

Governance challenges in the Attractive Nordic towns

Mapping governance challenges linked to execution of single projects in the Attractive Nordic towns project

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Summary

Norway held the presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2017. The presidency project "*Attractive towns. Green redevelopment and competitiveness in Nordic urban regions. Towns that provide a good life for all*" last from 2017 to 2019. A network of small and medium sized Nordic towns participated in the project and executed their own (single) projects in collaboration with towns in the other countries.

The Centre of Competence on Rural Development was asked to map governance challenges the cities face in their «single projects». This report presents findings from a survey. The focus is mainly on factors that promote execution of the single project, factors that inhibits execution, and strategies the towns use to overcome governance challenges.

Most common obstacle was lack of time, and most common strategy was time management. Most common enabling factors were being able to make fast decision as a medium/small sized town, and good overview over relevant actors to involve.

However, other factors were more prominent when looking at which factors which were directly related to easier execution of the projects. Execution of the single project was easier when there was a high degree of trust between involved actors, high degree of co-operation between departments in the municipal organisation, if the project was mentioned in the budget, and municipal plan. Execution of the project was also somewhat more easy when there was high endorsement of the single project goal in the relevant stakeholders, relevant knowledge underpinning the measures, agreed upon indicators to monitor the progress/goal completion of the single project, and when they kept the measures of the single project simple (focus on "low-hanging-fruit").

Based on these results and the projects leaders' elaborative comments, we highlight the importance of priority and leadership as a prerequisite to have all departments on board, to have a co-creation mindset, to further be able to persist over time. The use and benefit of local planning documents vary. The planning process is important for develop common goals, which are vital for mobilisation and goal completion, but also for integrating the efforts in the daily work – not as limited projects "on the side". National signals help in giving direction and priority. Awareness of the context of conflicting goals – for instance economic goals versus sustainability must be high. There is a need to operationalise what the sustainability means in human scale, in the context of the towns.

1. Introduction

Norway held the presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2017. One of the main priorities was "The Nordic Countries in Transition". The presidency project "Attractive towns. Green redevelopment and competitiveness in Nordic urban regions. Towns that provide a good life for all", is one of several initiatives to promote Nordic competitiveness, green redevelopment, the transition to a low-emission society, integration and a good environment for public health.

The project is led by the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Care Services and the Ministry of Climate and Environment.

The project focuses on how towns and their surrounding areas can become more attractive through the development of vibrant and inclusive urban environments that are economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. Elements are environment- and climate-friendly solutions, social balance and equal opportunities for all, good social and public health services, cultural activities, vibrant town centres, historical-cultural objects and environments, good blue-green structures, urban spaces and architecture, coordinated land use and transport solutions and attractive job opportunities. Such development will involve a whole range of actors and societal subsystems and co-creation of new solutions.

Co-operation between actors from different sectors and levels is not unusual and not new. But steering processes have become more complex because the character of the problems that the public sector is trying to solve has changed (Røiseland & Vabo, 2012).

Managing change in a context where power is distributed across diverse societal subsystems and among many different actors calls for a networking and co-creating approach.

The Centre of Competence on Rural Development was asked to map the governance challenges the cities face in their «single projects». What types of challenges have they met, what have they done to deal with them, and what challenges do they see forward in continuing the work?

The goal of this short report is to describe and discuss the governance challenges, and provide advice based on what the cities have learned.

2. Method

2.1 Survey

We mapped challenges and knowledge in the participating cities through an online survey. An important principle for us is that we do not want to use any more of the participants time than strictly needed. The advantage of the survey-method in this context is that the participant can complete survey at the time that fits them the best, without the hassle of finding interview time. Another advantage is use of closed question and standardisation across towns, which makes enables statistical analyses, and easier summarising of open questions.

The disadvantage is not having the opportunity to directly ask follow-up questions as one have in an interview setting. However, this short report makes a basis for follow up questions or studies, if there are any remaining questions.

Importantly, we focus on challenges *executing* the local projects (single projects). We do not study whether the projects will have impact with regards to sustainability or attractiveness – i.e. “success” of the projects. This means that if a project has an easier execution of the single project – that does not necessarily mean that the project will be more successful with regards to the overall goal of “Attractive Nordic Towns”. That is outside the scope of this short report.

We took great care in developing the survey. First, we clarified with the ministry what information they needed. Second, we picked categories for the survey based on literature and experience from project leaders in other relevant programs (as the “developmental program for urban regions” [Byregionprogrammet]). Third, we interviewed a project leader from Attractive Nordic Towns on the relevance of these categories, and what other topics we might have missed. Fourth, we developed the specific questions in the survey. Lastly, we did a user test of the survey on both a project leader and person outside the programme on understandability of the questions, duration and so forth.

The “population” for this short report is the participating towns in the Attractive Nordic towns project. For generalisability for “small or medium sized Nordic towns” overall, a larger sample should have been used. However, generalisability to all Nordic towns was not the task here. But rather to collect the experiences from these towns, who have taken initiative to develop their towns in a more sustainable direction. The task of this short report was to map the experiences the towns have gained during this project period that we, and other towns can learn from. There were 18 participating towns, and their experiences implementing a local project on sustainability and attractivity is very valuable.

We chose to distribute the survey to the project leaders in each town. We wanted the input from the person with the best overview of the project, and this person’s experience with governing the project.

2.2 Overall structure

The categories in the survey are

- Ease of/difficulty in executing the single project
- Relationship between single project and municipal plans and UN SDGs
- Obstacles in executing the single project
- Enabling factors in executing the single project
- Handling of governance challenges
- Future challenges
- Lessons from other countries in the network/what could other countries learn from your country.

Please see the attachments for the specific questions.

The quantitative data was analysed with JASP, and qualitative data was categorized in topics.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive analyses

3.1.1 Execution, municipal plans and UN SDGs

The survey was completed by 15 of the 18 project leaders, thus a response rate of 83 %.

The towns are on the middle of the scale when assessing the difficulty of executing the single project locally. Most classify the execution as “somewhat difficult” or “somewhat easy” (see Figure 1).

