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Mind the gap – understanding organisational collaboration

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Introduction

Organisational collaboration is said to foster innovation (eg Bommert, 2010; Jaspers, Prencipe, & van den Ende, 2012) and enhance research (eg Butcher & Jeffrey, 2007) but also to have effects on groups (Walther, 1997) and to provide the possibility of doing something "cool" in a "boring" institutional setting (Grabher, 2002). Lately, it has also been argued that co-operation between organizations is necessary in order to solve the magnitude of the challenges that the world faces today (Baldwin & von Hippel, 2011; Cankar & Petkovsek, 2013; Crosby, 't Hart, & Torfing, 2017).

In this paper, we reflect on the experiences made in a 3-year research program aimed at developing the understanding for the organisational challenges that public organisations, such as municipalities and county councils, face when collaborating on issues of social sustainability. Over the years, several different studies have been performed within the scope of the program. This paper aims at exploring the complexity of the inter-organizational collaboration by understanding how collaboration comes about through a series of *translations*.

The concept of translation has its roots in several constructivist theories common in organization studies, such as actor-network-theory and new institutional theory. Actor-network-theory (ANT), a theory developed in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), is an approach to social phenomena where all actors – humans as well as non-humans – involved in the social are seen and treated as equal. ANT-inspired scholars are thus interested in understanding how the social is assembled (Latour, 2005), and the theory has been used to understand a variety of empirical phenomena, ranging from projects (Aubry, 2011), globalization and cities (Smith, 2003) and the practice of science (Latour, 1987).

A key proposition in ANT is that the social is built through networks that come about through a translation process where humans and non-humans alike play a part. This process takes place in four phases: problematizing (where the actors involved agree about the problem and identify an "obligatory point of passage" through which they must pass in order for the process to proceed); interessement (where the roles of the actors are identified); enrolment (where the actors are enrolled); and mobilization (where spokespersons are appointed that speaks for the network) (Callon, 1986). This process is seen to be a process of *translation* and it is through this process that networks emerge.

The concept of translation has also had an influence in that which is called new institutional theory, where it has been argued that translation is what takes place when institutions

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become more alike (Erlingsdottír & Lindberg, 2005). This 'travel of ideas' between organizations is what makes organizations more alike – even though they sometimes believe that translating ideas from other organizations into their own is what will make them unique (Pipan & Porsander, 2000).

In this paper, we partly free ourselves from this background and use the term translation more liberally. The reason for this is our focus on collaborations for the creation of public good (Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2014), but where collaborative initiatives sometimes are without any predefined organizations. Instead, intended collaborations are sometimes one sided and without clear ideas on what to build, with whom and how. As translation is necessary in order to build something mutual, it remains an interesting concept for reflections upon our empirical material, and as such it is used, where we hope our fresh use might open up for some new insights into how the translation concept can be utilized.

The argument of the paper is that translation is imperative to successful inter-organizational collaboration. In the following, two empirical studies will be used to describe how translation was sought after and how it took place during the re-organization of a municipality. The first is a case study of the reorganizing of a city and the second is an empirical study of citizen participation. The two studies differ in scope and arguments, but give complementary perspectives on how a municipality approach collaboration. The first study takes an inside perspective and follows a municipality's process for a sought organizational change with the aim of engaging actors outside the municipality in the creation of social sustainability. The second study takes an outside perspective and studies techniques and results from a formalized instrument for increased participation at local level labelled *citizen participation* (CP).

Study 1: reorganizing the city for social sustainability

The example of how translation plays a role in inter-organizational collaboration in individual work practices comes from a case study of a re-organisation process within one of the municipalities participating in our research program. The process was initiated in 2014 and affected the working situation for about 300 employees. The aim of the project was to improve internal (municipal) as well as external (private sector) collaboration. The ultimate goal was to create a flexible organisation that better could handle uncertainty and societal needs.

