

Putting social sustainability into practice – Close the gap and get lost in translation

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand why and how the concept of social sustainability evolves over time by generating a gap between the initially desired strategy and the daily practices at the city level. An extensive ethnographic study was conducted focusing on how social sustainability, as defined in the smart strategy of the city of Gothenburg, was first translated and then turned into practice. Through the lens of Actor Network Theory, findings reveal that the translation of a smart city strategy aimed at ensuring social sustainability depends on how the actors involved at various organisational levels interpret the concept of social sustainability and work to translate it into practice. Such translation takes different directions and may lead to a transformation of the concept itself which becomes foggier over time.

Key words: smart city, social sustainability, theoretical translation, practical translation

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Introduction

Cities today face great challenges of urbanization and as a consequence social fragmentation due to the urban planning and development solutions that are implemented. These challenges have motivated policy makers and city managers to plan and build “smarter cities”, something that has led to or emphasised new forms of governance models (Meijer 2017; Meijer and Rodríguez-Bolívar 2016). There is however no commonly agreed definition of smart city (Grossi and Pianezzi 2017). Pamula, Gontar, and Gontar (2013) define the smart city as a solution to problems such as aging of social infrastructure, CO2 emissions, and urbanization. Lombardi et al. (2011) claim that the term smart city refers to the relation between the city government and its citizens, and according to Giffinger et al. (2007) the smart concept consists of six characteristics: smart economy, smart mobility, smart governance, smart environment, smart living and smart people. This multifaceted view of the characteristics and goals of a smart city raises some ambiguity, which makes it difficult to know if smart cities perform as expected (Grossi and Pianezzi 2017).

By promoting smarter solutions, cities are supposed to also become more sustainable, and sustainability is often claimed to be the overall goal of urban planning (Bramley and Power 2009). Davidson (2010) and Gressgård (2015) found that sustainability is connecting different groups over boundaries, in new ways of working (c.f. Lee and Lee 2017). Yet, in the same way as the smart city concept, sustainability is often regarded as vague, something that makes different actors agreeing but where it is difficult to know exactly what they have agreed on (Zeemering 2009; Cox and Béland 2013; Long 2016; Schmidhuber and Wiener 2018). What the concept of sustainability actually constitutes is therefore often determined by local planners and decision makers (Lombardi et al. 2011; Parr 2009), resulting in cities claiming to be sustainable in diverse ways (Gibbs and Krueger 2012). This also implies that sustainability becomes an issue for the everyday practice of managing the city. Zeemering (2018) argues that there is the risk that sustainability becomes a flag to wave but then people fail to take actions accordingly. One issue is, according to that author, that current public administrations “emphasize what managers should do to pursue sustainability, but not how to manage in pursuit of sustainability” (1). Therefore, when strategies aimed at sustainable development are translated into practice, a potential gap between what is said in the original strategy and what

is done in practice exists.

The purpose of this paper is to understand why and how such gap emerge by focusing on the implementation of social sustainability strategies at the city level. An extensive ethnographic study was conducted focusing on *how* social sustainability, as defined in the smart strategy of the city of Gothenburg, was first translated and then turned into practice, and altered the way the city is managed. We focus on social sustainability since it is within this dimension cities today face greatest challenges (Gerometta et al. 2005; Cassier and Kesteloot 2012) and at the same time as there is a lack of writings addressing social sustainability (Dempsey et al. 2011; Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017; Kim and Larsen 2017). We draw upon the translation concept of Actor Network Theory (Czarniawska 2010; Czarniawska and Hernes 2005; Latour 1987) to be able to analyse our findings.

Strategic planning has become a mainstream activity in local governments (Kornberger 2012; Poister and Streib 2005). Zeemering (2018, 147) argues that “studying sustainability and strategy in local government can provide researchers an opportunity to differentiate the cities that will employ sustainability to change their organizations, and those that will leave the concept behind as yet another fad.” In Gothenburg a new smart vision and related strategies were adopted in 2012 by the city council after a two-year drafting process. Visions of the future, of a smarter city is claimed to become more common, yet it is difficult to know if it stays at being “dreams of the future” (Vanolo 2014; Luque-Ayla and Marvin 2015). The document was named the River City vision and was refereeing to the large area, mostly consisting of old harbour areas, within the city centre (River City Vision 2012). During, as well as after, the process of drafting the new document, social sustainability was highlighted as the most important part, and the way the city addressed it was described as something new and innovative (Brorström 2015). After the year of 2012, the new vision was supposed to be translated and put into practice. The implementation started with the creation of a project organization consisting of a steering committee, a management group and seven city development projects, each run by two project leaders. The fourteen project leaders had a large degree of freedom to translate the new vision and strategy document in a way that suited their specific project (Brorström et al. 2018). This meant that the translation of social sustainability could vary between different parts of the city even if the role of the steering committee and management group was to monitor that the projects were loyal to the vision and strategies of the social sustainable city.

