# Localizing the sustainable development goals through an integrated approach in municipalities: early experiences from a Swedish forerunner

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# Localizing the sustainable development goals through an integrated approach in municipalities: early experiences from a Swedish forerunner

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The 2030 Agenda and its SDGs call for cross-sectoral collaboration and societal transformation. Translating these indivisible goals to the local level is an important undertaking for municipalities given their wide range of responsibilities. This paper explores SDG localization in a Swedish municipal organization, providing analyses on management practice, having an integrated approach to sustainability. Based on document studies and interviews, it reflects experiences from an early phase of SDG localization. Having an integrated approach to SDG localization was shown to be dependent on aspects such as structure, leadership and coordination, yet simultaneously flexibility, organizational learning as well as time and timing. Such an integrated approach also comes with the challenge of operationalizing the SDGs into management systems, budgets and motivating employees across organizational silos and levels. The paper concludes that the SDG framework presents an opportunity for municipalities to understand and review their organizations through a broad systems perspective on sustainability.

**Keywords:** SDGs; the 2030 Agenda; strategic planning; management; local authority

## 1. Introduction

Adopted in 2015, the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for societal transformation, where collaboration between actors, and across sectors and levels in society, is key – aiming to "leave no one behind" (United Nations 2015). The goals are described as indivisible, interlinked and universally applicable and have an integrated approach, with interconnections and crosscutting elements. Each national government decides how to incorporate and link the goals with national planning processes, policies and strategies connected to all sustainability dimensions. Regional and sub-regional levels are important in operationalizing the SDGs since their frameworks "can facilitate the effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete action at the national level" (United Nations 2015, 7). How this is to be operationalized locally is still unclear, given the manifold of agendas, and given the complexity of local practice (Fenton and Gustafsson 2017). Hence, implementing the SDGs is a complex undertaking, which on national and subnational levels often includes finding coherence between the seventeen goals and existing plans, strategies

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and goals (Fourie 2018). The local level is addressed in several paragraphs in the 2030 Agenda, not seldom connected to cities, but even if SDG 11 might be the most obvious, all the goals are relevant to the local level in one way or another (Zinkernagel, Evans, and Neij 2018). In this paper, the SDGs are referred to as a framework with seventeen indivisible goals that can be used to implement sustainability in municipalities.

SDG localization has thus far been little in focus. In those cases where the regional and local levels have been addressed, it is mainly based on concepts (e.g. Barnett and Parnell 2016; Lucci 2015; Slack 2015), and there is little emphasis on local practice. Fenton and Gustafsson (2017), propose that the knowledge gap related to the SDG implementation within municipalities' existing strategies, policies and practice needs to be further elucidated. Several researchers have raised related concerns connected to the gap between policy and implementation (Betsill and Bulkeley 2007; Fenton and Gustafsson 2017; Grainger-Brown and Malekpour 2019; Stafford-Smith *et al*. 2017; Valencia *et al*. 2019) and that sustainability efforts lead to little change (Barr 2008; Blake 1999; Fenton and Gustafsson 2017). Zeemering (2018) suggests that one reason for this implementation gap is that sustainability may not be properly integrated into the organizational management. Stafford-Smith *et al*. (2017) indicate the importance of integrated sustainability plans that connect sectors and align goals to implement the integrative SDGs. Although, localization of the SDGs in cities has been recently addressed, for example by Krellenberg *et al*. (2019) and Valencia *et al*. (2019), they have not explicitly focused on integrated approaches to sustainability management in municipal organizations. However, they have noted that leadership appears fundamental in SDG implementation. Moreover, aspects such as participation and inclusivness (of levels, actors and sectors); having a sustainability department or coordinators with sufficient mandate; and allocated (economic and human) resources are also highlighted as important. A challenge related to not having an integrated approach is that SDG implementation ends up as isolated projects with little or no impact (Grainger-Brown and Malekpour 2019). Moreover, it is not only important to integrate the SDGs into existing strategies; there is also a need to have an integrated approach in order to avoid "cherry-picking" among the SDGs, and to ensure that they are adopted as a package (Stafford-Smith *et al*. 2017).

On a local level, municipalities are important and stable institutions, and they can be seen as facilitators for urban sustainability initiatives in the local geographical zones in many countries (Lafferty and Eckerberg 2013). Municipalities play important roles not only through their services, but also by ensuring the needs of citizens (Slack 2015). They are responsible for acting according to political aims in an accountable and legitimate way, whilst covering a broad scope of responsibilities and activities (Keskitalo and Andersson 2017). The municipality can be understood in different ways, e.g. as the municipal organization and as the municipal geographical zone. In this paper, a municipality is defined as a local public authority with responsibilities such as local welfare services such as schools, social services, and spatial planning (SALAR 2020). This paper focuses on the internal municipal perspective related to SDG localization in a Swedish context. By tradition, Swedish municipalities have a strong role in society with a high degree of independence (Montin 2015) and large-scale autonomy in relation to regional and national goals (Keskitalo and Liljenfeldt 2012). Swedish municipalities are often seen as forerunners when it comes to sustainability efforts (Sanchez-Gassen, Penje and Slätmo 2018), and Sweden has topped the

SDG index for several years (Sachs *et al.* 2019). Hence, Sweden and Swedish municipalities are a compelling case to study when it comes to SDG localization.

This study contributes with knowledge of how the SDGs could be translated into existing strategies and management processes in a municipal context having an integrated approach. Localization is used to describe the process of translating the SDGs into the local context and the municipal organization, whilst an integrated approach to sustainability management refers to the ambition of holistically (across sustainability dimensions) integrating the SDGs in strategy, policy and practice. The paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of management practice in relation to SDG implementation, guided by the following questions:

> RQ1. How can the SDG framework be localised through an integrated approach to sustainability management?

