

Reform in Translation: The Swedish Transport Administration's Quest for a New Mission Statement

Hans Rämö and Eva Wittbom*

Abstract

The long-term outcomes of reform processes in the public sector remain understudied in the literature. This study investigates the Swedish Transport Administration (STA) employees' and managers' translation and internalization of their new role as societal developers. Since the STA's founding in 2010 and until 2018, the STA head office neither guided nor centrally determined how to define and understand the STA's role as a societal developer. We examine this internalization process through the lens of Czarniawska's translation model of the distribution of ideas as a collective creation through local translation and adaptation. The study shows that the ongoing friction that occurs when the concept and role of a societal developer are discussed and disseminated within an organization is influenced by prevailing identities and local action nets. It also shows that the translation of this new role eventually failed, due to either it being submerged within already-existing concepts or it having a perceived lack of relevance. We conducted this mixed-method study over six years (2016–2021) using documentary analysis, workshop participation, interviews and a survey.

Introduction

When the Swedish Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation reorganized the transport and infrastructure policy sector (Government Bill 2009/10:59), the Government founded and commissioned the Swedish Transport Administration (STA) to take responsibility for the national planning of four transport modes (roads, railways, sea and air) as well as for the construction and maintenance of national roads and railways. The Government also emphasized that this was more than just a merger of existing organizations, instead representing a completely new agency. By collating the planning for all transport modes within one agency, the Government expected to increase overall performance in terms of socioeconomic efficiency and long-term sustainability within the transport sector.

The Swedish public administration is considered to be dualistic in the sense that the Constitution prescribes a strict division of power between politicians and civil servants, which means that the director general is empowered to organize how commissions shall be executed (Jacobsson, Pierre and Sundström 2015). Since its foundation in 2010, the management of the STA formulated the vision "Everybody arrives smoothly, the green and safe way," together with the following mission statement: "We are *societal developers* who develop and maintain smart infrastructure every day. We do this together with others to make life easier throughout Sweden" (STA 2011:7; emphasis added to the English concept that is also used internally at the STA).

The Government characterized the STA only as society builders, never

Hans Rämö,
Stockholm Business School,
Stockholm University,
Sweden
hra@sbs.su.se

Eva Wittbom,
Stockholm Business School,
Stockholm University,
Sweden
ewi@sbs.su.se

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***Hans Rämö** is Associate Professor at Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University, Sweden. His research interests include temporal and spatial factors of management and organizing in relation to communication, networks, philosophy and sociology of science, and sustainability.

Eva Wittbom is Assistant Professor in Business Administration at Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University, Sweden. As director of The Academy of Management Accounting and Control in Central Government her research interests include critical perspectives in public sector management control.

mentioning the concept of “societal developer” (Swedish Government 2010). The top management of the STA introduced the concept of “societal developer” as an expanded commitment. It took only two months to formalize the concept in a strategic plan, but this formalization did not specify how “societal developer” was to be understood (STA 2015). The management directives for the concept were deliberately vague so as not to exacerbate the tensions that existed at the time of the reorganization. Instead, management expected the STA employees to translate the concept themselves.

Problem Discussion

In situations of agreed organizational change, participants do not always understand each other to the extent necessary to cooperate well. The reasons for this are several. The participants represent a range of professions (Abbot 1988) and institutionalized modes of reasoning (Clarke 1995; Friedland and Alford 1991; Haughton and Hunter 2003; Lounsbury 2007; Reay and Hinings 2009). These differences exist not only between organizations but also within organizations.

Issues of introducing new ideas and change in organizations comprise extensive areas of research (cf. Carnall and By 2007). Researchers have also shown that studies of change processes in organizations lack historical connection, context and understanding of the processes (Pettigrew 1985, 1990; Pettigrew et al. 2001; Sørensen et al. 2011). Yet some longitudinal studies of this matter have been conducted (e.g. Augustsson et al. 2017; Bartunek et al. 2006; Giaever and Smollan 2015; Holten and Brenner 2015; Klarner et al. 2011). Attention has also been given to power and resistance to change in organizations (e.g. Ford and Ford 2010; Ford, Ford and D’Amelio 2008; Thomas and Hardy 2011).

Studies of change implementation can be further subdivided based on the model they have followed. The *diffusion model* represents by a more or less rational or intentional spread of ideas, independent of the influence of the local setting. The *translation model*, on the other hand, represents a distribution of ideas that is influenced by the local context to which ideas must be adapted (Czarniawska 2014; Sahlin-Andersson 1996). The translation model has been used in studies focusing on various areas such as lean thinking in hospitals (Andersen and Røvik 2015; Van Grinsven, Sturdy and Heusinkveld 2019), knowledge transfer (Røvik 2016), public-sector accounting (Becker, Jagalla and Skærbæk 2014) and climate change (Wright and Nyberg 2016). In this sense, the translation model represents a complex process of negotiation, the intraorganizational issues of which have received less attention and need further investigation (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002; Wæraas and Nielsen 2016).

In the literature on the public sector, the word “reform” is used more commonly than “change” (Kuipers et al. 2014). Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) define *reform* as an intentional and conscious change, which makes the concept narrower than “change” in general. Several authors have emphasized the need for more empirical studies of reform in the public sector (e.g. Andrews et al. 2011; Cole and Eymeri-Douzans 2010; Fernandez and Rainley 2006; Vann 2004). A literature review by Kuipers et al. (2014) demonstrates that the

literature contains a lack of detail on public-sector reform processes and outcomes, highlighting the need for more in-depth empirical and comparative studies. Similarly, Van der Voet et al. (2014) argue that processes through which public-sector reforms take place are largely overlooked in the literature. Specifically, reforms in the transport sector are important for societal development (e.g. in terms of increasing accessibility, safety and sustainability; cf. Tyler 2017). Some studies have also focused on Swedish transport planning and the STA. Tornberg and Cars (2014) and Qvist (2017) both studied the societal developer role externally in infrastructure projects around Sweden. Rehnberg (2019) studied the STA's media image and self-presentation. Tornberg and Odhage (2018) and Ek Österberg and Qvist (2020) studied collaboration in Swedish transport planning. Notwithstanding these existing studies, there is still a need for more in-depth empirical research into reform processes over time and internally within public administrations. When employees in an administration are given the opportunity to translate their role of becoming societal developers on their own over several years, questions can be raised regarding the realization and outcomes of this approach. Although a strategic decision initiated the STA's process of reform, the procedure is taking place largely without clear top-down guidance. This leads to two questions: (1) How is the translation of a new role carried out under such uncontrolled circumstances? (2) What is the outcome when a large administration with various prevailing identities tries to freely translate a new role?

