



National environmental objectives in Sweden: a critical reflection



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ABSTRACT

The National Environmental Objectives (NEOs) adopted by Swedish Parliament in 2001 and proclaiming that major environmental problems should be solved within a generation are often portrayed as good practice of a concrete yet visionary sustainability strategy. In this paper we summarize one and a half decade of the NEOs' experience for the international audience. The NEOs were based on an eclectic mixture of conceptual reasoning, most importantly the Management by Objectives concept and the notion of a policy deriving its authority and legitimacy from scientifically established 'natural laws and limits'. The 16 NEOs fall into two groups. The first group is a positive reformulation of existing environmental problems based on well established scientific evidence. While they have scientific authority and can be operationalized and enforced through standards they are hardly visionary, strategic or capable of responding to emerging threats. The second group contains utopian landscape goals which are more visionary but also more difficult to operationalize, especially for local authorities which play major part in the implementation of the NEOs in Sweden. We argue that the system that mixes these two sets of goals based on two different paradigms of sustainable development inherits the weaknesses of both and the strengths of neither. The NEO system lacks the hierarchical and scientific authority potentially possible for scientific goals and at the same time fails to provide for learning, mobilisation and consensus-building power of utopian landscape goals. It has been too fuzzy to be implemented in a top-down way and yet too rigid to enable bottom-up action. A more effective approach would be to separate these two sustainability governance approaches into complementary but distinct systems.

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1. Introduction

A system of National Environmental Objectives (NEOs)¹ is a distinct feature of environmental policy in Sweden. Introduced in the early 2000s, they have been promoted as an innovation of environmental governance supporting Sweden's status as an "environmental front runner state"². Their relevance to international environmental governance is especially actual at present, when the shift from the Millennium Development Goals to

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is widely discussed in policy and academic circles (e.g. Sachs, 2012). Yet evaluations of the NEOs have been partial, inward-oriented and not easily accessible to a wider international audience. In particular, the voices pointing to the lack of systematic evidence of success of NEOs (e.g. Lundgren, 2013; Emmelin, 2013) have not been internationally heard.

Overall, Swedish literature on the NEOs broadly falls into two separate streams: one grappling with the effectiveness of the NEOs (more specifically the fact that they have not been attained) and the other interpreting NEOs in light of various governance and public policy theories. There is little analysis of the connection the observed lack of effectiveness and conceptual flaws of the NEOs. For example Lundqvist (2004) explains the NEOs as a management-by-objectives (MBO) component of "ecological governance" but does not discuss their effectiveness. Edvardsson (2009a, 2009b) discusses the NEOs from the perspective of "goal system coherence" under the assumption that a system of "rational goals" will be effective. Wibeck et al. (2006) discuss "communication" as a means of handling the goal conflicts inherent in the NEO system but do not

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¹ Lundqvist (2004) introduced the English term NEO for the Swedish "miljökalitetsmål" which in our view best describes the system and which we use in this paper. English-language literature also uses terms "environmental quality objectives" or "national environmental objectives". The English language version of the official website for the NEOs (<http://www.miljomal.se/sv/Environmental-Objectives-Portal/>) uses the term "Environmental Objectives" in headings and a mixture of "environmental goals" and "environmental quality objectives" in various pages.

² For a recent review of the literature and arguments concerning Sweden as a front runner see Hysing, 2014.

touch upon the difficulty of communicating imprecise and fuzzy goals.

This critical viewpoint aims to bridge this gap by linking theoretical reflections on NEOs with observations on their effectiveness in the last decade and a half. We start with discussing the history of the NEOs in the 1990s and the 2000s with particular attention to their foundational ideas: that science can provide legitimate foundation to government policies; that long term proactive goals perform better than reactive processes, and that hierarchically organized objectives support effective multi-level governance. Subsequently we summarize scholarly observations on the effectiveness of the NEOs (Section 2). Section 3 contains theoretical reflections on the NEOs. In particular we show how the NEOs mix two fundamentally different approaches to governance based on two perspectives on sustainability. We also examine these approaches in light of several governance and management theories. We show that the NEOs exhibit a “fallacy of detachment” between goal formulation and implementation because of the lack of associated consensus and authority. Finally, in Section 4 we offer general observations on how similar failures could be avoided in a national or international environmental governance relying on high-level environmental objectives.

