Local coordination across structures – insights from a project for collaborative innovation in a public organization

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Abstract

With collaborative innovation as main theoretical base the paper discusses current insights from an ongoing municipal project on how to organize for social sustainability. The research rests on a participatory design, where the main empirical material for this paper consists of interviews and discussions with a development projects group members and group managers. The study concludes that the project do not fulfil the requirements for collaborative innovation so far, but instead gives an example for how public organizations can create local coordination across structures. Reasons for this limited advance is, according to the themes of this study, a diverging understanding of organizational needs between organizational levels, lack of priority and support, influence from existing structures and, most vital, a demarcation to involve only personnel from public organization at the core of the project. In all, the project has come to handle social sustainability as an organizational problem rather than a societal problem where many other actors more naturally would be involved. There are though advances that partly move into the direction of collaborative innovation, where the paper ends with some reflection upon how this can be achieved. From the process of analysing the paper also have used the division between outer flexibility and inner flexibility as well as verbal priority and action priority, which are presented as candidate theoretical contributions.

Keywords (2-5)

Collaborative innovation, New organizational forms, Public organizations, Social sustainability, Sweden (inner/outer flexibility, verbal/action priority)
Theoretical background and introduction

Public organization is currently characterized by a strong influence of New Public Management (NPM) which emphasises accountability in public structures (Hood, 1995; Kettl, 1997) but also more subtle ideas of indirect rule through New Public Governance (NPG). Criticism of these arrangements is spreading, but without any strong alternatives developing (Lindberg, Czarniawska, & Solli, 2015). This is unfortunate as new knowledge and new practices based on the particular logic surrounding public organizations are necessary (Osborne & Brown, 2005; Osborne & Strokosch, 2013).

Innovation in the structures and processes of the public organization is thus called for. The public organization is innovatively an exciting unit of study since it on one hand shows a good ability to innovate in terms of, for example, introducing new control systems taken from private organizations, and, on the other hand, display an inability to innovate through continuously adjusting processes to the changing needs of citizens (Hartman, 2011; Lindberg et al., 2015; Windrum & Koch, 2008). In line with these findings Andreasson and Winge (2009) state that there are no clear overall objectives, no requirements or incentives to encourage core activities in municipalities and county councils to be innovative except in a small and limited scale. The introduction of what has been known as innovation procurement in several Swedish municipalities can be seen as an innovation in itself, but at the same time this particular measure also indicate that many public organizations are unable to innovate their own processes or that they purposefully have moved this responsibility to their procurement partners (Andreasson & Winge, 2009; Edquist & Zabala-Iturriagagoitia, 2012; Georghiou, Edler, Uyarra, & Yeow, 2014; Knutsson & Thomasson, 2014; Uyarra, Edler, Garcia-Estevez, Georghiou, & Yeow, 2014). Adding to this, in a previous study (Wihlman, Hoppe, Wihlman, & Sandmark, 2016), we concluded that public employees do take several initiatives for innovations, but in the lack of a public innovation support systems, these initiatives often stay local and do not spread systematically.

A suggestion for how to proceed towards new organizational forms and processes post NPM comes from Bommert (2010) who discusses possibilities to supplement bureaucracies with an innovative, network-based public organization where public officials together with others coordinate mutual resources. In order to reach this state, called collaborative innovation by Bommert, the public organization needs to (p. 28):

1. develop the capacity to explore its innovation needs. These needs might be detected inside or outside of the public organization and top-down or bottom-up.
2. build the capability to look across and outside of the organization, in order to identify innovation resources,
3. be able to motivate and enable actors to apply their resources, in order to identify innovation resources, and
4. coordinate the application of resources for the innovation of public value.

A project for moving in this direction, although not framed as innovation, was initiated by The City1 in 2015, a municipality in Sweden with approx. 150,000 inhabitants. It was the result of a strategic discussion addressing a society in constant change where the increasing complexity was deemed hard to meet with existing organizational structure and means. The municipalities current dependence on the Purchaser-Provider-Model

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1 The name of the municipality has been exchanged in order to decrease the visibility of the actual unit of study in the text.
(PPM), implemented in the late 1990s, was also deemed unsuitable for meeting these new needs. Instead, the municipality wanted to become more flexible and find other ways of quickly coordinating resources from different departments, answering to different local demands where the individual public servant was given coordinating powers. There was also a pressing need for involving other organizations and recourses, outside the municipality’s control, in future organizational initiatives. Leading this development, two different pilot groups was formed in the beginning of 2016 with the mission to find new ways of organizing for social sustainability in two different residential areas. In the autumn of 2016 they were moving from planning and structuring towards common action.