The aim of this study is to examine how STA employees' prevalent identities affect the translation and outcome of a reform – the role of becoming societal developers.

The empirical focus is on the five operational areas of the STA that deliver external services, internally translated as business areas: Investment, Maintenance, Major Projects, Planning and Traffic Management.

This paper is arranged as follows: Theory is discussed in the next section, followed by methods and data selection. Thereafter, the interview and survey results are given. This is followed by the analysis and discussion sections, and finally conclusions are offered.

Approaches to Understanding Change

Emphasizing the complexity of introducing new strategies makes it clear that change and reform are rarely accomplished as originally intended (cf. Mintzberg and Waters 1985). Large public administrations can be understood as complex phenomena with many levels and interwoven networks and identities, making it important to study how directives are translated and altered in different parts of such organizations (Pope et al. 2006). The significance of endowing new strategies and reforms with meaning for employees is a central issue in creating acceptance and legitimacy for change. Raelin (2006) shows that top leaderships are too often content to relay their visions without ensuring that they are sufficiently understood and supported by employees.

After analyzing the content of existing studies on change in public administrations, Kuipers et al. (2014:8) suggest a division between “three orders of change.” The first order of change is limited to a subsystem or an

organizational process or structure, such as the introduction of new processes, systems or practices. Second-order change, influencing the organizational level, represents reorganization. Third-order change occurs at the sectoral level and across the boundaries of specific organizations. It includes organizational culture and identity, organizational climate and other behavioral factors. Third-order change often occurs in connection with reforms of public administrations (Kuipers et al. (2014). This third-order change is relevant here because the STA identified its role as a societal developer at its foundation in 2010.

Kuipers et al. (2014) also suggest – based on Pettigrew (1985) and Pettigrew, Woodman and Cameron (2001) – that the focus on change should be on context, content, process and results. They also add a fifth category to this list: leadership. The context in the case studied in this paper is transport-sector reform and the formation of a new organization, which were driven by arguments for establishing an overarching transport agency. The content category in this study includes the expanded role of a societal developer. The process factor is characterized by the absence of interventions and directives regarding how this expanded role should be shaped in the various business areas within the STA. The fourth category of results then deals with the ways in which this unclear role eventually has been translated by the employees themselves. The fifth and final category in Kuipers et al. (2014) – leadership – remains deliberately vague and open-ended, as the head office has neither guided nor centrally determined how to define and understand the STA's expanded role of being a societal developer.

Downplaying the processes of managing change, effectiveness and quality and focusing instead on conforming to unclear expectations are also consonant with the institutional perspective (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004; Kuipers et al. 2014; Wæraas and Nielsen 2016). The STA's many years of ongoing achievement within its expanded role exemplifies a process of continuous organizing (cf. Weick 1969/1979, 1976). As Czarniawska points out, “studying ‘organizations’ can obscure critical instances of organizing” (2012:145). This has relevance for the introduction of new ideas and reforms in an organization, either by transmitting a preformed idea or by creating meaning through renegotiating the significance of an idea in local contexts.

The order of events can vary in change processes. Czarniawska and Sevón (1996; Latour 1986) subdivide the views on the course of events in change processes into two models: the diffusion model and the translation model. The diffusion model is represented by the more or less rational dissemination of ideas (e.g. the implementation of a control technique independent of the local environmental impact; Czarniawska and Sevón 1996). On the other hand, the translation model of the dissemination of ideas views this dissemination as a collective creation through local translation and adaptation (Czarniawska 2014). The translation model lacks a strong guiding intention or plan, but the order of events is nevertheless not random. Furthermore, while the “friction” that arises in diffusion models is negative and represents a diminution of energy through resistance or similar phenomena, in translation models of change “friction” is the desirable generation of energy arising from the interaction of “traveling ideas” with existing frames of reference or “ideas in residence” (Czarniawska 2014:106).

Ongoing translations also create connections among actions, called “action nets.” Viewing action nets as the “construction of connections between different collective actions” means that in action nets actions come first and then actors follow, unlike in networks, which usually refer to sets of connections between actors (Czarniawska 2004, 2016:168; Lindberg and Czarniawska 2006). Action nets, unlike events or chains of events, are ongoing processes of organizing throughout the organization, and they may extend beyond it. Action nets are created and recreated (e.g. through a budgeting process following guidelines that translate actions into numbers and then numbers into actions). Action nets, together with other day-to-day translations, create organizational stories and chatter, moving from text to action and back again. In this way, action nets are created and recreated, and they bind the organization together, construct inscriptions within and beyond the organization, explain what is happening within the organization and decide which rules to apply.

Czarniawska (2014) also emphasizes that action nets are influenced by how loose or tight the couplings are between the parts of an organization. A loose coupling may exist between two units in an organization that work on completely different matters, such as the product development and personnel departments. There is a link between these units, but the coupling is loose. Both units will have developed their own rules and routines that influence the translation of, for example, organizational change. Tightly coupled units, on the other hand, might be represented by the finance and personnel departments, which work closely together. From a normative perspective, management usually assumes closely tied systems, but in practice such systems are often more loosely coupled or, in extreme cases, even decoupled (Lounsbury 2007). In such cases, management and its direction emerge through collective action, communication and mutual influence (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992).

In the division into three order of change categories suggested by Kuipers et al. (2014), the outset is the third-order change in which the Swedish transport sector is reformed through the formation of a new organization. The content is represented by the attempts to establish a new role: that of the STA being a societal developer. The process, without guidelines and directives, represents ongoing discussion and negotiation, which also reflects the wishes of the leadership. Therefore, the focus here will be on the fourth category, represented by the outputs (i.e. decisions) and outcomes (i.e. results) of this new and expanded role, particularly regarding the way in which local action nets and prevailing identities within the five business areas affect the translation of this new role.

