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Visions as trading zones: National and local approaches to improving urban sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Making cities more sustainable is high on the agenda in many countries, but a major challenge is the identification of which actors should contribute, and how. This paper departs from an assumption that visions may guide urban development work, and examines and compares national and local governments' visions of future sustainable cities in Norway. The case study is the urban multilevel governance program 'Cities of the Future'. Previous literature on urban sustainability and multilevel governance stresses the importance of shared visions and goals between stakeholders. However, the paper finds that, in the context under investigation, visions were partially dis-aligned between national and local stakeholders. Nevertheless, participants from both national and local governments considered the Cities of the Future program as successful. This was especially due to the learning networks facilitated by the program. The paper critically discusses the assumption of alignment and suggests a shift of attention from the content of vision to the processes of *vision making*. By this, we may understand visions as possible trading zones for the negotiation of future directions in urban sustainability.

1. Envisioning a future sustainable city

Visions play a vital role in efforts to enroll actors in agendas relating to urban sustainability. It is important to study these visions to analyze what issues that are considered crucial in these agendas, how the related goals are to be achieved, and the extent to which they are shared by relevant stakeholders. This paper studies vision making to compare the way in which national and local governmental actors in Norway present issues of urban sustainability, and the extent to which these presentations are aligned.

[Williams \(2010\)](#) stresses that there are two main challenges related to urban sustainability: first, there is the question of what a 'sustainable city' is; second, there is the issue of how one should *do* sustainability in cities. To begin, 'sustainability' is used in many ways, often to characterize efforts to improve environmental, social and/or economic conditions. However, such definitions meet with problems. For example, [Campbell \(1996\)](#) argues that conflicts between these three aspects are unavoidable in what he calls a battle over growth, the environment and social justice. In a different vein, [Shove and Walker \(2007 p. 766\)](#) fear that the concept of sustainability works as a legitimizing discourse, while [Skjølsvold \(2012, p. 40\)](#) shows that terms such as 'sustainable' and 'climate friendly' are relational and consequently negotiable within a given collective. While the sustainability of cities is a frequently shared goal, one cannot take for granted what such a goal means. Consequently, this paper departs from the studied actors' own understanding of sustainability to describe their visions of sustainable cities, and not any scholarly definition. Thus, I analyze the actors' articulation of the main goal – urban sustainability – and how they engage with it.

Much academic research on urban responses to climate change has been concerned with governance. [Bulkeley, Castán Broto and Edwards \(2015\)](#) some of these efforts. She finds that the main research questions have been why cities should take leadership with

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respect to climate change adaptation and mitigation, what kinds of actions should be prioritized, who should be responsible, and which institutional factors facilitate or prevent climate change action in city governments (Bulkeley et al., 2015; see also Hoffmann, 2011). The focus has primarily been on mitigation efforts, but issues of urban resilience, vulnerability and adaptation have also been on the agenda (Bulkeley, 2015, p. 7). Scholarly efforts often articulate so-called multilevel governance contexts. This research has explored interactions extending vertically from transnational organizations to nation states, regions and cities, and horizontally to civil society organizations, businesses and other non-state actors (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Coutard & Rutherford, 2010; Puppim de Oliveira, 2009; Romero Lankao, 2012).

These research efforts promote multilevel governance as a promising framework for the management of urban sustainability. The central idea within this is that efforts are coordinated and aligned between governance actors, presupposing shared visions across multiple levels. This paper critically discusses this assumption by exploring the visions made by national and local (city) actors participating in an urban multilevel governance program called 'Cities of the Future' (CoF). It investigates and juxtaposes the visions articulated by the national and city government actors in the program. What visions were expressed, and to what extent were they aligned among the participating stakeholders? In the next section, I discuss previous research on the role of visions in sociotechnical projects, such as efforts intended to develop more sustainable cities.

