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Planning for sustainability in expansive metropolitan regions: exploring practices and planners' expectations in Stockholm, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In Sweden, local and regional planning practices are faced with the challenge of managing rapid growth in expansive urban regions. However, spatial planning should also contribute to the fulfilment of formalized sustainability objectives and support sustainable development. This includes addressing cross-cutting sustainability issues that transcend established administrative and territorial boundaries. Thus, the management of sustainability issues requires attention from actors at different levels, and challenges how contemporary planning practices plan for development. Based in the expansive Stockholm region, this study explores the cross-level interaction in spatial planning and decision-making and planning practitioners' experiences and apprehensions of contemporary municipal planning practices with a focus on statutory plans to achieve sustainability targets and objectives. The results show that municipal planning organizations are under pressure because of rapid urban expansion. It is concluded that the role, format and content of statutory as well as informal planning instruments are decisive for the cross-level interaction between planning levels. Moreover, planning instruments find new trajectories resulting in mismatches in expectations from planners at adjacent planning levels. This influences the interplay and preconditions for achieving national and regional sustainability targets and objectives.

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1. Introduction

In the coming three decades, the global urban population is predicted to grow by 2.5 billion and, by 2050, 66% of the global population will live in urban areas (United Nations, 2015). This will create a great demand for development in metropolitan regions, and the development of cities and urban areas are now regarded as key drivers of sustainability (United Nations, 2016). According to Haughton, Allmendinger, Counsell, and Vigar (2010, p. 5), spatial planning is 'bound up in a belief that planning has a central role in moving society towards sustainable development', and it has been argued that

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spatial planning is a vital tool for how cities and societies plan for sustainable development (Davoudi, Hall, & Power, 2008). However, due to the cross-cutting nature of sustainability issues, it is no longer enough to integrate ecological, social and/or economic aspects of sustainability into fragmented local and regional planning processes. A major challenge for spatial planning is to manage interdependent and cross-cutting sustainability issues that require attention from actors at different levels in various sectors. In other words, the concept of sustainable development promotes a more integrated perspective on society which includes management of the institutional relationships and the cross-level interactions, i.e. the vertical interplay between management systems located at adjacent levels in planning and decision-making (Young, 2006). Thus, in order to plan for sustainability, it is important how planning practice handles this interplay and utilizes the planning instruments and their related planning processes at different administrative and spatial levels.

In the literature, it is argued that it is now possible to think of 'spatial plannings' due to the increasing diversity of practices that can be related to spatial planning (Haughton et al., 2010). What seems to characterize these practices, besides belonging to specific 'traditions' (see Nadin & Stead, 2008) or a specific 'style' or 'type' (see Brindley, Rydin, & Stoker, 1996; Innes & Gruber, 2005; Nilsson, 2007), is that they (i) constitute hybrid frameworks where traditional forms of statutory planning coexist with new strategic instruments and (ii) are expected to bring 'coherence to increasingly fragmented systems of governance' (Haughton et al., 2010, p. 5). In Sweden, municipal comprehensive planning and detailed development planning constitute the two key statutory planning instruments. These instruments are regulated in the Planning and Building Act (PBL) with the overall aim of supporting a sustainable development (Planning and Building Act, SFS 2010: 900).

Even though Sweden follows the Scandinavian comprehensive-integrated approach where the planning systems are 'intended to provide horizontal and vertical integration of policies across different sectors and jurisdictions' (Elinbaum & Galland, 2016, p. 183), it has been stated that 'current institutions for policy-making, planning and implementation are more suited to solving social and environmental problems that are immediate, local and divisible into specific policy areas and jurisdictional levels' (Polk, 2011, p. 185). Moreover, local authorities utilize different plans in addressing different issues and, as a consequence, 'with separation, contradictory issues never stand in direct opposition to each other, and in this way the need to make a decision with respect to the bigger picture is avoided' (Nilsson, 2007, p. 443). As a consequence, it is necessary to further explore how local and regional planning practices can manage cross-cutting sustainability issues in expansive urban regions when 'jurisdictions are entrenched' (Faludi, 2012, p. 208) and 'the clear geographical and professional boundaries of planning, plus the hierarchical and silo ways of behaving are already planning history' (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009, p. 618).

One recent study discusses the role of traditional, or statutory, planning vis-à-vis more informal approaches and identifies the fact that, in practice, 'the hierarchical "top-down" system of urban and regional planning, set in the national legislations, is not trusted or found suitable as a guideline for the strategic perspective' (Mäntysalo, Jarenko, Nilsson, & Saglie, 2015, p. 350). Other studies have identified that planning practices are characterized by 'fuzzy boundaries and soft spaces' (Allmendinger &

Haughton, 2009; Faludi, 2012) where ‘soft spaces’ are described as a ‘search for new opportunities for strategic thinking and breaking away from pre-existing working patterns by working outside the formal requirements and rigidities of statutory planning’ (Olesen, 2012, pp. 911–912). In particular, it has been claimed that spatial planning is part of a re-scaling process which aims to create the conditions for a strategic perspective that can operate on scales other than the formal statutory planning system (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009).

The design, or the institutionalized style, of planning practices thus becomes an important factor for the management of cross-level interactions, i.e. the interplay, at the local and regional level. This makes the case for a deeper analysis of how contemporary planning practices utilize available planning instruments as a means to handle cross-cutting sustainability issues.