Method

In an overview of research methods in public administration studies, Groenevelt et al. (2015:80) find a predominance of qualitative approaches, and they emphasize that “it would be worthwhile for future studies to consider employing mixed methods designs more often.” Subsequently, mixed-method approaches gained increased attention in the public administration literature (e.g. Hendren, Luo and Pandey 2018; Hendren et al. 2022; Mele and Belardinelli 2019; Raimondo and Newcomer 2017). Previous in-depth studies of translation, on the

other hand, have usually been based on observations (e.g. Lindberg and Czarniawska 2006). However, recurring and in-depth observations over time in a large and complex organization tend to be complicated, and therefore the preference has been for other forms of information to be gathered. This study uses a mixed-method design involving documentary analysis, interviews and exploratory factor analysis of a large survey to corroborate and integrate its findings (cf. Bazeley 2009). The analysis is based on abductive reasoning, where the empirical material gathered is interpreted on theoretical bases, and we critically reflect upon both the empirical basis and the relevance of the interpreted results (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000). Using documents, interviews and a survey, we seek to determine how prevailing identities, friction and action nets affect the translation and understanding of the STA's new role across its five business areas.

The fieldwork at the STA started in 2016 with eight interviews of ten employees involved in business development and planning at five different STA regional offices around Sweden. We conducted the interviews as conversations of 60–120 minutes in which we asked the interviewees to describe their duties, how they work with strategies and guidelines and their views of the role of a societal developer. We prepared the interviews after reading the relevant research literature as well as texts and documents published on the official STA website. The interviewees furnished us with internal working documents from the STA's intranet. We also attended a one-day workshop in March 2016 with 16 STA managers responsible for the coordination of business development.

Quite early in the field study it became apparent that we would need to capture a much broader view on how the role of a societal developer was perceived in the organization. We therefore designed a survey that we administered in 2016 to gather data from the STA's five business areas, garnering more information than interviews would have been able to provide in the same amount of time. We believed it was important to learn more about the understanding of the societal developer role across the different professions and business areas throughout the STA (Rämö and Wittbom 2017).

In 2017, we conducted three interviews with top management to obtain their views on our survey results. In 2021, we conducted three follow-up interviews with the Director of Communication at the STA to determine what had changed in terms of organizational understanding of the STA's societal developer role.

We recorded and transcribed all of the interviews. We have translated any quotations given below from Swedish.

Table 1. Interview respondents.

Date	Profession	Business Area / Unit	Place for interview	Code
2016-03-08	Business Development Manager	Major Projects	Solna	IR1
2016-03-14	Administrative Manager Planning of measures	Planning	Borlänge	IR2
2016-03-17	Business Development Manager	Maintenance	Göteborg	IR3
2016-03-18	Business Development Manager	Investment	Malmö	IR4
2016-04-19	Societal Planner			IR5A
2016-04-19	Strategist Rail, Sea, Freight Traffic	Planning	Gävle	IR5B
2016-04-25	Coordinator Societal Planning			IR6A
2016-04-25	Investigator, Strategic Choice of Measures, SCM	Planning	Solna	IR6B
2016-05-20	Unit Manager	Investment	Luleå	IR7
2016-05-26	Project Manager	Strategic Development, Head Office	Borlänge	IR8
2017-05-18	Director of Strategic Development	Head Office	Borlänge	IR9
2017-05-30	Director of Human Resources	Head Office	Borlänge	IR10
2017-06-01	Director of Planning	Head Office	Stockholm	IR11
2021-03-16	Director of Communication	Head Office	Zoom	IR12
2021-03-18				
2021-06-03				

We developed the survey after conducting documentary analysis and interview analysis and finally after going through a near-complete draft of the survey questions together with the Business Development Council at the STA. The Human Resources department of the STA provided designations of the educational backgrounds of participants, and the Market Analysis department implemented the survey itself, with department members offering their experience as to how a survey should best be formulated to obtain the greatest reply frequency possible. Brevity was their only concern, not survey content. We therefore limited the number of background variables to position (employee/manager), place of employment preceding the STA (e.g. the two discontinued predecessors of the STA: the Swedish Rail Administration and the Swedish Road Administration) and education (economist/engineer, etc.). A translated copy of the survey is given in Appendix 1.

The STA’s Market Analysis department distributed a total of 1 341 surveys by email with Stockholm University as the sender. The population comprised everyone working in the agency’s five business areas – Investment, Maintenance, Major Projects, Planning and Traffic Management – from all over Sweden. The selection included managers plus 25% of employees from these five business areas. The survey could be answered during the period from June 15 to September 1, 2016. Reminders were sent out August 15 and 28.

The response rate on an aggregated level – with all business areas combined – was 57%, and this varied by 29 percentage points between the five business areas (Table 2). The Planning business area had the highest response rate (72%), while Traffic Management had the lowest (43%). The response rate of the Investment business area was at the average level, while Maintenance and Major Projects response rate was slightly above average (both at 61%).

Table 2. Numbers of surveys and responses in decreasing order of response rate across the five STA business areas.

Business area	Surveys	Responses	Response rate	Code
Planning	290	208	72%	PIQ:#
Maintenance	274	167	61%	MaQ:#
Major Projects	120	73	61%	MPQ:#
Investment	240	137	57%	InvQ:#
Traffic Management	417	180	43%	TMQ:#
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,341</i>	<i>765</i>	<i>57%</i>	

Codes for quotations from free responses: acronym for business area (Pl, Ma, MP, Inv, TM) followed by the survey question number and the response number from our material.

The survey began with the following question: “What does the STA’s societal developer role mean to you?” There were seven possible responses, and we asked the respondents to mark all answers that they agreed with. They also had the possibility of writing in their own answers. All 765 respondents answered this question, and only 34 respondents (4%) chose to write in their own answers. Of those, 29 were varying responses, while the remaining five all rejected the societal developer role.

