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# The Sustainable Society in Swedish Politics

Renewal and Continuity

# The Sustainable Society in Swedish Politics: Renewal and Continuity

Torbjörn Lundqvist

## ***Sammanfattning***

Syftet med artikeln är att undersöka hur idéerna om en hållbar samhällsutveckling utvecklats och anpassats till svensk politik. Utifrån antagandet om att nya idéer har störst chans att få genomslag om de anpassas till den politiska kulturen och om någon dominerande aktörer gör idéerna till sina egna undersöks frågan för åren 1988-2004. Studien visar hur socialdemokratisk välfärdsideologi gjort tydliga avtryck i retoriken för ett hållbart samhälle. Den visar också att idéerna om en hållbar utveckling tagits upp i de olika politiska partierna från höger till vänster, och anpassats till de rådande ideologierna och synsätten hos dem. Det gäller inte minst de medel som man vill använda för att uppnå ett hållbart samhälle: stat eller marknad, reglering eller konkurrens, centralt eller lokalt, experter eller demokrati etc. Det som på ytan kan uppfattas som en gemensam vision för framtiden är på partinivå en kontroversiell fråga.

## ***Abstract***

The aim of this article is to study how the ideas of a sustainable society have developed and adapted to Swedish politics. It starts with the assumption that new ideas have a greater possibility to make a difference if they adapt to the political culture, and if important actors make the ideas their own. This issue is studied for the years 1988-2004. One conclusion is that social democratic welfare ideology has given its imprint in the rhetoric of a sustainable society. Another conclusion is that the ideas has been obtained in party ideology from left to right and been adapted to traditional ideological differences. That is true not least for the means: state or market, regulation or competition, central or local, experts or democracy etc. On the surface the sustainable society could be seen as a common vision for the future but in politics on party level it is a controversial issue.

## ***Introduction***

In the 1980s the UN appointed a commission dealing with global environment and poverty under the lead of the Norwegian social democrat Gro Harlem Brundtland, prime minister 1981, 1986-89 and 1990-96. The commission published its report in 1987, *Our Common Future*<sup>1</sup>, and made the concept 'sustainable development' well-known. By this concept they advocated a modernist view saying economic growth and development was necessary for sustainability. The Brundtland report was important for the politics of ecological modernization in the 1990s, and created a field of its own in social science.<sup>2</sup> At the same time others were sceptical, seeing the concept sustainable development as a prerequisite for an ecological modernization legitimizing the capitalist system causing the problems in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

Swedish governments have since the late 1980s been using ideas in line with the Brundtland report. Today it includes a vision and a strategy for obtaining a sustainable society sometimes in the future. In 2005 the government also created a ministry of sustainable development. But what does this really mean? In the early documents for a sustainable development, as Agenda 21 from 1992, guidelines were introduced to be adopted in single countries, adapted to individual circumstances. For example: "The overall objective is to promote, in the light of country-specific conditions, the integration of environment and development policies through appropriate legal and regulatory policies..."<sup>4</sup> The aim of this article is to study this issue (or problem) of country-specific adaptation and discuss some findings from a study on Swedish policy for a sustainable society in the years 1988-2004.<sup>5</sup> What happened to sustainable development in the meeting with Swedish political culture? As in many other countries environment became an 'ecological modernization' discourse.<sup>6</sup> But in what ways did it adapt to circumstances in Sweden?

In some ways this issue must be understood in the context of the contemporary problem of governing modern industrialised nations. What has been called the strong state (welfare state) peaked in importance in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> It coincided with the high time of social policy, economic regulation, labour market policy and an interventional macro economic policy in general. Some call it a strong national political culture. Politicians could steer the economy and we believed to be masters of our destiny (which we of course never have been). During a few decades Sweden was an exporter of ideas like "the Swedish Model" in industrial relations and of welfare policy ideas.

