. In other words, the aim is to simplifying/transforming the complex disruptions of change into social cohesion that requires efforts to construct meaning. So, sense-making is practiced by integrating numerous factors that enhance the role of middle managers in articulating the need for developing new processes.

Well, we mostly sat and discussed and we tried to put into context the arguments. Obviously, we take into consideration that this is a public organization and bureaucracy exists, so we normally do not expect to reach something substantial in those meetings. So although there were occasions that we agreed to modify



or replace some details of the proposed decision for change, however in the last instance we could not compromise the overall decision. (Nori, September 2016, Financial Trust)

Eltoni mentioned organizational structure, authority and responsibility when referring to factors that unequivocally determine the rationale of constructing sense-making in public organizations. He mentioned that upper management makes all the decisions on conducting changes. Middle managers' actions are mostly linked to the operational scale of implementing processes of decisions made. However, on numerous occasions, they show indicative contributions in creating the infrastructure for modifying and altering the changes proposed related to the operational level. In such events, sense-making aims at avoiding ambiguity by considering the contextual situation in performing actions and performing conversations of change.

There are many tasks that require approvals from different levels and instructions and changes that have to be implemented by different levels of the organization. Top management usually approves changes in general terms, and then it is our responsibility to elaborate and communicate and monitor the implementation from the lower levels. (Eltoni, August 2016, Network Kosovo)

### ***Second phase- reflexivity as a means of reconstructing sense-making***

One of the issues that came up in the conversations with middle managers is reconstructing sense-making, which is associated to reflexivity in the event of unplanned situations during the restructuring change. In the process of change it is not an unknown the situations when middle managers need to reflect and rethink the sense made as an integral part of the structural development and learning process. To illustrate this Eltoni mentioned the importance of systematizing the internal working process by following the hierarchy during the change process. In his thoughts, hierarchy provides responsible people with a reason to cogitate ideas and solutions and support technical employees when they are not able to solve problems. This demonstrates that Eltoni reflects upon the previous occurrences where employees solved the technical issues without discussing it beforehand or asking for any additional input from their line manager. Eltoni reflects upon that dysfunctionality of the hierarchy off initiating a more proactive dialogue between managerial echelons, as well as seeking to make sense of the actions that need to be implemented by following a chronological manner of analyzing the structural development during the unplanned change.

During this restructuring process I have managed to establish a new system of responsibility in the hierarchy. Meaning that the technical person is in charge of doing that job and not for instance as it was used to be before, the technical person went to inspect the situation of a public-owned enterprise and he spent all day long and when he came back he said the job was not done because, this was not his responsibility. (Eltoni, April 2017, Kosovo Managing Resources)

Middle managers in public organizations reflect upon the social environment that accentuates the role of harmonizing different interests. It was mentioned by middle managers that sense-making creates a better logistical infrastructure and effective utilization of resources as an outcome during the change process. Therefore, middle managers take an inclusive approach when reflecting on previous cues and frames by acknowledging the interpretation of change that emphasizes the knowledge domain as a trigger for incentivizing reflexivity to the sense made. This could be seen in Nori's daily managerial work. He mentioned the reflection process of making sense by coupling two important components: firstly, recognizing the people with whom he is working that determines his sense-making; secondly, Nori uses this recognition as a reflection about his future discursive interaction with the rest of the staff. Although Nori acknowledges that the changes are most of the time centralized, he implies that his role is to reflect about the social environment and the unexpected turnover of the internal staff.

I did recognize that I am talking to people that will be affected directly by the initiated changes within the HR and sale unit and I tried to explain that we would make this change regarding the sales staff that is in

the restructuring process. The restructuring process has created this culture that nobody is going to stay in the wickets but they are going to move in the offices and then he will go out to talk with any interest groups. (Nori, March 2017, Financial Trust)

Therefore, the change process demands that managers reflect on their approach to making sense of the internal processes. Gazi provides an interesting account about the private and public organizations as one of the factors that trigger middle managers to embrace a reflexive approach of sense-making in public organizations. This to a large extent accentuates the role of change as a dynamic process where middle managers constantly make sense of their sense-making during the unplanned changes. Likewise, Gazi highlighted the learning process that helps him to reconstruct the sense made by initiating the internal dialogue that accentuates the cognitive facet of handling the change through sense-making perspective.

