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Approaching change: narratives on radical sustainability transitions in Swedish policy and planning

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1. Introduction

Increased social fragmentation, a "crisis of democracy" and continued stress on ecological systems indicate that we are still far from a safe and *just* operating space for humanity as outlined by Raworth (2012), based on Rockstrom et al. (2009). Meanwhile, there is a growing recognition that ensuring social justice within planetary boundaries will require more significant changes in society than the current rate and range of implementation of sustainable development strategies. What this might actually mean however remains contested, particularly in regards to different national or regional contexts and the institutional capacity to handle these large complex issues.

It is increasingly acknowledged that long-term sustainable development cannot rely solely on technological innovations or a "greening" of production and consumption (Alfredsson, 2004; Huesemann & Huesemann, 2008), but requires more profound shifts in how we are to meet basic needs without undermining key Earth-system processes (O'Neill, Fanning, Lamb, & Steinberger, 2018). This relates for example to shifting the norms and practices that are taken for granted in contemporary politics and planning, and that are rarely more critically challenged in practice – even in developments marketed as being at the frontline of sustainability (Hagbert & Femenías, 2016; Storbjörk, Hjerpe, & Isaksson, 2017). A particularly prevalent facet is the idea of economic growth, which permeates the political discourse and policy and planning priorities, and is either more explicitly stated or implicitly assumed in future visions at all societal levels.

Calls for more radical sustainability transitions point to the need for deeper examination of current economic and institutional structures in formulating new trajectories and policy approaches (Grin, Rotmans, & Schot, 2010; Martinez-Alier, Kallis, Veuthey, Walter, & Temper, 2010), and re-politicizing the discussion of what socio-environmental futures might entail beyond a prevailing growth-paradigm (Demaria, Schneider, Sekulova, & Martinez-Alier, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2007). There is however a lack of more structured descriptions of *how* to reach these normative visions, and a deepened analysis of the role of policy and planning in driving change, under what conditions and what space for action there is. Assuming that transitions such as those proposed within more growth-critical socio-ecological narratives, and particularly by degrowth scholars, will require "a disruption of existing

institutional arrangements, some of which may be very persistent" (Joutsenvirta, 2016, p. 25), there is a need to explore how these transformations might come about. How different actors perceive transitions and opportunities for change is an important aspect of this, not the least in more actively considering discursive structures and imaginaries (such as a tacit assumption of continued economic growth) that shape landscape-level constraints – treating this not merely as exogenous factors in transitions (Næss & Vogel, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to explore narratives of transition in the context of Swedish policy and planning, and how different actors relate to and perceive more radical transitions to reach overarching social and environmental sustainability goals. It is based on empirical examinations of what ideas of change that are expressed among different local, regional and national actors, ranging from grassroots "transitioners", planners, public officials, and politicians. The paper takes departure in the degrowth literature's calls for more radical societal change, utilizing a basic analytical framing of approaches to change derived from sustainability transitions literature, yet with a focus on discursive structures and narratives from different actors perceive change. The empirical insights presented in this paper provide a snapshot of the discourse and practice in Swedish policy and planning, and are further discussed with regards to the key issues and conflicts that might arise between different narratives and the strategies this proposes for enabling a sustainable development path for a country such as Sweden, where ambitions for transformation are high, but the road to transition still rather vague.

2. Background

2.1. Narratives of radical transition beyond growth

Envisioning a future society can be seen as a way of also examining current understandings of what is for example meant by development. It also offers a certain representation of how the past and the present are made sense of, as well as outlines perceptions of trajectories for humanity and our life on this planet. While certainly not uncontested, particularly regarding the direction and extent of transition, there is nonetheless a growing recognition that we will need more or less fundamental societal changes if we are to move towards a more socio-ecologically sustainable development. Calls for improving and ensuring social justice, while (or rather, through) keeping within planetary boundaries, provide a framework or "compass" for the strive towards finding a safe and just operating space for humanity (as outlined by Raworth, 2012, building upon among others Rockström et al., 2009). This in turn poses challenges for policy and planning in operationalizing such visions into strategies for action.

While the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015) perpetuate an understanding of development as linked to sustaining economic growth, a mounting critique challenges the reliance on, and belief in, continuous growth (Alfredsson & Malmaeus, 2017; Schneider, Kallis, & Martinez-Alier, 2010). Conceptualizing different societal trajectories is relevant for discussing the implications of certain policies, investments or initiatives on different levels, and the norms and attitudes regarding progress and development that permeate policy and planning institutions. In this perspective, there is a need to explore what a society beyond growth will look like, regardless whether you see it as a threat or an opportunity, in order to plan for a sustainable future (Victor, 2008).

