

The Sustainable City

Promoting socially sustainable cities through civil dialogue

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“The freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.”

– David Harvey, 2008.

In October 2017, 30 years will have passed since the Brundtland report defined sustainability as consisting of an economic, ecological, and a social dimension.¹ Although the three dimensions are equally weighted in theory, the social dimension has been de-prioritised in practice up until recently,

¹ Brundtland et al. *Our Common Future*. World Commission on Environment and Development. 1987; McKenzie, Stephen. Social Sustainability: Towards Some Definitions. *Hawke Research Institute Working Paper Series* No 27. 2004. p. 2; Murphy, Kevin. The Social Pillar of Sustainable Development: a Literature Review and Framework for Policy Analysis. *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy* 8.1. 2012. p. 15; Weingartner, Carina and Moberg, Åsa. Exploring Social Sustainability: Learning from Perspectives on Urban Development and Companies and Products. *Sustainable Development* 22.2: 122-133. 2014. p. 1-2.

leaving it under-researched and generally lacking in specificity.² Previous research highlights two potential reasons for this de-prioritisation, one being that it is more challenging to find indicators for the social dimension and the other that the definition of social sustainability has been too vague. Both reasons contribute to a stated difficulty to understand as well as work with the social dimension, potentially causing it to fall behind the other two.³

Although the previously stated arguments are reasonable, a universal definition of social sustainability might not be desirable. Arriving at a viable definition of social sustainability is a challenge that is made harder as a key issue is the need to adapt a potential definition to the relevant local context.⁴

Authors argue that given the need for adaptation and the fact that contexts can differ significantly between countries, regions, or even neighbourhoods within the same city⁵, it would appear necessary and beneficial to instead let key themes or values underpin the dimension.⁶ This article argues that social sustainability underpinned by human rights values could aid in mitigating risks when adapting a definition of social sustainability, such as the definition reproducing the values of the agent using it or that values inherent to human

² Colantonio, Andrea and Dixon, Tim. *Urban Regeneration & Social Sustainability: Best Practice from European Cities*. Wiley-Blackwell. London. 2010. p. 4; Weingartner and Moberg. 2014. p. 4.

³ McKenzie, Stephen. 2004. p.6-8; Littig, Beate and Griesler, Erich. Social Sustainability: a Catchword Between Political Pragmatism and Social Theory. *International journal of sustainable development* 8.1-2:65-79. 2005. p. 67.

⁴ McKenzie. 2004. p. 16-17; Weingaertner and Moberg. 2014. p. 2; Abrahamsson, Hans. *Städer som nav för en globalt hållbar samhällsutveckling eller slagfält för sociala konflikter [Cities as hubs for a global sustainable development of society or battlefields of social conflicts]*. Kommission för ett socialt hållbart Malmö (diskussionsunderlag). 2012. p. 39.

⁵ Colantonio and Dixon. 2010. p. 4.

⁶ Bromley, Rosemary DF, Andrew R. Tallon and Colin J. Thomas. City Centre Regeneration through Residential Development: Contributing to Sustainability. *Urban Studies* 42.13: 2407-2429. 2005. p.11; McKenzie. 2004. p. 8.

rights are lost. Furthermore, this article will bridge the aspects of making the social dimension of sustainability more tangible while at the same time ensuring that values inherent in human rights are in fact *not* lost. In doing so, it investigates the potential of utilising human rights-based civil dialogue as an indicator of social sustainability and subsequently a tool for promoting socially sustainable cities.

Placed in Sweden, the focus of this study is a process of adopting a new strategy for civil dialogue in the Swedish City of Lund, in May 2016. The primary source material consists of three documents that make up part of the groundwork that led to this adoption, as well as the adopted strategy itself.