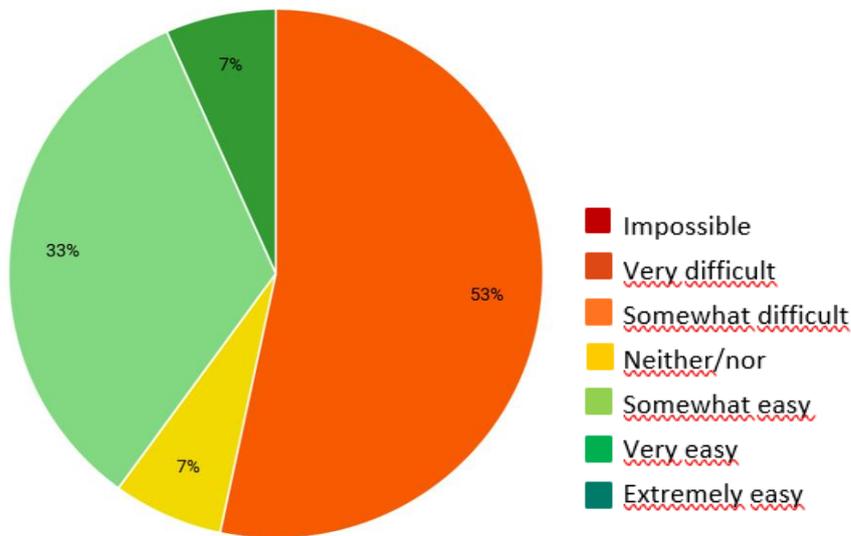


Figure 1 Distribution of answers to the questions "execution of the single project in my town/municipality is..."

Every town, except one, answered that the goals of the single project is in line with municipal planning (see Figure 2). About half said that the project was mentioned in a municipal plan, four said that the single project was mentioned in the budget.

Most agree that the UN SDGs give clear direction in defining the single project. About half answered that the UN SDGs are operationalised in municipal plans, which indicates that this group of towns are more forthcoming in terms of sustainable development compared to most Nordic Towns.

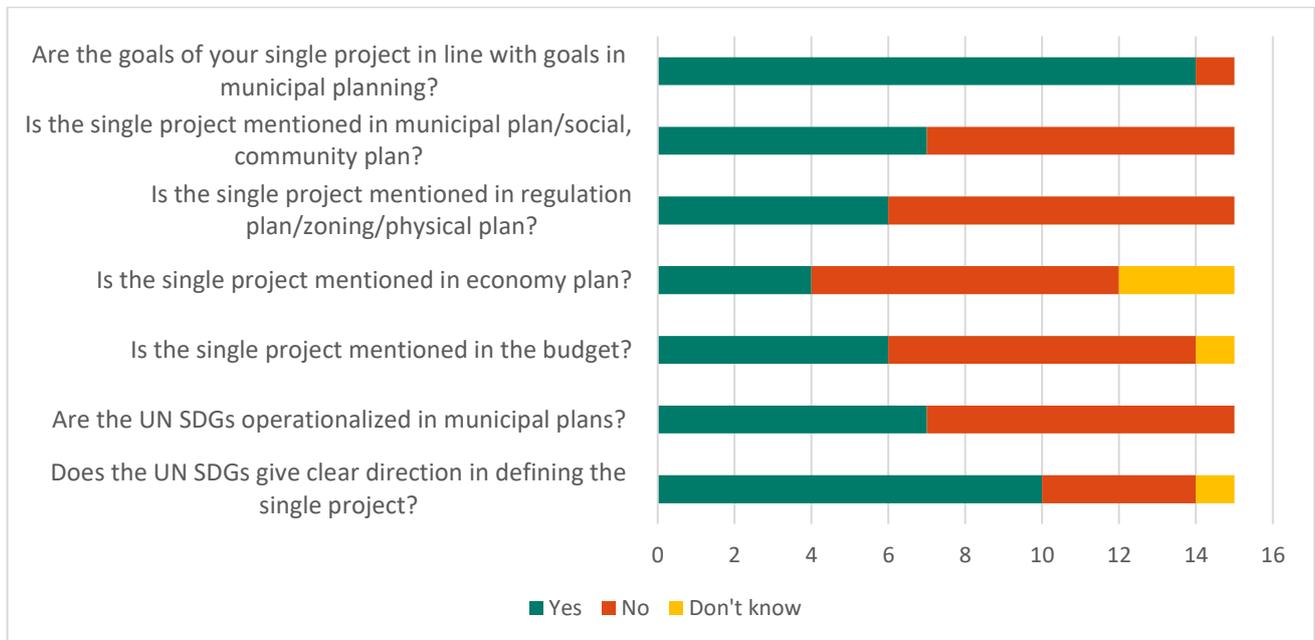


Figure 2 Connections to planning documents

3.1.2 Obstacles and enabling factors

The participants could check obstacles (as many as they wanted) from a list of 21 possible obstacles, plus an open field for “other”. For “enabling factors”, they could choose from a list of 17 factors, plus an open field for “other”.

There is a large spread in number of enabling factors checked. One town checked 17, and one town checked only one factor, while the most common was between three and six factors (Figure 3). On obstacles, one town listed 10 obstacles, and one listed only one obstacle. The most frequent number of obstacles were six (Figure 4).

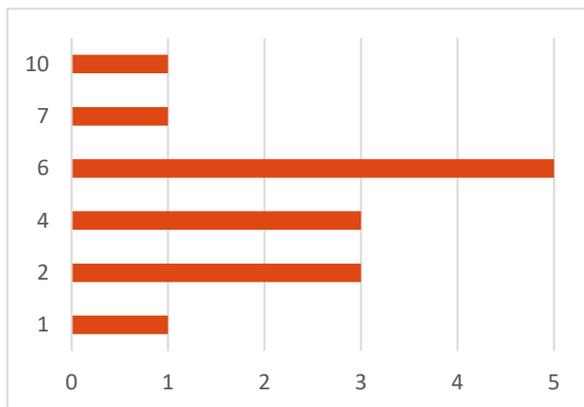


Figure 3 Distribution of number of obstacles

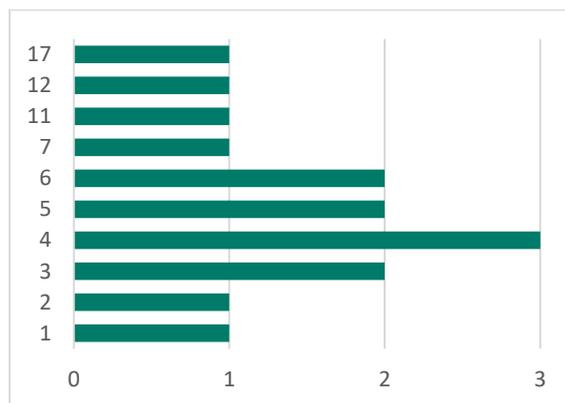


Figure 4 Distribution of number of enabling factors

One thing is merely looking at the sheer volume of obstacles and enabling factors. Next we look at which of the enabling factors and obstacles was most common, and which are related to execution.

