

Title: *SEA and spatial planning in Sweden - Tiered or what?*

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1. Introduction

In the next coming decades, human environments face intricate challenges in terms of sustainable development. Cities are most often seen as an appropriate level for action and as engines in transformations to more sustainable realities (OECD, 2013);(European Commission, 2010). Hence, spatial planners and environmental assessment practitioners play vital roles in ensuring and advancing sustainable development. However, planners are part of larger institutional and administrative systems and in order to attain effectiveness they need to relate their policies, programs and plans to local, regional, national and international levels of governance. Thus, by recognizing that spatial planning acts as an important means for sustainability it can be argued that activities (e.g. plans & projects) and institutional structures (e.g. levels of decision making) constitute a patchwork heavily influencing and underpinning the conditions for a transformation towards a sustainable built environment.

The overall aim of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of complex mechanisms underpinning sustainable development and identify needs for future inquiry.

More specifically, this paper aims at:

- Exploring the above mentioned patchwork of planning activities and institutional settings in a Swedish context;
- Outlining recent shifts in spatial planning practice and discuss how these relate to environmental assessment and;
- Analyzing whether Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) may act as vehicle for both vertical and horizontal coordination and integration of planning activities.

Methodology

This paper has evolved from a desktop study focusing on the three concepts of planning, SEA and tiering. Starting from the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) Key Citation Series regarding SEA, key journals were identified and later used to identify authors using the terms of governance, tiering, planning and Sweden (in various combinations) in titles, abstracts or key words. Prior to the desktop study three in-depth interviews with municipal officers were performed in the autumn of 2013. These interviews were transcribed but not validated and were used as “focal point guidance”, not as formal data collection.

2. Planning and the environment

Sweden, a member of the European Union, has adopted a three-fold national environmental objectives system (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2012). Already struggling to fulfill the 16 national environmental quality goals where progress is - with a few positive exceptions – either stagnant or negative (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2014) Sweden now has to step up and match stated visions with firm action. What creates this stagnation and lack of action?

According to Emmelin (2006) a major hindrance is the notion of two existent, legitimate, functional, parallel paradigms being the *planning paradigm* and the *environmental paradigm*. These two paradigms, or discourses with related professions and educational backgrounds, underpin the Swedish system for land-use planning and environmental protection. However, over time there seem to be no consensus on such a thing as “the” planning paradigm.

2.1. Outlining Swedish planning paradigms

Planning theory and research on planning practice has been elaborated on for numerous decades, see e.g. Faludi (1973), Faludi (1987), Healey (1996), Flyvbjerg (1998) and Healey (2006). This paper has no intention of covering the vast field of planning research; rather it focuses on outlining the Swedish preconditions.

Engström and Cars (2013, p. 11) state that “planning – if planners are to explain it – is all about controlling change”. Since the 1940’s planning practice in Sweden has undergone a number of rejuvenations to match the changing needs and transformations in society, see e.g. (Cars and Engström, 2008), (Tornberg, 2011), and (Engström and Cars, 2013). In Sweden, this process of controlling change is regulated mainly through the Planning & Building Act (PBL) and the Environmental Code.

Furthermore, legislation in Sweden is based on the recognition of three democratic levels where decision making, power and responsibility is decentralized to the regional and municipal level (Hägglund, 2013). However, spatial planning at the regional level – existing solely in the regions of Stockholm and Gothenburg – can be described as heterogeneous and limited in power and is to be considered as guidance (Johnson, 2013).

According to Blücher (2013) the introduction of 1987’s revised PBL increased the municipalities’ influence over land use planning – introducing the mandatory municipal-overlooking comprehensive plan and citizen consultation processes. In the -90’s Sweden went into a deep economic crisis, changing the preconditions for the municipalities. Since then, the Planning and Building Act has been revised again in 2011, commented by Blücher (2013, p. 13) as: “recent changes have given a stronger position for landowners and developers, but it can be seen to constitute the legalization of already established practice”. What is “established practice” is elaborated on in Strömgren (2007), giving a somewhat alternate description of the Swedish planning discourse’s development. In short, Strömgren describes the historic development of the legislative discourse as rooted in one Faludian discourse, acknowledging planning as a rational decision making process. Strömgren’s results give incentives to further investigate the appearing discrepancy between planning theory, the political and legislative discourse and research on planning practice - see e.g. Håkansson (2005), Åkerskog (2009), Folkesson et al. (2013) & Isaksson (2006).

In an international context, the Swedish municipalities hold a very strong position and land-use planning in Sweden can be described as an exclusively municipal activity (Blücher, 2013, Johnson, 2013). The municipalities possess the municipal planning monopoly and the PBL provides them with a hierarchy of planning instruments. The comprehensive plan, alike the regional plan, acts as guidance, while detailed development plans are legally binding (Hedström and Lundström, 2013). However, recent debate has focused on altering these conditions and the municipal planning monopoly has been criticized (Cars et al., 2013). Also, preliminary results from the research programme SPEAK¹ indicates new types of planning practices are appearing. For instance, regional waste management plans have been initiated even though formally being a municipal activity; collaborative approaches to both comprehensive (e.g. municipalities of Norrköping and Linköping) and detailed comprehensive planning are evolving. How can these shifts be explained? These examples being sustainable or not; Bulkeley and Betsill (2005, p. 48) stress the importance of acknowledging processes at “[m]ultiple sites and scales of governance” when analyzing why sustainable initiatives are, or are not, taking place.

