

Various-sized Municipalities Dealing with Growth Issues: Different Issues but the Same Solutions?

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Abstract

This article deals with differences in identified growth issues between areas, ranging from managing growth in metropolitan areas to managing decreasing population in rural areas. Across areas, attempts are made to realize and communicate shared visions of place; however, because inhabitants may not agree with these attempts, confusion rather than the intended outcomes may result. Pressure to grow tends to result in resources being spent on branding activities with limited results, and populations continue to decline in rural areas despite such efforts. Growth may cause problems unless it is managed in harmony with the place identity, so ensuring that the local community supports branding efforts is crucial, quite apart from the fact that growth per se may not automatically increase place attractiveness. Our research questions the dominant paradigm suggesting that economic growth is the key driver of place attractiveness and success. We also draw parallels to the sustainability concept to highlight different perspectives of population growth.

Introduction

Municipal organizations face pressure from inhabitants, companies, authorities, and other stakeholders to expand the services offered and become more attractive. The resulting changes are often seen as aligned with new public management (NPM) ideas (Hood, 1991; Lapsley, 2008), reflecting an ideology that has adopted tools and the psychological dimension (i.e. the consequences for individuals working with and under such systems) from the business world (Diefenbach, 2009). Rankings on a variety of performance-related dimensions suggest that economic growth is the way to create attractive places (Kornberger and Carter, 2010; Leo and Andersson, 2006), complicating the situation for municipalities with limited growth opportunities. For this reason, our study treats three types of municipalities – metropolitan areas, intermediate-sized cities, and rural areas – to highlight the differences between places of various sizes and characteristics.

The likelihood of successfully increasing the attractiveness of a place depends on the characteristics of the area in question. Over time, urbanization has led to a fundamental shift of economic activity from rural to metropolitan areas. Figures from Sweden indicate that while a tenth of Sweden's municipalities have lost more than 30 per cent of their inhabitants in the last 30 years, all municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants have grown (Swedish Statistics Bureau, 2016). Intermediate-sized cities (100,000–1,000,000 inhabitants) and metropolitan areas (1,000,000 inhabitants and more) benefit from 'automatic growth', while rural areas struggle to maintain their populations and levels of economic activity. Moreover, financial crises and economic downturns hit rural areas

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harder than metropolitan areas because the industrial structure of many rural areas makes them vulnerable to mass layoffs and factory closures. Scholars from various fields have treated the metropolitan–rural divide from a range of perspectives, for example, differences in living standards (Sahn and Stifel, 2003), welfare distribution (Sicular et al., 2007), effects of political communication (Vavreck et al., 2002), and conceptual definitions of the social, cultural, economic, and environmental issues that distinguish rural from metropolitan areas (Lin, 2001; Scott et al., 2007). Since 2005, Sweden has experienced fast urban growth, in 2010; Sweden’s most densely populated areas grew at a rate of 17.3 per thousand residents, outstripping the EU average of 5.2 (Eurostat, 2016). This, and the fact that Swedish local governments have strong autonomy (Haveri, 2015), makes Sweden an interesting case to study.

Aim of the study

Our research aim is to analyse and discuss how Swedish municipalities of various sizes, i.e. metropolitan areas, intermediate-sized cities, and rural areas, address growth-related issues and challenges. Our research draws on earlier studies of public management in relation to urbanization, growth, and sustainability. Because growth and sustainability are often seen as conflicting concepts, we use them together to address a research gap and deepen our understanding of how municipal managers deal with growth-related issues. The research contributes to the literature on public management in relation to sustainability and growth (Brorström, 2014; Ferlie and Ongaro, 2015; Krueger and Gibbs, 2007; Orr and West, 2002).

Literature review

Urbanization and sustainability

Since 2008, the number of people in the world living in cities has exceeded those living in rural areas, and by 2050 the urban share is expected to have risen to 75 per cent (Newton and Doherty, 2014). Urbanization affects all types of areas and has many facets, such as air pollution and social problems in bigger cities (Sarzynski, 2012). While large agglomerations of people may harbour severe societal problems, growth is considered a key to an attractive future (Lombardi et al., 2011). Urbanization has far-reaching implications for the demographic development and intensity of economic activity in various areas, but demographic change also greatly affects urbanization patterns (Drakakis-Smith, 1996; Goldstone, 2002; Peng, 2011).