Cities and civil dialogue

The Brundtland report specifically highlighted the significance of cities as battleground for sustainability challenges, an insight that is currently confirmed both by an increasing urbanisation trend that is projected to place over two thirds of the world's population in cities by 2030, and the recently adopted United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁷

Furthermore, contemporary research on socially sustainable cities support the position of this article when affirming that inclusiveness, participation and the ability of inhabitants to influence city development are common denominators of social sustainability in cities on an international level as well as in a Swedish national context.⁸ Participation in general elections, which is

⁷ Dempsey, Nicola et al. The Social Dimension of Sustainable Development: Defining Urban Social Sustainability. *Sustainable development* 19.5: 289-300. 2011. p. 6; United Nations Population Fund. *UNFPA state of the world population 2007: unleashing the potential of urban growth*. United Nations Population Fund. 2007. p. 1; United Nations. United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. *Goal 11*. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11> (Accessed 2016-04-06).

⁸ United Nations. United Nations Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. Goal 11. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11> (Accessed 2016-04-03); The Public Health Agency of Sweden. Democratic Participation

a common measurement of citizen participation, does not suffice in itself and there is a need for increased inclusion of citizens in local-level politics.⁹ People's right to be able to decide or affect their own circumstances and influence and participate in society without discrimination is one of the most fundamental aspects of a human rights perspective. Thus, social sustainability in cities is a matter of human rights.¹⁰

Civil dialogue is a method that is used to involve citizens and increase their participation, and is described as a way for cities or municipalities to involve citizens in a continuous and consistent way to strengthen the social dimension of sustainability as well as local democracy. There is a common understanding that by involving citizens in matters other than general elections, cities can counteract segregation and social division of the city.¹¹

Furthermore, the general population's declining political interest in combination with increased political influence from powerful actors within the private sector poses a significant threat to the ability of citizens to make

[Demokratisk delaktighet]. <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/om-folkhalsomyndigheten/folkhalsopolitiska-mal/> (Accessed 2016-04-07); Marsal-Llacuna, Maria-Lluïsa. City Indicators on Social Sustainability as Standardization Technologies for Smarter (Citizen-Centered) Governance of Cities. *Social Indicators Research*. 1-24. 2015. p. 4; Buser, Martine and Koch, Christian. Tales of the Suburbs? – The Social Sustainability Agenda in Sweden through Literary Accounts. *Sustainability* 6.2: 913-934. 2014. p. 914.

⁹ Marsal-Llacuna, Maria-Lluïsa. 2015. p. 4; Buser and Koch. 2014. p. 914; Weingartner and Moberg. 2014. p. 13; Abrahamsson, Hans. *Makt och Dialog i rättvisa och socialt hållbara svenska städer [Power and Dialogue in just and socially sustainable cities]*. Mistra Urban Futures. Göteborg. 2013. p. 12, 21.

¹⁰ Sida. Rättighetsperspektivet i Sidas arbete [The human rights perspective in Sida's work]. <http://www.sida.se/Svenska/Samarbetsparter/resurser/metod-och-verktyg/rattighetsperspektivet-i-sidas-arbete/> (Accessed 2016-05-26); Abrahamsson. 2013. p. 8.

¹¹ Regeringens skrivelse 2013/14:61. En politik för en levande demokrati [Politics for a thriving democracy]. 2013-12-12. p. 28-29.

their claims.¹² Civil dialogue is showing significant potential to reach and involve vulnerable or marginalized groups that might lack channels to raise issues that are important to them, and are unable to affect their own situation in the political arena. Along with increasing globalisation and urbanisation, cities are also becoming more culturally diverse which further demonstrates the importance of civil dialogue to include all citizens and their perspectives, which could reduce discrimination in regards of political access and influence.¹³

Introducing the City of Lund

Social sustainability is often discussed in relation to countries categorised as “developing”, where the government might be struggling to meet the basic needs of their citizens. In cities and urban areas where challenges of that character exist, there is likely less capacity to work with inclusion and participation in processes other than general elections, such as civil dialogue. Although initiatives like that in the City of Lund might be conducted in these countries, the challenge of establishing a functioning and inclusive strategy for civil dialogue will most likely be more challenging in a “developing” country than in a country categorised as “developed”. As the theoretical approach in this thesis will be made up by an ideal type city where all inhabitants are included in decision making in urban development matters, the City of Lund, which is a frontrunner in regards of the ecological dimension of sustainability¹⁴, appears to be a city with potential to meet the targets presented in the theoretical approach.