Because many of the correlations between the questions can be assumed to be high, some variables might be redundant. Therefore, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis to determine the fewest underlying factors. To achieve this, we used Horn’s parallel analysis method for determining this number of factors (cf. Hayton et al. 2004; Horn 1965). This is regarded as one of the most accurate methods for exploratory factor analysis (e.g. Hayton et al. 2004; Zwick and Velicer 1982).

The response rates reported above allow the survey to be considered as both internally and externally valid; in other words, the selection of respondents in the study was relevant, and the results provide a useful overview of the five business areas. However, because we only sent the survey to employees in these five business areas, the results cannot be generalized to the STA as a whole. We did not include the employees in the STA’s seven central departments in the study

(Communications, Finance and Administration, Human Resources, Information Technology, Legal Matters and Plan Review, Procurement and Logistics and Strategic Development). We instead focused on the five business areas that deliver external services.

The study can be assumed to be reliable regarding bias/skewed results, at least in part because the outcomes of the initial interviews are consistent with the survey responses (cf. Bryman and Bell 2015).

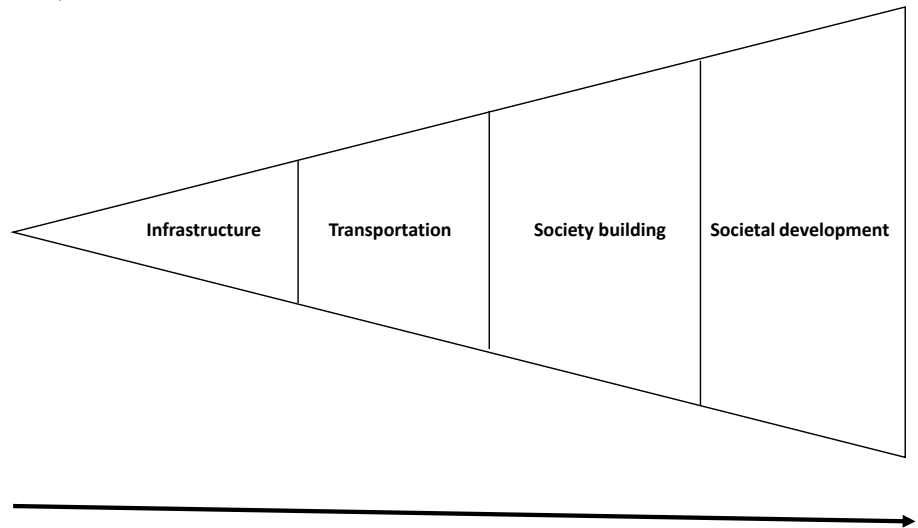
Empirical Findings

By the time of our field study, efforts to adopt the role of societal developer had been underway for six years, ever since the STA had been formed in 2010. Preparations for the launch of this new agency were outlined in projects named “Society builders in cooperation” and “Society builders in one transport agency” (STA 2015; Swedish National Rail Administration 2009:4). The concept of a societal developer was introduced in a completely top-down fashion, without any iterative processes, and this approach was consciously chosen as the new top management wanted the new role statement to be in place without any delay (STA 2015).

In the discussions with employees, the image of a funnel (Figure 1) was frequently used by top management to illustrate the expanded perspective implied by the societal developer concept:

Everyone thinks it's a good idea, but how does it really work? How do you work? And then I usually show the funnel. Because I think it's very good. We are still infrastructure managers, but we shift the perspective to societal development. (IR9)

Figure 1. A broadened perspective of infrastructure in society (STA 2015:68, 2016).



However, this funnel illustration of the new role did not convince all STA employees. As one interview respondent said:

A lot of thoughts arose internally in the STA that infrastructure was not so important anymore since we all should be societal developers. That is the interpretation of this funnel. Considering that, we wish to communicate more about what we do, which hopefully will lead to us eventually being perceived as societal developers. (IR8)

In addition, concerns were also expressed regarding the funnel illustration at the workshop with the business developers:

We were also discussing the [funnel] illustration that describes what we do at STA. It goes from the infrastructure manager, or holder, which is the little, little cone on the far left, to the broadening societal developer on the far right. And we did not think that was a good thing as infrastructure is the base, it should be at the bottom, big and wide, because without roads and rails, we do nothing, I claim. And then we should have a small, small top up there that is about societal development. (Workshop March 2016)

The Director of Communication expressed similar concerns about the use of the funnel illustration:

You know, there were interpretations and translations, so we said, no the funnel is not relevant. The visualization itself became an obstacle in the organization because it had gained a foothold and was twisted and interpreted in a way that was not intended from the beginning. (IR12)

These quotes indicate that the funnel illustration was interpreted as if the small cone on the left was less significant than the broader space on the right – as if tangible infrastructure was of the least importance.

In the survey, we invited all 765 respondents to indicate their agreement with seven proposed meanings of the societal developer role. In all five business areas the option “Enabling travel and transportation” scored the highest at 83%; Planning and Traffic Management both scored this interpretation the highest at 86% each, and Maintenance scored this the lowest at 74%. The option “Building and maintaining infrastructure” accounts for the second highest response rate (72%), and the three alternatives that involve interaction with external parties also scored relatively highly (61–65%).

The free response options in the survey produced similar answers to the introductory interviews. Many answers in the survey questioned what a societal developer should be, similarly to the interviewees: The “basic product” of the operation is still seen as something “tangible,” such as roads and railways (IR4). Questions that touch on societal development are translated more or less metaphorically with concepts such as “goals statement,” “needs statement,” “societal vision” and “accessibility.” Numerous comments also touched on the matter of control over carrying out new projects. Two of the interviewees