Two project managers at strategic level were assigned responsibility for preparing and implementing the new organizing and thereby developing a new approach to how to best manage current and forthcoming societal challenges. The work was organized as a 17-month project (here called the EX-project), and in addition to the project managers, a steering committee with heads of divisions (third level managers was assigned). The project managers also organised a team of the managers from the different departments in the municipality (second level managers) that was to be affected by the re-organizing. The project managers had regular meetings with the steering committee, the team of managers and other professionals with special knowledge, for example regarding financial-, HR- and strategic issues. In addition, weekly meetings were held between the project managers. In these meetings, they discussed daily issues and shared information between each other that was relevant for future decisions of the project.

Through meetings, the project managers appreciated the opportunities for discussions and knowledge sharing. By discussing propositions and suggestions with each other and with members of the different groups, the project managers also made use of the participants' feedback on ideas and issues concerning the EX-project.

The project managers' purpose with the different meetings was thus to listen, learn, establish some ideas and get feedback on other ideas in order to develop new organizing. They asked for input on how new and flexible organizing could be structured and what methods to use. On a few occasions, they also met with the employees, but their recurring meetings during autumn 2015 were with the steering group and the manager team. Unit managers from the first organisational level were not involved in the discussions. The project managers' work practices included working on an over-arching level with strategic issues relatively far away from operational activities, and therefore they perceived the meetings with the manager team and steering group as important for the EX-project, in their endeavour to develop the municipality towards a new, more flexible organization. The employees were informed about the EX project via their managers. At least, this was the way the work of the EX project was communicated in the autumn of 2015 when it was initiated.

The need for understanding

Even though the project managers strived for good communication they were, at the end of the project in December 2015, uncertain whether the heads of administration had realized what this new organizing would mean for their operational units:

> *"I think that the managers do not really understand how much this will be for them to support." (Project manager 1, 21-12-2015)*

The quote above shows that the project manager seems to understand that the organizational translation process has run into problems even though the project managers had strived for involvement and engagement from employees and managers through the whole EX project process. The citation also airs a concern about the task at hand, where the project managers grooving understanding about the challenge they face together with their limited influence on the actual practice inside the organization.

In the final phase of the project, in the end of 2015, two pilot districts were selected as sites where an experiment into a new, flexible organisation was to be launched.

The year 2016, when the new organisations in the two pilot districts were to be implemented, started with the project managers meeting with the unit managers in order to discuss the new organizing ideas. Several managers showed that they were not aware of how the new organisational form would affect their own units e.g. by contributing with time and staff for about one day per week per person. One frequently asked question during the meeting was *"How is this supposed to be?"* This question indicates the unit managers' overall ignorance regarding the EX-project. The managers also expressed their dissatisfaction of not being involved in the EX-project much earlier. At the same time, they also perceived the EX-project as important and stressed their view on the importance of the project. When the project managers informed the managers of the intended kick-off with their staff later in March 2016, the unit managers protested as they thought they did not have enough time to

plan for a replacement of the staff in addition they did not have funds for the coming extra costs.

This episode at the start of the project shows friction in the structure of the intended translation process. In relation to the unit managers, the project managers were way ahead in their translation of the political will and task. The unit managers, on the other hand, had at the best heard of the project but had not been involved in translation until they were forced to do it close to the start of the project. The conditions for translation were thus quite different. Project managers, who personally were engaged in these questions, did their translation from a positive position of long term change as contributing to building something new. The unit mangers were not privileged with this. Instead they were forced to rather quickly translate the project into something that worked with their other responsibilities, a more negative position, where the project actually disturbed their chances of carrying out their job in line with their intentions. It can be argued, that this also was the intention behind the project, disturbing the normal ways of organizing the municipality, but especially the time frame was not a kind invite to the unit managers of contributing into building something new. To be clear on this, it can be said that they now had to take responsibility of solving someone else's (the project managers) problem. Still, they didn't express a negative attitude against the intention behind the project, where they now had to translate it into something doable within a frame set by others, also minimizing their influence on the frame as such. It's possible that if they were engaged earlier, taking part in the translation of the political intent into organizing activities, the frame would have looked different, with wide effects on the construction of the project, possibly making it less challenging but also more doable through the support it would have created.

