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Why Organization May Be the Primary Limitation to Implementing Sustainability at the Local Level: Examples from Swedish Case Studies

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Abstract: Much of the effort to address environmental issues at the local level has focused on defining principles and aims rather than addressing the operational difficulties of implementation. Drawing upon insights from sustainability scholarship, this study reviews two cases: the development of a Swedish standard for implementing sustainable development at municipality, county council, and regional levels, and attempts by a small rural municipality to establish a process towards implementing the Aalborg Commitments. The research illustrates the specific organizational and managerial complexity of these case study experiences. It concludes that an organizational focus on integration and mainstreaming deserves particular attention to achieve broader sustainability, or related environmental or adaptation goals. The results, in particular, highlight the role that integrated management systems can play for sustainability work at the local level.

Keywords: sustainability; Sweden; local level; public management; integrated management systems; organization

1. Introduction and Aim

The local level has been targeted in environmental sustainability and climate change adaptation literature as the level at which processes of sustainability and adaptation should fundamentally be organized. Implementation at the local level is argued to be particularly well-suited to take into consideration the specific requirements at each location (e.g., [1,2]). In climate change adaptation literature, it is also argued that, to improve climate integration, climate change should be integrated into all sector policies (e.g., [3]). In this regard, "(m)ainstreaming involves the integration of information, policies and measures to address climate change into ongoing development planning and decision-making" [4] (p. 38). Such mainstreaming or policy integration efforts have previously been applied to environmental policy (as the environmental policy integration concept (e.g., [5])), and to sustainability processes, more broadly (e.g., [6–8]). For sustainability, a large local focus has been the Agenda 21 process, where local integration and coordination of sustainability processes is regarded as a crucial part of development [9].

However, how this process of mainstreaming or integration should take place remains poorly understood. Existing attempts place the focus generally on developing guidebooks or catalogues of the issues to be taken into account, rather than reviewing the organizational context (cf. [10]). In the case of sustainability there is, thus, a strong focus on the way in which policy instruments and processes should be designed and managed (cf. [11]), but a more limited focus on the political conditions that make implementation of these instruments and managements likely [12]. However, both climate

change adaptation and sustainability literature increasingly indicate that processes of integration are not linear or step-by-step in relation to any given sequence but, rather, are dependent on political decisions and contexts (e.g., [4,13,14]). Research further shows that organizations which are successful at implementing sustainability programs in the process-based manner have often been conceived (including, for instance, integrated management cycles), and often already have the culture and governance systems to support them [15]. Within successful organizations, these specific characteristics provide a context for the goal of the process to fit within the organization's goals and procedures (as well as leadership and resources) [16]. Nevertheless, the complexity of organizations makes it difficult to identity and understand the cause of systemic problems or to understand how to solve them [17]. Therefore, lock-in effects—due to changing only one component of the system, or changing it independently while other actors or sub-systems do not change—run the risk of undermining the processes of change [18]. Due to the breadth inherent within the sustainability concept, the lack of a clear definition of the term poses specific challenges to local processes and implementation, and risks becoming an isolated and specific product of local relations and organizational contexts—and often limited possibilities for implementation [19,20]. Previous research on sustainability programs shows pockets and examples of good practice and innovation, but also a great deal of business-as-usual, weak, or even non-existent implementation [21–25].

In particular, much of the research on process-based, integrated management style sustainability programs and implementation to date has focused on non-state actors and roles (e.g., [26–28]), whereas less attention has been paid to the specific organizational challenges and the effects of, for instance, using process-based tools in implementing sustainability within the public sector. This study takes the approach that in order to understand the present challenges in integration of broader environmental issues at the local level, experience from sustainability activities may serve as relevant examples. To this end, the study explores the organizational challenges of local implementation of sustainability in the public sector, in light of considerations identified with implementation of processes inspired by the private sector and New Public Management (NPM). By reviewing processes in two cases relevant to local level—the development of a Swedish standard for implementing sustainable development at the level of municipalities, county councils, and regions, and the process towards implementation of sustainability commitments within a smaller rural municipality in Sweden—this study examines the organization and potential process-based and integrated management considerations related to sustainability programs. The study thereby also contributes to knowledge on the performance and effectiveness of voluntary agreements (e.g., Aalborg Commitments) [29,30], cf. [22], and of sustainability programs in the specific context of public management and policy.

