

DARING TO IMAGINE A DIFFERENT CITY:
**EXPLORING THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR URBAN
PLANNERS TO CONTRIBUTE TO A DEGROWTH
TRANSFORMATION**

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**Daring to Imagine a Different City: Exploring the Opportunities for Urban
Planners to Contribute to a Degrowth Transformation**

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Abstract

This thesis explores possibilities and challenges for urban planners to contribute to a degrowth transformation. Degrowth calls for a reduction of production and consumption, a redistribution of wealth and a shift in societal norms and values to address the current environmental crises. According to the existing literature, urban planners may be able to help advance and implement degrowth. To explore this possibility, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 urban planners working in eight Swedish municipalities, during which a future urban vision inspired by degrowth proposals was presented. The interviews were analysed through thematic coding and supported by an operationalised analytical framework, revealing various difficulties and opportunities. The analysis finds that planners' operating space for transformative change is limited by the embeddedness of growth in societal structures, governance institutions, and the mindset. These structural, institutional, and cognitive conditions limit planners' power and their ability to independently pursue transformative change alone. At the same time, the study identifies three main possibilities for planners to contribute to a degrowth transformation: (1) their influence on the physical space, (2) fostering collaboration, and (3) their knowledge and skills. The paper concludes that urban planners have opportunities to contribute to a degrowth transformation within Swedish municipalities, but their role is partial and constrained. While it remains unclear how a degrowth transformation would occur in practice, future research could further explore potential triggers for such a transformation and the role urban planners might play in it.

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Summary

Humanity has already exceeded seven out of nine planetary boundaries, pushing the Earth beyond a safe operating space. Cities are major contributors to the problem; they cause 67-72% of global greenhouse gas emissions and are responsible for about 75% of the global energy consumption. Degrowth is an approach for transformative change and a response to interconnected environmental crises and the failure of green growth strategies to reduce emissions and resource use at the necessary scale. Rather than relying on continued economic growth, degrowth advocates a planned reduction in production and consumption, redistribution of wealth and resources, and a broader shift in values away from competition and consumerism toward sufficiency, care, justice, and collaboration.

Therefore, the study asks: *What are the challenges and possibilities for urban planners in Swedish municipalities to contribute to a degrowth transformation?* To answer the research question, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with urban planners working in eight Swedish municipalities: Gotland, Göteborg, Helsingborg, Lund, Malmö, Mörbylånga, Uppsala, and Östersund. During the interviews, participants were presented with a future urban vision inspired by degrowth ideas and asked to reflect on it in relation to their professional roles and planning practices. The material was then analysed through thematic coding, utilising an operationalised analytical framework focusing on both challenges and possibilities for transformative change.

The findings show that obstacles are rooted in broader systems rather than in individual planners' choices alone, limiting their ability to pursue transformative change. Planning is shown to take place within systems shaped by capitalism, growth dependency and competition, where municipalities remain financially dependent on economic growth. Growth is embedded not only in the capitalist economy but also in governance systems, infrastructure, municipal competition, and the physical built environment itself. At the same time, planners operate within forms of lock-in embedded in spatial arrangement and infrastructure, creating technical and practical challenges for planners to work towards degrowth. The institutional dimension adds another layer of difficulty. Urban planners are further influenced by shifting political priorities, conflicting goals, powerful external actors, and institutional constraints that limit planners' agency.

The final challenges are set within cognitive and normative aspects, including resistance from other actors, growth-oriented thinking within planning itself, weak views of sustainability,

and a sense of powerlessness in the face of complex systems. The dominance of growth as a cultural norm makes alternative futures seem unrealistic, radical, and difficult to articulate. This affects not only institutions but also individuals' ability to imagine transformation. Complexity can also produce paralysis: when environmental problems feel too large, and responsibility is spread across many actors, it becomes easy to feel powerless or to shift responsibility elsewhere.

Despite these constraints, planners are found to still have meaningful opportunities to contribute to change. One of their most important strengths is their influence over physical space. Tools like plans and land allocations give planners influence over space, which can help create spaces that enable different practices, behaviours, and social relations. A second important potential contribution is collaboration. The planners' networks and experience with collaboration, especially with citizen participation, seem to be in a good position to foster collaboration, which is considered essential for a degrowth transformation. A third potential aspect lies in planners' knowledge and professional skills. Their assessments influence politicians' decisions, and planners may be able to frame degrowth in certain ways to increase interest and acceptability. Their skills in long-term thinking, sustainability assessment, experimentation, and visioning were also seen as a possibility.

Overall, the study concludes that urban planners can contribute to a degrowth transformation, but they cannot drive such a transformation on their own. Still, they should be seen as relevant actors in a broader societal shift. Therefore, the thesis contributes to the emerging literature on degrowth and urban planning by showing both the constraints planners face and the possibilities that can be part of the transformative change. While it remains unclear how a degrowth transformation would occur in practice, future research could further explore potential triggers for such a transformation, and the role urban planners might play in it.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	i
List of Tables.....	i
Acronyms	ii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Aim and research question.....	2
2 Background.....	4
2.1 Degrowth.....	4
2.1.1 An overview of the concept of degrowth	4
2.1.2 Spatialising degrowth and degrowing urban planning	6
2.2 Planning in Sweden.....	7
2.3 The municipalities	8
3 Analytical framework	11
3.1 Challenges.....	11
3.1.1 Structural challenges	12
3.1.2 Institutional challenges.....	12
3.1.3 Cognitive challenges	13
3.2 Possibilities	14
3.2.1 Systems thinking and the leverage points	14
3.2.2 Multi-level perspective.....	15
3.3 Combining the sections	17
4 Methodology	19
4.1 Study design.....	19
4.2 Data collection	19
4.3 Sampling strategy.....	23
4.4 Data analysis.....	24

4.5	<i>Ethical considerations and positioning</i>	24
5	Limitations	26
6	Introduction to the findings	28
7	Findings: challenges	30
7.1	<i>Structural challenges</i>	30
7.1.1	Economic system.....	30
7.1.2	Economic factors and growth dependency.....	31
7.1.3	Competition between municipalities.....	31
7.1.4	Material and immaterial embeddedness	32
7.1.5	Practical and technical issues	33
7.2	<i>Institutional challenges</i>	33
7.2.1	External factors	34
7.2.2	Problems with goals and goal conflicts.....	34
7.2.3	Actors	36
7.2.4	Collaboration.....	38
7.2.5	Planning process.....	39
7.3	<i>Cognitive challenges</i>	40
7.3.1	The mindset of other actors.....	40
7.3.2	The mindset within planning.....	41
7.3.3	The need to change the mindset (within the administration)	44
7.3.4	Difficulties with changing the mindset	44
8	Findings: Possibilities	46
8.1	<i>Planners' mindset: openness to the vision</i>	46
8.2	<i>Steps towards the vision: sustainability goals and efforts</i>	47
8.2.1	Ambition for sustainability.....	47
8.2.2	Current efforts towards the realisation of the vision	48
8.2.3	Support from other actors and collaborations	50
8.3	<i>Planners' major potential contribution to a degrowth transformation</i>	51
8.3.1	Fostering collaboration.....	51
8.3.2	Planners' influence on space and norms	51

8.3.3	Planners' knowledge	52
8.4	<i>How change can occur (with planners)</i>	<i>54</i>
9	Conclusion.....	57
10	References	59
11	Annex.....	74
	<i>Annex A. Participant distribution between municipalities.....</i>	<i>74</i>
	<i>Annex B. Participants' numbers and their role.....</i>	<i>75</i>
	<i>Annex C. Consent form.....</i>	<i>76</i>
	<i>Annex D.1 Interview guide (ENG)</i>	<i>78</i>
	<i>Annex D.2 Interview guide (SWE).....</i>	<i>79</i>
	<i>Annex E.1 Vision (ENG).....</i>	<i>80</i>
	<i>Annex E.2 Vision (SWE).....</i>	<i>82</i>
	<i>Annex F. List of actors mentioned by urban planners</i>	<i>84</i>

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of Sweden depicting the 8 municipalities included in this thesis.....	9
Figure 2: The 12 leverage points as defined by Meadows	15
Figure 3: Transitions according to the multi-level perspective.....	16
Figure 4: The operating space for urban planners.....	17

List of Tables

Table 1: Overview of the characteristics of the different Swedish cities.....	10
Table 2: Practical examples of a degrowth city mentioned in the literature	21

Acronyms

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MLP	Multi-Level Perspective
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIMBY	Not in my backyard
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
PBL	Planning and Building Act
RUS	Regional Utvecklingsprogram

1 Introduction

We are faced today with several interconnected crises: Humanity has already exceeded seven of the nine planetary boundaries, defining the environmental limits within which Earth's systems can remain stable (Sakschewski et al., 2025). Crossing these boundaries threatens the ecological conditions that allowed human civilisation to develop and thrive in the first place (Richardson et al., 2023; Rockström et al., 2009). Cities are a big part of the problem: While they cover merely 3% of the Earth's surface (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2023), they are home to more than 50% of the total human population (UNDP, 2023), cause 67-72% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Calvin et al., 2023) and are responsible for about 75% of the global energy consumption (IEA, 2024). According to Savini et al. (2022, p. 4), their “ecological footprints [...] are five to ten times higher than any sustainable threshold”.

The urgency of mitigating climate change to stay within the planetary boundaries, and reducing ecological degradation, has led scholars to argue for the need for transformative change (Hickel et al., 2021; Jacobs et al., 2022; Kronenberg et al., 2024). While transformative change is difficult and complex, fundamental societal transformations are not unprecedented. Societies have historically undergone profound economic, technological, and social shifts, for example, during the Industrial Revolution (Becker, 2023). One current approach to create transformative change is *degrowth*, which pushes for a fundamental overhaul of economic models, values, and governance, challenging the growth paradigm itself to move rapidly towards sustainability by minimising resource use (Escobar, 2015; Hickel et al., 2021; Saitō, 2024). In short, degrowth is an approach to achieve socio-ecological justice through an intentional reduction of economic growth and the redistribution of wealth and resources (Demaria et al., 2013; Hickel, 2022). It is also a shift in norms and values from individualism, competition, and consumerism to collaboration, nature-connectedness, and sufficiency (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Krähmer, 2022; Savini et al., 2022; Schneider, 2018).

By this, degrowth is challenging the mainstream green growth approach, which argues for continued economic growth while decoupling environmental degradation through technological innovation, green investments, and policy shifts, instead of more transformative change (Polewsky et al., 2024; UNEP, 2011). However, so far, mitigating climate change by trying to decouple the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from emissions has failed to produce results at a sufficiently large scale and high speed to remain within 1.5°C to 2°C of global warming (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). Indeed, apart from recession times, total global emissions

have historically never decreased (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). Therefore, degrowth scholars and activists are arguing that staying within the targets set in the Paris climate agreement is not compatible with the continued pursuit of economic growth in the Global North (Savini, 2024).

Cities today are not only part of the problem, but they are also a place for sustainability experiments (Kaika et al., 2023; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2023; Seto et al., 2017). In this sense, urban areas are seen as particularly important by degrowthers, due to their ever-multiplying climate, economic, financial and political crises and the significant re-organisation of space necessary to support degrowth (Kaika et al., 2023; Xue & Kębłowski, 2022). To realise the potential of urban degrowth, several authors discuss the possibility of urban planning to steer change (Huxley, 2009; Xue, 2022b; Xue & Kębłowski, 2022). In this context, degrowth does increasingly engage with the spatial and material dimensions of the concept to make it more influential. This is based on an understanding that space, in the sense of both the built and the non-built environment, shapes human actions and interactions (Xue, 2022b). However, as noted by several researchers, the literature on degrowth and cities is only emerging, and more research is needed on the topic (De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023; Kaika et al., 2023; Xue, 2022b).

The Swedish context seems particularly interesting because municipalities there have comparatively more power than in other European countries (Hägglund, 2013; Rydin, 2022). The municipalities have authority and formal responsibility for spatial development, which gives them significant influence over land use, infrastructure, and long-term patterns of resource consumption (Boverket, 2020; Regeringskansliet, 2015). Even though many Swedish cities and municipalities have adopted ambitious climate targets, such as climate neutrality by 2030 or 2040 (Viable Cities, 2024), research suggests that only a limited number of municipalities currently appear to follow emission trajectories compatible with the Paris Agreement (Olsson, 2022). Only around 16 out of Sweden's 290 municipalities might remain within a Paris-aligned carbon budget, if current emission trends continue (Olsson, 2022). Similarly, the resource use - or Domestic Material Consumption - has steadily increased in Sweden since 1998 and went up between 2023 and 2024 (Statistikmyndigheten, 2026). Due to this, Ruiz-Alejos and Prats (2022) examined how degrowth ideas could be integrated into municipal urban planning as a practice in Södertälje, Sweden. Their focus was on the relationship between existing planning policies and degrowth proposals, as well as identifying planning strategies that may facilitate degrowth (Ruiz-Alejos & Prats 2022).

