



Is spatial planning a collaborative learning process? A case study from a rural–urban gradient in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

International and national policies stress the importance of spatial planning for the long-term sustainability of regions. This paper identifies the extent to which the spatial planning in a Swedish region can be characterised as a collaborative learning process. By combining qualitative interviews and systems thinking methods we analysed the main attributes of public-led spatial (i.e. comprehensive) planning in nine municipalities representing a steep urban–rural gradient in the Bergslagen region of Central Sweden. We show that the attributes of strategic spatial planning needed for collaborative learning were absent or undeveloped. All studied municipalities experienced challenges in coordinating complex issues regarding long-term planning to steer territorial development and help to solve conflicts among competing interests. Stakeholder participation was identified as a basic condition for social learning in planning. Together with stakeholders we identified the causal structure behind stakeholder participation in municipal planning processes, including main drivers and feedback loops. We conclude that there is a need for arenas allowing and promoting stakeholder activity, participation and inclusion that combines both bottom-up and top-down approaches, and where evidence-based collaborative learning can occur.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary European Union (EU) and Pan-European policies (e.g. ESDP, 1999; Anon, 2000; Council of Europe, 2006a,b; UNECE, 2008; European Council, 2011) stress the importance of spatial planning for the long-term sustainability of regions. To support long-term, large-scale and balanced territorial development, spatial planning is expected to integrate territorial economic and social requirements with ecological and cultural functions (e.g. ESDP, 1999). Public sector-led spatial planning is an important tool for the holistic integration of economic, environmental, cultural and

social policy agendas; and for re-scaling issues from international and national levels to regional and local levels (e.g. Albrechts, 2004; Albrechts et al., 2010). Europe is characterised by a high diversity of planning systems originating from political, cultural and institutional differences within and among countries (Albrechts, 2004, 2006; Albrechts et al., 2010; CEC, 1997). Therefore, International, Pan-European and EU policies are likely to be implemented differently among countries (Busck et al., 2008). The diversity in planning systems presents an opportunity for learning towards effective policy implementation. This stresses the need for in-depth studies and comparisons of spatial planning systems in European countries with differing political, economic and socio-cultural contexts (Angelstam et al., 2013a).

This study focuses on strategic spatial planning as a key component in guiding urban and rural development based on the translation of various sustainability policies into integrated spatial plans. There are many definitions of strategic spatial planning. Albrechts (2004, p. 747) defined it as ‘a public sector-led socio-spatial process through which a vision, actions, and means for

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implementation are produced that shape and frame what a place is and may become'. Numerous studies stress the need for involving multiple stakeholders in the development of a strategic vision for territorial development and spatial planning, and to build stakeholder commitment to the planning process (e.g. [Albrechts, 2006](#); [Poister and Streib, 1999](#)). This is also stated in multiple EU and international policies ([Council of Europe, 2000, 2006a,b](#); [Aarhus Convention, 1998](#); [FAO, 2003](#); [European Commission, 2004](#); [Forest Europe, 2011](#)). A corollary of this is the normative implication that strategic spatial planning should be a process of collaborative learning amongst a multiplicity of actors and stakeholders (e.g. [Faludi, 2000](#); [Granados Cabezas, 1995](#); [Albrechts, 2004](#)), rather than a technical process oriented exclusively towards producing spatial plans. Planning should aim at gaining a better understanding of current and future problems to make better decisions ([Faludi, 2000](#)). During a collaborative learning process, a strategic spatial plan becomes a flexible document capable of guiding the development process, and serves as a frame of reference for negotiation among multiple actors involved with planning ([Faludi, 2000](#)). Under this approach, open dialogue, collaboration, and consensus building are key concepts (e.g. [Albrechts, 2004](#)). However, in practice the degree to which strategic planning corresponds to a collaborative learning process appears to vary widely ([Faludi, 2000](#); [Schäffer and Willauer, 2003](#)).

