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**SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
IN SWEDEN:
RHETORIC, POLITICS
AND PRACTICE**

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Abstract: Sweden is a forerunner in environmental policy and one of the most ecologically modernized countries in the world. However, as most other countries, it has not been able to escape from economic recession and high rate of unemployment. Thus it is of great interest to investigate whether Sweden, in front of this challenge, is still on the right track in redesigning society to become environmentally sustainable. The overriding question of this article then is: how does Sweden stand the test when bold sustainable development goals confront the challenges of financial and economic crisis and strong pressure on its social welfare system? The analysis finds that Sweden has adopted an understanding where economic growth, social welfare and environmental policy support each other. However, reconciling these dimensions into an integrated strategy for sustainable development is easier said than done, and it is shown that the distance between rhetoric, policy and practice is longer than recognized in the formulated policy.

Since the Brundtland report in 1987, sustainable development has been a key term in worldwide environmental politics and policy-making. By marrying economic growth with environmental concern, it presented a perspective that was easy to adopt not only by environmental organizations and green politicians, but also by stakeholders that earlier had not given the environment any priority. Sustainable development was a conceptual innovation with huge political importance. It served as a “boundary object”, a point of reference providing a coherent story-line (Star 1989), where different stakeholders could meet and find mutual interests.

The Rio Conference in 1992 fuelled this development, and the last couple of decades we have globally seen a rapid growth in policies for sustainable development across a wide range of organizational contexts. National and local governments, government agencies, for-profit companies, and non-governmental organizations have made sustainable development to an important rationale for their activities. Thus, sustainable development has made a triumphal march, not only in parliamentary buildings and head offices of environmental organizations, but also in the boardrooms of transnational companies. Environment is no longer understood as a sector interest, a discrete policy area with vague relations to other policy areas (such as employment policy, transport policy, and energy policy). Instead, sustainable development provides a holistic approach which brings together different, and seemingly divergent, interests and activities. All actors and activities are now attributed responsibility for making society more sustainable.

However, the apparent success story of sustainable development has also a reverse side; questions have been raised whether this concept really matters. As formulated in the introductory chapter of a volume strikingly titled *The Sustainable Development Paradox*: "... sustainability is so ambiguous that it allows actors from various backgrounds to proceed without agreeing on a single action. That is, before we make judgments about environmental sustainability, we must also consider other dimensions of sustainability." (Krueger & Gibbs 2007: 5)

To what extent has policy changed, emissions been reduced and production and consumption patterns altered? Has adherence to the goal sustainable development only been a "greenwash", i.e. a way to put dirty activities in green clothes? When oil companies present themselves as promoters of sustainable development – is it only rhetoric or is it a change in their operational activities? When national parliaments declare that sustainable development is a central goal – has it any substantial implications or is it only lip service? Or even worse, is sustainable development rather a key strategy for sustaining what is known to be unsustainable (cf. Baker 2007, Blühdorn 2007, Blühdorn & Welsh 2007)?

Taking these critical questions as our point of departure we will in this article explore Sweden's environmental policy. Considering the country's historical legacy of being one of the first nation-states developing an extensive environmental policy Sweden is a critical case in this context. It was the first nation state to establish an environmental protection agency and one of the first countries to develop comprehensive environmental legislation. Sweden also initiated the very first worldwide environmental conference – the United Conference on Human Environment – which was held in Stockholm in 1972 (Lidskog & Elander 2000).

However, Sweden is of interest not only for historical reasons, but also because of its present policy. By some researchers Sweden is even claimed to be one of the most ambitious and ecologically modernized countries in the world (Jänicke 2008, Lundqvist 2004, Fudge and Rowe 2000, Weale 1992). Operationalized into sixteen environmental quality goals, this policy states that the most serious environmental problems are to be solved within one generation, as exemplified by the climate policy goal, which goes beyond what it is required according to the European Union's internal burden-sharing (deduced from the Kyoto protocol). Thus, Sweden appears to be at the forefront in developing environmental policy and redesigning society to become environmentally sustainable. At the same time, Sweden– as most countries – has experienced economic recession, and high rate of unemployment, and is heavily embedded in structures and processes remote of domestic control. How does Sweden stand the test when bold sustainable development goals confront the challenges of financial and economic crisis and strong pressure on its social welfare system?