2. History of the NEOs

Lundgren (2013) identifies three periods of Swedish environmental policy. In the first “period of environmental problems” (1962–1985) it focused on pollution from point sources such as industry and municipal wastewater. Successful reduction of this pollution resulted in a positive environmental image for Sweden, increased public support for environmental policy and created a foundation for the “period of major environmental bills” (1985–1997) when the Ministry of environment was created and a number of comprehensive environmental laws enacted. The attempts to tackle new and more complex problems such as diffuse pollution sources and global warming comprise the third “period of national environmental goals” (1999–2011), which is the main focus of this paper.

In the early 1990s, Swedish environmental policy was focused on protection from environmental threats. This approach was often viewed as too “reactive”, i.e. failing to address the problems “at their source” (Bill, 2009/10:155). The “prevention better than cure” paradigm demanded a more “pro-active” policy focused on positive goals rather than on problems. In this period, government agencies and Parliament also adopted a large number of environmental goals of various kinds. By 1996, the number of goals had reached 167. In its review, the Swedish Environment Protection Agency, Swedish EPA (SEPA), argued that these goals did not form a coherent and comprehensive structure and should therefore be rationalized (Lundgren, 2013:311). The management-by-objective (MBO) concept, which was becoming popular as part of “new public management” ideas in the 1990s, influenced this rationalization. According to Lundgren (2013:316–317) it was supposed to make environmental policy both more effective and more efficient.

In 1997, the Government proposed a bill to Parliament (Bill, 1997/1998) to adopt a set of 15 NEOs listed in Table 1.³ The Government proposed that Parliament should decree the intent to achieve the NEOs in the space of one generation. According to the Bill this would mean achieving a “state of sustainability” with all major environmental problems solved. Nine central Government

agencies, with the SEPA as the lead agency, were designated as “environmental objectives agencies.” The implementation of the system was seen as essentially an administrative undertaking. The NEOs⁴ however were given no legal standing but were assumed to be reached by voluntary action at the national and local level and in all sectors; they were regarded as visionary rather than statutory. Parliament adopted the NEOs but demanded developing concrete sub-goals and indicators, which were prepared at short notice primarily by the SEPA and in contrast to the proactive and visionary NEOs reflected the problem-focused environmental management at the time (Emmelin, 2005). Thus, the system finally decided on by Parliament in 2001 consisted of:

- “The generation goal” stating that environmental problems were to be solved within the space of a generation, by 2025;
- “Core values”: promotion of human health, protection of biodiversity, protection of cultural heritage, protection of the long term production capacity of ecosystems and a wise use of natural resources;
- 15 NEOs (Table 1) – each with a set of around 70 partly quantified and time-bound “sub-goals,” and
- Three strategies for achieving the objectives:
 - The “strategy of efficient use” of energy, transport & resources;
 - The “ecocycle strategy” to reduce pollution;
 - The “wise use strategy” primarily for land use and planning.

Since their adoption, the NEOs were reviewed and updated several times. In particular, the Government’s in-depth evaluation proposed the 16th objective on biodiversity in 2005. Following the recommendation of the most recent review commission (SOU, 2009), the Government in 2010 proposed a renewed structure for the NEOs (Bill, 2009/10:155). The proposal reiterated the original intent of the NEOs and noted various criticisms, most significantly that the NEOs were not being attained. To deal with this, a number of changes were proposed. Most notably the generation goal ceased to be a state to be achieved but rather became “the direction of necessary change”, a change described by Lundgren (2013) as follows: “Today we are not to believe that we will have achieved the goals by 2020. We are now to think that in 2020 we will be able to believe that we can reach the goals.” Lundgren sees this change as an adaptation away from the “visionary overreach” of the initial objectives. Alternatively, it could be argued that the vagueness of the whole system increased and that the visionary function of mobilisation (Emmelin, 2000) was weakened. However, all in all the revision did not alter the basic characteristics of the system.

Several studies have attempted to examine the impacts of the NEOs especially at the local level and in specific sectors. Edvardsson (2009a) in a theoretical examination of goal 15 (“a good built environment”) gives examples of how it “fail(s) to guide and motivate action”. Nilsson et al. (2009) show a wide discrepancy between national policy and actual achievements in waste management. Hysing (2014) shows that recent policy changes and concrete actions in four areas – biodiversity, marine policy, energy and climate change policy – run contrary to NEO rhetoric. It is clear from his analysis that NEOs and their “specifications” have not influenced these changes.

Other studies focused on whether the NEOs meet normative procedural criteria for or influence governance and planning practice. Edvardsson (2007) shows that five NEOs do not fully meet the “rationality criteria”: precise, approachable, motivating

³ The table contains the 16th objective on biodiversity which was added later against a certain amount of opposition since it was considered to overlap with several other objectives (Emmelin, 2005).

⁴ In translations of quotations we use “goal” or “environmental quality goal”.

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