The societal changes we have witnessed since the 70s are many and sometimes complex to understand: increasing 'globalization' of the economy, consequences of the EU-membership, neo-liberal ideas turned in to governing practise. All together, it has changed the possibilities to govern. In political debate, it is often said we are

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<sup>1</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), *Our common future*. Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> Mol, A. & D. Sonnenfeld eds. (2000), *Ecological Modernisation Around the World. Perspectives and Critical Debates*, London: Frank Cass; Young, S. ed. (2000), *The Emergence of Ecological Modernisation. Integrating the environment and the economy*, London: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> de Paiva Duarte, F. (1999), From 'Saving the Planet' to 'Managing the Planet': Environment and Development Politics in the Late Twentieth Century, *Social Alternatives* 1999, 18:3.

<sup>4</sup> Agenda 21, chapter 8.16. [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).

<sup>5</sup> Lundqvist, T. & M. Carlsson (2004), *Framtidspolitik. Visionen om ett hållbart samhälle i svensk politik* (The future politics: the vision of a sustainable society in Swedish politics). Stockholm.

<sup>6</sup> Hajer, M. (1995), *The Politics of Environmental Discourse. Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*. Oxford.

<sup>7</sup> Rothstein, B. & L. Vahlne Westerhäll eds. (2005), *Bortom den starka statens politik?* Stockholm.

living in a time of adaptation. Sustainable development with its global focus and its global political ambitions is part of this change, and at the same time an attempt to reduce the effects of global capitalism.

Is sustainable development about the diffusion of an idea? In the descriptions of the “new” future ideas often play an important role. The historian J. R. McNeill seems to mean the future is more difficult than ever to foresee due to new technology, fast diffusion of ideas and rapid changes in reproductive behaviour, in other words the effects of the demographic transition.<sup>8</sup>

McNeill assumes that the fast diffusion of ideas contributes to a more uncertain future. However, here we have to be observant. The fast diffusion of ideas can be diffusion on the surface. Which ideas really go in the deep and adapt to or change the society? New ideas have to stand up to competition from already established and many times institutionalised ideas. History repeatedly shows that new ideas must prove its usefulness.

The breakthrough of new ideas is often dependent on their benefits on real conditions. In social issues new ideas have a better chance if an interest group of some kind make them their own. However, new ideas of real importance seldom breaks through and when they do, often slowly. Quick diffusion through new media, e.g. the internet, does not automatically mean acceptance in the dominant part of the culture. Informal institutions such as norms, attitudes, mentalities seem to be relatively stabile. Not least because formal institutions like organizations guard values and interests which new ideas could threaten. Maybe it is even so that new ideas have harder to break through today due to more competition. In advertising this tends to be a growing problem.

So, to some extent, in line with the discursive institutionalist approach, I argue that translation of ideas into a context of national political culture better explain sustainable policy than naïve conceptions on the diffusion of ideas. The Danish political scientists Peter Kjaer and Ove Pedersen write:

*The problem with the notion of diffusion is that it represents ideas of frozen cultural objects that are transferred from one context to another without being altered.*<sup>9</sup>

Instead Kjaer and Pedersen points out the process of an “ongoing production of meaning in a particular social context in which an idea may be articulated and then stabilized”.<sup>10</sup> So the concept of translation is preferred in this article:

*Translation is a process whereby concepts and conceptions from different social contexts come into contact with each other and trigger a shift in the existing order of interpretation and action in a particular context.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> McNeill, J.R. (2000), *Something new under the sun: an environmental history of the twentieth-century world*. New York.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Kjaer, P. & O. Pedersen (2001), *Translating Liberalization: Neoliberalism in the Danish Negotiated Economy*, in J. L. Campbell & O. Pedersen eds., *The Rise of Neoliberalism and Institutional Analysis*. Princeton, p. 219.

This article starts with the assumption that new ideas have a greater possibility to make a difference if they adapt to the dominant culture in a sector. Here we talk about political culture. This adaptation is eased if important actors see these ideas as beneficial for its own interests. The aim of this article is therefore to study the ideas of sustainable development and their adaptation and translation into Swedish politics. The answers we find will help us understand the possibility to shape a sustainable society, and give us insights in the functioning of the political system in the country studied.