The article comprises four parts, this introduction being the first. The second part surveys the development of Swedish environmentalism during the late 20th century, whereas the third analyses current environmental goals and instruments as related to other policy priorities than environmental ones. In conclusion we summarize and highlight some crucial issues of tension and conflict that characterize the processes and outcomes of environmental policies in Sweden.

■ SWEDEN AS A PIONEER COUNTRY

Alone or together with the other Scandinavian countries Sweden has commonly be referred to as an exemplar of the Scandinavian welfare model (Esping-Andersen 1990). The country has a long tradition of public regulation, in which state-oriented solutions are judged as more effective and socially just than market-oriented solutions (Trägårdh 2007, Alfredsson and Wiman 2001). Another crucial element of the Swedish post-war welfare state and society was a general agreement about the rules of the class struggle between blue and white collar unions, the owners of capital and the state. The rules were set by this corporatist unity, and lay the ground for an institutionalised and, fairly stable labour market far into the 1980s (Esping-Andersen 1992, Therborn 1992). Congruent with this compact there is a widespread view that Sweden is a country where politics is dominated by consensual relations between different interests, and where severe conflicts are

exceptional. This is the harmonious picture drawn by a number of foreign researchers over the years, starting with Childs (1936), and going on to such writers as Heclø and Madsen (1987), Milner (1989), Esping-Andersen (1990) and Trägårdh (2007). An expression of this consensual political context is the unique Swedish governmental process of commission and referral for consideration [the “remiss” process] allowing any actor ((e.g. NGOs) considering itself affected by a particular government proposal to submit comments , although the government on its part generally tries to anticipate the circle of potentially affected interests (Olsson et al. 2009: 169).

The image of harmony has also been painted by researchers looking at environmental policy in Sweden. For example, in a cross-national study in the 1980s, Wildavsky (1987: 66) found that the norms underlying Swedish environmental policy emphasize harmonious relationships, avoidance of direct conflict, a search for consensus, and a clear conception of an active role of the state. One may wonder to what extent this rosy picture of environmental policy in Sweden told in much research literature is a reflection of the fact that environmental policy research has commonly focused on policy formulation, ignoring implementation, neglecting the role of environmental movements, and presupposing the descriptive correctness of the rationalist, democratic chain model of policy-making. In the concluding part of this article we will return to, and reflect upon this question.

However, when looking at environmental policies in Sweden one should first keep in mind some contextual circumstances. On the one hand the geography of Sweden offers some potentially favourable conditions for ecologically sustainable solutions. Hydropower has been extensively exploited, and – together with Sweden’s large investments in nuclear power – it has lead to an electricity production with very low emissions of carbon dioxides. A large area of the country is covered by forests and other green areas that could be used as a provider of fossil free bio-fuels for heating and transport, and also a resource for technology and industries based on these assets. There is also plenty of land suitable for wind power, and even if it until now has been exploited only to a low degree, Sweden has a potential for developing wind power parks.

On the other hand, with an industry increasingly being penetrated by transnational capital, heavily dependent on export and a member of the EU, Sweden is strongly dependent on the surrounding world. As most other European nations, the country has recently experienced rather far-reaching deregulation of state responsibilities. Sectors earlier managed by state monopolies – such as railway, energy and telephony – are now populated with a number of companies, and in cases where state-owned companies (or companies where the state is the major shareholder) still do exist; they have to compete with private companies. Public procurement has increased since the early 1990s, especially with the EU Directive 2004/18/EC, which opened a larger geographic territory for competition. As a consequence of this, competition has become more aggressive and new rules are being incorporated into Swedish law.

Ever since the beginning of the 1990s, a process of deregulation and privatization of schools, pre-school and elderly care and social services in a broad sense has been largely promoted by social democratic as well as conservative/liberal governments. Parallel to this process the gulf between the rich and the poor has widened, primarily due to hugely rising salaries in the upper echelons. The most vulnerable categories of people are children, youth, single mothers and immigrants. More than ever poverty has become concentrated to the immigrant groups, especially those who have arrived in Sweden in recent years (Socialstyrelsen 2010; Sommestad 2010). Thus, although Sweden has been and still is a country with relatively small socio-economic disparities (Wilkinson et al. 2009), since the 1980s income differences between households have increased as well as social polarisation between rich and poor neighbourhoods (Andersson et al. 2010). This development is contrary to what is referred to as the social dimension of sustainability, which concerns the quality of life (Lehtonen 2004).