When I make a decision I try to know exactly the impact, in particular, restructuring change. In private sector people are usually oriented in profits and they do not care about the rest. In public sector, you have to learn what is going to happen after a year. You have to justify that you are making the right decision because others will complain in case you are doing something wrong or making a wrong decision. You do not know how people are going to feel, and here I learn more about emotional empathy. (Gazi, February 2017, Network Kosovo)

In particular, the idea of reflecting on the sense made during the change process is a natural managerial attitude in dynamic and processual organizations. In his managerial style, Xoni points out times when he is required to think differently or alter the sense made. He understands reflexivity as a way of feeding back that demands from middle managers to reconstruct the sense made prospectively. The process of reconstructing the sense made prospectively demands analyzing various aspects of organizations that increase the sensemaking value of unexpected/unplanned change events.

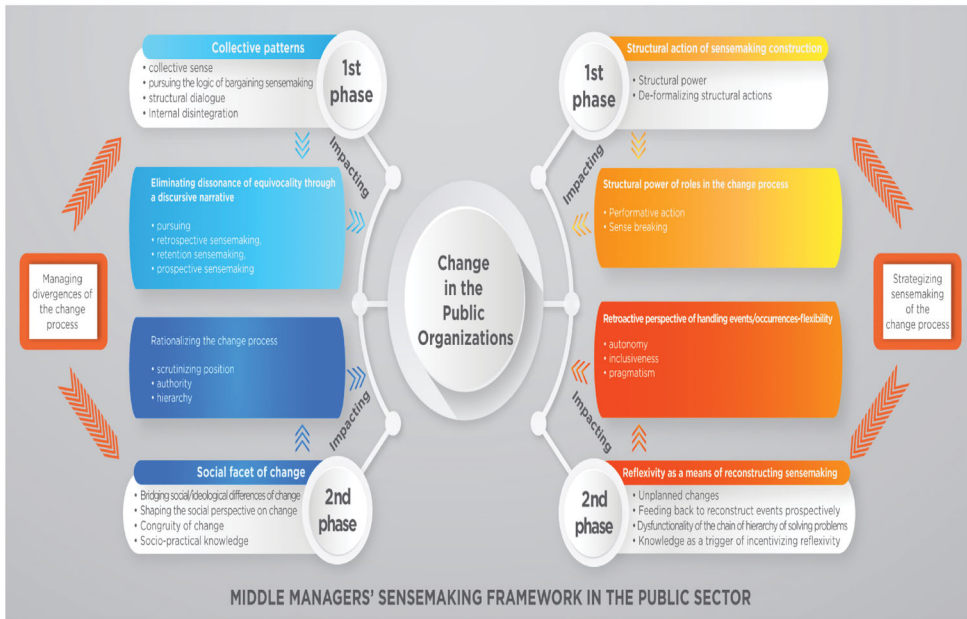
I am usually driven from the principle that I need to have a clear picture in order to be able to transmit to the rest of the staff. If there is something that could be disputed the officials of units have more knowledge what is going on here. But even in case if there is any disgruntlement they discuss with the unit's officials by critically evaluating the cause of that incident like we had quite a long time ago when the head of protocol unit and the head of translation unit had a misunderstanding due to a document that was not technically harmonized which opened an internal discussion within the administration department. (Xoni, January 2017, Kosovo Network)

The conceptualization of the workplace and the managerial style employed when leading the changes has an important role in reconstructing sense-making. Agoni mentioned interesting issues that help us to better understand the trigger of a reflexive approach to the sense made. He points out that when an organization provides flexibility/autonomy for dealing with different processes, this might comprehensively impel middle managers to reflect on their sense-making approach, because flexibility/autonomy reduces formality as well as instigates a broader interaction among managerial echelons. In contrast to this, Agoni names bureaucracy as an impediment to reflection. He associates bureaucracy with establishing a very formal and structured channel of operation while reflexivity requires inclusiveness and pragmatism. He understands reflexivity as a process of listening to new ideas and challenges to expand the opportunity to proactively read the context of change.