A growing activist as well as research interest in degrowth, understood as the equitable downscaling of production and consumption levels to enhance ecological conditions and the possibilities for human wellbeing (Schneider et al., 2010), outlines the unsustainability of contemporary growth policies, and points to normative ideas of how a different society, post an economic growth paradigm, could look like. Accompanying the richness in degrowth literature of critical debate on growth economics and normative ideas of a society post growth "[t]here are also ideas about practices and institutions that may facilitate this transition and the processes that can bring these together and make them flourish" (Kallis, Demaria, & D'alisa, 2014). However, as pointed out by for example Joutsenvirta (2016, p. 23) the literature on degrowth "lacks analyses on actual materialization and the nature of the change required". This gap between the radical and normative ideas of a future society with other foci than economic growth and the present, and the lack of clear descriptions of alternative (degrowth) policy developments to reach that goal is seen as possibly strengthening "the current status quo in economic policy and reassert the position of the growth paradigm" (ibid., p. 23).

Little attention has so far also been given to institutional features of a society beyond growth, and how a transition from current institutional orders can be implemented. The type of radical societal changes discussed might also imply very different things in different socio-political and cultural contexts. Not the least when trying to contextualize non-growth narratives outside the Southern European context of much of the degrowth literature, characterized by a relatively low trust in authorities and societal institutions. Kallis et al. (2014) for example describe how different types of grassroots economic practices and institutions (cooperatives of different sorts, urban gardens, community currencies, time banks, barter markets, associations for child or health care) have developed due to economic crisis and as conventional institutions fail to secure the basic needs of people in for example Argentina, Greece or Catalonia. The point of departure might however be very different in countries that haven't been affected in the same way by the type of transitional push that for example an economic crisis entails, and where trust in established institutions is higher.

2.2. The Swedish policy and planning context

So, what could more far-reaching sustainability transitions, including trajectories where growth is no longer a given, look like in the institutional context of Sweden, an affluent Nordic welfare state? This paper contributes by explore narratives of change in the context of a relatively institutionally stable society, often lauded as a front-runner in environmental policy, yet with a high metabolic profile and level of consumption. Swedish policy over the past few decades could be characterized by a triple bottom line approach (people, planet, profit), where a historically strong social welfare system, middle-of-the-road economics and relatively ambitious environmental management have merged under the idea of ecological modernization, positing the compatibility (or even necessity) of continued growth for improved environmental consideration (Lidskog & Elander, 2012). The "Nordic model" has built upon a culture of consensus, with an alliance between public and private interests, and between labor and capital. This assumed consensus has been considered essential in building the economy, including maintaining economic growth as a key facet of social democratic politics spurring tax revenues and securing the welfare and pension system. This dynamic of corporatist exchange however appears to be changing, as corporatism in policy preparation, as well as implementation processes, has declined since the 1970's (Öberg et al., 2011). The government output (i.e. going from policy to implementation) can also be seen as no longer

having the same rationality in its social steering (Lindvall & Rothstein, 2006), in a shift from "social engineering to governance" (Larsson, Letell, & Thörn, 2012).

Sweden has implemented policies that rely on a techno-economic rationality in ushering the "greening" of several sectors, fitting an eco-modernist framing of advancing environmental management while maintaining economic growth (Lidskog & Elander, 2012). From a planning perspective, the efficiency and rationality of large-scale infrastructure has been a particularly prevalent narrative, in for example establishing and expanding recycling or residential district heating systems. Made possible in part by centralized state investments, such initiatives have been successfully anchored in regional and local decision-making, while an intensified discourse of intra-regional or metropolitan (international) competition has to some extent pushed the need for what is seen as strategic investments and bids for "frontline" green developments (Bradley, Hult, & Cars, 2013; Hagbert, Mangold, & Femenías, 2013). Contemporary planning and policy in Sweden has as such been geared towards ensuring a continued growth, but framed within the green urban economy, where for example the deregulation of planning processes is currently discussed as essential in promoting innovation. Simultaneously, a growing interest both among grassroots movements and in academia is challenging established structures – based in an understanding of everyday practices, motivations and the potential for transition beyond the growth paradigm on both local and national level.

2.3. Scenarios for a sustainable Swedish society beyond GDP growth

The premises for and consequences of a more radical transition towards a sustainable society are explored in the trans-disciplinary research project "Beyond GDP growth: Scenarios for sustainable planning and building". Using scenarios as a basis for discussion on future trajectories of development, the research aims to develop strategies for policy and planning. In a normative back-casting approach, goals that should be fulfilled in the futures that the scenarios explore were first set up in a collaborative process among the 17 involved researchers from different disciplines and project-affiliated societal partners (including among others government agencies, local officials from a range of municipalities and sustainability networks/NGOs). Four sustainability goals, two environmental and two social, were outlined regarding climate and energy; land use; just distribution of resources; and power and participation (for a description of the methodology, see Fauré, Svenfelt, Finnveden, & Hornborg, 2016).

The four scenarios explored – circular economy; local self-sufficiency; automation; and collaborative economy – offer different images and descriptions of the future that are purposefully contrasting in terms of variables such as the level of technological development, urbanization, and the role of the state or civil society sector (Svenfelt et al., forthcoming). As such, they depict a range of strategies that pose very different challenges for implementation, and that might overlap or be in more direct conflict with each other, depending on the path of development taken. A key question for policy and planning in relation to the formulation of such scenarios is not necessarily what of these descriptions of the future are more or less likely, or more or less desirable – but the discussion of for whom, by whom and under what conditions they might be. Several of the strategies outlined are part of varying contemporary discourses on sustainability transitions, such as more collaborative practices or circular systems of production and consumption. But to go from what is today can at best be considered marginal phenomena, to where this is a more dominant economic logic (as

described in the scenarios), implies steering towards futures beyond growth that do not compromise (too much) with environmental and social sustainability goals.