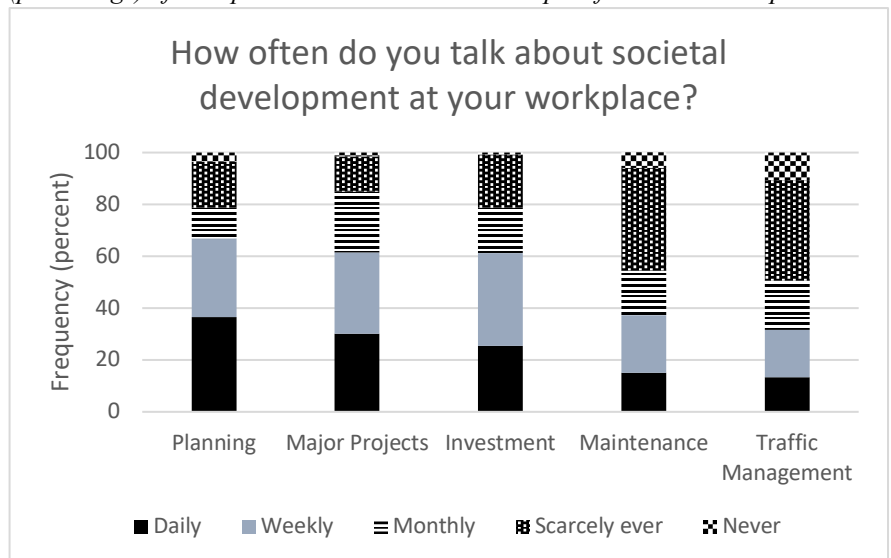
expressed their concerns about this in the following way: “Now goals had become unclear, and the role had become that of placing orders” (IR4); “The toolbox so clearly disappeared when the sector responsibility was taken away. ... The responsibility that remains is not very clear” (IR2).

Some respondents were nonetheless more positive regarding the societal developer concept. One respondent from the Planning business area said that “societal development was seen as always being a part of the operation, now with a better understanding” (Workshop March 2016). Another respondent said that, previously, when the two separate rail and road agencies were responsible for their own sectors, they were vertical “silos”:

Rail sat on one floor, Electricity sat on another floor, Signaling sat on yet another, and they didn't talk to each other unless they had to. The strength now was seen to be able to sit together and be “general transportation.” In addition, it is now more common to bounce ideas back and forth and work toward consensus, both internally and with external stakeholders. (IR5B)

The answers to the question on how frequently societal development is talked about in the workplace (Figure 2) show that Planning uses the concept frequently; Traffic Management and Maintenance mention it rarely, while Investment and Major Projects score in-between. Only a few respondents, particularly from Traffic Management, never talk about societal development.

Figure 2. Answers to survey question number 2, indicating the frequency (percentage) of workplace conversations on the topic of societal development.



Regarding the question of how often the respondents communicate with anyone outside the STA in their work, there are only minor variations between the business areas. The results show that only 2% never communicate with

anyone outside the STA; 76% have daily or weekly external contacts, and 24% have monthly or infrequent external relations. However, there is much variety regarding with whom the respondents communicate. Staff in Planning communicate extensively with Government agencies as well as regional and local authorities to set up plans for new solutions related to infrastructure and transportation. Staff in Major Projects and Maintenance communicate mainly with suppliers and contractors once plans are set, while staff in Traffic Management mainly communicate with railroad transport operators regarding ongoing traffic work.

The survey also included three background variable questions on position, professional background and education. From the results, we can conclude that respondents who came to the STA from other organizations represent the largest group, and that respondents from the former Swedish Rail Administration outnumber those with a background in the former Swedish Road Administration. Engineers are also in the majority. Several respondents (24%) also indicated having a different background from the alternatives specified in the survey.

When respondents were given the opportunity to say something about their own views on the STA's role as a societal developer, this resulted in a wide variety of comments, with some using negative terms such as "buzzword concepts" (Inv6:7; Ma6:4) and "lack of meaning" (Pl6:36), while used wrote affirmative comments such as "[the new role] is important and with it follows a great responsibility" (Ma6:14; MP6:10).

Mostly, representatives from Planning feel comfortable with the societal developer concept, which fits into their frame of reference focusing on societal benefit: "Being a societal developer is, in practice, nothing new for STA. Some departments have been working on what is now called societal development for decades" (Pl5:12). Investment and Major Projects both have to relate to Planning's decisions; they inherited the societal developer concept but in a adapted sense: "We implement what is imposed on STA to do" (Inv5:8); "The role [societal developer] is very important for the development of infrastructure, which supports society, to be as good as possible within the given limits" (MP5:16). The above three business areas – Planning, Investment and Major Projects – interact frequently with various internal and external actors; the factor analysis also confirmed the form and frequency of such communication to be important.

Maintenance regularly cooperates with a limited number of contractors, meaning that members of this business area understand implicitly that the societal developer role facilitates support and prioritization within the STA. As was said by one Maintenance interview respondent, this cooperation with contractors is done "[t]o make the right priorities for long-term traffic solutions and to invest well in time and in the right way" (Ma5:3).

Traffic Management's focus on facilitating daily transport operations enables others to develop and perform without requiring them to further clarify the societal development role: "Not really applicable to us on Traffic Management. We make sure that people who travel arrive, not to develop society" (TM5:8). However, the top management appreciates Traffic Management's hesitation regarding the concept: "You have to work specialized

as well. This is where we get lost sometimes. Not everyone can sit and think about how society should develop” (IR9).

In sum, the majority of respondents felt that there had been a persistent lack of clarification as to what the societal developer role actually meant in the various business areas. The societal developer role is instead mainly discussed only in formal settings. In the various business areas, however, only a few respondents had ever used the term “societal developer” in conversation with colleagues.

Although the term had been in use for several years, top management still felt that there were difficulties in concretizing the societal developer role in both internal and external communications (STA 2016). They were also convinced that the concept should still be applied, as expressed by the Director of Planning:

Previously, it was more about us working with infrastructure, but not seeing the connections. We must become better at seeing the connections infrastructure has with, for example, housing construction, with smart urban planning, employment and business conditions and the like. The scope has become much wider. (IR11)

The Director of Human Resources puts this another way:

[W]e have not formally been assigned the role of societal developer from the Government. But we have chosen to take it. And now this is what applies. And there I think we can get sharper, which is required if we are to reach everyone. (IR10)

Attempts had been made to emphasize that this process is about an expanded role, not abandoning a previous role for another one but instead gaining a wider perspective:

If you say that we go from the perspective of maintaining infrastructure to contributing to societal development, then it will be right. But to carelessly say that we are leaving being infrastructure holders, then there are many who feel lost. (IR9)

In an internal investigation, the formulation of the role statement “we are societal developers” was criticized in two respects: firstly, that it would be better to communicate “what we do,” not “that we are societal developers”; and secondly, that the role of a societal developer is difficult to break down for the individual employee. The role is only for the STA as a whole and not for everyone individually (STA 2016).