1.1 Aim and research question

This thesis aims to contribute to the limited and emerging literature on degrowth and urban planning by exploring the role of urban planners in facilitating degrowth-oriented transformations at the municipal level. Importantly, this research is not about the desirability of degrowth, but rather looks at its practical realisation. More specifically, through a case study of eight Swedish municipalities - Gotland, Göteborg, Helsingborg, Lund, Malmö, Mörbylånga, Uppsala, and Östersund - the study examines the challenges and possibilities for urban planners to contribute to degrowth in local planning contexts. By including Swedish municipalities of different sizes and characteristics, the thesis captures a variety of perspectives and planning contexts. Drawing on 17 semi-structured interviews, the study uses the concept of visioning to present a future degrowth city. In this way, participants were able to reflect on the vision in relation to their professional roles and planning practices. Given the limited research on both degrowth and urban planning, the thesis develops an analytical framework to contextualise planners' challenges and possibilities for acting towards degrowth. In combination with the paper's future-oriented and vision-based approach, this signifies that the study relies on an exploratory perspective. The research is guided by the following research question:

- What are the challenges and possibilities for urban planners in Swedish municipalities to contribute to a degrowth transformation?

2 Background

2.1 Degrowth

As the theory of degrowth is central to this thesis, this chapter will offer a brief introduction to the general concept before presenting the ideas of ‘spatialising degrowth’ and ‘degrowing planning’.

2.1.1 *An overview of the concept of degrowth*

Degrowth is described as a slogan, an imaginary, an ideology, a demand, a call by activists, a social movement, a political strategy, a practice, a research area, or several of these at the same time in the literature (Crowley et al., 2021; Kaika et al., 2023; Krähmer, 2022; Vansintjan, 2019; Wächter, 2013). The concept emerged under the name ‘décroissance’ in the 1970s in France and has been utilised in academic writings in English since the first degrowth conference in Paris in 2008 (Demaria et al., 2013; Schmelzer et al., 2022). There exists no uniform vision of degrowth, and there are many different definitions of the concept (Schindler et al., 2023; Schmelzer et al., 2022). However, some ideas recur in many of the definitions: Above all, most definitions of degrowth mention an intentional reduction of production and consumption of superfluous goods and services in rich countries, which would entail a reduction of economic growth (Demaria et al., 2013; Kaika et al., 2023; Kronenberg et al., 2024; Savini, 2024; Schneider et al., 2010; Xue, 2022a).

The call for a reduction in economic growth within degrowth does not merely mean a lower GDP, but rather a challenge to its centrality to the entire social system. This is exemplified by Demaria et al. (2013, p. 209), who start their definition by saying that “degrowth challenges the hegemony of growth (...)”. For this purpose, degrowthers go beyond criticising the existing system, and propose alternative values and norms for a cultural shift (Chertkovskaya, 2022; Kallis et al., 2015; Savini, 2021; Wächter, 2013). Some central suggestions describe a better human-nature relation and reciprocal relationships among people, who should have more time and freedom to pursue meaningful lives independent from material wealth and consumption (Krähmer, 2022; Savini, 2021; Schneider, 2018; Xue, 2022a). Further values and concepts - commonly mentioned as alternatives to the current norms based on economic growth and the logic of markets - include solidarity, collaboration, care, justice, simplicity, and autonomy (Chertkovskaya, 2022; D’Alisa et al., 2015; Schneider, 2018).

Opponents of degrowth sometimes equate degrowth with a recession or an economic crisis (Hickel, 2021; Schmelzer et al., 2022). However, the reduction in economic growth should

not be understood as the goal of degrowth, but rather as a means to stay within planetary boundaries and a probable outcome of the reorganisation of society (Hickel, 2021; Kallis et al., 2015). Furthermore, degrowth is an intentional and planned process that shrinks specific practices and economic fields, like advertisements or the production of sport utility vehicles (Hickel, 2021; Kallis, 2011; Schindler et al., 2023). Degrowth is thus not like an economic crisis; instead, the idea behind degrowth is to create a different system in which a lack of economic growth does not lead to unemployment, scarcities, and suffering (Hickel, 2021; Schmelzer et al., 2022).

Besides reduced production and consumption, redistribution is another central element of degrowth (Demaria et al., 2013; Kaika et al., 2023; Krähmer, 2022). In fact, various definitions of degrowth call for a “redistributive downscaling” (Demaria et al., 2013, p. 209; Kaika et al., 2023b, p. 1194). Degrowthers suggest tools like a wealth tax and maximum income to redistribute wealth and reduce inequalities within countries (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Hickel, 2022). Hickel (2021) further suggests that an implementation of degrowth in the Global North could reduce pressure on the environment and economies in the Global South, supporting transformations that improve the standard of living for local populations and dissolve neo-colonial dependencies. However, others point out that degrowth may have a negative impact on the Global South as countries depend on exports to the Global North (Fevereiro & Lowe, 2025). Some degrowthers thus call for strengthening research on and collaboration with the Global South to ensure that its proposals break with global dependencies and inequalities (Kaika et al., 2023; Schmelzer & Nowshin, 2023)

Not only does degrowth draw inspiration from a variety of approaches, such as feminists, anti-colonialists, and other critics of growth, development, and utilitarianism, but it also aims to build alliances with them (Kallis, 2011; Schmelzer et al., 2022; Videira et al., 2014). The concept can be understood as a part of the larger postgrowth family, which “rejects the belief that the increase in GDP is necessary to meet social and climate targets” and can be achieved while respecting the planetary boundaries (Savini, 2024, p. 115). Its negative view of economic growth and clear intent to reduce GDP is what sets degrowth apart from other postgrowth approaches (Kronenberg et al., 2024; Savini, 2024; Yücel & Durán-Díaz, 2025). However, it should be acknowledged that the terminology is applied in different ways in the literature, also because some authors perceive the term degrowth as negative and unsuitable for speaking to and mobilising the larger public (Drews & Antal, 2016; Savini et al., 2022).

To ensure clarity, in this paper, the term postgrowth is used only in the sense of an umbrella term, encapsulating various concepts, including degrowth.

2.1.2 Spatialising degrowth and degrowing urban planning

Spatialising degrowth and degrowing urban planning are two approaches from the literature focusing on cities and urban planning more specifically. While the concrete terms seem to stem from the article ‘Urban planning and degrowth: a missing dialogue’ by Xue (2022b), the concept has explicitly been taken up by some other authors (including Kaika et al., 2023; Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022) and implicitly treated by several more.

Spatialising degrowth is largely about engaging with theories and practices of urban science and planning to advance its theory and practice (Kaika et al., 2023; Xue, 2022b). It rests on the neo-Marxist idea of an interdependency between spaces and societies: Based on their values and norms, societies create and re-create space, which in turn shapes production, behaviour, and social interactions (Xue, 2022b). Therefore, considering space can help contextualise and operationalise degrowth (Kaika et al., 2023; Xue, 2022b). According to Kaika et al. (2023, p. 1205), “degrowth can provide an alternative imaginary for the future. But this imaginary has to be transformed into spatial images, plans, and practices for it to start having a significant impact and effect”. That is where urban planning and planners come in as important actors for the transformation (Kaika et al., 2023; Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022; Xue, 2022b). Planning is key for the provision and accessibility of basic services, such as housing and education; it is concerned with social justice and environmental protection, and shapes change processes (Xue, 2022b). Therefore, it has high potential for contributing to a degrowth future (Xue, 2022b).

However, as planning today is part of and maintains the capitalistic growth system, Xue (2022b) suggests ‘degrowing planning’ as the second component of her degrowth-planning approach. It consists of a critical analysis and effort to change planning from a degrowth perspective: “The link between growth and planning is so strong today that it is hardly possible for planners, governments, and their constituencies to question economic growth as the sine qua non condition of urban well-being” (Savini et al., 2022, p. 5). Xue (2022b) suggests that recognising the growth paradigm as the dominant logic underlying planning today is the first step for degrowing planning. Subsequently, urban planning should more critically and in-depth interact with substantive values to define what ‘the good life’ entails and engage once again with utopian thinking (Xue, 2022b). According to Lamker and Schulze

Dieckhoff (2022, p. 189), “planners’ capacity for imagining growth- independent spatial development depends on overcoming obstacles in their own mindsets, values, and worldviews”.

2.2 Planning in Sweden

The Swedish system for governing and planning distinguishes three different levels: national, regional, and municipal (OECD, 2017). The national level defines how the Swedish land-use planning system and process function overall, mainly through the Planning and Building Act (PBL) (OECD, 2017). Besides the PBL, there exist a variety of laws and frameworks for various topics, in particular the Environmental Code (Boverket, 2023; Hägglund, 2013).

While Sweden has no national land-use plan, some transport infrastructure is planned at the national level (Boverket, 2023; OECD, 2017). The national government can further define national objectives and areas of national interest for specific purposes ranging from the preservation of natural or cultural heritage sites to energy production and specific industries, like forestry or fishing (Boverket, 2023; Hedström & Lundström, 2013; OECD, 2017). One of the main actors for planning on the national level are the County Administrative Boards, which act as coordinators between different municipalities and ensure the respect of national interests and regulations in planning (Boverket, 2023; OECD, 2017). The National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket) is concerned specifically with ensuring that the PBL is applied through controls and support (Boverket, 2023).

The intermediate level in Sweden consists of the 21 counties (OECD, 2017). Only three of them, namely Skåne, Stockholm, and Halland, regulate planning on a regional level through a so-called ‘Regionplan’ (Boverket, 2023; OECD, 2017). Other counties could, in theory, introduce spatial plans for their entire area - or parts thereof - too, but they are not required to (Boverket, 2023; Johnson, 2013). However, while most regions do not have a regional spatial plan, they all must develop a more generic development strategy (Regional Utvecklingsprogram, RUS), outlining a vision for the region without necessarily referring to land-use or physical planning (Boverket, 2023; Johnson, 2013). The RUS is prepared by different bodies in different regions, including municipal cooperative associations, county councils and county administrative boards (Boverket, 2023; Johnson, 2013).

The lowest level, namely the 290 municipalities (SCB, n.d.), hold the most power in the Swedish planning system (Boverket, 2023; OECD, 2017). This is exemplified by the use of the unofficial term of ‘municipal planning monopoly’, describing municipalities’ power “[...]”

to decide if, where, and how land and water should be developed” (Hedström & Lundström, 2013, p. 69). For this purpose, municipalities have several legal tools at their disposal: Firstly, they must develop a comprehensive plan (Översiktsplan) covering their respective geographic area (Boverket, 2023; Hedström & Lundström, 2013). This plan “must be reviewed by the municipal council at least once during each legislative period” and by the county administrative board to ensure its compliance with national regulations (OECD, 2017, p. 198). It lays out the general, long-term planning strategy, including how land, water and the built environment shall be used and how different interests, values and standards will be met (Boverket, 2023; OECD, 2017). It can be supplemented and updated through elaborations (fördjupning av översiktsplan) or additions (tematiskt tillägg till översiktsplan) (Hedström & Lundström, 2013).

The comprehensive plan informs the detailed plan (Detaljplan), which specifies the development in a smaller area, usually one or a few city blocks (Boverket, 2023; OECD, 2017). The latter may entail various provisions, including “where new buildings must or may be placed, how large or tall they may be, how much distance there must be between a building and the site boundary” (Boverket, 2023, para. 11). As opposed to all of the previous tools, this plan is legally binding (Boverket, 2023). It is valid until its repeal or replacement, which usually means for 5-15 years (Boverket, 2023; OECD, 2017). Detailed plans are developed when and where necessary, with the process being initiated by the municipality itself or the owner(s) of the land (Hedström & Lundström, 2013).

Besides the comprehensive and detailed plans, municipalities can impact land-use through several other instruments, including municipal land ownership, the provision of public housing and infrastructure such as roads and sewage systems, and decisions on building permits (Kalbro, 2013; OECD, 2017). Additionally, Swedish municipalities are also responsible for a broad range of public services, including childcare, water and energy provision, waste management, and other welfare-related functions - all of which are closely connected to spatial planning (SKR, 2025). These extensive responsibilities are rooted in the idea of local self-government, which gives Swedish municipalities more autonomy and influence than their counterparts in most other EU states (Hägglund, 2013; Hedström & Lundström, 2013).

2.3 The municipalities

The municipalities included in this research are Göteborg, Gotland, Helsingborg, Lund, Malmö, Mörbylånga, Uppsala and Östersund. These municipalities vary significantly in, for example, size, geographical area, and political governance. The location of all municipalities is indicated in Figure 1 below. An overview of some municipal factors and additional details can be found in Table 1.