Urbanization has long been subject to study and analysis (Reckien and Martinez-Fernandez, 2011) focusing on how cities grow; the questions of why and how cities shrink have attracted interest only more recently (Metzger, 2000; Wiechmann and Bontje, 2015). Cities have traditionally been regarded as ‘growth machines’ (Logan and Molotch, 1987), growth being seen in a purely positive light. Urban growth is what all local leaders would regard as success;

conversely, cities that do not grow are seen as less successful or even failures (Leo and Anderson, 2006). Leo and Andersson (2006) describe growth from a North American perspective, as follows:

Growth is to North American civic leaders what publicity is to Hollywood stars; there is no such thing as bad growth and no such thing as too much of it. If we take local media seriously, we may come away with the impression that growth is the elixir that cures all ills (p. 169).

This quotation could equally apply in the Swedish context. Earlier studies of local governments in Sweden have identified growth as a crucial hallmark of successful local government (Brorström, 2010, 2015). Leo and Anderson (2006) further emphasize that most cities really cannot affect the pace of their growth, no matter how much they try through strategies or policies. Sousa and Pinho (2015) argue, for example, that local government can take one of two approaches to dealing with shrinking population: reaction or adaptation. Reaction entails finding ways of trying to change the course of development, while adaptation implies minimizing its negative consequences. This is not a static but a dynamic process. Hoyt and Leroux (2007) traced the actions of shrinking cities through various phases: the first phase is shock, possibly stemming from business closure, while the next involves the reaction. It is important to bear in mind that neither shrinking nor growing municipalities follow general patterns, but can have different rationales for their actions (Sousa and Pinho, 2015).

Urbanization implies that people are moving to urban areas. There is a vast literature on why people move from one setting to another, but the research is not clear as to the main driving forces of such movements. Garville et al. (2000) state that these movements are less about the labour market than one might think, i.e. people do not necessarily move because of job opportunities, instead arguing that social considerations are crucial drivers of people's movements. Nedomysl (2006, 2010), on the other hand, claims that the labour market is the most crucial factor underlying people's decisions to move, but that this motivation varies across groups of individuals. Highly educated individuals have a greater tendency to move than do less-educated individuals. Figures from Sweden indicate that about one quarter of moves are returns to individuals' places of origin. Considerable evidence also suggests that young people are the ones most likely to move (Dixon, 2003; Green, 2013), and that it is not until late in life that individuals assign low priority to the attractiveness of a place when deciding to move (Conway and Houtenville, 2003). The propensity to move peaks in the early 20s, declines until age 50–55, and then stays flat (Green, 2013). Millennials express a strong preference to live in bigger cities (Parment, 2014), a preference that could reinforce urbanization. Moreover, Hollander (2011) finds that life satisfaction does not correlate with population growth. Despite different assumptions and emphases, the urbanization literature agrees that dealing with

the effects of urbanization, such as population growth, will be a great challenge in the future. Relating this to the concept of sustainability reveals the situation to be even more challenging.

Sustainable growth?

Sustainability is often defined in terms of three dimensions, i.e. economic, ecological, and social, a definition that stems from the Brundtland Commission report of 1987 (Redclift, 2005). Though, in theory, it appears possible to combine the three dimensions, doing so has proven difficult in practice. On the other hand, the very abstraction of the sustainability concept makes it possible for contrasting interpretations to coexist (Brorström, 2015; Satterthwaite, 1997; Swyngedouw, 2009). More recently the social dimension has been emphasized, as it is here that cities face the greatest challenges in the form of segregation and gentrification (Gerometta et al., 2005). According to Massey (2013), there is conflict between the social and economic dimensions of sustainability, because there are clear patterns of growth leading to greater segregation (Orr and West, 2002). Krueger and Gibbs (2007) sum this up as two dilemmas: the first is between growth and quality of life, i.e. quality of life declines with population growth, while the second is between the effects of growth and further development, i.e. citizens with low-paying jobs cannot afford to live in city centres and therefore must commute to work, which in turn might lead to shortages of certain types of workers. In addition, according to Hardoy et al. (1992), there are contradictions between sustainability and development in general, as cities judged positively in terms of achieving economic and political goals may have among the highest use of non-renewable resources.

