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From Rio to Johannesburg. Environmental concerns, neoliberal climate change and planning in the Nordic countries

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Since the publication of the UN report *Our Common Future* (Brundtland Commission, 1987), the issue of sustainable development has been a common challenge for all nations. Environmental sustainability appears to be emerging as one of the competing rationales for planning in western democracies.

Following the Brundtland Commission, the concept of sustainable development combines ethical norms of welfare, distribution and democracy while recognizing that nature's ability to absorb human-made encroachments and pollution is limited. According to the Commission, a sustainable development is first and foremost about ensuring that everybody (both in poor and rich countries, and today as well as in future generations) can have their basic needs met. This must be obtained without jeopardizing the natural systems on which life on earth is dependent. Furthermore, the decision processes leading to such a result must be democratic and legitimate. Thus, the concept of sustainable development comprises a strong element of distributive ethics, focusing on the distribution of benefits and burdens over time (across generations) as well as spatially (within generations).

As the saying goes, a pet child gets many names. Concerning the use of the concept of sustainable development, one might perhaps as well say "a pet name gets many children". Today, a manifold range of strategies and projects are promoted with the claim that they are derived from the very concept of sustainable development. It has become politically impossible not to be a supporter of a sustainable development, so there is a clear danger that the concept will be watered out. Instead of declaring openly that a sustainable development is not wanted, those whose interests are threatened by the requirements of a sustainable development may attempt to redefine and deradicalize the concept. For example, by twisting and stretching the concept to mean 'sustained growth' instead of development and fulfilment of human needs, and by omitting the clear requirement of the Brundtland Commission that the content of economic growth must be changed by significantly reducing the resource input per unit produced, and that growth must be channeled primarily into activities that are less energy and resource demanding (Brundtland Commission, 1987, p. 51). The concern of a fair distribution spatially (between wealthy and poor countries and between different population groups within a country) also appears to have been down-played in much of the later literature on sustainable development. Such a downplaying is at odds with one of the main principles of the Brundtland Commission's report, exemplified by the following statement (p. 43): "Even the narrow definition of physical sustainability implies a concern for social equity between generations, a concern that must logically be extended to equity within each generation". In the years immediately after the presentation of the Commission, ambitious environmental goals were presented in several Nordic countries. In Norway, for example, there was a virtual competition among the political parties, at least to the left and in the middle segment of the political spectrum, on formulating the goals with the highest carbon dioxide reductions. After this somewhat euphoric situation, politicians came to second thoughts, as the real policy implications within different sectors of society of pursuing such goals were realized. In addition, the dominating ideological climate has changed. Today, the willingness among decision-makers in rich countries to pursue a sustainable and globally solidary development appears to have declined significantly. Instead, cynicism and hostility against 'the distant Others' seems to have gained momentum. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1993) has characterized this way of thinking as casting the people who are far away, spatially or temporally, in a position at which they are denied the capacity of moral subjects: "we are only morally responsible for what happens to people who are culturally similar to ourselves".

The emphasis on the Brundtland Commission's goal of closing the gap between wealthy and poor nations was considerably downplayed in the Johannesburg conference in 2002. Compared to the Rio de Janeiro conference on Environment and Development in 1992, Johannesburg was a backlash for the global equity objectives as well as for the goals of reducing global warming and protecting biodiversity. Among the Nordic countries, such a change of policy has been especially apparent in Denmark, where the present government pursues a considerably more refusing policy on global distributional issues than its predecessors. In all the Nordic countries, environmental concerns have dropped to a lower place on the agenda of policy-makers as well as in the population at large (NSD 2001), following the general trend among OECD countries.

In this short article we shall take a look at how the professional and political discourse in the Nordic countries goes on land use and travel and how the development has been over the last ten to twenty years in those policy areas.

Professional and political discourse on urban sustainability

There are indications of differences between Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway in the professional and political discourses on the relationship between land use and travel. In Norway, this was a subject addressed in the so-called TP10 project, initiated by the ministries of Environment and Transport in 1989 in order to find better transport solutions in the ten largest Norwegian urban areas. As a followup, Governmental Policy Provisions on Coordinated Land and Transport Planning were issued in 1993, instructing the municipalities to plan their land use and development in a way that limits the need of transportation and facilitates the use of public and non-motorized modes. Compact city development in order to limit travel and auto dependence was also an objective in the governmental white papers on land use policies in 1993 and 1997. According to Hoftun, the compact strategy is hegemonic in the Norwegian urban sustainability debate. In the national level discourse on sustainable urban development, strong discourse coalitions have

been formed around the story lines of 'save land' and 'transportation', making it difficult for urban strategies placing less emphasis on these issues (notably the 'green city' model) to gain foothold among planners and policy-makers. In comparison, the Danish emphasis on these issues seems more modest, with guidelines by the Ministry of Environment and Energy recommending new office buildings in the Copenhagen area to be located close to urban rail stations as the most spectacular example. In Denmark, much of the debate on environmentally friendly housing has evolved around the concept of city ecology, focusing on local self-sufficiency, waste and water management, and closed circuits of substances. The features regulated by the overall physical planning, such as the emblemic issues of the compact strategy (land consumption and transport), are not given much weight in this strategy (Hoftun 2002).

