

BRIDGING WHAT GAP?

The role of local professionals working for sustainable development in collaboration with the inhabitants

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“One of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development is broad public participation in decision-making”
(UNCED 1992: ch. 23.2)

The paragraph from the Agenda 21 document constitutes the basis for the research project described in this paper. The project, thus, focuses not only on the broad political vision of sustainable development at the local level, but also on problems concerning the influence of the inhabitants on local decision-making. Further, the project has its focal point on suburban areas from the 60s and the 70s in major urban centres in Sweden – as such segregated areas are often described as suffering from a particularly serious communicative gap between the top-down management and the bottom-up perspective. Additionally, the project attempts to implicitly discuss the role of the locally employed professionals in local development work. This article is based on the findings presented in the licentiate thesis *Bridging Gaps: Sustainable Development and Local Democracy Processes* (Stenberg 2001).

RESULTS

The empirical part of the thesis contains a field investigation carried out in Göteborg, Sweden, with the purpose of exploring the potential of the interviewed local professionals to work as transformers¹ of the notion of sustainable development at the local level. The local professionals are from eleven distinct city districts and primarily employed by city district committees and private or public housing companies. They were questioned about their experiences of local democracy processes, i.e., collaborative local projects or processes with the intention of increasing the influence of inhabitants on local decision-making.

Three main themes were described as central by the local professionals. First, the inclination of the inhabitants to remain in the housing area; second, collaboration in networks with local actors; and third, the ability to embrace the complex of problems from a comprehensive perspective. These themes were also described as being in a position of dependency (see Fig.1): The problem of little inclination to remain in the housing area affects local professionals collaborating in networks, which in turn affects the ability to act from a comprehensive perspective, which would increase the potential to help people with their most severe problems, which would lead to an

¹ The term *transformer* is inspired by a notion presented by Bruno Latour: *successive layers of transformation* (1998: 253-263). The term is used here to illustrate that this is a matter of a transformation or translation of the notion of sustainable development, when the notion is transmitted from the global level to the local level, and back again.

increase in the inclination of inhabitants to remain in the housing area. This is the good circle that constitutes a framework for the activities that the local professionals in the field investigation take part in.

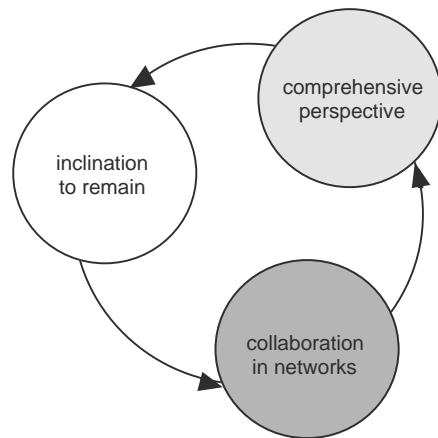


Fig. 1. Three main themes form a framework for local professionals.

How, then, do local democracy processes fit into the strategy of the respondents in the field investigation? One assumption that the respondents make, is that local democracy processes increase the inclination to remain in the area. However, the realisation of the vision of broad public participation in decision-making at the local level seems to constitute a difficult dilemma for local professionals. It appears evident that it is mainly the local professionals who take part in the actual processes. However, the local professionals usually also consider participation from the inhabitants as fundamental to the successful function of local development work, although local professionals often find it hard to engage people in the long run. Even if it is not complicated to initiate a process with the participation of local inhabitants, such a process demands constant support if it is not to wither away and die. Therefore, successful examples of such processes are mostly in the possession of local professionals, as they have to guard and nourish them at all times. Consequently, one important result of the field investigation was that the degree of influence of the inhabitants on local decision-making is rather low compared with the vision formulated in the Agenda 21 document. However, most of the respondents have the ambition of fulfilling the vision of a high degree of local inhabitants influencing local decision-making and they are not at all content with the results thus far. Although the reason for this shortcoming is not at all self-evident, the local professionals point out some obvious obstacles, such as segregation, competitiveness between companies, hierarchic structures, conflicting systems, safeguarding territories, ingrained power structures, and different time perspectives.

How do these experiences of the respondents, then, relate to the stated purpose of the field investigation? Do these local professionals have the potential to work as transformers of the notion of sustainable development at the local level? The answer to this question, however, is both positive and negative. The potential may be considered as being high because the professionals often already collaborate in local networks. Further, they see such collaboration as being necessary for their organisations to function well and, from their point of view, they also perceive the collaboration as being fundamental to the positive development of the local area. On

the one hand, taken together, this indicates the possibility that such local collaborative processes may continue, henceforth, and have the potential to survive in the long run. On the other hand, the potential for the local professionals to function as transformers may be seen as little when observing their obvious lack of collaboration with the inhabitants.

