

SITTING BETWEEN TWO CHAIRS: INTRODUCING SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THREE LARGE SWEDISH CONTRACTOR COMPANIES

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Recently the largest Swedish contractors have advertised social sustainability as a new competence in their social housing portfolios. They have created organisational functions related to the concept and integrated it in their strategies. Their presentation includes terms such as: attractive, safe and fair areas; social responsibility; consultation and involvement of the residents; as well as new forms of partnership and financing. In doing so, these companies have stepped aside of their traditional contractors roles as providers of technical and environmental friendly new build and renovation. This development of the contractors' business towards societal issues brings new challenges. Based on one in-depth case study juxtaposed with two other cases we analyse how the in-depth case company has tried to introduce social sustainability in its organisation and why it has failed to do so. We show that the two others are far thinner in their claim of social sustainability. The case studies include interviews, workshops, grey publication and advertising material. We draw on the theoretical concepts of hybrid organisation, project based organisation, marketing and sustainable leadership approaches, in particular the concept of "*ambivalent supplication*" defined by Parkin as the moment when a company is willing to engage in a sustainable process but at the same time not quite ready to leave business as usual. The results underline the following issues: the competing strategic priorities, the complexity of implementing strategy across various business functions, the lack of recognition from the financial markets and the differing definitions of sustainability across cultures.

Keywords: contractors, social sustainability, Sweden.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development and climate mitigations have become increasingly influential (Ghahramanpour *et al* 2013). While the term was first employed in relation to environment, it no longer considers sustainability solely as an environmental concern but incorporates economic and social dimensions as well (Axelsson *et al* 2013, Opoku and Ahmed 2012). However, if a social dimension to sustainability is commonly accepted, there are competing definitions of what it means (Boström 2012). In addition the practical applications of social sustainability are not anymore directed only by public regulation, their developments link to changing social needs of individuals and communities add complexity to the process of achieving these goals. Building companies including contractors do to some degree take on board these social sustainability goals, but they tend to replicate the methods used previously in urban development (Öresjö 2012). It is more than likely that they will achieve the

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same limited results. Therefore there is need for leadership and appropriate innovative approaches to contemporary challenges in social sustainability. At the same time however, the current harsh economic conditions, means that many building companies are struggling for staying competitive. Therefore relevance of the corporate engagement in sustainability practices becomes contested. Increasing problematisation of adopting a proactive role in balancing economic, social, and environmental sustainability development occurs, and the companies' commitment appears unstable and contingent.

The purpose of the paper is to first develop a framework for understanding contractor's implementation of social sustainability in their service product and then analyse the case of a Swedish contractor who has tried to implement a concept of social sustainability in social housing projects.

Built on a literature review a framework for understanding implementation of social sustainability in contractors' services is developed. It picks three important elements of the extensive but imprecise task of delivering social sustainability: to develop a business concept, embed it in the project based organisation and create reference projects. The qualitative empirical work focuses first on one of three building contracting companies involved in renovation programmes in socially deprived areas in Sweden. Second this first in depth case is compared to two other. The contribution is empirical findings and analysis of implementing social sustainability in construction businesses.

The structure of the paper is the following. First a method section, then a framework of understanding, then the in-depth case, then a discussion including also the two other cases and a conclusion.

METHOD

The method is multidisciplinary with interpretive sociology as a core (Burrell and Morgan 1979, Bryman and Bell 2011). The frame of understanding is based on a selective literature review drawing on management and organisational theories, transition theories and sustainability theories.

The contracting companies have been selected for their high public profile in both professional and general media on the issue on renovation of the deprived neighbourhood in Sweden. They are thus spearheading companies and understood as deviant from the rest (Flyvbjerg 2006). They are all three among the ten largest contractors in Sweden with more than 10.000 employees.

The first company (Contractor 1) has an apparently rigorous and implemented social sustainability concept. This contractor has four main business areas and units and operates broadly in Sweden and abroad. The case study builds on interviews, workshops, grey publication and advertising material. Two master theses are central sources Bergendahl and Käll (2014) and Starke (2013): The first including 7 interviews, 6 with managers involved in the social sustainability effort and one with a customer of the social sustainability concept; the second four interviews with the same contractor's managers. For the two other companies web search for material, article search on a Swedish database for news media and collection of previous elaborated material was carried out. The case analysis appreciates each case as unique but allow for qualitative comparison (Stake 2000).

