



Urbanistica n. 124

May-August 2004

Distribution by www.planum.net

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Interview with *Tuija Hilding-Rydevik*, by *Maria Håkansson*

Tuija Hilding-Rydevik is engaged in research in the environmental policy area at the Nordic Centre for Spatial Development (Nordregio) in Stockholm. She is also, together with Eva Asplund, the project leader of the research program The Municipal and the Territory. Arena for Sustainable Development at the Department of Urban Studies at Royal Institute of Technology (1). Her main research focus is on processes for Environmental Assessment and also on other processes for integration of environmental issues and sustainable development in different planning processes. Recently she is initiating and leading projects concerning these issues on the arenas for regional growth and development.

Maria Håkansson: What do you see as the most challenging environmental issue today in a Nordic context?

Tuija Hilding-Rydevik: The most challenging 'environmental issue' today, seen from my perspective, in the Nordic as in the European context, is the poor relation between environmental policy goals and action. There is, from the policy and the research community, a missing recognition of and focus on the societal processes that hinder environmental goals and policies to become every day professional practice and action. In Sweden, and also in the other Nordic countries, the environmental sector has become institutionalized in the sense of being a strong sector in itself, in relation to the knowledge base, the

professional competence, legislation, as being an important policy field etc. Environmental issues are today selfevident on the societal and political agenda. This is a radical change that has taken place during the last 20 years. There are also areas where the environmental policy and practical work has achieved good results in the sense of actually contributing to remedy existing environmental problems, diminish negative environmental pressure (for example the emissions of acidifying and eutrophying substances and the fresh water abstraction, seen from a European perspective) (2) or preventing the reoccurrence of old or occurrence of new environmental problems (as in the instances where environmental assessment legislation and processes are effective) (3).

M. H.: A lot of positive results seems to have been reached. In what way is then the mentioned weak relation between policies and action a problem?

T. H. R.: It seems that most of the institutional setting for a successful environmental work is at hand. The baseline is however, for several existing environmental problems, that there are huge difficulties in changing the negative environmental trend, for example concerning climate change and the depletion of the ozone layer. It also seems, so far, that the normal functioning of societies leads to firstly the reproduction of old environmental mistakes and environmental pressures. Secondly also occurs the creation of new environmental problems, one example is through the constant introduction of new chemical compounds with detrimental environmental and health impacts.

There is no lack of strategies and policies aiming at solving existing environmental problems and preventing new ones. But the implementation and institutionalization of these goals in different contexts outside the environmental sector and in the every day professional practice seems still in many instances to be difficult and a struggle, which is evident from a number of research studies concerning environmental management practice. This struggle becomes evident when environmental, ecological and economic issues are to be judged and handled in relation to each other in different policy, planning and decision making contexts, and now we are talking not only about achieving the political goals of environmental integration but also achieving sustainable development. Since environmental problems are societal problems, since sustainable development challenges the sector thinking and organization of society and since the implementation of environmental and sustainable development goals needs to be enhanced, policy and research must to a greater extent focus and recognize the crucial role of the every day professional practice at the micro level.

M. H.: Can you give an example of what this implies?

T. H. R.: The every day professional practice, for example in the context of a planning process where a multitude of sector actors participate and a number of sector issues are to be handled, negotiated, weighed etc. takes place through social structuring processes. The existing norms, values and attitudes, ethical standpoints, language, organization etc. can hinder ever so good

environmental legislations, political goals and environmental tools to be implemented. When discussing environmental issues these structuring factors are many times foreseen. In Jensen's Danish case in this journal an example of this kind of thought-structuring process is given, namely the discourses of urban ecology versus environmental management. They represent two quite different ways to approach and manage environmental issues, mainly at the policy level. Another example is the concept of 'integration' that is common in the environmental debate and policies, the environmental issues are expected to be 'integrated' in other sectors in order to solve environmental problems. What this implies of changes in the actual professional practice is not however defined. At the national level, the creation of preconditions for integration to come about is left to be handled at the micro level in every day professional practice. This has in many instances proven to be a too challenging task.

M. H.: In your research you have studied these kinds of processes. Can you us give some examples?

T. H. R.: We have to recognize that the implementation of environmental goals in for example planning processes takes place at the micro level through complex and dynamic social processes, between actors with differing standpoints, but also between the actors and the structures surrounding them. Studies we made in the Swedish municipalities show that environmental issues are sometimes neglected unintentionally, through these structuring processes. Another example of

processes is when the low status of environmental actors and their work is manifested through that they are 'aloud' to enter the planning arena when important planning issues, like for example economic and development issues, have moved to other more highly ranked planning arenas, where sustainable development hardly is discussed. It is also clear from our studies that environmental issues often do not become institutionalized in an organization (for example in the municipalities) since environmental work is only tied to strong key persons. When the persons leave, so does the work tied to these persons. Interrupted organizational learning prevails often. There are of course exceptions from this negative picture for example in some of the Nordic regions today working with sustainable development. The question here is if it is possible to change old existing conservative planning arenas to manage also environmental issues and sustainable development issues or do we need to create new ones? Existing administrative structures and professional perspectives are sector based, and have inherited firmly established hierarchies, which hinder new ways of thinking and acting. In new arenas the actors might be able to find new roles and ways of sharing their knowledge and by this promote sustainable development. But at the same time the risk is that creation of new arenas is used to diminish certain issues and put them aside, by giving them a shielded 'playground'.

M. H.: Do you have some concluding words?

T. H. R.: The micro-levels every day professional conditions and processes

do to a large extent hinder the existing environmental and sustainable development goals to be implemented. The hindering processes are found also in the environmental sector itself for example just because its actors act from a sector perspective. The existing but 'hidden' structuring social conditions and processes can be made visible and reflected upon and thus make organizations become more professional in their management of changing professional practice and planning arenas to contribute to sustainable development. There is both an empirical and a theoretical research gap to be filled here in relation to environmental issues and sustainable development. This gap can however not be used as an excuse for not going ahead with practical actions in this field. There are good examples and enough knowledge from other implementation fields to go ahead.

Notes

1. Financed by the Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning.
2. European Environment Agency (2003), "Europe's environment: the third assessment", *Environmental assessment report* No. 10, Copenhagen.
3. The effectiveness of environmental assessment legislation and processes is a delicate issue to define and by effectiveness I do, in this context, not refer to the situation when EA stops development projects. I see effectiveness more in relation to the power of EA to contribute to a decision process that is based on a well developed knowledge base in relation to the nature and possible impacts of the decision, to provide

enough 'power' to all relevant sector actors to have and participate in a dialogue concerning impacts, solutions, etc. and to be democratic. So far the effectiveness of EA in this sense seems more related to the 'preparedness' of the planning arena itself to manage environmental input than to the design of the EA instrument itself. The 'power' of EA as an instrument to change planning arenas seems so far to be weak.