Sustainable small town transports: learnings from a network project

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Abstract

The project *Vehicle efficient planning in vibrant small towns* ran between 2011 and 2014. It was a part of the programme Sustainable municipality, in which 37 Swedish municipalities cooperated with the Swedish Energy Agency in order to produce cutting edge examples of sustainability work at the municipal level.

The objective of the project was to find ways to handle a common challenge for small towns in Sweden; a high degree of car dependency. This car dependency can be traced back to a multitude of factors. One important explanation is a wide spread influence of functionalism in the spatial planning. As a consequence, many Swedish towns, communities and cities are planned around traffic systems in which the car is central. Sprawl is common, even in smaller towns.

Given this, walking and bicycling make up relatively small parts of the total transportation in Swedish towns. Public transport has also difficulties to attract travellers, as the low density usually makes it hard to run bus lines with the necessary frequency to win over car drivers.

In the project, eight municipalities formed a network group. A common denominator of the municipalities was their limited population; between approx. 15,000–30,000 inhabitants. Apart from that, the municipalities came from different parts of the country and had diverse prerequisites in terms of e.g. economic situations and/or closeness to economically strong regions. The municipalities worked with different projects in their own municipalities in order to find approaches to the high car usage. Among the measures being made were bicycle promotion, creation of sustainable transport plans and work with systematic process change within the municipal organisation.

The presentation will sum up the results and learnings from the project, and highlight the most interesting of these. As many countries have similar challenges, special focus will be put on solutions that are not specific for Sweden, but that can be duplicated in other countries.

Introduction

The programme Sustainable municipality was initiated by the Swedish Energy Agency in 2003. It has been running for three periods; 2003–2007, 2008–2011 and 2012–2014. The programme has been based in collaboration between the Energy Agency and the participating municipalities. In this cooperation, the Agency has contributed with expertise and the necessary structures for network building. The municipalities, on the other hand, have entered into the programme with specific projects which they have wanted to develop. In the third period of the programme, 37 municipalities have participated (out of 290 in total in Sweden).

The objective of the programme has been to produce cutting edge examples of sustainability work at the local level. In the third period, there was a focus on two specific themes; sustainable spatial planning and sustainable local growth (with emphasis on energy). Below each of these two themes, a number of network groups consisting of municipalities worked with different issues. One of the network groups below the sustainable spatial planning theme was called *Vehicle efficient planning in vibrant small towns*.

The network group *Vehicle efficient planning in vibrant small towns* was founded to address a common problem among small town municipalities; a high degree of car dependency. The purpose of the network was to explore ways to – in the small town context – decrease car use, and to increase walking, bicycling and public transport.

The network group consisted of nine municipalities. During the programme period, two of these aborted their participation. Seven municipalities participated the entire period. The municipalities came from different geographical parts of Sweden and had different contextual settings. Some of them came from economically strong and vibrant regions, and some from regions with declining population status. They did however have a common denominator; their size. All of the municipalities had a population of approx. 15,000–30,000 inhabitants.

The challenge

In general, there is a high degree of car dependency in Swedish small towns. The people who live in small towns do in general use their car to a higher degree than people who live in cities or bigger towns. Reversely, they walk and cycle to a lesser degree.

This pattern can be explained in many ways. However, one major explanation that might be more important than most is a widespread influence of functionalistic and car centred spatial planning in Sweden. Since the Second World War the Swedish society has to a great extent been planned around the car. New built communities and neighbourhoods have often been placed quite far from existing town centres. Also, structures which existed since earlier have usually been altered in order to make way for the car society.[1]

As a result of this, many towns are quite unattractive for walking and/or cycling. Public transport is usually not attractive either, as the sprawled character of most towns makes them hard to support by buses. The density is usually too low to keep up any good frequency on buses.

In the last decade or so, this car centred spatial planning has gradually started to loosen its grip. Awareness of climate change in combination with increased oil prices has led to new perspectives on spatial planning. People have also been starting to require better possibilities for walking and cycling. In addition, more and more people as well as politicians have embraced the concept of sustainable city development. This thinking, which is based around the dense, mixed and green city or community, highlights totally different values than the traditional car centred thinking.

Nonetheless, even if a more sustainable perspective regarding spatial planning is gaining ground, there are still challenges. One of these is the infrastructure and the environment which have been built in the last fifty years. It will take many years and big investments before the built environment is even slightly changed.[2] Another factor of importance is that the majority of small towns lack the necessary financial means to do any major changes in their built environment.