I like to simplify administrative procedures, and even I do know that it sounds banal but I say sometimes that life could have been better if we would not have lawyers. I do not like bureaucratic or administrative epithets I am a pragmatic person. I always try many alternatives, and I do not accept the notion that something cannot be solved if we do not change our approach. Obviously, I am the decision maker in the room, but for sure I encourage everybody to be part of the process because two brains always, always could produce better ideas than a brain. (Agoni, January 2017, Kosovo Managing Resources)

## Summary of findings

In this section we discuss the findings and present the framework of middle managers sense-making in the change process in the public sector. This section is organized around managing divergences of the change process and strategizing sensemaking of the change process ([Diagram 1](#)).



**Diagram 1.** Middle Managers' sensemaking framework in the public sector.

**Managing divergences of the change process**- middle managers exhibited the importance of sense-making in creating social cohesion during the change process. This particularly occurred when middle managers experienced structural changes, departmental changes or merging functions that created the infrastructure for sense-making interpretation of equivocal events that destabilized the logical order of implementing change processes. Making sense of change emphasizes the importance of seeking to structurally monitor the process, particularly in times when employees expose their enthusiastic disagreement with the operationalization of change from middle managers' perspective (Alvesson et al. 2017). Because, although sense-making seeks to give meaning to new efforts of functionalizing obsolete processes, naturally change exposes the fear, instability and "ignorance" of what will happen and how change is established in the public sector (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2015).

In seeking collective patterns, when change happens, sense-making is not understood as cognitive process like some researchers claim (Cunliffe and Coupland 2012; Klein, Moon, and Hoffman 2006), but as natural, social and discursive process (Balogun and Johnson 2005; Maitlis 2005; Weick 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005) of interpreting people's actions and interactions, and how substantial these are for what public organizations could become. This demands intersubjective efforts to understand and retrospectively make sense of events in which, middle managers find themselves and their identity creations. Middle managers' inclination to create a collective approach draws on the ontology that consequently rejects the objective view of a linear change, and substitutes it instead with a processual view of perceiving change as dynamic construction of continues flux and in a perpetual state of becoming (Chia 1996; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). Therefore, middle managers concomitantly purported that sense-making is a dynamic social process even in turbulent and transitional contexts. But they argued that complex "legislation" in place and the nature of external political interference, are factors that contribute toward (inhibiting) initiating new means for evaluating the functionality of the managing system. Because regulation and legislation reduce variety, and support uniformity, consistency and formality. Therefore, middle managers acknowledge the impact of sense-making in the process of structural deconstructions with the clear aim of creating plausible meaning, which ultimately/ eventually increases variety.

Structural congruity requires further attention, as organizational actors are inclined to avoid a systematic predictable methodological approach of shaping the mosaic of how actors respond to the unknown, unseen and inexperienced situations cognitively and linguistically. This argument is in line with other authors that accentuate middle managers' sense-making as means of establishing congruity across organizational boundaries (Balogun et al. 2005), although they do recognize numerous divergences that exist between the structural interests. Middle managers prioritize managing divergences because, change is not perceived as a separate interval occurring at a particular time, but as a continuous process where any collective disentanglement is presupposed to enhance internal polarization and disintegration of ongoing events. Therefore, the process of ensuring change exposes the specifics of discursive sense-making as a strong social power, which "coherently" articulates the disgruntlement regarding structural transformation, intends to influence the present and shapes the prospective thinking/future. This theoretical point is moreover in line with other researchers who suggest that by embracing discursive sensemaking, middle managers reach to interlock individual's behaviors over time (Psychogios et al. 2019) which leads to the following propositions:

- I. In managing divergences of the change process, middle managers of public organizations use aspects of collective patterns like collective sense, bargaining of sense-making, structural dialogue and internal disintegration.
- II. In managing divergences of the change process, middle managers of public organizations rely on social facets of change such as social differences of change, shaping the social perspective of change, congruity of change and socio-practical knowledge.