Contractor 2 operates has also an international profile. The corporate organisation is complex and involves a large number of financial, legal and business units. Contractor

3 operates a large number of business areas, and is organised in several legal units in Sweden and abroad.

Some references have been left out as they would compromise the anonymity of the case companies, similarly too precise dates have been avoided to assure anonymity. It is a limitation that Sweden as a context is particular for working with social sustainability. The qualitative method covers three companies and a few projects. The analysis thus provides qualitative insight, but carry no claims of generalizability.

FRAMEWORK OF UNDERSTANDING

The framework consists of three main elements: First, an understanding of social sustainability to be used to scrutinize the company conceptualisation of its (new) service product. Second, an understanding of the degree of embedding of the concept in a project based organisations. Third, the creation of reference projects communicating the company ability to deliver social sustainability services.

These elements enable a discussion of degrees of social sustainability, leading to a focus on intermediate steps between “*business as usual*” and sustainable business (Parkin 2010) and to establish criteria for rigorous implementation, drawing on Lozano (2013) and others.

Social sustainability

Sustainable urban community development and urban regeneration rest in tensions between multiple dynamics (Imrie and Lees 2014), and have been understood from a series of disciplinary perspectives, such as green building research (Zuo and Zhao 2014) and sociological theories (Frantzeskaky *et al.* 2013). Increasingly however, integrated multidisciplinary perspectives building on the original tripod of economic, environmental, and social sustainability are proposed (Axelson *et al* 2013, Boström, 2012, Colantonio and Dixon, 2010, Ghahramanpour *et al* 2013, James 2015).

Reviewing and synthesizing several perspectives, Colantonio and Dixon (2010) develop a multidisciplinary understanding of social sustainability, defined as how community, society and individual coexist, and how this coexistential environment creates common models for the future, integrating a concern for the global ecosystem (Colantonio and Dixon 2010)

Further, they propose twelve characteristics of a sustainable community, grouped in social, spatial, and economic categories (Colantonio and Dixon 2010, p. 33). The social characteristics of social sustainable environments are active, inclusive, safe, well-served and fair for everyone. The spatial are well-designed and built, well connected centre-periphery, and environmentally sensitive. And the economic characteristics are well run, thriving, with a flourishing and diverse local economy, However they underline that social sustainability is more of a contextual ongoing open ended process, calling for cautiousness in establishing too stable and generic frameworks (Colantonio and Dixon 2010). Adding to this, Axelsson *et al.* (2013) point at a combination of material and immaterial elements encompassing “*human built objects, landscapes and combined man and nature systems*” as well as immaterial; “*practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, and instruments, objects, artefacts, spaces associated with practices, including tradition, identity, values, cultural diversity, spirituality, and aesthetics*” (Axelsson *et al.* 2013, p 6). Other “*qualifications*” of the definition would be to include reduction of social exclusion (Tasan-Kok *et al.*, 2013), gentrification (Lees *et al*, 2015), strengthening

empowerment (Fung 2009), access to employment (Ghahramanpour *et al.* 2013), and reduction of violence (Cozens, 2011)

The contextualization of the social sustainability justifies a look at the Swedish context and its specific understandings (Boström, 2012). Olsson (2012) proposes that social sustainability should encompass welfare, justice and problem-solving capacity. The welfare and justice dimensions overlap completely with the above mentioned, but the problem-solving capacity of a society is new. Olsson (2012) argues that this relies on individual initiative, cultural values, and control mechanisms within, and depending on, societal institutions and politics.

To summarize, social sustainability is composed of multifaceted and emergent elements involving social, spatial, economic and material aspects that should be kept in context and involve local appropriation. Important elements are employment, civic society and physical aspects such as non-violence, buildings and locality. However the concept carries internal tensions and contradictions. This review and in particular the aforementioned characteristics of social sustainability will provide a frame for comparison for the concepts developed by the companies.