One interesting result from the field investigation into sustainable development, is that environmental issues were not spontaneously and extensively discussed by the local professionals. It seems like, while global and national actors from a top-down perspective focus on the environmental and economic dimensions of the vision, the local actors from a bottom-up perspective rather focus on the social and institutional dimensions of sustainable development. Why is the environmental dimension not considered as a central part of local democracy processes? What are the consequences of the lack of equal treatment of the four dimensions at the local level? May the lack of awareness and knowledge of this theme imply a difficulty for the local professionals to act as transformers of the notion of sustainable development at the local level?

Yet one more important observation is that the accounts of the respondents reflect a common criticism of the way that proceedings are implemented, i.e., mainly from the top. In this context, the vision of sustainable development is not an exception. Taken together, all the problems that the respondents describe as main obstacles may be seen as forming a thorough description of the distance – or gap – between top-down management and bottom-up needs.

BRIDGING THE GAP

The theoretical part of the thesis is based on a review of the literature exploring the themes found in the field investigation; themes related to the problem of bridging the gap between top-down and bottom-up perspectives. The themes that are examined in the theoretical part are – except for the theme on sustainable development² – the debate on democracy,³ collaborative planning,⁴ organisational learning,⁵ interorganisational learning,⁶ the development of competencies in interplace,⁷ designed links for sustainable development,⁸ mental pictures,⁹ successive layers of transformation,¹⁰ the themes of space and place,¹¹ and finally, the theme of the site or the face – a notion that is based on the interest in the artefact and attempts to contain the entire context.¹²

² See e.g. Spangenberg and Bonniot (1998), Valentin and Spangenberg (1999) and Kain (2000).

³ See e.g. Putnam (1993).

⁴ See e.g. Healey (1997) and Malbert (1998).

⁵ See e.g. Argyris and Schön (1995).

⁶ See e.g. Læssøe (1995).

⁷ See Forsén and Fryk (1999).

⁸ See Falkheden (1999).

⁹ See e.g. Birgersson (1996).

¹⁰ See Latour (1998).

¹¹ See e.g. Jensen (1994).

¹² See e.g. Bech-Danielsen (1998).

This review reveals knowledge about the specifics of the different approaches aim at bridging this gap. In particular, the potential for combining and comparing literature on sustainable development with other bodies of literature seems to be substantial, even if there is still much to be done in this line of work. However, and most interestingly, the review also indicates new ways of perceiving the gap in itself. In fact, it appears as if there are several distinctive gaps, which, in different ways, seem to obstruct positive local development (see Fig. 2). First of all, there is the gap between top and bottom, a gap which is often discussed in the literature on planning and democracy. Second of all, there is the gap between abstract and concrete, which is often the focus in the literature on planning and learning. In this second group, the gap between space and place may also be included, as well as the gap between theory and practice. The third gap is between place and place, i.e., between the distinct abodes of the local professionals and the organisations of the inhabitants. This gap seem to be of concern mainly in the literature on the local level. Finally, the fourth identified gap is between the four dimensions of sustainable development, an area of interest for literature on planning and, of course, in literature on sustainable development.

approach \ gap	top bottom	abstract concrete	place place	four dimensions
new roles in planning	X			
collaborative planning	X			
deliberative democracy	X			
border walker	X			
catalyst organisations	X			
mental pictures	X			
double-loop learning		X		
designed links		X		
layers of transformation		X		
space place		X		
social capital			X	
competencies in interplace			X	
face			X	
the prism of SD				X

Fig. 2. Which gap does the approach primarily intend to bridge?

CONCLUSIONS

This structured matrix seems to be of help to better distinguish between the different gaps. But, in what way can this literature review be of help to future work in the research project? One important issue is to understand whether or not it is necessary to bridge all four gaps if it is to achieve positive development. The answer to this question seems to be “yes”, first, based on the empirical findings of the field investigation, and second, supported by the theoretical input from the review of the literature. Any neglect of the existence of either one of the four gaps may cause problems that will constitute obstacles to the development sought for, i. e., sustainable development. And, yet another main issue to be considered in future research is whether or not it is desirable to develop an approach with the purpose of bridging all four gaps. The answer to this question may be both negative and positive. On the one hand, negative, as it seems to be impossible to include all aspects into one single approach, since such an overall approach can never be operational. On the other hand, the answer may be positive if understanding such an approach means, in fact, encompassing several different approaches, or methodologies, with the aim of bridging distinct gaps. If attending to such a complex of problems with the aid of Latour (1998: 253-263), it may be possible to understand such an assembly of methodologies as constituting successive layers of transformation. In this case, it is essential, according to Latour, to keep track of the whole chain of successive layers of transformation and not leave out any single layer. Is this comprehensive perspective of the approaches – keeping track of the chain – that which is lacking today? Is there, instead, a chain of discontinuities, i. e., a chain of gaps? Can it also be so that conflicting overlaps and contradictions between the described approaches constitute a serious dilemma?

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