

# **Rationale for the development of a Swedish local authority-adapted standard supporting sustainability management**

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Environmental management Systems, Sustainability Management Systems, standardisation, Local authorities.

## **General review**

## **Abstract**

The trend in society goes from environmental management to sustainability management. A widened systems perspective in many organisations lead to that many realise that it is difficult to view the environmental or the quality or the economic or social issues in isolation and managed by different systems. This trend is valid for both the private and the public sector. This paper focuses the development of sustainability management in Swedish local authorities. It describes the background to sustainability management, the initial phase of the development of a national standard that will support the local authorities' efforts and it discusses potential possibilities and challenges with Sustainability Management Systems (SMSs) and a sustainability management standard. This paper concerns an issue that is rather in its infancy where there is limited practical experiences and where the standard development process just has been initiated. The main reason for writing this paper is to give the reader an initial picture of the development and to open up for a discussion concerning these issues.

## **Introduction**

Using Standardised Environmental Management Systems (EMSs, according to the principles in ISO 14001 and EMAS (Eco-Management and Audit Scheme)) has become a common way to organising and structuring the environmental management efforts within organisations. This approach has been used mainly in industry but also in the public sector. The focus of the systems has, along with the EMS maturity in many organisations, shifted and expanded in its scope, to also embrace the other dimensions of sustainable development: the social and the economic dimensions. To meet and support this development in society, ISO is underway to develop guidance on social responsibility, ISO 26000 (see ISO, 2008). The aim of ISO 26 000 is to support organisations with guidance on social responsibility, its core subjects and how to integrate and implement socially responsible behaviour in already existing organisational systems, strategies and processes. Like the ISO 14000 and 9000 series, ISO 26000 is a voluntary instrument that has the intention to be applicable to all kinds of organisations. Unlike ISO 14001 and ISO 9001, this new standard is not a management system's standard, which means that there is no certification procedures connected to ISO 26000. In a draft version of the standard, important characteristics for social responsibility were defined:

- “ Accountability of the organization's impact on society;
- Engagement with stakeholders;

- Contribution to sustainable development, and
- Integration throughout an organization and its relationships”  
(ISO, 2008)

The guidance focuses on seven core subjects. These are:

- Organizational governance
- Human rights
- Labour practices
- The environment
- Fair operating practices
- Consumer issues and
- Social and economic development of the community

These subjects are described and set in relation to social responsibility. Among other things, main principles and considerations as well as benefits from taking social responsibility for these subjects are presented.

In Sweden, many local authorities have long experience from using EMSs. Despite that ISO 14001 intends to be applicable to all kinds of organisations, many local authorities experience that this approach is not totally in concert with the structures and local authorities’ way of working (Emilsson and Hjelm, 2005). This has led to that many local authorities have developed their own locally adapted standards that fit their needs and ambitions. However, these locally developed standards build on the main principles in ISO 14001 and EMAS. The same discussion has been held concerning sustainability management and there is a request for a local authority adapted and perhaps more simplified and concrete standard to support their sustainability management. Therefore, a sustainability management standard adapted for Swedish local and regional authorities is under development. This process is in its infancy and the process has recently been initiated. The purpose of this paper is to describe the background to development of sustainability management systems in Swedish local authorities and the very initial phase of the development process of a national guidance standard that will support such development in a Swedish local authority context. This paper is written in a very early phase of the process, just to give a first insight of the current development and ideas concerning sustainability management in Swedish local authorities.

The idea of developing a local authority standard for sustainability management is not new, it was discussed already in the mid-nineties (Levett, 1996). However, such a standard is not yet in use even though the revision of EMAS lead to a somewhat wider scope when it comes to environmental management compared to the old version (compare EC, 1993 and EC, 2001). Furthermore, the concept of sustainability has long been rooted in society, however in the nineties the concept was hijacked by the environmental dimension and when speaking of sustainable development and local Agenda 21, it was mainly environmental issues that were lifted (see Brundin and Eckerberg, 1999). Now it seems like the sustainability concepts used in a more inclusive way in many organisations (and also in the debate in society), which means that all three dimensions (social, economic and ecologic) are taken into consideration when speaking of sustainable development.