There are also other challenges regarding sustainable transports in smaller communities which not easily can be solved by the same measures as in larger municipalities. A common problem is competition from nearby larger municipalities and from external shopping areas, which can make it hard to plan for efficient and sustainable transportations in small towns. The widespread phenomena of external shopping areas are also a reason why small town centres often are drained of commercial and cultural service.

Another challenge for small towns is the fact that they usually have large commuter groups. The majority of these commute via car, and as consequence a challenge is to find sustainable transport solutions as fuels are getting more expensive.

Finally, there is a big challenge to handle prevailing structures within municipal planning organisations. Despite awareness of climate change and other environmental aspects of car driving, many spatial planning projects are still based around the car. Conservatism in the planning offices is one explanation to this, however not the only one. Traditional organisational structures are usually built up in silo systems. It is well documented that such organisational systems can have a negative effect on sustainability in the spatial planning.[3] There need to be ways for the planners to communicate with other competences within the organisation in order for a sustainable planning to come true. If not, there is a great risk that they miss important aspects in the planning process.[4]

Besides a good and well-functioning internal communication, a sustainable spatial planning process is also dependent on dialogue with other stakeholders in the community.[5]

The network

All of the network groups in the programme Sustainable municipality were modelled in a similar way. The Energy Agency provided a network foundation, and organised the meetings and activities. The Agency also made sure that necessary expertise was available. The participating municipalities, on the other hand, joined the network groups with specific projects which they wanted to develop. Each municipality had one or two contact persons, who were the people who participated in the meetings and activities. A consultant firm was also assigned to help out with the management of the programme.

The programme did not include any direct financial support from the Agency to the municipalities. Rather has one of the major ideas behind the programme been that the municipalities should improve their ordinary routines and way of work. As an objective of the programme is to spread good examples, it has been considered important that these improvements should not be dependent on financial support.

The municipalities in *Vehicle efficient planning in vibrant small towns* met in organised meetings three to four times a year. In between the meetings, there were a number of web based meetings, as well as web based lectures. The meetings were mostly held in Stockholm, but a couple of meetings were also held in some of the municipalities. There were also study visits in other municipalities. Each meeting consisted of a part where the participants gave an account for how their projects

1. Lundin, 2008.
2. Statens offentliga utredningar, 2012.
3. Statens offentliga utredningar, 2012.
4. Ranhagen, 2011.
5. Statens offentliga utredningar, 2012.

had developed. Much focus was put on eventual obstacles and hinders, and how these were handled.

Every meeting did also have one or two presentations from experts, about relevant issues. Planning for cyclists, public transport solutions, mobility management, parking and how to plan for pedestrians are examples of themes in the presentations. Some of the presentations were held some time later again, online, so that the contact persons in the municipalities could gather a group of colleagues at home and listen together.

Every municipality were also entitled to an equal number of consultant hours. How these were used was decided in dialogue between the agency, the municipalities and the consultant firm.

The municipalities

The municipalities in the project were:

- Alvesta.
- Håbo.
- Härnösand.
- Nyköping.
- Strängnäs.
- Västervik.
- Mora.
- Kungsbacka (dropped out).
- Upplands Väsby (dropped out).

In this paper, three of the municipalities (Alvesta, Håbo and Mora) are presented. They were chosen for the paper as they mirror the challenges of the participating municipalities in a good way.

ALVESTA

The municipality of Alvesta is found in the Kronoberg län (county) in southern Sweden. It joined *Vehicle efficient planning in vibrant small towns* with the specific challenge of how to increase cycling in Moheda, a small village with approx. 1,800 inhabitants. The goals of the participation was to find good ways to work with cycle planning, produce concrete action measures based on the strategic guidelines in a detailed comprehensive plan for Moheda and to increase the cooperation in the municipal organisation; especially between the people in the environmental and planning offices.

The work was based in the detailed comprehensive plan for the village of Moheda, in which the objective to increase cycling was underscored. The plan was produced and accepted by the municipal council shortly before the municipality joined the programme, and it gave the work with cycling promotion legitimacy within the municipal organisation.