■ INSTITUTIONALIZED ENVIRONMENTALISM

The history of Swedish environmentalism during this century follows a route from preservation to sustainability, and covers a number of changes in environmental perspectives and policies which influence the character of the environmental movement as well as its interaction with other spheres in society (Jamison et al. 1990, Kronsell 1997, Lidskog & Elander 2000). Until 1960 environmental policy had a very restricted role in Swedish politics, mainly concerning the preservation of specific features of nature, and trying to solve discrete, local and occasional environmental problems, e.g. the pollution of air and water. The organizational basis of environmentalism was dominated by one organization — the Swedish Society for the Conservation of Nature [Svenska Naturskyddsföreningen; SNF], which was created in 1909.

Around the 1960s there was a qualitative shift in the environmental debate. Now it was no longer enough to protect certain places from harmful activities. Already in the 1950s the risks connected to biocides were observed, the effect of mercury on birds was discovered by amateur ornithologists, and both the state and the SNF arranged conferences on these issues. The translation of Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* into Swedish in 1962 triggered the first major environmental debate in Sweden (Jamison et al. 1990). It was now recognized that human disturbances spread through ecosystems, causing unforeseen effects, which posed a threat even to humans at the apex of food chains. A holistic approach to the environment was therefore needed.

The environmental debate in the beginning of the 1960s led to a fourfold increase in membership of environmental organizations, a gradual integration of environmental protection into the programs of the political parties and the creation of state administrative units responsible for natural resources and natural protection (Lundqvist, 1971). Sweden was the first country in the world to establish a national environment protection agency (1967), and Sweden's Environmental Protection Act (1969) was the most encompassing environmental legislation in the world at that time (Weale 1992: 98; Jamison et al. 1990). Ecological science and comprehensive planning emerged as dominant instruments for environmental policies. Thus the state was considered to possess the managerial efficiency and the authority necessary to confront environmental problems successfully.

In the late 1960s a global perspective on the environment was gaining ground, manifested by the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 and the creation of the Swedish branch of The Friends of the Earth (FoE). Environmental concern became more far-reaching in the sense that both cases and causes of environmental destruction were attacked. This led to a questioning of industrial society and a search for alternatives to the dominant societal paradigm. The breeding ground for this new kind of critique was the more radical and activist political culture of the late sixties, coupled with a boom for ecological science. The political answer was more comprehensive planning aided by increasing use of ecological science.

From the mid-seventies until the referendum in 1980 the environmental debate focused on Sweden's plan to build the most ambitious nuclear programme in the world (Lidskog and Sundqvist 2004). After a remarkable silence in the 1950s and 1960s, opposition grew fast, leading to the nationwide People's Campaign Against Nuclear Power [Folkkampanjen mot Kärnkraft] in 1978. The campaign organized a broad spectrum of groups and organizations, including environmentalists, peace activists and women's liberationists. Inspired by a merger of socialist and environmentalist ideals, the People's Campaign also spread ideas of a future resource-preserving society with meaningful work for everyone (Lidskog 1994). Ideas for an alternative society thus came to the fore. Organizations like The Friends of the Earth and The Future in Our Hands (Swedish branch in 1976) contributed new values, a focus on life-styles and a global outlook.

From the mid-eighties, there was a large increase in public concern for the environment, in 1988 leading to parliamentary representation of the Green Party [miljöpartiet], established in 1981. The global character of environmental problems also became more pronounced (e.g. the depleting ozone layer and global warming), and attention shifted to diffuse and prognosticated problems. It was realized that environmental problems cut across sector borders in society and demanded the cooperation of state, civil society and the market for their

solution. The number of actors involved in environmental problems therefore increased dramatically. 'Sustainability' became the central concept in the environmental debate.

