The planning of regional transportation systems in Sweden

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Abstract

Improvement of transport infrastructure networks is generally considered to generate increased productivity. This correlation is a common argument in Swedish transportation planning that provides a rationale for investments in regional transportation systems. However, due to a number of limitations in the planning and decision-making process, the development of effective transport infrastructure networks at the regional level is hampered.

In this contribution the findings of a research project on Swedish regional transportation planning are presented, which focuses on an analysis of current planning practise. This analysis is based on an evaluation of the recent planning process of the regional transport infrastructure plan for the Kalmar region. Issues that will be addressed are the disintegrated planning of regional transport systems, the lack of strategic planning in Swedish planning practise and the weak connections with other fields of public planning. The presentation concludes with a set of recommendations to improve the planning of regional transportation systems in Sweden.

1. The role of regional transportation systems

In a sparsely populated country like Sweden effective transport systems are crucial to assure the continued existence of rural areas, which are dependent on the services that are located in the regional cores. The further concentration of these services to larger cities involves that the distance to the regional cores constantly increases, which calls for additional improvements of the regional transportation systems in order to uphold the accessibility of the services.

The regional transportation systems are not only important to access public services, but also to support resilient labour markets. Effective transportation systems facilitate long-distance commuting which allow people to find qualified labour within a larger region and not being dependent on local employers. Hence, the vulnerability of labour markets for the closure of major local employers reduces if the transportation system allows people to commute over a larger distance. Therefore regions will support all measures that provide for increased mobility of labour.
For regional businesses and industries the regional transport networks are important for deliveries and distribution of products and services. Inadequate transport systems lead to increasing transportation costs which in the long term may be a contributory cause for regional economic stagnation. Also tourist industries require diversified and effective transportation systems. This involves that strategic improvements of the regional transportation system can provide a substantial contribution to the vitality regional economy.

The evident connection between the improvement of regional transportation systems and regional development implies that the long-term development of a region should be a central issue in the planning of investments in regional transportation systems. However, a closer study of current planning practises in Sweden shows that these issues are not considered in a cogent way. Regional transport plans focus on minor adjustments in the road system rather than on strategic actions that support the long-term development of regions. In this paper some of the core reasons for the lack of strategic action will be addressed. Based on the experiences from the previous planning process for the regional transport infrastructure plan in the Kalmar region a number of adaptations are identified that will contribute to a more adequate planning of regional transportation systems.

2. Transport infrastructure planning in Sweden

In March this year the Swedish government presented a new bill regarding national transportation policy (Swedish Government Bill 2006). This is the first step in revision of Swedish transportation policy which previously consisted of three steps (figure 1). In the second step the governmental infrastructure policy was determined, but according to the new governmental bill this step is integrated in the national transportation policy. In the third step the action plans for transportation infrastructure are revised. At the national level the Swedish National Road Administration (Vägverket) and the National Rail Administration (Banverket) both present their own national plans, for roads and railways respectively. The regional transport infrastructure plans are prepared either by the county administrations (länsstyrelse) or the newly established regional government bodies (regionalt samverkansorgan).

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<td>Official report (1997)</td>
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| Governmental infrastruc-  |
| ture programme             |
| Strategic analysis (1999)  |
| Governmental bill (2001)   |

| National and regional    |
| action plans             |
| National & regional      |
| transport infrastructure  |
| plans (2003)             |

Fig. 1 Overview of Swedish transportation policy-making and planning between 1994 and 2004.

The national railway plan relates to all railway infrastructure in Sweden, while the national road plan only relates to road infrastructure in the national road network. The regional plans concern investments in national roads that are not part of the national road network, traffic safety measures and regional public transportation facilities. This involves that the regional plans do not contain any investments in rail infrastructure, which among many regional representatives is considered as a major deficiency (Schmidt-bauer Crona et al. 2005).
3. The planning of regional transportation systems in Kalmar region

Kalmar region is located in the southeast of Sweden at the coast of the Baltic Sea. As one of the experimental counties, a regional government body was already established in the 1997, which involves a strong municipal attachment to regional planning and the planning of regional transportation systems. The regional transport infrastructure plan for Kalmar region was developed by a group of municipal representatives and approved by the Regional Council in 2004. The development process of this plan has been evaluated in a research project with the aim to identify deficiencies and improvements that can facilitate the planning of adequate regional transportation systems.