The kick-off discussed during the unit manager meeting in January 2016 was organised in March later the same year, with the purpose of discussing and establishing the new ideas in Project EX. The employees with engagement in the two pilot districts met for a two days' conference where they discussed what a new flexible organization meant to them and their work. The same question as in the unit manager meeting earlier in January was posed by the employees: "*How is this supposed to be?*"

This shows how an organizational translation process is a process where successively more and more people with different positions are engaged. Stating the obvious, the timing for translation follows the formal hierarchy of the municipal organization, where people in more central positions are ahead in their translation process, whereas people towards the periphery will be engaged later. This means that the periphery's translations will be dependent on what is framed and communicated from central positions. If municipalities keep following this principle, they will always limit the translation universe and favour certain perspectives pregnant at more central positions. If they instead aim to more radically think anew, which would be in line in a more collaborative way of working, this principle has to be questioned, allowing other complementary translations to form and that in earlier phases of bringing about change.

Turning back to the project as such. It has started, where the project members have agreed on certain translations (although within what's been framed through the communication from central positions and the project managers) and initiatives in order to start testing new ways of organizing. Today, new ideas developed in the project are currently tested in these districts. A team for each district has been formed, led by two process leaders, with the aim of contributing with their knowledge concerning the local resources and the citizens' needs;

needs that have to be met in the endeavour of fulfilling the aim and purpose of the project – to create a purposeful organizing in order to become a socially sustainable society.

Translation of talk into action and vice versa

Following the development of a pilot project for social sustainability, one can note an intense process of continuous translation and retranslation in the communication between different stakeholders of the EX-project. It's an issue mainly dealt with inside the public organization, comprising four levels of the municipal organization: political level, strategic level, middle management level (here as two pilot group managers) and employees (eleven pilot group members in two cross functional teams). Other actors, such as citizens, companies and sports clubs, are also engaged in a) actions organized by the project groups and b) discussions organized at strategic level. For instance, a land lord has been eager to help out by supplying the projects with subsidised facilities in areas of social unrest, where the land lord sees a direct relation between increased social activities and street life and decreased insecurity amongst tenants (and through that an increased value in their properties). At strategic level, there are also open invitations to work shops and public events, where issues of social sustainability are discussed. So, there are complementary translations of social sustainability, but they are all organized by people inside the formal municipality, which is the major concern of this study.

Today (June 2017), the project has been going on for at least two years. At the centre of this communication is the concept of *social sustainability*, which can be described as a concept FOR development, in the sense that stakeholders at the political and strategical level of a municipality has agreed to use it in order to enforce new organizational patterns, but have not (yet) agreed on a definite definition. There is an agreement that this central concept is formed by three sub-concepts: *social trust*, *social inclusion* and *social mobility* (Hoppe, 2017), but these concepts are also quite vague, and sometimes also exchanged for other concepts, e.g. has *social mobility* been exchanged for *belief in the future* at some point.

Emphasizing FOR development above, is done in order to high light the strategical use of ambiguity in order to enforce the development of different translations of the concept as it enters different contexts, and by that create diversity in the direction for development. It is a development project after all, where the need for experimentation into what works is important. Ambiguity is also a natural part in the creation of political policy. Unspecific descriptions and less distinction creates room for political manoeuvring, sometimes necessary in order to secure support and legitimacy for different initiatives (Souto-Otero, Fleckenstein, & Dacombe, 2008).

To carry on, as the members of the municipality doesn't know how the central concept of social sustainability can be reached, it is impossible to be clear about the substance of the concept. Gaining knowledge and developing practice through the project might in time stabilize the concept, but that is not the issue at this point in time. At the same time the concept is at the heart of a political and strategical agreement of it as being a prioritized area for development. By that a latent momentum for organizational change is created, where the concept is used to muster resources and action inside the organization, alas a concept FOR development.