3. Analytical framework

The nature of the change needed to reach sustainability goals (and what is normatively envisioned as a sustainable society), how change is to come about and if (or how) it could be stimulated, steered or even managed, are all key questions for approaching transition processes. While this paper does not claim to provide a complete review of the range of social theories and ontological standpoints on change as a whole, or even more particularly in relation to sustainability transitions (see e.g. Geels, 2010 for a MLP-framed account), we describe some aspects of theoretical strands that point to different ideas on change as it pertains to certain logics of transition and the type of steering (if any) implied. The type of change needed is a relevant starting point for understanding how different approaches to change pose different stories both of where we (society, industry or nature – the subject of the story also differs) currently stand and where we normatively ought to be going. A basic premise put forward in this paper is nonetheless that transitions to a low-impact society – i.e. a just and safe space within planetary boundaries – will call for some sort of examination of current institutional, social and economic structures, societal systems or use and distribution of resources. Yet, a critical aspect appears to be whether environmental impacts and social inequalities are seen simply as symptoms of mismanagement (implying a better management could be possible), or a more intrinsic part of the very fabric and ideals of a modern society and (capitalist) growth economy (Martínez-Alier, Pascual, Vivien, & Zaccai, 2010). This connects to understandings of "socio-metabolic" regimes, as patterns of energy and material flows associated with certain systemic characteristics of how societies relate to nature, and the high metabolism of modern industrialized nations (Krausmann, Fischer-Kowalski, Schandl, & Eisenmenger, 2008).

The debate on responsibility and agency in moving towards a sustainable future has tended to posit individual action against large-scale societal changes (see for example the exchange between Shove, 2010, 2011; Whitmarsh, O'Neill, & Lorenzoni, 2011). This supposed dichotomy between incremental, technical or "behavioral change" (assuming an evolutionary economical or rational choice model), and "social change" (arguing for the inadequacy of individual actions and calling for more situated socio-material studies of the dynamics of transition) has not only polarized research debates, but has also been raised in the public discourse on individual contra collective responsibility. Attempts to bridge these micro/macro level approaches to pro-environmental action (Reid, Sutton, & Hunter, 2010), or methodological individualism/holism in sustainability research on a more general level (Geels, 2010) have however emphasized the need for a more pragmatic outlook in diversifying research perspectives and practices to find ways forward (Hobson, 2006).

One way of approaching change that claims to offer a complementary perspective, formulated as a basis for sustainability transitions research, situates socio-technical systems as a meso level unit of analysis. Sustainability transitions acknowledge the need for major shifts in key societal systems, related to e.g. energy, agriculture and the built environment (Markard, Raven, & Truffer, 2012). These major changes imply for example the overhaul from a fossil based to a fossil free energy mix, or the reconfiguration of the transport and housing infrastructure. These types of shifts are however understood to not only be a technical challenge, but rather a change in the various socio-technical systems that uphold or lock-in

certain modes of production and consumption, at various levels (Geels, 2010). Established socio-technical systems are slow to change, yet sustainability transitions research posits that incremental change will not be sufficient in meeting sustainability goals, and instead seek to explore how more fundamental transformations can be promoted and governed (Markard et al., 2012).

In relation to the different ways of approaching what type of change is assumed to take place, the role of different actors involved in and the drivers for transition processes also differ. A sustainability transitions perspective proposes the guidance of transitions in line with long-term goals, where multiple actors are involved and assumed to work together, but where political actors will take a major role and where public policy should provide the direction of transitions (Markard et al., 2012). This could include more regulatory frameworks such as stricter environmental regulations and taxation, but also formulating policies and creating institutional frameworks that can stimulate innovation. In a Multi-Level Perspective, processes of transition entail interactions within as well as between different levels, including struggles between niches and established regimes, "enacted by interpretive actors that fight, negotiate, search, learn, and build coalitions as they navigate transitions" (Geels, 2010, p. 495).

Part of the sustainability transitions research has however also been criticized for not engaging in more explicit questions of power and hegemonic narratives and actor constellations. It has for example been argued that a more fundamental political discussion of the nature and scope of transitions in light of different societal trajectories is needed (Avelino, Grin, Pel, & Jhagroe, 2016; Kenis, Bono, & Mathijs, 2016), underlining the persistence of social problems as "attributed to the path dependency of dominant practices and structures" (Avelino et al., 2016). As stated by Kenis et al. (2016, p. 581), particularly the hegemony of a "liberal-democratic growth-based market economy and its post-political ideology" can pose "a key obstacle to realizing a proper sustainability transition, as the latter circumvents the need to move beyond merely 'evolutionary' change".