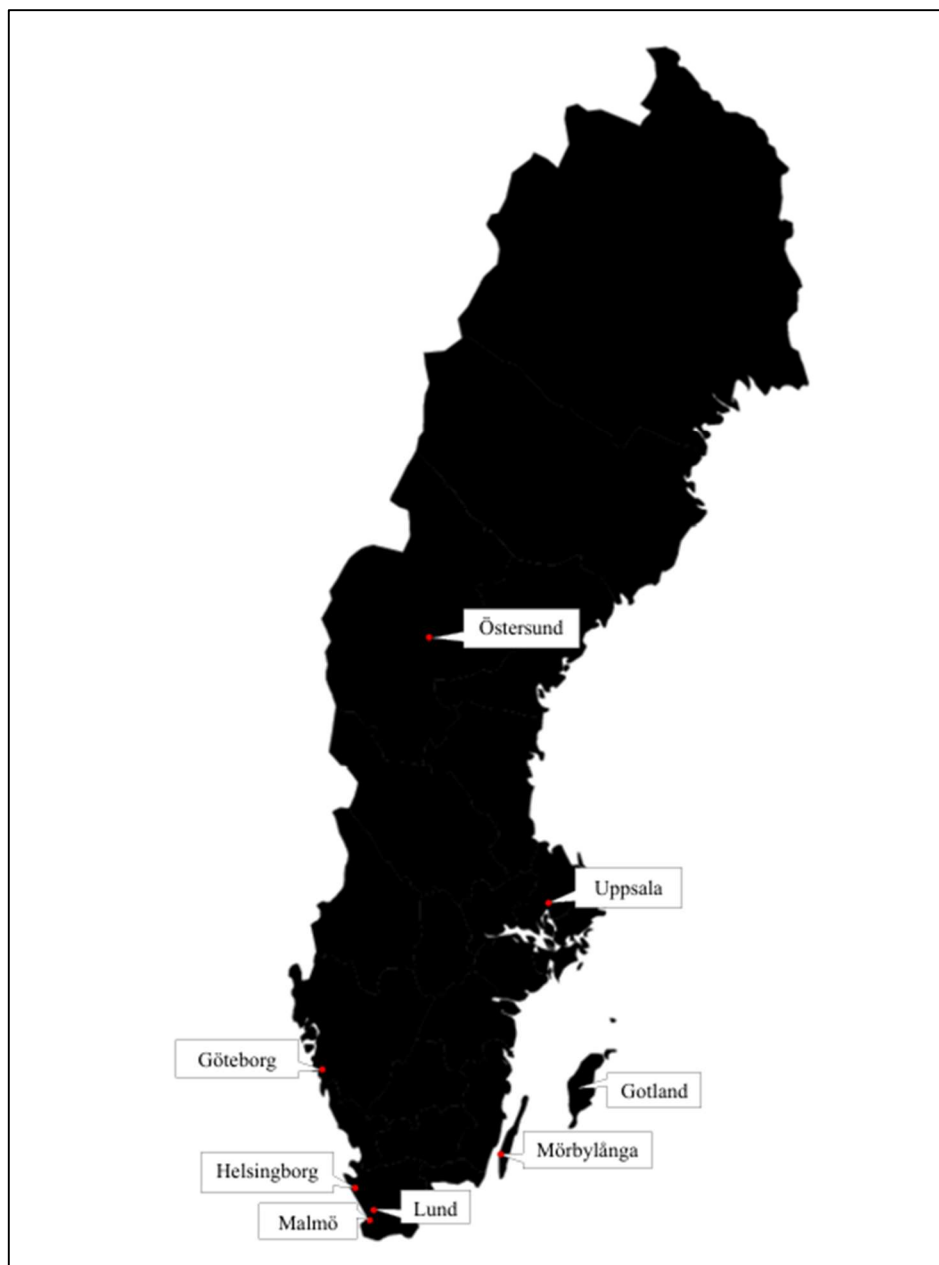


Figure 1: Map of Sweden depicting the 8 municipalities included in this thesis (created by the authors)

Table 1: Overview of the characteristics of the different Swedish cities included in the study

	Gotland	Göteborg	Helsingborg	Lund	Malmö	Mörbylånga	Uppsala	Östersund
Population 2025	60,852	613,278	152,776	132,333	367,924	16,306	249,726	64,963
Population projection 2050	64,456	685,016	168,177	140,629	422,779	17,547	300,852	67,822
Expected population increase in %	~6%	~12%	~10%	~6%	15%	~8%	~20%	~4%
Land area in m ²	3,150	450	376	428	157	668	487	2,220
County	Gotland	Västra Götaland	Skåne	Skåne	Skåne	Småland	Svealand	Jämtland
Validity of comprehensive plan	2025-2040	2022-2035 for some aspects longer	2021-2050	2025-2050	2023-2043	2015-2025 new plan for 2045 in work	2016-2050	2022-2040
Climate neutral by	2040	2030	2030	2030	2030	2030	2030	2030
Municipal parties Conservative: Moderaterna (M) Kristdemokraterna (KD) Liberalerna (L) Centerpartiet (C) Socialist: Socialdemokraterna(S) Miljöpartiet (MP) Vänsterpartiet (V)	S and M. Changing majority parties almost every election since 1994, except between 2010 and 2018	S, V and MP. Historically, socialists from 1994, besides 2018 to 2022, with conservative	M, L and KD. Mainly conservative parties since 1991, besides 1994-1998 and 2002-2006, with S and V	S, M and KD. Changing majority every election since 1994 between conservative and socialist	S, MP and L. Socialists' majority in every election since 1994, together with L since 2018	S and M since November 2023. 2018 to 2023 S, C and V	S, V and MP. Socialist since 2014. Conservative from 2006 to 2014	C and S. Socialist from 1994 to 2018. Conservative from 2018 to 2022
Further particularities	Island; tourism importance; military significance; municipality and region combined	Sweden's second-largest city; major port and industry city	Location near Denmark; port city; cross-border connections	University city; high student population; strong innovation sector	Part of the Öresund region; urban growth	Rural/island municipality on Öland; seasonal tourism; agricultural landscape	Major university city; strong commuting connection to Stockholm	Northern regional centre; winter tourism; long transport distances

3 Analytical framework

Degrowth aims for transformative change, which is generally understood as a “fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values” (IPBES, 2019, p. XVIII). In the case of degrowth, the change would more specifically target the capitalist economic system and a reconfiguration of the systems of production, consumption, governance, and social organisation (Ajl, 2021; Hickel, 2021; Kronenberg et al., 2024; Saitō, 2024; Wolfram et al., 2016). While transformative change implies deep systemic shifts, “it is better understood as a pathway or process of change involving multiple cascading changes that trigger and reinforce one another, often in unexpected ways” (Bennett et al., 2025, p. 133). However, transformation is contextual and shaped by, for example, specific social, political, and institutional conditions; therefore, no universal blueprint exists for how change occurs (Bennett et al., 2025).

Given both the absence of a blueprint for change and the limited research on degrowth and urban planning, this study develops an analytical framework to analyse the challenges and possibilities for urban planners to work towards a degrowth vision. The framework focuses on exploring planners' operating space for transformative change by looking at challenges and possibilities for change. The analytical framework was developed through a two-step process. First, a review of the literature on degrowth, urban planning, and transformative change was conducted to identify the main challenges that may constrain planners seeking to work towards a degrowth vision. Second, the framework draws on the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and leverage points to conceptualise possibilities for change. The challenges concern existing conditions and mechanisms that can be observed in the present whereas possibilities concern future pathways of transformation that cannot be directly observed. The framework is thus asymmetrical. Challenges were combined from the literature explaining *why* transformative change is difficult to achieve, and while the possibilities rely on theoretical perspectives that explain *how* systemic change may emerge despite existing constraints.

3.1 Challenges

As degrowth fundamentally challenges the dominant paradigm of continuous economic growth, this part of the analytical framework seeks to examine how growth is embedded across the societal system and how this embeddedness creates challenges for transformative change. It draws on Xue's (2022b) remark that planners' possibilities for acting towards degrowth are restricted by the larger economic and political system they are a part of. To

focus and simplify the discussion of challenges, this framework is structured around three dimensions: structural, institutional, and cognitive. While the structural dimension regards the broader societal systems, the following chapters zoom in on the challenges related to governance institutions and the mindset.

3.1.1 Structural challenges

Structures are here understood as the immaterial and material arrangements of society; in other words, structures comprise systems like capitalism alongside physical infrastructure. The existing systems are, in general, locked into historical trajectories, making it difficult to reconfigure structures and practices (Goldstein et al., 2023). As capitalism developed historically in close relation with colonialism, its global dominance was facilitated through resource extraction, economic exploitation, and the establishment of a global trade system (Wallerstein, 2004). These components are still tied to our current capitalist frameworks that drive economic growth (Ajl, 2021). At the same time, capitalism developed alongside the creation of statehood, making growth inherently embedded in the modern state structure (Scott, 1998; Tilly, 1985; Wallerstein, 1974).

The built environment, comprised of the physical structures and elements of man-made living, such as working, travelling, and the recreational environment, is shaped by the values of societal systems (Williams, 2013). It in turn inevitably shapes physical and material processes, so that societies become dependent on a continuous throughput of materials and energy required to build up, maintain, and operate their material stocks – what Marx called social metabolism (Foster, 2013). The material aspects not only reveal the foundation of, in this case, the capitalistic system, but they also create a resource and fossil fuel lock-in where the physical systems and technologies are built around the constant need for more (Unruh, 2000). In short, the system's lock-in and growth dependence are shown through reinforcing relationships between institutions, technology, economic structures, and material development patterns, which can limit transformative change.

3.1.2 Institutional challenges

The growth dependency is a complex and multi-layered system governed by a web of ecological, social, cultural, economic, and political relationships (Williams, 2013). The dominant growth-oriented worldviews shape institutions, policies, and decision-making processes (Hickel, 2022). In this sense, decisions on the institutional level are not neutral, but reinforce the logic of the current economic system. A transformative change towards

degrowth would be challenged by the structures and values of modern governance and state structures (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Homs, 2012; Koch, 2022).

At the same time, governing for environmental and societal transformation is characterised by high levels of complexity and fragmentation, which create challenges for coordinated action (Boström & Lidskog, 2024; Meadowcroft, 2007; Thorseth & Schuppert, 2018). The actors within government institutions are not necessarily the only, or even the most influential actors, as environmental governance increasingly takes place through networks involving public, private, and civil society actors (Boström & Lidskog, 2024; Rydin, 2013). As a result, responsibilities for addressing environmental challenges at an institutional and governance level become more unclear (Thorseth & Schuppert, 2018).

In addition, governing is shaped by goal conflicts, particularly between economic development and environmental protection. There is an incompatibility of sustainability dimensions, especially when balancing resource protection, social justice, and economic growth (Campbell, 1996; Sarkheyli et al., 2025), which often leads to trade-offs that are difficult to resolve (Boström & Lidskog, 2024). Borgström (2019) finds that these challenges are increased by short-term economic funding, where immediate and visible outcomes are prioritised over long-term development. Consequently, it creates a disconnect between actors, sectors, and governance levels, limiting the capacity for coherent and transformative action (Borgström, 2019).

3.1.3 Cognitive challenges

A transition towards degrowth is not only constrained by structural and governing conditions, but also by cognitive factors that influence how individuals and institutions understand and imagine societal change. One key cognitive challenge lies in what Gramsci (1971) describes as cultural hegemony, where dominant worldviews become internalised as common sense within society and societal institutions. As the dominant worldview (such as growth) becomes the consensual basis, it becomes more difficult to imagine a completely different system (Gramsci, 1971; Hickel, 2022; Howson & Smith, 2008). Since capitalism and the growth paradigm are well situated within dimensions, like culture and education, they shape how people understand and organise many aspects of everyday life, which illustrates their hegemonic influence (Hickel, 2022). Therefore, any alternatives to the status quo would, according to Gramsci (1971), be viewed as unrealistic or threatening.

The complexity of environmental and societal challenges further constrains the ability to envision and act upon alternative futures. Boström and Lidskog (2024) argue that finding a solution to the complex environmental problems seems overwhelming for any actor, leading to a focus on individual solutions and the risk of paralysis. The multitude of actors involved in society and the complexity of the environmental crisis can also create a sense of being an insignificant component in a bigger system, making it easier to shift the blame and focus on someone or something else (Boström & Lidskog, 2024). Both reactions – feeling paralysed and blaming others – lead to inaction, undermining transformative change (Boström & Lidskog, 2024). They further connect the cognitive to institutional challenges, as Boström & Lidskog (2024) argue that they are not only caused by the difficulty for humans to grasp complexity (cognitive), but also due to the actual fragmentation of power regarding sustainability governance (institutional).

3.2 Possibilities

The Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and the concept of Leverage Points are two of many existing frameworks theorising change. They have been chosen firstly because both of them can be connected to degrowth thinking. Secondly, the two approaches can be seen as complementary: The Leverage Points focuses on the depth of transformation achieved through a change of system components, and the MLP describes the different levels of change, including the actors behind it (see also Wigboldus et al., 2019). The theories will be used to discuss specific possibilities for implementing degrowth in the findings, while this chapter only provides a brief introduction to avoid repetition.

3.2.1 Systems thinking and the leverage points

The 12 leverage points developed by Meadows (1999, p.1) describe “places to intervene in a system”, sorted from shallow to deep, as depicted in Figure 2. A key message of the leverage points is that interventions should target deep leverage points, like the mindset or goals of the system, to achieve larger effects (Meadows, 1999).