Translations for change and stability

What we have studied in the research project is mainly the creation of the pilot project, aimed at moving towards social sustainability in two different residential areas (with a specific cross functional team for each). With the instigation of this pilot project, the concept moved from being a rather abstract idea at strategic level of the organization, to becoming concrete action that was carried out at employee level. At this level, though, the ambiguity will not do as this will prevent joint action. Instead, the project teams must agree on at least a provisional definition in order to collaborate for a common goal. The concept thus moved from the *talk organization* to the *action organization*, where the move forced middle managers and group members to interpret explicit texts and oral communication into a pattern of coordinated actions in the two residential areas. Note, the previous verbal process at political and strategic level was translated to an agreed *pattern of actions* at middle management and employee level, but then not necessarily actions defined through specific words. Hence, the project highlights that the social is constructed through both words and actions, where translation is constructed in an interplay with defining contexts.

The concept of social sustainability thus gain substance a step at the time, where the use of this label for the pilot project automatically classified actions taken within the project as action definitions of social sustainability. That the actions, carried out by the group members, were quite normal for them, such as organizing community services for newcomers and helping youth in trouble, were not expressed as something strange. Instead, they uttered that they were used to structural and policy changes initiated by politicians and management, where they constantly needed to adapt how they described their work in order to secure legitimacy and necessary resources for doing what they thought was right to do (cf. Moore, 1995, 2013). Translating, was thus used as a common strategy for stabilizing their work, creating a necessary continuity in order to uphold relationships and processes that they deemed necessary for a working community. Summarising this argument, what is seen as translation process for change in the talk organization thus meets a translation process for creating stability in the action organization.

The concept of social sustainability is, as described here, part of a process of taking an issue from political and strategic level and making it useful at lower levels. Even though the original idea has been to create change, translation has been used in order to secure stability in action. What has not been stable though, is the configuration of the pilot groups, where employees from different departments were gathered into cross-functional-teams. These new working patterns were also part of the design, conjured at the strategic level and enforced through the municipality by decree. Social sustainability so far has thus less been an issue of what the municipality does but how the municipality is internally organized, where the pilot groups are treading new ground. In this respect, it is here at the organizational level the real translative challenge might be said to be carried out, where traditional interpretations of how a municipality is organized is questioned, opening up for new interpretations, where translative acts at all levels work together in making it possible. Although the ambiguity of the social sustainable concept stimulate communication and translations of what social sustainability is, a more hidden translation is also apparent in how especially the members of the pilot groups act and speak differently compared to the normal way of organizing the municipality. A new social is built first through planning but later in the interactions of people engaged in the creation of actions in the name of social sustainability.

In a meeting with the two group managers, of some obscure reason, we came to discuss the pilot project through a metaphor of a rugged pair of trousers, symbolizing today's organization of the municipality. They said that their aim as group managers was to design a new pair of trousers, or a pattern for a new pair of trousers. At least this was how they've interpreted the project goal expressed by strategic level. The group members though, the group managers said, were more concerned with their individual holes, visible from each group member's working position inside the organization. Launching the project meant that they both had to upheld their normal work as well as create action under the label of social sustainability, so when deciding on how to turn words into action they simply described their different holes and how they were connected and from there started actions that could be viewed as patches for already known holes in the municipal trousers. It was a translation that made it possible to act upon the ambiguity, but at the same time the pattern for the new trousers was obscured. The team members interest in new organizational forms was also limited, which in turn is nothing strange as the organization of the municipality mainly is a question for the political and strategic level.

Study 2: citizen participation

Citizen proposal (CP) means that all residents who are registered in a municipality, including those without the legal right to vote, can raise issues to local government regarding the local areas of responsibility. The standing order is regulated by the Local Government Act (LGA) as inaugurated on July 1, 2002. As a matter of fact, some municipalities (23) make it eligible for its residents to raise the issue to the council before this instrument got legislative status (SCB, 2012). The mechanism of CP spread further among Swedish municipalities after changing of LGA and 83 of Sweden's municipalities introduced CPs between 2002 and 2006, 17 more municipalities between 2006 and 2010 (SCB, 2012). In 2016, there were 195 municipalities and county councils that have introduced CP, according to SCB (2016).