### ***Sustainable development in politics***

In 1988 the social democratic government introduced a bill on environment which started a policy close to what later was called *hållbar utveckling*, the Swedish term for sustainable development. The main perspective in the bill from the minister of environment Birgitta Dahl was ecological, but with a clear connection to welfare policy. This bill laid the road for environmental policy in the 1990s. There were the ideas of ecological modernisation, the economic and legal means of governing environment, the important role of municipalities, and the sector comprehensive approach.<sup>12</sup>

However, it was not until 1993, after the Rio summit, that this policy took hold in Swedish politics. Now it was a bill from Olof Johansson, minister of environment in the liberal-conservative government 1991-94, which led the issue forward. He launched the first national strategy on sustainable development, based on Agenda 21. However, compared to later national strategies this one was rudimentary, held at a rather general level. It was more or less a presentation of the principles of Agenda 21 and did not include detailed propositions and discussions on means to obtain sustainability.<sup>13</sup>

During the following years sustainability had a close connection to environment policy. But, in 1997-98, sustainability started to become a broader concept in policy discourse. The social and economic dimensions of the concept grew in importance. Sustainability policy was approaching traditional welfare policy and took further steps in the direction of ecological modernisation emphasising economic growth and employment. At the same time the ecological dimension took a leap forward through an environment bill proposing a structure of environment goals, leading to a more concrete policy focusing on goals and means.<sup>14</sup>

When we look at the national strategies of 2002 and 2004 (National strategy for sustainable development and the revised A Swedish strategy for sustainable development) we can see a further closing to welfare policy. They include a long run vision of the future society, called the sustainable society, perhaps a vision without surprises. It is a society based on economic growth, welfare, cohesion combined with a good environment. And society satisfies its needs without risking the needs of future generations. It is also a society permeated by democratic values and civic participation. The sustainable society is also said to be a society investing in its most important resources, people and environment. Moreover, the economy is characterised by efficient use of natural resources, companies are competitive and economic growth is good. The welfare system is adapted to demographic change (age

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<sup>12</sup> Government bill 1987/88:85 (Om miljöpolitiken inför 1990-talet).

<sup>13</sup> Government bill 1993/94:111 (Med sikte på hållbar utveckling).

<sup>14</sup> Government bill 1997/98:145 (Svenska miljömål. Miljömål för ett hållbart Sverige).

transition). Lastly, in the sustainable society all major environment problems are reduced to long term sustainable levels.<sup>15</sup>

The vision of a sustainable society in this version seems to strive towards ideals well known in social democratic ideology for long time. Historically, of course, the ecological dimension is of recent times. But it is included in a general welfare policy of older date. In that way I think it is fair to say that this vision is more characterized by continuity than renewal. However with marked kinship with the Brundtland report.<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to strategy in the 'national strategy' it is said to concern all relevant policy areas, and have its starting point in already working policy. The government sees in this a holistic approach where policy areas interact with synergies as an effect. The aim is to increase the awareness of the sustainability issue in society. One purpose with the strategy is to create a governing where all important decisions are taken with respect to the three dimensions of sustainability: economy, ecology, and the social dimension. Strategy is the name for a broad method to change society, where goals, means, tools, institutions and actors are weaved together. An arsenal of different means and tools are mentioned: legislation, planning, sector integration, evaluation of consequences, financial means, research & development, information, education, dialogue and institutional capacity. The government also points out the central sectors to be ruled in a sustainable direction: environment, climate, public health, quality of life, working life and employment, economic growth and welfare.<sup>17</sup>

What is new in the strategy of 2004, compared to the one of 2002, is a clearer focus on the importance of children and young people in an ageing population. Clearly, there is now a demographic perspective in the Swedish policy for sustainability. Moreover, three strategic issues for the future are pointed out: environmental economic growth and welfare, public health, and regional balance. According to the government, a major problem is society's lack of insight into the problem. Therefore, the integration of sustainability thinking in all policy sectors demand better steering and coordination.

### ***The Social Democrats***

Normally, if new ideas shall have a chance in politics they need to be received in an established party. However, green issues also have a foothold in politics through green parties. In 1988 the green party in Sweden reached parliament after an election where environment played a crucial role. This also influenced other parties in the struggle for voters. Even the social democratic party adapted to the new ideological landscape. Hence, already in 1988 they were influenced by ideas on sustainable development and what later was called ecological modernization, that there was no conflict between economic growth and environment if it was done in a proper way.

