



Choosing conflict on the road to sustainable mobility: A risky strategy for breaking path dependency in urban policy making



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have identified implementation problems connected to sustainable mobility. These difficulties raise the question of which strategies can be successfully pursued to break path dependencies in urban policy making. This article is focused on corporate mobility management as one specific example of sustainable mobility initiatives, and analyses the formation and implementation of a travel policy for employees at the city administration of Örebro, Sweden. The analysis reveals how controversies can evolve into major implementation barriers for sustainable mobility initiatives. The analysis centres on the playing out of power relations between politicians and groups of officers in the development of interventions to break path dependencies. The strategy pursued in Örebro turned out to be very challenging within the municipality, since it required significant transformation of the officials' personal travel behaviour, and so led to open conflicts within the city administration. The case demonstrates that radical and confrontational attempts to break path dependencies may result in the same watering down as less controversial, more consensual strategies. When handling controversial sustainable mobility measures there may be more benefit in deliberative strategies of raising awareness, creating new consciousness or institutionalising desired discursive shifts.

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1. Introduction

There is today wide knowledge about policy measures that can make urban transport systems more sustainable. Accordingly, much effort over the last few years has been put on developing and promoting various combinations of policy measures like road pricing, increased public transport, better modal interconnections and mobility management measures such as information provision and education (Banister, 2008). A specific measure that has so far not been a main focus in sustainable mobility research is workplace travel policies and guidelines (Cairns et al., 2010; Roby, 2010; Rye, 2002), which is the policy measure in focus in this paper. Travel policies and guidelines, intended to influence employees' mode choice and frequency of travel, are also commonly referred to as corporate mobility management (CMM) (Gustafson, 2012).

In practice, sustainable mobility measures often turn out to be politically controversial at the policy development stage and difficult to implement in practice. Existing experiences show that controversial policy measures that impose additional costs or restrictions on certain modes of transport, tend to be avoided in favour of more incremental approaches, or may be watered down to secure acceptance, and so become less radical than intended (Banister, 2003). Such behaviours reinforce path dependencies in policy making, and consequently in travel behaviour (Mahoney, 2000; Page, 2006; Tilly, 1994). The difficulties associated with explicit attempts to break such path dependencies raise the question of whether controversial

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transport mobility measures can be implemented as originally intended, or whether implementation is 'contingent upon the original proposals being weakened to become acceptable' (Banister, 2003, p. 249). Several studies have concluded that the outcome of initiatives for sustainable mobility at the end of the day is a question of power (Hrelja et al., 2012; Jensen, 2006; Jensen and Richardson, 2004; Richardson et al., 2010), indicating that there is a need for transport research to provide more analyses of how power relationships affect transport policy in practice (Bickerstaff and Walker, 2005; Pemberton, 2000).

Quite a bit of the literature on sustainable mobility initiatives over the last few years has focused on public and political resistance and acceptability when explaining path dependence in policy making (Banister, 2003; Isaksson and Richardson, 2009; Jaensirisak et al., 2005; Jakobsson et al., 2000). In this paper, however, we will explore the dynamics of power and resistance occurring *within* urban authorities responsible for developing and implementing mobility management measures. The paper builds upon earlier research in the Western European context that emphasises how sector-specific goal formulation, professional norms and organisational cultures between or within different areas of responsibility among urban authorities are key aspects of the formation and implementation of policies for sustainable mobility (Hull, 2005, 2008; Hysing, 2009; Low et al., 2003; Lundin, 2008; Vigar, 2000). From this existing field of research, we conclude that the actions of officers always constitute an important aspect of any type of policy formation and implementation, thus reflecting key lessons from traditional implementation research (Lipsky, 1980). The fact that the actions of officers can hamper the realisation of political goals about sustainable mobility has been identified in recent transport research (Hysing, 2009). Several contributions have further pinpointed the importance of political leadership and commitment as key factors in urban transport policy change towards sustainability (Attard and Ison, 2010; Hysing, 2009; Ison and Rye, 2005).

This article focuses on the complex role of officers in the formation and implementation of sustainable mobility initiatives. The paper presents a case study on CMM: the formation and implementation of a new travel policy for employees at the city administration of Örebro Municipality, Sweden. As a major employer, the municipality has the chance to make a considerable impact on travel behaviour in the city and its surroundings. As an organisation with an explicitly stated policy agenda for sustainable mobility, it has a unique starting point for managing ambitious policy goals within the organisation. Hence, the case illustrates the vanguard role that urban authorities may take in introducing mobility management strategies as travel policies that break the path dependence. It also reveals an intrinsic challenge, where officers involved in making policy are directly implicated in taking the first steps by changing their own mobility patterns.

The aim is to shed light on a particular set of power relations – among politicians and officers – in the pursuit of mobility management policies. The resulting claim is that a focus on these particular power dynamics is critical to understanding how and why sustainability transitions are both complex to manage, and difficult to implement, in contexts where urban authorities seek to lead by example.

The Örebro case study examines what happened when politicians attempted to 'shake loose' from what they regarded as a path dependent policy culture among their officers, that they perceived as blocking a politically desirable transition towards sustainable mobility. The case study reveals how, after identification of this obstacle to policy transition, strategies were pursued by politicians seeking to overcome this barrier, involving interventions at policy, organisational, and professional levels. In the case we focus on the dynamics of decision making and implementation of the travel policy, showing how controversies evolve into significant implementation barriers for this type of sustainable mobility initiative. The analysis provides insights into the power dynamics that evolved between politicians and groups of officers as a response to the chosen strategy for designing and implementing a travel policy that attempted to change employees' travel behaviour. The focus on power dynamics provides new insights which contribute to the general literature on path dependence, and the specific literature on transitions towards sustainable mobility. In particular we follow Low et al. (2005), who argue for a broad conception of path dependence, incorporating institutional and discursive perspectives alongside the technical (Low et al., 2005), by analysing the intra-institutional dynamics associated with attempts to achieve the required transformations in policy.

The article is organised as follows. In the next section, the conceptual approach to analysing power relations between politicians and officers is introduced. In the subsequent section the methodology and data sources are described. The analysis of this case follows, including a brief introduction to the city of Örebro. The article ends with a discussion of the main findings and conclusions that may be drawn.

2. Theoretical framework

Recent research on the design and implementation of policies to promote sustainable mobility transitions contains findings of relevance to this study. Isaksson and Richardson (2009) discuss the challenges related to implementation of congestion charging policies, and state that in challenging policy situations, planners, policy makers and politicians 'are forced to consider how they can legitimately introduce a policy that the public do not want. Shall they seek full citizen support, or work strategically with key stakeholders towards implementation in the face of public opposition?' (Isaksson and Richardson, 2009, p. 253). Such questions provide a cogent starting point for this study, which also focuses on a controversial policy measure. A delicate question for policy makers in Örebro was how to design the process for the new travel policy so it could lead to an effective outcome in terms of its capability to break with path dependence, while still having the chance to gain acceptance within the organisation. Should the strategy be to focus on creating internal support, which would perhaps take a long time and risk being watered down through negotiations, possible consensus-building procedures or compromises? Or

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