3.1.3 Types of obstacles

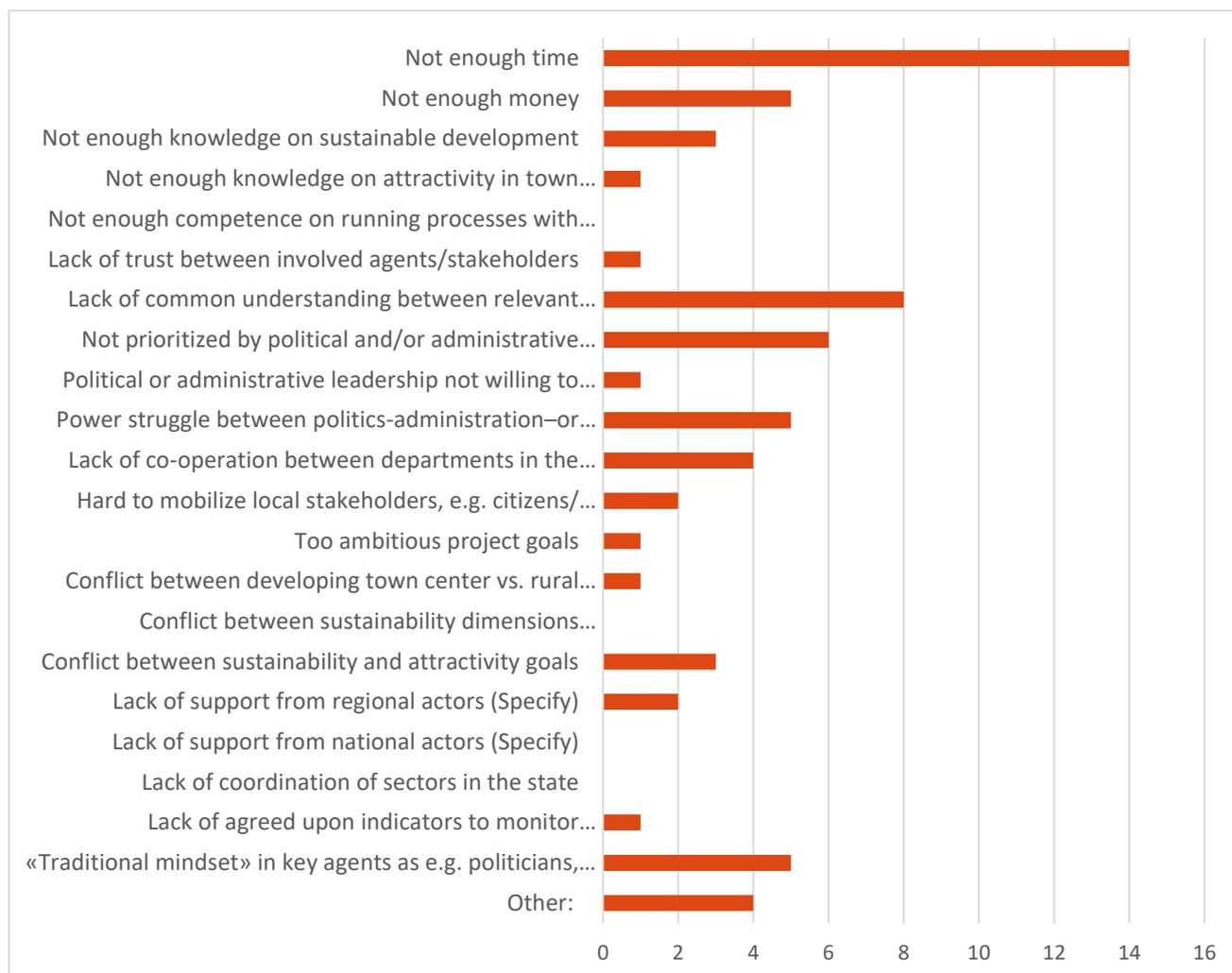


Figure 5 Frequencies of obstacles (number of towns). See attachment for full names of items.

Most frequently mentioned obstacle is “not enough time”. Second and third most frequent obstacle is “lack of common understanding between relevant stakeholders on sustainability challenges in my town” and “not prioritized by political and/or administrative leadership my municipality”. There were also four potential obstacles not checked by anyone.

Four towns mentioned “other” obstacles:

- “We have had change of staff at the planning office.”
- “The sub-projects chosen does not allow for a complete test of the methodology”
- “Participation in the Nordic Towns project has been too time-consuming, than was first understood”
- “Due to political decisions we had to rethink some of our goals”

Elaborative comment by towns

When execution was somewhat difficult:

The respondents were asked to elaborate what they find as the largest obstacles and why.

For those who commented that the execution had been somewhat difficult, there were some similar statements. First, some point to issues of a more practical nature. For example, having a change of staff at the planning office, and elections which led to postponing of decisions and change in conditions.

Second, many points to the role of **leadership and priority**:

- “[...] there have been difficulties in marketing sustainable values to politicians and thus making the project work in practice.”
- “[...] the project as a whole is not prioritized by political and/or administrative leadership in the municipality. There is no common understanding on how the project should be run, what the goals are or how to implement the project. Therefore, it has been difficult to obtain capital to actually finish the project”.
- “Sustainable development topics are just referred in strategies but are not deeply enough included to the action plan if all [...]. ...it need to be more cross sectoral and public discussion in order to define a common language for a new shared value system based on sustainability.”
- “The time and resources (in terms of personnel) to be able to give the project full attention and the broad anchoring it should have had.” (i.e. in terms om lack off).
- “It has been difficult to get employees to set aside time to work with the issue due to high workload. Everyone agrees that this is an important issue, but there would be a need for clearer directions from the management”.

When execution was somewhat or very easy

For those who said execution of single project was “somewhat easy” or “very easy” – the obstacles have a slightly different nature. Whereas those with a more difficult execution emphasized problems with lack of internal priorities, those with easier execution emphasize more evolved or mature problems.

Those with easier execution (somewhat and very), obstacles refer more to factors which could have made execution “even easier” – not factors that made execution difficult. That does not mean that these factors are hard or complex. Several mention “**time**” as a factor:

- “Attractivity and livability” for a city takes time to define and measure”.
- “The SDGs are new to most people – takes time to understand”.
- “We have worked with anchoring [...] politically and administratively in the municipality organization and in the local community. This takes time”.

“**Traditional mindset**” was also elaborated:

- “The property owners would like to think and do things they have already done and think that gives them most money”.
- “Traditional mindset amongst stake holders is the key problem”.

Other elaborated the need to **define the SDGs** as they are very broad; at the early stages to find and agree which SDG to focus on and how to find indicators to measure them.