¹² Abrahamsson. 2013. p. 21, 23.

¹³ Abrahamsson. 2013. p. 20-21.

¹⁴ World Wild Fund for Nature. Earth Hour City Challenge.

<http://www.wwf.se/wwfs-arbete/hallbara-stader/one-planet-city-challenge/1599862-earth-hour-city-challenge-2016> (Accessed 2016-05-27); Svahn, Görel. Lund kan bli årets svenska klimatstad [Lund can become climate city of the year]. *Sydsvenskan*. 2016-04-26.

During the analysis, the fact that the documents are produced by a City of Lund official, which poses a risk of them having a political angle representing the current political situation, has been considered. Although the City of Lund is the subject of the study, however, the political context is made less relevant as the aim is to investigate the potential of promoting socially sustainable cities through civil dialogue anchored in human rights values *in general*. The aim is not to investigate its usefulness in the City of Lund specifically, in which case the political context would have been much more significant to consider. City of Lund officials have been contacted and included in this study in order to gain insight into the activities of the organisation as well as to provide access to relevant material. The study was not commissioned by the City of Lund and no monetary or other benefits have been offered or received and the City of Lund has not affected the results of this study in any way.

Theoretical perspective – The Right to the City and the Just City

The concept *The Right To the City* originates from Henri Lefebvre, but it is David Harvey's interpretation and development of *The Right To the City* that will be used as inspiration for an ideal type city in this article. In combination with Fainstein's theory of *The Just City*, the theoretical components will form an ideal type later used in the analysis and discussion. Harvey expresses the very essence of his theory when he states that:

The right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake

ourselves and our cities is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.¹⁵

He positions the opportunity to shape the urban area or city in which one lives as a human right and frames the right to the city as more of a collective right – a right that the inhabitants of a city, as a group, can claim. He thereby shifts the focus of the right to the city from revolving around individuals' access to resources of the city to incorporating more of a form of protection against having policies or decisions regarding the shaping of the city imposed on them. Harvey then continues to define the underlying issue of today's political sphere:

The right to the city, as it is now constituted, is far too narrowly confined, in most cases in the hands of a small political and economic elite who are in the position to shape the city more and more after their own particular heart's desire.¹⁶

The above statement is interpreted as Harvey expressing a call for increased involvement of all city inhabitants, shifting the power balance and redistributing power to all city inhabitants. Specifically describing what the right to the city is, and what claiming that right would entail, Harvey's position can be summarised as follows:

To claim the right to the city in the sense I mean it here is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made [...]¹⁷

¹⁵ Harvey, David. The Right to the City. *New Left Review* 53: 23-40. 2008. p. 23.

¹⁶ Harvey. 2008. p. 38.

¹⁷ Harvey. 2008. p. 23-24.

[...] greater democratic control [...] establishing democratic management [...] constitutes the right to the city.¹⁸

The Just City constitutes the second, and more operational, part of the theoretical base of this article. *The Just City* is a theory of urban justice in relation to public policy and decision-making developed by Susan Fainstein. As described by Fainstein herself the aim is “[...] to develop an urban theory of justice and to use it to evaluate existing and potential institutions and programs”¹⁹, which is what this article will use it for. She argues that justice in urban development should rest on the three concepts *equity*, *democracy*, and *diversity*. Realising that these values are not always compatible, but can in fact be opposed to each other, she argues that they should be weighted in that same order. In practice, this weighting has the implications that when *equity*, *democracy*, and *diversity* might oppose each other, decision- and policy makers should always prioritise *equity* over *democracy* and *diversity*, and *democracy* over *diversity*.