The development of the sustainability concept in city management (Brorström, 2015; Shaw, 2013) has led to a shift in emphasis from how to 'build green' to social issues and how to organize local government to meet upcoming challenges (Lægreid et al., 2015; Lægreid and Rykkja, 2015). This shift often leads to cooperation between multiple actors involved in collaborative solutions. The underlying idea is that such complex issues cannot be handled by single units, but must be handled collectively. However, collaborative organizations are complex, having unclear decision-making processes, and the involved actors' various mandates are unclear (Rainey, 2014; Steane, 1999). The situation becomes even less clear against the background of public organizations that increasingly take risks and engage in promotional and entrepreneurial activities, blurring the distinction between activities characteristic of private versus public organizations (Chapin, 2002; Hall and Hubbard, 1998; Harvey, 1989; Healey, 2007; Leegan, 2015). As a result, branding activities are becoming increasingly common in municipalities of various sizes, for example, as means to redirect ongoing negative developments (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Ramos and Piper, 2006; Schau et al., 2009). The excessive volume of commercial messages makes it difficult for municipalities to reach audiences and convince stakeholders. As well, the increased volume of user-generated content mirrors the emergence and growth of grassroots-driven information that challenges content generated by

companies and institutions (Kaplan and Haenlien, 2010; Schau et al., 2009). For example, in the field of place branding, the ‘demarketing’ concept implies that places, by marketing themselves in certain ways, could become less attractive as people may not recognize the identity described (Medway and Barnaby, 2008). If the place brand as communicated does not reflect or lacks consistency with established perceptions of the place, the result is likely to be confusion as to the brand content.

Methods

Case studies

When we chose municipalities to study we used demographic data. We divided the 290 Swedish municipalities into metropolitan areas, intermediate-sized cities, and rural areas based on a model for categorizing municipalities introduced by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. Six case municipalities were chosen:

- Gothenburg and Stockholm, the largest municipal areas in Sweden, represent metropolitan areas.
- Jönköping and Linköping are intermediate-sized cities with 100,000–150,000 inhabitants, universities, municipal authorities, and competitive companies in various industries. These cities function as hubs and have airports and train stations with direct connections to metropolitan areas and other intermediate-sized cities.
- Rural areas have fewer than 100,000 inhabitants and often rely on single industries, such as tourism, manufacturing, or services; here, these are exemplified by Högsby and Valdemarsvik.

A qualitative case study approach was chosen as it is arguably the preferred method for identifying patterns and making conceptual contributions (Siggelkow, 2007). The data were collected through interviews with municipal representatives as a means to identify the driving forces behind activities in the municipalities in relation to population growth or decline. We were interested in seeing how the municipal actors reacted, or adapted, to the challenges confronting them. We conducted three to seven interviews in each local government. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended and lasted between half an hour and three hours. In addition to the interviews, we examined material provided by the municipalities and interviewees during the visits, and conducted additional research to gain a solid understanding of the specific local contexts. We conceive ‘municipality’ as constituting the municipal organization.

Extensive access to a variety of actors was an important factor affecting our choice of municipalities. As the research was exploratory, we used a semi-structured approach with predefined, open-ended questions. The interviewed actors – politicians, civil servants, and representatives of organizations conducting place branding for the municipalities – were all in some way responsible for municipal branding. Questions followed a structure that addressed specific challenges facing the municipalities and their branding, and how the municipalities, as organizations, dealt with branding and the rationales of the approaches chosen.

The data analysis was an iterative process that systematically combined theory with empirical data, using both inductive and deductive reasoning and applying an abductive methodology (Scheff, 1990/1994). This process entailed alternating between empirical data and theory: after applying theory to see whether our findings fit established theoretical discourse, we returned to the empirical material to try to explain the emergent patterns.