Sweden is often described as an example of a European country where strategic spatial planning includes developed participatory mechanisms grounded in its long democratic traditions ([Busck et al., 2008](#); [Maier, 2001](#)). The administrative system of Sweden consists of three tiers: national, regional (counties) and local (municipalities). However, it ought to be noted that, in practice, strategic spatial planning remains the sovereign realm of Swedish municipalities due to their planning monopoly, and that the county level mainly has oversight over coordination of the use of designated areas of national interests, e.g. areas of national importance for infrastructure, national defence and nature conservation. In a formal sense, there is no strong regional spatial planning present in Sweden. Spatial planning is regulated by the Planning and Building Act ([Boverket, 2006](#)) and by a number of related laws with implications for spatial planning, including, for example, the Environmental Code. Each municipality should prepare an up-to-date comprehensive plan, covering the entire municipality, which should provide guidance for decisions related to the use of land and water areas, and the built environment, for a period of 20–30 years ([Boverket, 2006](#))¹. The main goal of spatial planning is vaguely expressed as the promotion of 'societal progress towards equal and good living conditions, and a good and lasting sustainable environment for the benefit of the people of today's society as well as that of future generations ([Boverket, 2006](#)). The government made attempts to strengthen the strategic function of comprehensive plans and to re-establish its central role in planning practice of municipalities in the revised Planning and Building Act ([Fredriksson, 2011](#)). According to the national legal documents ([Anon, 1998, 2004](#)), all policies related to sustainability should be incorporated into spatial plans, including comprehensive plans. However, municipalities and counties in Sweden have different prerequisites to exercise governance of natural resources to develop value-added production, networking and entrepreneurship ([Andersson et al., 2011b](#)), and thus to encourage a collaborative learning process in spatial planning.

Using the Bergslagen region in Sweden as a case study, the aim of this paper is to identify to what extent the comprehensive planning is characterised as a collaborative learning process by analyses of the main attributes of public-led strategic spatial plan-

ning (i.e. comprehensive planning). The study combines qualitative and systems thinking methods to answer the following research questions: is municipal spatial planning a collaborative learning process among actors and stakeholders or a technical project? What are the main drivers for collaborative learning in spatial planning?

Using qualitative methods we interviewed municipal planners, politicians, public officials and large landowners involved in strategic spatial planning in nine municipalities in the Bergslagen region. From the interviews we extracted conditions for, and properties of, planning as a collaborative learning process. To do this we used a framework consisting of the main normative attributes of the collaborative learning concepts. The results of the study were then presented to and discussed with the interviewees. This exercise permitted jointly-produced understanding of the basic conditions for learning in spatial planning using the system thinking method. Finally, we discussed how to perform strategic spatial planning as a collaborative learning process.

2. Theoretical framework

Collaborative learning is the fundamental concept being examined in this paper. It is a trans-disciplinary approach, originating in the 1990s in the US Pacific Northwest, as a means of dealing with complex natural resource management controversies involving many stakeholders with conflicting interests that are difficult to fully understand ([Daniels and Walker, 2001](#)). The collaborative learning approach has two main parts: *Collaboration* is a process of including partners that have different perspectives on a problem and constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible ([Gray, 1989](#)). *Learning* (particularly adult learning) takes place when learners can relate the issue at hand to their own experiences, and critically reflect and discuss the validity of information together in a group where they feel safe and comfortable ([Kolb, 1984](#); [Ramsden, 2003](#); [Vella, 2002](#)). Hence, prerequisites for collaborative learning include that stakeholders share a willingness to collaborate ([San Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2005](#)), work as equals ([Arnstein, 1969](#); [Kabanoff, 1991](#)), respect each other's opinions, interests and professions ([San Martín-Rodríguez et al., 2005](#)), and empower each other ([Fung and Olin Wright, 2001](#)). Collaborative learning is thus a means of identifying a common frame for the complex situation, and from this base to define and develop new opportunities by joint learning. This is often supported by the external input of new knowledge for managing and improving the situation.

Practically, collaborative learning includes identification of the collaborative potential among stakeholders, setting up a series of events to promote learning and creative thinking, inputting new knowledge to the process, and arranging constructive debates to support stakeholders and their learning. In addition, it also includes the implementation of these ideas, assessment of outcomes and thoughtful reflection ([Daniels and Walker, 2001](#)). To handle this, collaborative learning is built on approaches and practices from the fields of negotiation, conflict management, deliberative democracy and soft systems theory that are put together as a framework for development and change through joint learning ([Cheng and Fiero, 2005](#)). In this study we draw on two of these theoretical approaches, namely deliberative democratic theory and system thinking, to ground our analysis of collaborative learning in strategic spatial planning.

Deliberative democratic theory has particular relevance to collaborative learning due to its emphasis on dialogue and the development of a shared understanding amongst diverse groups of people ([Parkins and Mitchell, 2005](#)). Since the 1990s, it has been recognised as an important part of participatory forms of planning and resource management ([Dryzek, 1990](#); [Elster, 1998](#)).

¹ We use the term strategic spatial plan as a synonym to the term comprehensive plan, which is relevant for Sweden.

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