

Challenges of SEA in regional planning in Sweden

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1. Introduction

Swedish counties are obliged to have Regional Development Programs (RDP). This is a relatively new requirement, as the regional development programs were introduced in 2001 for the purpose of contributing to regional economic growth and national cohesion (Wallgren et al. 2011). At the same time, the government regulation (SFS 2007:713), which governs the RDPs, states that the programs should be based on sustainable development and its economic, social and environmental dimensions. For this reason it is expected that the programs consider environmental issues. In a study conducted by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), it was found that the 17 RDPs which were available in April 2008, lacked information about whether an SEA had been carried out (Naturvårdsverket 2009). Furthermore, the SEPA study did not find any information about the mandatory assessment of the need for an SEA (behovsbedömning, i.e. screening) which is required by Swedish law. Also, the study notes that the regional development programs generally promote regional expansion by transportation as a tool for economic growth and cohesion. However, the increasing environmental pressure that follows from growing travel demand is either addressed superficially or not at all in the RDPs (ibid.).

Earlier research has suggested various reasons for a low level of implementation of SEA in the Swedish planning system. One is the confusion among practitioners by the merging of SEA regulation with EIA regulations (Lundberg et al. 2010). Other reasons concern analytical difficulties, as well as institutional reasons (Wallgren et al. 2011). A lack of capacity on SEA has also influenced the level of its application in Swedish planning. For instance, it has been found that there is uneven distribution of knowledge of the SEA processes and SEA regulation (Lundberg et al. 2010; Wallgren et al. 2011) and missing tools, frameworks and techniques for SEA (Lundberg et al. 2010). Another concern is brought up by Emmelin and Lerman (2006), which is related to the objectives of RDPs. They note that unless potential conflicts between the three dimensions of sustainable development are investigated, planning can move in any direction. The SEPA notes in its study that there is far too little discussion about existing goal conflicts between e.g. environmental objectives and promotion of transportation (Naturvårdsverket 2009).

Since 2008, when the SEPA conducted its study, many regions have renewed their RDP. It is, therefore, of interest to follow up the developments concerning SEA and to highlight how regional development programs consider environmental challenges of transportation. The purpose is to investigate whether the application of SEA of RDPs has improved and in what ways RDPs address goal conflicts between transportation and environment.

2. Method

In a first step document studies were carried out. Nine RDPs were chosen among the 21 counties in Sweden. The sample of RDP documents cover counties with different prerequisites concerning geography and population. In the second step, three counties were selected for in-depth interviews. The three included counties are; the County of Gävleborg (about 100 kilometres north of Stockholm), the County of Västerbotten (in the north of Sweden) and the County of Västra Götaland (on the West Coast, including Sweden's second largest city; Gothenburg). A common feature is that all three counties have an RDP that has been approved during the past few years, thus increasing the probability that those who were in charge of co-ordinating the process of the RDP are still working at the regional authority and remember details of the process. Furthermore, while the RDP of Gävleborg had a stronger and Västerbotten a weaker environmental profile, this factor provided further reason for the choice of these two counties.

The findings of the study will be presented in the following sections. Prior to the discussion of the results, a short description of the role of the RDP in the Swedish planning system will be provided in section 3. Section 4 will present the results of the document study in terms of SEA and how the environmental aspects of transportation have been dealt with in the RDP documents. Section 5 will highlight the results of the interviews and section 6 concludes the paper.

3. The Swedish planning system

The Swedish planning system is governed by strong local level governance. The regional planning level has not been very well developed and represents the weakest tier (Wallgren 2011, Pettersson, 1998). Governance in Sweden has been described as an hour-glass where the regional level is the waist, with weaker mandate and powers than at the national or the local levels (Pettersson, 1998). In contrast to many EU countries, Swedish regions have no mandate to conduct spatial planning (SKL, 2014). In the Swedish planning system, the RDPs are strategically oriented umbrella documents, providing guidelines for other regional and local programmes and plans, providing input to e.g. structural fund programmes and comprehensive plans at the municipality level. The idea behind the RDP is to join the forces of the many public and private actors on the local, regional and national level of importance for regional development through formulating common objectives and strategies (SFS 2007:713). As a result, the process of the RDP is based on consensus-building within the partnership (Wallgren et al. 2011). The government's guidelines state that the RDP should be a uniting strategy of regional growth in one or several counties (SFS 2007:713). For this reason the relevant regional authority, invites regional actors, including municipalities, business representatives and representatives of local communities to a process of participatory dialogues, which precede the compilation of the RDP document.

In 2004 with the implementation of the European directive on environmental assessment of certain plans and programmes, SEA became compulsory for planning and programming. This means that an SEA should be carried out in a process parallel to that of the RDP, or if not, the motivation of why the RDP does not have significant environmental impact (behovsbedömning) needs to be publicly available.