2. Theoretical Background

It has been noted that many approaches to assessing mainstreaming at the national level (e.g., [13]) are limited in that they assume or propose a linear sequence of capacity-building, training, information to key policy-makers, and incorporation of results into policy, whereas, in fact, it has been recognized that the process is not linear, but rather "made up of a patchwork of processes, stakeholders and approaches that converge or coexist" [4] (p. 48) (cf. [14]). In the Swedish case, although Sweden has been "at the forefront of implementing" Local Agenda 21 [31] (p. 335), earlier research has indicated the difficulties that smaller municipalities, with limited resources (including funding, staff, and skills), experience in achieving implementation [32]. Previous assessments have also targeted the problems of limited, unclear, or conflicting goals [33]. For example, reviewing the Local Agenda 21 process in Gothenburg, Khakee concludes that it "revealed a considerable variation with regards to the degree of understanding about sustainable development and what is required to attain this goal" [34] (p. 61). A limited linkage to clearly stated national implementation and requirements has also been noted [32]. Considerations here may also be relevant to climate change adaptation and broader environmental policy integration work (cf. [5]), which has sometimes been developed as a voluntary, rather than a

mandatory and regulated, development, e.g., on the part of local councils, and thereby gained limited integration across levels and actors (see, e.g., [35]).

The academic debate on the role and function of the term "sustainability" is extensive (e.g., [36,37]). Some observers argue that this ambiguity has always been the term's greatest weakness [38], while others argue that it has supported its staying power [39]. However, the implementation of sustainability, often in the form of programs, does not just happen, but requires careful discussions, debates, planning, and designation of resources [40]. The conceptual underpinning of implementing sustainability has, somewhat similarly to that on climate change adaptation at present, been dealt with extensively in the literature (e.g., [41,42]) and has resulted in a significant number of guides, manuals, and toolkits (e.g., [11,15,43]). Practical systems for defining sustainability can be found along a spectrum from formal certification systems (such as standards systems, e.g., ISO 14001 and ISO 26000 (see [44,45]), where results are assessed according to set measureable indicators by external auditors) to voluntary principles of agreement (such as Aalborg, where the municipality signs up to an agreement, but without external auditing) (see [29,30,46,47]). These softer, often market-based and informational, policy instruments mark a shift in the modes of governing over recent decades [48,49] with, e.g., partnership, performance assessment, and best-practice-oriented systems to motivate and enable self-surveillance (e.g., [50,51]) and self-organizing networks [52].

With regard to sustainability, the well-known Bellagio Principles, published in 1997, relate to the full process from choice of indicators to communication on sustainable development, and include a number of parameters that are often highlighted in other sustainability process documents ([53,54], cf. [55,56]). These various forms of tools and measures have been shown to have an impact on organizational goals and strategies, as well as reporting for public accountability [57,58]. An important area of investigation is how the tools are used, what the assumptions in them are, and how institutions and organizations are affected by these systems [59]. This is because the choice of governing modes or instruments to adopt will never be a totally open or value-free activity given the prevailing systems of governance [60]. Jordan [22] emphasizes that we need to know what modes of governing lead to what sorts of outcomes, while, within the context of local government, ensuring that they remain legitimate and publicly accountable [20]. In relation to the public sector, sustainability processes may entail radical change in highly-institutionalized practices of service delivery and, therefore, may stall due to implementation difficulties [8,61].

The principles of sustainable development, as implemented in many of these processes, suggest that the development of indicators must be dependent on their vision and practical goals, and that social, economic, and ecological components, as well as present, near-future, and remote consequences and broad participation, should be included. Practically, the Bellagio system suggests that the focus should be placed on a limited number of indicators organized in some manner, preferably standardized to support comparison, and with continuous evaluation to assess results and adjust indicators. To this end, it asserts that access to institutional capacity is crucial in order to allocate responsibility, monitor, and develop in relationship to results [53,54], cf. [62,63]. How the indicators are developed affects the process and the outcome [64] and is crucial for its credibility and legitimacy [53]. Another relatively prominent thematic framework used today is the Aalborg Charter and Commitments, which resulted from a conference on sustainable city development in Aalborg, Denmark, and targets thematic areas, including participatory democracy and social justice, protection of shared natural resources, responsible patterns of consumption, strong local health and economy, and responsibility not only for local development, but for the consequences or linkages this has to the global scale through different processes (e.g., [29,30,62]).