Previous analysis of transition opportunities concerning land use and planning has also pointed to the crucial role of landscape level dimensions in transitions. Particularly in challenging deeply rooted concepts and practices concerning everything from what is considered as an appropriate and desired urban development, norms surrounding transport infrastructure and travel, but also in relation to business policies and attitudes towards industrial establishment - not the least in countries with a decentralized structure, where the local administrative level make a lot of the decisions and where the state only has a small say in what priorities are made locally (Isaksson & Heikkinen, 2018; Næss & Vogel, 2012). In these contexts, landscape dimensions such as prevalent socio-economic structures, but also laws, rules, norms and views on progress, development and transition opportunities, are essential to what type of transitions can be initiated.

Calls for acknowledging the detrimental role of current societal structures in the continued environmental degradation and global inequalities more explicitly challenge an incremental, economistic rational choice model and the adequacy of incremental improvements under a market driven logic. Degrowth scholars underline the need for affluent societies (or parts of societies), particularly in the global North, living with an abundance of resources to "liberate conceptual space for countries to find their own trajectories to what they define as the good life" (Kallis et al., 2014, p. 5). These types of claims address political and economic power structures, particularly in high-consuming societies, but also confronts conventions and

practices enforced by more dominant growth and techno-centered sustainable development ideologies – including the reliance on large-scale industry and systems that have contributed to wealth accumulation and resource-intense economic growth (Martinez-Alier et al., 2010).

This connects to another common dichotomy between what is portrayed as "weak" or "strong sustainability" (Hobson, 2013). Hobson (2013) outlines what can be seen as a paradox between on one hand stark proclamations made in various policies, frameworks and programs regarding the need for radical transformations towards sustainability, and on the other hand a reliance on voluntary projects, and an underlying assumption of continued growth. Drawing upon the 10-year framework adopted at the Rio+20 conference as an example of the formulation of environmental problems as solvable within existing structures, Hobson discusses how this ties into an eco-modernist discourse of efficiency and informed consumers, where nudging and other non-regulatory interventions have penetrated policy discourse as well as practice.

In contrast, "strong" or deep green discourses argue that more radical transitions will require an absolute reduction in levels of production and consumption, and cannot rely on marginal efforts within what is otherwise framed as business as usual (Demaria et al., 2013; Hobson, 2013). In relation to such more radical claims, there could in turn – in a rather bold generalization – be said to exist two opposite strands of thought: that sufficient, yet radical change can come about in a more or less ordered way, i.e. designing the way there (Victor, 2008) or that some sort of larger (external) influence will be needed, which in turn could be handled in different ways. This has for example been explored in the case of the "special period" in Cuba, drawing references to, but also marking the differences, from an immediate crisis situation to possible degrowth strategies (Borowy, 2013). Here, the institutional prerequisites to work with change, whether desired or by necessity, will also depend on the capacity to for example prioritize certain sectors and developments to ensure a sustainable society, meeting both environmental and social goals

4. Material and method

The study is based on empirical material collated within different work packages in the Beyond GDP growth project, and consists primarily of in-depth semi-structured interviews with different types of actors involved in local, regional or national development, as well as insights from a dialogue session with policy makers, arranged at the International Sustainability Transitions Conference 2017 in Gothenburg, Sweden. A qualitative research approach was taken in order to gather and analyze the narratives on change that are expressed by these different actors.

The Beyond GDP growth project consists of several work packages seeking empirical insights from existing practices and discourses regarding the scenarios developed in the project. These include for example focus areas on everyday practices, mobility, built environment and policy and planning. Within these various areas, over 40 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with different types of actors, including public officials, planners, politicians, private and civil society sector representatives, as well as people engaged in the transition movement or other forms of alternative practices. The interview material explored in this paper offers a cross-section of the empirical studies conducted within the project, and is based on in total eight of these interviews (see table 1 for list of interviewees). These were chosen to provide as broad of a perspective as possible on how sustainability transitions are perceived in

different contexts and sectors by a large variety of actors, while limiting the scope to be able to do a more in-depth study of the narratives that emerge. The interviews all to some extent (even across the different sub-studies) dealt with questions of perceptions or definitions of sustainable development in relation to the particular context of the interviewee, their/the organizations' work with sustainability, and the interviewee's own role or motivation to work with more radical transitions (as exemplified in the scenarios). An analysis of the select interview transcripts was based on exploring what narratives of change the interviewees express, the drivers for change or key actors referred to, and the perceived barriers to change.

Table 1: List of interviewees

	Context/type of organization	*Interviewee:*
1	The Swedish Construction Federation	Environmental & energy manager
2	Northern County Administrative Board	Planning official
3	Small remote rural municipality in Northern Sweden	Development strategist
4	Small remote rural municipality in Northern Sweden	Local Centre Party politician
5	Large urban municipality in Southern Sweden	Traffic planner
6	Large municipal housing company in Southern Sweden	Environmental strategist
7	Middle-sized municipality in Western Sweden	Environmental strategist
8	Middle-sized municipality in Western Sweden	Couple involved in the local transition movement

The other main empirical material used as the basis for the analysis presented in this paper was gathered during a dialogue session, entitled "Radical transition in policy and practice – insights from policy makers", which was held on June 19th 2017, as part of the IST Conference. The session included a panel of four policy and planning actors, including:

1) a national opinion leader and former member of the European Parliament and the Swedish Parliament;
2) an environmental officer at the City of Gothenburg;
3) a Green Party politician and Chair of the Regional Development Board in region Västra Götaland, Sweden;
4) a climate activist and Left Party politician from the City of Gothenburg.