Our findings reveal that the concept of social sustainability evolves over time. It deviates from the original idea as defined in the smart vision and strategy document, being transformed by the actors called to implement it into practice in specific areas of the city. Such

transformation affects the city management and influences the overarching social sustainability aims of the whole city.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows; the next section presents the theoretical framework that will be used to analyse the findings. Thereafter, the method used to conduct this study is described, followed by the analysis of the empirical findings. The paper ends up with a discussion and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical framework: Smart and social sustainable cities

Already Jacobs (1961) claimed that cities are about connection people, something that emphasised that the management of cities at the bottom line is about people. The complexity of social life however also makes the management of cities complex. The social dimension of sustainability is often regarded as the most problematic to define, this at the same time that social fragmentation in many European cities grow and it is within this dimension cities have their largest challenges in the future (Gerometta et al. 2005; Cassier and Kesteloot 2012). One problem with working with social sustainability is that it is difficult to measure if a solution is being effective or not (Vifell and Soneryd 2012) and there is a strong belief in technical solutions as solving both social and environmental problems within cities (Vanolo 2014). This could also be why social sustainability has received less attention in the academic literature than the other two dimensions, the economic and the environmental (Dempsey et al. 2011; Kim and Larsen 2017).

For sustainability as a concept, scholars have documented the challenges with developing performance measurements, evaluating how well the city is doing (Dilworth et al. 2011; Hoppe and Coenen 2011). Zeemering (2018) argues that cities can demonstrate progress to the public but it is uncertain to what extent it contributes to organizational change. This had led scholars to argue as Gressgård (2015, 117) “the vocabulary of social sustainability enables people to imagine away current problems”. However, there are also those who have tried to define the concept. Hassan and Lee (2015, 1270) for example define social sustainability as consisting of ‘social equity and sustainability of community’, where social equity means equity of resources and opportunity to access goods, services, jobs and housing while community sustainability implies social interaction within a community.

Yiftachel and Hedgcock (1993, 140) have further defined *urban social sustainability* as: “the continuing ability of a city to function as a long-term, viable setting for human interaction, communication and cultural development.” Within these parameters, affordable housing is seen as one example of social sustainability (Kim and Larsen, 2017). Affordable housing is regarded

as a means to deal with segregation and social problems: to supply affordable housing in desirable neighbourhoods could enhance equity for lower income groups and minority households (Briggs 2005). Yet, one of the most enduring criticisms is that a variety of housing does not guarantee social equity (Day 2003; Grant and Perrot 2009). At the same time, affordable housing in desirable city areas does go against the growth idea of cities, where growth implies more expensive housing (Kim and Larsen 2017). To sum up, place diversity does not necessary result in social diversity (Fainstein 2005; Grant and Perrot 2009). Kim and Larsen (2017) conclude that social sustainability is not ensured as part of new projects, despite the stated dedication to this principle.

Besides definitional challenges, it is argued that the understanding of the sustainability concept is not fixed, but changes over time and contexts (Leach et al. 2017). This implies that the concept of social sustainability might be interpreted differently by the actors that are called to implement it into practice. The interpretation refers to the concept of translation (Latour 1987) referring to how actors implement social sustainability in line with their interests. When the responsibility to implement social sustainability is spread vertically, over different organizational levels, and horizontally, among different departments, in the city, then different actors may have different opinions and opportunities to accomplish their tasks. That is, there is the potential for multiple voice of different actors who have their view on how to implement social sustainability (Arnaboldi and Lapsley 2010).

The actors may use inscriptions, calculations and numbers to support their ideas, but the voice of some actors may be louder or more powerful than others (Arnaboldi and Lapsley 2010). This implies that how social sustainability is actually implemented does not only depend on the original definition provided in the politically decided vision and strategy document, but also on the translations (Latour 1987) conducted by the various actors within the city. The chain of translations from the political decision to the actual implementation of social sustainability can be very long in the city (Czarniawska 2010) leading to a gap between intentions and results. The concept of translation is core to actor-network theory (ANT) assuming that people acting to achieve a program may form an actor-network through translation of knowledge, technology and artifacts (Czarniawska and Hernes 2005). Within ANT humans and non-humans are treated symmetrically which gives a wider role played by artifacts (Czarniawska and Hernes 2005).