Mentioned across difficulties of execution, is that for some it is too soon to tell what the most important obstacles have been.

3.1.4 Types of enabling factors

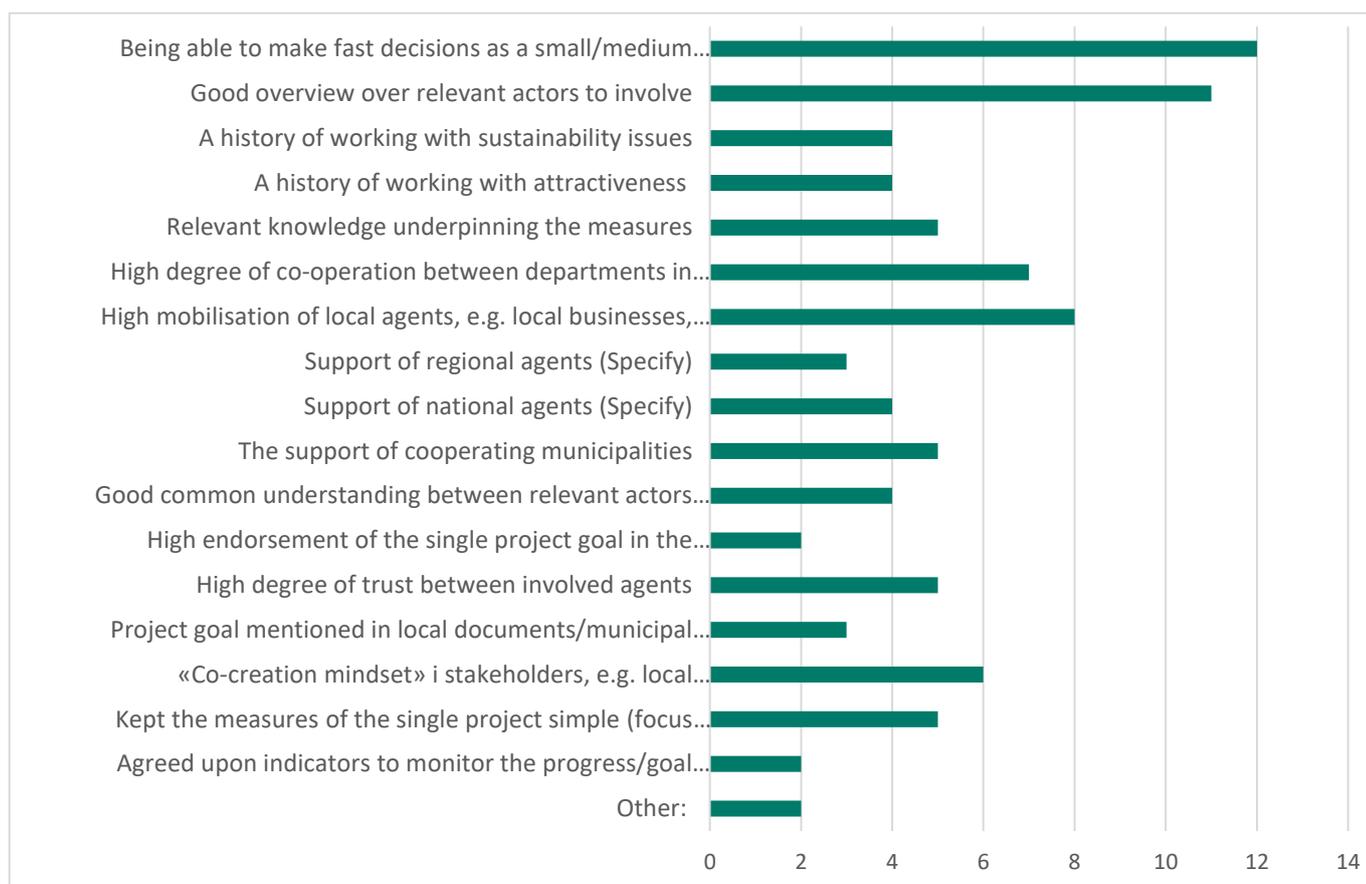


Figure 6 Frequencies of enabling factors by number of towns. (See full item names in appendix).

Most mentioned enabling factors for the single project were «being able to make fast decision as a medium sized town» and «good overview over relevant actors to involve». The number of citizens in town centre among those who said that “being able to make fast decisions as a small/medium sized town” ranged from 2 400 up to 84 700. The number of citizens in town centre among those who did not check this as an enabling factor ranged from 2 800 to 120 000. This difference is significant (those who checked it as an enabler was on average smaller towns). But, since the group numbers are so unequal (12 of 15 towns checked it as an enabler, the difference has less meaning. We also do not have bigger cities to compare with. “Good overview [...]” did not differ with town size.

«Being able to make fast decisions [...]» was mentioned by all respondents except the two largest towns and one of the smaller towns (in number of inhabitants).

«Good overview of relevant actors to involve [...]» was checked as an enabling factor by 73 % of the towns. At third place is «high mobilisation of local agents».

The least mentioned enabling factors were “high endorsement of single project goal in the relevant stakeholders”, and “agreed upon indicators to monitor progress/goal completion of the single project”.

“Other” enabling factors written in the open field:

- “Project leaders being firm and determined to push the project forward”
- “A common understanding with other involved municipal departments on the need for change and a higher degree of collaboration.”

Elaborative comments by the towns

We asked the participants to elaborate on what they found was the most important enabling factors. Below we have grouped their feedback based on execution of the single project.

When execution was somewhat difficult

For those who said execution was somewhat difficult, it is important to remember that execution could have been much more difficult. Thus, asking them what has been enabling factors is also useful.

Three topics was mentioned by more than one town. First, **political support** was mentioned (“positive town council”, “Our politicians prioritize these kinds of projects”). Second, **support from other towns** was mentioned as important. Both in terms of direct cooperation which gives them opportunity to discuss issues and get help and knowledge. But also, from knowledge from other towns not directly in cooperation, (“cases of other towns were inspiring and helped us understand our strengths and also practical knowledge/organizational conditions which need improvements”). Third, **keeping things simple** and working with what they already have (“work with existing structures and ongoing processes in order not to generate more work and to be able to demonstrate added value in a short time”, “we chose projects where the actors to involve were reasonably easy to identify”).

One town also mentioned a national program as the most important enabling factor (“Ministry of Environment recently launched a National program for sustainable urban development [Finland]).

