

# **The Capacity to Integrate and Deal with Environmental Issues in Local Transport Policy and Planning**

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The approach of this study has been to describe and analyse *how* environmental objectives and strategies have materialised in the real-life context of local transport policies and plans, *how* environmental perspectives have been picked up by policymakers concerned with transport issues, *how* policy and planning processes have been affected, etc. Focus has been on the actual practices of transport policy making and planning from an environmental perspective in Lund, Groningen, and Aalborg. The primary research aim has been to identify and discuss *the capacity to integrate and deal with environmental issues in local transport policy-making and planning processes*.

This is a summary of the lessons learned from the comparative study consisting of the cases of Lund, Groningen, and Aalborg. The summary primarily focuses on the main lessons to be learned among policy and planning practitioners.

## ***Local Discourses on Transport and Environment***

Throughout 20-30 years of development in local transport policy and planning from an environmental perspective in Lund, Groningen, and Aalborg it can be concluded that a capacity improvement in general has occurred in all cases. A driving force seems to have been changes in focus and content of the local dominant discourses on transport issues, in many ways in an environmental direction. By the late-1960s or early-1970s, all three cities abandoned policies that favoured almost exclusively the mobility of cars and 'right-of-way' principles inside the urban area. Instead, the debate began to focus on the negative consequences of traffic, and politicians and planners became interested in, and carriers of, new story-lines and discourse-coalitions that reflected a focus on issues such as the environment, safety, and the quality of life.

However, in particular in Aalborg and Groningen, the shift in the focus of the debate was met by resistance from local business and trade interests. In Aalborg, the resistance had serious consequences to the local political process throughout the 1980s (more on this below), while the consequences in Groningen were less severe. Throughout the 1980s, the discursive debate (or struggle) on transport issues in Groningen was rather diversified with a focus on accessibility issues as well as on urban living conditions. In Lund, the possibility for a car-free city centre was discussed through the 1970s and 1980s. However, until around 1990 the discursive focus in all three cities was solely concerning the local consequences of transport.

In the 1990s, the discursive interaction in Groningen continued to reflect and build on ideas that local transport policy could support local economic development while improving the urban living conditions. In Aalborg, the concept of sustainable development became a central story-line in the early-1990s, inspired largely from national transport policy. However, in the late-1990s issues of mobility seemed to regain influence in local transport policy in Aalborg. In Lund, the debate in the 1990s came to focus on environmentally adapted transport, primarily related to the issue of global climate change.

### ***Influential Background Conditions***

This study claims that differences as well as similarities in the local transport political debate in the three cities can be understood in relation to some influential background conditions.

First of all, the increases in local traffic by car have been a threat to values related to the presence of historical city centres in all three cities, especially in Lund and Groningen. The presence of universities in all three cities has also been of some significance, in particular in Lund and Groningen (with older and relatively larger universities compared to in Aalborg). Thereby, new insight on the negative environmental consequences of transport could relatively easily be transferred from university lecture rooms to local civil servants, politicians, and the public in general. In addition, the universities have been a breeding ground for radical student opinions concerning environmental issues, which particularly in Lund and Groningen influenced local transport policies.

Furthermore, local geography and demography has played a role. Lund and Groningen are known as bicycle cities, which is related to the compact urban structure of those cities as well as to high proportions of young people, compared to in Aalborg. In Lund and Groningen, the significant number of students also influences the possibility to argue politically for the role of soft modes of transport, such as walking and bicycling. In Aalborg, the more fragmented urban structure as well as the local topography and the Limfjord inlet is a hindrance (compared to Lund and Groningen) to the choice of soft modes of transport. Finally, congestion issues have played a role, particularly in Groningen where a longstanding traffic pressure has influenced the motivation to seek solutions that combine access and mobility with improved urban living conditions.

### ***The Policy-making Process***

Now, if the local debate, with its opinion-reflecting key concepts (story-lines), is a driving force in the changes, then the ability of the local political-administrative elite to manage the policy-making process (more or less in co-operation with interest parties and the public in general) in a direction towards increased strategic capacity is decisive.

First of all, the political process can be understood in terms that reflect the political culture, in this study particularly through the analytical concept of policy-style. By doing so, the differences between the cases become even more visible.

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the political culture in Lund can be characterised as communicative, co-operative, consensus-seeking, and step-by-step oriented. In general, both politicians and civil servants have aimed to establish a rather broad and common view on transport problems as well as on solutions. Those actors usually succeeded in anchoring policies among business interests and the public in general, while at the same time providing room for a variety of (other) stakeholders in the process. Such a political culture seems to be based in a Swedish tradition of consensus politics.