In the smart city scenario various artifacts, such as strategic documents, action plans, and evaluation and assessment tools can be created and used while translating social sustainability into practice. The combination of human actions and artifacts may explain why and how a gap between intentions and results in terms of social sustainability may emerge.

Methodology

This paper is based on an extensive ethnographic study (Van Maanen 2011; Huby, John, and Grant 2011; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, and Lê 2014) of the city of Gothenburg. Gothenburg is the second largest city in Sweden, located at the west coast of Sweden with about 560 000 citizens (<http://statistik.goteborg.se/>). The study started in 2011 when the new vision and related strategies document was being drafted and the study is still ongoing. The possibility to follow various events concerning the definition and implementation of social sustainability over a longer period of time has provided rich empirical material. This paper focuses on the material that allows to answer the research questions addressed in the Introduction.

In 2011 the drafting of a new vision and strategies started and in 2012 the city council in Gothenburg adopted the vision: “River City Gothenburg – open to the world” and the three related strategies: “Embrace the water”, “Strengthen the regional core” and “Connect the city” (River City Vision, 2012). One aim was to develop an area in the city centre that foremost consisted of old harbour areas in order to increase the liveability of the city centre. The “Connect the city” strategy entails social sustainability goals defined as: “Create a city for everyone”, “Build the city together” and “Get more people involved” (River City Vision 2012, 12). In sum, the strategy “Connect the City” intends to make the city inclusive – a city for all who want to be part of it.

Since 2014 the Gothenburg River City vision and related strategies have been translated into practice. The city administration established a project organization with city directors of different departments and CEOs of municipal corporations at the top in a steering committee, middle managers in a management group and the fourteen project leaders for the seven sub-projects at the bottom of the hierarchy. The directors of the steering committee and the management group are regarded as the “managing level” because of their responsibility of monitoring the ongoing work within the seven sub-projects by ensuring they are in line with the intention of the vision and strategies. The fourteen sub-project leaders are regarded as the “operational level” given their responsibility of finding concrete solutions for the successful implementation of the vision and strategies. The people involved in the project organization represented different city departments; the traffic department, the housing department, the city planning department, the city managerial office, one municipal real estate company, one city

district¹ and Business Region Gothenburg (a joint region development company owned by the city of Gothenburg and that represent 13 municipalities in the region as well as the businesses of the region). The actors involved in the project thus worked with different issues at their home organization. The underlying idea for this organizational solution was that not one – neither city departments, nor other stakeholders – alone could handle the challenging work of implementing the new document into the city organization.

Within the implementation phase twenty-five interviews have been conducted and 150 hours of observations of meetings, workshops and other events. The interviewees were key actors from the steering committee, the management group and sub-project leaders. They were selected because of their leading role in translating the idea of social sustainability into practice at different organizational levels. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to three hours each and were transcribed verbatim in their entirety. The interviews took the form of conversations, and questions asked did not follow a prepared interview guide. Questions were for instance asked about the interviewee's role in the strategy drafting, how they regarded the work with the project organization in general and about social sustainability.

In this paper, we look closer at two different sub-projects to be able to analyse how social sustainability was translated into practice. We choose “Backaplan” and “Central station area” since both areas are integrated parts of the city where physical changes of the existing area are difficult to accomplish without negotiating and getting along over city boundaries. These two sub-projects are relevant as they allow to unveil how the idea of social sustainability is negotiated, translated and transformed over time (see Czarniawska 2014).

The Backaplan area is located in the middle of Gothenburg city, on the island of Hisingen. The area is important for connecting the city together, over the river of Göta Älv. The area to develop to a large degree consists of parking lots and people visit by car but will in the future be a blended and dense city area. When the development project will be completed, there will be a tram and a bus terminal, about 8 000 new housing, 100 000 square meters of shops, 250 000 square meters office space, ten preschools, five schools and a new culture house.