Engaging citizens is a key point in the implementation of sustainable development (Lafferty, 2014) (Roseland, 2012) In Sweden, the instrument studied here should be understood in light of the Commission on democracy with focus on participation that was set up by the Swedish government twice (in 1998 and 2014). In the final report "Sustainable Democracy. Policy for the Government by the People in the 2000s" the first Commission recommend development of participation and "a participative democracy with reinforced features of the deliberative democracy theory. This means that every citizen must be afforded greater opportunities for participation, influence and involvement." (SOU, 2000:1, s. p.243)(our translation). Inspired by Michels and De Graf (2010) as well as considering intentions with the instrument and high administrative burden of handling CP the aspects of analysis how the municipalities have translated the intentions with and legislation of CP included in this study, that is inclusion, civic skills, limited deliberation and effectiveness. The results of the study show that the municipalities to great extent have mitigated but even to some extent translated intentions with this instrument and legislation in different ways (Guziana, 2017). These can be seen in information about CP on municipal webpages and in all aspects studied.

Information about citizen proposal on municipal webpages

The vast majority of municipalities provide information about CP under an own heading, mostly Citizen Proposal which makes this participatory instrument more visible. Nevertheless, some of the municipalities place this information without an own heading while some others (e.g. Munkedal, Nora, Åmål) have decided to increase the visibility of the instrument by a heading both direct under a main heading (e.g. Municipality and politics) and by a heading or information under subheading (e.g. Influence/Dialog). All municipalities having adopted CP provide the information about the instrument on their website. Still, the amount information provided varies. A majority of municipalities have more detailed information (500-700 words) which is often structured under titles such as Who can submit a citizen proposal? What can a citizen proposal be about? How is a citizen proposal handled? How can a citizen proposal be submitted? Nevertheless, there are municipalities both proving only very brief information (50-100 words) and also having a link to a document about CP.

Inclusion

One purpose with introducing CP was to involve those without a legal right to vote in the local politics, e.g. children, youth and immigrants. The ways of targeting these groups by municipalities take different and even surprising forms. Not more than half of municipalities using CP, target these groups explicitly in the information, while there are also examples on municipalities targeting only children/youth direct but not non-electors with foreign background. Regarding language access (both information in English and only Swedish) the municipalities with CP have made pure efforts. Some municipalities offer selected information in English (and other languages). But even those municipalities having information about how governing is organized with few exceptions lack information about how to influence. The information in Swedish is often complicated, more or less replicating official formulations from the Local Government Act.

Civic skills and limited deliberation

The CP instrument can contribute to development of civic skills in different ways. Understanding the process of handling CP and the decisions on CP are some examples. The most municipalities devote much attention to describing the process and the title How is a citizen proposal handled? is often used in information on CP. Nevertheless, very few municipalities (7 %) explain the decisions the local authority can pass to a CP. Results also show that municipalities have different alternatives for decisions. Furthermore, the municipalities have different views on recording submitted CP. Only 34 of 188 municipalities (19 %) provide record on submitted CP, while 4 other municipalities refer to the protocols. The share of municipalities that record CP with decision is even lower, only 7 %. Interaction with politicians can take place both before and after submitting; possibilities for the initiator(s) of a CP to attend a meeting when the CP is discussed are legislated in Chapter 6 § 19. How the municipalities translate this piece of legislation in their design of the instrument varies to a great extent, from requirement on participation or offering the possibility of presence or participation to not mentioning this issue at all. There are also examples on

limiting the amount CP that could be submitted by the same initiator per year which is actually according to a circular from SALAR (2005) not in accordance with legislation about freedom of speech.

Effectiveness

As handling of CP means growing administrative burden, one could expect that both SALAR and municipalities would have paid a lot of attention to the issue of effectiveness. Nevertheless, very few examples on direct attempting to avoid proposals concerning issues already in progress or issues already proposed in submitted CP can be identified. Furthermore, there are examples on strange and even not in accordance with legislation approaches among municipalities. Information such as "if largely a similar proposal has been processed during last two years the proposal will not be handled" without having any CP register are example on the first kind. Limitation of the amount CP that could be submitted by the same initiator per year (max 3 or max 5) are examples on, is as noted according to a circular from SALAR (2005), not in accordance with legislation about freedom of speech translation.