> RQ2. What challenges can be identified when having an integrated approach in municipal SDG implementation?

In this paper, SDG localization in municipal organizations is scrutinized from the perspective of the ones who are to operationalize the SDGs. Kirst and Lang (2019, 14) stress that "sustainability aspects are not yet systematically integrated into administrative practice" in municipalities and notice a need for more experiential knowledge from municipal practitioners. This paper contributes to that knowledge, focusing on early experiences from SDG localization in Sweden, more precisely in the municipality of Växjö. Their approach to SDG localization was to develop an integrated approach, to which all parts of the organization would contribute and align. Växjö initiated their SDG journey in 2017 as a strategic planning process to develop a sustainability programme called "Sustainable Växjö 2030" (SV2030), guided by the SDGs. This study is a snapshot from 2018/2019 when Växjö was in the process of planning for SDG implementation through the development of a sustainability programme. At the time of the study, the municipality were mapping their current organizational sustainability practice. It was therefore not possible to focus on the political perspective, organizational effects or broader achievement of the SDG implementation. Although the study has a Swedish perspective, we believe that the lessons learned in Växjö are valuable to municipalities in an international context. First, the organizational rationale for municipalities has many similarities in different countries (e.g. responsibilities and mission). Second, this in-depth case contributes to the rather humble knowledge bank on local SDG practice.

The paper is organized into seven sections, where this introduction is followed by a description of the study's theoretical background. Thereafter, the reader is introduced to the Swedish context and Växjö municipality, followed by a description of the research design. The paper continues with a presentation of the results and ends with a discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical background

How to implement the SDGs in municipalities' sustainability management is a challenge, and there is a broad range of aspects that need to be taken into account. In this

study, SDG localization is explored as a strategic planning process where the SDGs are translated to the local reality and management of the municipal organization.

Generally, municipalities formulate strategies to forward sustainability (Echebarria *et al.* 2018; Emilsson and Hjelm 2005; Keskitalo and Andersson 2017). Yet, these differ in such regards as scope, involvement, process design, organizational setup, and level of concretization and integration (see Krellenberg *et al.* 2019). Nonetheless, strategic planning and management is nothing new to the public sector, and when introduced in the early 1980s the literature focused on local governments application (Poister and Streib 2005). Strategic planning is a first step to systematically gather "information about the big picture and using it to establish a long-term direction and then translate that direction into specific goals, objectives, and actions" (Poister and Streib 2005, 46). Management can be described as a broader, continuous process where issues beyond just planning are handled, such as: who will do what and how, how will this be monitored, and enhancement of ongoing processes (Poister and Streib 2005). Hence, strategic planning can be seen as a step-by-step project, whilst management is an ongoing process that loops within organizations (Gustafsson, Hermelin, and Smas 2018). One bottleneck of strategic planning is to balance the top-down and bottom-up initiatives (Albrechts and Balducci 2013), and this is where management plays an important role (Poister and Streib 2005). Strategic planning and management are interconnected in many ways; hence, looking at an early stage of a planning process (as in this study) from a management perspective can contribute to valuable knowledge on how to bridge the gap between policy and implementation.

The 2030 Agenda is not the first global initiative where local sustainability is emphasized. Local Agenda 21 (LA21) and Millennium development goals are important predecessors that both have built for momentum for local sustainability implementation. Echebarria *et al.* (2018) explored essential elements in LA21 processes worldwide, where integration of actions and policies were described as both complex and important for achieving sustainability ambitions. They highlight limitations such as lack of: political support for sustainability efforts, resources, organizational experience/culture and capacity. Evans *et al.* (2006, 850) describe municipal capacity as "the knowledge, resources, leadership and learning that can make local governments effective and dynamic entities." Such features can act as change agents when governing for local sustainability (Evans *et al.* 2006). Heinrichs and Schuster (2017) explore LA21 implementation in German municipalities, where internal implementation is described as a precondition for municipalities to act as sustainability leaders locally. They argue that this is insufficient and highlight the four explanatory factors: dependency on higher level policies, the political and cultural commitment to sustainability (public discourse, sustainability awareness and party preferences), tight budgets and the fact that these organizations are highly bureaucratic. Even though municipalities have the benefits of being stable organizations, they may also come across difficulties introducing cross sectoral systems, changing organizational cultures and introducing new tools. Laurian and Crawford (2016) identified that cross-departmental coordination (and complaints about silos) was not a determinant, it was, however middle managers' mediating roles between organizational hierarchies. In a later study, Laurian, Walker, and Crawford (2017), stressed the importance of sustainability being prioritized and seen as a core value, where trust-building was considered important (in both horizontal and vertical relations), since it supports cultures of innovation and consensus. Internally in municipalities, minor changes such as "support through leadership", "educating

competencies, knowledge and skills" and "strengthening individual motivation and sustainability-oriented culture" could have large effects on sustainability implementation (Kirst and Lang 2019, 11). However, Heinrichs and Schuster (2017) argue that internal factors, in the end, are a political challenge. To face this challenge Laurian and Crawford (2016), similarly, emphasized the importance of political awareness and support. In relation to local SDG strategies, Krellenberg *et al.* (2019) observe that the SDGs suffer from insufficient ambition and that they compete or overlap with other local initiatives. For example, these inclusive and integrative SDGs, similar to other comprehensive frameworks, might result in other policy documents being included or related to, for example, a local sustainability programme. Comparably, a Canadian study explored this through the adoption of an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan in municipalities (Stuart *et al.* 2016), where the sustainability framework seemed to promote a more social sustainability-oriented approach, but also brought about difficulties in integrating policies, since many of these are out of the municipal control. When compared with its predecessors, the SDGs are more integrative in their nature, with seventeen interrelated goals aiming for inclusivity, it might even put more stress on the challenges exemplified in this section.