Among the activities that were made in the project were a number of travel surveys in order to understand how movement patterns of the inhabitants. Also, there were different forms of information campaigns held, aimed both towards the public and towards the people in the municipal organisation. For example, different happenings that highlighted cycling were held, were the municipality provided gifts and presents. The cycle focus did also lead to that the municipality decided to place a new cycle parking just in front of the central station, much closer than the car parking. The bicycle parking was equipped with an air pump for filling up bicycle tires.

The most important learnings from the Moheda project are that it is of most importance that projects like this have support of the politicians. The people working with the project did also underscore how important it is that the people who work with the project are engaged in it and that the project group is put together with care. Furthermore, the people who worked with the project underscored the importance of the municipality being a member of the Sustainable municipality network. This gave the sustainability issue weight within the political organisation, and strengthened the politicians and employees who were engaged in the issues.

The cycle project has yet not been evaluated in terms of how many more cyclists it has generated, but the municipality is optimistic about the outcome. In 2015, the work to promote cycling will continue in the municipality with the adoption of a strategic cycle plan for the entire municipality, in which the experiences from the Moheda project will be of great use. One thing that is for sure is that the municipality has learned a lot, both about planning for cycling and about how to work with sustainability issues in the municipal organisation.

HÅBO

The municipality of Håbo had a different challenge than Alvesta. Håbo is placed north of Stockholm, and can be reached from Stockholm in 40 minutes by commuting train. By car, the trip takes some 45 minutes. It is 57 km between central Stockholm and Håbo. The task that Håbo joined the programme with was to find ways how to transform Håbo from a car focused commuter suburb to a walking and cycling friendly small town.

At present, huge parking lots are the most central aspect of central Håbo. The car has a very central position in the way the municipality is planned. This is something that the municipality wants to change, so that Håbo eventually will turn into a small but densely populated town with urban qualities. The municipality consider the participation in the programme as the starting point of this transformation. They also considered the participation as a means to increase the weight of sustainability issues in the organisation.

The municipality has been an active participator in all the meetings and activities in the programme, and have used the knowledge this has given them in their projects at home. According the municipality, the participation has led to a higher degree of quality in the sustainability work. They also describe how it led to a higher self confidence in sustainability issues, within the organisation.

Håbo has produced extensive strategic plans for the development of the town, and sustainability has been allowed to take place in these. In particular, great focus has been put on the parking issue. However, the municipality also describe obstacles in this work. Even though the sustainability issue has got a higher status within the organisation, there is still no clear consensus about how to implement it in the municipal organisation and its work. Just as Alvesta, the people in Håbo describe the importance of political support when working with sustainable transport planning. The municipality has also had a great

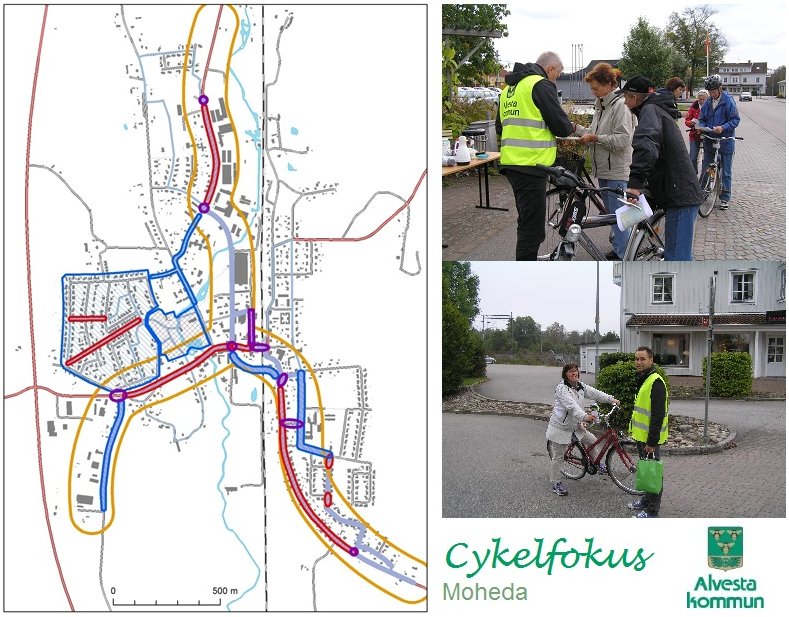

Figure 1. Map showing the village of Moheda with cycle routes and pictures taken at some of the activities that took place.

focus on how to involve the public in the planning process. Numerous workshops have been held, and a lot of focus has been put on how to make sure that the public is listened to.