1.1. Aim and scope

As has been identified above, a search for improved coordination across different administrative levels and territorial boundaries, which does not risk the legitimacy of planning, could increase the potential for planning to play an important role in supporting sustainable trajectories in expansive urban regions. The overall aim of this study is to increase the understanding of the conditions for and the nature of cross-level interaction in spatial planning. In particular, this paper explores planning practitioners’ experiences and apprehensions of contemporary municipal planning practices with a focus on statutory plans to meet sustainability targets and objectives. As a basis for this study, we address two main research questions:

- How are spatial planning practices contextualized in municipal and regional planning?
- How does planning practitioners experience and apprehend the interplay between planning instruments in contemporary municipal and regional planning?

The study is conducted in three Swedish municipalities within the expansive Stockholm region, Sweden.

2. Planning in Sweden: policy context and the Swedish planning system

Although having just about 10 million inhabitants, Sweden, too, is facing challenges connected to rapid expansion in metropolitan areas. With a population growth rate of 16.2% between 2004 and 2014, the Stockholm region has been one of the most expansive urban regions in Europe (Eurostat, 2016). At the national level, it has been prognosticated that 710,000 new units of housing are needed by 2025 (National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, 2016a), which also requires infrastructure delivery and services. However, as the municipalities in Sweden possess a planning monopoly, municipal planning should contribute to the fulfilment of formalized sustainability targets and objectives such as the 16 Swedish national environmental quality objectives that form the basis for implementing Sweden’s environmental policy (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2012).

2.1. The Swedish policy context

Sectoral entrenchment and ‘silo-based approaches’ are two concerns that have been identified as obstacles to sustainable urban development (The Delegation for Sustainable Cities, 2012). Moreover, local and regional planning authorities are key players in the implementation of the ‘national strategy for sustainable regional growth and attractiveness’ (Government Offices of Sweden, 2015). This strategy bridges ecological, social and economic aspects of sustainability and aims to achieve the national environmental quality objectives. In particular, the strategy stresses the need for improved collaboration between municipalities and private and public actors at different levels. This would mean that planning can be understood as ‘both an expression of old-style “government” and new-style “governance”’ where it ‘must operate within new associational networks, becoming deeply embedded in governance systems at all levels’ (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009, p. 621).

2.2. The Swedish planning system

In general, legislation in Sweden is based on the recognition of three democratic levels: the national level, the regional level and the local level, where decision-making, power and responsibility are decentralized to the regional and municipal levels (Hägglund, 2013). Hence, the political and administrative power in Sweden is to a large extent found at the local level in Sweden’s 290 municipalities (Hedström & Lundström, 2013). In an international context, Swedish municipalities hold a very strong, even uniquely strong position according to Johnson (2013), due to the municipal planning monopoly which ‘implies that the municipality decides where, when and how development may take place’ (Blücher, 2013, p. 47). However, due to the contemporary need for development, recent debate has focused on altering these conditions, and the municipal planning monopoly has been criticized (Cars, Kalbro, & Lind, 2013).

Regulations for spatial planning are formalized mainly through the PBL and the Environmental Code. According to Blücher (2013), the introduction of the 1987 revised PBL increased the municipalities’ influence over land-use planning, also introducing the mandatory municipal comprehensive plan and citizen consultation processes. In 2011, the PBL was again revised where ‘recent changes have given a stronger position for land-owners and developers, but it can be seen to constitute the legalization of already established practice’ where planning to a large extent is a matter of negotiation where major developers ‘now have the trumps’ (Blücher, 2013, p. 56). Hence, the situation reflects a situation in which local planning authorities possess and control only negative powers of development (Taylor, 1998).

Nonetheless, through legislation, a hierarchy of statutory instruments for spatial planning is provided, spanning from the regional plan to local detailed development plans, see Table 1. This framework has to a large extent been fixed since the introduction of the PBL of 1987 (Johnson, 2013). In the Swedish planning system, neither the regional plan nor the municipal comprehensive plan is legally binding, i.e. they act only as guidance, whereas the detailed development plans are regulatory (Hedström & Lundström, 2013). Regional planning in the Stockholm region, however, comprises a special case compared to other regions in Sweden due to its history as well as the current institutional and judicial setting (see Johnson, 2013). For a more detailed coverage than what can be provided

Table 1. Statutory planning instruments in the Swedish planning system.

Type of plan	Characteristics
Regional plan SFS 2010:900., 7 Sect. 6§ SFS 1987:147	A regional planning body may, for the region or a part of it, adopt a regional plan which shall: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) act as guidance for decisions regarding comprehensive plans, detailed development plans and area regulations and (2) outline principal land and water use and guidelines for the localization of development and construction, if it is of regional significance
Comprehensive plan SFS 2010:900., 3 Sect. 1§ SFS 2010:900., 3 Sect. 2§	Every municipality shall have an up-to-date comprehensive plan, covering the entire municipality The comprehensive plan shall specify the long-term orientation of the built environment. The plan shall act as guidance to decision-making related to the use of land and water areas and the use, development and preservation/conservation of the built environment
SFS 2010:900., 3 Sect. 3§ SFS 2010:900., 3 Sect. 5§	The comprehensive plan is not compulsory In the comprehensive plan it should be clear: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. how the municipality through land-use planning will consider and coordinate the comprehensive plan with relevant national and regional objectives, plans and programmes with a significance for sustainable development within the municipality
Detailed or thematic comprehensive plan SFS 2010:900., 3 Sect. 23§	A comprehensive plan may be changed for certain municipal areas. It may also be changed by an amendment in order to accommodate a certain public interest. A change in the plan for a certain area may be declared with another level of detail than the original plan
Detailed development plan SFS 2010:900., 4 Sect. 5§	In a detailed development plan the municipality shall: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) prescribe and zone for public places, areas for building sites and water areas, (2) prescribe the use and design of public places whereas the municipality is a mandator and (3) prescribe the use of areas for building sites and water areas
Detailed development programmes SFS 2010:900., 5 Sect. 10§	If the municipality assesses it is needed to facilitate detailed development planning, the municipality shall state the plan's purpose and objectives in a specific programme

here, Strömgen (2007) outlines the historical and political development of the Swedish planning system, and Fredriksson (2011) elaborates on the role of comprehensive planning in Swedish municipalities.