When execution was somewhat or very easy

Towns with easier execution (somewhat plus very) also mention **political support**, but it seems like political support in these town have been even more active, for example “politicians [...] have volunteered for the implementations of events”, “the key was a workshop with political stakeholders in the beginning of the project – to find a relevant project to work on”, and “local stakeholders have contributed (local council [...])”. **Broad involvement and mobilisation** characterize this group comments on the most important enabling factor. One town also elaborate on what have been the motivations among the stakeholders for the contribution of local stakeholders: Interest in long-term development of the city and to attract more citizens; improve the city-image and self-understanding; and to be first movers using GIS-related surveys.

3.2 Analyses of covariance

Most frequent is not the same as most effective obstacle or enabling factor. We therefore investigated whether the plan variables, obstacles and enabling factors were related to “execution of the single project”.

3.2.1 Relationship between execution, obstacles and enabling factors.

There were nine variables (enablers or plan-variables) positively related to execution of the single project, See Figure 7 below.

“Number of enabling factors” was strongly positively related ($r = .79, p < .001$) to execution, indicating that the more enabling factors they have experienced – the easier the execution of the single project was. Number of obstacles was however not correlated with either execution or number of enabling factors. Thus, obstacles and enabling factors seems independent of each other.

In addition to the sheer number of enablers, the specific enabling factors “*trust between involved actors*”, “*cooperation between departments*”, project mentioned in *municipal budget*, and “*goal mentioned in local documents/plan*” (reported as enabler), were strongly related to execution ($p < .01$).

“Relevant knowledge”, “high endorsement of goal”, “focus on low hanging fruit”, and “agreed upon indicators”, were also significantly related to execution of the project ($p < .05$). Meaning that if any of these variables were present, the execution was easier.

None of the obstacles were directly related to execution, except checking “other” (see list above). Execution was not related to number of citizens in town centre.

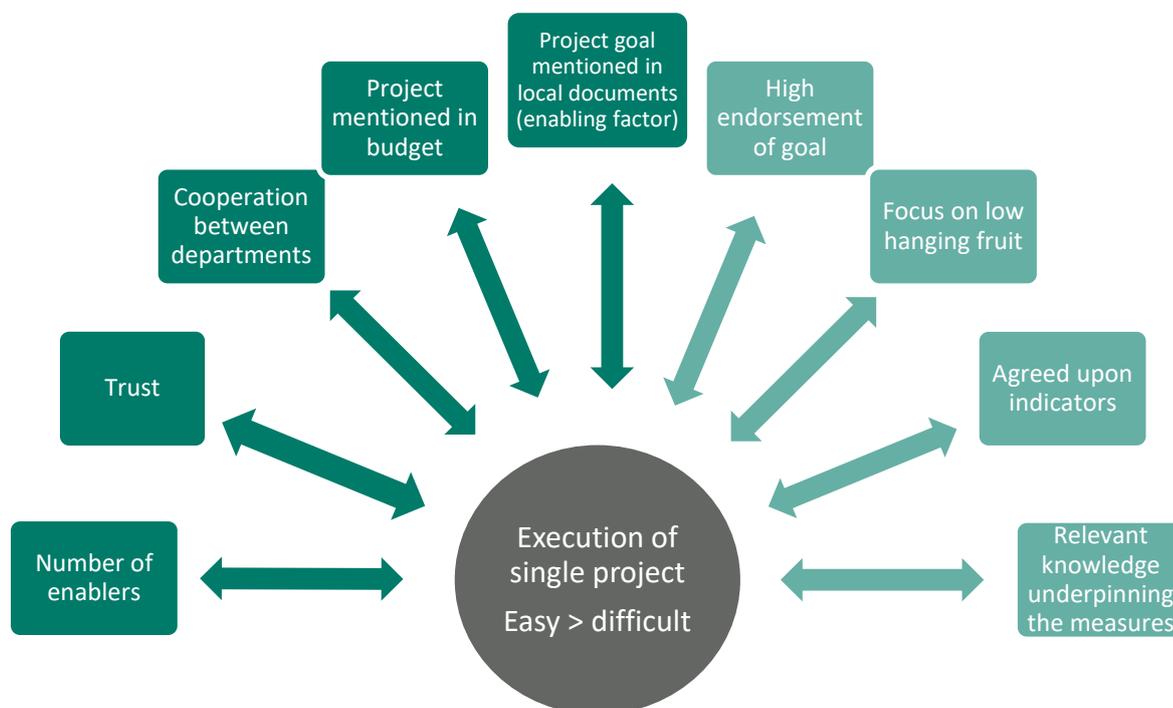


Figure 7 Relationship between enabling factors and execution. Darker green signifies stronger relationship.

3.2.2 Relationship between plans, obstacles and enabling factors

Covariates with planning factors

“Project goal mentioned in local documents/plan” as an enabling factor was positively correlated with “budget” and “economy plan”, but not “community plan” or “regulation plan”. Obviously, stronger support through prioritizing in budget is better.

- “Project goal was mentioned in local documents”, was positively correlated with “high endorsement of the single projects goal in the relevant stakeholders”, “high degree of co-operation between departments in our municipal organisation”, “agreed upon indicators [...]”, number of enabling factors,
- “Project goal mentioned in local documents/plan” was also positively correlated with some of the obstacles, including “too ambitious project goals”, “conflict between rural/urban areas”, “lack of regional support”, and “lack of knowledge on attractivity” – meaning that they had these obstacles present. It was negatively related with the obstacle “time”, meaning that most of those who found mentioning of project goal in plans does not believe time is an obstacle.

There were three towns who said that the fact that the project goal was mentioned in local documents was an enabling factor, and all three also reported that the single project was mentioned in the municipal budget. These also reported easier execution of the single project. Interestingly, all except one town said that the project goal was in line with municipal plans, and there were overall six towns who reported that the single project was mentioned in the budget. Most who reported that the project goal was in line with municipal plans, did not report that as an enabling factor. And, three towns did not experience the fact that the project was mentioned in the budget as an (or the most) enabling factor.

Covariates of having a history

Numbers of obstacles were negatively correlated with “a history of working with sustainability issues” and “a history of working with attractivity issues”. This means that, if the town has a history working with these issues, they also reported fewer obstacles. Having a history of working with sustainability issues was also related to having operationalised the SDGs in local plans ($r = .65, p = .009$). However, none of these were related to execution.

Having a history of working with sustainability and attractivity was also positively related to the enabling factor “high mobilisation of local agents, e.g. local businesses, citizens or organisations”.

Covariates of trust

“High degree of trust between involved agents” were correlated with “kept the measures of the single project simple (focus on low hanging fruit)”, “relevant knowledge underpinning the measures”, “high mobilisation of local agents [...]”, and “agreed upon indicators [...]”.

