



Deliberation or doctrine? Land use and spatial planning for sustainable development in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

Spatial planning has been earmarked as an important tool for achieving sustainable development. In Sweden the important task of planning for sustainable spatial development and land use falls largely to the local authorities, since there is no official institute for spatial planning at a national or regional level. This article investigates local planning for sustainable development by analysing recent municipal comprehensive plans, which it is argued are a major instrument for this purpose. Although comprehensive plans are statutory, their design and content is very much at local discretion, and for the most part, not a rigid process governed from above. For this reason, a template analysis was used, where the template was built from the contents of the comprehensive plans, and not from a predefined understanding of what sustainability is or how planning for sustainable development should be done. What the findings reveal, however, is that there is not much deliberation concerning the meaning(s) of sustainable development, and, further, that the planning principles considered necessary to bring about sustainable development were not exclusively regarded as sustainable as such, but rather as part of a general 'belief system' about prudent planning—sustainable or not. It is suggested that, rather than rethinking planning, planners have internalized the concept of sustainable planning into the existing 'belief system,' and thus, the planning principles have become 'sustainable' by default.

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Introduction

As we move along the road to a sustainable society, are we breaking with the past or merely adjusting to new circumstances? Since 1987, sustainable development has become a household word applied to almost everything imaginable, and today it is hard to think of any activity, area, or achievement that is not supposed to be sustainable. An important tool that was singled out for achieving sustainable development in *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987) and *Agenda 21* (UNCEP, 1992) was spatial planning. One way of addressing the aforesaid question is thus to investigate whether planning principles intended to generate sustainable development really govern land use and spatial planning.

Since the Brundtland Commission presented its report 25 years ago, Sweden has introduced various new policies, programmes, and laws promoting sustainable development, although it should be pointed out that these measures are a continuation of previous environmental policies (Lundqvist, 2000). Although the prudent management of land and water was a key concept in Swedish spatial planning even before 1987, the push for sustainable

development has further emphasized this. However, since Sweden has no formal institute for spatial planning on a national level, the important task of planning for sustainable spatial development and land use falls largely to the local authorities—the *kommuner*, or municipalities. The major instrument here, at least according to numerous governmental documents, is the *översiktsplan*, or municipal comprehensive plan. Although such plans are not legally binding, on either the municipality or the public, their purpose is to declare how each municipality will envisage and steer future developments concerning land use.

The aim of this paper is to elucidate how sustainable development is interpreted and operationalized in Swedish municipalities—how it is understood and negotiated by the parties involved in the planning process and ultimately put together in a comprehensive plan. (It should be made clear from the outset, though, that this is not a formal evaluation of planning intended to study how governance for sustainable development is implemented in Sweden. For such studies see, for example, Edvardsson, 2007, 2009; Lundqvist, 2001, 2004).

The present investigation consists of an analysis of 55 municipal comprehensive plans dating from 2008 to 2010, aiming to address the following questions: (1) How is a fuzzy concept such as sustainable development understood and unpacked in concrete local settings where it shall be used to guide future planning decisions and actions? (2) Do particular understandings of the concept

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translate into particular strategies and planning principles for sustainable development?

The point here is not to focus on a certain type of planning situation or on those municipalities that have come furthest in planning for sustainability, but to study current comprehensive planning in general, taking into consideration existing variations in order to illuminate different corners of the discursive field of spatial and land use planning. Nor is the purpose to pass judgement on whether planning in Sweden leads to sustainable development or not, but to consider how Swedish planners handle the concept of sustainable development.

Sustainable development and planning

The concept of sustainable development is fuzzy (De Roo and Porter, 2007), which mean that it 'possesses two or more alternative meanings' (Markusen, 2003, p. 702) and thus can be interpreted differently, according to varying circumstances (Haughton and Counsell, 2004, p. 214). This 'empty signifier,' as Gunder and Hillier (2009, p. 140) call it, tends to take on many different meanings. People might think that they are considering the same entity, but without a clear definition of the concept, there might be an apparent or shallow equivalence—what Hajer (1995) calls a 'discourse coalition'—rather than a shared meaning of the actual content. This inherent vagueness has been pointed out by scholars since the Brundtland report was published (Meadowcroft, 2007), but even before then the use of the concept as an analytical tool by environmental economists in the 1980s showed the ambiguity and variety of possible interpretations (Pezzey, 1992). In 1994 Tate (1994, p. 367) was warning that '[s]ustainability as a concept is in danger of being operationalized out of existence,' and further developments have not reduced the number of interpretations—in fact, the very opposite.