The Central station area (*Centralenområdet*) is described as the entrance to Gothenburg. Here people arrive when they come to visit, or commute to and from the city. The traffic is dominating the area but the aim is to turn the area into a more human friendly space, a place to stay and live and will in the future not only work as a transit. About 2000 new housing and 16

¹ The city of Gothenburg is divided into 10 city districts, one of them, Lundby, has representatives in the management group and in the steering committee.

000 new work spaces are planned for. The new train tunnel that is being planned underground (Västlänken) will make the commuting to and from Gothenburg easier. Skyscrapers are being planned here as well as shops, restaurants and cafés; the new area will thus alter the city silhouette.

To complement the interviews and observations, a document study was conducted. The documents that were analysed include the “River City Gothenburg” vision document, and especially the section focusing on social sustainability, named “Connect the City”, the City of Gothenburg development programs that have been drafted for Backaplan and the Central station area and are based on the River City vision. We also studied the documents drafted along the implementation process to manage and assess the ongoing development; one road map, a valuation system and different working packages (see Appendix A).

The analysing of the collected empirical material started with reading through the interview transcripts in order to identify how the interviewees talked about how the vision was used in their project in general and what happened with the concept of social sustainability in specific. Thereafter the field notes from the observations were read through and analysed together with the collected documents. By combining these three different sources, we could follow how the notion of social sustainability changed over time, how it was discussed at meetings and why. Finally, the findings were interpreted through the theoretical framework presented earlier.

Empirical Results

Social sustainability was part of the strategy named “Connect the city”. This means that the city of Gothenburg in the future should be inclusive, whereas the city today is described as socially fragmented. The River City vision document states that;

“We should work to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to live in the River City Gothenburg area. Socially mixed housing creates a varied city life and a more interesting range of services. It also helps underpin a broader commercial and industrial base where more people have the opportunity to work. A socially mixed population should be promoted by varying the range of housing through different forms of tenancy and size. We should be open to new ways of living.” (River City Vision 2012, 14).

This is turned into two “we will” points; namely, establish a test bed for socially sustainable housing and work to ensure a wide range of housing for everyone. Moreover, the “Connect the city” part of the document consists of text establishing how important meeting space is, the city will: “create a varied range of meeting places for all ages” (River City Vision 2012, 14). The document also highlights the importance of engaging the community. We will: “work to promote variation by having more people involved in the development of the area”. And: “give priority to individuals and agencies who can demonstrate how a modern city can be built with a diversity of content and expression.” The vision document is detailed: social sustainability is about making room for everyone, by creating meeting places, test the idea of socially mixed housing, engaging people and work with diversity. The vision document indicates a mix of *what* should be done and *how* things should be done. So how is this translated into practice and why?

The interviewees say that sustainability, all three dimensions, nowadays is taken for granted in new projects within the city, something that has implied that there is a new language spoken. This is described as both good and bad, one of the interviewees representing the sub-projects says that there is a risk that it is a lot of talk about social sustainability because that is expected but it is not sure that it means a change for the better, but just a way of packaging. However, several of the interviewees also highlight the social dimension and say that the vision and strategies give opportunities to work with issues connected to the socially fragmented city more than before the vision existed. Moreover, all interviewees mention that the River City vision encourages collaboration; to become a social sustainable city, actors need to collaborate, both within the boundaries of the city organization but also with other actors, such as construction companies, landowners and the business sector. This further entails that the vision and strategies are moved far beyond the boundaries of the city and the River City project organization and is being translated into practice by development firms and construction companies as well as city managers.

The involvement of different actors pursuing the overarching vision and related strategies and the specific objectives related to the sub-projects implied that the interpretation of the City river vision document was interpreted differently at the different levels of the project organization and in different areas (i.e. sub-projects).

The managing level (steering committee and management group)

At the managing level the vision and the strategies are explained as implying a new way of managing the city, where there is an overall goal and, for instance, not a specific number of

housing to be built a specific year. This is, from the managing level, described as facilitating their work since they can take different developments into account and then change accordingly. This means that objectives can be met, whereas it is easier to fail when you have a specific goal, a goal that you do not really know is best for the city after all. This also means that there is larger space for translating the vision into the practice that actually takes place, for the city directors it means that they in hindsight can argue why some changes were undertaken while others were not.

One of the city directors explains that there is a belief in the managing level to solve all kind of problems and to anchor the ongoing work in their home departments. But “we can talk us self to death and it will not be anchored anyway”. Other processes will have to take place. However, the directors in the steering committee describe their role as central since when they are seen together they embody the importance of the vision. Therefore, it is essential that they are seen together by their subordinates, but they are not supposed to make detailed decisions. One of them describes their role:

The steering committee is not a group where you find out what to do in specific issues. The steering committee is a forum where you report the progress and make sure we are moving in the right direction.