Even though Sweden is considered a forerunner in sustainability implementation and management, similar challenges such as "cost, integration, project dependency and lack of strategic resources over time" have been identified (Keskitalo and Liljenfeldt 2012, 25). Sustainability management in (Swedish) municipalities was, until about two decades ago, mainly focused on the environmental dimension (Eckerberg and Brundin 2000; Emilsson and Hjelm 2002). However, there has been a shift in focus, and many municipalities have expanded their environmental management to also encompass the economic and social dimensions and to expand its focus to mainly environmental experts in the organizations to include a broader range of actors, both internal and external (Emilsson and Hjelm 2009). A widened systems perspective on sustainability has been described as a maturing process among municipalities and is often thought of as an integrated approach to sustainability management (Emilsson and Hjelm 2009). Integrated approaches have long been the focus for researchers in the organizational theory field (see Mintzberg 1983) but have only recently caught the interest of researchers in sustainability management (Eckerberg 2001). Having this integrated approach could be related to a wide consciousness of related activities and actors (Fenton *et al.* 2015), and comes with the challenge of contextualizing and localizing the concept of sustainability to make it manageable (Keskitalo and Andersson 2017). The SDGs could be seen as an instrument for coordination of sustainability efforts and thereby enhancing a more coherent sustainability management (Gustafsson and Ivner 2018; Le Blanc 2015).

Although there are several potential benefits in having a broader systems perspective, it also brings about complexity (Emilsson and Hjelm 2009) and issues such as coordination, synchronization, competency and sub-optimisations in the organization. Over the years, municipalities have developed sustainability initiatives as separate projects running in parallel and with little interference with the overall management (Emilsson and Hjelm 2005). Initially, it could be necessary to run such projects to test and develop new approaches that, at a later stage, would be integrated into the ordinary management. However, there is a risk when working with projects in separate organizational settings, rather than having an integrated approach into the ordinary management processes (Palm and Algehed 2017), that these projects never become

integral parts of the overall management and remain add-ons, thus having little impact (Grainger-Brown and Malekpour 2019). Integrating projects into processes could contribute with value, as projects could provide energy injections to the processes (Palm and Algehed 2017).

To sum up, implementing sustainability in general, and localizing SDGs in particular, into municipalities' management practice is complex and challenging, as it often combines and includes different organizational actors and systems. In this, previous experiences from sustainability implementation such as: cross sectoral coordination, knowledge, trust and political awareness are raised as important factors. Similarly, when it comes to SDG localization, Valencia *et al.* (2019) stresses the importance of leadership, resources and inclusiveness. Many challenges in sustainability implementation still remain, and the question is whether having an integrated approach to SDG localization can put management practices and business as usual to the test.

## 3.   Materials and methods

This section explains the case of Växjö municipality and their SDG localization process, followed by a description of the methods used in this study.

### 3.1.   The empirical case: localizing the SDGs in Växjö municipality

Växjö municipality, situated in the south of Sweden with around 90,000 inhabitants (as of 2019), is classified as a "larger city", according to the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR 2017). At the time of this study, Växjö was organized into eight administrative departments and a number of municipally (partly or fully) owned companies, all in all with about 7,000 employees. As mentioned earlier, Växjö is seen as a forerunner when it comes to sustainability efforts, and the municipality has extensive experience of working with environmental and sustainability issues, which has been widely recognized. Växjö's first environmental policy was adopted in 1993, and in 1996, a (pioneering) decision to become a fossil fuel-free municipality was made by the politicians, followed by a LA21 strategy in 1999. These were later replaced by an environmental strategy in 2006, last renewed in 2014. The strategies were integrated into their environmental management system and were later supplemented with a social budget with the aim of achieving a more integrated approach to sustainability management.

Växjö initiated the process to localize the SDGs in 2016, as a way to further develop their sustainability ambitions. The first SDG activities included informal meetings with different actors, both internal and external. In parallel, a scan of internal steering documents and their connection to the SDGs was performed. About one year later, the political decision was made to formulate a sustainability programme called "Sustainable Växjö 2030" (SV2030). The ambition was to facilitate transformation toward a more sustainable society and achieve a common understanding within the municipal organization. Therefore, it aimed to encompass the entire organization and integrate sustainability into ongoing organizational policies and processes. At this point, several change processes connected to SV2030 were running in parallel: a new cross-sectoral management system, a new goal management system, a revision of the municipal comprehensive plan and the development of a new vision for the year 2050 (Figure 1).
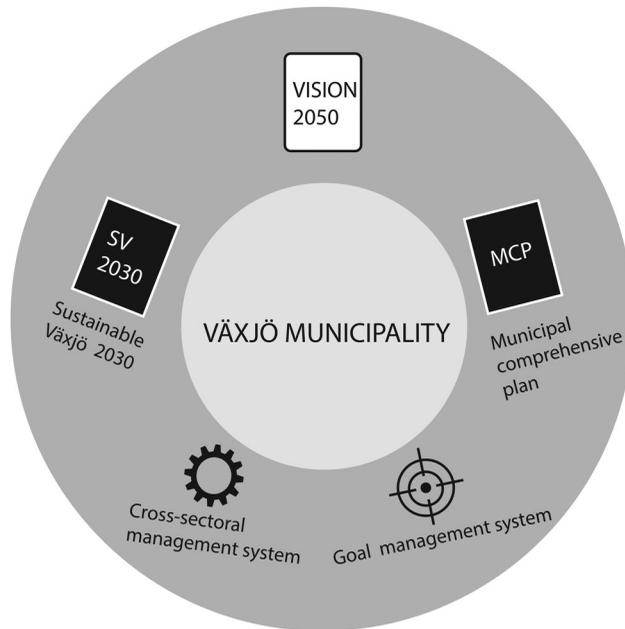
Figure 1. Overview of the parallel and interrelated change processes in Växjö municipality as of 2018/2019.