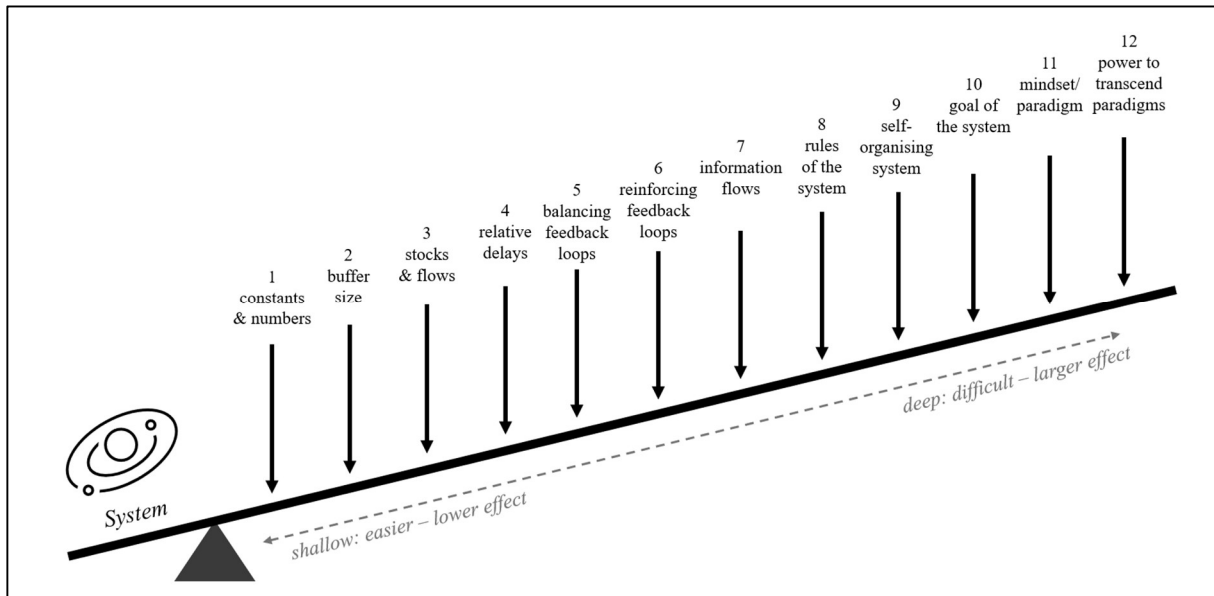


Figure 2: The 12 leverage points as defined by Meadows (1999, figure adapted from Doughnuts Economics Action Lab, 2024, slide. 44)

It is criticised that sustainability efforts today often remain focused on shallow leverage points, which are easier to change (Abson et al., 2017). Working on deep leverage points is more difficult but would also be more impactful, as altering them would have cascading effects throughout the system (Abson et al., 2017; Meadows, 1999). This connects well to degrowth, as the mindset represents the second most impactful leverage point in Meadows (1999) framework and degrowthers argue for working on the fundamental belief that economic growth is necessary and desirable to achieve a sustainable society (Chertkovskaya, 2022; Demaria et al., 2013; Savini, 2024). In fact, Meadows herself (1999, p. 1) pointed out that “the world’s leaders are correctly fixated on economic growth, but they’re pushing with all their might in the wrong direction”.

The leverage points built on systems thinking, which can be conceptualised as looking at the system as a whole, trying to understand how it works and how it can be changed to achieve desired outcomes (Arnold & Wade, 2015). Jaber et al. (2025) suggest that systems thinking is fundamental for being able to transform cities for sustainability instead of working only on isolated problems. This again can be connected to degrowth, which strives for a radical transformation of our society.

3.2.2 Multi-level perspective

In the MLP, transformation is understood as a change within the socio-technical regime, resulting from interacting processes of the niche, i.e., “the micro-level where radical novelties emerge”, the socio-technical regime, and the landscape level (Geels & Schot, 2007, p. 400).

The process illustrated in Figure 3 below can be summarised as “niche-level innovations gain traction, the landscape exerts pressure on the existing regime, and the regime destabilises, creating opportunities for niche innovations to influence the regime, incorporate within it, or even replace it” (Vandeventer et al., 2019, p. 273).

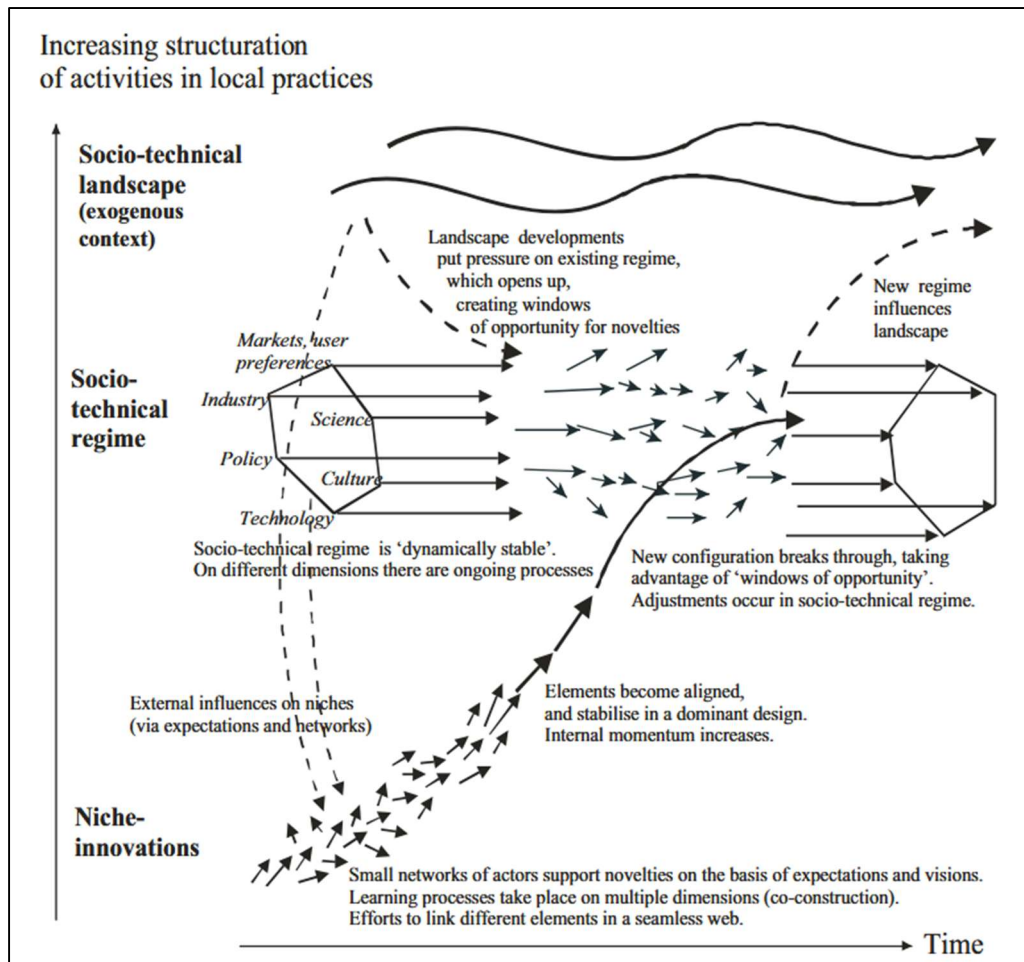


Figure 3: Transitions according to the multi-level perspective (Figure by Geels, 2011, p. 28)

Vandeventer et al. (2019) have adjusted the MLP for degrowth by conceptualising the socio-technical regime to be the current capitalist-growth system, which includes the economic system with technological innovations, trading rules, and the different actors producing, consuming, and exchanging goods. Degrowth is then defined as an innovation, which is competitive, meaning that it aims to replace rather than merely alter the current system (Vandeventer et al., 2019), connecting to the discussion about transformative change at the very beginning of this chapter.

Importantly, in the MLP, niche innovations, like degrowth, are actively supported by different actors (Geels, 2026; Vandeventer et al., 2019). To develop innovations further and increase

their influence, the network of supporters should be expanded, and the innovation itself should be improved through continued learning and adjustments (Geels, 2011; Vandeventer et al., 2019). Furthermore, “the articulation (and adjustment) of expectations or visions” can be helpful for the vision to gain broader visibility and align efforts of niche actors (Geels, 2011, p. 28).

As opposed to the general model, Vandeventer et al. (2019) suggest that degrowth can be seen as symbiotic to other innovations, which aligns with the approach of this work, viewing degrowth in connection to the large postgrowth and sustainability movement, as well as other critiques of the capitalistic system. For niche innovations to succeed in changing the regime, there must be simultaneous pressure from the landscape level, which “forms an exogenous environment beyond the direct influence of niche and regime actors (macro-economics, deep cultural patterns, macro-political developments)” (Geels & Schot, 2007, p. 400).

3.3 Combining the sections

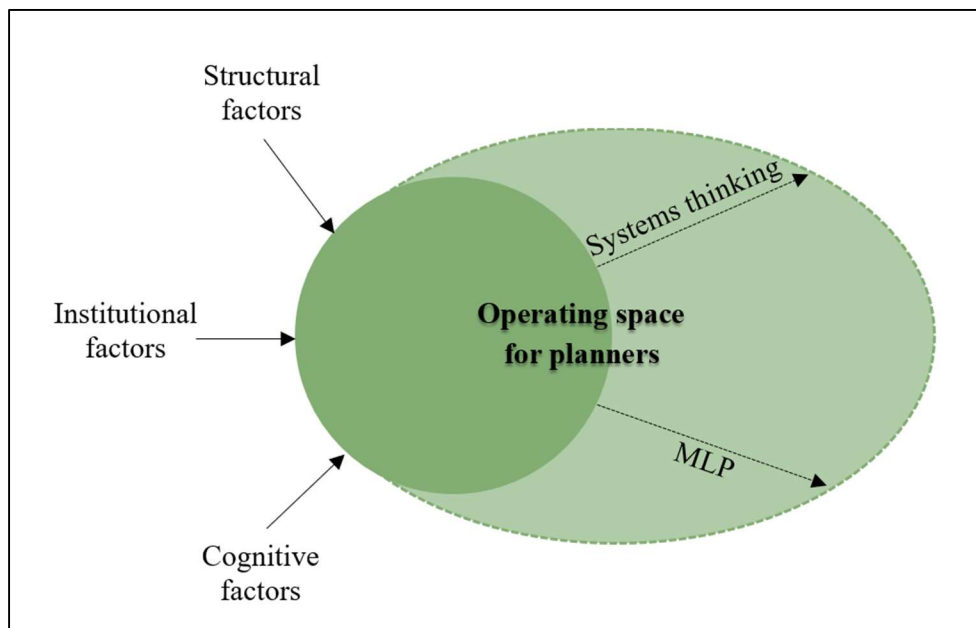


Figure 4: The operating space for urban planners delimited by the challenges and expanded by frameworks for transformative change

The analytical framework developed here can be understood as a delimitation of the space for a degrowth transformation, as illustrated in Figure 4. On the one hand, the persistence of overarching systems and the built environment - together with institutional frameworks, power relations, and dominant paradigms - contributes to processes of lock-in in which growth dependency is reinforced, thereby limiting the scope for transformative change. On the other hand, the concepts of MLP and leverage points theorise how change could occur. The exploration of niches, innovation, and strategic intervention points opens up room again

for the change towards degrowth. In sum, the analytical framework illustrates how challenges and opportunities delimit the operative space for urban planners to work towards a degrowth transformation.

4 Methodology

4.1 Study design

This study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of how degrowth-oriented principles are constrained and enabled within urban planning practices in their real-world context through a qualitative multiple-case study design, as described by Bernard (2006) and Creswell (2009). This case study looks at eight municipalities to see how they are currently working and what challenges and possibilities they see to act towards a degrowth vision. The research was conducted based on Maxwell's (2012) interactive model, allowing five core components - goals, conceptual framework, research questions, methods, and validity - to constantly interact and influence each other. Rather than following a linear, pre-defined plan, the model allows for iterative development throughout the research process. In this study, this involved refining different components in relation to each other over time.

4.2 Data collection

The study consisted of 17 semi-structured interviews with urban- and land use planners within the eight municipalities, each lasting around 1-1.5 hours (see Annex A and B for participant distribution and roles). All interviews were conducted in Swedish by one of the researchers for consistency and language constraints. 13 interviews were conducted on Teams and four in-person. While in-person interviews were suggested by the researchers, Teams was preferred in many cases for saving time or due to geographical constraints (see also Trier-Bieniek, 2012). Conducting interviews on Teams or in person was chosen so it was still possible to notice intonation, facial expression, and body language of the research participants (see also Irvine et al., 2013). The interviews focused on:

- How planning is interpreted and implemented in practice
- Perceived opportunities and limitations for the degrowth-oriented vision designed by the researchers
- Institutional, political, and practical constraints

An interview guideline was created with open-ended questions as a general script for the interviews. Thereby, the researcher controlled the line of questioning while the research participants could talk freely about their experiences and opinions. The interview guide (see Annex D) was structured based on a draft of the analytical framework and background.

Besides the interview guideline, the interview framework was largely inspired by the method of backcasting, which involves starting from a long-term future vision (25–50 years ahead)

and working backwards to identify the steps and resources required to achieve it (Dreborg, 1996). Therefore, during the interview, a vision (see Annex E) was read and shown to the participants to envision a degrowth future for their municipalities. After reading the vision, the research participants could reflect on likely challenges and possibilities for urban planners to work towards that specific vision.

Visioning is a concept used in both sustainability science and urban planning that emphasises “representing what the future should look like rather than what they possibly could look like” (Iwaniec & Wiek, 2014, p. 544) and is a reference to a “desirable state in the future” (Wiek & Iwaniec, 2014, p. 497). Usually, a vision is created by various actors in a group setting, such as during a workshop (Wiek & Iwaniec, 2014). Unlike the traditional approach, this vision was developed by the two researchers based on previous literature that mentions how a degrowth city could look like in practice (see Table 1). By doing a literature search of degrowth and urban planning, the authors could sort out relevant, concrete and practical aspects of what may be included in a degrowth city. Similarly, the researchers were inspired by one previous degrowth vision for the Swedish Municipality Järfälla (Håkansson et al., 2024) and a vision for sustainable urban planning for Stockholm (Naturskyddsföreningen, 2023) to draw on practical examples. The vision was first sent to an urban planner from Stockholm Municipality for a review. This led to the clarification on how the isolation of houses can contribute to more sustainable practices.