She furthermore addresses current trends in the urban justice debate by discussing the matters of *justice in relation to efficiency*, *justice as process and outcome*, and *justice in relation to specificity and universality* which offer guiding principles on how to further just cities. In short, Fainstein highlights the fact that one cannot strive for efficiency, for example, at the expense of justice, that a seemingly just process not always guarantees a just outcome, and that even though justice can be dependent on historical, social and geographical context (specificity), there is a general consensus on some basic values of justice which can be argued to be universal (universality).

Fainstein uses capabilities as an indicator of urban justice. Originally outlined by Amartya Sen, *The Capabilities Approach* was developed by Martha Nussbaum into an extensive list of basic capabilities needed by every human individual in order to function.²⁰ In Fainstein’s theory the inclusion of the

¹⁸ Harvey. 2008. p. 37.

¹⁹ Fainstein, Susan. *The Just City*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca. N.Y. 2010. p. 5.

²⁰ Fainstein. 2010. p. 54-55.

capabilities approach means that judgements on whether an urban policy is just or not would be based on whether they contributed to enhancing capabilities of disadvantaged groups²¹, further strengthening the relevance of Fainstein's theory in relation to human rights.

Civil Dialogue in the City of Lund

A qualitative *strengths, weaknesses, opportunities* and *threats* (SWOT) analysis was conducted in order to derive a result from the primary source material of the study. *Strengths*, in the SWOT analysis indicated aspects within the primary material that “measures up” to the ideal type, as specified in the section on theoretical perspective, while aspects were classified as *Weaknesses* if in need of significant improvement to close in on the ideal type. *Opportunities* were aspects or areas that might not be existing or outspoken within the primary material but nevertheless could be identified as potentially improving and strengthening aspects of it. *Threats* indicated potential obstacles that might not be present or outspoken in the material but can be identified as potentially weakening aspects.

As the primary material represents the City of Lund's process of adopting a new strategy for civil dialogue, it is not only the different aspects of the strategy in themselves that are of interest for the analysis, but also how these develop and change in said process. The analysis and discussion of the study will therefore be divided in two parts. Part one, which will be divided into identified areas of relevance, describes the findings in the work leading up to the adoption of a new strategy for civil dialogue and part two relates those findings to the final strategy.

Dialogue purpose and topics

In the early work of the process towards the adoption of the new strategy for civil dialogue, the main purpose were expressed as finding out what citizens

²¹ Fainstein. 2010. p. 55.

think and want, what their priorities are and how they want the city to develop.²² In a small fraction of the civil dialogue initiatives the purpose appears to have been somewhat superficial, simply wanting to make citizens feel as if they were involved in city development.²³ Applying a wide purpose implies a serious interest in knowing what citizens think and wish for, thus aligning well with the ideal type. Somewhat further along the process in adopting the new strategy, however, the City of Lund begin to argue for more specific topics and questions in dialogue activities, the main argument being that broader themes are more resource intensive.²⁴

Suggesting more narrow topics and questions for civil dialogue activities was both poorly supported in their own investigations and goes against the principle of never compromising justice to the advantage of efficiency. More narrow topics could furthermore mean that civil dialogue activities are strictly limited, and that inhabitants are unable to raise questions about matters that are important to them, thereby excluding certain groups of citizens and opinions which would undermine diversity as well as democracy. Additionally, topics and dialogue activities tend to have a short term focus, much in line with Fainstein's argument that politicians and officials are driven by short term, competitive thinking.²⁵ In combination with arguments for downscaling of resource use the City of Lund undeniably appears to favor efficiency over justice. Nevertheless, the purpose of the dialogues as well as topics and questions offer an opportunity to close in on the ideal type if modified and improved so that it allows for inhabitants to bring up their own concerns and provide broader themes where all inhabitants are encouraged to participate and raise issues.

²² Lunds kommun [Lund municipality]. *Mapping of civil dialogue activities in the City of Lund between the years 2013-2015*. 2016-01-26. p. 17-18, 21, 23, 28.

²³ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Mapping of civil dialogue*. p. 47.

²⁴ Lunds kommun [Lund municipality]. *Compilation of civil dialogue activities in the City of Lund*, KS 2016/0173, 2016-01-26. p. 11.

