

Swedish municipalities have large potential to advance sustainable consumption



SEI brief

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Key messages:

- **Local governments can advance sustainable consumption through their role as service providers and procurers. They also have the potential to influence residents' behaviors, but this varies according to local needs, contexts and possibilities.**
- **Most municipalities in Sweden are working with sustainable consumption to varying extents, and some of them with ambitious sustainable consumption related goals and policies in place. This work is concentrated on specific issues in certain consumption areas, such as food, transport, energy and waste.**
- **Administrative tools and communication activities are the measures most used by local governments in their work on sustainable consumption. New ways of working, such as cross-municipal collaboration, regional and national coordination and capacity building of government officials in the area of sustainable consumption, will improve current work and strengthen sustainable consumption as a policy area.**
- **The impacts of local governments' work on sustainable consumption could be amplified if financial and political support is provided by regional bodies and the national government.**
- **Collecting and analyzing local data on consumption is a vital way for municipalities to communicate the importance of sustainable consumption and track the progress of their work.**

Introduction

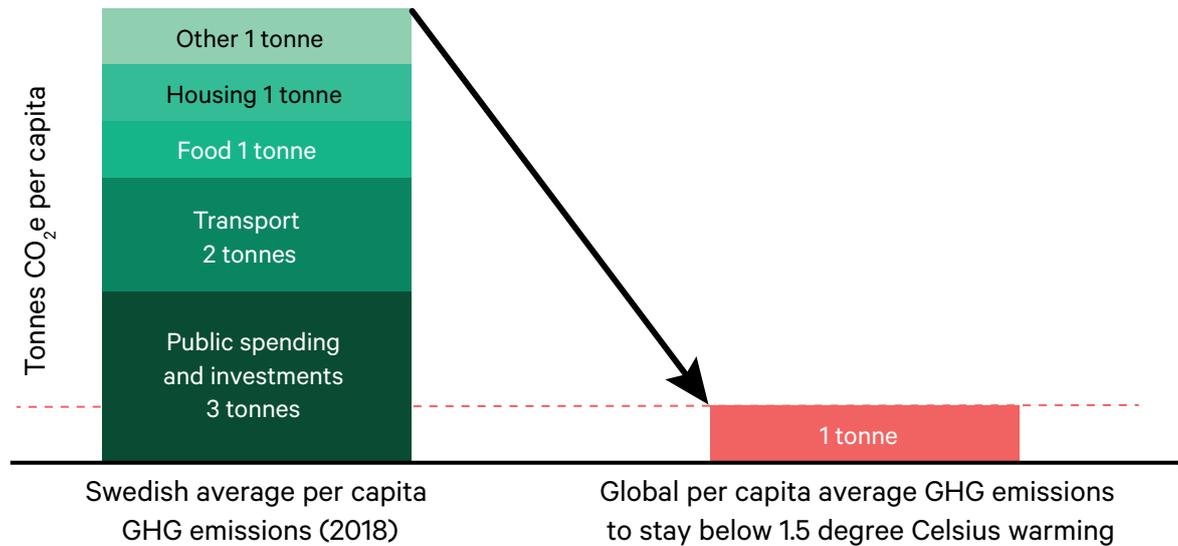
Sustainable consumption is a growing policy field in Sweden. In order to reach long-term sustainability targets, such as those established in the Paris Agreement and 2030 Agenda, the national government has recognized the importance of tackling unsustainable consumption. Recently, a parliamentary committee was commissioned, dedicated to exploring a consumption-based emission reduction target (Swedish Government 2019).

Despite often being described as a country with a strong environmental performance record, Sweden has not yet managed to substantially reduce the harmful environmental impacts associated with consumption. Swedish consumption-based greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) are still at a high level, even though they have decreased somewhat in recent years (Swedish EPA 2020).

Further government actions at all levels will be necessary to shape discourses and norms, and to provide the incentives and infrastructure for sustainable consumption

IMAGE (ABOVE): © NRQEMI / ISTOCK

Figure 1. Average consumption-based GHG emissions per capita in Sweden compared to the average emissions level required to stay below 1.5 degrees Celsius warming.



Source: Adapted from Swedish EPA (2020) for illustrative purposes

(Prothero et al. 2011; Vergragt et al. 2014). Local governments possess unique opportunities to facilitate and implement sustainable consumption initiatives. Their diverse roles as local politicians, service providers, city/community planners, enforcers, role models, employers, and consumers themselves (with significant procurement and expenditures), as well as their proximity to citizens represent effective ways for them to integrate sustainable consumption into their communities.

The Unlock project (Understanding local government drivers for sustainable consumption) aimed to get an in-depth understanding of how Swedish municipalities are currently managing sustainable consumption, the challenges they face and what opportunities currently exist for them to further advance their work. This policy brief is based on the final results of the project, described in detail in the UNLOCK final report (André et al. 2021).

SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Sustainable consumption and production refers to “the use of services and related products, which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations”. (UNEP)

MUNICIPALITY

Municipality refers to a single administrative division having corporate status and powers of self-government or jurisdiction as granted by national and regional laws to which it is subordinate. In this brief municipality and local government are used interchangeably.

How do Swedish municipalities work to address sustainable consumption today?

Of the 119 municipalities that responded to a nation-wide survey (Axelsson et al. 2019), over 60% of the respondents reported working systematically (meaning integrated into strategies, action plans or environmental programs) to address sustainable consumption and a further 23% plan to do so in the future. Many municipalities have sustainable consumption-related goals, consumption-based greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets, and policy measures in place that aim to tackle unsustainable consumption. Ambitious greenhouse gas emission reduction goals appear to be a key driver of their sustainable consumption work.

Topic areas and policy instruments

In the survey results, it was found that the most common areas addressed with sustainable consumption measures include food, transport, energy and waste within municipalities’ own operations. However, this breadth and level of work is not reflected in the academic studies on local governments’ role in advancing sustainable

consumption, where only a few empirical studies could be found in the literature review, mostly focusing on energy and transport (Dawkins et al. 2019).

THE UNLOCK PROJECT

The UNLOCK project, funded by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) environmental research fund, contributes with new knowledge on how local governments' roles could be strengthened to achieve a transition to sustainable consumption. The project investigates barriers and opportunities Swedish municipalities experience in their current work. The research applied a multi-disciplinary and mixed methods approach, combining a review of academic literature with case studies examining how officials from two Swedish municipalities currently work with sustainable consumption and a nation-wide survey of all municipalities in Sweden. This included both qualitative (e.g., interviews, focus groups, workshops, narrative synthesis and analysis of literature) and quantitative (a nation-wide survey) approaches. To learn more about the research methods, visit <https://www.sei.org/projects-and-tools/projects/unlock-sustainable-consumption/>

During a series of focus group meetings with two municipalities, municipal officers discussed that they have both the responsibility and the capacity to support sustainable consumption, performing various roles. In the design of their policies, they generally rely on informative and administrative policy instruments, as opposed to economic instruments (e.g., taxes, fees or subsidies) that are often perceived as more coercive. Similarly, the survey found that "information and advice" is the type of policy instrument that municipalities mainly apply in the work on sustainable consumption (86% of respondents reported that they work with this), followed by "plans and strategies" and "participation in networks and other initiatives" (both 78%).

Sustainable procurement

Procurement is a powerful tool to address sustainable consumption and to influence the market in a sustainable direction. In 2017, almost 70% of all public procurements in Sweden were conducted by municipalities (National Agency for Public Procurement and Swedish Competition Authority 2018). Municipal officers in the two case studies also highlighted procurement as an important means to address sustainable consumption. However, developing sustainable procurement strategies and policies and following up on their effectiveness was described as time-intensive and requiring a great deal of expertise. Even with access to the right skills, many of the decisions that need to be made are complex. As a result, decisions often have to be taken based on contradictory or incomplete information.

Although guidelines and requirements are provided from actors like the National Agency for Public Procurement, more support is needed from the national and regional levels to further facilitate sustainable procurement. Better coordination between municipalities can also support the procurement process, for instance through joint innovation procurement practices, i.e., "when the public sector uses its purchasing power to act as early adopter of innovative solutions which are not yet available on large scale commercial basis" (European Commission 2020). This practice is still rare among Swedish municipalities where only 15% of the survey respondents confirm that they have applied it on one or more occasions.

How do municipalities use consumption data and indicators?

Swedish municipalities agree that data and indicators provide good incentives for action (Dawkins et al. 2021). Data helps municipalities understand the environmental pressure of their consumption, enabling them to monitor their impact and implement ways to control it. But, currently, monitoring is limited to selected areas, and municipalities report lacking the necessary skills and methods to monitor the overall impacts from consumption. Hence, municipalities welcome further support, finance and tools to enable them to broaden their monitoring efforts and to help them understand the environmental pressures of consumption in their municipalities. The findings also suggest that both national data on the environmental pressures of Swedish consumption and local targets for reducing consumption-based GHG emissions act as valuable communication tools. These tools help raise awareness, increase commitment to reduce these pressures and enable engagement with various actors along the supply chain. Being able to demonstrate the environmental pressures associated with consumption was seen by municipalities as an important way to gain stronger political support for their work on sustainable consumption.