Empirical findings

Metropolitan areas

Stockholm is the capital of Sweden with about 900,000 inhabitants in the city proper and 2.2 million in the larger metropolitan area. Fast growth has increased travel distances and times, and made time-consuming commuting an everyday reality for many citizens. This has contributed to an emerging trend: inhabitants are increasingly remaining in the city centre even after having children. This puts pressure on the city administration to provide services for families with children. In some areas of the city centre, there are now ten times more children than in the 1980s.

The interviewees from Stockholm saw its growth as good from a competitive perspective, their rationale being that growth creates prosperity and facilitates urban expansion. The interviewees emphasized that this was not ‘growth at any price’: growth should be sustainable, as can be seen in new-built areas with green profiles. Urban planning in Stockholm focuses on pedestrians, and many inhabitants dislike the numerous traffic pattern modifications intended to reduce city-centre traffic.

Stockholm’s brand, ‘The Capital of Scandinavia’, was developed collaboratively by local governments in the Stockholm region and is described as important because it distinguishes Stockholm from an international perspective (although it initially annoyed Copenhagen, which also sees itself as the capital of Scandinavia). From Stockholm’s perspective, competition is primarily from other large cities in Europe and it is assumed that the city’s image will improve in the future.

Sweden’s second-largest city, Gothenburg, is also growing. Gothenburg has 550,000 inhabitants in the city proper and one million in the larger metropolitan area. The big challenge here is to reduce the city’s segregation, to ‘Build the city

together – over the River’. There is a strong socioeconomic division between the two sides of the river Göta älv. This problem is being addressed through infrastructure helping people travel across the city more easily. A vision and strategy document entitled the *River City vision* was created to communicate the slogan ‘Gothenburg – Open to the World’. Municipal representatives, however, doubted whether this new document could redirect ongoing development:

The easy part is to write a vision – the hard part is to make it come true (City director).

There was struggle during the *River City* process to find an appropriate vision for Gothenburg, because it is no longer an industrial city or an event city (as previously branded). The interviewees claimed that they needed to find a vision that people living in Gothenburg could agree on, as a means to address integration – a difficult endeavour. Accordingly, actors expressed the fear that the new vision would prove too abstract, not really saying anything, and would therefore not help bind the fragmented city together. One issue is that the city is too big to have an engaged local community, as is common in smaller municipalities. Inhabitants do not respond until change is already initiated, which was described as troublesome for the decision-makers in the municipality.

Intermediate-sized cities

Linköping, a typical intermediate-sized city, is Sweden’s fifth-largest city with 148,000 inhabitants, and has a ‘twin city’, Norrköping, located 45 kilometres northeast. Norrköping used to have more inhabitants than Linköping but is now 15,000 inhabitants smaller. For many years, Linköping has experienced substantial growth catalysed by its university, which offers many competitive educational programmes, and medical, engineering, teaching, nursing, and business students account for many of the 23,000 full-time students at Linköping University. The Mjärdevi Science Park hosts newly developed businesses, often founded by former students or university researchers. Linköping also highlights its work on sustainability:

We have been around the world to talk about our great sustainability efforts. We have even been invited to the United Nations. We are the good example that others should follow – that’s what they told us (Opposition leader).

The growth, business dynamism, and attractiveness of Linköping’s environs create considerable economic activity. Some challenges are important to consider, however. In cooperation with its twin city Norrköping and several smaller municipalities, Linköping has created the East Sweden region, representing more than 300,000 inhabitants, Linköping University, and numerous well-known companies. However, the East Sweden concept, the interviewees stated, is not

well anchored among local inhabitants, for whom East Sweden does not resonate as a place identity. Ultimately, Linköping is dependent on its university to keep growing and ensure a constant flow of students moving into the city.

Jönköping is an intermediate-sized city of 129,000 inhabitants with a long history of being Småland County's hub. Småland has a strong entrepreneurial tradition and Jönköping, with its strategic location near Lake Vättern and Gothenburg (130 km away), is Småland's 'gateway to the world' – as one interviewee put it. While the rest of Småland (except for its second-largest city, Växjö, with 100,000 inhabitants) evinces a locally focused mindset, the university, exchange students, and numerous international companies operating in Jönköping embody the area's international qualities and ambitions.