To implement aims in areas such as these, sustainability process documents, building on thematic areas such as those described above, have often referred to the use of process-based *integrated management* systems. This is a term that is usually applied to systems that set up a cycle for implementation, made up of a preliminary assessment of the current situation, followed by a goal formulation process (often including participation) in relation to the priorities defined, a formal

decision on these goals, followed by implementation, evaluation, and reporting to feed into the following implementation cycle (see, e.g., [65]). The use of such systems is, to a large extent, inspired by the private sector. However, literature generally underscores the high level of institutional capacity necessary to implement these types of integrated management cycles with regard in particular to public bodies (e.g., [15]). For example, it has been noted that public organizations may not be able to implement or manage integrated management systems in the same way as private organizations—from which the inspiration for these systems comes. Moreover, the types of processes and tools used in the slimmed and specialized organization associated with the New Public Management (NPM) (e.g., [66]) have themselves been criticized by a number of scholars, even "challeng(ing) the idea that businesslike practices and thinking can be part of public administration" [67] (p. 12) (cf. [68]). In the scholarly debate on the distinctive nature of public and private management and organizations, some specific differences are emphasized in the literature, e.g., the management of ethical issues and styles of decision-making [69]. The role of public organizations as multifactorial is also stressed [69,70]: whether the organization is public or private, factors such as organizational size or nature of task can heavily influence the nature of management [69]. Public and private organizations share some common tasks, but it has been argued that the content of these activities, and the circumstances in which they are performed, are fundamentally different [71]. Two key areas of governance in public administration are efficiency and democracy [72]. In public administration and public policy, efficiency is often associated with the institutions of service delivery and democracy with accountability and legitimacy. As an example, studies report a high commitment among public managers to sustainability [8,73], which is often challenged by limited resources (including funding, staff, and skills/knowledge) and retaining the organizational legitimacy of the issue. Public managers are, thereby, "incentivized" to look for "controllable, efficiency-based environmental measures such as recycling, energy efficiency, and waste management (which) are easier to manage than environmental matters which challenge basic values and assumptions" [74] (pp. 6–7). In the long-lasting balancing between economic prosperity and environmental protection in environmental politics and policy-making [40], the use of indicators can have distracting implications on the objective of implementation and system [75]. The commercial orientation of these reforms has a tendency to concentrate on "easier to manage" environmental issues and, thereby, limits their transformative potential [74].

Over the past decade, shifts in public management have contributed to a change in the boundary between private and public, which Rhodes [76] argues has led to fragmentation of organizational structures, obscuring of public accountability, and a reduction in government capacity for strategic steering. The focus on policy and performance in NPM [77] is heavily influenced by the belief in the superior efficacy of private, compared with public, organizations and the supremacy of the market [78]. The intensified, and slimmed, focus in the public sector on producing services, in combination with extensive decentralization, has left public organizations vulnerable to external reforms and processes (cf. [79,80]), which may put the legitimacy of the local government in danger. Given its requirement to act legitimately as a representative of the common interest, the public sector has, thus, in contrast to a private company, the responsibility to act in accordance with political aims, meaning that it cannot withdraw from certain activities, but must cover a comprehensive scope. Consequently, public organizations must also be more responsive to stakeholders (here, citizens) and fulfill a large number of roles, as well as speaking to a large number of responsibilities [81]. As these may impose conflicting demands on the organization, public services have to respond to problem complexes that are more intricate than those of even large international firms [82,83], and may need to develop broad management practices to achieve vaguely-defined or broad government objectives (cf. [67,84]).

Thus, "(w)hereas project management in the private sector is characterised by a strong orientation toward project goals ('What do we need to deliver?'), government agencies focus on budget and available resources ('What resources do we have?') . . . (which) makes it even more challenging to define project goals against the backdrop of conflicting and ambiguous stakeholder demands" [67] (p. 15–16). Taken together, these factors mean that the implementation of process-based and cross-cutting goals

in line with sustainability (and, for that part, mainstreaming of other environmental areas across the public sector, such as climate change) is shaped by the organizational and managerial complexity they entail. This may, indeed, be the major limiting factor in implementation, even in cases where other factors are supportive (and are, thus, severely compromised if other factors are not supportive of implementation). Based on the above, we suggest a review of the ways in which sustainability (as a political goal) is phrased (e.g., [21,22]), and whether and in what ways its management through cycles for implementation (e.g., preliminary assessment of the current situation, a goal formulation process, formal decision on these goals, implementation, evaluation, and reporting to feed into the following implementation) is possible to fit into the existing organizational context (e.g., [48,66,70,76,80]).

3. Material and Method

This study draws on cases in the context of Sweden in order to illustrate the issue of implementation considerations in a relatively wealthy and organized small state context. The Swedish context is characterized by relatively large-scale autonomy of municipalities in relation to established regional and state goals. The municipality has what is often called a planning monopoly, which means that it can itself determine infrastructure planning, as it is funded for a wide range of measures locally through municipal taxes. This differs from the corresponding municipal or local level in many other countries (cf. [85,86]) Consequently, the Swedish municipality enjoys relatively broad opportunities for prioritization of the issues considered important locally. However, it also means that municipalities with smaller populations (fewer local tax payers) and, thus, limited funding, still need to supply the same services as the larger municipalities. In such cases, complex tasks are distributed among a smaller number of people. It is also common for elected decision-makers or politicians on municipal boards to be "spare-time politicians", i.e., they are not fully funded for their work and need to maintain full-time employment in other professions. As a result, the capacity to deal with new, complex challenges is limited, not only due to the limitations caused by administration systems having to include process-based characteristics, as described above, but also due to municipal size and funding for activities that are manageable within a specific setting. Sweden thus constitutes, on the one hand, a case with potentially high capacity for dealing with this type of organizational issue as a relatively stable and highly organized society (e.g., [86–88]) and, on the other hand, a case where priority-setting and integration of new complex issues is limited by the need to take into account a large multiplicity of demands under limited resources. While the focus on multiple aims at local level may make it a relatively typical case with regard to the considerations in general concerning administration systems described above, the fact that elected local decision-makers are not fully funded for their work may also constitute a particular challenge in the Swedish case.