In Groningen, the situation was quite different. In the 1970s, a severe political confrontation was awakened in relation to the top-down implementation of a non-compromising environmentally oriented transport policy. The result was a major change in the local transport system, with significant reductions in transport by car in the city centre as a main consequence. Local business and trade interests opposed strongly, they opposed the actual

physical changes made but they also reacted strongly, and with indignation, against the non-compromising way in which those changes had been implemented. This indignation persisted through the 1980s, however it softened successively as shop owners, for instance, realised that a reduced accessibility and mobility by car did not lead to general reductions in turn-over.

From the late-1980s and onwards, a will to co-operate grew among the parties. It led to attempts to unify the environmentally oriented goals in local transport policy with intentions to develop the city centre of Groningen economically. Despite such a high level of ambition, the transport political process was successfully managed in a direction towards an increased strategic capacity. It is likely that those changes reflect an apparent characteristic in Dutch political culture. That is to first allow open conflict, and thereafter to seek towards a compromise.

In Aalborg, yet another situation developed. In 1979, an environmentally oriented transport plan for the city centre was presented. The plan was acknowledged and even prized by professionals. However, strong political forces among business and trade, the police, and the local newspaper worked against the implementation of the plan, resulting in a fragmentation of the 1979 plan. Through the main part of the 1980s, this in its turn led to a much more cautious policy-style among politicians and planners concerning local transport issues.

Around 1990, new impulses encircling the issue of sustainable development re-opened local transport policy in Aalborg in a somewhat more visionary, proactive, and co-operation oriented direction. Moreover, in the attempt to avoid situations similar to those in the aftermath of the 1979 plan, the local politicians sought, increasingly, to resist the influence (on implementation) of single or influential interests.

In the late-1990s however, this new policy-style has been put to a test in relation to a growing discussion on local road mobility in Aalborg. It is possible that the development and changes in transport policymaking in Aalborg illustrates the disadvantages of lacking a rather well established tradition for co-operation as in Lund, or a more constructive ability to handle and deal with severe conflicts as in Groningen.

### ***Project Organisations and the Participation of Stakeholders and the Public***

Hence, it seems there has been significant differences in the ways of initiating and making transport policy in the three cities. On the other hand, there has been a specific similarity in the institutional organisation of the policy-making processes. In all three cases, project organisations have been established, with politicians, civil servants, and consultants. Beyond that characteristic, however, the similarities cease to exist.

In Lund, a political steering group was established, being directly responsible to the municipal council. In addition, a work group with civil servants and a consultant was organised. Furthermore, several additional groupings were established that included representatives of various interest (business and trade, police, industry, schools, etc.) as well as representatives of relevant competence from the University of Lund. Finally, several public meetings were arranged. Thereby, a broad variety of stakeholders (primarily) got the opportunity to participate in the transport policy-making and planning process before and during the production of the first plan proposal.

In Groningen, a project group that included civil servants and consultants was arranged with direct responsibility to the municipal council. Furthermore, a number of additional groupings and practices were developed for the involvement of stakeholders and citizens. As in Lund, it provided the opportunity for a broad variety of stakeholders and citizens to participate in the transport policy-making and planning process before and during the production of the first plan proposal. In Groningen however, this structure was, much more than in Lund, designed in order to open up the process for the citizens in general (more on this below).

In Aalborg, a project organisation was established that primarily consisted of a political steering group and a project group that mainly included civil servants and consultants. It resulted in a rather closed process with few opportunities for other than politicians, civil servants, and consultants to influence directly (from inside the institutional organisation) the work towards a plan proposal. Thereby, control with the policy-making and planning process was maintained within the established political-administrative framework.

Hence, the three cities shows some rather significant differences concerning the openness, in the policy-making process, to organised interests outside the local political-administrative framework and to the citizens in general.

In Lund, communication and co-operation with stakeholders and the public was carried out in a relatively traditional forms and patterns. It implied that the local elite had a significant influence on the process, while the attitudes of the public in general were probably interpreted correctly.

In Groningen, an extensive participation experiment was carried out, implying that the citizens had the opportunity to participate directly in the political process. It happened in three steps, 1) questionnaires, interviews, round table discussions, and work groups; 2) workshops and public meetings along with a public debate through the local media; and 3) presentation of a plan proposal, debate phase, and a final questionnaire.

In Aalborg, the attitudes of stakeholders and the public was tested through a public pre-enquiry procedure. In addition, public meetings were arranged. However, only representatives from public transport companies was in direct contact with the political-administrative elite, and hence also with the construction of a plan proposal. Finally, a public debate phase was carried out.

Despite the above-mentioned differences between the three cities, there was a common goal with the chosen procedures. The intention was to identify, as early as possible, barriers or objections to the future plan, and in particular it was the intention to eliminate barriers to the implementation of the plan. It reflects a somewhat conscious ambition among the local political-administrative elite in the three cities to be able to control the policy-making process towards a concrete goal.