The cross-sectoral management system was introduced to the organization (just before the initiation of SV2030) to obtain a more integrated approach to the overall organizational management. This meant a reorganization in which the original administrative departments and municipally owned companies were sorted into five processes, in addition to the traditional departmental structure. These five main processes (the cogwheels in Figure 2) were labeled as follows:

- life-long learning (coordinated by the educational department),
- growing enterprise and market (coordinated by the business- and welfare department),
- spatial planning (coordinated by the technical- and spatial planning department),
- active leisure (coordinated by culture and leisure department), and
- independent life (coordinated by the social services department).

When this research was conducted, Växjö municipality was in the process of developing an understanding and assessment of their sustainability status in relation to the SDGs. Prior to this, and thus also before this study was conducted, the municipality had arranged a workshop to initiate a broader SDG discussion in the organization. The workshop, called "Current situation in Växjö municipality", attracted about 85 employees. Based on the workshop discussions, five focus areas were identified, which were later presented to the local politicians. However, the politicians were not satisfied with the proposed themes and asked for a more systematic approach to the SDGs. This resulted in a planning process consisting of three main steps - baseline review, validation, and goal setting (see arrow in Figure 2) - to formulate a sustainability programme (SV2030).
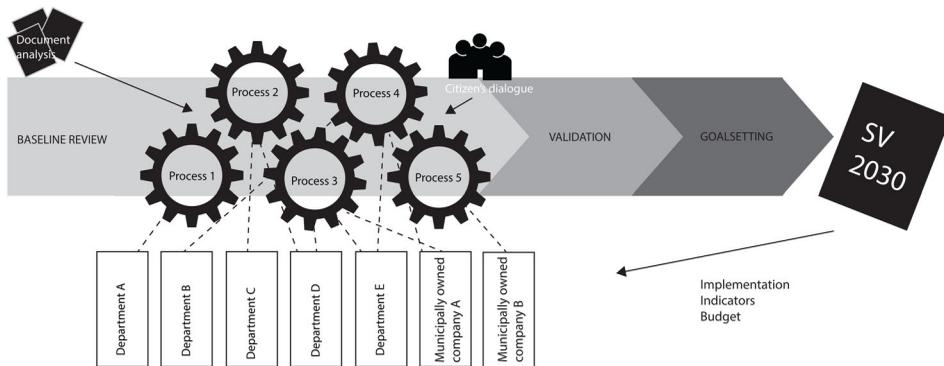
Figure 2. A visualization of Växjö's five cross-sectoral processes, their connections to departments and municipally owned companies and how these connect to the SV2030 process.
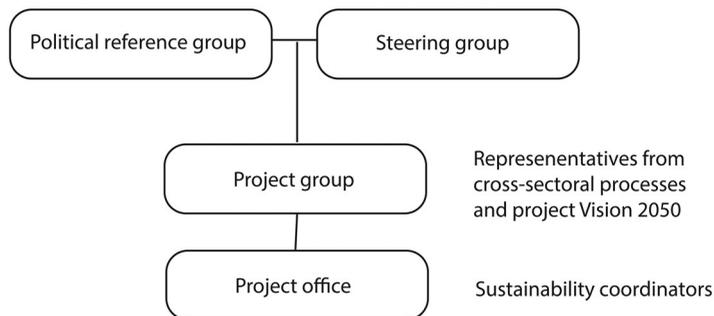


Figure 3. A visualization of the organizational setting for the initial process of SV2030 in Växjö.

A project group was formed to support the work for the baseline review consisting of a project office, representatives from the cross-sectoral management system and the project leader for the development of Vision 2050 (Figure 3). The project office, which was located centrally in the organization, had a coordinating function in the SV2030 process, while the representatives from the five cross-sectoral management processes were managers in different administrative departments. As seen in Figure 3, the organizational setting also included a steering group (heads of departments and CEOs of municipal companies) and a political reference group.

The baseline review included two parts: an internal self-assessment and an external citizens' dialogue. The self-assessment survey was inspired by a method applied by the Swedish state, when mapping current status in national authorities, in order to identify national SDG challenges. Ninety-six challenges were identified nationally, but to better suit Växjö municipality, the SV2030 coordinators selected seventy-six of these to be assessed in Växjö. Accordingly, all cross-sectoral processes were asked to assess their impact on each of these challenges (connected to specific SDGs). Moreover, they were also to consider whether the municipality's existing efforts were enough (i.e. regarding actions, plans, policies and development). The results from this survey were compiled and discussed in the project group and contributed to an overall view of Växjö's current efforts and potential development areas. The citizens' dialogue

Table 1. Overview of the interviewees, their role in the process of Sustainable Växjö 2030 and their functions in the original organizational setting.

| Role in Sustainable Växjö 2030 | Function in organization | Number of interviewees |
|---|---|---|
| Sustainability coordinators<br>*Project office*<br>*Project group* | Environmental manager<br>Environmental strategist<br>Sustainability strategist | 3 |
| Representatives for the municipality's cross-sectoral processes<br>*Project group* | Managers from different departments or units within the traditional organizational structure | 5 |
| Project leader of Vision 2050<br>*Project group* | Project leader of Vision 2050 | 1 |
| Sustainability manager<br>*Chairman of steering group* | Head of sustainability coordinators | 1 |

consisted of several workshops attended by approximately 1,500 citizens, companies and organizations (Växjö municipality 2019b). The workshops were facilitated by external moderators, but roundtable discussions were led by representatives from the five main processes. The scope of the workshops was broad, but all revolved around what was considered to be important for the attractiveness of living and working in a future Växjö. The citizens' dialogue was a joint event for the SV2030 process, Vision 2050 and the revision of the comprehensive municipal plan. The complete baseline review, including the self-assessment and citizens' dialogue, along with the scan of the internal documents, was compiled in a report. This report constituted the basis for further validation, goal-setting and hence the formulation of the final sustainability programme (SV2030) adopted in 2019 (Växjö municipality 2019a).