Degree of social sustainability implementation in project based organisations

In order to deliver service the contractor need to embed it in its organisation, and not only in single project. The degree of embedding consists of both structural and agency oriented elements including delivering projects with the social sustainability service and establishing an organisational function responsible for the development of social sustainability and its placing in the corporate hierarchy of a project based company. Large contractors and building firms are often multidivisional and usually exhibit headquarters with a range of corporate functions such as purchasing, finance, accounting, quality, human resources, health and safety and marketing (Bang 2002). This includes corporate social responsibility and CR (Arenas *et al* 2011). However the projects are the more important production unit where the actual balancing of a diverse set of interests and stakeholders occur (Cattani *et al* 2011, Valdez-Vasquez and Klotz 2013). It is therefore within the portfolio of projects that one should find the real embedding of intended business change. Arenas *et al.* (2011) provide an illustrative example of the embedding in the contractors' organisation. A civil engineering contractor company created corporate functions to support the transformation towards sustainability, namely a corporate function of innovation and sustainability as well as a supervisory sustainability committee. The corporate function encompasses sustainability, innovation, quality, R&D and regulation. The sustainability committee supervises policy, objectives and plans in the sustainability and CR areas (Arenas *et al* 2011). However the main transformation of the company occurred in the portfolio of projects, reducing construction projects from three thirds to half of the portfolio, increasing renewable energy projects from four percent to one fourth of the turnover and half of the profit.

Several authors have proposed to understand organisational transition towards sustainability in businesses through stepwise models, depicting it as a transformation of company into an integrated handling of sustainability (Arenas *et al* 2011, Averelo *et al* 2011, Haigh and Hoffmann 2011, Parkin 2010). Haigh and Hoffmann (2011) propose that the future organisation integrating sustainability should be understood as hybrid organisations where the business models blur for-profit and non-profit worlds (see also Kramer and Porter 2011). They (2011) portray traditional organisations as addressing social/environmental issues only if the organization has slack (e.g.,

resources, profit) and a strong business case. Whereas hybrid organisations encompass a business model configured to address explicit social/environmental issues. Likewise Parkin (2010) describes the transformed organisation as no longer distinguishing between economic and sustainability goals as done traditionally with sustainability as part of its reactive corporate (social) responsibility (CR), but integrating and balancing them. Importantly Parkin (2010) proposes to characterise several intermediate steps in the transformation, going from defensive CR, to strategic CR, to "*ambivalent supplication*" to sustainability, to a "*transformational*" phase before reaching the hybrid organisational form Haigh and Hoffmann suggest. Especially the "*ambivalent supplication*" and the "*transformational*" appear relevant in the context of building companies. Parkin (2010:127) summarises ambivalent supplication as "*too fearful to take the transformation plunge –want the helping hand of legislation, but, yet again, perhaps not ready to leave the shores of business as usual*". The following mechanisms are active in ambivalent supplication: competing strategic priorities, complexity of implementing strategy across business functions, lack of recognition from financial markets and differing definitions of CR across cultures (Parkin 2010). We suggest to fine grain Parkin (2010)-s two phases of "*ambivalent supplication*" and "*transformation*" by looking at first the rhetoric mobilised on social sustainability and to what extent the companies have developed a business concept for providing related services. The process of conceptualising a service for social sustainability can be understood in a similar vein as other business concepts, such as knowledge management (author references) also when it comes to the necessary organisational change. Here Lozanos (2013) study of implementation of corporate sustainability provide useful criteria. Lozano (2013), thinks of two elements of the needed organisational change. There are forms of resistance and strategies to overcome them. Both can be understood to potentially operate on individual, group or organisational level. And both can be informational, emotional, behavioural or systemic. Lozano (2013) shows that in three cases of corporate change there are incongruity between the recognised barriers to change and the strategies proposed to overcome them. Conceptualising a business concepts recurrently involves a local, business internal shaping of the general (globally available) concept, both by the provider of the concept and further in concrete cases in interaction with stakeholders.

Providing reference projects

Winning and carrying out building projects with social sustainability would transfer rhetoric into a more concrete form of reality. When implementing a new business concept it is common place to develop reference projects for obtaining more projects (Karim and Strzelecki 2012). Valdes-Vasquez and Klotz (2011) provide an understanding of such first projects and point (back) to corporate social responsibility and stakeholder management as tools in building processes for construction projects.

The quest for winning early reference projects is also apparent in the firms marketing efforts. Project-based companies can be characterised as having three types of marketing (Cova *et al* 2002). The first is mostly reactive and involves responding to invitations (call for tenders), but also to anticipate these. The second, called the constructivist (Cova *et al* 2002), focuses on creation and redefinition of the companies' service offers. The third, network-based marketing builds the company's reputation through interacting on personal level with other professional players in the sector (Graham 2012).