**Aim**

Given this background, one may ask if these two project groups are on their way towards establishing something new, maybe even moving into collaborative innovation? At least, there should be some initial experiences from the formative stages of the project that could be used in assessing the municipality’s advances into new organizational forms. Hence, the aim of the paper has been phrased to extract preliminary insights from the two pilot groups and assess the municipality’s advances towards collaborative innovation.

**Method**

As base for the presentation and discussion in this paper the researcher has followed the development and deployment of the pilot projects two work groups. Through a participatory design, the research is developed in dialogue, revolving around a surge for knowledge on how to create new effective organizational forms and work patterns. The design complies with the call for more in-depth empirical studies of public change processes, expressed by (Kuipers et al., 2014).

The research is theoretically quite open, but draws on employer driven innovation (EDI) as well as organizational space and boundaries for developing the analysis. This paper though is more concerned with extracting themes from the empirical material deemed interesting for meeting the stated purpose of this paper.

The participative approach can in this research be described as an abductive effort to parallel theoretical and empirical knowledge (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, 2014) for developing interesting knowledge (Weick, 1989). The method takes advantage of all possible ideas for identifying latent aspects in order to theorize (Weick, 1995) about the findings. What also distinguishes this and many other participative research research projects is a dependence on a democratically based process where participants are invited to become co-creators of questions and analysis in order to enhance research and social relevance (Holmstrand, 2006; Johansson & Lindhult, 2008). This is something that harmonizes well with public organizations’ specific conditions, which as Osborne and Strokosch (2013) points out is a most important marker to differentiate it from private organizations. As a side note, the method can also be seen as a practical application of collaborative innovation theories concerning the development of both practical and theoretical knowledge, but that is another paper.

Contextual and specific material and data were simultaneously collected through interviews, observations and dialogue at three levels in the host organization, The City
municipality. The levels were strategic, group management and group members, corresponding to the initiation and growth of the relationships between the researcher and the public organization. Trustful relationships have (March 2017) been built over two years at strategic level respectively one and a half year at group management level and nine months at group level, in order to lay a foundation for candid conversations. Six meetings with the group managers during 2016 was recorded and transcribed, as well as a semi structured interview with each of the two group managers in December 2016. This was complemented by attendance to two group meetings (documented through field notes) and recorded and transcribed semi structured interviews with eight of the total of eleven group members (two declined and one was indisposed). In general an interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes where all personal interviews revolved around each individual’s present working situation, experiences from change initiatives in the public organization and the project so far, ending with expectations on the future of the project.

The transcribed interviews were coded and initially analysed using the Atlas.ti software. Initial findings were presented, discussed and developed at a complementary meeting with the two groups in February 2017 whereafter the research now (March 2017) has moved into a more stochastic discussion with managers and group members when and where they express a desire to meet, share and develop experiences and ideas. Built on what’s presented in this paper, three different meetings are also set at strategic and managerial level for elonging the study, apply for extra funding as well as open other research collaborations.

This paper relies mainly on the transcribed interviews from the group members and group managers, as these were focused on the novel task of taking initiatives for new organizational action, whereas the group managers main concern has been to make this possible. Additional information has been extracted from municipality and group documents (such as web pages, power points and reports), field notes and e-mail conversations.

**Empirical findings and analysis**

This empirical section concentrates on findings and analysis, where the empirical material has been used to evoke interesting thoughts in order to theorize on the subject matter (Weick, 1989, 1995). The section is divided into three subsections, each building on previous subsections.

- The first subsection is an introduction of the project at The City, giving an contextual description of the circumstances that have guided the selection of members of the two project groups and their mission, but also giving a background to what was discussed at the interviews.
- The second subsection concerns preliminary inductive themes that arise from the material. It follows an emerging order, not restricted to a certain theory or specific preconceived ideas of application, although the public organization is used as an important reference point. This part will primarily answer to the first part of the stated aim, which is to extract preliminary insights from the two pilot groups.
- The third section instead rests on a preconceived analytical model in form of the four expressed needs for collaborative innovation (Bommert, 2010). The four
needs are used to select and sort empirical data in order to assess the municipality’s advances towards collaborative innovation, thus answering to the second part of the stated aim.

(Depending on the reception at the conference its possible to use the divide between bullet two and three in order to split this paper in two, but for time being their both part of the same whole.)

**A project for Social Sustainability**

Social sustainability (Social hållbarhet) has become a most central topic for The City, and is described as one out of four prioritized development areas, where the other three are knowledge and competence, climate and housing development. Social sustainability in turn is communicated as the sum of Social trust (Tillit), Social inclusion (Jämlikhet) and Social mobility (Dynamik), as seen in the figure below.