In the late 1980s, the growing environmental consciousness in society provided leverage for new interest groups, researchers and policy entrepreneurs to enter the political arena. Many NGO representatives moved to top positions in the environmental policy domain (Lundgren, 1995). Simultaneously, Swedish environmentalism lost its character as a people's movement, as environmental organisations grew more professional and result-oriented, illustrating the tension between pragmatism and idealism. It was the 'deputy-activism' (activism on behalf of a political interest) of Greenpeace (Swedish branch in 1983) and the expert-based pressuring by a revitalized SNF that proved to be organizational models well adapted to the environmental consciousness of the eighties and the early nineties. Organizations that were more directly based on member participation, like The Friends of the Earth and The Future in Our Hands, experienced a decline in membership.

The efficacy of the political branch of the movement, the Green Party, was temporarily disarmed in the early nineties as older parties recognized the political potential of environmental issues and adjusted their policies accordingly. Efficiently making use of the symbolic dimension in politics all political parties allegedly became 'environmentalist'. Environmental issues were thus largely absorbed by the traditional left-right dimension in Swedish politics.

The 1990s displays a dual development. Aside from the inclusion of environmental aspects within government and industry, citizens seemed not to give the environment the same priority as at the end of 1980s. Ranked number one by the voters in the election of 1988, in the 1990s the environment was surpassed by other issues such as employment, economic growth, elderly care, medical care and education, and when Sweden in the beginning of the 1990s experienced economic recession coupled with a dramatic increase in unemployment, ecological sustainability was not a given number one priority on the political agenda. The challenge of reconciling such diverse priorities as economic stability and growth, social welfare, and ecological sustainability will be our next focus.

■ ECOLOGICAL MODERNIZATION FACING A TOUGH REALITY

Although by the time of the Rio Conference (1992) the seeds for a greening of policies in Sweden had already been sown, the Conference was a trigger for bringing sustainable development on top of the policy agenda. In its preparations for the Rio Conference the Swedish government strongly argued that environmental policy had to be reconciled with democracy, market economy and economic growth, i.e. environmental policy was regarded as part and parcel of comprehensive welfare policy (Lidskog and Elander, 2000). This marks a clear connection to the Swedish welfare model as described earlier in this article, and is in well accordance with the Brundtland Commission Report, emphasizing that sustainability includes social and economic as well as ecological aspects. In line with this welfare model there is also a strong trust in the economic and technological rationalism associated with modernity, i.e. by assenting to the perceived demands of economic growth there will be created a substantial tax base upon which the state get resources to be used for redistribution (Elander 1978: 10-17). In relation to this ideological framework the Swedish approach to sustainable development could be seen as a manifestation of ecological modernization in policy and practice. In other words, having faith in the rationality of the economic system lays the ground for an alleged win-win situation between economic growth and ecological sustainability, and there will be no need for deep green ecological ideologies.

The message from Rio resulted in a strong response warranting a cautious optimism regarding prospects of further activities. In 1996, the Government's policy declaration stated that "Sweden shall be a leading force and an example to other countries in its efforts to create ecologically sustainable development. Prosperity shall be built on more efficient use of natural resources – energy, water and raw materials" (Regeringskansliet 1996). Implementing the Kyoto Protocol, the Swedish Parliament in 2002 decided to set a substantially higher

ambition as compared to EU demands.¹ The current goals of the environmental policy are probably the most ambitious ever formulated worldwide: It encompasses 16 environmental quality objectives of which 15 shall be achieved by 2020, and the remaining one – reduced climate impact – shall be reached by 2050, when there shall be no net emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Internationally, Sweden has played an active role in implementing the global conventions on climate change, protection of the ozone layer, biodiversity, transport of hazardous waste, nuclear safety etc. Within EU, Sweden is actively pursuing issues relating to the environment. Regional co-operation in the Baltic region has also been broadened and deepened through Swedish initiatives (Lidskog et al. 2009, Joas et al. 2008). Chairing the EU in autumn 2009, Sweden’s official priorities were the financial crisis, the climate challenge and that the competitiveness of the EU economy should be strengthened by converting to an eco-efficient economy. In line with this, the new coalition government² in its declaration of intent 5 October 2010, stated that

Sweden shall be a leading country for good environment and sustainable development, both nationally and internationally. [...] Through national means we can take the lead and show the way for the world-wide necessary transition. Therefore we have substantially increased our ambition for reducing the emissions in Sweden [...] Sweden will continue to press for a global climate agreement. A new agreement needs to specify more far-reaching reductions, including further greenhouse gases and more countries than today. Sweden will also work to ensure that all EU member countries adopt a national carbon dioxide tax. (Regeringskansliet 2010)

The overall goal of the Government’s environmental policy is “to hand on to the next generation a society in which the major environmental problems facing Sweden have been solved” (Regeringskansliet 2010).