The actors at the managing level also acknowledge the issue of agreeing when there will be clashes and different interests. The beneficial part of this is that it becomes visible when there are different views, something that before the vision occurred much later in the process. To be able to manage the seven sub-projects the steering committee and the management group developed documents, such as sustainability performance assessments. These assessments are developed with the three strategies as a base and consist of different indicators that are supposed to measure how well the project develops. Concerning the “Connect the city” strategy, 15 indicators were identified in line with the three goals: “Create a city for everyone”, “Build the city together” and “Get more people involved”. Examples of indicators are: number of apartments in the area that have a lower rent, closeness to meeting places and how many citizens that are involved in the planning processes. The document also includes estimated numbers of what an approved level is according to the vision.

However, when the interviewees were asked to describe the role of these documents, they regarded them more like a means of showing the progress to politicians and external actors; accordingly these documents did not work very well as steering tools for the sub-project leaders. One problem was that they included too many indicators, which meant that the sub-project

leaders felt that they could choose the parts they deemed important for their specific project. The suitability of performance measures was also discussed. Not everybody agreed that, for example, the number of metres to a meeting space was indicating that a city becomes more socially sustainable. On top of this, the political management was described as potentially problematic, if not a lot of action were to be taken there was a risk that the River City vision would be questioned before the next election in 2018. These documents were thus developed as a means to make sure the projects and the River City vision would survive political turbulence. During the interviews, the actors at the managing levels also talked about how they would need some more precise engagement from the politicians. Because of vague political instructions, the managers draft documents to prove the right of the projects, instead of devoting time to the issues of creating an inclusive, socially sustainable city.

Backaplan and Central station area (project level)

From the interviews and observations, two sub-projects appeared to be relevant in terms of translating social sustainability into practice, namely Backaplan and Central station area.

The involved actors of the Backaplan and the Central station area projects experience that there are expectations that they should solve all kinds of problem within the projects, but that it is unclear what mandate they have. This means that they are free to translate social sustainability in a manner that suits their everyday practice of the projects. This facilitated their work but also makes it harder since they did not know if they do what they are supposed to. The actions that actually take place also depend on several other actors and the leaders of the sub-projects Backaplan and Central station area say that they have to take several different interests and agendas into account. For instance, one of them claims that it can be difficult to get the city's will to be realised if the State government has got another agenda and a sharp time plan. The issue is also that when this is about to happen the state government actors tend to talk to actors at the managing level and not the project leaders, the city managers will put the issue back to the project leader, something that is not saving time. The project leaders experience that a lot of action needs to take place and the city has "promised much" but that there are no priorities of what should be done first.

One of the project leaders for the Central station area sub-project says that within the project they collected important actors within as well as without the city organization, read the River City vision, talked about what it meant for them and how they could respond to it. This work resulted in that the vision's three strategies were developed into a urban development program with six "city qualities": *Inclusive and living part of the city with various functions,*

New buildings in a dense city structure, pedestrian and bicycle in an attractive environment in eye height, regional and local availability at the pedestrians terms, build on existing and integrate new qualities, green and water, and environmental smart city development – make it easy to live sustainable.

When compared to the “we will” points of the River City vision and the part of social sustainability, these qualities seem to be vaguer than the text in the vision document, there is nothing about testing socially mixed housing and making a city where everyone can live. The word inclusive is thus present, but without a definition. The ones involved describe the six qualities as working well, and a result of that is that external actors use them. To make the vision of socially sustainable city real, it has to be accepted and negotiated by actors outside the city organization, however, the risk is then that some parts of the vision needs to be sacrificed. The vision can, in the case of the Central station area be said to have travelled from one area to another but are altered and negotiated. The part of social sustainability is vaguer than it was when the vision was decided upon.

Also in the Backaplan sub-project, the River City vision is used when communicating with external actors. One of the project leaders says that also they collected involved actors and discussed the River City vision and its implications for the area. The interviewees representing Backaplan describe how working with others to participate earlier in the process than before is one consequence of the River City vision. In Backaplan they thus see the process part of the vision as the key and the most important part, how they should work, not what they should be doing. One of the interviewee in the Backaplan sub-project describes how the vision of a social sustainable city gets practical meaning as a means of saying no to certain development. To react and say “this is not a socially sustainable development”. In Backaplan this got practical meaning when the first that was being planned was a large road to cross the area. One of the sub-project leaders said: “Then we said no, we cannot do this, this is not according to the River City vision.”