In summary, understanding of the societal developer concept was far from uniform. Although the concept itself was familiar, its meaning remained unclear, and so its use eventually faded into oblivion.

Analysis

The journey of the STA from a mission focused on building and maintaining infrastructure to assuming the role of a societal developer was one of an expanded assignment that intentionally retained previous roles. The societal developer role was interpreted differently by the employees from the five business areas studied, which made it difficult to establish the concept clearly. As is shown in Figure 2, the numbers of conversations about societal development varied substantially among the different business areas. In Planning, the concept was quite well adopted given Planning's focus on infrastructure development, while the focus in Maintenance and Traffic Management was restricted to already-existing infrastructure. This means that the role does not always suit the work practices that currently exist in each business area. Nor does the responsibility implied by the societal developer role suit the directives and management tools used in each business area. Neither the interviews nor the survey responses indicate that the STA followed up on the business areas' efforts to introduce the societal developer role, rendering difficult any effective evaluation of efforts regarding manageability and measurability.

As becomes clear from the factor analysis, understanding of the aim and direction of the organization together with the form and frequency of internal and external communications were the decisive factors in the survey (see Appendix 2). From this follows that employees in business areas having an identity that comfortably accommodates talking about societal issues in their daily work – such as Planning – are more capable of internalizing a concept such as “societal developer.” Thus, the translation of the concept takes various forms and is more difficult to achieve in some contexts than others, which is largely influenced by the prevailing identity in the group. Such identities can be attributed to several factors, including education and work. An educational background in engineering dominates among the STA employees, except in Traffic Management, where the majority had received in-service training. Social scientists and economists are more common among the planners. Engineers' traditional focus on building and construction rather than development has broad acceptance within the STA. There is also no explicit focus on development within Traffic Management; instead, the dominant group of in-service trained employees usually undertake more or less well-defined routine tasks. Planners with backgrounds in social science and economics, on the other hand, have duties and perhaps also have received training with a greater focus on development issues. Each business area seeks ways to incorporate a concept and role so that it fits into its pre-existing practice without substantially altering it.

Specifically, in the case of Planning, which regularly deals with societal-level concerns, the societal developer role was easily reconciled with existing concepts, such as societal benefit, and was translated accordingly. Planning included the concept within its existing vocabulary. Its connection with existing frames of reference appears to have generated friction – in the positive sense proposed. In Investment and Major Projects, “development” focuses on the creation and extension of a stock of infrastructure, and these areas translated “societal developer” in this sense, whereas Maintenance saw the societal developer role in terms of the contributions they make to supporting society,

which can be seen as a more limited translation. These three business areas thus accepted the concept, but without it becoming prominent. Traffic Management does not appear to have been able to translate the societal developer role; indeed, it seems likely that neither management nor the unit itself wished that such should occur.

Thus, translation in the various business areas takes place on the basis of the unit's prevailing identity; Planners often talk about development, whereas this is unusual in Traffic Management. Those areas that are tightly coupled to Planning, such as Investment and Major Projects, also do not consider the concept to be foreign. There are established action nets between these units that facilitated the translation of the new concept. There is also an order of practice in which Planning is closest to the role of a societal developer, and other business areas then implement and operate what Planning has prepared. When, for example, Major Projects or Investment become involved, Planning has already decided on the direction to take (cf. Qvist 2017). Thus, there are action nets between Planning, Investment and Major Projects, though these have not substantiated the societal developer concept in practice. Traffic Management is only loosely coupled to these units and works on substantially different tasks. Maintenance is even less tightly coupled to the above units than Traffic Management. When the daily actions in a unit are clearly demarcated from those of other units, reciprocal attempts at translation become challenging. Weaker action nets thus make it more difficult to incorporate an unguided concept. Within each unit there are "institutional orders," representing a set of prevalent institutions, and these do not have to be coherent with the rest of the organization (cf. Czarniawska 2004:780). If a novel concept is in tune with the unit's prevailing identity, it becomes internalized. Otherwise, it is translated into something that the unit is familiar with or it never gains a foothold. The daily activities in the various groups create and recreate different action nets that can be more or less receptive to translating and internalizing a novel concept, not least when a concept is to be implemented without guidance.

The translation model described in Czarniawska (2014; cf. Sahlin-Andersson 1996) does not proceed from the clearly articulated commitment or strongly promoted intention of top management, but the process is nevertheless not random. Instead, the idea is adapted as best as possible to the business area at hand. In most of these cases, a clear idea of what the expanded role of a societal developer represents is lacking. At best, business areas gave the concept an unspecified place together with existing concepts, or it remained foreign.

Cooperation and connection between business areas are of importance. Loosely connected business areas such as Planning and Traffic Management do not influence each other's understanding of new concepts and roles. On the other hand, more tightly connected business areas such as Investment and Major Projects exchange experiences and learn from each other. The action nets in all of these business areas are undergoing reorganization and translation – in this case, in attempts to create local meaning for the societal developer concept. When different actors both within and outside the organization influence the local identity and meaning in a group, this enables greater acceptance and understanding of the new concept and the accompanying new role. When local meaning in a group includes fewer actors with more specific tasks, then the new

concept and role should be made to fit into the particular context and identity at hand.

Therefore, in most cases, each business area grafted the term “societal developer” onto the existing vocabulary specific to that business area – that is, without necessarily broadening the business area’s perspective, which was the fundamental intent of the concept. The concept of building objects by connecting parts together seems to be more tangible and understandable to our respondents than the abstract concept developed, which etymologically addresses qualities that change over time. This is because the role of a builder is anchored in reality in this business that mainly focuses on technical issues and solutions.

As a result, the societal developer concept remains unclear or is made synonymous with concepts that are already in use, but this also makes it difficult to follow-up on the impacts of the societal developer role. For most purposes, it remains a “traveling idea,” as agreed-upon translations from the abstract and general to the real and specific are lacking in the business areas.