Covariates of municipalities co-operating

“Support of national agents”, “support of regional agents”, “support of co-operating municipalities”, and “high degree of co-operation between departments in our municipal organisation” were all positively related ($p < .05-.001$). This indicate that for projects with a regional theme (co-operating municipalities), regional and national actors were also involved. It is also interesting to see that for in these project – there were also high degree of co-operation between departments. Furthermore, “the support of co-operating municipalities” were also correlated with “high endorsement of single project goal” and “agreed upon indicators [...]”.

3.3 Handling governance challenges

The participants could choose from a list of actions to handle governance challenges, and again check how many or few they wanted. This was an optional question, and 14 of the participants answered. Six checked one action, and one checked five actions. Number of strategies checked was not correlated with ease of execution of the project.

The most frequent strategy reported was “to give less priority to other tasks – to release more time to this project”. Since “lack of time” was the most frequent mentioned obstacle, it makes sense with strategies concerning time management. Second most frequent was to postpone parts of the project [...]” (also time management) and “worked with raising awareness on why the project is important”. Least frequent was “downscaled the project” and “provided/applied for more funding”. None of the strategies were correlated with ease of execution. As Figure 8 shows, difficulty and ease are both spread across the different strategies.

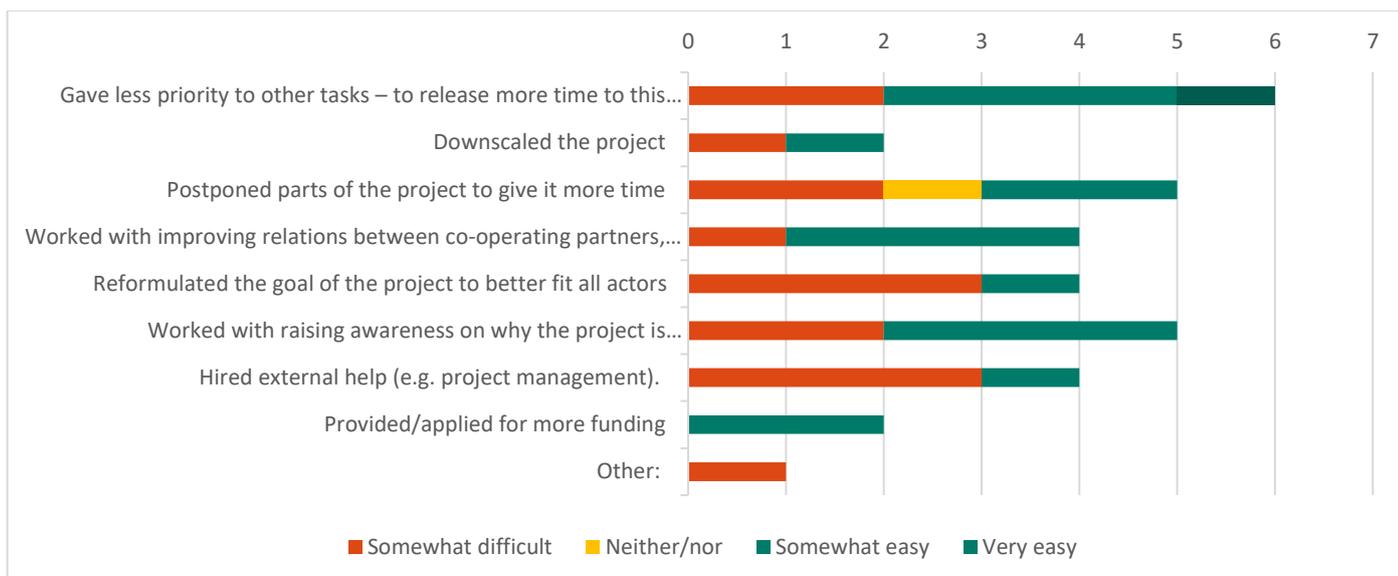


Figure 8 Frequencies of strategies, split by ease of execution (See attachment for full item names).

One person checked «other» and wrote in the open field «none».

Elaborative comments by towns

We asked the participants to elaborate on what they found was the most important action to handle governance challenges. We grouped their feedback based on ease of execution of the single project. However, there were no clear differences between these groups and types of actions taken, rather similarities across ease of execution. First, actions concerning the **organisation of the local project teams** was frequently mentioned:

- “reorganizing the local project team, involving a new engaged partner [...]”
- “We decided to hire external help to manage the process work as we see that it can sometimes be challenging to run the processes and be an equal partner in the way co-creation require. To have an external process manager can help to bridge the gap between the municipality and the inhabitants.”
- “We had to be more people on the team, in order to get our project done.”
- “Chose the right persons/representatives in working-group.”

This point to working with either carefully putting a good team together to begin with – or changing if need be.

Second, **trust/relations and time** (hand in hand) was mentioned by several:

- “Impatience - long process before without results. Need to build up trust with administration and politicians, that things will actually happen.”
- “Giving time to the project and the stakeholders to get to know each other.”
- “Improving relations - keeping everyone posted at all times.”

Third, working **inside existing structures and measures** was mentioned by several:

- “We concentrated on the least challenging political proposals, to be able to get people on board and learning how to work together.”
- “To fit the stakeholders, we try to reformulate parts of the goals in order to fit ongoing processes in the municipality. We also believe it will give long term results in a clearer way compared with the original plan.”
- “The project is seen in consistency with other projects and future plans we work with, where data from the project gives us a win-win effect in relation to co-operation.”

Again – here they either chose a path that was already in line with existing projects/plans from the beginning or changed direction during the project to become more in line.

Lastly, **political support and priority** was also mentioned.

- “The most important measures have been getting the politicians on board. It has taken time and a lot of effort.”
- “We have prioritized the project and worked a lot with anchoring of it.”
- “As mentioned before, time as a resource is a question of prioritize.”

3.4 Towns opinions on strategies to ensure a more sustainable development

The participants were asked what they believe is the best strategies to ensure a more sustainable development in their town. Their input can be summed in three different categories, that has some overlap.

The first concerns having a **holistic approach** concerning all aspects of sustainability, and coordination across local, regional and national level – over time: Vertical dimension of governance.

- «There has to be obvious upside to working with sustainability - in the context of conflicting goals (e.g. sustainability versus economic development). State support for smaller and medium sized towns is a prerequisite to create the necessary platform for successful cooperation between municipalities and regional and state actors. »
- «[...] Will to examine transport-habits. Focus on both environmental, social and financial values, but on operational level. What gives meaning on human scale? »
- «That all levels work hand in hand towards the same goal...local, regional and national. Consistency and resilience. »

Second, **co-creation** as a strategy and **commitment over time**: Horizontal dimension of governance

- «Insight into how we communicate and engage other actors in society. »
- «To involve inhabitants more in the Development work in the municipality - thus getting better solutions and more ownership to the solutions amongst the inhabitants. »
- «Work holistically and with anchoring in the planning, in close interaction with residents and other stakeholders. »
- «More co-creation and better coordination between the municipal administration, business and academia. Greater involvement and interest in the development of the local community among the inhabitants. »
- «The mindset that sustainable issues are concerning us all and not a single department or division. »
- Involving and all stake holders and making them accountable for the necessary changes.
- “Long and patient way of first explaining and expressing the way things are now and then building the solutions and trust on that.

