Sustainable development in Organizations

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1. Sustainable development in organizations

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INTRODUCTION

In many organizations, efforts undertaken to survive in competitive markets may have the side effect of deteriorating employee working conditions, leading to absenteeism and a loss of competitiveness. The organization becomes involved in vicious cycles of creating organizational conditions that do not promote sustainability with respect to the undertaken efforts. This book explores how to avoid this kind of destructive dynamic and enable virtuous circles, leading to sustainable development in organizations in both the private and public sectors.

Change is a central characteristic of our time, as are organizations and organizing (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2006). In a modern economy, everything takes place in an organizational context. This goes for all levels of relationships, from individual, to national, to global. An individual is engaged in, or a member of, a number of organizations in a system resembling Russian nesting dolls. The same goes for organizations. A firm or a company may consist of a number of workplaces, connected in units based on different principles. Consequently, the relevant organization varies across time, space, the number of contextual characteristics and individuals.

Because organizations are so important, there has long been great interest in finding the best way to organize (Scott, 1992). This question is constantly on the agenda in both research and public debate, resulting in a large number of consultants and popular books. Models for organizations and organizing 'travel' (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996) between organizations and across contexts. These travels are often not intended as duplications on behalf of the organizations imitating others. Rather, they are instead presented as a result of autonomous analyses and decisions, although often based upon the current norm for how to organize (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). However, some organizations enthusiastically and

1

explicitly copy innovations for finding and elaborating ways of organizing. Although research has shown that there are few eternal, general, duplicable truths of how to organize, the dream persists of finding 'the most efficient way to organize'.

The same applies to change and development in organizations. The rhetoric of change and development is often vast and convincing. Some organizations succeed in their development initiatives, often with many setbacks and change of scopes. Over time, they sometimes see their ideas being adopted and incorporated into standard procedures. Some organizations have good, well-founded reasons to refrain from applying new ideas. Most strikingly, many fail. Although research proposes different figures for the failure rate, 70 percent of all initiatives seem to go wrong in some sense (Burnes, 2014). Even more troublesome, initiatives involving cultural changes seem to fail in nine out of ten cases (Rogers et al., 2006). In most instances, initiatives do not meet the expected results and fall short of sustainability in the long run. Equally troublesome, evaluations of long-term effects of many projects in different sectors point to a similar conclusion: These programs' effects are often missing (or simply not identified and measured).

Therefore, engaging in development projects is a risky business with high stakes. Consider the following examples.

- Studies of projects and large-scale programs used to handle challenges such as employment of young people, subject matter expert (SME) production process development or competence development indicate that although the goals of the project or program are usually met, it is often difficult to implement the project results to reach more long-term benefits (for example, Brulin and Svensson, 2012).
- In the field of gender equality, there are many examples of how organizational routines, institutional ways of thinking and simple habits obstruct reordering. The gender order in organizations has been remarkably resilient. The studies of equality programs made by HELIX researchers are no exceptions.
- It is not unusual for organizations to set up internal activities to promote entrepreneurship. There is a strong belief that these activities will lead to new business opportunities and increased competitiveness. Unfortunately, knowledge and understanding of how to manage entrepreneurial processes are often lacking. It should not be surprising that entrepreneurial individuals are hindered by new organizational regulations and prohibitions. Good initial intentions will instead become counterproductive, leading to unsatisfied employees who may leave the organization.

● A healthcare system in southeastern Sweden has been pointed out in national comparisons as one of the systems with low scores on patient safety performance indicators. Despite many plans, research connections on patient safety, and central initiatives, improved results are missing.

As these examples indicate, change toward sustainable organizing is a difficult task. Nevertheless, the relevance of our vision in a broader societal perspective is seen in the centrality of these concepts and issues in current policy debates, such as those involving most governments, the European Union (EU) Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Chapter 17).