However, there have also been voices – especially at the senior management level – arguing for the benefits of not steering this process. A newly created large and complex organization accommodates many different professions and cultures that understand concepts differently and contribute to diverse identities at the unit level. Therefore, instead of forcing a definition of “societal developer,” the various business areas will find ways to internalize the concept in their prevailing local identity contexts. Although it did not gain a foothold in the organization, the concept was used for seven years. The formation of the STA in 2010 created an overall transport agency with more limited tasks through the formal removal of sector responsibility, after which the management on its own initiative introduced the expanded societal developer role. The STA’s mandate has consequently undergone phases of contraction and expansion, which also illustrates how complex change initiatives with divergent objectives over time can lead to ambiguous outcomes.

Focusing on Kuipers et al.’s (2014) third-order change – concerning organizational culture and climate and other behavioral factors – shows that reception of the societal developer concept at the STA overall depends on the business area. From the five proposed focus categories in Kuipers et al. (2014), the context in this case is sector reform and the subsequent formation of a new organization in 2010. Kuipers et al. (2014:14) also differentiate between change outcomes and outputs. Outcomes are the results of the implementation of a change (e.g. intended/unintended, positive/negative), whereas outputs are decisions, such as the introduction of a new objective following a reform.

In summary, the outcome of the uncoordinated translation and implementation of the new societal developer role was not as intended. The decision not to centrally coordinate the ongoing translation process meant that the concept remained vague and ambiguous. In addition, illustrating the new role using the image of a funnel unintentionally and misleadingly portrayed infrastructure as playing a smaller role than societal development. Nevertheless, Planning felt comfortable with the concept and, to some extent, influenced those that they collaborated with (i.e. Investment and Major Projects); Maintenance found a vague affiliation with the concept, while Traffic Management remained skeptical of it. Both proponents and opponents contributed to the outcome. In

Planning the concept was internalized and became part of the unit's understanding of their assignment, while in Traffic Management the concept was externalized and never took hold. In both cases the outcome was that the concept eventually faded away and disappeared due to it being either submerged within the existing vocabulary or abandoned because of its lack of purpose. The groups in between remained indifferent in this context, as they did not express strong commitment either for or against the concept.

Discussion

This example of a far-reaching translation model goes in many ways against what is typically recommended in, for example, the public-sector reform literature (e.g. Andrews et al. 2011; Kuipers et al. 2014; Pollit and Bouckaert 2004). Instead, this approach validates Czarniawska's (2004, 2016) discussion of an ongoing translation model and action nets. Traveling ideas can fit into prevailing "ideas of residence" without becoming prominent among the already-established actions in a group of people – or between groups. In other cases, "traveling ideas" do not gain a foothold at all within the groups' existing "ideas in residence." Thus, prevailing action nets are sufficient for the translation of "traveling ideas."

In the present case, an ambitious concept was allowed to float around in the organization without gaining a foothold. This raises the question as to whether this particular aspect of organizational change – the coining of a term such as "societal developer" – needs to be looked at less in terms of a "reform" or "strategy implementation" than as an attempt to embed a new and potentially unifying identity claim (cf. Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002; Wæraas and Nielsen 2016). From this perspective, the initial and long-lasting *laissez-faire* approach of management might be seen as a failure to establish such a cross-cutting identity that brings all of the former organizational units together under a new mission. Earlier studies demonstrate the need to replace generally formulated goals with clearly defined assignments within departments (e.g. Fernandez and Rainey 2006). In the case of the STA, both clear goals and assignments were lacking – despite the original ambition in 2010 to provide a coherent mandate instead of sectoral division into the four main modes of transport. However, this approach also avoided the temptation to impose such a view from the top down, which could potentially catalyze resistance, as the new identity claim would be placed in opposition to the former views and identities of each unit, not least when there had previously been a sectoral division between rail and road transport.

The present case certainly represents an unusually long period of time being given over to uncoordinated translation attempts. But hasty change implementation decisions are also risky. Allowing time for discussion and improvisation is necessary for revising initial change proposals (Piderit 2000). Different organizational members can also contribute to iterative negotiations through complex, messy, day-to-day working practices rather than through planning and design (Thomas and Hardy 2011). The question is: How are we to further build on the linkages already made in the process to endow an ambitious concept with local meaning and potentially make it richer and more meaningful

in practice? This process can be facilitated by simultaneously expressing local cultural understandings and enabling the exchange of experience. Consequently, we would need to focus on how the diverse identities of the individual units might cooperate or collaborate as necessary to achieve organizational goals. Ideally, this can be seen as another form of positive “friction” (Czarniawska 2014). In practical terms, this would suggest encouraging direct engagement within and across units where the introduced concept has been more successfully accepted through processes of identifying and exposing concrete examples of the concept. As enduring symbols of the working out of the concept, these might then become sites for further work to encompass the broader life of the organization.

There is a common assumption in translation theory that translation inevitably involves transformation and leads to unpredictable outcomes (e.g. Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; Røvik 2016). Uncoordinated attempts to translate abstract and ambitious concepts in an organization with institutionalized modes of reasoning are examples of this (cf. Clarke 1995; Reay and Hinings 2009). When there is acceptance, the concept in question might become submerged within the existing vocabulary; when there is doubt, the concept might be abandoned due to its lack of perceived relevance. In both cases, the unguided concept thus runs the risk of going astray.

Conclusion

There are few examples of a government agency deliberately leaving a strategic concept undefined for many years. Agencies with far-reaching autonomy will most likely take the time to hear what employees have to say before deciding what to do, without leaving matters ambiguous for years. Ambiguity regarding a new concept creates confusion within an organization, as evidenced in this study. Unguided translation of an ambitious concept makes matters even more challenging. There is thus a risk that such a concept will erode when clarifications are lacking.

This study provides several contributions to research and practice. First, it highlights the problems that arise when employees in a large public administration with different subareas independently seek an understanding of a common objective. Thus, we provide a clear example of the translation of the societal developer concept having been handed over to STA employees without attempting to control the process from the top. It appears that, in this case, when such implementation occurs without top-down intent or drive, it comes to resemble a translation process but without the concept being translated gaining a foothold in the organization. Therefore, this study shows how prevailing “ideas in residence” in various groups affect the translation of “traveling ideas.”

