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Sustainable Energy and Climate Strategies: lessons from planning processes in five municipalities

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ABSTRACT

Swedish municipalities have traditionally had significant powers and played a major role in implementing national energy strategies. This paper describes the factors influencing development of municipal climate and energy plans in five Swedish municipalities and assesses the relevance and importance of these factors from theoretical and practical perspectives. The questions raised in the paper are: what are the characteristics of municipal climate and energy planning processes in the five municipalities, do these municipalities include stakeholders in the process, if so how? Results suggest that a number of factors influence the development of municipal climate and energy strategies and their content. These include the importance of a clear, shared vision and engaged politicians; the size and organisational structure of the municipality and its willingness and capability to act; the organisation of the process and extent to which stakeholders have been involved; the need for clarity about financial aspects, such as planned financing of implementation; and the need for greater clarity concerning selection of targets and their relevance to global climate and energy trends. The study and its results may be used to inform policy-makers on the national and local levels about factors influencing municipal energy planning and also contribute to a discussion on benefits and problems of involving stakeholders and citizens in the strategic work to reduce climate impacts and energy consumption.

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1. Introduction

In a rapidly urbanizing world, the ideal of sustainable urban development has emerged as an influential phenomenon, observed on many levels (Rydin, 2010; UNCSO, 2012). Significant bodies of literature emphasize the significance of sustainable urban development in the context of large cities, yet forecasts from UN-Habitat suggest that around 75 percent of the global population will live in conurbations of less than 500,000 residents in 2020 and beyond (UN-Habitat, 2011).

As such, planning for sustainable development in these conurbations represents a critical challenge. Municipalities are often described as having a key role in planning for sustainable urban development (UN, 1992). This paper presents the results of a study of methods used by five Swedish municipalities to develop and implement climate and energy strategies. The study was part of

“Sustainable Energy and Climate Strategies”, a research project assessing various aspects of the Swedish Energy Agency’s “Sustainable Municipality” programme (Swedish Energy Agency, 2011).

Swedish municipalities have traditionally played a major role in implementing national energy strategies (Aall et al., 2007; Betsill and Bulkeley, 2007; Palm, 2006). Since 1977, Swedish law has obliged municipalities to prepare municipal energy plans and many municipalities are owners of, or own stakes in, local energy and property companies (Palm, 2006). Municipalities can thus exert influence over both energy supply and demand. This study explores how five municipalities of varying size address the challenge of preparing energy and climate strategies and identifies common traits, despite the variation in organisational complexity and contexts.

The paper considers the following questions: what are the characteristics of municipal climate and energy planning processes in five Swedish municipalities, do these municipalities include stakeholders in processes, and if so, how? In particular, the paper explores the ways in which municipalities organised processes to develop climate and energy strategies using rational or communicative approaches, and the ways that the selected approach influences the form and scope of processes.

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1.1. Theoretical framework

This study will scrutinise the process of energy and climate planning in five municipalities and the role of the Sustainable Municipality programme in assisting municipalities with this strategic task, by referring to recent advances in our understanding of public planning processes and reflecting upon the process of energy and climate planning in particular. Strategic planning in Sweden has historically been based on rational approaches, but in recent years, academics have observed a general trend in strategic planning, with a transition from rational planning models to more communicative models (Albrechts, 2004; Fredriksson, 2011; Healey, 2009).

Rational planning is often described as a linear process, in which a clearly defined series of steps are taken from problem formulation through analysis, selection and implementation to evaluation and feedback (Khakee, 1999: 25f). In such models, there is a clear division between the roles of politicians and planners, with politicians taking decisions and planners serving the common good (Campbell and Fainstein, 2003). Similarly, classical implementation theory portrays a top-down, rational process governed by control, direct intervention and regulation. Implementation is assigned to public servants who are assumed not to influence the process.

However, differences between the theoretical model of implementation proposed by rational planning and the observed practice have long been the focus of analysis. For example, Pressman and Wildawsky (1973) claimed that the actual process of implementation helps to form policy and solve political problems, with both public and private actors participating in policy development. This bottom-up perspective makes it difficult to define or specify the steps that will be taken during a process. Subsequent research into “street-level bureaucrats” has shown that officials often have influence over how policy is put into practice and that, in some contexts, both actions and decisions influence policy development (Lipsky, 1980).