The full vision can be seen in Annex E; however, to facilitate the understanding of the discussion and analysis, a shorter summary is presented here:

By 2050, [the city] has transformed into a climate-neutral and climate-resilient city that prioritises ecological integrity, social equality, and collective well-being over economic growth. Through reduced resource and energy use, localised economies, cooperative forms of living, and the increase of walkable mixed-use neighbourhoods, the city has become more self-sufficient, socially connected, and environmentally sustainable. There is a stronger focus on re-use and renovating existing spaces instead of developing new areas, as well as on green spaces, community services, and public participation throughout the city. Neighbourhoods can meet the needs of the residents and hold more power to self-organise. Together, these changes have created a more inclusive urban environment in which everyday

life is organised around sufficiency, closeness, sharing, mutual support, and care for both people and nature.

The full vision included a variety of concrete solutions ranging from urban farming projects to cooperative housing initiatives with multi-use buildings. To illustrate key aspects of the vision, Table 2 presents concrete examples identified through the literature review.

Table 2: Practical examples of a degrowth city mentioned in the literature

Topic	Example	Source(s)
Food & gardening	Urban farming and gardening, including community gardens	(De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023; Hermans et al., 2024; Savini, 2021)
	Farmers markets	(Savini, 2021)
Nature	Blue and green infrastructure	(Kronenberg et al., 2024)
	De-sealing and re-naturation	(De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023)
	Infrastructure for pollinators	(Hermans et al., 2024)
	Reconvert 1/3 of streets into nature areas	(De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023)
Mixed land use	Use fixed land use and transit-oriented development to make efficient use of space and reduce distances	(Kronenberg et al., 2024; Wächter, 2013; Yücel & Durán-Díaz, 2025)
	Focus on multifunctional, re-densified, small-scale, compact, decentralised land use to reduce resource consumption and increase social capital	(De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023; Wächter, 2013)
Mobility	Reduction of individual mobility	(Kronenberg et al., 2024)
	Fare-free transport	(Kaika et al., 2023)
	Reduce motorised transport by limiting urban sprawl rather than promoting public transport	(Yücel & Durán-Díaz, 2025)
	Slow mobility	(Savini et al., 2022)

Topic	Example	Source(s)
Housing	Housing communing, including co-housing, cooperatives and other types of shared living	(Hermans et al., 2024; Kaika et al., 2023; Savini, 2021)
	Promote house and goods sharing with subsidies or tax reductions	(De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2010)
	Include other types of housing ownership besides private or public	(Hermans et al., 2024)
Refurbishment and renovations	Focus on refurbishing existing houses (instead of demolitions)	(Schneider et al., 2010)
	Use simple means for renovation and conversion of buildings	(De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023)
	Low-tech upcycling including, reusing windows and doors in new buildings	(De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023)
Technologies	Use new, low-tech construction materials	(De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023)
	Use and incentivise innovative, low-tech, low-carbon technologies, including urban mining	(Hermans et al., 2024; Yücel & Durán-Díaz, 2025)
	Aim to generate renewable energy	(Hermans et al., 2024)
Commoning & sharing	Commoning of general spaces	(Hermans et al., 2024)
	Share private space	(Hermans et al., 2024)
Participation & democratisation	Make participation more accessible	(Yücel & Durán-Díaz, 2025)
	Horizontal decision-making including assemblies and direct democracy	(Hermans et al., 2024; Wächter, 2013)
Places to meet & help each other	Create and maintain spaces that facilitate community-based activities. For example,	(Wächter, 2013)

Topic	Example	Source(s)
	repair projects, urban farming initiatives, care activities and car-pooling	
Work	Promoting local employment through worker cooperatives, community development organisations, and community land trusts	(Wächter, 2013)

It is important to note that many of the concrete initiatives included in the vision are not unique to degrowth and may also be promoted within other sustainability paradigms, including green growth. In practice, there can be an overlap between the concrete interventions proposed by different sustainability approaches. However, the distinction lies less in the concrete solutions themselves and more in their intended outcomes. Similar initiatives may be used within, for example, the green growth paradigm to support continued economic expansion, while the initiatives for degrowth are understood to eventually contribute to a broader system change. The vision was, therefore, used to concretise a discussion about transformative change that does not yet exist.

4.3 Sampling strategy

The eight municipalities of Gotland, Göteborg, Helsingborg, Lund, Malmö, Mörbylånga, Uppsala and Östersund were selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in urban scale, geographic context, and planning conditions within Sweden. The aim is not statistical representativeness, but rather to capture variety to enable an exploration of how planning decisions and priorities are shaped in different municipal settings. While a degrowth vision is not a blueprint for every community, municipality or country, including multiple municipalities with different characteristics, allowed the study to explore a broader scope of the challenges and possibilities for change.

The interview participants were selected based on their profession as urban planners within one of the eight municipalities. The participants were found with the help of gatekeepers (see also Chambliss & Schutt, 2019) and snowball sampling (see also Bernard, 2006). In some cases, access was facilitated through existing contacts held by one of the researchers, which supported the identification of relevant participants. The researchers contacted urban planners in 27 municipalities across Sweden via email, reaching approximately 75 individuals.

Therefore, the final selection of participants was influenced by practical considerations, such as availability and willingness to participate.

4.4 Data analysis

All empirical material was translated from Swedish to English with the help of Klang AI before the process of coding. The interview transcripts were analysed with thematic coding, based on Braun and Clarke (2022), using the software MAXQDA. The initial set of codes was developed deductively based on theoretical concepts from the degrowth literature, the research questions, and the interview guide. At the same time, the analysis remained open to new codes that emerged from the interview data.

The overlap between degrowth and other sustainability approaches within the vision also has implications for the interpretation of the empirical material. Statements and examples provided by participants were not treated as evidence of a clear commitment to degrowth. Instead, contributions were considered relevant when they resonated with elements of the degrowth vision presented during the data collection. Consequently, some findings may also be interpreted as examples of broader sustainability planning; however, within this study they are analysed in relation to their potential contribution to degrowth.

The first four interviews were coded by the two researchers, allowing for comparison and refinements of the initial sets of coding. The remaining interviews were coded by the researcher who had not conducted the interviews, while the second researcher reviewed the coding to ensure consistency and allow for potential revisions. Throughout the process, new codes were defined and subsequently merged with other codes, where necessary and possible. As new themes arose, the transcripts were revisited and re-coded if necessary. This iterative and abductive process allowed for the refinement of categories and a continuous dialogue between theory and data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

4.5 Ethical considerations and positioning

To ensure the participants privacy and data security throughout the research process, several measures were implemented. All interview data were anonymised and stored on the

researchers' computers and in closed, encrypted systems. End-to-end encrypted tools, including Klang AI¹ for transcription and translation and MAXQDA² for coding were used.

Prior to the interviews, all participants received a consent form (see Annex C) which outlined the purpose of the study, how the data would be used, and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw at any time. Written or verbal consent was obtained before participation. Pseudonymisation was also applied throughout the research process, meaning that no real names or directly identifying personal information are included in the thesis. This means that the participant cannot be identified in the presentations of the findings.

Another important aspect of Maxwell's (2012) interactive model is the transparency of how the researchers influence the study. Since the question of degrowth is a normative, value-laden vision, the research positions on the topic will influence the research. Both researchers value the concept of degrowth and see it as a possible solution to the multiple crises we are facing. However, this research is not focusing on whether degrowth is a desirable solution, but rather how it could be practically realised. Therefore, the research is not trying to neutrally examine degrowth as a concept.

¹ Klang is a Swedish system with servers in France that operates entirely under European regulations. It is GDP-compliant, end-to-end encrypted, and no data is saved by the company.

² Verbi software is behind MAXQDA which is a German company. The project data is exclusively on the researcher's computer as a .mqda file. MAXQDA VERBI GmbH has no access to the data.

5 Limitations

This chapter presents the key limitations of the present research. First given the limited research on the intersection of degrowth and urban planning (in Sweden), both the vision and the analytical framework were developed by the researchers, whereas visions normally are developed in a workshop setting including important stakeholders (Iwaniec & Wiek, 2014). Not including the knowledge and perspectives of planners and other actors familiar with urban planning and the specific context of each municipality represents a shortcoming in the development of the vision. For example, certain critiques of specific solutions may have been linked to the vision not being adjusted to the pre-existing conditions of each municipality. This was exemplified by the interviews with smaller, more rural municipalities, as these participants pointed out that certain aspects of the vision did not make sense in their specific contexts. A vision developed in collaboration with local actors and experts could have reduced discussions about the vision itself and better focused the subsequent interviews on possibilities and challenges for implementing degrowth.

Furthermore, the vision presented a variety of concrete solutions in line with degrowth, to make the concept more tangible and connect it to urban planning. This approach may have diverted attention from the fundamental ideas and changes towards individual problems and fixes. Besides, the term degrowth was consciously avoided to avert negative associations (see also Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022). At the same time, a more in-depth and direct discussion about the current system and the concept of degrowth might have enriched the results, enabling a clearer distinction between ongoing and potential sustainability measures aligned with degrowth and intentional degrowth efforts within the municipalities.

Further limitations regard the method of and the dynamics during the interviews. Some interviewees explicitly talked about answering ‘correctly’, repeatedly asked for explanations of the questions, or came prepared with extensive notes, potentially aiming to meet perceived expectations of the researchers (see also Irvine et al., 2013). Moreover, some participants were hesitant to talk about certain issues they perceived to be politically sensitive. Given that the researchers do not have a background in urban planning, they may have missed asking relevant questions or misunderstood the interviewees’ answers. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the interviews were held in Swedish and then translated using KlangAI. While the native Swedish-speaker did go over the translation, some nuances may still have been lost in the process. Additionally, it should be acknowledged that this study only included municipalities that are part of the Viable Cities project and pledged to be climate-neutral by

2030 or 2040. Thus, the perspectives of planners working in municipalities that are less committed to sustainability are missing.

During the coding and analysis process, the researchers reflected on the possibility that some participants may have misunderstood parts of the vision or interpreted it as a collection of individual proposals rather than as an overarching transformative concept. More generally speaking, interviewees had less than an hour to read and think about the vision, as well as challenges and possibilities for its implementation. Considering that the vision proposes a radical societal and spatial transformation, this represented a limited time for reflection. As a result, uncertainties, misunderstandings, and time pressure regarding the vision may have negatively affected the findings. Interviewing the same participants twice could have given the researchers and interviewees time to reflect and improve the quality of the data.

6 Introduction to the findings

The results from the interviews and the discussion based on the analytical framework will be presented together, as the interpretation and analysis of the data fundamentally depended on the literature, which had been read by the researchers beforehand. Before exploring the challenges (see 7) and the possibilities (see 8) for planners to contribute to a degrowth transformation in the following two chapters, some overarching observations are presented.

A key finding is the striking breadth of data in the interviews. Participants touched upon many different topics, and the overlap between different conversations was often rather low. At points, the topics were understood as different examples of one overarching theme. For example, many diverse projects described by participants were summarised as ongoing efforts for sustainability. However, in other instances, they were kept as unique (single interview) or at least uncommon (a few interviews), yet relevant themes on their own. This is reflected in the high number of codes, namely 645. Such a result may be due to a combination of the abductive coding method and its application by the researchers, the openness of the questions asked, as well as the diverse backgrounds, jobs and workplaces of the interviewees.

Another result was the interviewees' reaction to the vision, which was mostly positive. Nine interviewees specifically described the vision as 'idyllic', 'good', 'great', 'exciting' or similarly. Additionally, four more remarked that it was close to the municipal vision or goals, without providing any other explicit evaluation. Only one interviewee was questioning the vision and where its ideas were coming from. Three other participants did not provide any clear evaluation, either jumping directly into discussing specific parts of the vision or commenting that visions never materialise as foreseen or intended.

In some interviews, the term postgrowth was brought up by the participant. Hence, the term postgrowth will be used in this chapter when discussing statements made in response to this. Otherwise, the term degrowth will be used, except when explicitly referring to the postgrowth streams, as in the other parts of this thesis. When presenting the subsequent results, numbers (1-17) will be used to refer to specific participants. A table containing participants' numbers and their role, or a generic name³ for it, is included in Annex B. Where relevant, only the

³ A generic name for the interviewees' roles in the municipalities is used since different roles sometimes have slightly different names in various municipalities and some roles are very specific, which could give away their identity.

name of the municipality will be mentioned without any numbers to avoid exposing participants' identities.

7 Findings: challenges

While the reaction to the vision, as discussed above, was overwhelmingly positive, all interviewees identified many obstacles to its realisation and partially criticised specific parts of it. In this section, the different challenges will be analysed and presented based on the analytical framework: First, the structural challenges will be introduced, then the institutional obstacles and finally the cognitive hurdles.

7.1 Structural challenges

Structural challenges were seen as the broader foundations that influence the planners, namely through capitalism and the embeddedness of growth. While not always framed by the interviewees as broader structural issue, they have been discussed through mentioning market economy, material and immaterial embeddedness of growth, economic constraints and competition between municipalities.