## 4. Method

This study has a descriptive and explorative approach since research on SDG localization in municipalities is still a fairly unexplored field. However, previous research on local sustainability management serves as an important foundation. The research design, mainly based on interviews, made it possible to gain a broad understanding of the SDG localization process through analyzing current experiences and reflections on future sustainability management.

This paper is based on interviews with individuals who were practically and actively involved in the baseline review explored in this study in late 2018/early 2019. Interviews were mainly held with representatives in the project group (including the project office; see Table 1) since they were key people in the early phases in Växjö's SDG localization process. The project group was interviewed because it consisted of managers of different departments (i.e. administration; educational; business- and welfare; technical- and spatial planning; culture- and leisure; social services) representing different perspectives. Furthermore, these will play an important role in the operationalization of SV2030 later on. In addition, Växjö's sustainability manager was also interviewed. The sustainability manager was both chairman of the steering group and head of the sustainability coordinators, hence playing an important role in the process at large, and from a management perspective. The interviews were supplemented with information from planning and policy documents, both internal documents (e.g. project

plans and communication material) and external documents (e.g. annual budget), to better understand the development process of SV2030. Additionally, the authors attended a few of the project group's meetings to learn more about how they worked.

The interviews revolved around the SDG localization process, and the questions covered issues such as the respondents' roles and involvement, positive and negative experiences from the process, organizational knowledge and anchoring, integration into existing policy and practice, possible goal conflicts, past experiences from sustainability work and future implementation of SV2030. The interviews were semi-structured with follow-up questions; hence, it gave an opportunity for each respondent to elaborate on his/her responses. All interviews were conducted via video link and the notes from the interviews were sent to the interviewees for validation. Thereafter, the results were presented and discussed at a seminar in Växjö municipality, where representatives from the municipality were invited to discuss and further validate the results. When conducting interviews, there is a risk that the interviewees answer in a specific way to satisfy the researchers, yet this can also be affected by other characteristics of the researchers (such as gender, age and personality) (Bryman 2012). Additionally, conducting interviews via video link can risk complicating the interview, which in combination with only taking notes (i.e. not recording and transcribing) could have led to information loss. However, this is not something that the interviewees reacted to when given the opportunity to validate the results.

The outcomes from the interviews were analyzed using a thematic approach, where identified themes in the material were later analyzed in the light of sustainability implementation, and more specifically strategic planning and management. Given the descriptive approach of this study, having an in-depth single case, the generalizability is limited. Yet, when put into a theoretical context, we believe that the Växjö story could inspire others and contribute to a deeper and nuanced understanding of the complex structures and interrelationships when working with sustainability issues, and more specifically the SDGs, in a municipal organization (cf. Eisenhardt 1989).

## 5.  An integrated approach to sustainability management in Växjö

This section presents the interviewees' reflections from localizing the SDGs. Växjö through the development of the sustainability programme Sustainable Växjö 2030 (SV2030). This description mirrors challenges and good practice that Växjö municipality experienced in their early phases of integrating the SDGs into their policies and practice while broadening their perspective to embrace all sustainability aspects.

### 5.1.  Broadening the scope to sustainability management and confusion regarding the concept of sustainable development

The fact that Växjö municipality has extensive experience in proactive environmental and sustainability management was perceived as a valuable asset in the process of developing the sustainability programme. This long-term engagement was mentioned as a reason for the clear political will, consensus, commitment and identity related to sustainability. Several interviewees reflected that Växjö's previous sustainability management approaches mainly covered the environmental perspective, but now, given the SV2030 process, it became clearer that sustainability concerned all perspectives and all municipal processes and activities, and their interconnections.

The SV2030 process was perceived as more open and coherent compared to similar previous processes in Växjö, and less dependent on the expertise of specific individuals. Several of the interviewees believed that the SV2030 process brought about more comprehensible sustainability management and enhanced a broader systems perspective on municipal activities and the municipality's inherent complexity. It was described as an opportunity to explore the municipality's current sustainability performance by clarifying what was already in place, finding potential gaps regarding sustainability efforts and ensuring that nothing essential was overlooked. Some mentioned that the SV2030 initiative was one of the most ambitious sustainability efforts in Växjö ever. This meant an integrated approach that was expected to create a joint direction and cooperation over organizational silos toward coherent goal formulation, where the SDGs were seen as a means of professionalizing sustainability issues. Yet, it was also reflected that this broad sustainability effort would have happened even without the SDGs and SV2030, although the SDGs were believed to have a catalyst function.

In the SV2030 process, the practical meaning and scope of sustainable development were contested; some were confused, and some reflected on whether "everything is sustainability" indicating that sustainability is all or nothing. Different departments were perceived as having different understandings and expectations of what sustainability means. This was believed to affect how employees interpret policies and strategies and their interlinkages, something that was seen as a potential challenge since it could lead to goal conflicts on an overall municipal level. Another potential challenge observed by the respondents was that the middle management of the municipality might perceive the SDGs and SV2030 as an extra burden and that it might be unclear to them how they relate to other organizational goals. An exemplifying scenario is where the urban planning department wants to build houses in an area, whereas the technical department sees important ecosystem services that should be preserved. In order to avoid such conflicts, it was considered important that goals are politically anchored in a clear way. Another interviewee wished for support from the national level to understand synergies and conflicts and how these might be handled locally. This could help to bridge the perceived challenge in how to handle the built-in complexity and inseparability of the SDGs.