In 1999, the Swedish Parliament adopted fifteen environmental quality objectives (EQO), and in 2005 a sixteenth objective – A Rich Diversity of Plant and Animal Life – was added to the list (Government Bill 2004/05:150, Government Bill 1997/98: 145). These goals are very general and largely targeting the ecological dimension of sustainable development, also including human health and culture. They are also very different in character, some of them concerning specific subject areas (e.g. marine environments) other concerning specific problems (e.g. climate change, acidification, and eutrophication).

TABLE 1. ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY OBJECTIVES (EQO) ADOPTED BY THE SWEDISH PARLIAMENT

Reduced Climate Impact	Good-Quality Groundwater
Clean Air	A Balanced Marine Environment, Flourishing Coastal Areas and Archipelagos
Natural Acidification Only	Thriving Wetlands
A Non-Toxic Environment	Sustainable Forests
A Protective Ozone Layer	A Varied Agricultural Landscape
A Safe Radiation Environment	A Magnificent Mountain Landscape
Zero Eutrophication	A Good Built Environment
Flourishing Lakes and Streams	A Rich Diversity of Plant and Animal Life

¹ The Kyoto protocol states that the industrial countries should decrease their emission of Greenhouse gases with 5.2% from 1990 to the years 2008-12. The European Union should decrease its emissions with 8%. Sweden was, however, allowed to increase its emission with 4 % with regard to its ongoing restructuring of its energy supply (decommission of nuclear power), its substantial decrease in its emissions before 1990, and its low level of emissions compared to most other EU-countries. However, the Parliament decided that Sweden instead should decrease its emissions with 4%.

² In the 2010 September elections the four-party coalition (the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party, the Center Party and the Christian Democrats) in power since 2006 again gained more seats than the red-green parties (the Social Democratic Party, the Green Party and the Left Party) in the parliament, although not an absolute majority.

These objectives define the goals of environmental policy in terms of future state and quality of a sustainable environment. The objectives structure the work needed to achieve the overall goal to attain a society where the main environmental problems have been solved. This means reducing pressures on the environment to levels that are sustainable in the long run. This *generational goal* – to hand over to the next generation a society in which the major environmental problems have been solved – aims to guide environmental action at every level in society. “One generation” means that the objectives should be reached by 2020, except for climate change, which is set to 2050.

To make these goals operational, a bullet list has been created. Environmental policy should be directed towards ensuring that (Environmental Objectives Portal 2010):

- Ecosystems have recovered, or are on the way to recovery, and their long-term capacity to generate ecosystem services is assured.
- Biodiversity and the natural and cultural environment are conserved, promoted and used sustainably.
- Human health is subject to a minimum of adverse impacts from factors in the environment, at the same time as the positive impact of the environment on human health is promoted.
- Materials cycles are resource-efficient and as far as possible free from dangerous substances.
- Natural resources are managed sustainably.
- The share of renewable energy increases and use of energy is efficient, with minimal impact on the environment.
- Patterns of consumption of goods and services cause the least possible problems for the environment and human health.

There is one national authority responsible for each EQO, including implementation measures as well as monitoring, evaluating and reporting the progress. However, focusing on environmental objectives means that there is a need to work across sectors. There is also a need to include Non-Governmental Organizations – industry as well as other important stakeholders – in this work. It is also emphasized that many small decisions affect the environment, and thus information, education and evaluation are necessary. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency is given the overall role to coordinate the activities. The EQO should be followed up regularly, with annual reports to the Government and an in-depth evaluation every fourth year, i.e. every parliamentary term.