2. Understanding sociotechnical visions

Envisioning future sustainable cities is a sociotechnical effort in the sense that such visions combine social and technical elements. There are several approaches to explore vision making and the potentially performative aspect of sociotechnical visions, including concepts like trading zones, scenarios, and the sociology of expectations. To begin, Dierkes, Hoffmann and Marz (1996) explain how a vision may give actors who otherwise do not collaborate an opportunity to develop a shared goal and direction. In their opinion, visions may contribute to simplify complicated issues, in this case urban sustainability, and thus make it easier for non-experts to engage in the debate. This directs attention towards the content of the vision, seeing visions as an outcome of some actors' specific views. According to Dierkes et al., several actors must share a vision if the vision is to be more than an individual idea. In this sense, visions express an already achieved idea or consensus among the actors involved. As such, visions are consensus-building tools that enable actors from different fields and areas of expertise to cooperate (see also Jasanoff, 2015).

Gjøen (2001:31) argues that Dierkes et al.'s understanding of visions as consensus-building is similar to Peter Galison's (1996) concept of trading zones, and the "work" that trading zones do. He developed the trading zone concept inspired by anthropological studies of how people from different cultures are able to exchange goods, despite differences in language and culture. Galison used the concept to analyze innovation processes in science, focusing on how computer simulations of the hydrogen bomb contributed in assembling and coordinating actors from different disciplines. He defined a trading zone as "an arena in which radically different activities could be *locally*, but not globally, coordinated (1996, p. 119, emphasis in original). Other scholars have picked up the concept, employing it for a variety of purposes. For example, Kellogg, Orlikowski and Yates (2006) use the concept to explain coordination of cross-boundary work in interactive marketing organizations. Collins, Evans and Gorman (2007) explore the evolution of trading zones, with a particular emphasis on interactional expertise, and provide some ideal types to explain how trading zones may work. Gorman, Groves and Shrager (2004) pilot study on collaboration between a material scientist, a social psychologist and a graduate student explore the societal dimensions of nanotechnology as a trading zone, and the division of labor within this collaborating team. Saporito (2016:45) shows that the trading zone concept has been used by communicative planning theorists to provide practical tools and interpretative framework to guide participatory action (see also Balducci and Mäntysalo, 2013). In this paper, the concept is used to analyze processes of making visions related to urban sustainability.

Visions produced in some kind of trading zone, as defined by Dierkes et al., may be understood primarily as tools to make actors with otherwise different views, expertise, values and interests, to assemble and collaborate. The actor's views may be exchanged but also challenged in a trading zone. As such, the enactment of a trading zone does not necessarily depend on shared ideas, interests, or norms. This makes the concept of trading zone useful in exploring how actors negotiate the objects at stake. Following this line of thought, Gjøen (2001, pp. 31-32) suggests that visions do not have to be consensus-building tools but may rather provide latitude for trading and negotiating ideas about the future. Thus, her use of the trading zone concept points to the *processes of making visions*, rather than seeing visions as outcomes of certain ideas, as suggested by Dierkes et al. (1996). For instance, Gjøen (ibid: 170) finds that the making of visions of future buses running on nature gas did not contribute to consensus about the future transport system. Rather, this vision making contributed in clarifying the actors' perceptions regarding the distribution of responsibilities with respect to this system. This suggests that there may be disagreement as well as consensus about future directions within such vision-making trading zones without disabling decision-making (Gjøen, 2001).

Berkhout (2006) argues that the primary role of visions may be to frame disagreement rather than to generate consensus about the future. The perception of visions as instances of established consensus is therefore a barrier to an understanding of visions as in the making (Gjøen, 2001, pp. 31-32). Thus, stakeholders involved in sociotechnical projects do not have to choose between ready-made interpretations of the future. They may contribute by trading interpretations in the making of visions (Gjøen, 2001, p. 309). Accordingly, my analysis focuses particularly on the process of trading visions.

Another useful contribution is Callon's (1987) introduction of 'scenario' to describe the process by which a leading actor tries to mobilize interest in and support of a desired future, and to distribute roles to other actors in this process. Callon emphasizes that scenarios become strategic tools to enrol necessary allies to reach a goal. The so-called 'sociology of expectations' (Borup, Brown, Konrad, & Van Lente (2006); Brown & Michael, 2003; Van Lente, 2012) develops this view further by putting forward the idea that visions are performative because they are wishful enactments of a desired future (Borup et al., 2006, p. 286). Thus, expectations

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