Third, **political leadership and integration into the ordinary work**:

- “To formulate political aims for sustainable town-development. ”
- “Brave and wise leaders. ”
- “support from the city council ”
- Not participating in projects, but focusing on stable initiatives
- Work to promote sustainable development requires the commitment of all those involved in municipal decision-making. Now, things are only progressing in individual subprojects, and the overall picture is lost. There is a need for commitment and practical action, for example, to support financially sustainable transport, rather than the additional lanes of motorways.
- We need to fit it into our overall municipal goals and budget not to be able to down prioritize it.

3.5 Future challenges in continuing the single projects

The most frequently mentioned future challenge is **lack of time and resources** in the single project and the continuing work.

- *The biggest challenge is to find the time to do the project, because the more acute thing is prioritized more important than the project and there is little time to do it*
- *It takes time to implement new stuff in everyday work*
- *Been given time and money to keep moving forward with the project and keep developing the concept.*
- *To have time and courage to test new or innovative methods in the ordinary activities from urban planning to concrete implementation.*

Lack of political ownership and support is also an ongoing challenge.

- *Political ownership and support, that the administration can learn from other Nordic countries.*
- *How to persuade the political decision makers on the need for including sustainability issues into the city branding*
- *We need to anchor our work further both in the administration and towards the politicians*

Having the opportunity to **test new methods and overcome traditional mindset** among relevant actors are challenges.

- *To have time and courage to test new or innovative methods in the ordinary activities from urban planning to concrete implementation.*
- *The property owners want to do the things the way they have always done.*
- *Changing a traditional mindset across all actors involved. Having enough power and resources to facilitate the change.*
- *To develop the method in our single project is not done overnight, so we need to be able to try and fail - to be a learning organisation in practice and this can be challenging as the culture to fail is not very well developed in our municipality.*

Implementation of the SDGs and integration of the work done in the single project into a masterplan are also mentioned as challenges.

- *To sort out the relevant experiences and how to operationalize this towards physical implementation.*
- *Elaborate the work with SDGs to concrete indicators and initiatives*
- *That the draft plan (single project) gains “approved” status and the SDGs will be integrated in the masterplan.*

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Taking the quantitative and qualitative data together, we can make some conclusions as to what important governance challenges they have met – what has been enabling factors and strategies. These conclusion gives useful input for a future strategy.

First, it was evident that having many enabling factors was enabling it is self, whereas many obstacles were not related to ease/difficulty of execution. One can infer from this that having many obstacles might not be problematic. It is more important to have “good factors” to overcome the obstacles. Having obstacles is to be expected. Having the opportunity to deal with them through the presence of enabling factors is what matters. Below we discuss the enabling factors that were most evident in the analyses.

4.1 Time and persistence

Not having enough time was the most frequently mentioned obstacle. It elaborated in open answers on obstacles, and it was also reflected in what strategies the towns adopted to handle challenges.

Time also has another meaning – reflecting the towns feedback that this kind of work takes time – both working to create more sustainable towns and adopting new methods and ways of working: *“One of the project goals is to co-create between departments in the planning process and we are on the way, but the roles are quite fixed since long ago and change of structures and responsibilities takes time.”*

There is a need to be patient and persistent. The correlations with “having a history” of working with these issues are therefore interesting. Notably, if the town had a history working with sustainability and attractiveness issues, they more likely also had operationalised the SDGs in local plans and reported fewer obstacles. Importantly, having a history of working with sustainability and attractiveness was also positively related to the enabling factor “high mobilisation of local agents, e.g. local businesses, citizens or organisations”. Thus, these findings indicate that having a history and being persistent helps.

However, none of these factors were related to ease of execution. Thus, in the single project a history was not directly enabling in terms of easier execution of the single project. That is not to say that it does not matter in other work on sustainability in the municipality. It might be that these towns projects are effective in terms of creating more sustainable towns no matter how “easy” the execution have been. “A more sustainable and attractive town” is a completely different dependent variable than we used in this report – but would have been interesting to explore. However, that is not easy to measure either objectively. It is also too soon to see such results and effects of the single projects. The objective of this short report is to map governance challenges and not sustainability or attractiveness success. It might be likely that those with a history also have more success in terms of increased sustainability, despite difficulty of execution.

The statements from the survey correspond with findings in 2019 Nordregio report «Global goals for local priorities, the 2030 Agenda at local level» (Sachez Gassen, Penje, and Slätmo, 2018). The report presents an analysis of implementation of the 2030 Agenda at local level in 27 towns that are “first movers” in working with the SDGs (including Sønderborg, Växjö and Mosfellbær). It can be challenging to engage inhabitants, local companies and civil society in SDG issues. Making the SDGs important for everyone, not only to be implemented by someone else, somewhere else. It is challenging to prioritise goals and coping with potential conflicts between the SDGs. Results from sustainable efforts only become visible in the long term.

4.2 Priority and leadership

It is important with resilience and consistency, accepting that it takes time longer than the project period to ensure a more sustainable development on the local level. In order to ensure time, resources and persistency, the work must be prioritised. A strong will is necessary. This point to local, regional and national leadership to take stand and stand firm in this direction. The role of political and administrative leadership was highlighted in elaborative comments on obstacles, enablers, strategies and future challenges. It is considered vital when it is present and impeding when it is lacking. Challenges with traditional mindsets are also related to leadership. It is the leader’s job to go in front as good examples and front new ways of doing things.

Many of the towns feedback here corresponds again with findings in the Nordregio report (Sachez Gassen, Penje, and Slätmo, 2018). Challenges and success factors in implementation of the SDGs are political support and to get all local authorities on board. Dealing with lack of personnel devotes to work with integration of the SDGs in the local authorities and targeting lack of engagement and scepticism towards working with implementation of the SDGs. These factors correspond with statements from the single projects.

Support from national, regional level could be funding for activities on local level, providing more information, and spread good examples and solutions. National signals and goals will also help with giving priority locally.

It is also very important to encourage young people to participate in activities concerning sustainability issues – both in setting the agenda and being part of the solutions.