4. SEA and sustainable transport in RDP documents

The document studies, covering nine Swedish regional development programs, provide no information about the application of SEA. Neither is there information available why no SEA has been carried out. Searches on the internet using the name of the mandatory document (behovsbedömning), resulted in just one hit, concerning the regional development plan of Stockholm County, which is governed by other legislation than RDPs.

In order to identify how environmental aspects of transportation are taken into consideration, the concept of sustainable transport was used as a starting point (for a literary review on sustainable transportation, see Pettersson 2014). According to Banister (2008) sustainable transport requires actions to reduce the need to travel (less trips), to encourage modal shift, to reduce trip lengths and to encourage greater efficiency in the transport system.

Several RDP documents focus on the development of public transport and the expansion of bicycle lanes. It is also common for RDPs to suggest improvement of internet access by development of broadband infrastructure. In those RDPs that mention international accessibility, this is largely related to enhancement of air transport. Two RDPs discuss rural transportation and the need to improve accessibility by road (Gotland and Värmland). Several RDP documents mention strategies to substitute fossil fuels with renewable fuels.

Measures to reduce the demand for transport include urban planning that aims at dense and mixed urban areas. Although RDPs are no spatial plans, they provide guidelines for municipal spatial planning. Despite this, only two of nine RDPs suggest integration between land-use and transportation. The RDP of Värmland proposes a holistic approach by enhanced interaction between transport and urban planning. One of the goals of the RDP of Östergötland is sustainable use of natural resources; described as integration between urban development, transportation and technical systems in order to minimize the environmental impact. There is almost no discussion about goal conflicts between transportation and the environment. The exceptions are Gotland and Gävleborg. The RDP of Gotland points out that the transport system has positive impacts on the dimension of economic and social dimensions of sustainable development, but is in conflict with the ecological dimension. The RDP of Gävleborg considers all three dimensions of sustainable development. Unless all of them evolve in the right direction, development cannot be judged sustainable. While the contents of the documents indicate awareness of sustainable transportation, there is very little discussion of potential goal conflicts between transportation and environment.

5. The RDP process

In the interviews, the informants of Västra Götaland and Västerbotten explain that they did not distinguish any major goal conflicts during the process of preparation of their RDP. Goal conflicts existed in discussions, but according to both informants, these were solved in the dialogues between the actors participating in the RDP process. In Västerbotten, they had prepared for goal conflicts by appointing a working group for handling trade-offs. A traditional goal conflict in northern Sweden is between transport infrastructure and indigenous Sami communities, but this conflict did not occur. There were also discussions about the environment and transport and this led to priorities concerning environmental measures at airports.

According to Gävleborg, they distinguished potential goal conflicts between economic growth and the other dimensions of sustainable development. It was perceived that economic growth is the principal interest in planning, unlike e.g. gender and environmental issues. This led to the choice of not focusing on economic growth. Instead the region concentrated on the other two dimensions of sustainability.

Since no SEA had been carried out in the three counties, another topic of discussion was whether SEA is a tool that can be used in the process of RDP. In one county, however, the interviewee was not aware of SEA. This was probably due to division of labour during the preparation of the RDP. Environmental issues were delegated the responsibility of the environmental secretariat. The other interview responses suggest that there is a mix up between SEA and EIA. One informant pointed out that SEA is applicable to assess the impacts of concrete actions, which do not exist in an RDP. "The regional development strategy is a broad and comprehensive approach that is neither linked to physical action or any spatial dimension". Another view was that an SEA of the RDP would require substantial resources and would be technically difficult to carry out. One interviewee pointed out that on a general level, the driving force of the RDP is not about environmental objectives. According to this view, the environmental dimension of RDPs should be to certify that the suggested strategies do not to affect the environment adversely.

6. Conclusions

The document studies of a selection of nine Swedish RDPs suggest that little has happened since the previous study. As in 2008, no information was found about the use of SEA on RDPs. The in-depth interviews further confirm that SEA is not undertaken. For these reasons, the conclusion is that application of SEA has not improved.

Although SEA had not been carried out, the document study suggests that RDPs put significant focus on sustainable transportation. From this point of view, the conclusion differs from the previous study. At the same time, there is very little discussion of potential goal conflicts between transportation and environment in the studied documents.

In the interviews, lack of knowledge of SEA and the fact that planners mix up SEA and EIA became apparent. The notion of analytical difficulty of carrying out an SEA was also observed in interviews as one informant stated it is technically difficult to apply the tool to an RDP. These findings are also in accordance with earlier research.

Another obstacle to include the environmental dimension in planning is the potential conflict between different objectives. Document studies imply that goal conflicts between transport and the environment are either superficially treated or not handled at all. In practice, goal conflicts were solved in discussions during the process and not handled further by the RDPs. This might be an inherent problem of RDPs as they are strategically oriented and, therefore, avoid difficult discussions about trade-offs.

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