Reference cases are according to Karim and Strzelecki (2012) often used by professional service providers to overcome the intangible feature of services. The use of references is believed to serve the purpose of increasing credibility, being helpful in convincing potential clients about the company's abilities and quality offerings letting reference cases for example exhibit well known clients (Karim and Strzelecki 2012).

Summarising the framework

The challenge for contractors engaging in social sustainability is to gap a business approach focusing on the possible financial benefits today and a social approach aiming at long term possibly intangible results. The framework of understanding consist of the following main elements; having a concept, embedding it in the organisation and developing reference cases. The first involves formulating a foundation, making a concept of social sustainability suitable as project service offering; Second establishing an organisational function responsible for nurturing the development of social sustainability and its placing in the corporate hierarchy of a project based company; And third shifting from reactive to constructivist marketing of social sustainability. We will focus in particular on reference cases. These elements are then used to characterise the degree of social sustainability.

A CONTRACTOR MOVING TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY?

Below the case is presented, and the analysis done in the subsequent discussion section, where the other studied Swedish contractors are drawn upon. The contractor has four main business areas and operates in Sweden and abroad.

Business concept

The contractor formulated an entire comprehensive concept for the development of deprived areas and launched it in 2011. The launch was followed up by further marketing efforts to publicise the concept. This concept is integrated in the strategy of the contractor along with a number of other concepts, appearing in the annual reports the subsequent years. It claims to be holistic encompassing environment, social and economic sustainability such as building- and energy technological solutions, financing alternatives, safety and more jobs in areas of building when in need.

The concept was integrated in the strategy to strengthen stakeholder relations. The company initially carried out a stakeholder dialogue on sustainability. This was juxtaposed in an analysis of issues of importance, where energy efficiency, ethics and law compliance had high priority, whereas social sustainability is not mentioned and contributions to societal development are moderately important.

Resources were also allocated to further development of the concept over the next three years with a focus on the efficiency to produce buildings and/or renovate them. By 2015, the concept is still part of the public communication of the company.

Embedding social sustainability in the organisation

In a period the CEO was also manager of sustainability which was placed as a support function in the headquarters. The project was supported by a five persons sustainability council amongst which the human resource and one of the business unit managers participated. A responsible for the concept was appointed.

The company also carried out various corporate social responsibility activities such as sponsoring youth associations. The policy being that the sponsorships should focus on societal effects, development of society, communality and teambuilding. The company also introduced sustainability annual reporting in the same period. However

after just a few years the company reorganised its new built business area, due to drop in turn over. The reorganisation reduced the higher echelons both at the corporate and regional levels. The sustainability function was not affected by this reorganisation, but the manager responsible for the concept was moved to another position.

Reference Cases

The reference cases on the website involves a broad set of corporate social responsibility activities but no direct reference to the comprehensive concept mentioned above. The company annual “*sustainability report*”, which is a separate document of the annual (business) report, tells about a small town in the outskirts of Stockholm where the contractor has built some 100 ownership apartments hiring 25 unemployed persons. This is described by the contractor as being in the “*spirit of economic and social sustainability*” (the annual sustainability report). The concept was announced to continue with the building of more apartments. Two projects were announced in 2012, but no results communicated. On the contrary, by 2014 there appears to have been internal disagreement on the usefulness of the concept for running project and its marketing properties. Concerns were raised regarding the costs of realising the concept entraining rents' increase of apartments, which in turn would risk leading to social segregation. These concerns however had anticipatory character and were not linked to concrete project experiences. The concept did appear to lack ownership after the reorganisation. The projects presently operated by the contractors, are according to interviewees at managerial level developing in other directions. Moreover internal knowledge sharing through experience exchange databases is not supporting the social sustainability concept sufficiently to make it appear doable for new interested project managers.

DISCUSSION

The discussion starts with the development of contractor 1. It then it juxtapose this with the two other contractors in three dimensions of business concept, placement in organisation and reference cases.

Evaluating the contractor 1's concept, its integration and progress

The presented case shows how contractor 1 took important steps to deliver a social sustainability service. The business concept, the embedding in the organisation and the first reference project all came in place. The concept involves social dimensions, yet does not covers the range of topics suggested by Colantiono and Dixons (2010) definition. Moreover a number of barriers for the internal embedding were active, on individual, group and organisational level (using Lozano (2012)-s concept).