2.2. SEA and environmental assessment

With the introduction of the EU SEA Directive in 2004 (European Commission, 2001) SEA was introduced as a formal concept in Swedish regulations. Acknowledging the fact that decisions influencing environmental quality often are taken at higher levels than the project level the concept of tiering was one of the key drivers for the development of SEA and its application to policies, plans and programs (Arts et al., 2011). Tiering and its relation to environmental assessment have been discussed in both theoretical and practical terms by several authors, see e.g. Noble (2000), Nooteboom (2000) & Partidário and Arts (2005). A somewhat broader definition of tiering than e.g. the one of the European Commission is provided by Arts et al. (2011, p. 417) as: “The deliberate, organized transfer of information on issues from one level of planning to another, which is being supported by EAs”.

Sweden assumed a minimalist approach creating unclear requirements, e.g. what type of plans would be affected by the EU SEA Directive. The implementation of the EU SEA Directive was defined by a lack of clarity and guidance, opening up for sectoral interpretations and application (Emmelin and Lerman, 2005). SEA implementation have proven to be utmost context-dependent and a number of differences in national, regional, organizational and sectorial contexts have been identified (Hilding-Rydevik and Bjarnadóttir, 2007, Hilding-Rydevik and Åkerskog, 2011). Further, there is a need for an

¹ SPEAK – Sustainable Planning and Environmental Assessment Knowledge – a Swedish research program on planning and environmental assessment funded by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2014-2016.

identification of planning problems related to sustainable development in different planning contexts along with a demand for more thorough understanding of how SEA may provide solutions to these problems (Hilding-Rydevik & Bjarnadóttir 2007). Here, the notion of tiering - interpreted as an “organized transfer of information” - could facilitate improved understanding of planning problems in different contexts by enhancing communication and information exchange.

Consequently, SEA being an adaptable tool relevant for underpinning sustainable planning in different contexts and at different levels (White and Noble, 2013); (Stinchcombe and Gibson, 2001) may prove valuable not only as a tool for ensuring consideration of environmental and/or sustainability issues but as a vehicle of horizontal and vertical coordination.

3. SEA and planning, tiered or what?

As shown by Hilding-Rydevik and Bjarnadóttir (2007) there is a need for constant context awareness when analyzing the application of SEA. Apparently, a major hindrance for further development of SEA applicability is related to “the complexity of the societal decision processes and contexts which SEA seeks to influence, limiting the capacity of research to provide clear conclusions and practical recommendations” (Wallington et al., 2007, p. 581) and a need to decide upon the nature of SEA in relation to sustainability (Bina, 2007).

A need to revisit tiering theory and gather empirical experiences seem evident to improve our understanding of the underlying governing mechanisms of planning and environmental assessment. At this point, there seems to be some type of dissonance between:

- the juridical frameworks guiding the application of SEA in planning where tiering is an – at least theoretically, see e.g. Arts et al. (2011) - integrated notion;
- the notion of tiering as a theoretical concept and;
- SEA implementation and the operationalization of tiering in various planning contexts.

Clearly, methods helping to understand the realities in which SEA is to operate are needed. One such framework could be that of multi-level governance used as an analytical tool. Bulkeley & Betsill (2005, p. 48) describe such a framework as “Taking a multilevel governance perspective entails engaging with the multiple tiers of government and spheres of governance through which urban sustainability is being constructed and contested”. This sounds appealing for any inquiries targeting planning, tiering, and SEA. Through applying a multi-level governance perspective it “[i]s clear that engendering urban sustainability is no straightforward matter” (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005, p. 56) and “the need for a renewed approach to analysis which is able to bring into plain view the multi- and transscalar nature of environmental conflicts, and the consequent implications for sustainability”. Thus, applying a multi-level governance perspective might render an increased understanding of different contexts, and more importantly how these contexts relate to each other in a range of different perspectives. One such perspective could be that of information exchange which would add substantial experience to the notion and theory of tiering in SEA.

4. Conclusions

This paper has identified a set of questions for further inquiry. First, there seem to be a need to further explore what can be described as the “planning paradigm” where planning theory (and theorists) claims that Swedish planning have undergone major paradigm shifts since the 1940’s while the political discourse is characterized as continuous and bound to one “Faludian” discourse (Strömgren, 2007). As SEA application has proven context-specific, what could be more misleading than trying to practice SEA in a “communicative” planning system which in fact is “Faludian”?

Second, the relation between the planning and environmental paradigm seem unexplored and in need of empirical studies focused on developing SEA theory. Here, it may be that SEA has a role to play not only to “safeguard” environmental concerns in planning but to facilitate information exchange and act as a vehicle for coordination between different contexts and levels. As the notion of tiering is integrated in SEA theory it might come in handy for analysis.

Third, it is concluded that in order to understand the contexts where SEA is to operate, new analytic frameworks are needed. One such framework could be that of multi-level governance used as an analytical tool.

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