**Figure 1: Social sustainability - a prioritized development area** *(The City, 2016c)*

In order to move towards this vision, the municipality agreed to form a pilot project for exploring how this could be done. The project was decided upon in 2015 and run from the beginning of 2016 until the end of 2018 … or longer, which I’ll come back to later.

The two groups consists of five respectively six members (February 2017). A group manager heads each group, where the two managers work tightly together and share the same office. Noticeably, while forming the two groups the municipality also enforced an unexpected saving program as new calculations had shown that if nothing is done the municipality will run with a yearly deficit of about €10.000.000 (100.000.000 SEK) a year *(The City, 2016a)*. This might have influenced the project in more than one way, as the project also is supposed to find ways of saving money in the long term, according to one of the group managers.

Each groups mission is to find new ways of working across formal structures in order to create social sustainability, where each group is targeted towards a specific residential area, each with known social problems. The group members come from different departments, both central and local, encompassing e.g. social workers, employment officers, sports and leisure management and cultural workers. They all have been given
8 hours a week to work with the project, which means that the rest of a normal 40 hours working week, they continue to reside in their original workplace. There are no members in the groups who have an original workplace outside the municipality.

There is no general reason why these specific employees have been chosen for the project, instead there are several contextual reasons. What can be read into the interviews is that several of those engaged use to participate in these kinds of projects, a fact which also is known at their original workplace. There are also utterances in the interviews that some of their colleagues were relieved when they in turn didn’t have to participate, that someone else was chosen. But there are other reasons as well. One person just came back from paternity leave, and thus was available for the project without too much restructuring of other work tasks. Another person is manager of another department, who expressed that he couldn’t spare any of his staff, so he volunteered himself (but also aired concerns that he had problems of prioritizing the project). The two managers of the project were on the other hand deliberately chosen as they had long working experiences within the municipality, had worked with similar questions before and also displayed personal qualities in organizing explorative work.

**Inductive themes**

This section is build from the themes evolving from the coding of interviews. The selection below stems from an assessment of the interest they provoked and not from how often a certain theme was touched upon or the amount of time spent discussing it at the interviews. Each section underneath vary in length depending on aspects touched upon and the richness of the material supporting each theme.

**On continuity, change and the difference between inner and outer flexibility**

This is the most interesting theme by far in the material as it highlights several tensions within the The City. The whole project started with an expressed concern at strategic level that the public organization needs to become more flexible in meeting new demands from citizens and a more complex societal context with the intention of creating social sustainability. From the interviews it’s instead clear that social sustainability in action does not rest on what I here label as outer flexibility primarily but on personal continuity between public servants and specific individuals who are inclined for social unrest and possibly criminality. Flexibility is present, but not in the relationship. Instead flexibility is directed inwards, towards the host organization. This flexibility, that I label inner flexibility, is displayed at the individual public servant when he or she acts to muster resources and twist existing organization in order to maintain continuity in their work and their relationships. Outer flexibility can also be associated with what an organization does as it needs to meet a world in change whereas inner flexibility can be associated with how it is done as action needs to meet an organization in change.

A reason for this divide on flexibility might be that depending on perspective social sustainability is interpreted in different ways. In more central positions, it’s about the society as a whole where certain societal institutions are upheld through an adaptive public organization. The practice in the field, on the other hand, instead focuses on individual citizens, struggling to keep them inside the boarders of a sustainable society. The words are the same but the context give different meanings to the understanding. One might agree on the official formal text that state the mission, but actually disagree
on what it means. One can also note an interesting tension between the concept of sustainability (long term lasting stability in a leading aspect) and the concept of flexibility (short term changes in possibly several subordinate aspects), which might be a theme to dwell more upon later.

As touched upon, the data suggests that there are important alterations in how different positions within the public organization perceive and relate to the organizational context. At more central levels, distanced from fieldwork, the discussion becomes more abstract where major trends in the population relating to education, unemployment, integration etc. are dealt with as structural problems. This is where the idea of a more flexible organization originates (but then concerned with outer flexibility and not that much inner flexibility). At the distributed level, at the rim of the organization, all these trends are less visible, where specific citizens instead appear as personal concerns for specific public servants. One story from the interviews can exemplify this; a major concern was how to support one male in his 20s in order to move him out of criminality towards work and a more edifying life. The concern was fuelled by the influence he deemed to have on many youths that looked up upon him. His example would then determine the outcome for many others, some of the group members reasoned. The trust in a continuous relationship between him and a specific social worker was thus considered crucial in the work of creating social sustainability.