7.1.1 *Economic system*

One challenge mentioned during a few interviews was that the planners are situated in a broader system. For example, participant 1 said that for parts of the vision to be realised, the economic system would need to change.

At the end of the day, we live according to what we know right now, in a market economy. That is what drives us to a large extent: the fact that there are people who want to make money out of almost everything. So, these ideological concepts that are also part of this vision – that we do things together and help one another more, rather than selling them as services and so on – that, well, might not work right now, but it is a vision, after all. So, I'm not really sure what kind of change in society at large would need to take place, other than that it has a lot to do with the economic systems we actually live within.

This statement aligns to a certain extent with that of scholars, who agree that whatever means would be used for the realisation of degrowth, the economic system as well as the broader capitalistic and state systems would need to change (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Homs, 2012; Koch, 2022). While this was not a main topic during the interviews, other examples illustrated that the planners operate within institutional and economic frameworks that are largely

structured and dependent on continued growth. Drawing on Goldstein (2023), reconfiguring these structures and practices would be difficult for anyone, let alone the planners.

7.1.2 Economic factors and growth dependency

Money represents yet another important challenge for parts of the vision, which was mentioned by almost all interviewees, albeit in different ways. Sustainable solutions were criticised for being more expensive than the alternatives, both in terms of their acquisition as well as with regard to the price for consumers. Similarly, maintaining or creating a green area like a park generates no direct financial returns. As municipalities are structurally dependent on economic growth, they have an incentive to prioritise projects with clear economic returns (Borgström, 2019; IMFG, 2022; Rydin, 2013). The tendency to deprioritise long-term sustainability initiatives, whose benefits are less immediately visible within existing financial frameworks, would need to change for the degrowth vision to be realised.

In the same vein, interviewee 17 viewed the creation of suitable funding models as a challenge. For municipalities, the problem seems to be two-fold: Firstly, based on a few of the interviewees frequently mentioning that planners have many discussions around what should - or even can be – financed. For example, according to participant 3, the planner's ability to implement any projects today was seen to be undermined by a lack of available funds compared to earlier in their career. Secondly, interviewee 16 explained that the development should, in principle, “pay for itself” to not waste taxpayers' money. For the planners, this becomes a challenge to implement aspects of the vision that are non-monetary, more expensive and will generate other types of values besides economic growth. Relating to Giddens (1984), he argues that transformative capacity as power depends on allocative resources (raw materials, capital, technology) to enable structural power, or authoritative resources (social roles, expertise, reputation) empowering actors to control others. In this case, urban planners operate under financial constraints and have limited control over how to allocate the budget (Rydin, 2013); this, in turn, restricts their ability to work towards alternative visions and norms.

7.1.3 Competition between municipalities

Another aspect brought up in a few of the interviews was the competition between municipalities. Participant 2 said:

[We should] not get stuck on the idea that every municipality is an island and that we must solve all our problems on our own. (...) It's also about growth

and GDP and all that sort of thing – thinking like our municipality having the tallest building and our municipality having this and that. The small suburban municipality also wants to be able to compete with the other municipalities and remain attractive.

This resonates with Yuval's (2022) observation that municipalities compete for population, businesses and tourism. Since all important goods in the city or municipality are funded through revenue streams, the overall increase in economic output is important, leading to potential competition (Savini, 2021). While competition is 'taken for granted' and situated in norms, paradigm and political culture (Worthen et al., 2009), it is also structurally embedded within the capitalistic market logics and growth (Berta et al., 2012). These broader economic structures set the dependency on competition to increase growth, even within urban planning (Savini, 2021). To change the structure of competitiveness, Savini (2021, p. 5) notes demand to "rethink the fundamental institutions that structure the city-regions as competitive markets, that have artificially separated land uses and that have frustrated communities' political and material autonomy". For planners, this is again not something that they directly have the power to change alone. Changing the competitive narrative would require a broader system change to secure planning for important goods without the need to compete for revenue streams.

7.1.4 *Material and immaterial embeddedness*

Besides the general structure of capitalism, growth dependency and competition, interviewees, more or less explicitly, described how the built environment reflects norms and values of society (see also Williams, 2013). Färjestaden and Östersund, for example, were mentioned as historically having been designed around car-based mobility, with road infrastructures, parking spaces, and spatial layouts prioritising the usage of cars, hampering a shift towards a more sustainable mobility today. Not only does this example reflect a form of lock-in from past decisions (Unruh, 2000), but it also shows what possibilities are constrained within the existing urban space and, therefore, restrict change through existing spatial and material arrangements. The example further illustrates how infrastructures can shape the urban social metabolism, structuring materials and movement within the city (Fischer-Kowalski & Weisz, 1999; Foster, 2013). However, the influence of the past is not only materially embedded, but also immaterial. Interviewee 17 described that if a municipality has allowed exploitation over time, it creates an expectation that further developments will be allowed in the future. Working against the material embeddedness and the expectation of

continued exploitation would be necessary for the degrowth vision to be realised, but that is a difficult task that planners alone cannot achieve (see Foster, 2013; Unruh, 2000).

7.1.5 *Practical and technical issues*

For the implementation of certain aspects of the vision, planners identified practical and technical issues. For example, the vision describes a green, clean city, with more focus on natural values (see also De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023). For these aspects, the question of planting trees arose. While the idea of planting a tree seems like an easy solution, several interviewees explained that it was a rather complicated process due to cables under the roads. At places in the city, the planners either need to move water pipes or electrical cables if they want to plant a tree. Similarly, the vision puts forward the idea of using porous asphalt as a more sustainable alternative to conventional road materials. However, participant 15 highlighted that such materials may not withstand the weight of heavy vehicles. These discussions underscore the importance of including practitioners in the development of degrowth theories and proposals, as suggested by Kaika et al. (2023).

The two examples illustrate a technological lock-in (Unruh, 2000). To have electricity and water in our home, we need cables and pipes. Likewise, to transport food, we need heavy vehicles. The technological interventions are already set within society. So, the planners cannot simply introduce new solutions but must work within existing socio-material configurations that limit flexibility and require trade-offs. Another example brought forward from the vision is renovation over demolition, including measures such as reusing materials and improving insulation. While such approaches align with degrowth principles by reducing resource use (De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2010), several participants noted practical challenges. For instance, older windows may provide insufficient insulation, while improving insulation can increase the need for ventilation and generate more electricity use. This example illustrates that sustainability-oriented interventions are not always straightforward, revealing the complexity and uncertainty of sustainability in practice (Boström & Lidskog, 2024; Campbell, 1996).

7.2 Institutional challenges

Urban planners work within the municipal administration, which is a part of the broader institutional structure of the state. What was mainly brought up as challenges during the interviews were external factors, goals and ambitions, goal conflicts, institutional and legal frameworks, actors, and citizen participation. Some of these influences are indirect (not aimed

at targeting the planners), such as external factors and some general goals, while others specifically shape planners' work (aim to influence planners) through laws, regulations, policy frameworks, and institutional procedures.

7.2.1 *External factors*

Since municipal planners operate within a broader socio-political context, interviewees emphasised that the realisation of a degrowth-oriented vision is constrained by external factors that limit municipal autonomy. Many interviewees described how municipalities were subject to a continuously shifting context, including changes in political priorities, legislative frameworks, and environmental conditions. These dynamics increased uncertainty, which might reduce the capacity for long-term, transformative planning. One example highlighted by several interviewees is the increasing national and municipal emphasis on preparedness, security and military defence due to the geo-political situations with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Sweden joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). This was especially relevant for Gotland and Östersund because of their strategic importance for the Swedish Army and NATO, illustrating how the overarching context and geopolitics influence planners and their work.

The shift in national priorities was described as a major concern for urban planning in general, with interviewee 12 perceiving it as a major obstacle for the realisation of sustainability efforts more specifically. Indeed, several interviewees observed a shift away from sustainability, including less political discussions, funding, and more permissive legislation. The de-prioritisation of sustainability significantly narrows the space for the transformative approaches needed for degrowth, which depends on sustained and systemic commitment to sustainability. While the accounts of several interviewees suggested that preparedness gained prominence at the expense of sustainability, the growing attention on preparedness could also represent a chance for a degrowth transformation since part of the vision could be framed from a preparedness perspective (see 8.3.3).

7.2.2 *Problems with goals and goal conflicts*

The shift of the national level to increase the focus on (military) preparedness further portrays a frequently discussed theme during the interviews, namely goals and goal conflicts. To start, a few interviewees lamented a lack of clear and ambitious goals on either the national level or the level of committees within the municipality. At the same time, interviewees observed how previously agreed-upon goals and commitments were not respected. For example, none of the

participants believed that the municipality would meet their goal of climate neutrality by 2030 or that the commitments for the protection of biodiversity, climate change adaptation or the reduction of car use were being met. Interviewee 16 also criticised the understanding of sustainability within the municipality, particularly that Agenda 2030 was described differently within the administration's various thematic programmes. While goals will be discussed as a possibility (see 8.2.1), they also illustrate challenges. If sustainability goals are not met or prioritised, an even more 'radical' shift towards degrowth is unlikely to be admitted. Interviewee 16 further said, "It wouldn't be a problem to adopt the vision [as a goal], but I think implementing it would be much harder in practice". So, even if degrowth were adopted as a goal, that would not be sufficient.

Besides preparedness, one of the main municipal goals mentioned during almost all the interviews was population growth. The general issues of a growing population of elders in combination with a relatively smaller working-age population seemed to intensify the need to attract residents who contribute to the tax base and can fill important roles within the municipalities. Interviewees explained that municipal revenue structures create incentives for continuous population growth, making the construction of housing, especially individual family houses, a central planning priority. Although municipalities experiencing population decline were not included in this study, the discussion still highlights a broader tension of competition as previously discussed in section 7.1.4 (Savini, 2021). The goal of population growth for the municipalities cannot be realised for all at the same time. As a result, some municipalities will gain population at the expense of others, meaning that some municipalities will inevitably 'lose'. The competition and current strategies for attracting people will also inherently clash with the degrowth vision, as noted by interviewee 16. Indeed, municipalities attempt to attract inhabitants by developing small houses in the urban periphery, reinforcing patterns of low-density expansion and car dependency, which would represent the opposite of the vision (see also De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023; Wächter, 2013).

Given the various goals adopted by the municipalities, all participants also alluded to the inherently goal-conflicting nature of planners' roles. While all planners seem to be working - somewhat - towards the goal of sustainability, they did note that it is difficult because the goals do not always align. As participant 12 said:

You can't have everything in one place, can you? If we're to increase biodiversity and protect our groundwater, whilst at the same time being a growth region and increasing our population. We mustn't put too much strain

on our resources, but we also must be attractive to visitors and tourists and safeguard our cultural heritage. You can tell straight away that it's very difficult to achieve all that.

The example demonstrates the difficulty of balancing different interests and goals, especially when they conflict. It was further argued by participant 5 that even their Regional Development Strategy has built-in goal conflicts that were never addressed in the planning process. Not only are the goals contradictory at times, but they can also change when the political majorities change. This creates a situation in which planners are not only working toward multiple objectives but must continuously negotiate trade-offs between them (Campbell, 1996). This incompatibility of goals or values is seen as part of and a by-product of urban planning processes (Chan et al., 2016; Sarkheyli et al., 2025). Even working towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) will lead to trade-offs that are difficult to resolve since the goals are inherently incompatible (Boström & Lidskog, 2024). In turn, this can limit the capacity for coherent and transformative action (Borgström, 2019). In the context of degrowth, such contradictions can create additional challenges for planners, as transformative ambitions may conflict with existing political, economic, or development-oriented priorities.

7.2.3 *Actors*

In the interviews, the realisation of the vision was described as highly dependent on other actors, especially due to the scale of the change required. A lot of different actors were mentioned by all interviewees; however, the main recurring ones were private developers, politicians, civil servants and urban planners.

First, interviewees 8 and 11 remarked that the sheer number of actors complicates the processes where the planners are highly dependent on other actors, mainly private developers. This was especially emphasised in municipalities that do not own significant amounts of land themselves, such as Gotland. According to the participants, the private actors ultimately hold considerable influence over what developments are realised, while planners are often limited to encouraging sustainability ambitions by attempting to create favourable planning conditions. As illustrated by participant 10, developers can also always withdraw from the activity or avoid investing in a locality if they are not happy with the negotiation outcomes. So, while planners possess certain regulatory powers, developers retain significant influence over whether and how development takes place (see also Rydin, 2013).

The illustration of how private developers hold power relates to Rydin (2013), who further argues that market actors are integrated into planning governance and policy implementation because they control resources - particularly financial capital - that the public sector lacks. This creates a structural imbalance within governance processes in which market-led economic activity gains prominence within urban planning (see also Rydin, 2013). In this context, planners may not only struggle to challenge growth-dependent development patterns but also become reliant on developers' willingness to support alternative forms of urban development aligned with degrowth principles.

Besides private developers, municipal politicians were discussed as important actors shaping the planning process. According to the interviewees, municipal politicians set the goals and frameworks that the administration is expected to follow, while the planners must provide continuity and implement the policies of the ruling political majority. As explained by participant 2, planners cannot work as activists pursuing personal ambitions, but instead they strive to meet the requirements set by policymakers. This aligns with Xue (2022b, p.417) arguing that "replacing the political objectives with planners' professional or personal values would be a technocratic planning in lack of democratic legitimacy". Nevertheless, the participants mentioned that the planners can still influence politicians by giving expert recommendations (see 8.3.3), although this varied between municipalities. Furthermore, some participants said, that politicians may ultimately choose to disregard planning recommendations, limiting the influence of planners.