3. Methods

This study is intended to provide an in-depth understanding of how municipal planners in peri-urban areas experience current planning practice, and of the cross-level interactions in spatial planning in the case of rapid urban growth. In order to do this, a qualitative research design was used so as to explore how planning practitioners experience and apprehend the interplay in contemporary municipal planning practices in the Stockholm region, Sweden. The study was designed as a case study in three Swedish municipalities within the expansive Stockholm region, and utilized an emergent design (Creswell, 2013). In accordance with Yin (2009), this case was chosen based upon early deliberation of practical and substantive considerations, e.g. in terms of the availability and quality of data and the distinctive issues in spatial planning practice within expansive metropolitan regions where planners have to respond to cross-cutting sustainability issues.

To inform the interview study, literature and planning documents from the investigated municipalities were reviewed. Then, one interview was conducted in order (i) to explore the relationship between planning practice and the development of planning legislation and (ii) to elaborate on preliminary findings. Next, interviews were carried out to sample participants' experiences and apprehensions of contemporary municipal spatial planning practice, and of the cross-level interactions in spatial planning in the case of rapid urban growth. Six interviews were conducted within the selected municipalities. In each of the three municipalities, one planning manager (PD1, PD2 and PD3) and one comprehensive planner (CP1, CP2 and CP3) participated. This selection provided the opportunity to investigate the cross-level interaction between the strategic comprehensive planning and the detailed development planning. These planners were identified as key persons due to their role in the organization and the operational responsibility for implementing political goals and agendas at different administrative levels. All interviewees had vast experience from municipalities as well as from a variety of other planning institutions, ranging from national to local levels and public and private agencies. The interview study used a semi-structured approach (Kvale, 2009). The questions were reiterated so as to encompass important perspectives provided by participants. One central part of the interview let participants reflect upon the interplay between the statutory planning instruments, see Table 1. The interviews, lasting between one and two hours, were audio taped and transcribed. The interviewees verified both a verification protocol that summarized their statements, and the transcriptions. The protocols and the transcriptions formed the basis for the data analysis which was conducted in accordance with the qualitative data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2013). This process included describing, classifying and interpreting the data collected, and resulted in a set of themes in correspondence with the formulated aim and research questions.

4. The study area

The study has been conducted in three municipalities within the Stockholm region, Sweden, see Figure 1.

In the classification provided by Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2016), the investigated municipalities are defined as 'commuter municipalities close to a city', as more than 40% of the night-time population commutes for work. Furthermore, two of them are 'inner municipalities' and one is an 'outer municipality' according to the upcoming regional plan RUF5 2050 (Stockholm County Council, 2016). The three municipalities are geographically adjacent and represent a mixture in population size, ranging between approximately 45,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. In addition, due to a low rate of construction in relation to the population growth, these municipalities have an accumulated deficit in housing (National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, 2016b).

The motivation to investigate practice in this context is threefold. Firstly, the municipalities investigated are independent in terms of jurisdiction and local government, but share a deep connection for the development of the Stockholm Region. Therefore, contributing to the understanding of how these municipalities plan for development is necessary so as to realize the vision to become Europe's most attractive urban region (Stockholm County Council, 2010). Secondly, the study area is situated in a region now facing