In order to be able to understand and explain the differences in the transport policy-making and planning processes between the three cities, the role played by differences in political cultures are claimed to be a decisive factor (as already indicated). It relates to the degree of co-operation as well as the way in which conflicts are being managed. Differences in political cultures were also expressed or reflected in how organised interests and the public became involved. The ability and will to integrate such interests as well as the public in the policy-making process was developed to the largest extent in Groningen. In principle, the process

was open to a similar extent in Lund. However, new and innovative participatory practices for a more active involvement of the citizens in general were not attempted in Lund. In Aalborg, the process was rather closed with few actual openings to varied interests and to the public.

Compared to the role played by different political cultures and the varied ability to open up the process to stakeholders and the public, the ability to innovative renewal of existing political-administrative structures were secondary. Of somewhat greater importance was the element of external funding of specific transport projects embedded in the new plans. In that respect the three cities experienced some remarkable similarities, in spite of differences in the specific arrangements of external funding.

### ***The Strategic Capacity***

In this study, the strategic capacity in the political-administrative system relates to the ability to integrate and deal with the new long-term environmental considerations that were introduced and articulated in the international scientific and political debate from the late-1980s and onwards. In addition and in particular, it concerns the ability to be able to manage the political process in a direction towards a goal of a somewhat more long-term environmentally sustainable transport system.

This study has focussed on the processes leading to, and the contents of, three local transport policies and plans produced in Lund, Groningen, and Aalborg in the late-1990s. In the above, the plans have been related to 10 specific OECD guidelines for policy and planning towards environmentally sustainable transport. Thereby, it has also been compared how the strategic capacity has been expressed in the concrete transport policies and plans of the three cities.

Referring in the following to those OECD guidelines, Lund has established a significantly more long-term vision for an environmentally friendly transport system than in Groningen and Aalborg. Definitions and quantification of health and environment objectives were found in Lund and Aalborg, but not in Groningen. The ability to describe specific strategies aiming towards environmentally sustainable transportation seems to have been developed to the largest extent in Lund, i.e. Lund is the only city with a strategy to work towards reductions in transport volumes. The choice of instruments and specific projects have in many ways been similar in the three cities, however in the Groningen and Aalborg plans a continued construction of road infrastructures have been included. Finally, Groningen demonstrates the most detailed plan for implementation as well as for monitoring and evaluation.

Hence, the strategic capacity of the three cities, as expressed through the plans, seems to differ in comparison. In Lund, the international discourse concerned with long-term sustainable transport systems has been picked up successfully. Here, the local political-administrative elite has sought and applied outside information and knowledge. In addition, a new institutional structure for transport policy-making was established, and the civil servants demonstrated abilities to work across sector limits. Furthermore, success was achieved in anchoring decisions, policies, and plans among a broad variety of stakeholders at an early stage in the policy-making and planning process. Finally, the perspective in Lund seems long-term and with care for global issues such as climate change.

In Groningen, a rather consequent course has been followed all along. Some progress can be identified in uniting environmental considerations with other transport political objectives, such as reduction of congestion. A new institutional structure for local transport policy-

making was successfully established, and in a rather unique way the process was opened to an early (in the policy-making and planning process) and extensive participation from organised interests and the citizens in general. Furthermore, an ability to manage such a situation has been successfully demonstrated. The result is a plan that is less long-term oriented than in Lund, e.g. the Groningen plan focuses more intensively on present every-day problems than in Lund. Such an approach may influence the strategic capacity in a negative direction in the long term, on the other hand it seems to secure a high degree of public support in favour of the policy.

After the fragmentation of the 1979 plan in Aalborg, local civil servants succeeded, in the early 1990s, in initiating a more visionary discussion on transport issues from an environmental perspective. The politicians and the civil servants regained control of the transport policy process, and the integration of long-term environmental objectives looked promising in the mid-1990s. However, a growing concern for congestion in relation to the crossing of the Limfjord inlet has, once again, directed attention towards the issue of road mobility. Thereby, the strategic capacity for environmentally oriented change seems to have decreased once more in Aalborg.

A tentative explanation of those differences can be found partly in a number of background conditions, and partly in the local political cultures.

The strategic capacity in Lund seems, to a large extent, to be dependent on the tradition among local political and administrative actors to conduct scientifically based discussions concerning environmental issues. It has made those actors rather open to new perspectives on the relationship between society and the environment, and it has been a precondition for the management, by those actors, of the policy-making process. The urban and geographic structure has contributed to a broad public acceptance of relatively radical solutions. Furthermore, the strategic capacity has been built on a political culture characterised by communication and co-operation. Thereby, the international debate concerning a sustainable development as well as the national discussion concerning an environmentally adapted transport system was successfully transferred to Lund.