## 5.2. Change is complex and takes time

As described earlier, there were a number of parallel change processes in Växjö. Coordinating all these processes was considered a challenge by some interviewees, one reason being their interdependence. For example, the slowdown of one process would affect the development and progress of others. But the converse is also true, as potential positive synergies between them were also emphasized. Someone suggested that an internal process coordinator for all ongoing processes would have been helpful. Other respondents stated that the SV2030 process was perceived as being managed in an unclear way, or, as put by one respondent: it might be that the coordinators did not have the mandate to govern the process. Some respondents observed that the reorganization through the cross-sectoral management system was problematic for the SV2030 process, since the basic organizational structures had not yet settled. In relation to that comment, one implied that the reorganization should have been carried out before initiating the SV2030 process. Moreover, some suggested that the different timeframes

for the ongoing processes should have been synchronized, for example, the time horizon for Vision 2050 and SV2030. The time aspect was a challenge that several mentioned in their interviews, in the meaning that change takes time. One respondent thought that the timeframe for the SV2030 process was too narrow. Another emphasized the importance of letting change take time, especially when many changes run in parallel. The SV2030 process would have been more efficient without all the restarts, according to one respondent, but these restarts were, at the same time, considered vital for the maturity of the process. Some found it difficult to set aside time for the SV2030 process as the majority (except the coordinators) in the project group had other main responsibilities, since the majority of the project group representatives were managers on different levels in the organization.

Several interviewees noticed changing conditions, both connected to politics and organizational groups involved in the SV2030 process. For example, new directives and changes following political elections were described to affect the conditions for the SV2030 process. This, along with the perceived challenge of members of the political reference group and the steering group of the SV2030 process leaving and new members entering, led to temporary slowdowns and restarts, which affected the continuity. One reflected on the complexity of having several different groups steering the SV2030 process, which led to diverse directives from different parts of the organization. For example, there had been clashes between parallel processes revealing a lack of clarity regarding who was in charge of what and which steering documents were higher in the hierarchy than others. Hence, the many policies and goals of diverse types, importance, content and interconnections in the organization were perceived as problematic. One of the respondents hoped that the ongoing reorganization and review of policy hierarchies would bring about a structure that clarifies interconnections and what goals, policies and plans are superior to others. S/he also saw a need to clarify how operations within the departments and units relate to the different organizational goals and policies. Another mentioned that since different policies and goals may be in conflict, both with each other and SV2030, the integration process requires time to settle. On the other hand, the SV2030 process brought to light the already existing goal conflicts because of the review of policy documents and structures, decision-making processes and other parts of the organization that were not in tandem. However, the interviewees believed that SV2030 would facilitate in sorting and prioritizing their sustainability efforts, even if it would take some time before it is operationalized.

### 5.3. Coordinating cocreation toward SV2030 – the importance of anchoring and clarity

Some project group members said that more clarity on the overall level would have facilitated their understanding of how things were interconnected. They also wished for clearer directions on how to work and what the SV2030 process was expected to result in, but several interviewees described the connection between SV2030 and the cross-sectoral processes as becoming clearer over time. However, the SV2030 process was recognized as setting the cross-sectoral management system into perspective and as a way to test it, which subsequently was believed to stimulate organizational learning and maturity, although one interviewee highlighted a potential risk of the cross-sectoral processes becoming new organizational silos. Several respondents indicated that it was challenging to be a forerunner in SDG localization, of which one stated

that it is difficult to know whether they are doing the right things since they had no one with whom to compare. This, combined with the difficulty to foresee what the work would entail for the municipal departments, made the start of the SV2030 process somewhat ambiguous. Yet, one respondent described it as "learning along the way", since it became clearer through the cooperation on the sustainability self-assessments. These self-assessments were seen as helpful toward making the sustainability work more hands-on and made it possible to concretize the way forward. Several interviewees emphasized the strength in the self-assessments as they contributed to cocreation between middle management and employees when scrutinizing the local challenges. This was also seen as important for building trust and engagement.

At the time of this study, the interviewees expressed diverse opinions regarding how well the SV2030 process was anchored in the municipal organization, yet everyone saw that the SDGs lubricate communication efforts connected to sustainability, both externally and internally. Some interviewees described the initial workshop (in early 2018) as an "eye-opener", where a broad set of employees from different parts and levels of the organization attended. It was described not only as a knowledge-brokering event on SDGs and sustainability, but also as a way to recognize ongoing efforts and gaps connected to the SDGs in the municipal departments. Hence, the members in the project group were considered important brokers in the communication to the wider organization. Someone highlighted the importance of communicating early in the process, but saw the paradox since there were so many uncertainties initially. However, many found SV2030 as well-anchored and communicated in central parts of the organization and amongst those who were involved in the SV2030 process. In other parts of the organization, far away from the classical "office duties" and outside of the city hall, there was insufficient communication and anchoring at the time of this study, for example, amongst employees with more operational duties. The departments' size and functions were also believed to affect the anchoring of the implementation of the SV2030 programme. Some interviewees mentioned that the SV2030 process was not communicated in a clear way initially in the process, specifically regarding expectations and time plan. If formulations had been clearer, then both understanding and operationalization would have run more smoothly, according to one of the interviewees. Someone saw the importance of "packaging" the communication material in a feasible way (i.e. relevant and easy to understand) with regard to the different departments' needs and preconditions. Balancing between when and what to communicate to whom during the process was considered important in order to engage the employees.