As previously mentioned, participants further described how political priorities could shift every four years following municipal elections. This was regarded as a greater challenge in the municipalities where political majorities frequently changed, compared to those with a more stable political majority. Several participants further argued that the vision would be politically challenging if it were perceived to conflict with citizens' preferences, for example, by reducing the prioritisation of single-family housing or car-based mobility. Since elected officials are dependent on public support and re-election, some planners considered it unlikely that politicians would pursue more radical measures that risk generating political opposition. In this sense, the planners perceived the inability to pursue the vision to be linked not only to formal institutional constraints, but also to assumptions about citizens' preferences and political feasibility. These findings also highlight how planners' ability to contribute to transformative change is dependent on political support and institutional legitimacy, limiting their capacity to independently advance degrowth-oriented agendas.

The interviews also discussed the challenges with other actors. For example, interviewee 8 brought up a bike lane that has been discussed since the 70s but has not yet been realised. The reason was partly that it requires the Swedish Transport Agency to prioritise it and private actors to give up parts of their land. Another example was discussed by participant 12, that planners were getting uncoordinated responses regarding the national interests from the County Administrative Board, which in turn created uncertainty for the planning process. The presented examples show how complex systems are characterised by a multiplicity of actors with overlapping roles and responsibilities, which can lead to an imbalance and a more complicated process for the process of change (Boström & Lidskog, 2024; Rydin, 2013).

Another actor that the interviewees reflected upon was themselves. In contrast to other actors, their own influence was often perceived as particularly limited. Interviewee 13 initially even negated any potential contribution towards the vision, although they did recognise that it depended on the underlying understanding of urban planning. Several other interviewees pointed out that they lacked control or influence over certain parts of the vision. Interestingly, their own power was never compared to that of an actor who had less power than themselves; it was only in relation to politicians or private developers. At the same time, the findings indicate that planners do retain influence over important dimensions of urban development, which will further be discussed in Chapter 8 on planners' possibilities.

7.2.4 Collaboration

With the sheer number of actors, many interviewees discussed the importance of collaboration but saw challenges in the current situation. One central aspect of collaboration discussed regarded the work within municipalities. The municipalities are composed of multiple administrative units staffed by civil servants with different responsibilities and mandates. Interviewees consistently described a lack of collaboration between these units as a key barrier to realising the vision. While initiatives to improve coordination exist, one fundamental barrier for collaboration discussed by several interviewees was the different ways of thinking and working within various sections of the administration. Participant 16 described that different departments prioritise different goals (such as economic, environment and social) whereby collaboration becomes more challenging. The difficulties with collaboration seemed to be more pronounced in larger municipalities, where the size and complexity of the organisation make coordination more difficult. Some interviewees even talked about the municipal departments operating in silos, complicating collaboration further.

Another form of collaboration challenge was discussed regarding citizens. While citizen participation exists today, a few interviewees acknowledged that decisions were often made before citizens' involvement, or that the citizens' comments were ignored. Others regretted that the initiative usually came from the municipality, and grassroots efforts mostly opposed rather than proposed something. The lack of collaboration between the two levels creates a challenge for the vision, as it relies on citizen engagement as both a goal and a tool for transformative change. In general, to work towards degrowth, a lot of change would need to happen simultaneously with various actors at all levels (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Koch, 2022), since, as of now, it is difficult to see which actor has sufficient authority to drive such a transformation independently. Therefore, if the collaboration and coordination are lacking, it may create a fundamental challenge for the realisation of the vision.

7.2.5 Planning process

Parts of the planning process have already been discussed, including goal setting and aspects of the technical implementation challenges. However, another point of discussion was brought up by participants 15 and 16, who said that 'the municipal' way they work would need to change for the vision to be adopted. One example was to work less with guidelines and rigid structures within the institution. This was, however, contrasted by participants 5 and 7, who alluded to a lack of guidelines as a challenge. For example, according to them, the comprehensive plan needs clearer recommendations and strategies for handling goal conflicts, while the municipality needs clear processes for how to handle trade-offs.

The PBL was also discussed as an inflexible structure for how the planners could work towards the vision. Participants 1 and 16 mentioned that the PBL can be interpreted in a rigid way, creating difficulties in working proactively with sustainability, as it has not kept up with societal development. The participants explained that for certain aspects of the vision, the planners are not allowed to impose specific requirements. For example, they cannot decide exactly how apartment buildings will be used or decide what materials to use when constructing the buildings (like using Swedish local materials). However, it was also stated that planners do have some possibility to give directions towards special requirements (see 8.3.2), something that interviewee 16 said that the political parties feel differently about. According to them, one side of the political spectrum wants the planners to impose such sustainability requirements, while the other side is opposed because it hinders market competition.

Several interviewees also expressed doubts about whether the vision could realistically be implemented by 2050, with the exception of interviewee 2, who partly considered the time to be sufficient. Reasons for the scepticism were that not only would growth dependency need to be transformed, which would be a long process, but also that planning processes themselves operate over long time periods. For example, the comprehensive plan and the legally binding detailed development plan have already been established for many years in advance, making substantial changes difficult and time-consuming. As participant 12 explained, changing an already adopted comprehensive plan is “not just something you can do”. From this perspective, working towards a new transformative vision will first take many years to plan, and even longer to implement. So, these long planning timeframes might function as a constraint, limiting planners’ ability to respond quickly to new priorities or transformative visions.

However, interviewee 7 brought up a contrasting challenge: While the process was discussed as very long by most, the planning cycle was also seen as too short-term when considered in relation to ecological systems and natural values. In other words, planning seems to be working on timescales which do not align with the longer-term dynamics of environmental change. This institutional and temporal mismatch might constrain the implementation of degrowth-oriented approaches. Thus, the planners’ challenges can be seen as twofold: Firstly, they would need to work rapidly towards degrowth to address the ecological crisis and to stay within the planetary boundaries (see also Saitō, 2024; Sakschewski et al., 2025). Secondly, planning for ecological transformations requires thinking and planning more long-term than it is now (Wheeler, 2016).

7.3 Cognitive challenges

Besides structural and institutional challenges, the space for planners to work towards transformative change is also limited by cognitive challenges. This chapter will first examine the mindset of other actors and within planning as obstacles to implementing a degrowth transformation. Subsequently, the need to change mindsets and the difficulties for that will be presented.

7.3.1 *The mindset of other actors*

As was already alluded to before, interviewees anticipated opposition, or at least a lack of support, for the vision from various actors. Most interviewees did not explicitly phrase it in terms of mindset, but many of them described that actors’ goals and values would partially

conflict with the realisation of the vision. For example, they questioned the importance of sustainability and long-term thinking for other actors and criticised the citizens' thinking in terms of 'not in my backyard' (nimbyism⁴). In this sense, other actors' mindsets represent a direct obstacle to implementing the vision according to the interviewees. This is relevant because, as seen in the previous chapters, other actors hold a lot of power in the system.

However, participants did admit that the degree of opposition or support would vary within groups, like interviewee 1 describing different developers: "Some are very ideological and align completely in their thinking with this vision, others are more about speculative building now; we want to get as much money as possible". Furthermore, it is important to remember that other actors' opposition represents an assumption by the interviewees and does not necessarily reflect other stakeholders' actual attitude. Nevertheless, the anticipation of opposition can already represent a difficulty, as it restricts which options are even considered and discussed. For example, several interviewees affirmed that cars were still seen as the norm in their municipalities. They explained that the removal of parking lots and other measures restricting car accessibility were viewed negatively by citizens, business owners, and politicians, making it very hard to achieve or even discuss such measures. This can be seen as another illustration of cultural hegemony creating a sort of cognitive lock-in by making it difficult to envision anything different from the currently dominant norms (see also Gramsci, 1971), in this case, the car norm.

7.3.2 The mindset within planning

In line with the literature suggesting that the growth paradigm was also embedded within planning itself (see Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2022; Savini et al., 2022; Xue, 2022b), various statements by 11 interviewees indicated alignment with the currently dominant growth mindset. This became most clear during discussions about economic growth and GDP, which the vision suggested would be abolished by 2050. Instead, interviewee 13 argued that GDP should merely be supplemented with additional indicators, as economic growth constitutes a prerequisite for realising solutions suggested in the vision. Several other interviewees also stressed the importance of economic growth as an enabling factor for the

⁴ NIMBY = Not in my backyard: The concept is frequently used to describe opposition to various developments like waste disposal sites or wind parks by local actors (Hubbard, 2009). Some geographers criticise that the term is applied too broadly today to delegitimise any citizen mobilisation as self-interest and no longer reserved for mobilisations, which solely oppose the location and not the development as such (Hubbard, 2009).

welfare state and sustainability efforts. While few voiced it explicitly, several participants seemed hesitant about giving up GDP.

Another clear sign of the strength of the growth paradigm was the statements describing the abolition of GDP and realising the vision as going back to the 1800s (participant 9) or a cause of bankruptcies and debt (participant 13). These statements resonate with common critiques of degrowth being regressive and being similar to, or the same as, a recession (Schmelzer et al., 2022). Moreover, they also hint at a fear of ideas that contradict the dominant cultural values and norms as described by Gramsci (1971) in his conceptualisation of cultural hegemony. While most other interviewees did not voice such strong opposition to the vision, many interviewees did use the term ‘daring to’ in their discussion of the vision, which still implies that the vision was seen as threatening or scary.

The influence of the growth mindset was also visible in participants’ assumptions about citizens. Interviewees 9 and 13 suggested that people based their decisions on financial reasoning and strived to own a villa and a car. These statements connect to the neoliberal understanding of humans as self-interested, purely rational, and economically driven; in other words, the concept of *homo economicus* conceptualising human behaviour as a simple cost-benefit analysis (Kalter, 2015). Building on existing critiques of the concept, degrowthers describe *homo economicus* as an ideological construct within the growth ideology, which is too limited to explain human desires and behaviour (Schmelzer et al., 2022). This also connects to a different understanding within the degrowth literature of what a ‘good life’ means for people (see Hickel, 2021; Schmelzer et al., 2022). In this sense, interviewees’ assessment of the vision as unattractive for citizens can be interpreted critically as shaped by the growth mindset. According to the literature, this growth mindset within urban planning must be changed to contribute to a degrowth transformation (Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2022; Xue, 2022b).

Apart from the centrality of growth, another challenge for planners to contribute to a degrowth vision could lie in the conceptualisation of sustainability within municipalities. Interviewee 16 criticised how different departments worked with diverging understandings of sustainability. In their opinion, sometimes a limited interpretation of economic sustainability still dominated decision-making in their municipality. Several other interviewees talked about the need to balance the different dimensions of sustainability and referred to the SDGs. These statements align with the concept of weak sustainability, which dominates globally, according to Usubiaga-Liaño et al. (2026). The social, ecological, and economic dimensions are seen as

equally important within the weak understanding of sustainability, and losses in one of these three dimensions can be compensated with gains for another dimension (Levelt et al., 2026; Usubiaga-Liaño et al., 2026). A weak conceptualisation of sustainability can lead to an overly optimistic assessment of the current situation and restrict the room for discussing and implementing more transformative measures (Chakori et al., 2025; Usubiaga-Liaño et al., 2026), which could represent a barrier for implementing the vision. Furthermore, degrowth itself is conceptualised as a strong sustainability approach, while weak sustainability is associated with green growth (Chakori et al., 2025; Levelt et al., 2026). Strong sustainability postulates that social or economic capital cannot substitute nature, which is seen as the basis for society and well-being and as intrinsically valuable independent of humans (Chakori et al., 2025; Usubiaga-Liaño et al., 2026).

Degrowthers argue that the creation of the capitalist system centred around economic growth and the continued exploitation of nature depends on peoples disconnect from nature, which is seen as particularly acute in cities (Hickel, 2022; Kronenberg et al., 2024). In line with this, interviewee 7 lamented that citizens' knowledge of local species and nature was deteriorating, lowering people's awareness and concern about biodiversity loss. Indeed, based on the urban degrowth literature, the researchers had anticipated that one contribution of urban planning to a degrowth transformation could be the fostering of nature connectedness through efforts for more green areas and biodiversity within cities. Interviewees 7 and 16 discussed the importance of ecosystems and biodiversity, and various participants mentioned green areas and parks. Yet, nature connectedness, its potential impact, and how planners could contribute to it were not discussed in any interview. The concept was also not explicitly mentioned in the vision itself.