In order to explore the organizational considerations of local implementation of sustainability in the public sector, the present study examines two cases with relevance to the local level: the work of a national group on setting a sustainability standard for municipalities, county councils, and regions; and attempts to manage sustainability processes (specifically the Aalborg commitments, [30]) in a sparsely-populated municipality in Northern Sweden. In the first case, working group members, often with experience with working with implementation of sustainability aims in local settings, discussed operational possibilities and difficulties with developing a process-based system for local and regional levels, whilst in the second case, implementation and operational difficulties were confronted directly at the local level.

The national case concerns the work of the Swedish Standards Institute (SIS)-led group on developing the standard SIS/TK 522, at its inception expressed as "targeting sustainable development in municipalities, county councils and regions" (Swe. *Hållbar utveckling i kommuner, landsting och regioner*) (for the final standard, see [89]). Participants in the development of the guiding standard (i.e., not a certifiable standard) included representatives of a large number of municipalities, county councils, and other regional organizations, as well as a state body, the Swedish Environmental Management Council, and the professional organization for Swedish local government, the Swedish Association of Local

Authorities and Regions (SALAR), which took the initiative to develop the standard. Sources in the development of the standard included a number of sustainability-oriented standard documents (some of which are referred to above), such as ISO 26000 [45], 14001 [44], and 9001 [90], Managing Urban Europe (MUE)-25, [65,91] and also the Aalborg Charter and Commitments [29,30]. The present analysis of this standard development process, and the considerations taken in it, builds on documentation and observations at meetings, including telephone conferences, within the SIS process that was held from August 2009–November 2013 (however, not all meetings could be attended for practical reasons). The observation protocol (notes made in meetings, including direct quotations of short pertinent statements in discussions) targeted discussions on operational issues with regard to developing and implementing a standard for sustainability. In addition, four semi-structured interviews were held, with the project manager of the Swedish standard on sustainability for local government, the SALAR representative in the group, the Swedish Environmental Management Council representative in the group, and a consultant on sustainability certification active in the group. All interviews were carried out in person in late autumn 2009–spring 2010 and targeted the development of the process and issues regarding developing a standard for sustainability. These interviews were recorded, fully transcribed, and coded in relation to experiences of process and method of work, in particular the ways in which sustainability is phrased, and whether and in which ways its management (e.g., through cycles for implementation) is possible to fit into an organizational context.

The local level study targeted considerations in work within Vännäs Municipality (population approx. 8500) in establishing a process towards fulfilling the Aalborg Commitments, as part of a broader initiative in the Umeå Region (see [88]). In a similar way as in the national study, the participants in the process (elected representatives and officials) were interviewed by telephone (with 14 out of 18 participants being available for the study). The interviews focused on their experiences and considerations regarding the process and work. The interviews were carried out in June 2010, recorded and transcribed in full, and inductively coded based on patterns and commonalities in the participants' experiences amongst others with regard to perceived requirements and considerations regarding these in implementation of the sustainability-focused process.

In the results presented below, quotes provided from meetings of the group are translations, by the authors, of either notes taken at meetings (in this case utilizing statements that were noted in full) or, in the case of interviews, from the recorded and transcribed interviews. The results section first describes the national process of development of a sustainability standard (Section 4.1), followed by the local process for implementation of the Aalborg Commitments at the municipal level (Section 4.2). These two cases are compared and discussed in relation to the aim and theoretical background of this paper in the concluding section.

4. Results

4.1. Responding to Local Requirements? The Development of a Swedish Standard for Sustainable Development in Municipalities

The standard, in its final form, is structured in relation to the different steps of sustainability work. Thus, following an introductory section focusing on issues concerning sustainability work in municipalities, county councils, and regions, the standard proceeds from taking the initiative for systematic work on sustainability to planning, including assessment of the current situation, consultation, and development of a vision, goals, and indicators, and a strategic program with action plans. This is followed by a section on implementation, including cross-sector coordination within the organization, evaluation, monitoring and measurement and, finally, improvement, including continuous improvement. A number of appendices that relate to specific areas of implementation, such as public procurement and physical planning, are also included (see [89]). As it responds to aims, such as the different prerequisites and problems in different municipalities and different political priorities, the standard is intended to be a guide rather than a basis for certification, and was developed through a consensus approach among the participating parties. The standard follows a more general

design relatively well for sustainability process documents by highlighting amongst other assessments, strategic development, and continuous follow-up (e.g., [65]).