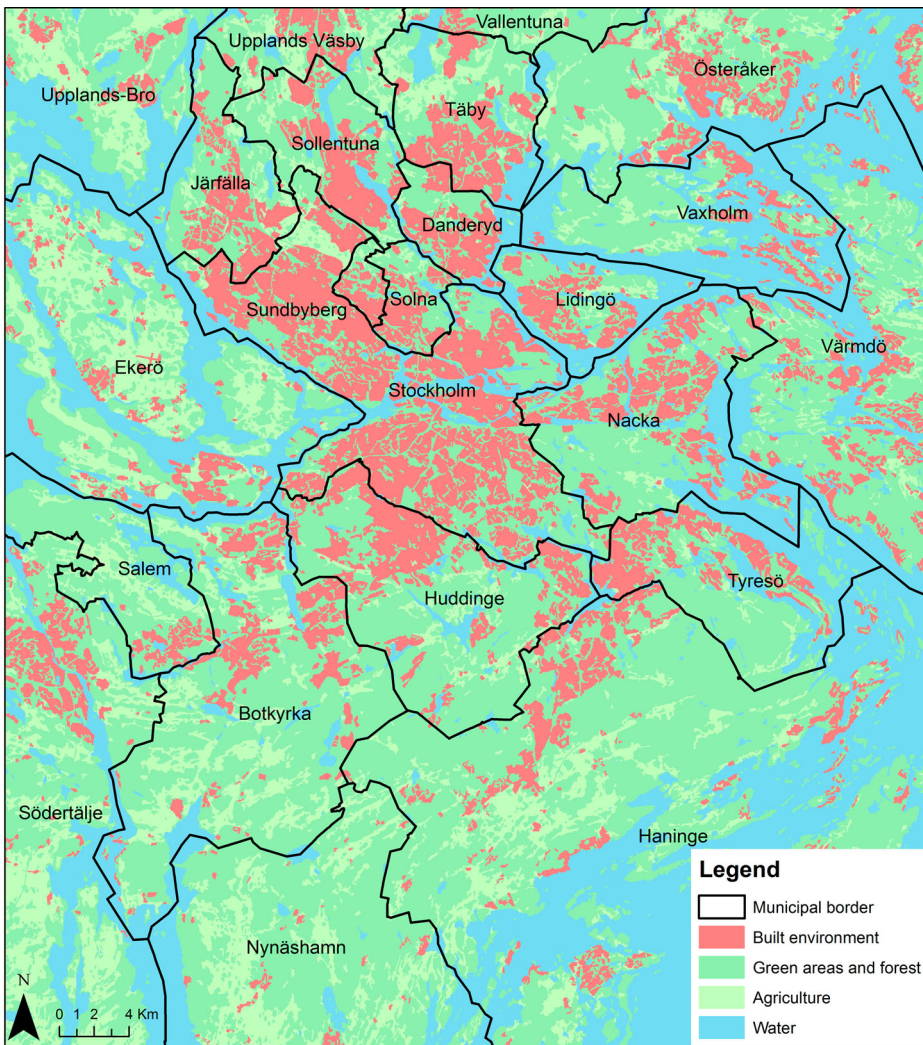


Figure 1. Land use map of the expansive Stockholm region.

major challenges related to urban growth. In the municipalities investigated, the population is prognosticated to grow by approximately 15–20% by 2025 and approx. 25,000 new units of housing are needed (Stockholm County Council, 2015). Consequently, such development puts pressure on local planning authorities to plan for development within their territory.

Thirdly, the municipalities' current situation relates to the findings of Hall (1974), as cited in Taylor (1998, pp. 99–100), where the concepts of urban containment, suburbanization and an inflationary effect on land and property have influenced and still influence development. In relation to containment, the current regional plan designates regional urban cores and establishes a poly-centric regional structure in which densification in already built-up areas is proposed (Stockholm County Council, 2010). Two of the municipalities investigated have designated cores, and thus plan for development where a

multitude of actors and policies at different scales and levels coincide. Next, the effects of suburbanization have created a situation in which the three municipalities are subject to intense commuting, which puts the regional transport system under major stress (OECD, 2013). Finally, due to the inflationary effect, the municipalities investigated have different preconditions for attracting developers compared to the inner-city areas.

5. Results

The results depart from the two research questions and are presented in two main sections. In the analysis of the interviews, three themes were identified for each research question. The results are in both sections presented according to these themes. The first section provides the planners' perspectives on the significance of context in municipal planning, and the second reports on how the planners experience the interplay between spatial plans and the planning process. At the end of this chapter, a summary of the results is presented.

5.1. Contextualizing municipal spatial planning

Regarding the significance of context for municipal spatial planning, three themes were identified: (i) addressing national and regional targets and objectives, (ii) the efficiency of planning processes and (iii) management and prioritization in municipal planning.

5.1.1. Addressing national and regional targets and objectives

Municipalities should contribute to achieving national and regional targets and objectives, e.g. the national environmental quality objectives (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2012). According to the interviewees, addressing these objectives is difficult for three reasons. Firstly, there is 'no intrinsic support to fulfil these objectives', as there is a discrepancy between the ambitions of national and regional objectives and the scope of the regulatory instruments provided (CP3). Secondly, to address the gap between such objectives and actual development requires interpreting what such goals mean for a certain plan or development activity (CP3). Thirdly, municipal government alone cannot ensure the fulfilment of national and regional objectives (PD2). Therefore, municipalities need to motivate developers to contribute to such fulfilment through the developers' activities (CP3), and market interest is needed in development areas pointed out in a comprehensive plan (PD2). Thus, municipalities need an increased understanding of the terms of market-led planning (CP2), especially since already adopted detailed development plans that are not implemented are a major source of annoyance in municipalities (CP3) and disturb the cross-level interplay, which in turn influences the likelihood of fulfilling national and regional objectives.

5.1.2. The efficiency of planning processes

In relation to the notion of efficiency, some of the planners interviewed emphasize the importance of intra-municipal organization. When elaborating on an effective planning organization, one planner defines it as an organization that produces a certain number of dwellings each year (CP2). In one municipality, the driving force behind a major re-organization is to 'shorten lead times and improve governing' (PD2), aiming at enabling a higher rate of construction. In such an efficiency-oriented landscape, one of the

interviewees recognizes the municipality's fast-paced process as a competitive advantage which enables the municipality to attract developers (CP3).

Moreover, the notion of efficiency in planning processes frames a polarized conflict fuelled by the housing shortage and the insufficient production of new dwellings (CP1; CP3; PD3). Municipalities and national authorities claim that poor efficiency is related to limited knowledge regarding the statutory planning instruments among developers, while national-level politicians and the construction industry allege legislation and municipal practice as constituting an obstacle to increased efficiency. Among municipal planning practitioners, there is dissatisfaction with the contemporary approach at the national level to 'tweak' current planning legislation which, according to one interviewee, creates unrealistic assumptions about increased efficiency among developers at the local level and leads to disorder and discontent (PD3). However, this conflict is identified as a level-dependent issue. In the municipality with the fast-paced process mentioned above, the developers understand and respect why the planning process takes time and are not complaining about the efficiency; what is of greater concern are the differences they encounter among the municipalities (PD3).