### ***Methodological approach***

This paper is based on my earlier research on EMSs in Swedish local authorities, in which I have followed several Swedish local authorities’ development of their EMS work over a 9

year period (See eg. Emilsson, 2005, Emilsson and Hjelm, 2002 a and b, 2004, 2005 and 2007). The empirical data is compiled via interviews, postal surveys, focus group interviews and case study methodology. For a more detailed description of the data collection and methodology I refer to the above mentioned research papers. This paper synthesizes the findings from earlier studies to build a general picture of the EMS development in Swedish local authorities in order to explain the development towards sustainability management.

The literature study is supplemented with participative observation in the group that initiated the process of developing a national standard for sustainability management. The group consisted initially of representatives from the Swedish Association for Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), Swedish Standards Institute (SIS) and the Swedish Environmental Management Council. Once the project was launched observation was carried out in the technical committee for the development of the standard. This group consists of representatives from local authorities, regional and national authorities and consultancy firms. The empirical evidence were compiled and analyzed in order to describe the early stages of the development of the Swedish regional and local authority standard for sustainability management.

### ***Background of the development and use of EMSs in Swedish local authorities***

Implementing EMSs in local authorities in Sweden has been an issue since the mid-nineties (Emilsson and Hjelm, 2002a). About half of the local authorities are in the process of implementing and using EMSs (Emilsson and Hjelm, 2002b), however unlike organisations in the private sector, certification is not an obvious aim. Most local authorities use the standards as guidelines or inspiration for designing their own locally adapted EMS standards that are designed from their local conditions and organisational settings. When the EMS concept was new to the organisations it was rather common that the local authorities used ISO 14001 and/or EMAS rather strictly (Emilsson and Hjelm, 2005). After some time, however, many realised that this strict or instrumental approach did not fit with their organisational structures, needs or ambitions. Certification of the EMSs is seldom the aim, much due to that the local authority services are little exposed to competition. After realising that a functional EMS could be put in place without a formal certificate, many local authorities restarted their EMS work and developed locally adapted simplified versions of ISO 14001/EMAS (Emilsson and Hjelm, 2005). However, for the technical departments (that are in charge of heat production and distribution, waste management etc) it is quite common to implement certifiable EMSs. One of the reasons for this is their resemblance to organisations in the private sector and that these kinds of departments sometimes are converted to subsidiary companies (where the local authorities are the owners; Emilsson and Hjelm, 2002b). There are two exceptions from the trend not to certify the EMSs in local authorities. In Uddevalla, the whole local authority organisation is registered according to EMAS (see Uddevalla, 2008) and in Östersund, the whole local authority organisation is ISO 14001 certified (see Östersund, 2008).

When generalising on the earlier studies on EMS implementation and use in local authorities three different phases of EMS maturity can be distinguished: early EMSs, mature EMSs and SMSs (see Table I). This is a rather schematic picture of the development but it has proved to be common among Swedish local authorities. All phases are important for the further development.

**Table I.** Swedish local authorities' development from Environmental Management Systems (EMSs) to Sustainability Management Systems (SMSs) (from Emilsson and Hjelm, 2008).

	<b>Early EMSs</b>	<b>Mature EMSs</b>	<b>SMSs</b>
<b>Organisational focus</b>	Mainly technical departments Internal	All departments	All departments Society
<b>Scope</b>	Direct environmental impact	Direct and indirect environmental impact	Direct and indirect environmental impact Sustainability
<b>Actors</b>	Mainly the environmental experts in the organization	Central environmental coordinator Most employees External stakeholders	Central environmental/sustainability coordinator Most employees External stakeholders
<b>Position in organizations</b>	Separate from other activities	Integrated in the overall management system	Integrated in the overall management system