However, said and done may not go hand in hand. To what extent has the far-reaching environmental ambition been realized? The latest annual assessment shows a mixed picture. Some EQOs seem to be on their way to be realized, or at least will be provided that additional action will take place. Other EQOs seem to be hard, or even impossible, to reach within one generation. Nevertheless, Sweden has the reputation of being a forerunner in environmental policy, an example of how ambitious environmental goals not only are articulated but also put to practice. Recent figures shows, for example, that Sweden’s emission of greenhouse gases has decreased with almost 18 percent as compared to 1990 – whereas the national goal was only a four percent decrease (SEPA 2010a).

**TABLE 2: WILL THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY OBJECTIVES BE ACHIEVED?
(SOURCE: MILJÖMÅLSRÅDET 2010)**

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY OBJECTIVE	Forecast for 2020	Trend	ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY OBJECTIVE	Forecast for 2020	Trend
1. Reduced Climate Impact*			9. Good-Quality Groundwater		
2. Clean Air			10. A Balanced Marine Environment, Flourishing Coastal Areas and Archipelagos		
3. Natural Acidification Only			11. Thriving Wetlands		
4. A Non-Toxic Environment			12. Sustainable Forests		
5. A Protective Ozone Layer			13. A Varied Agricultural Landscape		
6. A Safe Radiation Environment			14. A Magnificent Mountain Landscape		
7. Zero Eutrophication			15. A Good Built Environment		
8. Flourishing Lakes and Streams			16. A Rich Diversity of Plant and Animal Life		

* Target year 2050, as a first step

Comments: happy smiley – the EQO is expected to be achieved; indifferent smiley – the EQO can be achieved if further action is taken; unlucky smiley – the EQO will be very difficult or impossible to achieve even if further action is taken.

The EQO that is considered the hardest one to reach is “reduced climate impact”, i.e. to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent until 2020 (intermediary goal) and 80 percent by 2050. Sweden is one of few states in the European Union that have so far succeeded to reduce its emissions. Even if this makes Sweden becoming a role model for other countries, the pace of reduction is too slow to reach the established goal. Aside from reduced climate change impact, eight other EQOs are hard to achieve. High environmental ambitions are good, but if they are deemed almost impossible of being attained, why are they at all formulated? Are they merely symbolic, and will they ever have substantial effects? These are questions that we will return to in the concluding section of the article.

■ ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY OR ECONOMIC GROWTH AS TOP PRIORITY?

The first decade of the new millennium displays a contradictory development. On the one hand, the environment is held in high esteem by political parties, governmental agencies, private companies, interest organizations and citizens, and many of them are accepting the need for sustainable development, not least the need for reducing carbon dioxide emissions. On the other hand, Sweden also faces substantial problems

to reach environmental goals. It still has one of the world's highest levels of energy use per capita. The country's 7 tonnes of carbon dioxide per capita (2009) is, however, low compared to other European nations, mainly because nuclear power and hydropower generate some 90 percent of the electricity supply. However, including the carbon dioxide emitted through consumption – i.e. products that are consumed in Sweden but manufactured in other parts of the world – the emissions are 25-35 percent higher, i.e. more than 10 tonnes per capita (SEPA 2010b). Taking this additional emission into account, the country's ambition to transit to a low-carbon society, with the overall goal to become independent of fossil energy by 2050, will be even harder to reach.

Notably, Sweden was the first country in Europe to implement economic reforms designed to exchange environmental and energy-related taxes and fees for lower taxes on wage earnings, and in 1991 it was also one of the first countries in the world to introduce a specific tax on carbon dioxide, a tax for all fuels other than biofuels and peat (Lidskog and Elander 2000). However, manufacturing industry, agriculture and forestry pay no energy tax on fossil fuels, and only 21 percent of the carbon dioxide tax. For energy-intensive industrial activities there are special rules which make them pay even less in carbon dioxide tax (maximum 0.8% of the manufactured product sales). Research has shown that from a climate change point of view, it is not optimal to have different tax rates for the intermediary use of firms and for the final demands of the household (Bohlin 2010). Current differentiation implies that manufacturing industry refrains from relative inexpensive ways to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, whereas households invest in rather expensive means for energy saving with low effect.