²⁵ Fainstein. 2010. p. 81.

Target groups and participation

In a majority of the civil dialogue activities, the target group is everyone living in the area of the city which the activity concerns.²⁶ In theory, this is a fact that would be ideal, but in reality only a very small percentage of concerned citizens participated in the activities despite the target group being everyone.²⁷ In its present form this is definitely a weakness, but is deemed an opportunity as it possesses potential to improve the percentage of participating inhabitants, in which case it would transform into a strength.

A minor issue, however, is the fact that there are no statistics on who is participating in the dialogue activities or to which societal group they “belong” which in turn means that there is no way of knowing if marginalized groups such as children, disabled people or newly arrived immigrants have been represented in the civil dialogue activity. In relation to the ideal type this is a threat as the theoretical approach highlights the importance of ensuring that minority or marginalized groups are included in deliberations. Information regarding who participates could also ensure greater diversity among participants and a more democratic process. In the next phase of the process, the City of Lund draws this same conclusion and states that there is a need for analysis of who the participants in the civil dialogue activities are to determine if specific measures are needed to reach groups that are not sufficiently represented. They furthermore address the fact that there might be a need for different methods, such as e-democracy, to reach different groups.²⁸ In that regard, children and newly arrived immigrants are highlighted specifically,²⁹ a fact that offers potential to increase diversity and broaden democracy. Simultaneously, however, the City of Lund unfortunately shows a tendency to again prioritize efficiency over justice,

²⁶ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Mapping of civil dialogue*. p. 21, 24.

²⁷ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Mapping of civil dialogue*. p. 21, p. 23.

²⁸ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Compilation of civil dialogue*. p. 9.

²⁹ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Compilation of civil dialogue*. p. 10.

which could be argued to be a sign of them primarily searching for more *efficient* methods.

Focus on process

The City of Lund argues that they are in need of an established process for civil dialogue. The reason, they state, is that an established process would make the conducting of the civil dialogue easier.³⁰ Furthermore, they argue that having an established process for civil dialogue would ensure its quality, as important or relevant parts of what should constitute the process then would not be lost.³¹

In relation to the ideal type, *focus on process* has been deemed a threat. The City of Lund should not argue for a process to make the civil dialogue *easier*, which shows how they choose efficiency over justice once again. Furthermore, they claim that establishing a process would ensure the quality of the civil dialogue, and that might be true to a certain extent. However, although recognising the importance of a just process, the ideal type puts greater emphasis on making sure that the outcome of the civil dialogue activity is just. A seemingly just process, it is argued, does not necessarily correspond to a just outcome.

In addition to that, having an established process does not, as we have seen, necessarily mean that important values constituting justice or ensuring that vulnerable groups are not harmed by its outcome is guaranteed. This article has found several weaknesses and threats that would be likely to be included and cemented in that established process.

The strategy for civil dialogue

The first point of the strategy deals with the purpose of civil dialogue. In that first point, the strategy states (in my translation from Swedish):

³⁰ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Compilation of civil dialogue*. p. 11.

³¹ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Compilation of civil dialogue*. p. 11.

Civil dialogue should be conducted when politicians and officials have a need to find out what the inhabitants' opinions and priorities are. When there is a proposal that directly affect the inhabitants, and when politicians have not yet taken a position, civil dialogue should always be considered.³²

Some of the initial strengths that have been found within the primary material have clearly been lost when translated into an actual strategy. The first point of the strategy does not incorporate the perspective of inhabitants as it states that civil dialogue activities should be conducted when officials and politicians have a need to know what inhabitants think, and not necessarily when inhabitants have a need to raise issues that are important to them. The strategy thereby limits the ability of inhabitants to influence decision-making and policy development, in contrary to the whole point of the ideal type. There is an imminent risk that when civil dialogue activities are actually conducted, they will be limited and selective.