Furthermore, the organizational positioning of, and the interplay between, the planning administration and the administration for land development, which manages treaties and financial arrangements between the municipality and developers, is recognized as influencing the efficiency (i.e. pace) as well as the capacity to address important issues in planning processes. One planner with experience from both these administrations explains that the organizational positioning of the administration for land development, being either close to planners who make detailed development plans or to strategic planning activities, has an impact on the efficiency of the process (CP2). Based on the results from the interviews, the interplay in between these two administrations varies (CP2; PD3) or is even subject to hierarchical and administrative conflict, e.g. regarding leadership in a detailed development planning process (CP3). In one municipality, these two administrations have created a joint process description so as to clarify their roles and to determine who does what (PD1).

5.1.3. Management and prioritization in municipal planning

Officials and politicians in different municipalities tend to highlight different typical questions (CP1). Also, the management of the municipalities' planning processes in the three municipalities investigated shows some variation. For example, the time span, typical questions, spatial coverage and inter-municipal and regional communication differentiate between comprehensive planning and detailed development planning (PD3). Based on their former experiences of various planning agencies, two of the interviewees point out that municipal planning practice differs due to variations in population size, work models, organization, culture and traditions, decision-making structure, and capacity (PD2; PD3). For example, in one municipality, the representatives of the planning administration and the administration for land development exercise dual leadership in the detailed development planning process.

However, a 'project way of planning', where plans are managed as projects, is present in all three municipalities. According to one planner, it is not clear what actually governs development, as the relationship between the comprehensive plan, the political will and the municipality's project plan for development projects is unclear and the officers call

for a closer observance of existing documents (CP2). As a consequence, the planning administration managing detailed development plans requests clear guidance on which plans to prioritize. At the strategic level, certain development areas are pinpointed; however, the planning administration is working with other detailed development plans which undermine the legitimacy of decisions at the strategic level within the municipality (CP2). In order to improve the management of planning processes, another planner expresses the importance of having sufficient available resources and 'a distinct order of priority' (CP3). In this context of a 'project way of planning', the interviews show that the 'order of priority' and the management of detailed development planning is an important issue for the planners, as it is a central aspect of how they assess the interplay between the municipality's plans and planning processes.

Furthermore, one interviewee expresses concern over the absence of evaluation of the formalized guidelines and the lack of short-, middle- and long-term objectives in the municipality's comprehensive plan (CP2). In addition, this planner recognizes the need for an action plan encompassing a distinct order of priority that relates to the overarching municipal budget which 'guides the distribution of funds and the priority among projects' (CP2). In one municipality, development projects in conflict with the comprehensive plan at times surface due to political priorities utilizing modes of decision-making other than the regulated spatial planning system (PD2). In another, the mandatory review of the topicality of the comprehensive plan showed that detailed development plans complied with the comprehensive plan (CP1), even though the process of prioritization among development projects is carried out by a smaller group consisting of a mix of politicians and administrative managers where the unit for strategic planning is not taking part (PD1).

5.2. The interplay between spatial plans and the planning processes

In this section, the results related to the interplay between the spatial plans and the planning processes are presented in accordance with the following three themes: (i) the role, format and content of comprehensive planning, (ii) municipal co-operation in multi-level planning processes and (iii) the interplay between municipal and regional planning.

5.2.1. The role, format and content of comprehensive planning

Municipal comprehensive planning is currently taking a 'strategic turn' (CP1; CP3; PD1). In one of the municipalities investigated, comprehensive planning is used to consolidate municipal identity, 'who we are and what we want', by establishing the plan as an agreement between the municipality, its inhabitants, the state level and private business (CP3). The changing role of the comprehensive plan challenges current practice in the municipalities, as both the 'producers' and 'users' of a comprehensive plan are concerned about how to make the plan both a practical asset to planners at other planning levels and a strategic tool that is able to 'market the municipality' (PD1) or to promote a municipality's intentions, e.g. in order to facilitate a dialogue regarding regional infrastructure investments (CP1). To one planner, the most recent and more strategic comprehensive plan has a 'unifying function' which opens up for the integration of other municipal strategies and guidelines (CP2).

In the interviews, it is outlined that the utilization of planning instruments can in many cases be considered a choice. According to one planner, the project organization and

applied work models have great significance in determining what type of plan will emerge from a planning process (PD3). Consequently, the design of the planning process influences both the format and content of a comprehensive plan (PD3; CP1). This design process is not formalized; rather, it is dependent on how the project leader chooses to work (CP1). If this choice results in a comprehensive plan being strategic or 'fluffy', it will generate problems in implementing its intentions at the detailed development planning level (PD3). For this reason, the development at the detailed comprehensive planning level will play a central role (CP1; CP3). In short, the development towards more strategic comprehensive plans creates new conditions for the interplay between planning levels, their associated instruments and the planning process.

