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Achieving sustainability? A case analysis of policy-to-project processes

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Abstract

This study explores the gap between policy initiatives and actual projects; specifically how strategic objectives are manifested at project level. The object of this study, the “Brøset project”, is an attempt to establish a “Carbon Neutral” city district in answer to national Climate policy. The Brøset Project is analyzed based on a documentation study and semi-structured open-ended interviews with project stakeholders. The project is described up to its current state, and assessed with regards to sustainability and consistency between the Strategic, Tactical and Operational objectives. Findings from the case study illustrate a lack of agreement regarding both the feasibility and the relevance of the Brøset project. This study elucidates challenges concerning policy-to-project processes in the Norwegian Public Sector.

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Keywords: Sustainability; Policy-to-project; stakeholder involvement; goal hierarchy; strategic consistency

1. Introduction

Achieving Sustainability has been a vision ever since the term Sustainable Development (SD) gained recognition in wake of the report “Our Common Future” (WCED, 1987). Subject of much discussion these last thirty years, a universally agreed upon interpretation and established policy application still remains elusive (Haavaldsen et al., 2014; Marshall & Toffel, 2005; Mondelaers et al., 2011; Santillo, 2007; Victor, 2006; Weaver & Jordan, 2008). This study addresses challenges in implementing and maintaining SD principles in processes transferring policy visions (Page, 2006) into actual projects. Key to this study is viewing SD both as a means to an end and as an objective in its own right.

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The Brøset Project, an urban development project in the city of Trondheim, Norway, is chosen as a case study. The Brøset project is interesting as a case in this context for two reasons. Firstly, it challenges the traditional conditions for public policy by the way it emphasizes individual life style changes as an important condition for achieving sustainability (Støa et al., 2014). Secondly, the go-ahead for the actual development is still not given after almost eight years, whereas the municipality suffers from persisting shortage of residence. The objectives of the study have been to uncover how the stakeholders in the Brøset project understand the concept of sustainability, how sustainability has been implemented in the project, and to analyse the consistency between the strategic, tactical and operational objectives in the policy-to-project process. Because the actual development of the Brøset is yet to start, it is deemed necessary to limit this study to the policy-to-project process, concluded by the approval of the Brøset zoning plan in 2013 (Trondheim kommune, 2013a). This process will be referred to as the Brøset Project.

In 2007, the newly elected red-green majority coalition in the city of Trondheim stated their intent to develop a new progressive environmental-oriented residential area in the city (Trondheim AP et al., 2007). The area chosen was Brøset, a predominantly agricultural area of about 34 ha some 4 km from the city center. A project group, consisting of members from the municipality planning office and the city's research community, was assembled for implementing the project. The primary objective was to produce a comprehensive zoning plan for the Brøset area in accord with the political vision, but the project was also intended to establish a best practice for climate friendly and environmental urban development (Trondheim kommune, 2010). The main project vision, established in the Planning Program (Trondheim kommune, 2010a), was to develop a "Carbon Neutral" (CN) district. CN was defined as 3 tons of Co₂-emissions per capita per year (a reduction of 70-90%). For advancing the vision into reality, the project sought inspiration from other projects (Wyckmans & Solbraa, 2010) and applied a "parallel planning commission" (PC) method in which four teams developed proposals for practical solutions (Gansmo et al., 2011; Trondheim kommune, 2009a). In 2013, the finished zonal plan was approved by the city council (Trondheim kommune, 2013b). The plan envisages 1800 residences with about 4000 inhabitants and an environment designed for adopting a climate friendly lifestyle. Shortly before the approval of the plan critics of the project surfaced, claiming that the plan was economically unfeasible and not in line with the needs and priorities of the market (Aspestrand, 2013). Since then, awaiting resolution concerning persisting ownership issues, nothing has happened at Brøset. No further resources have been allocated towards development of the area and the future of the project is highly uncertain.

The Brøset zoning plan is a result of a process transferring a vision into the basis for an actual tangible development project; a policy-to-project process. This study analyzes the process from a project perspective, examining how the process has affected the project result, and thus the likelihood of the valid policy being implemented. Consistency between the Strategic, Tactical and operational level objectives is used as a measure for likelihood for success. The analysis is based on interviews with project stakeholders, a documentation study and an extensive literature review. The purpose of this study is to elucidate challenges towards SD in policy-to-project processes in the Norwegian public sector. The research questions structuring the study are as follows.

- What policies justify the Brøset Project?
- To what extent is there consistency between different level objectives?
- To what extent does the Brøset project embody Sustainable development?

The first research question will be answered in the section 3. The final two will be addressed in section 5.

2. Methodology

This study is carried out through the analysis of a single case study; The Brøset Project. The rationale for the use of a single case approach is viewing Brøset as a unique and favorable case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009). Both the scale and the aim of the project as well as the combination of actors involved are, or were at the time of initiation, unique, and thus considered sufficient basis for generalizing in this study. The case study was conducted by

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