Jönköping is attempting to attract families with children in order to create economic activity. A place-branding company – 'Destination Jönköping' – has been created by the municipal organization, local companies, and the university. This makes it possible to make fast decisions and use aggressive marketing to recruit inhabitants. On the other hand:

Everything we do, basically, evokes a lot of opinions. Our costs are far too high because our schools, primary healthcare, and other services are designed for a much larger population. But downsizing is difficult. Our politicians are part of tight social networks and see their voters in the grocery store, at kindergarten, and at sports events. You basically don't get away with anything (Municipality official).

Jönköping is called 'Sweden's Jerusalem', as a high percentage of its inhabitants are church members. It also has to deal with a strong 'local hero culture' that may make it difficult to present Jönköping as an open, sophisticated, and attractive place for various target groups. However, the interviewees described successful and innovative marketing campaigns to encourage former Jönköping inhabitants to move back home that, along with a beautiful geographic situation (hundreds of reasonably priced villas with gorgeous sea views are for sale every year), provide a platform for future growth. The target group is individuals 28 to 40 years old, but it has proven very difficult to recruit couples unless at least one of them has personal ties in the greater Jönköping area. The local culture does not really appeal to people with no connection to Småland.

Rural areas

Småland County's Högsby is, with 1900 inhabitants, one of Sweden's smallest municipalities and faces ongoing population decline. However, the interviewees from Högsby saw urbanization as an opportunity, as it may encourage people to move away from crowded cities. One of Högsby's representatives referred to Dutch people as a target group: 'We could sell the silence'. The approach entails making the best of the conditions at hand, so Högsby's brand is 'The place of opportunities'.

Högsby's small size, however, is also described as a challenge, as the municipal organization is difficult to manage. The inhabitants know each other well and decisions made by local government are likely to affect neighbours or friends, making decision-making difficult. Accordingly, the changes necessary to cope with present and future challenges are implemented slowly or not at all. Unlike in metropolitan areas, engaging people in local issues is not a problem. For instance, one respondent talked about the inappropriateness of closing schools, even though enrolment is insufficient, as the schools are important for Högsby's attractiveness: 'In Högsby, there is no queuing for kindergartens or schools', a fact one of the interviewees stressed as a positive aspect of living in Högsby.

Valdemarsvik is located on the east coast of Sweden and has access to extensive areas of attractive scenery. Its location, a three-hour drive from Stockholm and one hour from Norrköping, makes Valdemarsvik more attractive than its population development suggests: from 9303 in 1980, the population declined to 7585 in 2014.

Valdemarsvik's challenge is neither its location nor its infrastructure, but rather the area's social climate and attitudes. Local journalists emphasize misbehaviour in the area and the lack of a constructive relationship between politics and business. Politicians do not want to take risks to help make Valdemarsvik prosper again, and thoroughly negative media reporting makes it difficult for decisions intended to promote Valdemarsvik to gain traction among locals.

In a meeting about building Valdemarsvik, a municipal commissioner stated, in response to the suggestion to offer real estate along the coast at attractive prices to attract new inhabitants, 'No way I'll give away real estate to people from other regions who just buy property here to resell and earn money'. The increase in the property value, though, would not materialize unless real estate were released for development, and that is unlikely to happen as long as the municipal commissioner attempts to block decisions intended to improve the attractiveness of Valdemarsvik to new inhabitants. 'Features' such as parking being free of charge and traffic being uncongested do not really attract new inhabitants, but may rather be seen as signs of decline. Given that 93 per cent of those who were born in Valdemarsvik in the late 1970s have moved away, something needs to be done.

Discussion: the norm of growth and sustainable development

The NPM ideology prompts municipalities, regardless of size, to aim for growth. Our case studies demonstrate, in contrast to the intentions of municipal management, that a strong focus on growth can induce municipalities to do things that undermine their attractiveness. First, growth per se may not increase municipal attractiveness. If, for instance, Högsby's attempts to sell silence to the Dutch are successful, there will be little silence left. Second, growth as an ideology often emphasizes economic activity and recruiting new companies/start-ups; local residents, however, may not want growth per se, but rather specific features

that increase their wellbeing and welfare, such as green space. Third, when many municipalities implement similar growth-promotion initiatives, none of them gains an edge over any other. It is common sense that growth is worth striving for and fuels activity, creativity, and attractiveness. To escape herd behaviour, it becomes necessary for municipal governments to craft their own idiosyncratic trajectories of strategic renewal. Growth as interpreted in our case municipalities entails explicit attempts to compete with larger places, reflected, for example, in labelling Stockholm ‘The Capital of Scandinavia’ and in construction projects in intermediate-sized cities and rural areas intended to attract visitors.