Main themes discussed during the session was: how do these actors, at both national and local levels, relate to the idea of major social change as a key feature for long term sustainable development? What would be key elements of national and local policy measures in these types of processes of radical social transition? The dialogue session was documented by multiple researchers, and detailed notes compiled.

5. Narratives of change

5.1. The type of change needed

5.1.1. Urgency and scope of change

A key facet of sustainability discourse in Swedish policy and planning, as in many other contexts, has been whether the speed of and direction of transitions to a less environmentally detrimental and more socially just development is enough to meet the urgency of the problems at hand, not the least when it comes to climate change mitigation and curtailing consumption of non-renewable resources. This was also a key theme raised in the dialogue session, where all panelists emphasized the need for fundamental transformations of society, and that it needs to happen quickly. What might have previously been possible within the system is no longer seen as an option, meaning to some extent that exponentially larger transitions are perceived as being needed the further we go down the current path of development. The panel advocated the need for prompt societal focus on climate-issues, and also the need of calling the current situation *"for what it is: a crisis"*(panel member 2). Other members of the panel called out for the need of "*a new Enlightenment. A new revolution"* (panel member 1).

The inadequacy of the current rate and scope of transition was also raised in all deep-interviews. An example was given by the Traffic planner in a large urban municipality regarding the need to negotiate between different ambitions in planning and policy, but where environmental goals tend to come second to more socio-economic development issues such as employment and housing:

> *"That's a balance that we're not sure about, of course, whether it'll be achieved. We follow up on the environmental aspect, where we can see that, well, yeah we don't really have the pace needed to reach the environmental goals for 2020 that have been set."*

Some interviewees also pointed out the discrepancy between the insufficient change rate and the increased awareness of the type of systemic change implied to reach sustainability goals: *"We have to live in a different way if it's not all gonna go to hell. And we who are environmentally aware know this"* (Environmental strategist in middle-sized Western municipality). Here, there is a bias in that a majority of the panelists and interviewees work with sustainability issues in some way or another, with several identifying as "deep green", yet they are also aware that not everyone wants to acknowledge the need for system-wide change or take the decisions that are needed to reach sustainability and climate targets.

As part of this narrative, an aversion to efficiency measures as a stand-alone solution can also be detected. Sustainability goals as those outlined in the Beyond GDP project, and particularly regarding climate, are seen as relevant due to that they clearly state that the total level of consumption needs to be reduced:

> *"I thought this [climate goal] was good, because it doesn't say any drivel about energy efficiency [...] instead of consuming as much, but more efficiently, you actually have to reduce, I think that's great."* (Environmental strategist at large municipal housing company)

Although all interviews expressed doubts of the current pace of change being sufficient, not all of the interviewees would however identify themselves as "deep-green". This for example applies to the interviewees from the remote rural Northern municipality, where the Development strategist and local Centre Party politician rather talk about sustainability issues (although they don't necessarily identify them as such) as "common sense" of creating a premise for local development based in people and their relationship to each other and their environment, where the grand nature experiences available is a primary basis for creating a

sustainable local economic development that does not encroach on the very "raison d'être" for the municipality.

5.1.2. Possible trajectories of change as working within the system

Different notions of possibilities for change emerge in the empirical material, where some propose ways in which current systems can be tweaked, while others - in line with the views expressed above - instead argue that system change will need to be sparked in more radical ways. In two of the interviews, (Environmental strategist at large municipal housing company, and Environmental & energy manager at the Swedish Construction Federation) conventional eco-modernization and green growth views were clearly dominating, along with a self-described techno-optimism and belief in decoupling. They give accounts that show a clear belief in market forces and technology, which are the tools they see as part of working with sustainability in their day-to-day. The strategist points to the importance of economic incentives for steering sustainability work, and also for making visible the urgency to work with certain issues. *"Those are things that could happen by emission allowances or things that make one invest money in what's currently not an economical cost".* The effectiveness of economic policy incentives is also advocated by the Environmental and energy manager at the Swedish Construction Federation, who points to the need for monetary valuation, particularly in public procurement of for example infrastructure projects, in order to reward green innovation: *"Money has proven to be a very effective means of [steering]*.

There is an expressed belief in that if you can find several different aspects that converge in questioning conventional norms or structures, it is more likely to stimulate a development in the direction of a particular scenario. As the current system is seen as self-cementing, there is a sense that changes towards more sustainable ways of living, planning and building will have to be "tacked onto" or coincide with other narratives that might be perceived as more "attractive". This includes market notions of preferences and demand, as well as more motivational and philosophical aspects of renegotiating what is considered "the good life".