MORA

Mora is a small municipality in the Dalarna län in mid Sweden. In *Vehicle efficient planning in vibrant small towns*, they joined with the challenge of how to promote cycling in a not yet built neighbourhood, placed outside the town.

As in most municipalities, the strategy in Mora is first and foremost to plan for densification of the town. Nonetheless, there are interests in the housing industry that want to build a new residential area on the outskirts of town, and the politicians have supported the project. The neighbourhood goes under the name of *Noret Norra*. It was early decided, though, that everything possible should be done to promote sustainable transports, such as walking, cycling and public transports in the area. The municipality does not want the inhabitants in Noret Norra to be dependent on their cars for transportation. Thus, the municipality wants to avoid the – otherwise very usual – pattern where sprawled areas mean car dependency.

Noret Norra is still in the planning phase, but sustainable transportation has been allowed to take a great place in the planning process. The municipality has done a number of workshops within the organisation, to anchor the sustainability issues. For example, the planning office, the traffic office and the public health office have participated in these workshops. When asked about their participation in *Vehicle efficient planning in vibrant small towns* and what it has meant for the municipality, the contact person in Mora stresses the increased knowledge within the organisation about sustainability. In general, there is a greater understanding about the importance of having a wide perspective in the planning process. Another learning from Mora is that if the municipality is to plan for sustainability, the planning process needs to take the time required. It takes time to let all the relevant stakeholders take part in the process, but it is necessary to let them do that.

Learnings from the project

When *Vehicle efficient planning in vibrant small towns* was initiated, the objective was that it should lead to a number of cutting edge examples of sustainable transportation planning in small towns. During the time of the program, it has been increasingly clear for both the municipalities and the Energy Agency that it would be hard to define what a cutting edge example like this could be. A major reason for this is the contextual setting of spatial planning. There are always a number of factors that influences a planning process, and the end result can differ a lot from what initially was planned for.

As a consequence of this, the major learnings from the project are rather about spatial planning in general than about specific traffic planning. However, these learnings are of great value and they ought to be considered in every planning project/process.

First of all, an important learning is to have a wide dialogue with important stakeholders inside the municipal organisation. Too often, the planning office does all the planning without talking to other relevant actors within the organisation. This could be, for example, the traffic office, the environment office or the office of public health. There is a great risk that the planning office, by doing like this, misses important facts and knowledge that can be of great importance for achieving sustainability in the spatial planning. Likewise, it is usual that the traffic planners don't talk to the spatial planners, which is equally bad.

Secondly, it is very important to also have a dialogue with stakeholders outside the municipal organisation. Not least, this is of importance from a democratic perspective. A well done dialogue process does however also have great benefits for the project itself. If people who are affected by the project feel that they have been listened to, the risk that they will appeal the project decreases. For a dialogue process to be successful, it must be clear for the stakeholders what possibilities they have to influence the project. If they have the impression that they can stop it entirely, and this is not possible, having a dialogue can

rather make the situation worse. There are several good methods that can be used for dialogue. Many of these are collected in the handbook "4 big leaps and 20 small steps – Conceptual guidelines on sustainable spatial planning"[6], published by the Swedish Energy Agency.

Thirdly, the value of a decided and consensus-based political strategy cannot be underestimated. The planners need to feel that they have the support of the politicians. It is important, also, that this support is unconditional. Of course, the planners have to base their work in democratically taken decisions, but once these are taken, they have to feel confident in their role.

Connected to all of these recommendations is also the great value of having an ongoing and transparent discussion about what sustainability means in the specific municipal context.

Finally, some words about the network itself. All the participating municipalities have emphasized the positive impacts of being in a network such as *Vehicle efficient planning in vibrant small towns*. As already mentioned, a common viewpoint is that being a member gave the issue weight. To some extent, this has to do with the fact that the network is organised by the Swedish Energy Agency. When joining the network, the municipal councils had to sign an agreement in which they made sure that the municipality should participate fully, and that the required means should be available for this. This formal agreement did probably have a positive effect on the municipalities' engagement in the network.

Another effect of the network was of course the network itself, and the exchange of ideas and experiences between the participating municipalities. The network provided a channel for informal discussions, something that all the participating municipalities have said was a positive and useful.

Also, the Energy Agency used the network to spread useful information to the municipalities. That was similarly something that the municipalities appreciated.

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6. Ranhagen, Ulf, 2011.