The complexity of coordinating the parallel processes, changing conditions and unclear mandates and documenting hierarchies was not only found to hamper the development of the ongoing processes; they all contributed to the anchoring of the SV2030 process. Therefore, even if the many changes made the process a bit less efficient, it made the process better in many aspects and was believed to, in the end, have an overall positive influence on the organization's performance. However, interviewees were attentive to future potential goal conflicts between the SV2030 and other ongoing processes (and between these) once SV2030 is to be implemented in the organization, such as between SV2030, the cross-sectoral management system, goal management system and budget. The connection between SV2030 and the budget still remained unclear to many, and this was considered a challenge since the budget is central to the departments' operations. On the other hand, one noted that there have always been

goal conflicts, also when they were working in the traditional silos (without an out-spoken integrated approach to sustainability) and saw a potential for improvement with a cross-sectoral management system, new goal management system and its connection to the budget. The integrated approach was believed to facilitate prioritization but could, at the same time, balance between perspectives, which would complicate both concretization and the opportunity to make rational priorities. Therefore, it was found important to structure SV2030 in order to visualize how the SDGs, as an inseparable framework, were integrated into the organization to avoid that certain SDGs were singled out and managed separately from others. Another respondent saw a challenge in implementing the SDGs, since it was not considered to be of high priority in their daily work compared to more acute problems such as service delivery and financial imbalances. The SV2030 coordinators hoped that the SV2030 process could shed new light on the municipality's activities, where the closely connected municipal budget is a strategic tool to prevent such imbalances.

### 5.4. *Reflections on preconditions for implementing SV2030*

The majority of the interviewees in the project group were positive and believed that it would be possible to integrate SV2030 into the core of the municipal organization. This was mainly because it was broadly anchored among employees and on a high political level in Växjö municipality. Moreover, SV2030 was developed to be enforced high up in the document hierarchy, meaning that all steering documents would have to relate to SV2030 and that all future plans and policies would be connected to its focus areas. Consequently, finding a feasible model for the document hierarchy and a common level for the goal structure was considered both as a foundation and a challenge for the implementation of SV2030. The competency and knowledge in the municipal organization (both among employees and politicians) were considered to be important factors for the implementation process, in which the coordinators were described as "the engine". One respondent emphasized the importance of having the "right people" involved, both regarding the development and implementation, in order to legitimize the process and facilitate SV2030 having an impact on the organization.

Several respondents stressed political engagement as an important success factor for the SV2030 process and believed it would constitute essential support in its operationalization. Despite this, several respondents stated that the role of the politicians in the SV2030 process still remained unclear. At the time of this study, and in the studied phase of SV2030, the political reference group had the role of a reconciliation group, and to what extent the politicians should be actively involved in the actual phase of the process or how and what information they should be given was considered vague. One respondent, however, saw the roles of politicians clearly: to initiate the process by a political decision and sustain the direction of the process. Several informants emphasized the importance of politicians being well informed and that they understand the benefits, consequences, and results of SV2030. Nevertheless, the interviewees all stressed that material and reports produced along the SV2030 process (such as the baseline review) need to be politically independent and neutral. This is because the politicians are involved later in the process to weigh and prioritize goals for the sustainability programme, which is the product of the whole SV2030 process.

## 6. Discussion

The studied SDG localization process is framed as a strategic planning process, yet studied from a management perspective, since the interviews are based on an organizational perspective on SDG implementation. The aim of this study was to explore SDG localization in a municipal organization having an integrated approach, and the challenges associated with this. As mentioned earlier, having an integrated approach to sustainability management is in this paper described as having a broader systems perspective to sustainability management (as discussed by Emilsson and Hjelm 2009) and trying to fit all parts of the sustainability work into coherency (Valencia *et al*. 2019) – horizontally and vertically. Vertically, in the sense of trying to connect local sustainability efforts to global/national sustainability frameworks whilst aiming to integrate it into local policies, strategies, and practice. Horizontally, cutting through sectors, organizational boundaries, and other potential silos. Localizing these indivisible and global goals introduces a similar challenge as on a national level; hence the challenge of aligning plans and processes to the SDGs whilst keeping the integrity of existing settings (Fourie 2018). In a municipal organization this, as shown in our case, includes contextualization of sustainability and coordination of several already ongoing change processes, organizational settings and existing policies. It also comes with the challenge of operationalizing the SDGs into management systems and budgets and motivating employees across organizational sectors. This paper argues that an integrated approach to SDG localization is indeed a complex undertaking that calls for coherence, dependent on aspects such as structure, leadership and coordination, yet simultaneously flexibility, organizational learning and not least time and timing.

The opposite of having an integrated approach to SDG localization is running sustainability efforts as a separate project, hence, an "add-on" or "cherry-picking" (see Stafford-Smith *et al*. 2017) separate SDGs that for example fit the organizations' already-existing ambitions. It might even be that the SDGs are just a fad, similar to what can be seen in some previous sustainability and environmental efforts in municipalities (Zeemering 2018). Conversely, having an integrated approach means having a wide systems perspective and can be described as a maturing process in municipalities, connected to learning and capacity (Emilsson and Hjelm 2009). Moreover, how strategic planning processes are adopted in municipal organizations is also conditioned by its capacity (Zeemering 2018). Evans *et al*. (2006) identify both committed politicians and officers as influential elements to build institutional capacity and that key individuals play an important role in forwarding such processes. Institutional capacity and integrated approaches are interdependent, or as Valencia *et al*. (2019, 20) suggest, an integrated approach can be facilitated by "the establishment of a high-level strategic coordination/integration unit or committee with a specific cross-sectoral mandate and sufficient powers to drive this agenda". The Växjö case illustrates both the importance and challenge of this, especially through the work of the coordinators. In Växjö, the coordinators were perceived as engines in the SV2030 process, yet their mandate to govern the SV2030 process was contested by some members in the project group. However, these organizational "engines", in combination with the overall knowledge and experience of sustainability work, were seen as enablers as it led to cross-sectoral learning. One important task for the coordinators, is therefore creating an experimental and open environment, hence testing new ways of doing things, yet also having the mandate do so (Wittmayer *et al*. 2016). In terms of SDG localization, the importance of political leadership (Krellenberg *et al*. 2019) and advocacy (Valencia *et al*. 2019) is