The results of this evaluation showed that a consistent planning of the regional transportation system in the Kalmar was difficult due to the fragmentation of planning and decision-making. The national road networks as well as the railways, which provide the frame for the regional transport networks, are not part of the scope of the regional plan. Furthermore, the administrative borders between the regions hampered the coordination of transboundary investments. Neighbouring regions did not make the same priorities as Kalmar region, which involves that improvements in the connections with other regions could not be made in the ongoing planning period. Hence, the fragmentation of the responsibilities for transportation infrastructure resulted in a disintegrated planning of regional transportation systems. This disintegration has implications for the mobility management measures, which require coordinated efforts of the national rail and road administrations, Kalmar regional government body, the public transport suppliers and the municipalities. Moreover, the disintegration involves that each county optimises its own plan, but the sum of the plans is not necessarily the optimal solution for the entire country.

Another deficiency that has been identified in the evaluation of the development process of the regional transport infrastructure plan for Kalmar region is the lack of strategic planning. As mentioned earlier improvements of the regional transportation systems can support the long-term development of the region. Although the plan contains a vision on the future development of the Kalmar region, the list of planned investments consists projects that aim to remedy local shortcomings in the road system rather than supporting the implementation of the proposed vision. This list reflects to a large extent the political process of dividing the available funds equally among the municipalities in the region. In addition to the dominant role of the local needs, insufficient funds is a major explanation for the lack of strategic actions. Finally, the limited planning mandate of the region did not allow considering any investments in the national road and railway networks which provide the preconditions for the implementation of the long-term vision.

The lack of strategic planning also results in a weak connection with other fields of planning. Without a clear link between the planning of regional transportation systems and the future development of the region, it will be difficult to interrelate different fields of planning. In the governmental directive for the previous planning process, the counties and regions were encouraged to relate their regional transport infrastructure plans to the regional growth programmes and also in the new governmental bill a stronger link between these plans is advocated. However, in order to strengthen the connection with other fields of planning, additional changes in the planning and decision-making should be considered that provide adequate preconditions for strategic transportation planning at the regional level.
4 Improving the planning of regional transportation systems in Sweden

The evaluation of the development process of the regional transport infrastructure plan in Kalmar region revealed some of the main deficiencies in current planning practices in Sweden: the fragmentation of planning and decision-making, the lack of strategic planning and the weak connection between different fields of planning. These problems can only partly be solved within the transport sector, but additional efforts are needed which are beyond the sector responsibilities.

The first measure is to improve the coordination between the different transport infrastructure plans. Experiences from the previous development process of the regional transport infrastructure plan for Skåne region shows how a better coordination between the national and regional planning processes can be established (Brokking et al. 2004). Such coordination will increase the consistency between the plans and contribute to a more accurate planning of transportation systems. As part of the enhanced coordination, a common regional planning document may need to be developed rather than three parallel documents. In such a document the national administrations and regional actors should outline the long-term development of the transportation systems and the investments needed. The geographic scope of the plans should be adapted to functional relations between cities and regions, and not to the administrative borders.

In addition, a disconnection between strategic planning and the distribution of funding may have to be considered. As the experiences from Kalmar region show, the debate on a fair distribution of funds is having a dominant role in the planning process. A disconnection would encourage the strategic discussion and leave the decision on the distribution of funds to a later stage.

These measures are a first important step towards a more consistent and integrated planning of regional transportation systems. The new governmental bill reflects similar intentions to the renewal of transport infrastructure planning in Sweden. In addition, improvement of the quality of the regional growth is needed to strengthen the connection between transportation planning and strategic regional development. The combination of these measures will facilitate the development of effective regional transportation systems.

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6 References