> *Because people have different driving forces and for a lot of people that is to have, what you perceive, a better life."* (Environmental and energy manager, the Swedish Construction Federation)

The Environmental strategist at the municipal housing company further talks about how sensitive it can be to work with consumption related issues, and to try to influence how people live and behave, in that it is political. In some cases, however, it seems more ok to work more explicitly with "setting the conditions" - a sentiment echoed by the Environmental and energy manager at the Swedish Construction Federation and the municipal Traffic planner, in for example making it easy to travel more sustainably or steering the programming of areas or buildings to strengthen social cohesion. The implicit norms that these assumptions in turn are based on are not reflected upon as problematic, but instead seen as a condition for working with sustainability transitions in ways that adhere to as well as potentially sparks changes within the current system.

5.1.3. The view on more radical transition narratives beyond growth

Both in the dialogue session and in the interviews, there is a narrative of focusing on life quality rather than consumption, even though this is seen to imply different things. Classic degrowth strategies such as reducing work hours within the formal economy and promoting more cooperative solutions are raised by the panelists. Several of the panelists and interviewees also talk about the consequences of the current growth-based system that society is based on, and the problems of trying to achieve more fundamental changes of this system.

GDP growth in particular, as a national aggregated measure, is problematized in that it isn't perceived to actually say much about the "quality" of societal development. The local Centre Party politician in the remote rural Northern municipality for example talks about how national economic politics and local rural development interests might even be at odds with each other:

> *"When "Sweden Inc." is doing poorly, when there is a recession, then we have an in-migration. [...] sometimes it's almost like you wish that there would be a financial crisis as there was in the beginning of the 90's, when we increased the population."*

Some explicitly uphold the need to reduce the reliance on growth, yet most – even those expressing more conventional "green growth" framed views of sustainability transitions – emphasize above all the importance of more actively striving to reach a society beyond current institutional lock-ins and unsustainable ways of living or organizing society.

> *"There is an intrinsic contradiction in how the economic system works, compared to what natural science says we can handle in the form of human activity."*
> (Environmental strategist in middle-sized municipality)

At the same time, growth is by some seen as the very premise for being able to engage in sustainability, either in terms of tax revenue in municipalities, or as in profits for businesses to be able to research and develop new approaches and be incentivized to innovate. This appears very contextual as well. The Environmental and energy manager at the Swedish Construction Federation for example talk about the different approaches, with large-scale companies that can work in-house on developing their processes to reduce environmental impact and which "lead the way", and smaller firms that are slower to implement, and generally more reactive to legislation rather than pushing the issues forward. Similarly, the Planning official at the Northern county administrative board compares the prerequisites in different municipalities to drive change depending on if they are growing (both population wise and economically):

> *"I can say that the municipalities experiencing economic growth talk about these issues more, as it is there that they can do more, since they can influence with new-built environments"*

In the data there are also accounts of a disbelief in that a future without growth is likely, and furthermore not seen as something desirable. In relation to the different scenarios formulated within the projects, some interviewees have a hard time imagining what a society beyond growth might be like. It is perceived so distant, that "*It would take a rather intense revolution almost, or I don't know if that would be needed, but I do see it as a rather large shift. [...] sometimes I can think that it turns into a utopic discussion, because of that. And sometimes it can feel a bit more action-oriented to adjust the conditions within and to also try to include more things to be considered in the economic system in different ways."* (Environmental strategist, municipal housing company). A future beyond growth is by the same interviewee described as something that in that case would come about from an external crisis that reduced consumption and that might lead to a negative consequences in other ways, and as such could not be characterized as a sustainable development.

The reluctance to talk about alternatives beyond a growth narrative and how to ensure a sustainable development that does not take growth for granted is by others experienced as limiting the discussion. There is a fear of being labeled as "unrealistic and dopey" (Environmental strategist, middle-sized Western municipality), when trying to problematize the detrimental effects of the current growth economy and instead talk about other things growing, such as knowledge and compassion, rather than resource depletion and consumption . The couple engaged in a local transition movement however underline the need for creating

resilience – locally – in the face of uncertainty, and to engage in the discussion with people at different levels. They talk precisely about that to avoid more significant negative consequences and to plan for a different future that can handle large shifts without facing revolutionary instabilities, there is a need to become more knowledgeable and empowered rather than rely on mainstream narratives that shies away from discussing alternatives.

5.2. Drivers (and barriers) for change

5.2.1. Necessity and Survival

In the material from the interviews and from the panel discussion, different types of drivers for a sustainable, less resource-intensive society emerges. On one hand these are drivers on a micro-level, stimulating people to rearrange their lives, to work for sustainable transitions within their professional roles; on the other hand, drivers on a societal level include enabling a change of mindsets, priorities, practices and policy measures in different areas of society. Necessity and survival is recurrent in the narratives as a driving force for both societal change in large, and in narratives of personal engagement and motivations. Insights of peak oil and where we as a society is heading, for example, influenced the couple involved in the local transition movement to invest time on sustainability studies and engagement in local transition groups, and also drove them to rearrange their lives in different steps. First, they tried to adapt their house and life as "terraced-house transitioners" in a Swedish town, and later they moved out to a farm on the countryside.