From a sustainable development perspective, it is obvious that the studied local governments face different challenges and opportunities. That growth leads to increased social problems (Orr and West, 2002) is not something the interviewees talked much about, though it is obvious that larger local governments must determine how to engage people and create visions and strategies that take account of these problems. In this respect, we see that social sustainability is discussed more in larger local governments, particularly when problems arise, though considering it at an earlier stage could well be useful. Smaller municipalities, in contrast, could highlight their social advantages, as was done in Högsby when it emphasized that there was no queuing for schools. Sustainability practices then largely mirror the issues –and opportunities – that local government faces. These practices also mirror the organizational development of local government, which could entail, for example, collaboration with others, centralization, or adopting new strategies and policies. This tendency of increased collaboration could be regarded as a means to adapt, rather than react, to the challenges (Sousa and Pinho, 2015).

Identity of place and attractiveness

A cornerstone of becoming attractive as a municipality is doing something different, thereby gaining an advantage over competitors (cf. Kotler and Gertner, 2002). When all municipalities are doing the same things, i.e. focusing on growth and relating their offerings to those of larger municipalities, real differentiation is elusive. Again, when relating the municipalities’ ongoing development paths to sustainability and to the widely differing challenges that local governments face, such similar actions appear insufficient. In this respect, our interviewees talked about the importance of having a strong place identity. Yet, place identity is formed through interaction with place, and people describe themselves in terms of belonging to specific places (Hernández et al., 2007; Knez, 2005). At their worst, strategies for becoming more attractive, for example, through place branding, can reduce local attractiveness and make target groups less inclined to move to a place. Drawing on Medway and Barnaby (2008), our case studies provide examples of how such efforts, contrary to intentions, can result in place demarketing. For example, efforts to present Gothenburg under a single, unified brand have activated tensions among different perceptions of the city’s identity. Unifying Linköping and Norrköping under the ‘East Sweden’ umbrella has found little support from local inhabitants, making it clear that the twin cities are

‘inherently different’ from each other. Yet, in the bigger picture, Linköping and Norrköping are not that different, though their marketing efforts have activated stakeholder resistance. A similar pattern appears in the Valdemarsvik case: Instead of focusing on communicating the overarching Valdemarsvik brand, local ‘sub-brands’ started promoting their own interests. Drawing on the place demarketing concept (Medway and Barnaby, 2008; Medway et al., 2010), our research has identified municipal branding efforts that are not anchored in an identity that local inhabitants can recognize. We recognize that this may activate resistance among stakeholders and might contribute to place demarketing.

In addition, societal forces can work against the successful dissemination of an image that differs from reality. NPM strengthens these forces by emphasizing evaluations and rankings, and by taking inhabitants’ voices into consideration when making decisions (Ramos and Piper, 2006; Schau et al., 2009). Increased transparency of communication makes it difficult to maintain a discrepancy between identity and image. There is no quick fix: anchorage in the local environment, as suggested by Syssner (2010), must involve local cultural heritage and key stakeholders, in particular, local inhabitants.

Rural areas may have a clear advantage when it comes to creating a unified identity, as they harbour fewer competing ideas regarding their place identity. In intermediate-sized cities and metropolitan areas, there may be too many competing identity concepts, reflecting different interpretations held by various stakeholders. This could give the advantage to rural areas, with their fewer competing perspectives, ideas, and strengths. However, actors in rural areas have severe difficulties making decisions, because attempts to create a unified identity can activate resistance among their highly engaged inhabitants. It is likely to be advantageous for rural areas to promote inherent advantages rooted in authentic place identity, rather than attempting to meet the preferences of a target group that is likely to find more of its desired activities and amenities in intermediate-sized and metropolitan areas. Municipal managers must balance the provision and development of key public services (to the immediate benefit of current inhabitants) against efforts to create attractiveness (to the uncertain and long-term benefit of current inhabitants and new recruits). Public resources may be spent on measures to promote place image rather than on fulfilling key municipal obligations. Obviously, in most cases such efforts have been unsuccessful, as all but a few rural areas in Sweden are losing inhabitants (SCB, 2016). As noted by Sousa and Pinho (2015), every municipality has unique characteristics, and these may not be explored or exploited if smaller municipalities focus on comparing themselves with larger ones.