To a large extent, meetings during the development of the standard focused on continuous revision and discussion of revisions of draft versions of the standard. At early meetings, discussions, to a larger extent, focused on taking in and summarizing good examples from other standards, as well as from experience in different municipalities, with early agreement to structure the document in accordance with a type of standard structure of documents observed in ISO 26000 [45] Aalborg [29,30], MUE [65,91] and including also for instance the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI, see [92]), which focus on process. Potentially, given the extensive experience with different types of standards in the group and the focus of the coordinator on starting from ISO 26000, the variation among standards never became a major hurdle in the group. Instead, a large part of the discussion focused on how to develop sustainability as a strategic and manageable aim (an operational definition of sustainability) and to relate it to the municipal, council, and regional contexts and organizational control, with the issue of how to manage issues, such as organizational and management, implicit in many of these discussions.

In the view of the interviewees, the issue of organizational challenges was one of the reasons for the standard being guiding, rather than certifying. As further discussed below, the complexity of the municipal context, in particular, including a need to bring together politicians and civil servants around common aims, was frequently a background to discussions in the group. For instance, the emphasis on efficiency and democracy was noted by the SIS representative that "some who have long-term experience of ISO standards (may) think that (complex standards implementation) is a piece of cake but you don't (easily) get the (larger municipal) group to join and develop understanding or get feedback and understanding of the work" (SIS interview; cf. SALAR interview).

4.1.1. Defining Sustainability Operationally and Rendering It Manageable

At several meetings of the development team, how to interpret sustainable development and whether to use ecological, social, and economic terms or a broader environmental concept was discussed. Some examples of discussion along these lines were as follows: At a meeting in April 2010, the present challenges (and need) for criteria to use were noted, for instance, "how do you treat conflicts between economy and ecology—that should also be a criterion", and that issues such as human rights have to be clarified to include education and public health. At the November 2010 meeting, one person noted that "I feel a certain concern that it is becoming too exhaustive and too big", even if, as another participant noted, "every organization can choose parts of thematic space, make choices after the assessment of their current situation". At a meeting in January 2011, continued general discussion on the definition of the term "sustainable development" also noted the issue of scale: that "it has to be emphasized that sustainable development cannot only take place in the municipality in a vacuum, it has to support sustainable development globally, not negative externalities". In response, another person noted that "this is why ISO 26000 does not mention sustainable development, but social responsibility". Thus, while there was generally agreement that no small organization could cover all of the areas relevant to sustainability, participants largely underlined, from the basis of different situations, that the standard needed to be open to the various relevant interpretations that the organization in the specific case may wish to highlight.

Throughout, the consideration of developing a complete, correct description of sustainability was, often explicitly, balanced against the needs and possibilities of municipalities, county councils, and regions to work with and, not least, implement a complex standard. In many cases, it was the process and integrated management requirements of the work that were seen as demanding in relation to the organizational resources and management. Thus, for instance, at the meeting in September 2010, it was noted that sustainable development was demanding for municipal boards, as "90% of the municipality ('s work) is to administer what already exists" and "municipalities are not so used to thinking in process terms." Other participants similarly wondered "how should the (municipal) leadership think in order to include and understand each other's' roles?" and noted that "there is

no maturity (in this issue), perhaps only those most mature (in their thinking on sustainability) will join in this work". At a meeting in November 2010, comments along such lines included: "if (the document) becomes too extensive, the case is that small municipal organizations will not manage to deal with it", with one person noting that "I won't be able to explain this even if I read it aloud from ISO 26000". Numerous participants also explicitly raised the issue of a division between public and private sectors in how they could act on sustainability. For example, participants emphasized that "industry and business are far more capable of working on a process basis than municipalities . . . and we need to learn from them in order to manage these big issues" but also that "it is easy when it comes to industry or business because there you have a core process where you add on (social aspects), but municipalities have to do everything they do already (to) cover everything such as health and such (. . .) and then have to coordinate with political leadership and all the different interests".