Early EMSs can be understood as EMSs resembling those developed during the 1990: ies. When the EMS tool was/is new to the local authorities it is a rather instrumental tool that gives the organisation support when it comes to structuring their environmental efforts. A new approach implies a period of learning how it functions before it is fully in use and settled within the organisation. It is rather common that when getting used to this new approach it is mainly issues that are rather easy to identify and measure that are included. In this case it is direct environmental impact that is in focus (such as use of resources, transports). In this early phase of the EMS initiation it is common that the EMS mainly is the concern of the environmental specialists in the organisation, even though the management has committed to implement EMS (at least rhetorically). It is also rather common to limit the EMS to one or a few departments where different approaches are piloted before disseminating the EMS to all departments (Emilsson and Hjelm, 2005).

Once the EMS methodology and ideas are settled in the organisation and the EMSs become more settled in the organisations, the EMSs are often expanded from mainly cover the direct environmental impact to also to encompass indirect environmental impact (e.g. environmental impact from education, advice, decisions; Emilsson and Hjelm, 2007a). Furthermore, once the EMS thinking has settled it is common to widen the organisational focus to cover the entire local authority organisation and to have a more integrated approach to the EMS, where it is incorporated into the general management system. Such EMSs can be described as mature. Another sign of the maturity of the EMSs is that, along with the widened systems perspective, employees and also external stakeholders are involved to a higher degree.

The next step in the maturity of the EMSs is an even more extended systems perspective. This is when the organisation has worked with EMS for quite a while and when the EMS is more or less taken for granted. Then it is common to start reflecting on the difficulty of managing environmental issues in a separate management system and that the overall performance of the organisation would benefit from a more integrated approach where environmental issues are one of several dimensions. Also, and perhaps most importantly the EMS needs to be

integrated to the overall management system. By expanding the EMS with the social dimension it becomes easier to find improvements and also to motivate departments with less obvious direct environmental impact to actively work with the EMS/SMS. One of the local authorities that have been studied over the years, used to have an EMS that was rather decoupled from the overall management system (Emilsson and Helm 2007b). When the local authority was about to consider ways of reorganisation, it realised that the environmental issues needed to be incorporated to the overall management system in order to gain legitimacy and to be taken seriously. Today, this organisation is underway developing an integrated management system where the budget system, along with environmental management and management of social issues are related and tied together more clearly. By having this approach the local authority believes that its overall organisational performance will improve. Those local authorities where the EMS is integrated or at least clearly connected to the overall management system is connected or integrated, have over the years been most successful in their EMS implementation. It is rather self evident that the EMS should be connected to the overall management system, but this is, surprisingly enough, not always the case. It has proven difficult to get acceptance for the EMS in those cases where the overall management system and the EMS is not or little connected. One explanation to this is that, in the early phase of EMS implementation, the organisation is so concentrated on formulating their system and the new ways of working that they do not realise the value or need of connecting the two together.

### ***Examples of different approaches to developing EMSs to SMSs***

There are many different ways in which local authorities develop their EMSs to SMSs and this chapter describes only a few: the Aalborg commitments, integrated management and Rural Sustainable Livelihood. The main reason for choosing these is that these are rather common approaches among the local authorities in Sweden. In some local authorities they use a combination of different approaches in order to support the development towards SMSs.

#### **Aalborg**

The Aalborg charter was stipulated by the participants on a conference in Aalborg in 1994, organised by European Sustainable Cities and Towns campaign. The Aalborg commitments encompass 10 themes under which the local authorities formulate their challenges/commitments (Aalborgplus10, 2008). The themes are:

1. governance,
2. local management towards sustainability,
3. natural common goods,
4. responsible consumption and lifestyle choices,
5. planning and design,
6. better mobility, less traffic,
7. local action for health,
8. vibrant and sustainable local economy,
9. social equity and justice, and
10. local to global.