> "*We do this since we want our children to have something to eat, to be quite frank. So that we and the people we love shall have somewhere to go when 'the crap hits the fan'. Otherwise we would never had lived here"* (Couple involved in local transition movement).

The feeling of independence and self-sufficiency – to have power over important parts of one's own life – and that it is *fun* and *fulfilling* were also important drivers for the couple. They live according to the transition movement motto: *"if it isn't fun, you are doing it the wrong way"*. Enjoying the work on the farm, building it up from scratch and constantly learning new things helps them cope with all the long hours of work needed.

Necessity and survival is however also apparent in the narratives of what can bring change on a broader societal level. In arguing that the western world will have to change its economic system to achieve a more sustainable society, the necessity of change for societal survival is pointed to by the planning official from the Northern County Administrative Board who argues that the change will come:

> *"if not before, when it is too expensive to extract resources, then you will have to invent something else. The system we have now was created... this modern liberalism...was created from coal. And after we have had this [...]oil interval. And when this interval is over, a new economic order will come, just as there were one [...] before"*

5.2.2. Politics – hope or hindrance?

The view of the role of politics for the needed transformation to a sustainable society is very ambivalent and dual in the empirical material. This is especially prominent in the accounts of the panelists. On one hand politics and the current democratic system is portrayed as a weak

system that won't necessarily be able to drive the needed decisions on neither international nor national or local level. Political decisions are depicted as being made on the basis of fear for change and for raising negative public opinions, and not on the basis of facts:

> *"When I started as a politician I thought facts were important for decision-making. They are not. That was a shock and it is tragic. People aren't mean, but they are afraid of going out saying 'this road should not be built'. The facts are there though".* (Panelist 3)

On the other hand politics is emphasized as an important factor and actor for accomplishing change, and views are expressed regarding that nothing will happen without political reform, both among panelists and interviewees. The importance of a cooperation between innovation processes and radical political reform is also put forward. One of the panelists remarks that: *"As long as EU doesn't impose design regulations for circular economy, recycling doesn't matter. You absolutely need reform"*(Panelist 1). Implementing politically decided sustainability goals is seen as an important strategy for achieving change by several of the panel members, both on local, regional and global levels. However, the formulation of goals is not enough – you have to achieve them despite the existence of goal conflicts, path dependencies, fears (of change and of public opinions, meaning you won't be re-elected) and uncertainties regarding the appropriate means to do it.

The ambivalent role politics plays today in driving change is however expressed in several of the interviews, particularly in that the current political system is limited in terms of pushing through the radical changes needed. Yet the possibility for politics to resume a previously strong position, through a future paradigm shift, is put forward by the Environmental strategist at the municipal housing company. As expressed by the Environmental strategist in the middle-sized Western municipality, who has experienced a shift in priorities just within the last few years: *"Politicians on both sides say they think environment is important, to talk the talk is easy, but to walk the talk is not as easy"*. There are also difficulties for policy arising from the speed of technological innovations, where regulation is needed to take advantage of technology, while at the same time avoiding chaos and negative societal and environmental effects, and yet still being flexible:

> *We don't have a clue what e.g. autonomous cars will mean. [---] [We need to] put a framework in place to reap the benefits, e.g. to utilize in a public transport system to reduce overall number of cars. Political actors need to start preparing. Tech is happening fast, while the political system is so slow. How do we anticipate what will happen in the future? How do we avoid making stupid decisions today?* (Panelist 1).

5.2.3. The role of grassroots, citizens and media

Just as politics are seen as an important driving force for change, so are citizens and "grassroots" initiatives. And although there is an awareness of that there are different shades of green among the general public, as within politics, one member of the panel uphold that citizens sometimes are more progressive than the political and economic establishment: *"People were ready to live sustainable already in the 1970's [speaking of for example the strong anti-nuclear power movement in Sweden], but the large companies did not want that"* (Panelist 4). This panelist further argues that to be able to understand failed transitions "*we must analyze power. At that time, the majority lost"*. Citizens are by several members of the

panel also named as an important actor in making sure that politicians live up to their promises, and democratically decided visions and goals: *"Citizens have to be very tough"*.

In the same way, media is - together with citizens and research - seen as an important driving force for change, in scrutinizing the goal-fulfillment of politics as well as communicating other narratives. At the same time, some emphasize that media hasn't been critical enough and that the journalistic capacity to handle environmental issues has been decimated throughout the last years. Others agree that critical scrutiny is needed, but that political compromises made also shouldn't be judged too hard, as it is part of the political process and necessary to move forward at all.