Intermediate-sized cities have stronger images than do rural areas and put more effort into active branding. However, due to local engagement and resistance, intermediate-sized cities are difficult to steer in new directions, and their inhabitants might not react until it is too late (cf. Novy and Colomb, 2013). Managing the internal municipal organization is closely connected to what is going on in the external environment of such cities. On the other hand, compar-

ing, benchmarking, and measuring key indicators of competitiveness may increase the attention paid to the external environment.

Opportunities and challenges in various-sized areas

Opportunities and challenges differ across areas. Because of the ‘automatic growth’ phenomenon, metropolitan areas are unlikely to stop growing; this will lead to the problem of gentrification, which is likely to worsen through efforts to improve municipal branding (cf. Lees et al., 2008), creating tensions between areas. Not only is gentrification inconsistent with the obligations of municipal organizations to provide similar services to all inhabitants regardless of economic and social status, it may also result in poor publicity. If a place lacks strengths of significance to target groups, as in Högsby, its external communication will lack appeal. Being consistent is difficult if the inward context being communicated lacks consistency. We see that, no matter the size of the municipality, there is a shared language and the solutions – investing in trying to become more attractive, collaborating across boundaries, and using the sustainability concept to rationalize the inclusion of mutually incompatible developments in municipal strategies – are similar.

Conclusions

Our case study highlights certain important insights and supplements the literature on public management in relation to growth and sustainability by emphasizing certain inherent difficulties in dealing with growth-related issues in various-sized areas. Our study identifies significant differences between areas. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach when it comes to managing local government, as managing population growth differs from managing population decline. Regardless of whether a municipality is shrinking or growing, our empirical data suggest that local government needs to be managed according to *broader* and *long-term* perspectives to be sustainable in the long run. That is a challenge that needs to be dealt with across traditional boundaries, via broader organizational structures, possibly involving local inhabitants, businesses, and other stakeholders. This implies reducing the complexity of the proposed solutions, because all stakeholders need to agree on what actions to take, which in turn implies finding abstractions on which all can agree, setting politics aside (see Swyngedouw, 2009). This also implies making decision-making transparent and open (Collm and Schedler, 2014). However, in a public organization this risks lowering the level of democracy, because the differences between actors are not emphasized, though probably still present beneath the surface.

Our study also identifies several explanations for the lack of progress in increasing attractiveness, in rural areas in particular. First, rural municipalities lack confidence in what they are doing, largely reflecting the overarching discourse in society: the bigger, the better. Second, the challenge facing rural areas is to manage place branding in a manner that identifies and communicates place-rooted strengths, despite the lack of activities and amenities that larger places offer.

Growth is associated with success but may cause problems unless it is managed appropriately – quite apart from the fact that growth per se may not be the best way to build place attractiveness.

Finally, we question the dominant paradigm holding that economic growth is the key driver of place success (cf. Lombardi et al., 2011). If a place does not grow, is it then automatically unattractive? We do not believe so. It is obvious that the public sector is increasingly engaging in promotional activities, blurring the distinction between activities characteristic of private versus public organizations, as argued by, for example, Harvey (1989) and Leegan (2015). The existence of these promotional activities largely reflects a competitive situation, and our research demonstrates that municipalities are largely attempting to gain competitive power. Connecting the discussion to sustainable development makes it even more complex, as the three dimensions of sustainability often conflict with each other, with growth leading to new problems (Brorström, 2015; Krueger and Gibbs, 2007). Our case study reveals that the particular sustainable development practices enacted reflect the issues and development priorities of particular local governments. In addition, using the concept of sustainability could lead to inherently incompatible developments within the same local governments, which could explain why we see similar proposed solutions to various problems across municipalities.

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