The Aalborg process is initiated by ratifying the Aalborg charter and signing its commitments. The organisation commits to perform an integrated Aalborg Commitments baseline review within 12 months from the endorsement. This serves as a point of departure for the target setting and includes a policy context, references to existing political commitments and description of current challenges. The next step is the local participatory target setting process, which is based on the baseline review and other sustainability efforts, such as Local

Agenda 21. The local targets must be set within 2 years from signing the charter and these must address all ten commitments mentioned above. It is important that the targets are possible to monitor since there is a requirement for regular monitoring review of the progress. This is a rather transparent process and there is a requirement to make the monitoring review available to the citizens.

Today, more than 2500 local authorities in Europe have signed the Aalborg charter (Aalborg plus10, 2008), which means that this approach is fairly wide spread. In Sweden, 23 local authorities and a regional authority has signed up for the Aalborg commitments (as of November, 2007; Aalborg plus10, 2008).

The local authority of Botkyrka is one of the signatories and also one of the first cities in Europe to carry out the Aalborg baseline review and target setting (Botkyrka kommun, 2007). Their vision is to be one of the best local authorities in Sweden to live and work in and where sustainability is a key (Botkyrka kommun, 2005). Botkyrka has used the Aalborg charter as a tool to identify the organisation's strengths and weaknesses when it comes to sustainability management and they have formulated 5 challenges to each of the ten commitments listed above. In order to adapt the Aalborg work to the local work, Botkyrka has identified six main challenges to which the commitments are connected. These are connected to the citizens' work, social safety, education, climate change, public health and democracy. There are two indicators connected to each of the challenges in order to enhance for the following up of their efforts. The challenges are also connected to action plans and to the local sustainability management certification (that will be further discussed below). The progress with the Aalborg commitments in Botkyrka has also been assessed by a peer review team as part of a joint project between Union of the Baltic Cities, SIDA and Coordinamento Agende 21 Locali Italiane (Botkyrka kommun, 2007a). The peer review included a review of the baseline review, the target setting and the published reports. The review resulted in a report where good practice as well as challenges for the future work was presented. This served as an input for the further development towards the local authority's vision: a sustainable Botkyrka.

### **Integrated management systems**

As mentioned earlier in the background chapter, the EMSs in local authorities tend to expand and widen their scope and content. This is, in many cases connected to a more integrated management where all aspects of the organisational performance are taken into consideration. In Botkyrka, the EMS serves as a point of departure and, in combination with their Aalborg commitments and other sustainability efforts, they have expanded their EMS to SMS (see [www.botkyrka.se](http://www.botkyrka.se)). This standard builds on the six challenges that were presented in the previous chapter, that together aim to make living in the city as pleasant and attractive as possible. All the departments have to design a strategy for how the challenges are to be met. Once the criteria are fulfilled, the departments get a diploma as a proof or appreciation of their efforts. Their work is then followed-up on a yearly basis in order to ensure that they still comply with the local standard.

Another approach to integrated management systems is the EU-project Managing Urban Europe 25 (MUE25) on integrated management towards sustainability. MUE 25 ran between 2005 and 2008, in which 25 European local authorities and regions participated (see MUE25, 2008). This project is a response to the Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment. The purpose of the project was to create a framework that local authorities and regions could use for developing their already existing environmental management systems and organisational structures of sustainability management. The framework model that the project resulted in

includes guidance for how to implement an integrated management system for the whole urban area and is thus not limited to the local authority organisation. The idea is that by applying this system, the local authorities are better prepared to improve the implementation of environmental legislation, urban management, municipal compliance with existing legislation and voluntary agreements. There is also support for communication such as environmental assessment and reporting, communication with local stakeholders. The Aalborg commitments are central in this approach to integrated management.

The framework designed within the MUE25 project follows the PDCA-cycle and starts with a baseline review where the local authorities analyses its current sustainability situation (compare with the baseline review made within the Aalborg commitments). Next, the strategic programme and action plan is prepared along with the formulation of a common vision for the future development of the city. Both long-term targets (15-20 years) and a more short term action plan (1-3 years) are crystallised from the vision and the baseline review. Indicators are important components for the following up of the system. The keys to this management approach are participation and co-operation, which also means that stakeholders have an important role for target setting and action planning.