Present-day patterns of production and consumption in Sweden and in other industrialized nations are not sustainable, neither on the input side (the exploitation of non-renewable natural resources), nor on the output side (the environmentally harmful emissions that stem from societal activities). The ecological footprint of Sweden is estimated to 5,1 global hectares per capita, which is slightly higher than the average of the European Union's ecological footprint (WWF 2008). This can be compared with USA (9,4 gha/person), China (2,1 gha/person) and India (0,9 gha/person). In other words, for the global population to have the same level of consumption and lifestyle that average Swedes have, we need the equivalent of almost three planets. The question is whether all the activities announced as pro-sustainable — government declarations, the establishment of environmental agencies, the creation and dissemination of environmental consciousness — do in fact lead to substantial changes in the present patterns of production and consumption.

Sweden has officially adopted the concept of ecological modernization in the sense that economic growth and environmental policy would never contradict each other. Even in those cases when there is reason to claim that current decisions run against the country's environmental ambitions, issues are framed in a way that economic and environmental sustainability are harmonized, at least rhetorically. Transport infrastructure investments, such as the new motorway west of the capital Stockholm, planned to be built 2012-2020, the new legislation decided by the Parliament in 2010 making it possible to replace old nuclear power plants with new ones, and the acceptance of the gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea are recent examples of decisions, which are framed in the language of ecological modernization. These, and other decisions of a similar kind, are seen as part and parcel of a general policy for sustainable development, despite the complications for goal attainment caused by the impacts of these decisions.

■ LOCAL POLITICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The political system of Sweden is deeply penetrated by party politics and the central-local dimension cuts through the minds and actions of the near 50,000 elected local and regional representatives of all parties, sometimes provoking internal conflicts, especially in times of financial stress. This means that local politics is not just a reflection of national politics, the importance of which is underlined by the presence of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) as a representative, spokesman and political resource

of all the 290 municipalities and 20 regional councils. This is a powerful actor not to be bypassed by the central government when preparing decisions in all matters affecting local and regional governments.

The state is the authoritative law maker imposing commands that are binding for all actors within its jurisdiction. Local government is supported, and partly controlled by the county board, which is the regional “arm” of the central government, responsible for monitoring environmental and other policies in towns and cities. The county board can also, as an independent actor, join other local actors in partnerships, for example when implementing local climate investments. Swedish municipalities were pioneers in implementing the Local Agenda 21 action program, which is still relevant for the local level, although now integrated into more comprehensive environmental programs (Dahlgren & Eckerberg 2005).

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency in several documents points out the municipalities as engines of environmental policy, because of their responsibility for creating good conditions for living, ecologically as well as socially and economically. The Agency also emphasizes the crucial role of the municipalities in climate policy, e.g. by disseminating information and knowledge within their territories (SEPA 2003).

In terms of eco-governance, including such functions as district heating, sewerage and waste treatment, recycling, green public purchase, green consumption and green accounts, Swedish municipalities are crucial actors (Gustavsson et al. 2009). However, with regard to transport and energy, municipalities have very limited powers to implement measures that have any positive effect on overall fossil fuel dependency (Lidskog & Elander, 2000). In addition, issues related to climate change and the environment compete with a number of other high priority issues on the local political agenda, such as place-making and social integration, thus illustrating an always present, and pressing challenge for policymakers at any level and sector of society (Granberg & Elander 2007).

■ CONCLUSIONS: ECOLOGICAL MODERNIZATION IN RETHORIC, POLICY AND PRACTICE

Sweden’s environmental policy displays an inner tension. It was an early starter and a forerunner, developing high environmental ambitions, institutionalizing green issues in government policies and strongly promoting international agreements on the environment. In line with the notion of ecological modernization, and possibly more distinct than any other country, it adopted an understanding of the relation between economy and environment as a plus-sum game where smart economic growth, social welfare and ambitious environmental policy support each other. However, reconciling these dimensions into an integrated strategy for sustainable development is easier said than done, and, as we have tried to demonstrate in this article, the distance between rhetoric, policy and practice is longer than recognized in most policy documents and sweeping descriptions of environmental policy in Sweden.