People, in their role as residents and local community members, are also mentioned as being of great importance for the ability to work with environmental issues in for example the municipal housing company, but also in other municipal functions and development projects. Resident initiatives, such as "swop days" (exchanging clothes, household items, plants and other things) are upheld, as well as other initiatives such as gardening or interest associations that in different ways constitute alternatives to more formal economic, resource-intensive activities and structures. Also in terms of what type of developments are imagined as being offered in the future is perceived to be influenced by resident preferences conveyed in dialogues that already point towards:

> *the answer will also lie in things that aren't oriented around technology, but with how people can imagine living and if you would like other types of contracts, sharing or other social [arrangements] [...] But then you have to consider that Sweden has a different structure than the rest of the world, when it comes to families and single households and independence for more people than what you would maybe find in another society."* (Environmental strategist at large municipal housing company)

Within the transition movement, citizen initiatives are also in focus as a key force for achieving societal change, and the couple involved in the local transition movement expresses a strong belief in human creativity and ability for change. They also emphasize the importance of cooperation and community to both handle the struggles of transition and for making their self-sufficient way of life work. Although their belief in community and human ability is strong, it is not unconditional. They stress that their way of accomplishing a sustainable life is not for all, and are quite skeptical to the fact that countryside, self-sufficient living has become something of a "textbook solution" within the transition movement. They identify loss of community - due to conflicts or different views - as a threat and mean that many couples or ownership-communities have failed for this reason. They have therefore chosen to own their farm themselves, although plan for making room for other people and activities in the future, emphasizing the appeal of a village-like typology to be able to reap the benefits of close collaborations and shared visions for the future.

6. Concluding discussion

The empirical insights provide snapshots of the discourses surrounding sustainability and transition pathways in Swedish policy-making and planning practice, and can be seen as representing different narratives of change. In the context of Swedish policy and planning, with high ambitions for sustainability it is important to understand how different actors relate to and perceive more radical transitions to reach overarching social and environmental goals for identifying opportunities for transition. The generally high level of awareness and concern for environmental issues is apparent in the empirical material, as well as the emphasis on the need to speed up transitions in order to shift from what is seen as an unsustainable development path towards a different vision of the future. What a sustainable future entails can however mean different things depending on the actor, ranging from perspectives on local resilience, a more "common sense" framing of social cohesion and people-nature relationships as important components of "a good life", to ensuring an efficient and adequate built environment and basis for long-lasting business relationships.

While more mainstream narratives of ecological modernization are prevalent, the panel and interview material also shows that different narratives can, and do, co-exist alongside each other. The narratives blur, as illustrated particularly by the interviewees that propagate green growth ideas, yet also express that they think more extensive system-transformations are needed to reach sustainability goals. Strategies for working within the system and more generally changing the rules of the game or the entire playing field aren't seen as mutually exclusive. This type of pragmatism in practice is not surprising, given how discursive and institutional structures limit more radical actions that challenge prevalent norms and beliefs. The role of and need for clearer political visions is nonetheless upheld. Especially in a context of what could be seen as the decline of the strong state and move towards governance, long-term goals appear particularly important to be able to benchmark against, but also in challenging established political and planning institutions.

There is also a need for more explicit views on how change can be driven. While there is an expectation on ready-made solutions, one answer might be to understand how people that operate within various systems (whether socio-political or socio-technical) perceive that change could happen, and what their opportunities are. Examples of changes that must happen also pertain to institutional lock-ins, where there is a reported need to open up for more allowing processes or creating arenas that can address landscape level beliefs and norms regarding for example what type of development is sought and what is seen as desirable or appropriate in different contexts.

The presented research isn't a study of actors per se, but how different perspectives on change can be understood and contextualized. The importance of context is also evident in the empirical material. Different narratives of change are developed in relation to the different geographical locations and organizational settings that the actors operate within. They have different starting points for how far they have gotten in implementing ecological modernization programs and ideas, which means that they also are in different positions both when it comes to the end objective, but also whether they are prone to continue working along the established path or if they can rearrange their lives/professional roles/organizations in a way that is more align to more radical transition agendas.

Narratives of more radical change, such as expressed in degrowth imaginaries, are not completely foreign to the interviewees and panelists, but some are more familiar with the central tenants and strategies proposed than others. Those more skeptical to the need for going beyond a growth paradigm also emphasize the potential negative consequences of low or no

economic growth, not to mention the premise of degrowth. The risk that what is seen as needed investments or incentives for change and for working with sustainability will disappear is particularly pointed to. Meanwhile, empirical studies of what could be called degrowth strategies points to that alternatives (to growth or market solutions) tend to develop when societies no longer fulfill their purpose. A question is then whether it is harder to drive a transition in line with such ideas (including more cooperative forms of production and consumption, and significant reorganization of economic priorities and everyday practices) in societies that appear well-ordered and more or less functional? There is, according to what was expressed by some interviewees, a tendency for relying on and self-cementing the established system. Larger (long-term) issues appear harder to pursue among incumbents, with already established organizations and stable institutional settings, where more fundamental changes are needed but where there might be a reluctance to transition other than in incremental and evolutionary ways. A question thus remains about the plausibility of for example more radical transitions and for example degrowth interventions being implemented, as well as the conditions for the fundamental transformations needed and pointed to in the empirical material as essential for ensuring Sweden meets social and environmental sustainability goals within the scope and urgency referred to.

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