As the comprehensive plan is conceived of as becoming more strategic and detailed development plans are narrowing down in scope (CP1; CP3; PD1), a planning gap arises at the detailed comprehensive planning level (CP1). In this gap, 'soft' informal planning practices are emerging, and these activities are formalized in plans that are not statutory planning instruments (CP2). Examples of such plans are development programmes, structural plans and strategic guidelines developed to better fit the need of a certain development area and avoid the sometimes 'too conventional' regulated detailed comprehensive plan (PD3), which produces 'too little action compared to the amount of resources needed' and is too time-consuming due to formalized requirements of public consultation (PD1). In one municipality, the non-statutory type of plan used as a substitute for the detailed comprehensive plan is conducted in a synonymous manner, which facilitates a transformation to the statutory type of plan, in case the Country Administrative Board should intervene or the municipality itself deems it necessary (PD1).

Concluded from the interviews, the format and content of the comprehensive plan are decisive for detailed development planning for two reasons. Firstly, the comprehensive plan is a necessary practical asset to 'put the pieces of the puzzle in the right place', and detailed development plans are in need of a holistic approach at higher planning levels (PD3). However, according to one planner, this approach is missing due to silo-based approaches and weak cross-level understanding which leads to fragmented activities lacking a broader societal scope unable to grasp both present and future needs in society (PD2). One reason for this could be the ambiguous purpose of the comprehensive plan among different stakeholders. Comprehensive planners have a pedagogic challenge in explaining the purpose of the plan to municipal officers as well as politicians (CP1; CP3). According to one comprehensive planner, comprehensive planning is 'the almost unworkable activity' of either pleasing the municipal officers or the politicians, or making both disappointed (CP1). Another reason could be that the comprehensive planning process does not act as an arena in which sectoral knowledge is integrated, i.e. it fails to deliver the 'unifying function' described earlier. Secondly, the comprehensive plan constitutes a 'very important' asset for detailed development planning (PD3), which 'has to exist in order to govern long-term development' (PD2) and where, as far as possible, consensus among political parties is preferable because the comprehensive plan constitutes the overarching municipal long-term planning instrument (PD3).

Furthermore, one interviewee suggests that the extent to which detailed development planning complies with the intentions of the comprehensive plan can be correlated to the degree of support given by the comprehensive plan. Support is outlined as the concreteness of formalized guidelines, typical questions and the plan's topicality (PD3). When

asked to assess the relevance of today's strategic comprehensive plans, the planner estimated that '50% give relevant support and this is correlated to the organizational belonging of the unit for comprehensive planning' (PD3). However, whether the comprehensive plan should encompass such detail is uncertain. Comprehensive planners do recognize the need for specific guidelines among officers working either with detailed development planning or with building permits. However, they make clear that 'if that is the case, they can produce those documents themselves' (PD1) or 'ask for material which is needed in a specific case or assessment' (CP3) instead of integrating it in the comprehensive plan.

5.2.2. Municipal cooperation in multi-level planning processes

A lack of coordination between plans and planning processes constitutes a 'common issue' which many municipalities are currently working hard to resolve (PD3). For one planner, such coordination between the planning levels is needed to ensure quality in municipal planning (CP1). Also, cooperation between municipal administrations is essential in order to guarantee quality in detailed development plans, and a lack of interplay may result in poor adherence to strategic guidelines in detailed development planning (CP2).

In the interviews, the notion of inclusive planning processes is put forward as a measure to facilitate coordination, ensure compliance and assist implementation of a plan. However, one planner mentions the difficulties of attaining an effective mode of working when participants in the planning process act as sectorial protectors rather than contributors to a holistic planning approach (CP2). Nonetheless, to increase applicability, and in order to facilitate effective implementation of the plan, it is important that the plans are regarded as 'our document' and a result of an inclusive planning process (PD3; CP3). For example, implementation is outlined as the driving force behind an inclusive comprehensive planning approach in which participation in the planning process has created consensus on 'our plan' within the municipality (CP1). Moreover, it is important to be involved in the planning process so as to understand its intentions and to foster a common understanding of the plan (PD1). If detailed development planners do not participate in the comprehensive planning process, it is difficult for them to understand the intentions of the plan, as those planners will 'have no insight into the process but only what is said in the final document', which results in potentially losing track of critical planning issues (CP2).

5.2.3. The interplay between municipal and regional planning

In the interviews, four issues related to the municipal–regional interplay can be identified. Firstly, the implementation of the regional plan is based on municipal ambitions where the municipalities are free to choose whether to implement the policies and guidelines outlined in the plan (PD2). Secondly, the ongoing National Negotiation on Housing and Infrastructure with the mandate to increase housing, accessibility and infrastructure in Swedish metropolitan regions (Swedish Government, 2014) creates two parallel regional planning processes where the state has side stepped the statutory regional planning process conducted by the regional planning office within the Stockholm County Council (PD1). By participating in this negotiation, where development is negotiated and funded outside of the formal planning system, the municipalities re-prioritize development (PD1). Thirdly, the regional planning office is currently preparing a new regional plan, RUF5 2050 (Stockholm County Council, 2016). According to one planner, this

process is a hectic, top-down approach not firmly established among the municipalities (PD1). Instead of a new regional plan, municipalities are in need of elaborate strategies and funds to implement the former regional plan, RUF5 2010 (PD1). As a result, the availability of resources in the ongoing National Negotiation puts it one step ahead of the revised regional plan, which is turned into a 'wish list' (PD1).