At the September 2010 meeting, issues such as the target group for the document were raised. These considerations related explicitly to the variety of different roles in the municipal organization. For instance, it was noted that the process-based and broader standard-inspired terms used would need to be clarified for officials and politicians specifically "as the municipality is not a business and using specific municipal terms can provide recognition". Other participants noted that the municipal resident is defined in municipal law while interests, such as industry, need to be included; for example, one person suggested that the term "living and working" and one that the term "residents and other stakeholders" be included in the draft (a consideration that was left to the editing group). At the meeting in January 2011, similar terms were discussed with regard to role: one person noted in relation to democratic legitimacy (separation between administration and political roles) that it is important to "state that politicians need a good basis for decisions—but not to state anything that could be interpreted as governance by municipal official". Another person noted that "roles may vary if external interests are involved—it is a democratic issue to determine who should be involved and where". Additionally, at the September 2010 meeting, it was suggested that "we could develop information or presentation folders for politicians, so that the officials can work with this document" as "it will be the officials who use it", in that way trying to bridge the challenge of different roles, understandings, and tools used in municipal systems. As the standard aims to target not only municipalities, but also county councils and regions, it was also noted that there is a strong divergence among the organizations targeted as "county councils are 80% healthcare and this is not clearly dealt with here". The specific nature of public organizations and the variety of roles in the organization, as well as the different types of public organizations targeted, were further noted as considerations in developing the standard-based approach for these bodies.

4.1.2. Developing an Understanding of Integrated Management Systems for Sustainability

The issue of project management requirements for sustainability management was also treated explicitly: for instance, it was recognized that sustainability needs to be placed centrally within an existing or specifically-developed integrated management system (Swe. "*ledningssystem*")—a term that was, in the end, also inserted into the title of the final standard. The increasing emphasis on implementation of sustainability through an integrated management system thus developed through discussions in the group. For example, at the meeting in April 2010 it was noted that "governance and integration with existing sustainability systems is the big issue, but this is not dealt with in the standard". Other participants noted that "in (our municipality) we have many plans which have not been integrated" and that implementation of the standard "has to be a strong governing document for the municipality, otherwise it is no help. You have to be politically bound by what you have decided politically". At a meeting in November 2011, discussions targeted revision of the draft standard, with, for instance, one participant noting that "if it is clarified that goals must be defined by the organization in its entirety and adapted to ongoing activities, at the same time as there are strategic goals that are the result of the vision of the municipality . . . , (then) all activities have to set long-term as well as short-term goals". At a meeting in March 2011, discussions included issues of whether integrated

management system terms should be used or whether such terms as "organizational control", or some other term that is more directly recognizable, should be used instead. A longer discussion on the use of the term "integrated management system", and if this is really what is necessary for integrating sustainability, then ensued at a meeting in November 2011, with participants noting that the term itself is complex and could be regarded as a link to certification systems, while broadly agreeing that systematic sustainability integration requires some kind of systematic management or governing system in municipalities. As a result of this, the term was finally included in the title of the document, for assessment during the referral for consultation.

At a meeting in June 2013, where the focus was on reviewing the, largely positive, replies to the referral for consultation, the discussions covered, e.g., the need to clarify how the document, which largely focuses on developing the integration of sustainability issues from scratch, can be integrated by municipalities who already have some kind of integrated management system and need to fit work on sustainability into this. Participants at the meeting noted that these considerations should, at best, be integrated into the budget process in municipalities, but also that it is difficult to find a language in the document for system change and for the implementation of sustainability as a process throughout the organization. In particular, as one participant noted, "in most small municipalities there is no time or money to think ahead", underlining the issue of organizational context and resources. In more final discussions at a meeting in November 2013, the issue of whether the standard should be verifiable was raised. It was noted that it had already received good feedback, although a pilot project in one municipality noted the difficulty in understanding the term "sustainability" and the term "integrated management system". One person emphasized the technical challenges of public organizations in that "we should reach two groups, municipal officials and politicians (where) it is a little bit embarrassing for people to admit that they don't know this, but it is complicated stuff". Another person noted that "we probably need a network where we can meet (to support the work with implementing the standard)". As a result, discussions on network building were initialized in order to develop a network to support implementation. The standard was finally officially accepted in 2014 [89].

4.2. Organsational Considerations around Working with Sustainability in a Small Municipality

Local work towards implementing sustainability principles in Vännäs Municipality, Northern Sweden, was undertaken as part of a development in the broader Umeå Region (consisting of six municipalities, see [88]), and took place largely simultaneously with the development of the national standard for sustainability treated above. The work in Vännäs largely drew upon the Aalborg Commitments as a specific guide for work relevant also in the process above. The work in Vännäs was undertaken in the form of a specifically-appointed commission, meaning that a specific group was selected to prepare the discussion on how to implement the Commitments before potentially proposing this for decision by the municipal council. The commission consisted of municipal officials and politicians; however, many participating politicians were of the type that carry out their political assignments in their spare time.