Fuzzy concepts might well come in useful when serving as policy instruments. The broader the definition of a concept, the more participants may be willing to accept it and agree on the general idea, without anyone needing to specify any particular content or way to arrive at it (Kates et al., 2005; Foley, 1960, p. 212). For that matter, the definition of sustainability provided by the Brundtland Commission is politically ingenious to the point of being beyond contradiction. Who can withstand the rhetorical power of a reconciliatory statement that, without being too specific, brings environmental protection, economic growth, and social justice together (see Swyngedouw, 2007, p. 20)? However, fuzziness is also part and parcel of the transition from government to governance. In an increasingly complex and interconnected society with a multitude of public and private actors, each with different goals and aspirations, an important part of the governance process is to negotiate and renegotiate the content of a particular activity. This means that certain concepts may change meaning according to the outcome of such negotiations (Martens, 2007, pp. 53–54; Meadowcroft, 2007, p. 300). This is not necessarily a problem, but the effectiveness and the legitimacy of the governance process may be lost, if this possibility is not recognized by those concerned (Gezelius and Refsgaard, 2007). In a system of governance, fuzzy concepts function as pointers to a common subject, rather than defining that subject in detail. By introducing fuzzy concepts, politicians and policymakers can introduce an agenda and define desired goals in general, without knowing the exact outcome, although the latter may not be in their interest. Here 'sustainability may be understood as a specific kind of problem framing' (Kemp and Martens, 2007, p. 13), and thus needs further elaboration, if it is to be operationalized.

The concept of sustainability needs to be readjusted in whichever different contexts and situations it is applied, and the

same is true of planning. The introduction of sustainability in planning is part of the process of governance by which policymakers seek to frame a certain agenda and give recommendations for action, as is obvious in *Our Common Future* and *Agenda 21*. It would be fair to expect that such recommendations, translated into planning principles, would be well received in planning circles, since incorporating new ideas has been an essential aspect of the planning profession since the early twentieth century (Hall, 1992; Ward, 2002). However, it is important to note that a flow of ideas is not the same as copycat practices. Planning concepts may well spread widely and be long lived, but their actual realization can be quite different from the initial idea (Hall, 1996, pp. 2–3). One reason for this is that planning means slightly different things in different environments, because it is a historically and geographically contingent activity, guided by legislation, day-to-day politics, and culturally embedded practice (Busck et al., 2008; Dühr et al., 2010; Knieling and Othengrafen, 2009). Ideas about planning needs to be 'unpacked' and 'translated' to fit into their new location (Tait and Jensen, 2007, pp. 123–124). Even if the overarching idea of planning for sustainable development has led to the emergence of a number of common concepts and principles that are reiterated time after time in many different environments, praxis should be expected to show some variety, rather than conformity (Krueger and Gibbs, 2007, p. 3). This is a result of the contingency of planning, but also of different interpretations of sustainability, which in turn are related to the planning body's competencies and tasks, whether at national, regional, or local level.

The interpretation of what sustainability is and what it entails will influence how planning bodies structure a complex reality into a more or less coherent body of thought (Dühr et al., 2010, pp. 58–59). This resembles what Alexander and Faludi (1996) call a planning doctrine or paradigm (Faludi, 1999), which may be seen as a kind of 'belief system' (Alexander and Faludi, 1996, p. 14; Faludi, 2000, p. 314; see also Abram, 2011, p. 33) that gives meaning to different planning activities. This does not necessarily mean that all planning authorities have a fully developed planning doctrine as it is defined by Alexander and Faludi (1996). But it may be assumed that the concept of sustainable development is adopted into some sort of 'belief system,' including planning principles that define what 'normal' planning for sustainable development is. In a paper written more than 50 years ago, Foley (1960) pointed out that 'a web of generally accepted basic ideas and propositions' (p. 211) in planning could even be compared to an ideology, in that it gives an underlying rationale for actions taken by planning bodies.

However, the ambiguity of sustainability also has consequences when it comes to evaluating planning for sustainable development. A common solution in evaluation research is to identify a number of indicators and then test those indicators against praxis. Saha and Paterson (2008) studied 'the extent to which local governments in the USA were committed to the principles of sustainable development in their planning practices' (p. 21). The inquiry built on a survey sent to medium-sized and large US cities. To construct the survey, Saha and Paterson extracted a large number of indicators from relevant literature, which were then narrowed down by a panel of experts to the final number used in the survey. Jepson (2004) used a similar procedure (although without the expert panel) in his investigation of US cities. In a study of England and Wales, Counsell (1998) identified a number of relevant indicators in the literature that were assumed to lead to sustainable development and then tested them against the plans investigated. This approach is common in plan evaluation, and others have used similar, but not identical, approaches, including Berke and Manta-Conroy (2000); Edwards and Haines (2007), who evaluated smart growth, the US term more or less equivalent to sustainable development (Ward, 2002, p. 350); and Norton (2008), who evaluated anti-sprawl measures.

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