During the 1990s Prime Minister Göran Persson launched a new concept and a vision called "the green *folkhem*". The *folkhem* (people's home) was a concept used in the

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<sup>15</sup> Written communication from the Government 2001/02:172 (Nationell strategi för hållbar utveckling) and Written communication from the Government 2003/04:129 (En svensk strategi för hållbar utveckling).

<sup>16</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), *Our common future*. Oxford.

<sup>17</sup> Written communication from the Government 2003/04:129 (En svensk strategi för hållbar utveckling).

1930s by the social democratic government as a metaphor for the new welfare policy. However, this new green concept never got popular. Rather it was seen as “the emperor’s new clothing” by its critiques. Obviously, it was a try to renew social democratic ideology without leaving the roots from the *folkhem* years of increasing welfare and full employment. Instead, concepts like sustainable development and sustainable society took over, but with a certain emphasis on welfare. Thus, sustainable society in its social democratic variant seems to be close to traditional social democratic welfare policy: a great deal of continuity, a smaller part of renewal.

However, what is new in recent years is not the ecological dimension. Rather it is more emphasis on the social and economic dimensions together with a stronghold on coordinating different policy sectors. The government speaks of a “connected” policy, sometimes even of holism. Another observation is that social democrats often speak about ecological modernization rather than sustainability, at least at party congresses and similar internal contexts.

Will ideas on sustainability have a future in social democratic ideology? Historically, we can see how the party holds on to a nucleus of issues: equality, security, fairness and a welfare distribution based on economic growth and work. Here we can see strong continuity. In spite of the strong continuity, the social democratic party has so far been able to adapt to the tide and new views among voters. In later years subjects like gender and environment have been included. However, environmental issues are dependent of the economy. In good times voters are more willing to support a ‘green’ policy than in bad. Probably this includes sustainability in general. For instance, in demographic prognoses the ageing population is seen as a threat to future welfare and therefore a threat to basic values in social democracy.

The government tells us that social democratic ideology and policy always have been in line with a sustainable society.<sup>18</sup> In this rhetoric, it is difficult to find differences between traditional social democratic policy and a policy for a sustainable society. The government tells us that sustainability thinking characterise Swedish welfare during the 1900s. In this narrative Sweden became a forerunner in “investing in a social and economic sustainable development”. Moreover, in the 1930s did “population policy” safeguard reproduction and long term survival. In addition, the government states that Sweden’s relatively quick reaction to pollution in the 1960s “should be seen in the light of the strong tradition of sustainability thinking”. The government’s conclusion is that the ideas in sustainable development are since long established in Sweden.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the social democratic government in Sweden declares that sustainability was a part of social democratic policy from the beginning and therefore nothing new in the party ideology. Secondly, the government means that Swedish politics has a special rationality of foresight that has made the country a forerunner and model for others (a variant of the concept “the Swedish model”). Sustainable development therefore means a historical continuity making Sweden a forerunner of modernity.

Is this interpretation of history reasonable? Firstly, we must remember this is political rhetoric but even so, welfare policy in Sweden once was admired among social democrats internationally. Secondly, when it comes to the environment and

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<sup>18</sup> Written communication from the Government 2001/02:172 (Nationell strategi för hållbar utveckling).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

pollution alarms in the 1960s it is difficult to proclaim that social democrats in Sweden were especially early in their reactions.<sup>20</sup> However, the problem with this history writing is that it forgets the global dimension. In addition, it surrounds the concept with unclearness. Why should we be engaged in something that we always have done? Parallel with global survival issues, traditional social democratic welfare ideology is included in the concept, as if these issues was on the same level and had the same dignity. It occurs to me that this rhetoric tries to make sustainable development a social democratic ideology. Such tendencies are in a sense a good argument for studies of the type made in this article. Doesn't democracy demand transparency of this kind of party rhetoric? On the other hand, the social democratic view on the sustainable society is challenged. The other parties in parliament have their own ideology and therefore other interpretations of what we should mean by a sustainable society.

### ***Other parties on sustainability***

This article covers the period 1988-2004. During that period, the social democratic party governed except between 1991-1994, where a liberal-conservative government of four parties ruled (moderates, liberals, centre and Christ democrats). In the 90s, the social democratic minority government was supported mostly by the centre party, and in recent years by the green and the left. Nevertheless, when it comes to ideology and sustainable development each party has its own course.