This means that one central role that vision document has is that it makes it possible for actors to say no to some specific developments that they do not think is in line with the aim of the vision. To say no can thus also be a means to become more sustainable. In the Backaplan sub-project the project leader describes how, when they try to make the vision concrete, was focusing on how to make Backaplan a more included part of the city of Gothenburg. Inclusiveness here is seen as for the whole area and not from an individual perspective. For Backaplan this means that infrastructure becomes important, to be able to easy travel to and from the area. For both Backaplan and the Central station area the interviewees discussed that it is not possible to accomplish everything in their respective areas, and here socially mixed

housing is one example. This is tried out at one of the other seven sub-projects: Frihamnen, and the interviewees from Backaplan and the Central station area sub-projects argue that maybe it is enough that it is happening in Frihamnen. One of them explained:

“For us, maybe socially mixed housing and cheap rentals are not the most important way of creating integration within the city and a social sustainable city. For us, maybe it is about creating a large open space.”

The challenge is then to be able to see the whole city and all its parts, and here the project leaders feel that they need support. As mentioned above, there are documents meant to steer and support the projects - project directives have been developed that specify objectives for the different sub-projects and there are working packages for specific issues that need to be solved within the projects. For instance, there is one working package for socially mixed housing establishing that all the seven sub-projects need to take this into account when planning new city areas. There is also a road map, establishing the amount of housing and other spaces to be concluded at what time.

There is a discussion among the interviewees if these are goals or estimations, and the roadmap is foremost used to communicate the development to external actors. All together these documents are used as means of spreading information about the projects, to show that something is happening, but not so much for steering the city to become more socially sustainable. On top of this, there is an evaluation tool, where goals, measurements and indicators have been developed to determine how the sub-projects are progressing. The sub-project leaders however describe that it is difficult to measure some developments and since it is based on self-assessment it is difficult to compare the projects. One of the sub-project leaders declared that it would be good if they had an idea of what is good enough when it comes to social sustainability. There is a need of prioritising, all the documents are establishing what should be done, but give no further instructions on what to do first and what could wait.

Does it matter if one part of the city is socially sustainable, when the rest is not? Some of the interviewees talked about also look at what is outside the River city area and its seven sub-projects, does social mixed housing in this area mean that it becomes better in other parts of the city, or actually worse? Will the social fragmentation grow? This gives rise to an interesting issue when it comes to measuring social sustainability; between what barriers should it be measured? City areas, city district, the whole city, the region or the country? Measuring one project might not say much about the whole situation. This is also discussed from a financial perspective, if there is money to be made when selling land within the projects that could be

used to develop other parts of the city where the land is not as valuable. But this needs to be made clear.

Discussion and Conclusions

As highlighted in the previous section, the implementation of the new vision and related strategies in Gothenburg started by creating a project organization with responsibilities spread on different hierarchic levels. This choice was a way of making the vision real and visible – putting people into positions with the responsibility of implementing the new document, where social sustainability was highlighted as new and innovative. The project organization consisted of different organizational levels, in line with the ideas of smart collaboration and governance models (Meijer and Rodríguez-Bolívar 2016). Still, this solution influenced how the translation (Latour 1987) of the social sustainability concept took place.

In line with the theoretical framework, the concept of social sustainability appears to be vague (Hoppe and Coenen 2011) and challenges with its measurability exist (Vifell and Soneryd 2012; Dilworth et al. 2011). In the case of Gothenburg, variety in the interpretations made at different levels of the organization could be observed. The River City vision document specified the three goals related to the strategy “Connect the city” as: “Create a city for everyone”, “Build the city together” and “Get more people involved” (River City Vision 2012, 12). The vision document included parts that are clear on what the city needs to do. However, the choice of wording “we will” was not helpful because the translation (Latour 1987) activity was delegated to various actors, on different organizational levels, who raised different voices (Arnaboldi and Lapsley 2010).

The large degree of freedom awarded to the project organization contributed to the creation of a long translation chain (Czarniawska 2010) in which the concept of social sustainability became vaguer in the realization phases (see the work of the sub-projects) than it was in the vision document. It can be argued that social sustainability was lost in translation within the organization. The findings point at two types of translations that we name “theoretical translation”, observable on the management level, and “practical translation”, visible on the project level.