Complementing this, the project members also described the project not as a tool for creating new organizational forms but mainly as a tool for mustering recourses needed in order to do what group members knew worked. For instance, through the project it was possible, after some earlier failed initiatives, to organize a collaborative gender project with a school. As in garbage-can-theory (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972) the group members ideas was solutions looking for issues where they might be an answer. The real novelty of the project can thus be questioned, where the experimentation in new organizational forms more dealt with how to implement already existing ideas and insights on what one already knew would work (like night walking with youth, creating meeting places and neighbourhood watch). The group members also expressed that even though they brainstormed about what to address and how, the action that came out of their discussions rested on ideas already upheld by one or more of the group members.

To continue, the group members expressed reoccurring concerns about the public organization already being in constant change, interrupting their chances of doing their jobs properly. Changes were identified in a) organizational structures where departments and units constantly were moved around, b) in funding due to fashion and political initiatives but also c) in concepts used. Units, projects and processes were on and off renamed by obscure reasons, where these changes didn’t really help in carrying out needed tasks. Instead, the group members with less stable working conditions expressed that they had to be creative in describing what they were doing in new ways in order to secure funding or maintain legitimacy in their work. Changes were everywhere, but as they expressed, they knew what worked and how to accomplish good results (displaying abilities for creating inner flexibility). Even though changes, initiated at strategic level, were supposed to make the organization function better they normally was not perceived as such at the local level, instead they took attention away from more pressing issues. There is no evidence in the material that these often central initiatives for change really had any influence on the organizations outer flexibility. Quite contrary, the dependence on rigid process for procurement was for example
mentioned as a force counteracting a necessary ability for outer flexibility. In that respect the interviewees agreed with statements from central strategists, that PPM was a problem, but still upholding the difference in views on where the need for flexibility resides, as something outer (strategists) or inner (group members).

On priorities

Social sustainability is presented as one of the most pressing issues for The City. Politicians, public directors, head strategists and others constituting the top apex of the public organization agree on this and have started programs for realizing the vision of a more social sustainable city. As visible in Figure 1, it’s also stated that Social sustainability is a prioritized development area. From this one would assume that municipality leaders would forcefully put plenty of recourses into realizing this vision as well as give this issue priority in internal processes. But, the material available from the study does not support this view the least. Instead, there are plenty of indications that developing long-term social sustainability is less important than just keep existing organization working as close to normal as possible, not to say keeping existing budgets within existing structures. The bullets give some of the indications.

- Each project member just has 20 per cent (8 hours) of his or her working time designated for the project. The majority (80 per cent, 32 hours) has to be spent at their original work places. It’s just the group managers who have this project as their main and full time task. In total this corresponds with a little more than four full time equivalents of a total of approximately 9.900 employees of the municipality (Regionfakta, 2016).
- Group meetings seldom comprise all group members, as it’s common to prioritize other more pressing work in their original work place.
- The groups are not stable, where already from the start some of the group members were employed on short-term contracts at other projects. The effect is that there is a constant change of group members, putting a strain on the group dynamics and possibility of rallying a common group effort.
- With the exception for the cost for the two group managers, no additional recourses have been allocated for supporting the project. Instead, group members have been lifted from their original work place without giving compensation for this.
- Head of departments who have lost personnel to the project have had little saying in the planning and in some instances have also acted against the project (through airing scepticism towards the project and an unsupportive attitude) as it means less resources for maintaining the same service.
- The project has no natural home in the public organization and is managed as a satellite with few strings attached. Still the project is dependent on services of the public organization as it is organized today. A need for using a communication professional was identified in the Spring of 2016, but it is still not formally solved now in March 2017, partly due to the fact that a) no money was allocated to the project for this reason, b) no communication officer was available for doing the job as well as there were c) no planned time for this in the communication officers’ work descriptions. The problematic handling of this issue indicates that the structure of the pilot doesn’t comply with existing structures and that the pilot also lacks resources for dealing with this incompatibility.
- There are no expressed demands or support for sharing new insights and working patterns between the project members and their original work places. Instead the group members describe these two tasks as detached from one another, although there are utterances that they do share insights to some extent as well as its still a bit early in the project for sharing any more fundamental knowledge. The influence from any insights gained through the project will at least at this point in time primarily stay inside the project and don’t affect current structures of the public organization. There are of course formal reports and discussions, but no direct structures or processes to short cut current internal boarders of the organization.

- At their first presentation of their work for the community board (November 2016), the group managers were put last in the agenda (when some already had left), asked to skip the presentation and as short as possible give their view on the project. The group managers phrased the attitude as “horrible”, where both the chairman of the community board and the mayor came back afterwards and apologized for this.