Through its character of global vision, it is close to see sustainable development as a kind of uniting idea. However, it is a vision open for interpretation. In Swedish politics, this means different views among parties. Moreover, the different views mirror party ideology very well. That means an incorporation or translation of sustainability in to party manifests. What is remaining of the unifying parts of the idea is the view that we need a long term and sustainable policy and that some environmental problems are a serious threat to the future. When it comes to visions and how to get there, we can track traditional differences between left and right wing parties. Perhaps, we could see the green party as an exception, borrowing from both left and right. Generally, the differences concern future risks, the role of market economy, type of steering, and the global issues and so on.<sup>21</sup>

A common critique against government's sustainability policy says it is diffuse and unfocused. It is also held to be more words than action. The government's dilemma is of course to create unity in parliament to make the policy itself sustainable. However, when you try to unite left and right in one policy it tends to lead to a broad and diffuse policy. In literature, there have been such recommendations, aiming to include different visions, ideologies and interests in the process of sustainable development.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps this is to idealistic. However, if you want to make broad groups engaged it is probably necessary to have a view on sustainability including all parties, which at the same time open up for critique.

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<sup>20</sup> Anshelm, J. (1995), *Socialdemokraterna och miljöfrågan. En studie av framstegstankens paradoxer*. Stockholm.

<sup>21</sup> Official party material and motion's in parliament.

<sup>22</sup> O'Riordan, T. & H. Voisey (1998), *The Transition to Sustainability. The Politics of Agenda 21 in Europe*, London: Earthscan, s. 41; O'Riordan, T. & H. Voisey eds. (1997), *Sustainable Development in Western Europe: Coming to Terms with Agenda 21*, London: Frank Cass.; Hedrén, J. (2002), *Critical Notes on Sustainability and Democracy*, in Svedin, U. & B. Hägerhäll Aniansson eds., *Sustainability, Local Democracy and the Future: The Swedish Modell*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, s. 214-15.



When it comes to the role of the economy in sustainable development there is great trust in the importance of economic growth among both social democrats and liberal-conservatives, especially moderates and liberals. On the other side the green party sees the economy subordinated other values, and the left see economic growth as such as the problem. Moderates show most trust in market solutions, while Christ democrats advocate a social market economy, and the Centre party claims to have a humanist perspective and are favouring small business.<sup>23</sup>

The views on future threats vary among the parties. Moderates tone down the risks and mean environmental problems have successively diminished. Their solution to reminding environmental problems is efficient markets and democracy in the third world. The Liberal party see themselves as optimists, but stress that global injustices must be solved. Christ democrats on the other hand, see acute global environment problems. In addition, the Centre party sees large problems but are optimists. However, the Green party seems to take a pessimistic position and claims the need of a very new politics. Nearby stands the left party, demanding a new lifestyle in industrial countries. When it comes to global issues there are also large differences between left and right, even if the social liberal attitude in the liberal party breaks the pattern a bit.<sup>24</sup>

All and all, sustainability has been translated in to the Swedish party system and parties' ideology.

### ***Governing sustainability***

The government has often been criticised for not taking enough initiative in sustainability policy. In addition, it has been criticised for insufficient steering and engagement, together with demands for better coordination. Here we shall discuss some findings regarding government policy efforts.

When it comes to the three dimensions of sustainable development, we can see a change over time. In the beginning, focus was on ecology, which was opposed by most authorities involved and interest groups. A typical matter of dispute has been financing propositions from the government. Since the mid 90s many reforms directed to municipalities has been under financed, and this policy field is no exception. The Swedish Association of Local Authorities (Kommunförbundet) has been opposing this trend, but has at the same time applauded decentralisation.<sup>25</sup> A related issue of dispute is on what level responsibility should be held. Is central government the proper level or should municipalities get more responsibility. Central actors as Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (Naturvårdsverket) and The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (Naturskyddsföreningen) have been lobbying for more responsibility on central level, arguing that municipalities have too much influence on policy. They have meant that the level of ambition for sustainable development must be the task for government and parliament.<sup>26</sup> Also in other issues, there has been competition for influence between authorities and interest groups over

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<sup>23</sup> Official party material and motion's in parliament.