When discussing sustainable development, we make a distinction between the two complementary, interrelated perspectives of process and content. In a process perspective, sustainability is about reaching long-term effects of development efforts in organizations without consuming more resources (human, social and material) than are generated. A content perspective entails a view of sustainable development characterized by a balance between a result orientation (in terms of effectiveness, economic growth or innovation) and good working conditions (in terms of health, gender equality, learning and development). This focus is in line with the idea that efforts striving toward sustainable development must handle and balance different, sometimes conflicting needs that may be associated with a change process. A good example is needs related to effectiveness and innovation versus needs related to creating good working conditions.

This chapter introduces the reader to the overall aim of this book; namely how to organize for sustainable development in organizations. Although we use the expression 'in organizations', we do not focus only or primarily on development efforts within organizations. This book's focus includes development in and of organizations, as well as development processes between organizations (such as in networks or clusters).

We approach the subject from the following three starting points. First, we focus on the long-term effects of different types of development initiatives. This contrasts much of the research on change that focuses on the early development phases, but lacks interest in understanding what happens during phases of stabilization and institutionalization. In other words, where might long-term effects be detected? Second, we problematize approaches that build on strong assumptions of rational planning and *ex ante* forecasts of the effects of development initiatives. Stakeholders (such as financers or managers) of programs and projects tend to reinforce this logic, as systems for following up and reporting are based on

this way of thinking. Contrary to such overly rationalistic assumptions, a central argument in this book is that many types of development initiative processes are uncertain and ambiguous, and do not follow predefined stages. This makes it necessary to rely more on continuous learning and ongoing evaluation of processes and outcomes. Third, we apply a multi-disciplinary approach to study sustainable change and development in organizations. Burnes (2014, p. xiv) stresses that there are a lack of multi-disciplinary perspectives on change:

> Though change theory requires an interdisciplinary perspective, each of the major approaches tends to view organizations from the disciplinary angle of their originator – whether it be psychology, sociology, economics, engineering, or whatever – which can result in an incomplete and unbalanced picture.

In line with this, our multi-disciplinary approach is mirrored in the contributions to this book, comprising chapters by researchers from behavioral sciences, business administration, entrepreneurship and innovation, and health and work sciences.

MODELS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Much has been written about how to manage and organize change programs in organizations. A large number of models have been proposed over the years, providing researchers and practitioners with allegedly new approaches for understanding and handling renewal and change in organizations. In the following pages, we distinguish between two ideal families of models that are frequently addressed in the literature on organizational change and development, and are also implicitly or explicitly referred to by many of the authors in this book. The two families of models are 'planning-and-control' and 'process-and-learning' models. In fact, there has been an intellectual war over the years between proponents of these two models. Although there are clear signs of improvements on both sides in this war, the development during the last few years appears to have reached a kind of stalemate, in which little new seems to come forth. After distinguishing the two types of models, the following section briefly points to some factors that might help break this stalemate. Taken together, these factors represent an early attempt at synthesizing some of the key findings and present an outline of key findings of factors from this book.

Planning-and-control Models

An underlying rationale of many change models is identifying strategies for overcoming organizations' inertia in change and development processes. The solution to the shortcomings is most often to find rational, structured methods for how to make implementation more successful (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996; Røvik, 2011). Many of these models have a rationalistic basis, assuming that organizational change and development proceed through a neat set of stages that push the change forward. In many cases, they also emphasize a linear, planning-driven logic of change, with a strong reliance on detailed planning and means-ends analyses. There also is a strong divide between the planning and the implementation phases of change processes. Furthermore, these models are typically also characterized by blindness to issues of power, organizational conflicts and politics.

Much of this and other criticism of rationalistic models of change and development in organizations is far from new, but has its roots in research published decades ago (for example, March and Simon, 1958; Lindblom, 1959; March and Olsen, 1976). However, the rationalistic models still have considerable normative attraction and legitimacy, despite these criticisms. For example, rationalistic models seem to dominate the practice of project and program management, and many change and development efforts in organizations (Winter et al., 2006; Brulin and Svensson, 2012).