In contrast to the rational perspective, the communicative planning model suggests that all stakeholders affected or influenced by a planning strategy should participate in dialogue to clarify pre-conditions, interests and reach consensus on proposed actions (Innes and Booher, 2004). This increases the role of citizens and private stakeholders. In its ideal form, participation of citizens occurs in a consensus-seeking decision-making process, the participation taking the form of deliberation or dialogue (Bishop and Davis, 2002; Few et al., 2007; Hamilton and Wills-Toker, 2006; Hendriks, 2002; Levine et al., 2005). Deliberative communication is a problem-solving form of communication that involves problem analysis, formulating evaluative criteria, and identifying and weighing alternative solutions (Habermas, 1998).

The idea is to involve all participants, combining influence, inclusiveness, and deliberation, embracing democratic values such as citizens' rights to information, justice, and participation (Palm and Thoresson, 2014). Deliberative participation has a bottom-up view of participation, where the goal is to redistribute the power over decisions from governments and officials to citizens. In its ideal form, deliberative participation should be initiated, owned, and controlled by citizens. The focus on participation reduces the perceived importance of clearly defining each stage in the process—continuous interaction means stages may occur in parallel or different orders – with the result that communicative planning processes are sometimes seen as relatively unstructured.

The transition from rational to communicative models implies a shift from “government” to “governance” and increasing plurality, in terms of both the actors involved and the levels of awareness about the complexity or interdependency of the issues being discussed. ‘Government’ implies that governments govern through

their formal institutions, and the state’s monopoly on the use of legitimate coercion is in focus (Boyer, 1990; Stoker, 1998). In contrast, ‘governance’ allows self-organising networks to be established; these networks are not fully accountable to the institutions of Government. Cooperation and coordination make governance horizontal, even if the state may take on a hierarchical role to express power (Wihlborg and Palm, 2008).

Reflecting this, broader forms of governance structures have emerged in strategic planning to mobilize actors (and their resources) outside of their formal contexts to formulate and implement public policy (Considine, 2005). Network-oriented decision-making changes the role of local government and local governments’ perceptions about their perceived scope of influence, by making municipalities one actor among many (Pierre and Peters, 2000). Several studies of municipal climate and energy policy, planning and implementation have noticed that a certain amount of governmental involvement is good for local action, e.g. by providing clear guidelines and funding (Baker and Eckerberg, 2007; Fleming and Webber, 2004; Neves and Leal, 2010; Nilsson and Mårtensson, 2003; St. Denis and Parker, 2009).

Transition management literature usually emphasises that it is possible to stimulate a transition and to influence its direction and speed. In this perspective, power is distributed (although not necessarily evenly) rather than being directed in a top-down manner, and many actors need to play a part in shaping transition (Smith et al., 2005; Teisman and Edelenbos, 2004; van de Kerkhof, 2004). A wide number of actors should therefore be involved in a process, because it is hard for a small group to represent all different views (Arnstein, 1969; Hartley and Wood, 2005; Rotmans et al., 2001). One important benefit of participation is that it increases trust between the governed and the government; this may increase acceptance for decisions, which in turn will benefit implementation of what is decided (Bayley and French, 2008; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). The mix of actors within systems differs, resulting in different forms of interaction and transition.

In sum, there is a debate in the literature on the form and structure of organisational processes and the extent to which they are rational/communicative, top-down/bottom-up, linear/non-linear, regulatory/voluntary, and the impact of this on power, networks and the roles of participants. In order to better understand the difference between the two models, we suggest that a systematic approach is needed (see Fig. 1).

This paper uses results from the study of the process of planning energy and climate strategies in five municipalities to consider the relevance of these ideal models. This informs analysis on the extent to which differences in approach influence the local strategic process and final strategy document. As such, the article aims to improve understanding about the ways in which communicative or rational approaches may influence strategic planning in municipalities.

2. Methodology

The study formed part of a larger research project, “Sustainable Energy and Climate Strategies” and the research process is illustrated in Fig. 2. As part of this research project, a survey was sent to all municipalities participating in the Swedish Energy Agency’s Sustainable Municipality programme. Based on the survey results, ten municipalities were subsequently selected for additional study and participated in telephone interviews (Gustafsson et al., 2011). The results of these interviews, together with the survey results, were then used to narrow the scope of the research.

Five municipalities were selected to be the focus of Case Studies, on the basis of their different sizes, approaches and levels of experience. The five appeared broadly representative of the wider

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