So far the country has never developed an environmental policy that challenges the growth logic of capitalist society. When financial crisis and economic recession become top priorities on the policy agenda the environment does not seem that important any longer as illustrated in the election campaign 2010 when neither climate change nor the environment were topics much talked about. According to one media analyst only 2,5 percent of the news articles published in the campaign were related to the environment (Ehrling 2010). This observation goes well with the conclusion that a striking feature of environmental politics in Sweden is the absence of radical green perspectives in the public discourse (Hildingson 2010: 159). The public sphere seems to be semi-constrained consisting of highly organized groups and networks, many working in close contact with the state. On the other hand, there is a broad rhetorical consensus, even among growth-orientated elites in Swedish society that a sound environment is a prerequisite for economic growth, and in that sense sustainable development has become one of the given buzz words in the governmental policy handbook.

Looking at the development of Swedish environmental policy over time we may identify three competing, partly overlapping and complementing strands of policy orientation. First, we have the post-Rio agenda with its emphasis on bottom-up initiatives and inclusion of many co-operating actors in civil society (Hildingsson 2010: 145). Second, there is a hierarchical top-down approach as illustrated by the “Green People’s Home” notion coined by prime minister Göran Persson in 1995, and connoting a strong social democratic state (Lundqvist 2001). Third, there is a neo-liberal inspired, market-led orientation arguing that competition between profit-making companies will turn development towards sustainable production demanded by “green” consumers (Spaargaren & Oosterveer 2010). These orientations are in various proportions represented by the political parties in the Parliament, thus making environmental politics a mixture, or patchwork, of different mechanisms that may, or may not, in the long run lead us towards a sustainable, or rather less unsustainable society. Indeed, this is a less glamorous picture than the one indicated by the bold policy rhetoric proclaiming a happy marriage between ecological, economic and social values. Despite this somewhat depressing conclusion there are in Sweden a number of conditions giving some hope for the future:

First, the fact that Sweden was an early starter in developing environmental policies and institutions has created a structural framework, including organizational and professional resources of great potential for policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. Second, there are a number of strong non-governmental, environmental organizations watching the presence of and pushing environmental issues onto the policy agenda. Third, despite differences in strategies and tactics there is a broad consensus among the political parties that Sweden should stand up for its reputation as a country taking great environmental responsibility. Fourth, the Swedish model of approaching the environment has an important multi-scalar, multi-level dimension. Thus, when the government has been very active in pushing the environmental cause in international conferences and agreements local governments have simultaneously been crucial actors in implementing such environmental issues as Local Agenda 21, the 16 Environmental Quality Goals, and climate change mitigation and adaptation, thus illustrating the slogan “think and act –globally and locally” (Low & Gleeson 1998: 189). Swedish municipalities are also very active in trans-national city networking, as well illustrated in the field of climate change mitigation and adaptation (Gustavsson et al. 2009).

Finally, the strong level of local governments in Sweden offers an important link to civil society as illustrated by a number of ongoing dialogue projects, where households and citizens as target groups are stimulated by the municipality to switch their consumption and life style in a climate friendly way. The common denominator of these projects is that they put the household as consumer of goods and services at the centre, although also recognising that the household is dependent on the context, i.e. the governmental laws and regulations, local government infrastructure, and producers that supply climate friendly goods and services (Gustavsson 2010).

In the very beginning of this article we asked ourselves, “How does Sweden stand the test when bold sustainable development goals confront the challenges of financial and economic crisis and strong pressure on its social welfare system?”. Our brief answer to this question may sound trivial: rhetorically there is still a commitment, although in policy and practice the stumbling blocks on the road towards sustainability have proven more troublesome than once indicated by the bold formulations. Maybe the case of Sweden, because of its relatively promising preconditions for moving towards a sustainable society, is an exemplary illustration both of the potentialities and the limits for developed welfare countries efforts to balance environment, social and economic dimensions of sustainability? Or does the Swedish example rather demonstrate that sustainable development as a political project has reached a dead end, where in practice the notion of sustainability orchestrates the three dimensions in a way that never allows social and ecological sustainability to challenge economic growth? Today, it is possible to advocate both interpretations, although in the near future we will more distinctly see whether the gap between what has been done and what needs to be done is widening or closing. In other words are we on the right track towards a sustainable society, or do we need a radical re-politicization of current policy orientations (cf. Swyngedouw 2007)?

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