These indications are in conflict with internal documents, webpages and official communication where social sustainability is given quite a lot of space, airing priority. From this one might speculate if it’s possible to divide priority in two: action priority and verbal priority. In the political milieu, and at top organizational levels, the main tool for influence is arguments based on words, expressed in discussions, dialogue and debates. Identifying an issue and make it an internal verbal priority is an important part of creating and enforcing strategy development by attracting attention to an issue. The tool for action comes later, in how resources are distributed between divisions and projects, and this is where one can detect a flaw as no special funds and priorities for ensuring action priority has been taken; yet, one must add. In this respect social sustainability at this moment appears as mostly talk, where almost all 9,900 employees are hardly affected at all. As the project is still in its infancy, it might be a coming step and there are prior decisions that the rest of the organization should follow already in 2017, but with limited resources at this point any insights gained will be circumscribed to what’s possible to do in a project detached from the rest of the organization. At least, it raises question about the public organizations action competence and capability, but also willingness to let action lead. One might also assume that contextual democratic structures and organisational top apex dependence on verbal competence will make it less comfortable in actually enforcing action priorities, where local public servants and other internal and external actors are more competent.

One can also note that the term priority as in “prioritized development area” is quite frequently used in the internal communication. For example, a new program for developing trade and industry is now (Spring of 2017) under discussion wherein eight(sic!) different “prioritized focus areas” are mentioned (The City, 2016b). I have no data on how well spread this internal use of the term priority is, but this example indicate that it might be used as a synonym to important, loosing the original meaning of a priority as something that comes first. With the possibility of the municipality agreeing on upholding a plurality of prioritized development and focus areas, it’s not that strange that there will be problems in moving from verbal priority to action priority as there is no consensus on what comes first and what should lead. Instead it’s stated that a lot of

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2 Alternative concepts could be discursive priority or talk priority, but at this point I stick to verbal priority.
different activities are important but without any real agreement on what to actually prioritize.

On language

As touched upon earlier, group members have expressed concerns about constant internal changes in structures and language. Adding to the second aspect, language, there are also indications of formal language taboos, stated by group management level and above. Even though I use the term project to describe the groups’ efforts in this paper, group members are not supposed to use this label. Instead, internally they should use the term process, where the reason given for this is that there is no formal end for the work started by the two groups. As this firstly is a misconception of projects (Engwall, 2003) but also secondly that this particular group actually has a deadline in 2018 when the two group managers will be relieved according to plan, this appears really peculiar. One interpretation could be that leading officials in the public organization feel the strain of short-term politics and budgets, giving funding just for a year at the time, making it hard to implement any real enduring changes; so by pressing for the term process would emphasize both the open end and the intended change at the same time. When this was discussed with the group members, they mentioned that it also might be the citizens who are fed up with short term municipal projects, where the strategic level might have picked this up and by pressing for using the term process want to communicate that this time good changes are here to stay.

Another term the project members are not to use is area coordinator (områdeskoordinator) that denotes a certain position from a previous municipality initiative for dealing with challenges experienced in certain residential areas. But, as group members display a propensity for inner flexibility, they pursue ideas close to this coordinating function non-the less but without using this exact term. This connects to previous sections descriptions of the group members as pursuing already existing ideas as well as building their ideas on what they know works. As the area coordinator actually worked in dealing with certain problems, the group members use ideas originating from area coordinators, but calling it by other names.

A third example is a popular Swedish metaphor for a common bureaucracy drawback in terms of downpipes (stuprörr) along with gutters (hängrännor). The argument for this, as one of the group managers describes it, is that managers at strategic level fear that all usage of these terms will strengthen the compartmentalization of the organization, thus being detrimental to the objectives of the project.

Whatever reason lies behind these three examples, it’s worth noticing that language is purposefully addressed in the internal managerial communication in order to enforce and deter certain organizational ideas. The same goes for the two project groups where they e.g. coined the term “togethercreatorship” (medverkarskap) in order to focus a desired working style. In an interview with the two group managers, they especially mentioned they liked creating new words but also metaphors. While discussing this we came to describe their mission as part of creating a new pair of pants but that the citizens predominantly viewed them as a patch for fixing holes in existing trousers – a patch, they said, that might be to stiff to cover identified holes. They also wore worried that the different group members saw the project as a patch, but then for different holes. Continuing developing this metaphor, they said that the pattern for the new trousers
still remained a sketch where the job of actually seeing them lay in the future, where their job was to sketch a pair of trousers out of different ideas about a patch.