A compact building strategy, supported by many local policy-makers, dominates the professional discourse in Sweden. In the national context the Swedish Parliament has formulated environmental objectives including one that prescribes physical planning to support environmental-friendly transportation and a decrease in the use of automobile (Government Bill 2000-01, p. 130). At the same time there is a professional critique arguing for a policy of closed circuits of substances in garden city-like building structures (Rådberg 1997). Another contradictory element in the Swedish discourse is the location of new shopping malls in the periphery or even outside the urban builtup areas without considerable hesitation from local policy leaders.

In the Finnish political and professional discourse, the compaction strategy has also acquired a central role. This can be seen in both the National Land Use Objectives ratified by the Council of State in 2000, and in the specific policies of the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Transport and Communication. There is, however, a clear confrontation between this strategy and the traditional Finnish life style with non-urban one-family houses and summer cottages. These differences in political policy making indicate that the framing of the problem of urban sustainability may be different in Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway, and that this difference is an important explanatory factor for the differences in the outcome of the planning and decision-making processes.

Actual urban development

Urban development in recent years differs considerably across Nordic national borders. In some countries, like Sweden and Norway, urban sprawl slowed down in the 1980s and nearly came to a halt in the 1990s (Statistics Sweden 1992, 2002; Larsen, Saglie 1995; Næss 1997). Instead, a considerable densification has taken place, both in the form of renewal of older housing areas and redevelopment and transformation of derelict and under-utilized industrial and harbor areas. Although perhaps led by market demand following from new 'urban' life styles rather than being a result of environmental policies, this development must be considered favourable, seen in the perspective of reducing energy use, land consumption and carbon dioxide emission. In Denmark, the spatial expansion of cities is continuing, in spite of an increased pace of inner city regeneration and densification. While the growth of urban area in Danish cities dropped from 49 square kilometers annually in the period 1965-1982 to 30 square kilometers annually during the next 13 years, the conversion of non-urban land into builtup areas is currently increasing in Denmark (Damsgård, Olesen 2000). In the Copenhagen area, an increasing share of new office development has taken place in areas far away from urban rail stations (Hartoft-Nielsen 2001). In Finland, the general trend has been a simultaneous growth of population in the urban regions, and an even faster growth of the urbanized space. Thus the population density in the 40 largest Finnish urban regions (with the exception of Helsinki) has decreased by 20% in 1980-1995. This has increased the difference in urban density between Finland and the other Nordic countries. As the recession of the early 1990s was followed by the rapid growth of the four major urban centers (Helsinki, Tampere, Turku and Oulu), resulting in the growing demand of land and housing, a new wave of urban sprawl can now be seen. One of the indicators of this development are the longer commuting.

Whereas urban land use patterns appear to have followed different paths in different Nordic countries, the development of transport infrastructure seems to be more similar. In Norway an intensified urban road development has taken place in the late 1980s and the 1990s, alongside with urban densification (Strand 2001). A strong pace of road capacity increase has been observed in the same period in Denmark and Sweden too, in urban areas as well as in more rural regions, but with implementation obstacles in Swedish urban areas (Tengström 1998, pp. 180-181; Falkemark 1999; Isaksson 2001). In Finland the emphasis in transport policy has shifted from major new investments to maintenance. On the other hand, the connections considered essential in the globalized economy have taken precedence over provincial needs.

These similarities and differences between urban development in Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway during the period since the concept of sustainable development entered the political agenda makes up an interesting background for a comparative research study. How can the differences in land use development between neighboring countries with quite similar political and economic contexts be explained, and why have these countries continued to increase urban road capacity in spite of official goals of reducing the share of car travel? But how to finance such a study?

From sustainable development to sustained (local) growth

In all the Nordic countries, specific national goals of reducing domestic carbon dioxide emissions, formulated in the beginning of the 1990s, are 'sleeping' or have been officially abandoned. Instead, purchasing emissions quotas abroad has become a main approach. However, quota purchasing can at best only postpone the necessary changes of production and consumption patterns. This approach does not promote the necessary change-over towards energy saving and energy production based on renewable sources, but rather delays it.