The strategic capacity in Groningen seems to be primarily a result of the ability of the local political leadership to, at an early stage, to involve organised interests and the citizens in general in the transport policy-making process. In addition, Groningen has successfully moved from a situation characterised by severe conflict to a situation characterised by co-operation and common action. However, through the chosen course a more long-term environmental perspective seems to have been left rather unattended. Instead, the focus and the specific solutions seems to be directed towards local problems that are experienced by the local citizens in general as being present and urgent. Finally, the relatively detailed plan for implementation probably relates to the fact that Groningen, more than Lund and Aalborg, is dependent on external funding. As such, Groningen typically has to be able to present a rather clear picture to the outside world of the coherence and priority between specific projects.

On at least two occasions Aalborg has attempted the development of a significant strategic capacity for transport policy and planning from an environmental perspective. The first attempt was in the late-1970s, when an environmentally oriented transport plan for the city centre attracted much attention. However, the implementation of the 1979 plan was obstructed because of effective resistance from certain interest groups in Aalborg. In the early-1990s, a new and more visionary view was developed concerning how long-term environmental consideration could be integrated in local transport policy and planning. However, in the late-

1990s, the attention of the local political-administrative elite shifted again towards issues concerning road mobility. The results of that are yet unclear. The development in Aalborg seems to be influenced by the somewhat ramified urban structure (compared to Lund and Groningen) as well as the presence of the Limfjord inlet. More importantly however, is the fact that success has not been achieved in maintaining, over a longer time span, the interests and opinions concerning long-term strategic goals, as it has been the case in Lund and Groningen. As mentioned above, the reason for that is probably to be found in the rather closed local political culture in Aalborg.

### ***Concluding Lessons for Policy and Planning Practitioners***

This study has focused on the possibilities for integrating environmental considerations into local transport policy and planning in Lund, Groningen, and Aalborg. In particular, there has been an emphasis on conditions and requirements for the creation of an increased strategic capacity to deal with long-term environmental issues. It has included the question of management and control of local political processes in a direction towards goals and strategies for a long-term environmentally sustainable transport system.

Based on the empirical findings of this study, it can be concluded that the focus and content of the *local transport political debate* has been an initiating and driving force in the local transport policy. It has been of significant importance that the issue of environmental considerations in relation to transport in many ways has been established and accepted as an independently argued theme, an independent linguistic construction, in the three cities. Thereby, the theme has also been established on the local political agenda.

In the continuation of the local transport political process, the *local political culture* has played a key role to the handling and adaptation of that theme. In particular, the aspect of political culture has concerned the ability to be able to manage the political process in a direction of increased strategic capacity. Here, several elements have been of importance.

First of all, the *degree of openness* in the political process to organised interests outside the political-administrative framework, as well as to the citizens in general, has been decisive. The more openness, the greater the opportunity for a broad anchoring of goals and strategies.

In this connection it has also been decisive that interest groups and citizens were *involved as early as possible*, and *as direct as possible*, in the political process. It has been of particular importance that interest groups and citizens, through the involvement in project organisations, experienced early and direct contact with politicians, civil servants, consultants, and other relevant experts. It has also been of some importance that such a process was supplemented by scientifically based information and knowledge, not as a guarantee for better solutions but rather as a way to increase the possibility for somewhat enlightened debates. Hence, the involvement procedures concerned the establishment and development of a fruitful and well-informed co-operation in relation to the articulation and formulation of problems, visions, goals, and strategies, that is *before* the construction of the first plan proposal.

The earlier, and the more direct, the involvement of interest groups and citizens, the greater the possibility and constructive ability of the local political-administrative elite to identify barriers and objections to a future plan, and hence also to be able to eliminate or neutralise those barriers and objections. Thereby, existing or potential conflicts could be managed before they gained a somewhat more significant negative influence.

Finally, it was of decisive importance to the political process that the local political-administrative elite attempted to manage and direct the entire process towards a specific goal. Thereby, the political-administrative system could maintain initiative within, and to a large extent also the control with, the political process.

Hence, this study not only emphasises the importance of establishing concrete local political goals and strategies for environmentally sustainable transport solutions. In particular, the study emphasises the *importance of being able to establish and manage political processes, which can maintain and develop such goals and strategies within the local political, social, and economic life*. Some of the main elements in such processes seems to be:

- The creation of a broad local debate on transport issues from an environmental perspective (in a local as well as global context) with the intention to establish a broadly anchored vision for environmentally sustainable transport solutions.
- That a variety of interest groups and citizens are involved as early and direct as possible in the local transport political process, that is before the construction of the first plan proposal.
- That debate and participation procedures are supplemented by scientifically based information and knowledge.
- That the local political-administrative system focuses on leading and managing the political process towards visionary and yet clearly defined goals and strategies as well as their implementation.

As such, this study also emphasises and suggests that those elements should be of particular interest and significance for a further development of local transport policy and planning.