The actors involved on the management level, when interpreting the vision document and implementing it, produced various documents, such as sustainability performance assessments. These artefacts (Czarniawska and Hernes 2005), however, represented forms of translations that were not really useful to steer the leaders of the sub-projects. That is, such documents were mostly used to “translate up-wards”, to negotiate with politician and account to external

stakeholders. These artefacts did not allow to “translate down-wards” and represented a form of frustration of the sub-project leaders. Basically, the translations happening at the management level implied that social sustainability became an issue to be taken care by someone else in the project organization.

Indeed, at the project level, there is a focus on action, making things happen. Given that there was room for different interpretations, the sub-project leaders have made “practical translations” that would suit the participants of the sub-project. The fact that the performance measurement and assessment system was not used as a steering tool, but for communication and political negotiation implied that social sustainability became difficult to define and consequently to measure. This resulted in local interpretations (at the sub-project level) and particularizations. For example, in one sub-project (Backaplan) social sustainability was realized through infrastructural solutions. To some extent, social sustainability went lost in translation. The concept changed over time and context (Leach et al. 2017) and left various actors with doubts. If there is supposed to be something else than what now is taking place, someone needs to say so and point out what is right and what is wrong. This leads to the importance of reflecting on the performance metrics related to a city’s sustainability strategy in order to ensure that sustainability becomes as an organizational value (see Zeemering 2018).

It turned out that the actors on the management levels needed different steering, where the directors of the city wanted to be vague and talk about visions, the sub-project leaders found it frustrating that no one could tell them more in detail of what to do and how to prioritize. Even in the cases where the management level did develop steering documents, the sub-project leaders found them insufficient.

To conclude, the case of Gothenburg shows how the concept of social sustainability depends on whom you ask confirming the idea that sustainability varies over time and context (Leach et al. 2017). In addition, social sustainability is negotiable and subject to different types of translation (Latour 1987; Czarniawska 2010) made by various actors using their artefacts (Czarniawska and Hernes 2005). The structure of the project organization, consisting of a plurality of actors working on management level and the single project level, has paved the way for considerable talk about social sustainability but questionable results in terms of the achievement of the overall vision and strategy (River City Vision 2012). Different voices (Arnaboldi and Lapsley 2010) concerning how social sustainability is interpreted and implemented could be observed, but these voices were not part of the same choir and produced sounds that were not fully tuned.

Our findings contribute to ANT (Latour 1987; Czarniawska 2010; Czarniawska and Hernes 2005) by showing the multidimensionality of the translation concept. We identified a “theoretical translation” of social sustainability, performed by the actors creating artefacts supporting their talks to keep the whole vision alive, be accountable and have negotiation capabilities. We also identified a “practical translation” of social sustainability, executed by the actors that work at the operative level and take concrete actions in the implementation of social sustainability. We argue that the theoretical translation does not necessarily mean that change takes place in practice, while the practical translation implies that some change takes place even if a gap between intention and results may emerge.

We also contribute to the smart city literature (Meijer 2017; Meijer and Rodríguez-Bolívar 2016; Grossi and Pianezzi 2017) by showing how the different aspects and characteristics of smart cities (Giffinger et al. 2007; Pamula, Gontar, and Gontar 2013) may collide. Establishing a project organization with plural identity (i.e. including actors with different competences and responsibilities) may be a smart collaborative governance solution, but such solution may hamper the implementation of a city vision and related strategies. The case of Gothenburg showed how social sustainability can be turned into an organizational issue. Collaboration among all actors is necessary, but the coordination of their voices and artefacts is even more paramount to avoid social sustainability getting lost and being the “burden” of someone else (to be blamed) within the organization.

When priorities are not defined and communicated, but the concrete translation of the vision into reality (i.e. practical translation) is delegated downwards to various actors (i.e. sub-project leaders), the original meaning of social sustainability may change and become what those actors have decided and put in place. All in all, the city management has changed through a collaborative arrangement but social sustainability is still not fully accomplished because the misalignment of practical translations require more managerial steering and political engagement.

This study only relies on the findings of one case. Even if the access to extensive data, through observations and interviews with key actors, has allowed to obtain deep insights into how social sustainability is shaped over time in a city context, generalizations cannot be made. Further studies on this topic with a specific focus on the “translationability” of social sustainability are necessary.

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