4.3 Broad and deep ownership and co-creation

Among the most frequently mentioned enabling factors were «high mobilisation», «good overview of actors», «co-operation between departments» and «co-creation mindset». These all point to a more overarching category of co-creation and broad ownership. This is also reflected in the elaborative comments

on enablers. Importantly, co-operation between departments was also a strong covariate of ease of execution. Although none of the obstacles were significantly related to execution, the only one who had a tendency was the factor “Lack of co-operation between departments in the municipal organisation» ($r = -.51$, $p = .06$).

It is a common answer that there is necessary to have **all departments on board, to co-create** with stakeholders, inhabitants, business and academia to ensure broad ownership. School students and young people should be involved. “Sustainable issues are concerning us all”, anchoring in the planning, the overall municipal goals and budget, common knowledge and enthusiasm is vital. Communication skills and a culture for, and existing arenas for recurring dialog is necessary.

It is important to have support from both national, region and local authorities to ensure implementation on local level.

4.4 Trust

Trust was one of the strongest covariates with ease of execution of the single project. Trust as a success factor in work that demand co-operation is well documented (se for example, Vareide, 2018; Hardwick, Anderson, and Cruickshank 2013).

According to Vareide, trust is an important factor in increasing attractivity if a place due to the many resources and actors needed – local businesses, volunteers, politicians, administrations, general population. How can a place create the necessary mobilisation without trust between the actors? Our correlation analyses also found that trust was positively correlated with high mobilisation.

Thus, trust is confirmed here as an important enabler in local work on attractivity and sustainability.

Promoting factors of trust is, benevolence, integrity, and ability/competence (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman, 1995). *Benevolence* reflects the attitude of “us” as opposed to “me”. As one town commented «The mindset that sustainable issues are concerning us all and not a single department or division.” Note that “high endorsement of goal” was also positively related to ease of execution. *Integrity* is the opposite of taking advantage of given situations to promote personal/separate agendas. The last factor is the most relevant for a Nordic strategy: *ability/competence*. The actors have trust in other actors that they believe can conduct change. National and regional actors can in this respect help local actors by increasing competence by making knowledge available and other capacity building activities. Trust was in our analyses correlated with “relevant knowledge underpinning the measures” indicating the importance of a knowledge base as enabler of trust.

Due to the non-causal nature of the survey, it might also be that ease of execution led to high evaluation of trust between relevant actors. Note also that «trust» was correlated with «kept the measures of the single project simple (focus on low hanging fruit) ».

4.5 Low hanging fruit

Managing the project inside some “restricted lines» that many can agree on – and have an interest in – is a good strategy. This represents a pragmatic approach to the single projects. The question is whether these kind of measures gives the largest effects in terms of sustainability and attractivity? Then again, thinking long term, this strategy might be a wise place to start with the aim of reaching tougher sustainability goals in the future. Taking one small step at the time. The important, but hard task of finding the balance between what would have a sustainability effect, and that is manageable.

4.6 The use of local plans

As the survey results indicate, it seems like the use of local plans/documents are used vary. Most who reported that the project goal was in line with municipal plans, did not report that as an enabling factor. Three towns did not experience the fact that the project was mentioned in the budget as an (or the most) enabling factor. Some view the mentioning in plans as an enabling factor – and some do not – can signify that either local plans have not high standing in the municipality, or that the project leaders use the plans differently. A strong connection to plans at the action level, and use of plans, should be part of a strategy.

How does plans vs. trust relate to one another? Relying on firm planning does not exclude working with trust, and vice versa. Actors outside the municipal organisation might not be concerned with municipal plans. But their input is always important in the planning process and can be used to anchor municipal goals in actors both outside and inside the municipal organisation. The planning process is important for develop common goals, which are vital for mobilisation and goal completion. Without trust in the municipal organisation, the document will not have any value.

4.7 The (project) leader

Although we did not investigate the project leader role directly, this data set gives good information on their role. Firstly, it was mentioned as an enabling factor in the open “other” field. Second, their descriptions of strategies to deal with challenges show important qualities. Namely: “flexibility” - they show the ability to change what is not working. But also, “endurance” – in terms of sticking to the plan when they consider it as the right path. As discussed above, there is also variance in terms of actively using plans.

It is also important to note that to be able to mobilise and get people on board – which is a large part of their job - they must have high standing and be given mandate. It is also highlighted by the project leaders the importance of passion. This has some consequences for recruiting and training. What kind of project leader is needed? For example, if local businesses are important partner – they need someone who understands local businesses. Maybe recruit someone with business experience? If many different partners are needed, someone with broad experience might be useful. But, also someone who is considered as competent and passionate is important, both in terms of building trust, and being persevering. As discussed above, communications skills are also important.

We write “project” leader with quotation marks around project. Several argue that the work on sustainable development should not be organised in projects – but rather be integrated in the all parts of the organisation and ordinary work.

4.8 A holistic approach and common understanding

To ensure a more sustainable development it is important to focus on both environmental, social and financial sustainability. Awareness of the context of conflicting goals – for instance economic goals versus sustainability must be high. It is easy to agree that “sustainability is nice”. There is a need to operationalise what the sustainability means in human scale, in their context. “Agreed upon indicators” was positively related to ease of execution. We believe this is related to the other covariate “high endorsement of goal”. An agreed upon goal is a prerequisite of common indicators. Agreed upon indicators can reinforce the work by keeping the focus on the goal and allowing feedback as to whether they are going in the right direction or not.

In reference to future challenges, some point to dilemmas with mobility specifically – the need for a will to examine transport habits locally, and finance sustainable transport rather than motorways in the national level.

4.9 Weaknesses with the report

By exclusively focusing on the governance challenges with execution the single projects, which are limited in time and resources, we are probably missing important governance challenges that are relevant in larger initiatives.

For example, we asked if “lack of coordination of sectors in the state» was an obstacle – as it is emphasized in the literature (see e.g. Hanssen, Mydske, and Dahle, 2013). However, none of the participants checked it as an obstacle. We do not believe this challenge the argument that sectors need to be better coordinated. Rather, it reflects the nature of the single projects. If we had asked the participants about the challenges of sectorised state in relation to other work related to sustainability and attractiveness – we would most likely get long elaborations (as we sometime do). Thus, we hope that a common Nordic strategy for attractive and inclusive urban environments, builds on other existing literature which described the problems of a sectorised state in promoting a sustainable future.

Another weakness of a more technical problem is the small sample size. It is not a small sample regarding representativity of the participants in the project. But it is small regarding small and medium sized Nordic towns in general. Also, the small number of participants limits the kinds of statistical analyses possible.

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Appendix

1. Survey questions