However, there are some clear limitations associated with this way of thinking. A central dilemma is that it assumes that the organization operates in a stable, predictable context. This view has been questioned by scholars who argue that the world confronting organizations is increasingly discontinuous, ambiguous and uncertain (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Weick, 1995; March, 2006). Another related problem is that it assumes that decision-makers have the best knowledge for making the right decisions (Beer and Nohria, 2000). This has been questioned in several studies and is further examined in various chapters of this book. Taking the patient safety initiative presented above as an example, this initiative occurred in complex interactions between different competencies and professionalisms, and between political governance, administration and care providers. This gives rise to a situation in which employee involvement and empowerment become critical (Downey-Ennis et al., 2004). Tacit knowledge and significant elements of variation and improvisation in performing care are set against predefined standards about the best way in which to work (Timmermans and Berg, 2010). Furthermore, the interactive, and often political, character of change processes, involving many actors with different interests and ideologies, limits the possibility of successful change through top-down programmatic strategies (Pasmore, 2011).

Process-and-learning-oriented Models

Research in different disciplines and fields has long pointed to the limitations of rationalistic planning models for understanding and managing organizational change. In line with this, a number of scholars have also argued for an alternative or complementary perspective on organizational change that emphasizes change as an open process of learning and mutual adaptation between different actors and perspectives (March, 1981; Beer et al., 1990; Brulin and Svensson, 2012).

Among the first to argue along these lines were scholars within the organizational development tradition (for example, Bennis et al., 1969). The ideas that change can be defined in terms of learning, and that planned organizational change might better be conceptualized as managed learning are common to many researchers in this tradition (Schein, 1996). Later on, researchers within the management field (for example, Beer et al., 1990; Mintzberg, 1994) proposed learning-oriented approaches for making strategies and organizational change. Researchers on project management (for example, Lindkvist and Söderlund, 2002; Morris et al., 2011; Brulin and Svensson, 2012) emphasized the importance of reflective practices and learning to effectively deal with the complexities and uncertainties involved in managing projects and programs.

Taking this as a starting point, and focusing specifically on managing publicly funded development projects, researchers within the HELIX program (for example, Brulin and Svensson, 2012; Svensson et al., 2013) showed that the predominant rationalistic logic, which mainly focuses on planning and control in a top-down perspective, is associated with short-term results and limited potential for successful implementation of project results leading to long-term effects. In order to promote long-term effects of projects and programs, these authors argue for rethinking the predominant planning-and-control logic for organizing and managing development projects and supplementing it with a more open process and learning-oriented logic.

As Svensson and Brulin (2013) argue, projects and programs that are organized and managed with a stronger emphasis on a process-and-learning-oriented logic have a greater potential to identify, handle and learn from the unintended consequences ('serendipities') that characterize many projects. There also is a greater potential for promoting long-term impact and sustainability.

The importance of openness to long-term unintended consequences has also been illustrated by other HELIX projects, such as in a project focusing on innovations in healthcare (Nählinder and Tillmar, 2013). This project exemplifies how long-term effects are represented by so-called strings of

projects; namely 'a broad spectrum of ideas and sub-projects like pearls on a rosary' (Scheele et al., 1990). The connecting rosary string symbolizes a long-term development strategy. Such a strategy can sometimes be planned in advance. Other times, it emerges out of the work and can only be identified afterward (cf. Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Sarasvathy, 2001).

BREAKING OUT OF THE STALEMATE – SOME FACTORS ENABLING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

Throughout our research program (see www.liu.se/helix) and this book, we have explored and discussed organizational change in terms of the two ideal change models outlined above. We were aware of the limitations of the two models, as well as the tensions between them. On the one hand, planning-and-control models of organizational change tend to underestimate the complexities and emergent character of change processes, their interactive nature and the mix of proactive and reactive modifications that are typically necessary along the way (Weick and Quinn, 1999). On the other hand, process-and-learning-oriented models of change emphasize the open, emergent character of organizational change, but tend to disregard the need for planning, steering and evaluating change efforts.

However, rather than embracing one or the other of these two ideal type models, we consciously tried to develop a co-existence and interplay between them. Indeed, a basic assumption in this book is the need to find a balance between the two models and consider the management of change as a process of planned interactivity, focusing both on planning and continuous learning from the different steps and actions that are undertaken.