<sup>24</sup> Official party material and motion's in parliament.

<sup>25</sup> Comment on a proposal referred for consideration, The Swedish Association of Local Authorities (Kommunförbundet).

<sup>26</sup> Comment's on a proposal referred for consideration, Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (Naturvårdsverket) and The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (Naturskyddsföreningen).

sustainability policy. Of course, this is normal in politics. Nevertheless, that is just the point. Sustainable development as a domestic policy issue does not differ from other issues in any major sense.

We have already concluded there is a marked continuity with traditional welfare policy in Swedish policy for sustainability. At the same time there is something new going on. Perhaps one could call it “inventing policy again”. Already in the mid 90s Ulrich Beck wrote about a state which negotiate and direct others rather than act by itself.<sup>27</sup> Nowadays we often talk about governance and the network state. We propose that sustainability policy in Sweden has turned this way, trying to direct and coordinate a network based steering of processes. However, what do we really mean by these diffuse concepts. In literature this is often referred to as a transition from government to governance. Traditional ways of governing through legislation, regulation and control has been complemented to an increasing degree with strategies, tactics, processes, networks and so on, just as in the Swedish strategy for a sustainable society. Sometimes the state is seen as an actor among others in self organized networks. But that is perhaps to simplify too much. In the policy for sustainability the Swedish state acts as maker of the rules, judge and player at the same time via different state instances at different levels.

The development of this policy area can be described as a change from environment policy to sustainable development. However that is just a part of the truth and indeed to some extent misleading. Environment policy still exists, and so do social or economic policy.

The development of sustainability policy is instead somewhat of an innovation as it is placed above mentioned policy areas. At this higher level its function is as an umbrella for a holistic vision for the future and those strategies that are supposedly leading us the whole way. Nevertheless, in writing the history of sustainable development it seems adequate to begin in environment policy as it started there, at least in Sweden.

Of course the ecological dimension is still there in documents, but the argument here is rather that sustainable development has mainly become a field of governance. When reading the government’s main documents, National strategy for sustainable development (2002) and the revised A Swedish strategy for sustainable development (2004), it is clear that the emphasis is on coordinating policy sectors.

However, the problem has been the relative subordination of the ministry in charge, environment. This circumstance can explain why the government has created a special office for sustainable development inside government. But it also explains the reconstruction in 2005 of the ministry of environment to the ministry of sustainable development. In the government’s own description the ministry is “responsible for environment issues, energy issues, emissions trading, construction and housing... also has the overall responsibility for coordinating the Government’s work on sustainable development”.<sup>28</sup> Further, the work of the new ministry “builds on the idea of the green welfare state, i.e. using new technology, construction and an active energy and environmental policy to drive forward the transformation and modernisation of Sweden to benefit sustainable development, new jobs, growth and

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<sup>27</sup> Beck, U. (1997), *The reinvention of politics: rethinking modernity in the global social order*. Cambridge.

<sup>28</sup> [www.regeringen.se](http://www.regeringen.se) (government website).

welfare”.<sup>29</sup> Worth mentioning is the difference between the Swedish name and the government’s translation of it to English. The Swedish name is in my translation ministry of environment and society building (Miljö- och samhällsbyggnads departementet). That is really not the same as sustainable development!

However, a new name for old phenomena is not enough and the government is clearly aware of that. On the contrary, they have pointed out the complexity of the problem, emphasising the need for time and hard work in a process of change. And the broadening of the concept has not eased the process. When more and more ministries and authorities have been involved in sustainability the whole process has been forced to go in the direction of coordination.

At least from a social democratic view there has been a will to take back the initiative in the shaping of the future. They have never accepted the market to be the prime force leading ahead. In that context sustainable development is a possibility to give politics and the state a second chance as a creator of a new society. As we have seen, social democrats also tend to describe a sustainable society in terms of traditional social democratic welfare policy. But at the same time it is important to stress the fact that they give science a lot of importance, and moreover, the policy field is characterised by management, or perhaps we should say bureaucracy. All and all, whatever is said in documents and in rhetoric, it is no doubt though that this policy field is subordinated in relation to the inner market of the European Union and its competition policy or national employment policy etc.