Discussion

Highlighting translation in the municipal processes for creating social sustainability and sustainable development, brings out the multicity of different contexts where ideas and concepts are given meaning in words and action for organizing processes for public value. It's apparent that just inside a municipality, internal stakeholders pile up, each with a certain interpretative position and interest influencing what kind of translations are both possible and favoured. To align these positions in order to create a more synchronized movement towards something else, something new, is to say the least, a demanding task. We should therefore not be surprised in the current internal focus, where collaboration is mainly sought intra-organizational compared to inter-organizational.

This tendency is quite strong within the first study, but is also possibly important for the enactment of CPs, judging by the results from the second study. Most municipalities seem to be quite happy to just install a CP instrument, make it visible and rudimentary inform about it, without much thought about how it should communicate and with what groups. There is not much mutual organization built, as just the limited numbers of CPs indicate. Instead, the whole process of CPs bear witness of an intra-organizational focus, and a one-sided translation process from a political idea to an instrument that can produce some kind of action that can be used to legitimize recourses spent and political intent. The next translative step, where the instrument meets the citizens and what they air as concerns through citizen proposals, is not given much attention at all. If one wants to be harsh, it looks like the symbol of CP is more important than the use; to actually create a more collaborative process for engaging the citizens in the development of the municipality. By adopting CP, the municipality signals a "modern" participatory image, notably also commonly included in the popular social sustainability discourse, where "participation" is a frequent, often unspecified buzzword (Gustavsson & Elander, 2016). The lack of direct targeting groups, of plain language, of recording CP as well as explanation of decision, the lack of feedback to residents on what has been changed/established/developed in the

municipality due to submitted CP are examples on the mitigation without a deeper reflection on the goals with introduction of the instrument.

How it this supposed to be?

From our studies, and quite visible in the phrase "How is this supposed to be?", one can identify an openness for translation support inside the municipality, apparent when employees are confronted with untreaded ground and a call for engagement. It signals an organizational dependence and use of instructions in organizing work. The employees do not for instance ask "What are our degrees of freedom?", signalling a more independent position in relation to the mutual construction of an organization. Building on this, it indicates that building mutual collaborations, where there is a need for employees to more freely synchronize different interests, will be tough. If you need permission and clear instructions of how things are supposed to be, the only municipal positions capable for doing this will be found at the strategic level and above. The first study is in this perspective quite interesting, as it actually has given the group managers and employees several degrees of freedom to perform something else than what can be considered as normal.

Conclusion

This paper is a work in progress, where we have touched upon some aspects of how translation can help us to better understand collaborative problems within public organizations. What is most prominent in our text, is some sort of one-sidedness of public organizations, where a lack of a more reciprocal approach to communication creates difficulties in achieving stated goals as well as creating more mutual social organizing in actions taken. One way of viewing it is that there exists a gap between the public organization and actors in its vicinity. Public organizations seem mostly concerned with outbound messages, imposing ideas on others, originating from the political and strategical spheres inside a taken for granted boarder of a privileged part of the public. Understanding translation as continuous flows between words and actions, creating substance as well as grooving meaning, is not as developed as one might have hoped, where words seem to attract more attention than related actions. Interestingly, at the heart of the studied processes, is the political use of ambiguity in communication, where it might be fruitful to ponder on the relationship and mechanisms where this ambiguity meet organizing needs for achieving clear translations in order to build something mutual. Maybe there is something lacking in these processes; something missing that contributes to the public difficulties in creating new intra-organizational and inter-organizational networks and collaborations?

In all, and as a final conclusion, considering the difficulties in handling translations, public organizations will find it hard to deliver on all the good that collaborations promise. Such things as fostering innovation, enhancing research not to say creating possibilities for doing cool stuff within a boring institutional setting, might simply be lost in translation. So, in order to proceed, it might be necessary to hesitate a bit and mind the gap.

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