Although we cannot present some kind of synthesis or third model, we have extrapolated a few key factors from our studies over the years, some of which are also included as chapters in this book. These key factors are summarized below in terms of three guiding principles that we propose are likely to enable sustainable development in organizations if realized in a change effort. The proposed principles will also be further explored in the remainder of the book.

Active Ownership

Active ownership is a central mechanism for creating long-term effects. This mechanism directs attention to the various roles and engagements that owners of projects and programs must pursue. Historically, owners have often taken the role of financing at the start and follow up the project

at the end. However, these two roles seem to be insufficient for sustainable development (Van de Ven et al., 2000; Svensson and Brulin, 2013). With this approach, project teams are quite often left on their own, struggling with lack of resources and searching for legitimacy in carrying out the development efforts. Project leaders often have the most powerful agent role in development efforts, but this dependence also leads to a built-in risk that the activity will fail whenever the project leader (or other influential people) leaves the project. Therefore, the owners' role is to correct this risk by actively taking responsibility for the sustainable development of the project.

However, there seems to be a risk with increasing engagement by project owners, since they tend to rely on the planning-and-control model of measuring and following up on project outputs. Through engagement in a program logic model that supports rational evaluation, project owners actually build structures that may hinder innovation and other creative sustainable changes (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988).

An alternative way for project owners to take an active part is to use a more learning-oriented approach. This approach proposes that project owners be more involved and immersed in the entire process of development, rather than just financing and evaluating results. Four different roles are proposed (Van de Ven et al., 2000): the institutional leader; the critic; the sponsor; and the mentor. These roles are often distributed among several people and may also change as development projects unfold over time. This implies that it is important for top managers and financiers to make decisions about how to engage in projects and acknowledge that how ownership is arranged will have major effects on sustainability of the development efforts.

Cooperation among Different Actors

Learning in broader partnership and network structures has become a leading idea to deal with the complexities and uncertainties of development efforts (Bovaird, 2007). Interaction among different actors promotes a common focus on goals and values, so increases the possibilities to achieve common goals in a sustainable organization. Such networked structures may stretch beyond the organization and, on democratic and pragmatic grounds, can involve customers and citizens in the design of projects from the very start to realization in practice (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003). Through networking, a broader understanding on how technical, social or economic solutions will be embedded in the beneficiaries' lives is an essential element of any change program and increases the likelihood of sustainability of solutions.

Such networking also links cooperation at various levels (multinational, to national, to regional, to local) to facilitate knowledge-based development and innovation, as well as coordinate projects and approaches toward more sustainable development. When such forms of organizations include actors from academia, government and private firms, they make up a critical triple helix logic (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000). One key element in this logic is the prominent role for the university in innovation. The second element is an expansion of collaborative relationships between industry, government and universities to manage the influence of government directives on innovation policy. The third element is an extension of the roles of institutional spheres in overlapping layers that promote collaboration and resolve conflicts (Etzkowitz and Klofsten, 2005).

A potential for both individual and collective learning within the partnerships will be created by generally developing supportive cooperative structures. Such collective learning processes promote a common language and a common culture that often seem to facilitate innovations (Lawson and Lorenz, 1999). The various constellations of collaborative relationships are contextual and specifically related to the aims of the project, so are difficult to reproduce and emerge over long periods of time (Storper, 1997). Therefore, networking and sharing knowledge and resources are important for sustainable organizational development in general. Key success factors appear to be collaboration over various levels, as well as triple helix logics.

Learning through Ongoing Evaluation

A common observation is that changes are often produced without intentions to do so. In other words, positive or negative changes happen as side effects or unintended consequences of our actions (March, 1981; Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). These and several other types of effects of interventions are dealt with in the theory of evaluation. Vedung (2013) shows that both anticipated and unanticipated effects, as well as intentional and unintentional effects, can be found both within and outside the goal area. In addition, it is obvious that some effects are short term, in the sense that they occur and rapidly become visible, while others are long term, in the sense that they only become evident after a longer period.