discussed and Gustafsson, Hermelin, and Smas (2018) stress that municipalities are policy-driven organizations. Thus, even though sustainability goals are set on a global or national level, the local political ambitions are crucial for operationalization. Comparably, political anchoring was seen as a key enabler for the SV2030 process and its operationalization in the case of Växjö. However, how politicians should be involved in such a process was questioned by some in Växjö.

Zeemering (2018) urges sustainability managers to use the concept of sustainability when shaping strategies, thus creating organizational learning, in order for it to be transformative. The SV2030 process was guided by the seventeen SDGs, translated in co-operation in the cross-sectoral processes. The ambition was for the SV2030 programme to be integrated into existing management, yet it was organized with separate SV2030 project management and testing the cross-sectoral processes. Palm and Algehed (2017) discuss the importance of balancing between having an innovative and flexible setting (often found in projects) and connecting it to existing procedures. Comparably, Wittmayer *et al.* (2016) acknowledge the tension between change and contesting the status quo (structures, plan and control) in municipalities. The Växjö case signals that this is challenging in practice, especially regarding the all-encompassing and integrative SDGs calling for organizational change, thus contesting "business as usual". Furthermore, the respondents pendulated between wanting more clarity (structure) and "learning along the way" (flexibility). Wittmayer *et al.* (2016) describes this as a way to create spaces for cross-sectoral actors to experiment, to collectively find new ways and put their different roles in perspective, hence creating a "fertile ground" for engagement in future change.

In order to implement the SDGs, integrated and collaborative efforts are needed, which from an internal municipal perspective means a cross-sector approach (Valencia *et al.* 2019). This study indicates the importance of cross-sector cooperation when, for example, identifying local sustainability challenges in the project group and in the cross-sectoral processes. The SDGs were described as a framework that facilitates mapping and understanding of sustainability issues across sectors and perspectives through its cooperative approach. However, such a process might not only bring about innovation and learning, but also a question of inclusion (who is involved) when this takes place, and how to forward this knowledge and induce change in following implementation processes. How to engage a broad range of sectors, actors and silos without losing momentum was considered challenging in Växjö. Lack of resources, both economic and human, risks such attempts being non-integrative (Krellenberg *et al.* 2019). However, in Växjö, the direct economic cost of developing SV2030 was not specifically described as a challenge, which can be explained by their long history of political support for sustainability efforts and the fact that Växjö is a relatively large municipality. Yet, the cost for employees "with other main tasks" to engage in such a process in combination with the fact that change and organizational learning takes time was mentioned as a challenge in Växjö. At the time of the study, SV2030 was mainly communicated and anchored in central parts of the organization and amongst the people directly involved in the process, and one challenge that was identified was that of communicating more broadly and in ways that are well-adapted to the receivers both when it comes to content and timing. Although, the individuals involved were seen as important communicators, building trust in the wider organization being key participants of (see e.g. Mishra, Boynton, and Mishra 2014).

As mentioned, the Växjö approach to SDG localization was to build a structural framework. However, Senge *et al.* (2005) stress the importance of not only focusing on the structural issues but to "cultivate a quality of perception that is striving outwards from the whole to the part". We can see this in Växjö as to structure and organization, with SV2030 being developed as an umbrella policy (the whole) and with the cross-sectoral processes (the parts) being involved and contributed to with important perspectives and concrete input to the formulation of SV2030. However, to this point, much emphasis was laid on the structure, whereas it was less clear how the perceptions of those involved in and those who would be affected by SV2030 would change in order to be able to achieve the transformations aimed for in SV2030. Many mentioned that the initial workshop induced a feeling that sustainability concerns all departments and all employees, but was this enough for joining forces and changing perceptions for transformation toward a more sustainable Växjö? According to Senge *et al.* (2005), it is important to understand the larger system, not only as a system that contains different parts but one where the different parts interact and contribute to the larger system. Senge *et al.* (2005) state that this is complicated and that there is a risk that the larger systems remain an abstract and intangible artifact, and when things become too difficult to grasp, one often gives up and goes back and concentrates on the more concrete and detailed parts.

## 7.   Conclusions

The experiences from the Växjö case could inspire other municipalities in sustainability implementation in general and to have an integrated approach to SDG localization in particular. The SDG framework presents an opportunity for municipal organizations to understand and review their organizations through the eyes of the SDGs offering a broad systems perspective to sustainability implementation. Many of the challenges found in earlier research on SDG localization and its predecessors were also found in this study, such as the inherent complexity of sustainability integration, the importance of political support, capacity, inclusivity, and cross-sectoral coordination and management of ongoing efforts and policies, where key individuals with enough mandate can act as drivers. This paper highlights that having an integrated approach to SDG localization provides the opportunity and likewise the challenge of developing coherence and organizational learning. However, it calls for comprehensive coordination of ongoing processes, where flexibility (balancing between projects and processes), timing (between existing processes and organizational changes) and the fact that change takes time, seem to be important components. This leaves one with the following question: who should be involved and when, to bring about learning and engagement (cultivating change), whilst not taking too much time, risking organizational fatigue, or ending up as just another layer in the document hierarchy? The year 2030 is just around the corner and this puts time pressure on such processes; hence municipal organizations risk ending up in a catch 22.

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