***Strategizing sensemaking of the change process-*** brings to the discussion the need for middle managers to develop structural actions in the sense of developing a horizontal and vertical dialogue. Middle managers' structural actions are associated with the content of change that determines sense-making construction. The content of change encapsulates the need for a decentralized organizational structure, whereby the flow of is not inhibited and bureaucratized by a centralized organization, as that might determine the path toward formalizing sense-making. The content of change provokes internal dialogue, where middle managers faced the need for transforming the organizational structure, such as convincing the staff with regards to structural re-arrangement. This moreover exposed middle managers' sociological abilities and skills, whereby sensemaking is constructed through performing the conversation (discourse) horizontally and vertically (Balogun et al. 2015, Bartunek 1984, Berger and Luckmann 1967, Davis et al. 1997, Denhardt & Denhardt 1999) . Performing the conversation is understood as an enclosed process from the overall contextual situation, where middle managers rely on practical knowledge of people's interests, rules, regulations, routines and languages which unites them (Rouleau and Balogun 2011).

Middle managers faced unplanned events during the change process. Although planned events drive middle managers to construct sense-making based on the construction of a clear and meticulous objective, unplanned events drive middle managers to recognize the trigger for reflexive sense-making. New and unexpected cues, frames and accounts are considered the trigger for reflexivity of the sense made, as it reevaluates the dynamic of change. In this vein, the trigger is particularly inherent in times where newly emerging processes demand an unconventional interpretation of what is going on, which urges middle managers to reconstruct the sense made based on the emerging cues. Therefore, reflexivity is considered a conducive social weapon to systematize the internal working process through dialogue among managerial echelons (Cunliffe and Scaratti 2017). Rethinking sense-making, by reconstructing it, brings into the discussion the importance of unconventional situations that demand re-adjusting and re-altering planned processes. Reflexivity reduces the discrepancy created in unplanned cues. We therefore claim that,

middle managers not only create meaning but also intensify commitment to learning from the process of ensuring change and therefore, live the organizational life (Alvesson and Spicer 2019). Based on the above discussion we suggest the following propositions:

- I. In strategizing sensemaking of the change process, middle managers of public organizations use structural action of sensemaking construction.
- II. In strategizing sensemaking of the change process, middle managers of public organizations rely on reflexivity as a means of reconstructing sensemaking

This paper exposes the criticality of change as a natural, rather than exceptional, process (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). And, the proposed two-fold framework could contribute toward expanding and contextualizing further the challenges/research about acknowledging the culture of external interference in public organizations, exploring the nature/motives of external involvement in determining the pace and functionality of public organizations, understanding the impact on middle managers' autonomy of constructing sense-making independently/without subordinating to a pre-determined discourse, and exploring middle managers' discrepant sensemaking in times when external involvement becomes an unbearable pressure to handle.

### **Theoretical implications**

This research adds knowledge to the literature on sense-making and the public sector in a transition context where Kosovo's public sector operates under volatile, fragile and tumultuous pressure of initiating reforms. Understanding middle managers' sense-making by widening the overarching dimensions (discursive involvement and strategizing sense-making) adds insights to the current sense-making literature, which is in line with Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015), who suggest that researchers need to focus on second-order sense-making by privileging written text. In particular, discursive involvement and strategizing sense-making are critical means, since middle managers seem to be moving out of their comfort zone or intermediate hierarchical position (Balogun 2003; Balogun and Johnson 2005), toward pluralistic groups that incorporate mid-level professionals, project-based executives and functional managers. This influences the change process because, although middle managers are considered key agents of change (Balogun and Johnson 2005; O'Kane and Cunningham 2012), nevertheless, this study claims that sense-making is a matter of formal dynamic interpretation influenced by sense-makers civil duties of abiding to institutional rules and regulations that determine how the change process is understood and interpreted. In other words, sense-makers in the public sector examine patterns of change to the existing structures of organizational/institutions interests (Hartley et al. 1997; Tantoush, Clegg, and Wilson 2001; O'Kane and Cunningham 2012; de Rond, Holeman, and Howard-Grenville 2019).

### **Practical implications**

We suggest that middle managers need to incorporate their subordinates' interpretations of events by strategically incentivizing the social dialogue so that subordinates are involved in changes that sought multiple interpretations. In such situations, we claim that multiplicative sense-making is entirely reliant on middle managers' ability to respond by being more sensitive, which might result in the reconstruction of negative anticipation/perception of change. This is paramount as subordinates have dissimilar behaviors, attitudes and reactions which determine whether recipients of change might resonate with the emerging cues (Maitlis 2005). In this vein, our research hints toward the "change role reversal" paradigm where both top and/or middle managers can initiate and/or implement change, as mentioned by (Heyden, Wilden, and Wise 2020). We

therefore suggest practitioners to draw on the “change role reversal” paradigm to become part of the change initiative by rethinking the traditional assumptions about “who does what” in the change process, and focusing on new possible avenues of reversal roles where middle managers initiating change and upper management implementing change. This would cement the role of middle managers as strategic sense-makers of change that reduces or evaporates internal sparks of resistance to change.