In line with this, we argue that when evaluating an intervention, such as a project, openness to both unintended and long-term consequences is vital. In many cases, what first appears as a lack of long-term effects might be a result of not being able to identify and measure the effects that actually did occur, or looking for and measuring other aspects of the intervention. For example, it is not unusual for evaluations to focus on the activities that have

been carried out and their short-term results, rather than on sustainability and possible long-term effects.

As suggested by research within the HELIX program (for example, Brulin and Svensson, 2012; Svensson et al., 2013), learning through ongoing evaluation enables continuous improvements and knowledge formation based on information of the effectiveness of actions undertaken as part of the change process. However, an important function of ongoing evaluations is also to provide disconfirmation of expectations or assumptions behind an intervention or project and create disturbances that may trigger developmental learning by questioning habitual thought and action patterns (Schein, 1996; Ellström, 2001). Through such mechanisms, evaluations can create potential for experimentation and surprising effects that exceed the a priori expectations concerning impact and sustainability that underlie the project or program logic (see Chapters 17, 18 and 19 in this volume). As Svensson and Brulin (2013) argue, an important task in evaluating development projects or programs is to focus on the unexpected, deviant and unanticipated. To borrow their paraphrase of Taleb (2010, p. 29), 'to look for "Black Swans" instead of gathering detailed data on "White Swans"'.

THEMES AND CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK

After this introductory chapter, the next six chapters of the book deal with various aspects related to production and organizational development. In Chapter 2, François Daniellou discusses the problem and consequences of distance between managerial models and the reality of work. By using the experiences of Lean production in French industry, Daniellou argues for applying the principle of subsidiarity as a way of creating better workplaces. A main argument is that decisions should be made at the lowest level at which they can be relevant.

Chapter 3 by Jörgen Eklund, Agneta Halvarsson Lundkvist and Pernilla Lindskog presents findings from empirical studies of a large number of public and private organizations in Sweden that introduced Lean production. The authors point out that there is a huge variation in how Lean is interpreted and implemented, and its outcomes. Their research shows that the majority of employees in the manufacturing companies felt that Lean meant improved working conditions, such as more participation, learning, and development. However, they also experienced more stress and repetitive work. For the public organizations, the employees generally considered that their working conditions had deteriorated.

In Chapter 4, Kerstin Ekberg, Maria Gustavsson and Anna-Carin

Fagerlind Ståhl report on the findings of a longitudinal study focusing on how use of Lean tools, workplace conditions and health are associated with presenteeism behavior. Further, the authors analyze the relative effects of use of Lean tools, workplace conditions, health and presenteeism on production.

In Chapter 5, Thim Prætorious, Peter Hasle, Kasper Edwards and Anders Paarup Nielsen present a vision of the collaborative hospital. This is mirrored through the conflicting demands of increased patient expectations, as well as financial, clinical and quality challenges. The authors argue for the collaborative hospital as an ambidextrous organization that opens for pursuing both exploration and exploitation within the same organizational structure.

Chapter 6, by Agneta Halvarsson Lundkvist and Henrik Kock, addresses the problem of how to steer projects and programs. The authors argue that learning-oriented models (steering by learning) can be viewed as both an alternative and a complement to program steering based on rational planning models.

Chapter 7, by Jon Engström, Mattias Elg, Bozena Poksinska, Lars Witell and Hannah Snyder, focuses on the role of the customer in developmental initiatives. The authors argue for and illustrate how customer involvement can be used not only to learn about various needs, but also how systematic involvement of customers creates tension for change.

The next three chapters focus on the role of employee knowledge and workplace learning in promoting practice-based innovations and professional development.

Chapter 8, by Karen Evans, focuses on how employees contribute to workplace innovation. Using the concept of knowledgeable practice, the chapter analyzes relationships between workplace learning and employee involvement in development of products and processes in organizations. The author argues for the need to pay greater attention to the development of knowledgeable practice by involving employees at all levels in different forms of workplace learning.

Chapter 9, by Mervi Hasu, Eveliina Saari, Laura Honkaniemi, Tiina Tuominen, Mikko H. Lehtonen, Katri Kallio and Marja Toivonen, addresses practice-based innovation in public services from a learning perspective. Based on a number of case studies from different public sector organizations, the chapter demonstrates the effects of organizational roles at play in developmental processes from innovation in local contexts into wider societal use.