Adjacent to these language examples, we can also note changes in the central concepts guiding the structuring of the municipal organization. With the popularization of NPM in the 1990s, The City was an early adaptor of a PPM-model, where the process for this organizational adaption also was called PPM (BUM) internally. As the criticism of NPM and PPM has grown these last years, internally the term PPM2 (BUM2) was launched, indicating the need for change in the use of the purchaser provider model, moving towards a more flexible and adaptable system. The social sustainable project was first launched under this PMM2 description, but during its implementation the term PPM2 has given room for just social sustainability. On direct questions group members say they don’t use the term PPM2 any more. The reason behind this, according to one of the group managers, is that social sustainability is just a project within a much bigger organization development initiated by PPM2. Even if this is just a practical internal divide, it’s an interesting marker as it suggests a change in focus from a specific management model (means) to a preferred outcome (end), giving room for both more inner and outer flexibility.

But, what about the term social sustainability, is it a good term to use in order to drive organizational development? Compared to the clarity of the idea behind PPM and the expected practice, social sustainability is quite vague, and has been defined as part of the process of launching the two project groups, inviting them to be part of a more concrete definition (starting with the central concepts social trust, social inclusion and social mobility as seen in Figure 1) as well as the deployment. In this process, the concept has come to denote “a basic human need for feeling safe and flourish”, as expressed by one of the group managers.

Social sustainability is at the same time a term that appears all-inclusive and good, displaying the qualities of “hegemonic ambiguity”, much like the term “leadership” as described by (Blom & Alvesson, 2015). Who can be against it? It’s a pervasive term that can be used in many settings but also vague in what is exactly meant. As the project shows, the group members use it in order to take concrete action towards what’s possible to do given their resources and priorities, and then as they understand social sustainability. At the same time, at strategic level, social sustainability is used as a more overarching idea of how society should be built. If this ambiguity will be helpful or problematic in creating new organizational forms and processes, is too early to tell at this time. What we can say though, is that the term now depicts a quite small project, encompassing two project groups, where the long-term outcome of this work possibly will influence the internal interpretation of the term social sustainability for years to come. In this perspective it’s a bit worrisome that it’s not given much action priority. The limited possibilities for the groups of creating something new on societal level will possibly diminish the concept as such. A failure in one aspect or another will at the same time possibly contaminate the term and make it less usable for whatever purpose later on, even though it at this moment appears all-inclusive and good.

**Indications for collaborative innovation**

Moving on to the third empirical subsection, it’s time to assess how The City is moving on towards collaborative innovation. To recall the analytical structure from the
introduction, in order to build capacity for collaborative innovation Bommert (2010) express that a public organization needs to fulfil the following needs.

1. develop the capacity to explore its innovation needs. These needs might be detected inside or outside of the public organization and top-down or bottom-up.
2. build the capability to look across and outside of the organization, in order to identify innovation resources,
3. be able to motivate and enable actors to apply their resources, in order to identify innovation resources, and
4. coordinate the application of resources for the innovation of public value.

Assessment

In a way, the initiation of the project itself is the result of an internal explorative discussion on how to make the organization more adaptable to future needs and then especially the need for creating a socially sustainable society. The project members are also given a mission to explore how they in practice can work in order to meet these needs. The project is thus a tool for exploration as well as an indication of an increased capacity to explore innovation needs. The process around the project also indicate that needs are explored top-down but possibly also bottom-up (the project is still developing so its too early to be more precise), as well as inside and outside. All expressed aspects connected with needs for increasing both outer and inner flexibility can be viewed as candidates for innovations. In this way innovation needs have been identified and is now explored, so we can conclude that there at least exists some capacity to explore.

But there are also several limitations visible in this capacity. To start, the recourses given for exploring new ideas and working patterns are very restricted, where both problems and solutions mainly are sought within existing limits of the organization not to say these two “satellite” groups. The easily doable (retrospectively identified as ideas that one already know works) has been given priority and is also confined to the two groups. Organizational exploration into more unknown ways of creating social sustainability, as mentioned as their main mission from strategic level, is thus not given specific attention in this phase of the project. The rest of the organization is at this point neither involved in the exploration nor in the exploitation of new ideas. Instead, existing organization is set to uphold the existing order, relying on political initiatives for innovation and do not to support distributed exploring of new needs; this means that the current organizations path dependency restricts what’s possible to explore and act upon. The problems associated with engaging a communication officer can be an example of how this works out in practice.