Thus, with regard to working operationally with sustainability as a concept, many highlighted the need for time resources and concerns about the complexity of the task. Comments in this regard were, thus, largely similar to those in the national standards process. For instance, a municipal official underlined the multifactorial nature of public organizations, stating that "you seem to have so much else to do and these are such big issues". In interviews, participants noted for example that:

> In daily political work, the issues that are more long-term and concern long-term processes may be perceived by many as a bit abstract . . . priority-wise they are not placed at the top but are pushed aside a bit, since you have a budget and so on for issues that you must deal with, a budget for this year (interview, politician).

> More knowledge about these conditions (sustainability) would mean sustainable development could gain a different definition for those who do not (inherently) think

> (about) nature. I think we have two groups, those who think about our base in natural conditions and to them the sustainability concept is of value, while to others it is something else. And it is a little hard for these two types to meet (interview, municipal official).

On the other hand, almost all of the interviewees indicated their general opinion that sustainability is important because it permeates all activities and is a given concept in the public consciousness, in municipal work, and for municipal growth. For instance, one of the municipal officials underlined the urgency in that sustainability is "high on the agenda in so many contexts, both in the municipality and in society at large. We simply must become involved in this".

With regard to impact on sustainability activities, interviewees generally highlighted that many of those taking part in the work also have numerous other assignments. As many of the politicians on the municipal board or in different working groups manage their political assignments in their spare time, rather than as part of their work, it was problematic if meetings were held during working hours rather than at the end of the day, since it was difficult to leave regular work during the day. Interviewees, both decision-makers and officials, noted that the municipal officials have, nevertheless, taken on a great amount of responsibility and provided support, "despite the fact that they have not been allocated time specifically for this task" Municipal officials, on their part, noted that "as a result of working in a small municipality, you have to work with all issues so (not attending) is because something (else) has had to take priority"; however, "when the assignment is set so that you should do it within existing time and resources, the risk is high that it will be pushed aside by other work". These issues underline the organizational challenges and complexity of developing these processes in the organization. Given the limited resources for managing the issues, an interviewee also noted that while the public should be involved in the work in accordance with the Aalborg Charter, it is "difficult for both politicians and administration to find sensible forms for involving the public in this type of very broad issue" (interview, politician).

Nevertheless, participants largely noted that it had been possible for politicians and officials to agree on important priorities and intentions in documents that now constitute the basis of these activities and, thereby, develop the requirements for integrated management through cycles for implementation of sustainability aims. Interviewees noted that implementation still remains to be achieved and that the documents would need to be integrated into municipal priorities, rather than put to one side. One official noted that "there is a certain awareness that we have said that we will work with sustainability at the municipality. But concrete issues where it is possible to point out that 'this was done because of Aalborg' are difficult to see". Participants also noted the need to set up arrangements similar to some of those in integrated management, for instance, that progress towards implementation be reported to the municipal board annually or, alternatively, that a shorter-term commission could be appointed to report to municipal board meetings. One official suggested that this matter could be taken up as a point in the annual report in relation to the Umeå Region goals, after which the commission could be convened again after the election to discuss potential continuation. After this type of stage, it was noted that it would then also be possible to communicate the work outward to citizens, schools, or other actors, for instance, in workshops, in the daily paper, in leaflets, or on the municipality's website, to increase the legitimacy of the process.

It was thus emphasized that activities should have both "operative and executive roles right from the start" and that it is important to "connect it to what you do in the everyday (work), so that it doesn't just become a project up in the air, but a part of regular activity" (interview, municipal official). The need for continuous reporting and feedback into continued processes, similar to requirements in integrated management were, therefore, also emphasized. For instance, a politician stated that it is important "that you are able to re-prioritize when it is time, and for the work not to die out with this (it is) important that there is a cohesive force at municipal official level (and) ownership at leadership level". The same person noted that the area needs to "be defined as an overarching strategic issue, not a part issue but something that has influence on all activities". An official noted, similarly, that:

> (Activities) would need to be more concrete, to (have) someone who leads and . . . follows it up. You often talk about how to set up measurable goals and measure effects, sometimes it feels like we are not even there today. What we would need to do is to become aware and try to gain knowledge about what sustainability is. And then we could illustrate it at each administration (unit), or perhaps procurement has made progress, and then we can say that now we are working with a focus on sustainability.