In Chapter 10, Gunilla Avby, Per Nilsen and Per-Erik Ellström explore the concept of evidence-based practice (EBP), particularly some challenges associated with EBP as applied in social work practice. The idea of EBP as

a way to bridge the gap between research-based knowledge and practice is addressed and problematized on the basis of three empirical studies.

Although organizational change and mobility is central to the whole book, the next four chapters more explicitly take this perspective.

In Chapter 11, Lena Högberg, Elisabeth Sundin and Malin Tillmar take a broad perspective and discuss dimensions of mobility within organizations in cooperative ventures between organizations and cooperation between sectors. Three cases are provided, with an empirical focus on changes within and through the public sector, with one case for each organizational arrangement. The cases show that a solution on one organizational level at one point in time created mobility problems on other organizational levels later on, and illustrate that mobility is part and parcel of the constantly ongoing perpetual mobility of organizing. However, the gender dimension seems immobile in the narrated cases.

In Chapter 12, Birgitta Sköld focuses on the (im)mobility of the gender system by studying women small-business owners in women-dominated industries affected by deregulations and privatization of previous publicly produced services. Using longitudinal data from Statistics Sweden, she investigates the effects of reforms on the underrepresentation of women as entrepreneurs and if that differs in different regions and industries. Sköld concludes that women's underrepresentation and the gender system are reproduced in business ownership. Regional variation is less significant than the variation in industries.

Small businesses are also the focus in Chapter 13, written by Ingela Sölvell. This chapter looks inside growing small businesses and focuses on problems with growth enabling formalization. The challenges that different organizational members face and the contextual dynamics involved are discussed.

In Chapter 14, by Hege Eggen Børve and Elin Kvande, the national and cultural contexts are put at center stage. The chapter discusses sustainable organizing in terms of what happens to the Nordic model of collaboration between employers and employees when a US company enters the Nordic context. The authors present and discuss a case in which they argue that the Nordic micro-model was challenged in a counterproductive manner.

An important feature of the HELIX program is its focus on the role of labor market intermediaries and clusters for promoting labor mobility, innovation and regional development. These aspects are discussed in the next two chapters.

Chapter 15, by Dzamila Bienkowska, Henry Etzkowitz and Magnus Klofsten, examines mobility in academia. A particular focus is on PhD students and networking-building activities ('boundary spaces') arranged during their education, which are aimed at enhancing familiarity with

external organizations and encouraging entrepreneurial behavior. It then elaborates how movement among different organizations and institutional domains can be sustained.

Chapter 16, by Inessa Laur and Alain Fayolle, investigates cluster initiatives, which are viewed as intermediaries for enhancing innovation and regional development through partnerships, joint learning and exchange of competencies. Data on 153 cluster initiatives in eight European countries shows that these initiatives are quite unique, quickly adapting organizations that continuously demanded activities for their members, aiming to improve their potential to remain competitive.

The two following chapters deal with methodological issues related to ongoing evaluation of development projects and programs.

In Chapter 17, Veronica Gaffey and Marielle Riché analyze the current practice of evaluating regional policy across the EU and outline some guidelines for improving these evaluations. According to these guidelines, in addition to counterfactual evaluations, there also is a need for theory-based impact evaluations that rigorously assess the theory of change behind projects and programs to promote learning about how they can lead to sustainable regional development.

In Chapter 18, Evert Vedung and Staffan Bjurulf discuss in more detail the concept of theory-based impact evaluation and argue for an evaluation approach based on a combination of shadow controls, generic controls and process tracing. The chapter is devoted to highlighting process tracing.

In the final chapter of the book, Chapter 19, Lennart Svensson, Göran Brulin and Per-Erik Ellström focus on the interactive research approach that is one of the cornerstones of the HELIX research program. Interactive research is a development of the action research tradition and is characterized by a continuous, joint learning process between the researchers and the participants. However, the main focus is on the outcomes of research in terms of new theories and concepts. The authors of this chapter illustrate and analyze the interactive research tradition and discuss its possibilities and limitations.

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