The impression is that the strategists, taking the initiative, group managers and group members do have a task of exploring new needs but do not share the same ideas of what to accomplish or how it is to be done. At the same time the rest of the organization is not involved in this endeavour. In this way, there is growing capacity to explore innovation needs at diverging hierarchical levels, but the capacity is mainly restricted to a small group with no real support of the rest of the organization.

The underlying problems seem to be a lack of resources and priority. Group members are torn between project tasks and their ordinary work. With too much to do in too little time, there does not exist any real organizational slack; the precondition for true experimentation into the unknown and more genuine initiatives for innovation (Cyert & March, 1963). On the other hand, several of the group members display a propensity for
inner entrepreneurship in order to develop inner flexibility. In that respect, there exist personal capacity for exploration, but then directed inwards towards the current organization, which could be a true asset for an organization that do want to change. On the other hand, there are no indications that this would be the matter in The City as this propensity for entrepreneurship and inner flexibility is not specifically addressed in the current project. Instead the project groups follows what could be labelled the normal municipality order of putting planning before action. By doing this they favour causation over effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001) in their work processes which have a hampering effect on their outer flexibility (as the recourses already are spoken for through planning where the municipal disposition is towards solving existing problems by existing ideas), diminishing existing slack and the possibilities of more freely exploring new ends and means with whoever wants to join in on a mutual task of creating social sustainability.

It’s stated in the guidelines for the two groups that its members should involve civil society and other actors in their work. This has also been done to some respect as the groups have met citizens at different occasions in order to extract and develop common ideas of what would build social sustainability. In later stages the group has also met and involved representatives of e.g. property owners, sports clubs and religious communities. The structuring of the teams, with members from different departments, is also in line with creating a capability of looking across. In this way there is a mix of people, with different positions, connections, backgrounds and perspectives working together in order to create social sustainability. The work forms are in this way promising. A bit disturbing though is a comment by a group manager who fears that those they’ve managed to involve outside the municipality are especially people who already are engaged people looking for different outlets for their engagement. They can be viewed as resources looking for familiar problems that will help them pursue their own agendas, in a way also displaying the qualities of garbage-can-theory (Cohen et al., 1972).

Also this aspect of looking across suffers from the limitations of priority and internal recourses given. As the process was designed to first form internal groups and thereafter work together with others for social sustainability, the external contacts have mainly been used to develop and implement what already has been conceived inside the public organization and the two groups. External partners have not been able to participate in the formative stages of the two groups and the framing of the problem (social sustainability), which of course limits the innovation potential in whichever collaboration. Any innovation attempt will then also be more focused on solving problems experienced inside the organization of the municipality and less of solving societal problems resting in the spaces in-between the municipality and other actors.

One will also tend to look for innovation resources that will help build solutions, instead of innovation resources that will help in building new ideas how society can develop in novel ways. External actors are now mainly chosen and involved on the basis of their productive capacity, instead of their capacity to question and think anew. The actual capability of looking across and outside is thus assessed as very restricted in the project studied. Non the less, the working patterns in the two groups could be a start of creating trustful relationships with external actors which in coming projects could be used to successively move the focus from solving municipality problem towards creating a socially sustainable society where the municipality is just one among many actors.
Assessment summery

The assessment shows that The City municipality through the project for social sustainability is moving towards collaborative innovation, but still have a long way to go before collaborative innovation is integrated as working procedures inside the public organization. The limitation is visible primarily in the following two dimensions.

- Innovation exploration is restricted to the two specific groups with no established structures for supporting and spreading any insights reached.
- Innovation exploration is restricted towards needs experienced by actors inside the municipality instead of more general societal needs.

Despite this, the project does show a move in the direction of collaborative innovation as

- the project is geared at exploring collaborative innovation possibilities, and represent a capacity in them selves,
- the work carried out is done across inside and outside structures,
- the innovative processes involve actors outside the public organization, and
- external actors have been motivated to apply their resources.

In this respect there are several lessons learned from the project that can be applied in coming projects building on the experience from these two, where the most pressing one seem to be to involve other actors more unconditionally and in earlier stages of the realization process. Along with this change, the municipality must also find ways of more fundamentally implement new working procedures built around collaborative innovation (Mörndal, forthcoming in 2018)

Concluding discussion

At the moment questions regarding the design of the project and process, the selection of focus areas and participants as well as earlier experiences and expectations are at the heart of the research. Indicative findings suggests e.g. that all initiatives for intended change are constantly obscured through other priorities and organizing activities, e.g. due to financial constrains and political positioning. This can in turn be expressed as part of the path dependency that comes from upholding a functioning democratic organisation. Other findings revolve around the deviate nature of all parts of the project; concerning both how people have been chosen for different tasks of the project as well as the project itself. The project is carried out at the rim of the organization and does not really bear witness to the claim of The City that social sustainability is a prioritized area for development. The innovative effects are so far small.