The discussions revealed that municipalities are aware that data in itself does not guarantee its proper use. Data can be selectively used or even misused, and there is no guarantee that it will lead to policy action. Municipal officers in the case studies also raised challenges in communicating the data and stressed the importance of ensuring that any uncertainties are understood. As such, it is important to communicate what is and is not measured, acknowledging that the ability to measure something should not solely determine the importance of an issue. Measurements alone are insufficient for resolving all trade-offs or designing appropriate solutions. For that, municipalities highlight more central support systems, especially for procurement. Other important ways to support municipalities work with sustainable consumption that were identified through the Unlock-project include: stakeholder engagement, participation and communication, supportive regional and national institutional environments (policies, incentives, instruction, guidance or legislation) and coordination of actions between different government levels.

Municipalities' perceptions of working with sustainable consumption: enablers and hindrances

Political and financial support and national direction

From the survey it was found that political and financial support were the most common types of support requested by municipalities in their work on sustainable consumption. Furthermore, municipalities highlighted the need for clearer national guidelines and policies. Municipal officers in the case studies also noted that long-term political decisions are crucial for further advancing their work on sustainable consumption. A lack of political support was identified as an obstacle to progress in many of the studies examined in the international literature. Regarding political support, the nature of decision-making for sustainable consumption, like many sustainability issues, requires dealing with trade-offs and value-based issues. Reflecting the findings in the literature, municipal officers in the case studies mentioned that sustainable consumption may be politically sensitive, especially regarding actions outside of the municipalities' own operations that target residents and businesses.

While economic incentives, such as cost savings or increased revenues, are a major driver for sustainable consumption, lack of staff capacity, time and financial resources remain large obstacles to progress on sustainable consumption. As one survey respondent put it, "we have the knowledge ideas and the will. We need the money to make our ideas a reality ..."

Local sustainability champions

Local champions (e.g. municipal officers/employees and politicians) and the municipal departments working on environment issues were seen to play a crucial role in advancing sustainable consumption agendas. From a list of predefined actors, 85% of the survey respondents considered their own staff to be the most important actors in driving sustainable consumption forward. Well-functioning cooperation and coordination between departments was also identified as essential. The international literature review confirmed that good cooperation and coordination between administrations is a key factor in determining the success of local government actions designed to address sustainable consumption. Despite good progress being made by local champions, results from Swedish case studies indicate that sustainable consumption is not yet fully integrated into all municipalities' work and remains relatively unstructured. To support these champions, sustainable consumption should be incorporated into the wider system of authority so that it includes policies and procedures guiding actions for sustainable consumption.

Cooperation, participation and networking

Another important finding from UNLOCK's research is that cooperation, participation and networking are seen as significant factors for the successful development and implementation of sustainable consumption work. A majority of the survey respondents considered "networks" to be important to support their work on sustainable consumption. Based on a list of twelve Swedish and international networks in the field of climate and consumption, it was found that nearly 60% of municipalities are involved in either two or three of the listed networks. The international literature review also found that extensive consultation, cooperation and participatory practices are important factors in enabling sustainable consumption activities. Several studies noted that obstacles to success often included difficulties in cooperating with key or necessary stakeholders. The reasons often given for this were a lack of cooperation from some actors and the exclusion of others, an inability to accommodate opposing views, or poor communication.

Policy recommendations

1. Prioritize the coordination of nation-wide work to address sustainable consumption. Provide national level guidance on the principles of sustainable consumption and establish processes and structures that clarifies roles and responsibilities between national, regional and local authorities.
2. Invest in capacity building at the local level which includes financial support, provision of data and tools, education and training and innovative solutions. This will help advance local governments' work on sustainable consumption and help them to identify and implement policies and measures in support of sustainable consumption.
3. Municipalities should establish long-term action plans with local targets for sustainable consumption as a whole, so that conflicts across areas of work and synergies can be regularly monitored and mitigated or enhanced.
4. Strengthen municipalities' opportunities for continuous learning, exchange of experience and collaborations through increased resources and the establishment of common meeting places.

Conclusion

Work on sustainable consumption has a strong momentum within Swedish municipalities, where several policies and initiatives are underway which attend to this issue. Swedish municipalities working actively with sustainable consumption show the breadth of actions that can already be taken. With greater opportunities for collaboration, pooling of resources and sharing of tools their impacts can be amplified.

However, municipalities themselves acknowledge a desire to do more to advance sustainable consumption within their own operations and facilitate sustainable consumption in their communities. To do this, the national government needs to provide: long-term political support; funding earmarked for sustainable consumption work; extended support for sustainable public procurement; and clear roles and responsibilities delegated to national, regional and municipal governments.



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UNLOCK publications

This brief is based on the research undertaken within the UNLOCK project:

- André, K., Axelsson, K., Dawkins, E. and Gerger Swartling, Å (2021). Drivkrafter för hållbar konsumtion på lokal nivå: Svenska kommuners roll och möjligheter [Local government drivers for sustainable consumption: The role and opportunities of Swedish municipalities]. Unlock final report. Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, Stockholm. <https://www.sei.org/publications/drivkrafter-for-...on-pa-lokal-niva/> (still to be published)
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