The disappearance of concrete objectives of emissions reduction is particularly evident in the traffic sector. In Denmark, for example, the emissions from the transport sector will, according to the latest projections, be 26% higher in 2005 than in 1988. The emissions have thus evolved in the opposite direction of the governmental goal from 1993 of stabilizing the 2005 emissions at 1988 level. This objective was abandoned in 2000, and so far no policies rendering a continual rise in the emissions unlikely have been implemented. Instead, extensive motorway construction is underway in urban areas as well as in the countryside, in spite of official goals (so far not abandoned) of increasing the proportion of travel accounted for by public and non-motorized modes. Based on current transport policies, the emissions from the transportation sector will make up 32% of the internationally agreed limit for the total, national CO2 emissions in Denmark in 2010, compared to 21% in 1997 (Jespersen 2000, p. 107).

Governance towards which goals?

The Brundtland Report emphasized that a sustainable development requires a political system that can secure its citizens a real influence on decisions. The Report mentioned the need to support grassroots initiatives, give more power to non-governmental organizations and strengthen local democracy. These recommendations are repeated in the Agenda 21 of the Rio de Janeiro conference in 1992, where local authorities are encouraged to initiate processes where, among others, young people, women, and enterprises are involved in local work to promote a sustainable development. In planning and decision-making in the Nordic countries alike with most western societies, there has been a shift from planning and control by representative democracy towards governance through collaborating stakeholder networks. However, the stakeholders gaining more influence are usually not young people and women, and the purpose of this collaborative planning is not necessarily to promote sustainable development. Rather, increasing the economic competitiveness of the local city or region is at the top of the agenda.

Several studies have illustrated the frequent success of corporate interests like, for example, property brokers or the local chamber of commerce, in making coalitions with leading politicians and municipal administrators, effectively blocking environmental policies perceived to be unfavorable for the business climate (Flybjerg 1991; Logan, Molotch 1996). In Aalborg, internationally known as the host city of the charter on Sustainable Cities in 1994, the 'growth alliance' has succeeded in redefining the concept of sustainable development so that the overall goal of the Planning and Sustainability strategy is "a strong and responsible Aalborg". And the first mentioned among seven major goals of the strategy reads as follows: "Aalborg is to be the energetic and innovative large city of northern Denmark, with a strong position in the global competition".

Thus, what is to be "sustainably developed" according to this plan is first and foremost the economic competitiveness of the city. Continued growth in car traffic is taken for granted and considered as a fact necessitating extensive highway development.

Best practice planning?

However, there are indications from other Nordic cities of a gradual change towards more sustainable developmental strategies, in particular as regards land use, but in some cases also concerning transport policy. Forerunners are cities like Stockholm, Oslo and Trondheim, where many policies recommended by research into urban sustainability issues have actually been implemented. Let us say some words about the two Norwegian cities Oslo and Trondheim. Oslo has for nearly sixty years maintained a protection line in its municipal master plans between the urban area and the surrounding forests. In recent years, this has been supplemented with similar demarcations around valuable elements of the green structure within the city, drawn in the city's 'green plan'. The municipality of Oslo has increased its population from about 440.000 to 515.000 during the latest 20 years, with virtually no spatial expansion of the urban area. A tollring charging motorists for driving into the inner/medium zone of the city, originally established to finance urban highway construction during a limited period, now seems to be made permanent, with a higher share of revenues allocated to public transport improvement. In 2003, Oslo was one among the three European cities awarded a Sustainable City prize.

In Trondheim, the latest municipal master plan is based clearly on the principle of densification, with little urban expansion into the surrounding natural and agricultural landscapes. At the same time, the green structure within the city is given a legal protection against the construction of buildings and other technical encroachments. Moreover, the Dutch ABC principle for workplace location has been followed, as the plan requires new office buildings and other workplaces attracting many employees and/or customers to be located in areas easily accessed by public transport, bicycle or by foot, but with a low accessibility by car (except workplaces generating much freight transport). Finally, about a half of the previously planned highway construction in the urban area has been cancelled. On the other hand, a tollring hitherto charging car drivers for access to the city center will be abandoned in 2005.

The review above shows that examples exist of Nordic cities having followed a course in urban development more compatible to what is usually considered key principles for sustainable urban development. They still only represent the beginning of a long struggle to turn urban development from unsustainability to sustainability. Today, the very idea of sustainable development, understood in the way the concept was used by the UN World Commission on Environment, seems to be in lack of political support. However, if the vision of a globally equitable and ecologically sustainable development manages to live through the barren conditions resulting from the neoliberal and xenophobic ideological climate change, the above-mentioned examples may become important inspirations for other Nordic cities.

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