Fourthly, there are different views on the applicability and overall purpose of the regional plan. In relation to applicability, one planner declares that the regional plan has a strategic influence, e.g. by formalizing the regional cores, but does not provide support regarding typical questions (PD1). Another states: 'in case the regional plan is relevant for us; it is due to certain typical questions' (PD3). Regarding the purpose of the regional plan, one planner outlines the potential to act as 'glue' among municipalities where 'in the best of worlds, the regional plan is the confluence where the intentions of all appertaining comprehensive plans meet; or reversely, where the comprehensive plans are synchronized' (CP1). Also, the regional planning process may constitute an important arena for knowledge dissemination and dialogue on 'what modern planning is about, what it should encompass, and what it should aim at' which could avoid a situation where individual municipalities have different approaches and understanding of how the system ought to work (CP1). However, to another planner, the regional planning process has not put in place a dialogue regarding the coordination of planning processes; rather, it has emphasized to translate national objectives to local contexts (CP3).

The notion of translating is referred to as not repeating and describing objectives formulated in relevant higher tier planning levels, but adapting them to local contexts and ensuring that they are implemented (CP3). In the municipalities, the comprehensive planners are given the task to 'disseminate knowledge on the regional plan' (PD1) or 'translate the regional issues' to the comprehensive planning level, constituting the planning level where detailed development planning seeks guidance (PD3). Thus, comprehensive planning is recognized as a very important instrument to translate regional intentions, as 'probably no one working with detailed development plans or building permits ever or seldom read the regional plan' (CP3). Accordingly, when one interviewee is asked about the relevance of the regional plan in detailed development planning, the planner highlights the importance of having an up-to-date comprehensive plan (PD3).

5.3. Summary of the results

This study identifies several challenges that planning practitioners in the investigated municipalities have to face in order to manage cross-cutting sustainability challenges. The main empirical findings show how municipal planning is contextualized, and depict the interplay between spatial plans and planning processes.

One challenge in attaining sustainability targets and objectives concerns the management of the planning processes, as planners at different levels have expectations on the role, content and format of utilized planning instruments. A shift in these conditions at any level of planning will influence the interplay between the spatial plans and planning processes. Another central finding is that municipal planners have to cope with the changing roles of these instruments while struggling with the demand for new housing and development.

Regarding the interplay between the plans and the planning processes, this study indicates that resources are put into both statutory and non-statutory planning processes that correspond to a certain spatial level and a specific territorial boundary. Even though an effective interplay is deemed as being necessary in order to facilitate coordination between different planning levels, to ensure compliance and adherence to strategic decisions and to assist implementation of the plans, there is limited evidence that the municipalities prioritize exploring or implementing mechanisms that could enhance such interplay. It is as if the planners are locked up in their respective organizational node, or 'project', where they try to reach out to other nodes by being more inclusive. Also, the results point to the fact that the municipalities are under pressure due to the rapid expansion. Under these circumstances, there is a risk that the municipalities focus even more on the processes that ensure the construction of new housing instead of any process that could support the translation and attainment of local, regional or national sustainability targets and objectives.

6. Discussion

This paper explores planning practitioners' experiences and apprehensions of contemporary municipal planning practices, with a focus on the role of statutory plans in meeting sustainability targets and objectives. In addition, it investigates the contextualization of municipal spatial planning practice and examines the interplay in municipal and regional planning. In the case study, the interviewees in particular stressed that municipal planning organizations are under pressure because of rapid urban expansion.

Based on the interviews, planning practices are reoriented, as both the planning processes and the role, format and content of municipal planning instruments at different levels within and outside of the statutory planning system find new trajectories. This development transforms the system of statutory planning instruments and the roles of, and interplay between, planning processes at different levels. For example, the gap between comprehensive planning and detailed development planning is increasing. In this gap, practices are altered or reconstructed which influence the possibilities of managing the interplay between the local, regional and national levels. For the interviewees, the practical strategies and processes suggested to overcome these gaps involve advancing cooperative and inclusive planning processes. However, there is a mismatch between the development of statutory planning instruments and the expectations among planners at different planning levels in the municipalities.

6.1. Planning with diverging expectations: from multi-level challenges to inter-level opportunities

In the study, planners at one planning level have expectations of adjacent planning levels. These expectations relate to the role, content and format of the planning instruments, which are important aspects in the interplay between the planning levels. For example, detailed development planning expects comprehensive planning to provide accurate planning support and to translate regional strategies to the local level. In the interviews, the 'dependency on the adjacent' is outlined as decisive for attaining quality, in particular at the detailed development planning level. According to the results, the notion of

quality is related to safeguarding that the planning process for a specific action handles and formalizes relevant typical questions in relation to past, contemporary or future actions and knowledge at other planning levels. Thus, the process of ‘translation’ constitutes a key element in ensuring quality and is crucial to any assessment of interplay in local and regional governance. As a consequence, any significant changes in the role, format and content at a specific planning level will influence this interplay.

However, in the investigated municipalities, such changes are now taking place. In accordance with the findings of Fredriksson (2011), comprehensive planning is shifting towards a more strategic approach. This shift plays an important role for the interplay in municipal practice. On the one hand, the level of detail decreases and the plan’s role in providing guidance for detailed development planning is changing. On the other hand, this development opens up for more adaptive and flexible approaches at the detailed development planning level. Thus, a shift away from micromanagement means greater freedom and adaptiveness, yet makes greater demands on managing cross-level sustainability issues at the detailed development planning level.