This official thus noted that to develop a full sustainability management system was, today, potentially difficult to accomplish. One official also stressed the need to create more awareness of what sustainable development is in order to "avoid running out of steam like Agenda 21". The same person stated that:

> I think it's hard when you get these kinds of tasks where they say that this is to be implemented, but no-one knows exactly how much work it requires to implement it and get a result, while at the same time they are saying that this will occur within the existing framework. I fail to see (that it will) . . . be able to achieve major environmental benefits . . . it may also cost money, especially when you start it up. And when you say that this must happen within existing frameworks, then something else has to be set aside.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study argues that in order to understand the challenges of integration or mainstreaming of complex sustainability or environmental issues at the local level, experiences from sustainability work are relevant, as they can illustrate the operational complexities and difficulties on the ground. Such experiences are identified here by exploring the organizational complexity of implementing process-based, integrated management systems-type processes towards sustainability in two cases relevant to the local level: the development of a Swedish standard for implementing sustainable development at the municipality, county council, and regional levels, and attempts in a small rural municipality to develop work on sustainable development in accordance with the Aalborg Commitments.

The study largely illustrates how these processes of developing and implementing sustainability assume specific forms of organizational context and management that are able to integrate relatively high levels of project management [93]. However, the understanding that the development of sustainability management requires relatively high levels of project management, related to requirements in integrated management systems, is not always clearly recognized in processes. Thus, these types of terms were only applied relatively late in the national case, and were not clearly articulated in the local case, although elements of such systems were recognized. However, in both cases the operational issues were concerned with numerous areas related to integrated systems management requirements strongly noted by participants. Understanding and conceptualizing the broad term "sustainability" within the specific local context of public management and rendering the object of sustainability manageable, e.g., through criteria and indicators (e.g., [50–52]), thus places large requirements on the organization. This emphasizes certain difficulties with this type of implementation of sustainability concepts in relation to public organizations; without clearly placing the focus on potential requirements of the process or expected concerns with implementation, participants may risk overlooking areas of importance for practical implementation, or may not, from the outset, be able to assess whether resources are sufficient for development of these processes, and, if so, in what areas. The study, thus, illustrates the considerations relevant to participants with regard to different organizational contexts (cf. [70,71]), so as not to potentially overlook important aspects (cf. [20]) or even endanger the status of the standard (cf. [93]).

Thus, as the organizational challenges of these processes are frequently discussed in both cases, the study underlines the largely implicit specific characteristics of, and requirements imposed on, the organization in terms of specific resources, including skills and professionals (or more broadly,

for instance, in a climate of under-funding), culture, and governance system (cf. [15,16]), to handle and manage these instruments and processes. It is within the balance between professionalism, efficiency, legitimacy, and democracy [72] that the challenge of these processes is partly positioned by the participants in both cases studied: to cover large issue areas whilst integrating a specific type of process, including participation requirements, often without new funding to cover the costs of the process. Difficulties with implementing sustainability processes, thus, exist particularly with regard to the complexity of the processes, coupled with existing multiple and high requirements on public organizations. These are exacerbated by the fact that mandatory requirements must often be prioritized over more voluntary or less established areas, or areas that are not allocated specific time and resources (as identified in other studies, cf. [33,85,94]). The question of what can really be done within different organizational settings and within the present underlying models constitutes an essential issue in sustainability work (e.g., [93–98]).

This places the focus on the extent to which these types of priorities, in this type of manner, can be further supported in sustainability, project management and, e.g., climate change adaptation literature, where some similar considerations may exist, and also in decision making in general. Considerations that target the practical organizational and resource allocation problems (i.e., not only capacity in a general sense) have been largely limited in, e.g., climate change adaptation literature and much of the sustainability literature, despite an explicit focus on discussing the implementation process (cf. [35]). Thus, considerations with regard to the very practical process of implementation that go more into the nuts and bolts of processes—the devil in the detail—may serve to identify orientations for broader sustainability, environmental integration, and climate change adaptation—and mitigation—research. For instance, they could broaden the focus beyond, e.g., systematization of adaptive capacities, to discussion of enablers in a general sense, consider broader conceptual overviews of the steps to be taken or best-practice guides in the light of practical implementation difficulties, and consider statements on the need to progress into transformation with regard to the multiple impediments to practical incremental work (e.g., [95,99]). Considerations, in particular, apply to process assumptions that relate to a more ideal or archetypical simplified manner of conceiving implementation processes. In relation to the adaptation literature, for instance, Wellstead, et al. [100] have illustrated that adaptation conceptions in relation to forestry often take as given a structural-functional logic that is removed from the mess of political implementation under real-life decision-making processes. In real life, organizations struggle with implementing process-based systems due to a number of considerations, particularly the complexity of the task (although considerable) and resources for it (although often limited), but also the organization of the work (making the role of supporting organizations potentially very great indeed, e.g., [101]). Here, social sciences and established theories on decision making in political science, as well as management sciences more broadly, may be better able to indicate limitations that are a result not only of the environmental area or specific to this, but of complexity and multiple demands in decision-making organizations per se (e.g., [67,68,95]).

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