The next important step is political commitment. Without the support and engagement from the political level, it is impossible to succeed with the management system. The politicians or different political key groups should be involved in formulating the strategic programme and action plan. Evaluation and reporting are also key ingredients in the MUE25 framework for integrated management systems. The systems do not have to be perfect from the start, the framework rather suggest to start small and to expand with time (MUE 25, 2008). Three steps of development have been identified:

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1. Territorial expansion: the application of the Integrated management system to the whole urban area with the selection of appropriate indicators and targets
2. Actor expansion: the cooperation with all relevant stakeholders in the city and cooperation with neighbours.
3. Dimension expansion: the integration of all sustainability dimensions into the management system.”

(MUE25, 2008)

The framework works as a repeated cycle that is followed up on a regular basis; however a full revision of the system is only needed every 3-5 years.

## **Rural livelihood**

Sustainable Livelihood is one important approach that Uddevalla kommun has focused on in their challenge to develop their environmental management to sustainability management. There are several definitions and ideas concerning this concept (Ashley and Carney, 1999). Scoones (1998) describe some key elements that the concept could encompass:

- Creation of working days
- Poverty reduction
- Well-being and capabilities
- Livelihood adaptation, vulnerability and resilience
- Natural resource base sustainability

In Uddevalla, the focus has so far been on “sustainable citizen dialogue”, where broad based participation has been the guiding star (see Uddevalla kommun, 2007). The purpose of this

pilot project is to find tools to measure the local authority's achievements and customer satisfaction, which in turn is seen as a way of complementing the already existing EMS. In the first pilot project they chose one neighbourhood (in a rural area), where the citizens had the opportunities to contribute to environmental and sustainable changes in their close by livelihood. Issues such as local environmental objectives, social measures (youth activities, bus shelters, speed limits through the village and street lighting) were issues that were dealt with.

### ***The development of a standard for sustainability management adapted for regional and local authorities in Sweden***

In some way the history repeats itself. In the beginning of the 1990:ies, there was an explosion of a variety of voluntary environmental management approaches in local authorities (and in other organisations of course). In some way, these different efforts were made in parallel to each other without any systematic or co-ordinated attempt. This means that a lot of good and important things were done, but these were not put in the greater context. Then, ISO 14001 was launched and much of the work that the organisations already did, could be structured and linked to a more systematic environmental management by becoming a part of the EMS. Now, we see the same thing happen for the sustainability management. There are many voluntary approaches and efforts made in order to make the organisations more sustainable, of which only a few were mentioned in the previous chapter of this paper. Some of the efforts are made in parallel and with little connection to each other, but with support from a sustainability management standard, these efforts could be placed in the greater context and made more systematically and integrated with the overall management system.

The initiative to develop a sustainability management for Swedish regional and local authorities was made by Swedish Association Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) together with the Swedish Environmental Management Council. They had identified a need from local and regional authorities for support when it comes to sustainability management. Just to draw a parallel, many local authorities in Sweden experience the environmental management standards as too complicated and that they give little support to this kind of organisations. This initiative was introduced to The Swedish Standards Institute (SIS). SIS was already engaged in the development of the international standard ISO 26000. After some discussions within the ISO 26000 technical committee it was decided that as long as this new standard did not compete with the almost already existing standard, then it was no problem. This argument was met by stressing the uniqueness of the public authority standard and by stressing that the Swedish guidance standard will be a direct application of ISO 26000, however adapted to the organisations of local and regional authorities. By applying those measures and conditions connected to these kinds of organisations the guidance will be more concrete and direct applicable and thereby contribute to a more simplified use. Like ISO 26 000, the regional and local authority standard will become a guidance standard that not is a management system standard for certification.