This development points to the fact that the planning system is regarded as too rigid and inert to grasp windows of opportunity. However, the planners are also concerned by the lack of observance and search for a more stringent hierarchy, or pecking order, from the regional level to the local. Thus, one central question is how to tackle the challenge of combining flexibility and structure in a way that enables the management of cross-cutting sustainability issues in expansive metropolitan regions where the demand for development puts pressure on local and regional planning authorities. Based on the results of this study, a process that aims to find elaborate strategies on how to manage the cross-level interplay between statutory and non-statutory planning instruments can assist in formulating an answer to this intriguing question that is decisive for local and regional governance and sustainability.

What has been observed in other European contexts is the introduction of new ‘soft’ planning approaches (Haughton et al., 2010; Mäntysalo et al., 2015; Olesen, 2012). In the case of Denmark, it has been shown how these soft spaces were intended to ‘provide the glue that bind formal scales of planning together’, but failed to offer solutions to the cross-level challenges they were intended for, and instead, due to their susceptibility, were used to promote specific political interests (Olesen, 2012). Furthermore, it has been concluded that, if strategic planning is detached from the statutory system, the introduction of soft spaces in planning risks the legitimacy of the planning system as a whole (Mäntysalo et al., 2015). This insight, and an awareness of recent trends and developments in spatial planning in other European contexts (see e.g. Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Grange, 2012; Olesen, 2014), should guide the effort to use the contemporary desire for rapid expansion as a window of opportunity to promote a search for new and improved practices that are able to cope with cross-level sustainability issues. This search should include an assessment of (i) how local planning practices engage with ‘the principle of hierarchy of planning levels, the forms and content requirements of plans, the treatment of legal appeals and the established practices of (siloe) guidance of the state of local and regional governments’ (Mäntysalo et al., 2015, p. 351) and (ii) the ability of planning to deliver sustainability objectives. The results of this study highlight several challenges for trajectories that aspire to reimagine the role of interplay in order to strengthen sustainability in local and regional planning.

6.2. Interplay for sustainability: re-imagining the notion of strategy in municipal planning practice

According to the results, the lack of a holistic perspective at strategic planning levels and the insufficient interplay between planning levels are a pressing matter for the investigated municipalities. Thus, practice searches for methods which could improve the interplay between planning levels. One starting point for this search could be to re-imagine the distinction between ‘strategic activities’ at e.g. the comprehensive planning level and ‘non-strategic activities’ at the detailed development planning level and let the interplay between the planning instruments constitute an important strategic guideline. This approach could facilitate addressing established sustainability targets and objectives and initiating a dialogue on the role, format and content in available and utilized planning instruments. Thus, spatial planning practice could recognize the ‘middle path’ (Cash et al., 2006), i.e. to reach beyond traditional top-down or bottom-up approaches and thereby better encompass multi-scale and multi-level challenges. It is about creating a framework in which different plans and their respective planning processes at different levels form and feed into a body of knowledge that is shared and co-developed within contemporary spatial planning practices. Furthermore, a process of strategy re-orientation could induce a need for institutional diagnostics (Young, 2012, p. 95) which implies ‘diagnosing the essential features of specific problems and then devising institutional arrangements that are crafted carefully to address the key issues’. In the municipalities, this could help to develop the ‘holistic perspective’ on urban development that, according to the results, is needed to grasp and tackle both present and future challenges in society.

However, promoting new approaches means challenging existing ones where local planning authorities at times ‘take the easiest way out’ (Nilsson, 2007, p. 444), i.e. consolidate a business-as-usual approach. Thus, any new form of interaction will have to alter or replace existing patterns where ‘stakeholders become attached to the way things are done, existing social practices become routines, and the status quo turns into the default option’ (Young, 2006, p. 27). Moreover, it is alarming if this status quo is defined as ‘politicized’ planning in which planners in strict municipal hierarchies cannot problematize truth claims and ‘see no other option than to be compliant’ (Grange, 2016, p. 16). There is a risk that the demand for 710,000 new units of housing and the push for more ‘efficient’ planning from the national level may further complicate any transition. For sustainability, however, change is necessary as e.g. the national environmental quality objectives are difficult to fulfil (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2016).

This study has emphasized the importance of advancing the cross-level interplay in contemporary local and regional planning. This relates to one central challenge for promoting sustainability in urban areas; to create a framework in which planning processes can manage cross-cutting sustainability issues. As seen in the results, the capacity to manage these processes is decisive for safeguarding and advancing quality in planning practice. Therefore, in order to increase this capacity, an exchange of knowledge and experiences not only within local planning authorities, but also between a wider array of actors involved in planning and decision-making, is needed. This calls for tailor-made transdisciplinary approaches where research and practice can explore new trajectories for attaining sustainable urban development.

7. Conclusions

Municipal planning has an important role to play in order to attain attractive and sustainable urban development. However, the management of cross-level sustainability challenges makes new demands on current planning practices. In addition, the demand for new development and the rapid urban expansion in metropolitan Stockholm puts pressure on local and regional planning practices. In the study, the planners in particular express how the drive for efficiency influences current practice. The results indicate that the interplay between local, regional and national levels is decisive for attaining quality in municipal planning. However, the interplay is influenced by the role, format and content of utilized planning instruments. As these instruments find new trajectories, there is a mismatch in the expectations from planners at adjacent planning levels. This influences the interplay between planning levels and has an impact on planning's ability to deliver sustainability and achieve national and regional sustainability targets and objectives. Therefore, there is a need for methods to improve the interplay between utilized planning instruments. New trajectories, where academia and practice can engage in transdisciplinary approaches, may strengthen the capacity to manage the cross-cutting issues of sustainability which are crucial for sustainable urban development.

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