The second contribution is that our study investigates how the implementation of a central concept can take place over a long period of time in a public administration. We respond to Kuipers et al.’s (2014) desire for more longitudinal studies of the change outputs (decisions) and outcomes (results) of public-sector reforms by providing a less successful example of such implementation through the case of the STA.

The third contribution is that our study uses a mixed-method approach involving interviews and surveys – an approach that recently has received increased attention in public administration studies (e.g. Hendren, Luo and Pandey 2018; Hendren et al. 2022; Mele and Belardinelli 2019; Raimondo and Newcomer 2017). In translation theory, mixed-method approaches can provide guidance and direction regarding where to search for relevant action nets in complex environments despite their qualitative nature.

The idea of being a societal developer did not receive widespread support when the previous identity of the STA focused mainly on being society builders. Thus, even desirable objectives encounter resistance when they do not conform to prevailing identities. Such resistance is certainly not unusual when implementing new objectives, but these objectives generally come with clear directives from above. In 2017, the societal developer concept began to be toned down in STA communications, before being phased out in the following year (though the concept is still mentioned in STA's 2021 Code of Conduct). Instead, a new catchphrase was introduced: We bring Sweden closer (Vi gör Sverige närmare). When the freedom to internalize a visionary role fails in an organization, it is replaced by more prosaic ones.

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Appendix 1

Survey (translated from Swedish):

1. What does the STA's role as societal developers mean for you?
Enter all the appropriate options:
 - Building and maintaining infrastructure
 - Enabling travel and transportation
 - Be process leader for decisions on infrastructure projects
 - Be process leader for decisions on other types of projects
 - Collaborate with external partners on the construction and maintenance of infrastructure
 - Collaborate with external partners on the development of transport
 - Collaborate with external partners on community development
 - Other:

2. How often do you talk about societal development at your workplace?
 - Daily
 - Weekly
 - Monthly
 - Scarcely ever
 - Never

3. How often do you communicate with anyone outside of the STA in your work?
 - Daily
 - Weekly
 - Monthly
 - Scarcely ever
 - Never

4. Which external parties do you communicate with at work?

Enter all the appropriate options:

- Ministry
- Other Agencies
- Local and Regional Authorities
- Trade and Industry
- Transport Operators
- Suppliers and Contractors
- Citizens
- Other:.....

5. Do you use other words than “societal developer” when you talk about the STA’s role in society? If yes, what words/concepts do you use?

.....
.....
.....

6. Please write something about your own view of the STA’s role as a societal developer:

.....
.....
.....

7. I work at the following STA level:

- Staff
- Section manager
- Unit manager
- Head of department/business area

8. I came to the STA from:

- The former Swedish Rail Administration
- The former Swedish Road Administration
- Another organization

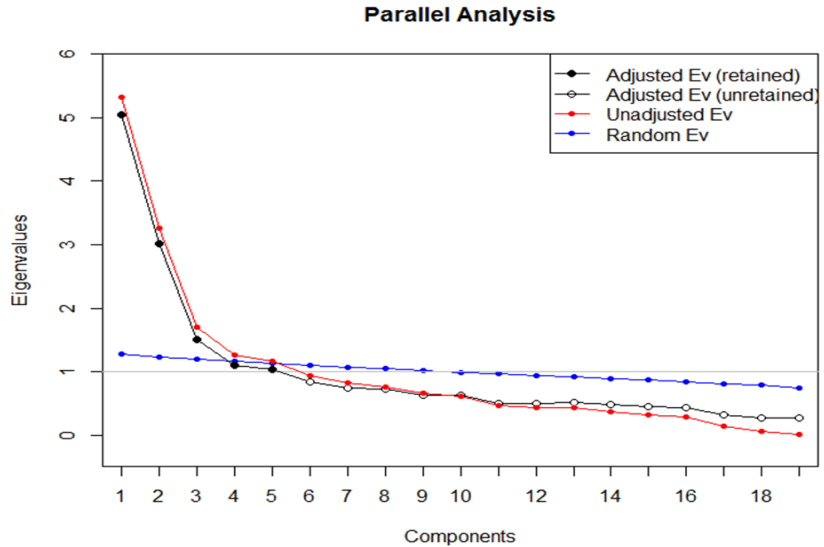
9. My principal educational background is:

- Engineering
- In-service training
- Social science
- Economics/business
- Behavioral science
- Law school
- Other:

Appendix 2

Figure A1 shows the results of Horn's parallel analysis (Horn 1965) for component retention at 500 iterations, using the mean estimate. Adjusted eigenvalues >1 indicate dimensions to retain (we retained five components).

Figure A1. Results of Horn's parallel analysis.



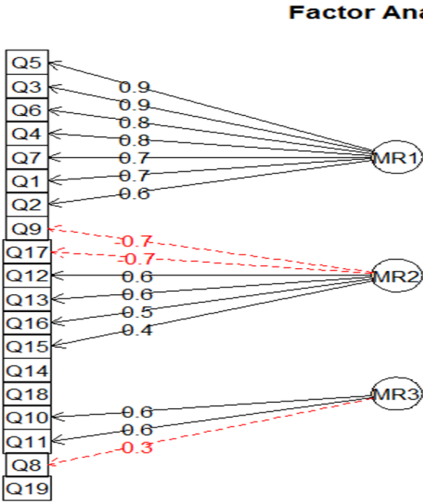
Ev = eigenvalue.

Table A1. Factor analysis with five factors.

	MR1	MR4	MR3	MR2	MR5
SS loadings	4.30	2.83	1.48	1.04	0.66
Proportion variance	0.23	0.15	0.08	0.05	0.03
Cumulative variance	0.23	0.38	0.45	0.51	0.54
Proportion explained	0.42	0.27	0.14	0.10	0.06
Cumulative proportion	0.42	0.69	0.84	0.94	1.00

Three factors explained most of the variation in the dataset.

Figure A2. Results of the factor analysis with three factors.



Q = question.

By categorizing the questions included in Figure A2, the three MRs above can be entitled as follows (see also the translated copy of the questionnaire in Appendix 1):

MR1: Understanding of the aim and direction of the STA;

MR2: Form and frequency of communication;

MR3: Frequency of external communication.