Continuing on the topic of dialogue purpose, the second point of the strategy highlights the importance of clarity (in my translation from Swedish)

The civil dialogue should have a clear purpose and the result should be fed back to the inhabitants that have participated in dialogue activities. The opportunity of citizens to influence should be clearly stated at the start of every civil dialogue.³³

The above undoubtedly appears to be a result of the City of Lund's continuous prioritization of efficiency over securing justice. A clear purpose might not be an issue in itself, but is so because of the fact that the City of Lund consistently has argued for more narrow dialogue topics which likely

³² Lunds kommun [Lund municipality]. *Official Letter*. KS 2016/0173. 2016-03-16. p. 5.

³³ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Official Letter*. p. 5.

implicates that “clear purpose” will be interpreted as more specific questions. The second point of the strategy therefore limits citizens’ ability to influence long term development and policies.

The importance of listening to inhabitants and letting them raise issues and matters that are important to them is brought up in the third point of the strategy (in my translation from Swedish):

It is important to let inhabitants raise issues that are important to them through different channels. Digital channels should be used primarily.³⁴

The fact that the City of Lund specifically highlights that it is important to allow for inhabitants to raise issues that are important to them is positive in general. It is remarkable, however, that they argue for primary use of digital channels as there is no basis for claiming that digital channels would be preferable to other channels when it comes to engaging with inhabitants.³⁵ That they nevertheless choose to promote digital channels provides reason to assume that they, again, prioritize efficiency over securing a just process and outcome, which goes against the ideal type. Creating a separate channel for inhabitants that wish to raise issues that are important to them appears to be a way of the City of Lund to guard themselves against the fact that they aim to narrow topics and questions when conducting a civil dialogue activity. Having a separate channel for inhabitants to raise other issues would then work as justifying narrow topics in civil dialogues.

Point number four discusses responsibility for the result of the civil dialogue (in my translation from Swedish):

³⁴ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Official Letter*. p. 5.

³⁵ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Mapping of civil dialogue*. p. 48.

The civil dialogue does not need to end in agreement. The final responsibility and decision making always lies with politicians who have the overall responsibility for political considerations.³⁶

The fourth point will not be discussed to any significant extent, as that would require further investigation. What can be deduced, though, is that there could be two reasons for why the City of Lund would guard themselves against having to go with claims made by inhabitants. It could either be in order for them to be able to ensure that the outcome of the civil dialogue is just or because they want to ensure that they are not forced to listen to claims made by inhabitants. The intent is left undiscovered until implementation however, and the topic is better left without speculation.

The fifth point mentions tools for civil dialogue in order to reach groups that normally does not participate, and the sixth point targets vulnerable groups in particular (in my translation from Swedish):

Different methods and tools for civil dialogue should be used for reaching inhabitants that usually do not participate in civil dialogues or contact the City of Lund organization through other channels.³⁷

When civil dialogue is utilized there should be a focus on children and young people's ability to participate.³⁸

In relation to the ideal type, the above points are positive as they aim at including more inhabitants in civil dialogue activities. Furthermore, it would increase diversity in participation as well as promote a more democratic and just process where previously unrepresented, vulnerable groups could participate. In addition to that it chooses justice over efficiency. However, the

³⁶ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Official Letter*. p. 5.

³⁷ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Official Letter*. 2016-03-16. p. 5.

³⁸ Lunds kommun [Lund Municipality]. *Official Letter*. 2016-03-16. p. 6.

point should specifically mention and include other potentially vulnerable groups, such as newly arrived immigrants and people with disabilities.

The Sustainable City?

By applying *The Right to the City* and *The Just City* as ideal type to the City of Lund's process towards adopting a new strategy for civil dialogue, this article has investigated and shown how civil dialogue underpinned by a human rights perspective on social sustainability in an urban development context could be used to mitigate the weaknesses and threats, enhance strengths and exploit opportunities.

Having established that, civil dialogue can undoubtedly be used as a tool to promote social sustainability and thereby serve as an indicator of human rights-based social sustainability in an urban development context. As such, it certainly does not appear farfetched to further claim that civil dialogue could be used to make the social dimension more tangible and thereby promote a more equal weighting of the three sustainability dimensions and further the sustainable city.

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