## Limitations and future research

Although this research can be considered as a foundation for researching sense-making in the public sector in Kosovo, it also opens the door for further theoretical and practical developments from multiple disciplinary fields in other public, private and NGO organizations. In particular, focusing on developing theoretical arguments by employing other rigorous methodological approaches, such as observations, focus groups and ethnography would create new knowledge and develop sense-making research much further in Kosovo. Developing further the structural boundaries that middle managers face when interpreting events might also be a useful avenue of shedding light on sense-making in the public sector. In particular, focusing on how middle managers make sense of constructing their working identities during the change process, is another potential area for further research from a comparative case-analysis perspective.

## Notes on contributors

*Feim Blakçori* is a Senior Lecturer in Business and Management at AFG College with the University of Aberdeen. His research interests revolve organizational change, organizational routines, sensemaking and identity. He has published in international scholarly journals such as *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *International Journal of Business and Management* and *International Studies of Organization and Management*.

*Alexandros Psychogios* is a Professor of International HRM in Birmingham City Business School at Birmingham City University in the UK. He is also a Visiting Professor at Cyprus International Institute of Management (CIIM) and a Research Associate in South Eastern European Research Centre (SEERC). His specialization and research interests are on Organizational Behavior, Leadership & Complexity, International Human Resource Management, and Total Quality & Performance Management. His publication record focuses on a variety of OB/HR issues in different, but rather challenging, contexts like economies in transition, SMEs in crisis, the public sector, etc. He has published several articles in journals like the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* and *Journal of Human Resource Management*, *Emergence: Complexity & Organisation*, *Brain science & leadership*, *TQM & Business Excellence*, *Employee Relations* and the *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management*.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Participant's information-first stage of interviews.

	Age	Education	Position in the Organization
<b>Kosovo Network</b>			
Artani	45	MSc degree in Public Management	Operation Middle Manager
Violina	35	Engineering degree	Branch Middle Manager
Ardi	42	PhD in Management	Procurement Middle Manager
Beni	36	PhD in Management	HR Middle Manager
Albani	39	PhD in Operations	TQM Middle Manager
Altoni	28	MSc in Management	Marketing Middle Manager
Labi	36	MSc in Finance	Finance Middle Manager
<b>Kosovo Managing resources</b>			
Xoni	28	MBA in Management	Operation Middle Manager
Goni	29	MSc in Economics	HR Middle Manager
Agoni	35	Degree in IT	IT Middle Manager
Eltoni	33	Degree in Marketing	Marketing Middle Manager
Dioni	31	Degree in Finance	Finance Middle Manager
Nori	38	MSc in Operation Management	Regional Middle Manager
<b>Financial Trust</b>			
Kastrioti	38	MSc in Management	HR Middle Manager
Mentori	37	Degree in German language	Operation Middle Manager
Veliu	34	MSc in Operation Management	Transportation Middle Manager
Seba	35	Degree in Finance	Finance Middle Manager
Berati	45	Degree in IT	IT Middle Manager
Gramozi	49	Degree in Marketing	Marketing Middle Manager
Albatrosi	53	Degree in Engineering	Branch Middle Manager

**Table A2.** Participant's information- second stage of interviews.

Managers	Age	Education	Position in the Organization
Beni	36	PhD in Management	HR Middle Manager
Violina	35	Engineering degree	Branch Middle Manager
Gazi	30	MSc in Management	TQM Middle Manager
Xoni	28	MBA in Management	Operation Middle Manager
Labi	36	MSc in Finance	Finance Middle Manager
Eltoni	33	Degree in Marketing	Marketing Middle Manager
Agoni	35	MSc in Management	Regional Middle Manager
Dioni	31	Degree in Finance	Finance Middle Manager
Albatrosi	53	Degree in Engineering	Branch Middle Manager
Nori	38	MSc in Operation Management	Regional Middle Manager
Gramozi	49	Degree in Marketing	Marketing Middle Manager