It is always easy to sit on a fence criticising, but it seems obvious that the broad and holistic approach on sustainability tends to end up in bureaucracy with endless meetings and paper work. The “talking state” has its strategies, visions, goals, plans, guidelines, budgets, sector responsibilities, coordination, dialogues, partnerships, indicators, follow-ups, evaluations, revisions, quality safeguarding and so on. And all paper work proceeds by internal and external meetings, projects, negotiations, remittances, new meetings and new drafts. This is often done on several levels: local, regional, national and international level. This illustrates a complexity which makes democratic insight troublesome. Maybe the complexity of the process, and its lack of concrete policy, is a crucial answer to why we see a diminishing engagement in sustainability among ordinary people.

This development is part of a trend to more expert rule in some policy fields. Sustainable development is a policy field where experts and politicians try to convince people of the necessity of a different lifestyle or higher taxes on energy and petrol. Perhaps this is natural when scientific knowledge becomes more important in politics, but nevertheless it tends to expert rule. Historically social democracy was characterised by the opposite, organized demands from below. To the defence for politics and the state it should however be emphasised that without governing from above the whole process could come to a stop.

Perhaps this is too negative. Above all, the ‘talking state’ with its rhetoric and expert rule means well in its aiming to create consciousness about future risks in the whole society. Maybe we should see this policy as first and foremost a pedagogic project where rhetoric is a central and important part. Thereby it would not be severe to be criticised for ‘more words than action’. Words can have great importance, not least in an information society with hard competition in reaching listeners and readers. We

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<sup>29</sup> [www.regeringen.se](http://www.regeringen.se).

must remember that rhetoric is a governors way of communicate, and in our time of increasing importance.

## ***Conclusions***

So, what happened to sustainable development in its meeting with Swedish political culture? In what ways did it adapt and translate to circumstances in Sweden? In the late 1980s sustainable development had an emphasis on the ecological dimension. It was a part of social democratic environment policy. After a break in the early 1990s, the social democratic party has held government since 1994, which has given them the opportunity to dominate the official discourse of sustainability. We can see that in government documents as bills and the national strategy for a sustainable society. Social democratic welfare ideology has given its imprint in the rhetoric of a sustainable society.

A general conclusion is that the global vision has become a crucial part of Swedish politics, and at the same time been included in party ideologies, from left to right. I think it is fair to say that sustainable development has been adapted to party ideologies. However, only in the case of the green party does it play the crucial role. Thus, sustainable development as a global vision has in its meeting with political culture in Sweden adapted according to the traditional left-right spectra. That is true especially for means on a principle level: state or market, regulation or competition, central or local, experts or democracy etc.

Sustainable development includes, however an international expert discourse of governance. This discourse does influence policy through experts in authorities. In that way it is possible that differences between parties play a minor role, as politicians hardly can or want to steer the means in detail.

But politicians have ambitions to steer the overriding direction of the sustainable society. In the documents studied, government seems to focus on the governing of authorities with the aim to coordinate different sectors in a sustainable direction. But it is also a way of improving the efficiency of the public sector with the aim to take back some of the initiative from the market in shaping the future. The means for more efficiency are the social engineering of 'governance'. And this is done by internalising sustainability into traditional social democratic policy, surely a good example of translation rather than diffusion of ideas.

Further, social democratic views certainly are internalised into the state apparatus through the strategies of sustainability. In this way both international ideas and methods for policy making has been adapted and translated to national political culture and been politicised. However, this is not something unique for this policy field. On the contrary, it shows the political 'normality' of sustainable development. Even if sustainability to some degree leads to renewal, it does so in the framework of continuity.

To conclude, on the surface the sustainable society with its holistic vision for the future seems to be a project we all have to join, but on a deeper level it ends up in party politics. And so it has to be in a democracy.

Former Working Papers:

- **Arbetsrapport/Institutet för Framtidsstudier; 2000:1- 2005:5**, se [www.framtidsstudier.se](http://www.framtidsstudier.se).
- **Arbetsrapport/Institutet för Framtidsstudier; 2005:7**  
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