There is not much collaborative innovation taking place in The City according to whats been covered in this study, where the project has come to handle social sustainability as an organizational problem rather than a societal problem where many other actors more naturally would be involed. For this to happen, the public organization must take a step back and through novel action appear as one actor amongst other societal actors where they cannot expect to control neither processes nor outcomes. Clearity and specific managerial models must be subordinated to diverging and changing circumstances, making it hard to uphold any predefined procedure as in PPM, putting a presure on for example existing budgeting and accounting procedures.
The two studied groups display some of these qualities, but are also detached from the host organization, where group members mainly solve already known problems with already known solutions. The pilot fails in that way so far, where the group members limit themselves to local coordination across structures, which on the other hand in itself is something promising as it challenges existing structures and builds new communication channels inside and outside current formal boarders. Accomplishing this appear to be quite easy, according to the studied project: you just have to find a goal worth striving for, people in different positions that can comply with this goal (maybe just to claim resources for achieving other ends), and enforce that they can devote some of their time to work together on accomplishing whatever has been agreed upon. People and managers at their original work place might not like it or support it, but if enough power is put behind the initiative, there is not much they can do to stop it. The study also shows that opportunities for development and change action is possible to muster through these types of initiatives, but current limitations are far too many in order to claim that this would be a fruitful path towards new organizational forms that are able to meet specific desired ends of social sustainability at strategic level.

Can we then in this project identify something that more fundamentally challenges public organizations dependence on managerial ideas associated with NPM? In a way, I think this is exactly what this whole case is about. From the start, it has dealt with a dissatisfaction of existing situation where the dependence on PPM and NPM does not support the functionality of public organizing, especially hindering the development of public action competence. If the project is part of the critique, the solution, or both, its too early to tell, but it complies with the critique expressed by Osborne and Strokosch (2013). Public organizations are mainly suppliers of common good and in the form of services, which makes them different to private product based companies and thus also need managerial practices developed for that particular context.

What the project over all display is a move in a direction where new solutions are sought in networks and relationships across structures instead of formal procedures and predefined management models. One of the group managers also calls for the development of complementary structures supporting sustainability as well as trust. Just to give room for experimentation and evolving solutions is in this respect very much in conflict with existing ideas of the necessity of control and accountability. What projects like these does is to move attention away from procedures inside the public organization towards solutions that lie outside the formal organization, focused on building something bigger – a working society. True to this promise we shouldn’t expect a grand design or an easily described management fashion to replace NPM. Instead we should expect a future where planning gives way for experimentation into what works; a process build on the tenacity among those who engage in this development. These champions will, if they are to be involved in collaborative innovation, most likely be found both inside and outside the formal boarders of the public organization. They will appear as diverging members of a movement for a social sustainable society where they by their coordinative actions contribute to mutual benefits through collaborative innovation of new public value. What restricts us at this time is more in the minds of people and dominating ideas of how public organizations should be organized and function, where the planning culture makes it hard to allow renewal processes build on trust.

But you need to start somewhere, where a continuous growth of local coordination across structures might be one path to pursue, where it also should be possible to
expand any exchanges of personel inbetween different departements and later inbetween other formal organizations. Creating processes for this, including action priority through new supportive structures, would help more informal internal and external networks to build and prosper. In time these connections could develop into visible and invisible short cuts within and beyond the formal organization, and as such help fulfil all the needs expressed by Bommert (2010). So, the answer of how to move towards collaborative innovation might not be found in the planned pilot project but in the experience and knowledge expressed by those employees engaged as group members in the pilot project. As such the pilot project delivers something valuable beyond what could be planned from the start.

Further research

The research is on going, where any suggestions for how to develop it are of most interest, where I welcome all contacts in this matter. If I non-the less should mention something in particular, I’d like to draw attention to previous sections where I launched the terms inner flexibility and outer flexibility as well as verbal priority and action priority. At least in this paper, these divides in flexibility and priority have helped me to better understand and explain differences in perspectives but also to problematize flexibility and priority as organizational concepts. By this we can e.g. acknowledge an entrepreneurial spirit directed inwards among project members (but possibly also among other organizational staff) as they adapt to internal changes in order to create financing and legitimacy for their work. It would be nice to carry this work further with the aim of exploring entrepreneurship inside public organizations and how this relates to inner and outer flexibility but also verbal and action priority.

The author also welcomes suggestions for complementary theories and joint projects making it e.g. possible to compare the work carried out in this project with other types of designs for organizational reneawal.

References


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