



CAN SWEDEN'S NATIONAL URBAN POLICY ADDRESS UNSUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

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At a global scale, Sweden is often seen as a good example when it comes to sustainable urban planning. But how sustainable is Sweden really? Will Swedish cities be able to fulfill the goals set up in the *New Urban Agenda*? This article is written by Jeet Mistry at WWF's One Planet Cities team and was originally published at [Citiscopes](#).

Following the long Swedish summer holidays, Stockholm has been slowly coming back to life with a series of cultural and sustainability festivals. The end of August saw the city host the Stockholm Act, including talks, cultural events and seminars on how Sweden can deliver on international sustainability goals. On the heels of that was World Water Week, a globally renowned forum attracting researchers and policymakers from top international institutions dealing with water and sustainability.

Stockholm also has been joined by cities such as Gothenburg and Umeå, in the country's north, in driving sustainability. All three have been national winners of [WWF's One Planet City Challenge](#), a global initiative designed to highlight cities that are implementing sustainable, low-carbon solutions and strategies to accelerate the global transition to renewable energy. In addition, Gothenburg has built a reputation around pioneering green bonds and its state-of-the-art public transport system, while Umeå has focused on integrated planning, measuring quality of life linked with sustainability.

Swedish cities thus appear to be global models of sustainability. Indeed, the urban districts of Hammarby Sjöstad in Stockholm and Western Harbour in Malmö regularly attract throngs of urban planners from the world over, eager to learn or mimic the innovative and high-tech sustainability efforts underway in these cities. Those efforts are finding parallel at the national level, too. Sweden's burgeoning reputation for urban sustainability has often been reinforced by the repeated claim at the national level that the country has successfully managed to [decouple economic growth from its emissions performance](#).

But what about the country's "ecological footprint"? This measure takes into account consumption-based emissions from the goods and services consumed by Swedes but that may be produced abroad. In fact, it tells a far different story. As set out in WWF's latest [Living Planet Report](#), Sweden ranks among the worst such performers, along with Australia, the United States and the UAE. Today, the average Swede uses the equivalent of four times the planet's per-person capacity — and most of this footprint stems from activities taking place in the country's cities.

Containing 'spillover'

But a new process is currently unfolding that could offer a key opportunity to rethink how Sweden's cities function — even, potentially, pushing back on this trend of unsustainable consumption.

The government is formulating the country's first-ever national urban policy. In part, this is seen as a means to cement the country's implementation of the New Urban Agenda, the global agreement on sustainable cities adopted last year to support the U. N.'s broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As part of that process, the government has been gathering civil-society input into what such a policy should look like, culminating in a conference in June to debate priorities. The event, hosted by the Swedish think tank Global Utmaning, was notable in part for its keynote address by U. S. economist Jeffrey Sachs, the figurehead for a network of research-focused institutions working to support the SDGs.

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On the one hand, Sachs noted, Sweden is one of the countries closest to achieving the SDGs, owing to its economic model of social welfare. On the other hand, he warned of "adverse spillovers" due to Sweden's high consumption of goods and services produced abroad. These spillovers referred to emissions and environmental harm caused by the production of goods in other countries, such as palm oil. Clothes manufacturing, for instance, has often led to pollution of water systems and high emissions in a producing country such as China.

That a new national urban policy would have to tackle these spillover effects was a point on which all stakeholders at the conference agreed upon. So, too, was the need to empower city officials to promote the idea that changing consumption habits would go hand-in-hand with improved quality of life for all citizens.

Some Swedish cities have already taken steps to do this. Of particular note is how several cities are using their powers of procurement — where, for example, only locally produced organic food would be procured for state-owned schools. Gothenburg even has established a citywide target to reduce consumption-based emissions to 3.5 tonnes of carbon equivalent per person by 2035. This is a highly ambitious goal for an industrialized city such as Gothenburg, whose

current consumption-based emissions stand at eight tonnes per capita; achieving this goal will thus entail a reduction of total emissions by more than 75 percent.

Getting people to change habits — especially related to personal issues such as what one eats, mobility choices and how one spends holiday time — is clearly going to be a monumental task. During her appearance at the conference, the difficulty of this task was underlined by new Environment Minister Karolina Skog, who oversees the “sustainable cities” portfolio. She highlighted in particular the need for Swedish cities to move away from the heavily car-based urban planning of the 1950s and 1960s to an approach that would be people-centric and “mobility smart” — aspects which would probably be an intrinsic part of a new national urban policy.

Beyond consumption

Despite a general consensus that Sweden’s new national urban policy would have to address the urgent need to transform high-consumption lifestyles, many also voiced concern about how the policy would address difficult and often neglected social realities on the ground.

For example, housing is a key area with which Swedish cities have struggled to cope, especially in larger metropolitan areas such as Malmö and Stockholm. A dearth of public housing has left these cities with soaring property and rental prices, as well as an unchecked and insecure informal housing market. The 2013 housing deficit was estimated at around 126,000 units, with another 300,000 required this decade, according to the Swedish Association of Public Housing Companies.

To compound these challenges, Sweden in recent years has experienced a massive influx of refugees and asylum seekers, peaking at 163,000 in 2015 — the most per capita in Europe that year. Having fled war, persecution and poverty primarily from Iraq, Somalia and Syria, they have arrived in Sweden’s metropolitan areas only to be faced by the already squeezed housing situation. Some have been fortunate enough to be housed in leased accommodation centres, but many, including children, are left on the streets, with some resorting to building informal shacks to survive the freezing winters.

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In such a situation, Sweden’s new national urban policy will need to go beyond strengthening technical and governance frameworks to support sustainable urban development, stakeholders said at the June conference. The policy will need to embody a people-centric vision, incorporating how urban Sweden must deliver across all aspects of the SDGs in an integrated manner — not just picking and choosing areas based on an idea that not all goals are relevant for a rich country.

The policy also needs to be integrated with other areas of national policy, such as climate, housing and migration. Such a broad strategy would provide deeper, long-term and comprehensive solutions to key environmental social and economic challenges facing Sweden.

And finally but most critically, the policy needs to place Sweden’s climate challenge in the global context and set out a strategy to tackle its consumption-based emissions and substantial ecological footprint, something that likewise would need integration across other policy areas. The country has taken tentative steps to address this through, for example,

commencing national policy reviews on the shared economy and “circular economy” planning.

If Sweden’s national urban policy can take up these challenges, only then can the country truly cement its position as a role model for implementing the New Urban Agenda and tackling the SDGs.