Once the decision to start the development process was made, a survey was carried out among some local and regional authorities in order to get an idea of what their need is from such a standard. Issues such as purchasing, spatial planning, climate change and education were raised as important issues where support was needed. Many of the local authorities wished for support when it comes to identifying and formulating indicators and following up systems of the issues related to the social dimension of sustainable development. Good practice and exchange of experience are other issues that the local authorities felt as important for the development towards SMSs.

After scanning the field for the interest of developing a standard for sustainability management and identifying some important areas of interest, the formal process was initiated by creating a technical committee. The official owner of the process is SIS (the same organisation that is “responsible” for the Swedish participation in other ISO processes). At the first meeting about 30 organisations were represented. These had all signed up to this committee and to the development process of the standard. There are mainly local authority representatives, but also some representatives from national and regional authorities and private consulting firms. The task of the committee is to develop the standard, that will be a guidance standard during the coming two years. The idea is to start to identify a few areas for which guidance could be formulated. Due to the complexity of the concept of sustainable development, it is impossible to try and grasp all issues at once. Therefore, the standard will crystallise, bit by bit by selecting different areas for support development. Areas within which it is probable to start formulating support are purchasing, spatial planning and education. During the standard development process, the members of the technical group will work in smaller working groups with different parts of the standard.

### ***Potential possibilities and hinders connected to a sustainability management standard***

As mentioned earlier in the paper, the development of EMSs to SMSs is a new phenomenon and there are few local authorities that have had a functional SMS for such a long time that it is possible to draw any general conclusions. This paper does therefore not come to any conclusions, but rather reflections on possibilities and hinders with SMSs and a sustainability management standard. The most important benefit from having an SMS could be that the organisation obtains a more integrated approach to its management and to its activities, which means that efforts made in different departments or on different levels of the organisation become more co-ordinated once they are identified. This may lead to a more co-ordinated work within the organisation and also to synergy effects. As a result, the overall organisational performance may improve. By widening the management systems, there is also a need for a deeper understanding for all dimensions and all responsibilities and tasks of the organisation and by having this understanding, the prerequisites for further deepening the understanding and learning within the organisation may be enhanced. This integrated approach could also lead to an improved communication and relation with as well internal as external stakeholders.

Using a sustainability management standard could be helpful for those who feel that they need some support or ideas of how to develop their SMSs. Hopefully this standard will be very down to earth and easy to use with practical examples in order to be as helpful as possible. Also, if such a standard is used, there might be a possibility that the local authorities work with similar issues in a similar way and could lead to better comparability between the organisations.

As I see it, the main challenge of SMS and a sustainability management standard is to incorporate the social dimension. Due to the complexity of the social issues (how should the social dimension be defined, what could it include?) there is a risk that these issues are left outside the system. How do you measure improvements on e.g. social security, on preparedness for climate change crisis, democracy issues etc? The effects from managing the social issues are less evident and could be compared to managing indirect environmental impact, which many local authorities excluded from the EMSs in the early phase of the maturity process, due to their complexity. Another important question to ask is whether it is possible to standardise the management of social issues. Another potential challenge when

developing SMSs in the organisations is to make them as comprehensive as possible and easy to use and understand. There is a risk that the systems become too complex (due to their wide scope and inclusiveness) so that it becomes difficult to actually understand the purpose and to grasp what needs to be managed within the system. Furthermore, the co-ordination of an SMS puts rather big demands on the competency. EMS co-ordinators are often environmental experts or experts on management. However, managing and co-ordinating an SMS requires a broader competency and perhaps it is impossible to find that entire competency in one person and instead there should be a co-ordination group that together holds the entire needed competency.

To conclude, the use of SMSs in Swedish local authorities is not yet fully developed and the standard for supporting their efforts is just in its very initial phase, which means that there still are many issues to be solved and carefully thought about. However, this paper has elucidated some approaches, potential problems and benefits and by continuing the process of identifying potential benefits and obstacles I think that many potential problems could be overcome before they even occur. This paper serves as an introduction to the new sustainability management and hopefully also as a start for further identification of important factors and things to consider, both for the development of the standard and for the local authorities that consider expanding their EMSs to SMSs.

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