Bergendahl and Käll (2014) thus point at a series of factors including lack of motivation among middle and lower levels' staff. According to interviews the project managers found it hard to use the concept, which became portrayed as lacking concrete content and at a time too inflexible for the single project. Bergendahl and Käll (2014) conclude that the concept became primarily a vehicle for marketing.

These signs of internal resistance appear quite classical for top down change in project based organisations. They reveal multiple internal cultures of interpretation.

Compared to Parkins' steps the move forward towards social sustainability placed the company in the ford between business as usual and sustainable business. The ambivalent supplication exercised was however asymmetric and uneven in terms of differences for diverse parts of the organisation for various projects and even in relation to the continued strategic priority to other types of sustainability and to corporate social responsibility.

Comparison with the two other: Business concepts

Only contractor 1 has communicated a concept with holistic social sustainability, encompassing environment, social and economic sustainability. Contractor 2 has a concept that communicates a lot of other concerns than social sustainability, such as cost efficient synergies between renovation, energy efficiency and maintenance. Contractor 3-s business concept for sustainable renovation focuses on energy savings involving project management, real estate management, installation, environment, certification and energy as important, and does not mention social sustainability.

Social sustainability in the organisation

All three contractors have managers in charge of sustainability placed in top corporate management board, but the strength of this placement differs. In the first case it was the CEO; in another it is a manager of several support functions, one being sustainability. In the third the priority is recent, giving the sustainability manager a seat in corporate management, showing that sustainability moves up the agenda. However priority to sustainability does not imply priority to social sustainability.

Reference cases

Where Contractor 1's reference case involves local employment in the building phase the Contractor 2-s reference cases focus on energy efficiency and close stakeholder involvement. Contractors 3's only reference case is organised to highlight the three classical aspects of sustainability. The reference case appeal more to other less deprived areas, risking to contributing to gentrification and indirect segregation. It is mostly adult tenant representatives who participate, counter to the age profile of the suburbs (Andersson *et al.*, 2009; Valdes-Vasquez and Klotz, 2011). Controlled participation is parallel to many other urban renewal projects (Valdes-Vasquez and Klotz, 2011). Resources have thus been invested in the corporate headquarters developing reference cases and to communicate them as done here. These efforts contribute to render the companies more attractive and societally reliable and responsible. A profile that might impact on for example recruitment of employees.

Compared to Parkin (2010)-s steps of sustainable leadership these companies can be said to exhibit an "*transformation*" in terms of engagement in sustainability and an "*ambivalent supplication*" vis a vis social sustainability. As the present analysis is taking a contemporary status only, it is difficult to evaluate whether internal different priorities and or common interpretations of clients' will to purchase the concept might explain the status. But it is a clear implication that social sustainability has to be developed from several positions inside and outside company.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has investigated how social sustainability can become imbedded or not in contractors services as part of the community strive towards balanced sustainability in urban renewal. Drawing on more strands of research literature, social sustainability was conceptualised through a set of criteria and its implementation as a service product understood as developing a business concept, embedding it in the project based organisation and developing reference cases. The three studied contractors were all large, operating on the Swedish market and assumed to be market leaders in social sustainability. However only one of the three contractors, contractor 1, had a "*full*" sustainability concept for a short a period, before it almost disappeared again. This service concept had a clear integration of social sustainability, aiming at doing social responsibility with new initiatives such as offering jobs to the residents during the renovation process and/or designing the dwelling so that its covers inhabitants needs

through the different periods of their life. The two other contractors, in contrast, communicate more energy efficiency oriented concepts and barely touch upon the social sustainability issue. So far the set of projects on social sustainability appears to be few and with a relatively limited understanding compared to a full blown conceptualisation of social sustainability. This could be because they evaluate what can be economically feasible to do as service project in this area, interpreting the economic conditions, and/or reflecting internal resistance and disagreement on the priority of the subject. Thereby the three contractors appear to show the clear limitation of translating a societal social concern into business concepts. They sit between two chairs. To create social sustainability requires a broader long societal alliance. As contractors contributions might be very valuable as part of such an orchestrated public- private effort, this seems to be a likely way forward.

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