A third challenge to the realisation of a degrowth vision lies in the complexity of the current system and its challenges, causing a sense of powerlessness, as described by Boström & Lidskog (2024). Both the interviews and the literature illustrate that a multitude of actors are involved in planning and sustainability efforts (Boström & Lidskog, 2024; Williams, 2013). According to Boström & Lidskog (2024), this division of power in combination with the cognitive difficulty of grasping complexity can facilitate shifting the responsibility onto other stakeholders. This dynamic was reflected in a report⁵ mentioned by interviewee 9, which found that both politicians and administrators within the municipality thought that the other

⁵ It seems like this report has not (yet) been published.

actor held most of the power. The feeling of powerlessness and blaming others was also illustrated through various statements by interviewees themselves. For example, a few interviewees mentioned in various ways that they were not responsible for the transport sector, despite other interviewees noting that planners influence the well-functioning of public transportation by integrating land-use planning and ensuring accessibility (see also Trygg & Grundel, 2025). Similarly, interviewee 13 described that the climate adaptation aspects (CCA) in the vision were mainly the responsibility of the state or individual property owners, not of the municipality. However, participant 14, who worked exclusively with CCA within their municipality, highlighted that planners do have responsibility over parts of it. These findings can suggest that the feeling of powerlessness is not only individual, but also a structural outcome of complexity and fragmented structures, creating an obstacle for the planner's contribution to a transformation. Similarly, participant 4 identified a sense of hopelessness regarding the future among planners and other municipal actors as an obstacle to implementing large-scale projects, like the degrowth vision presented during the interview. This connects to Xue (2022b), who calls for urban planning to engage again with utopian thinking, to 'degrow' the practice of planning and contribute to a better future.

7.3.3 The need to change the mindset (within the administration)

Degrowth scholars' postulate that the growth paradigm, including in the context of urban planning, must be overcome for the implementation of degrowth (Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2022; Wächter, 2013; Xue, 2022b). This necessity for a change in mindset to realise the vision was also recognised by some of the interviewees. Firstly, interviewees criticised the thinking around the economic system. Secondly, they also identified, more specifically, the mindset within the administration as a challenge. For instance, interviewee 15 suggested that 'business-as-usual thinking' within the municipality inhibited the realisation of a deeper transformation. Additionally, interviewee 16 lamented that administrations fail to change, instead simply adding new elements to the existing processes and goals. Furthermore, several interviewees described a too narrow focus on the short-term and financial gains, neglecting broader benefits. For example, in the case of green areas, participants regretted that some actors only saw the costs and ignored the various benefits for citizens beyond the immediate vicinity of these areas. Interviewee 4 further criticised that constructions which were intended to exist for 50-100 years were supposed to pay off within 10-15 years.

7.3.4 Difficulties with changing the mindset

Both the interviews and the literature describe changing the mindset as very difficult (see Meadows, 1999). Various statements by interviewees showed that everything different from the current status quo was seen as unrealistic or even threatening. Interviewee 17, for example, felt that it was only normal that other political ambitions took precedence over ecological considerations - a statement degrowthers would disagree with (see e.g. Kronenberg et al., 2024). Talking about diverging mindsets within the administration, interviewee 15 claimed that “if you talk to someone who is a business strategist within the municipality, they would be terrified and think that this [referring to the vision] is something you obviously can't even talk about”. The quote illustrates the cultural hegemony of growth and how it hampers change by making it unthinkable to even speak about alternatives (Gramsci, 1971; Hickel, 2022). The difficulty of changing the mindset and realising the vision was also indirectly recognised by interviewee 9, assuming that the vision would be too far from the current norms to be attainable. Similarly, interviewee 15 stated that past projects in their city worked because they did not question technology or the economic system. In line with Gramsci's (1971) concept of cultural hegemony, all these statements collectively illustrate a sort of vicious cycle, where the strength of norms inhibits any discussions and projects questioning them, thereby further strengthening the perception of the existing norms as the only conceivable option.

Some interviewees also more or less explicitly stated that changing people's mindset and behaviour was challenging, mostly referring to citizens. To begin with, a few interviewees affirmed that humans were not changing despite their knowledge about sustainability, a phenomenon known as the knowledge-action gap in the literature (Abson et al., 2017; Colombo et al., 2023). In fact, several interviewees suggested that only a crisis, or at least more visible effects, would lead to people changing. Besides, interviewee 10 remarked that efforts targeting the mindset and behaviours were difficult to implement for municipalities. It is challenging to achieve impacts with such campaigns and attribute possible changes to the municipalities' work, which makes it hard to assess the efficiency of interventions (interviewee 10). This not only represents a practical challenge for changing the mindset but can itself be seen as an illustration of the current mindset geared towards maximum efficiency, which is criticised by degrowth (Krähmer, 2022; Wächter, 2013). Moreover, it relates to the institutional set-up (see 7.2) showing the interconnectedness of the various types of challenges.

8 Findings: Possibilities

The identified possibilities for urban planners to contribute to a degrowth transformation will be presented in topical sub-chapters. First, planners' openness to the vision will be explored. Then, current goals and efforts by other actors and planners will be discussed as steps towards the vision. Subsequently, planners' most significant possible contributions to a degrowth transformation will be explored in more detail. The chapter will conclude with an exploration of how change will occur according to the interviewees and the literature.

8.1 Planners' mindset: openness to the vision

The generally positive reaction to the vision represents the first identified possibility. If the interviewees had immediately rejected the vision, it would have been impossible to identify how urban planning could contribute to realising a degrowth transformation. In this sense, participants' openness is thus a prerequisite, but it does not represent an active contribution towards a degrowth transformation. Four interviewees explicitly voiced their openness to postgrowth as a concept, with interviewee 9 asking for sources to learn more about it during the interview. In most interviews, the concept of postgrowth was not discussed directly, but participants' favourable opinion was deduced from their answers. Certain statements clearly aligned with postgrowth thinking, insofar as they critiqued the current system and the focus on GDP growth (see Savini, 2024). Other comments were less strong and direct yet still suggested a decentralisation of hard economics. For example, interviewees 1 and 17 did not mention the economic dimension in their definition of sustainability, although the former did also refer to the SDGs, which include economic growth as goal number eight (Agenda 2030, 2015). Several other participants further wished for the economic sustainability factor to be expanded beyond monetary, short-term costs and benefits. Such a reduction of the importance of economics or a shift in its meaning could open up room for transformative projects aligned with degrowth, which are currently not realised because they do not generate quick economic returns.

In total, 11 interviewees showed some openness to postgrowth, with two of them remarking that they had started talking about the theory within their respective administrations. Being open to postgrowth and being aligned with the dominant growth mindset were not considered mutually exclusive. In fact, both characterisations were used for 11 interviewees. An openness to postgrowth was not conceptualised as a complete rejection of the current growth mindset, but rather a willingness to engage with critiques and alternatives thereof. This is captured by interviewee 3's remark:

We have lived in a society for a very long time now that is built on growth. It's what comes to mind and what everyone has long been, or not everyone has agreed on it either, but (...) it has indeed been a way that ... it has a system that has worked well for us in Sweden with growth historically. So, it feels like a very controversial standpoint, while it might be what we need to approach and come to.

The results may thus best be understood as a spectrum, where some interviewees adopted postgrowth thinking, some were aligned with the growth paradigm, and most were somewhere in between. Where interviewees stood on this spectrum influenced the possibilities the participants identified for contributing to the vision and shaped the researchers' perception of the planners' possible roles in a degrowth transformation. In particular, planners embracing postgrowth thinking were identified as so-called "[...] 'hybrid actors' who are members of an organisation belonging to the regime, but sympathetic with the proposals of the niche" (Diaz et al., 2013, p. 69). As such, in the vocabulary of the MLP, they are seen to act as connectors between the niche and the regime and can help scale-up innovation (Diaz et al., 2013), such as degrowth thinking and practices. Some interviewees explained that they were aware of and supported different grassroots initiatives, for example, through the creation of a coordinator for urban farming in the planning administration. While they were referring to sustainability efforts more generally and not necessarily a degrowth transformation, their accounts still illustrate that planners may indeed be able to act as hybrid actors and scale up grassroots initiatives.

8.2 Steps towards the vision: sustainability goals and efforts

8.2.1 *Ambition for sustainability*

While some interviewees had attested a shift away from sustainability (see 7.2.1 and 7.2.2), others affirmed that its importance was in fact increasing. The seemingly contradictory observations appear to be linked to interviewees looking at different dimensions of the topic. A shift away from sustainability was mainly observed on the national level, while the shift towards it mainly referred to the municipal level. On a temporal scale, a lack of focus on sustainability was described for recent years, with (military) preparedness taking centre-stage, while an overall increasing attention to sustainability was seen over the last decades. Lastly, some of the interviewees attesting to an increased attention were referring to CCA or specific

aspects thereof, like flood management. The planners connected this to an increasing visibility of the impacts of climate change and the overall effort towards preparedness.

Overall, the interviews made it clear that, according to most participants, the level of ambition for sustainability within the municipalities was high. In fact, the discussion of ongoing sustainability efforts (see 8.2.2) took up a lot of space in many interviews. Several participants further talked about the enshrinement of sustainability goals in international agreements, laws, and municipal programmes. Even though these goals, unfortunately, were not yet achieved (see also 7.2.2 and 8.2.1) some interviewees still thought goals were helpful for ensuring that progress was being made.

A high ambition for sustainability, attested by most interviewees to politicians, seemed particularly important, as politicians hold a lot of power in planning (see 7.2.3). While ambition for sustainability should not be equated with an ambition or even openness to degrowth, it may be seen as a prerequisite for planners to work towards a degrowth transformation. A few interviewees also indirectly suggested that at least some politicians may support the vision, such as participant 13, arguing that left-wing parties have long been advocating for parts of it. However, interviewee 12 remarked that politicians talked a lot about sustainability yet did not always act accordingly. While this may initially appear to hinder a degrowth transformation, it can also be interpreted more positively. The findings suggest that sustainability has become an issue that politicians are expected to address, indicating that it has gained broader importance. This is also indicated by a study, who found that political parties throughout Europe made promises about sustainability during electoral campaigns, but later did not invest a proportional amount of money in respective projects (Siriteanu, 2026). In the language of the MLP (see Geels & Schot, 2007), sustainability may thus be seen as a cultural norm within the landscape level. As such, it could contribute to a destabilisation of the capitalistic growth regime, providing an opening for transformative change. This interpretation of sustainability as a factor on the landscape level is supported by interviewee 15's statement that municipalities must work with sustainability to be considered leaders, as well as by other comments implying that sustainability is an obvious and inevitable value within the administration.

8.2.2 Current efforts towards the realisation of the vision

One of the most surprising findings was that all but one interviewee affirmed that they, as planners or as the municipality more generally, were already working on the vision or parts thereof. 10 participants representing six municipalities explicitly said that existing goals or

plans, at least in parts, aligned with the vision. A few interviewees specified that this meant that planners had an assignment to work towards these parts of the vision. Another six interviewees described efforts, which in their opinion were congruent with the vision, that they as planners were taking. Examples mentioned by participants ranged from installing trash cans to avoid littering in nature reserves, to a coordinator for urban farming, and the conversion of streets into pedestrian zones or green meeting spaces. Interviewees' perception that they were already working towards the vision can be seen positively as a reaffirmation of their openness to the vision and to work for a more sustainable future.

However, some literature suggests that currently too many sustainability efforts remain focused on quick, easy fixes, which do not necessarily lead to the fundamental changes needed (Abson et al., 2017; Boström & Lidskog, 2024). Boström & Lidskog (2024) argue that specific solutions are necessary, but it should be evaluated critically whether they contribute to, or distract from, systemic change. This resonates with interviewee 16, who insisted on the importance of seeing the vision as a whole and warned about the risk of cherry-picking specific measures, without changing the overall way of working. Similarly, participant 6 perceived simple, quick fixes by other actors as potential distractions from the broader problems and solutions. At the same time, they recognised that the municipality could learn from faster, small-scale projects (participant 6). Consequently, ongoing efforts for sustainability were included as a possibility for a degrowth transformation, because they could act as a stepping stone for larger change (see also Boström & Lidskog, 2024).

Some of the projects mentioned by interviewees seemed to have the potential for fostering transformation. Maybe most prominently, interviewee 4 described an effort within their municipality to supplement GDP with climate calculations. While degrowth is much more complex and goes beyond a change of indicators used for measuring success and well-being (Savini, 2024), this seems significant insofar as it implies a change in the importance awarded to GDP. Thereby, it can serve as an indication for a shift in the underlying mindset, which is otherwise difficult to observe. Indeed, as discussed in the background (see 2.1.1), the critique of GDP is a core element of the larger postgrowth family (Savini, 2024). Interviewees 12 and 15 further mentioned circular construction and circular economy efforts within their respective municipalities. Circular economy is sometimes understood as a “(...) ‘watered down’ version of degrowth” (Kaika et al., 2023, p. 1203). Similar to the previous discussion on specific solutions, Kaika et al. (2023) argue that less radical versions of degrowth could either stabilise the capitalistic system or, on the contrary, pave the road for a degrowth transformation. The actual effects of efforts connected to the circular economy and

supplementing GDP cannot be predicted. Nevertheless, they are seen as a possibility because based on the interviews the knowledge and application of postgrowth and degrowth seem to be low in the participating municipalities, and the interaction with ‘watered-down versions’ could help raise awareness of degrowth and system critiques more generally.

8.2.3 *Support from other actors and collaborations*

While other actors were sometimes mentioned as obstacles to realising the vision (see 7.2.3) interviewees also pointed out positive examples. Besides politicians, who have been discussed already, participants mainly mentioned citizens and businesses. Regarding citizens, most interviewees seemed to consider that only a minority among citizens actively supported and demanded sustainability, while other interviewees pointed out a more general support for specific projects like urban farming or leisure banks. Since citizens were perceived as important both for influencing political priorities and for reducing resistance towards planning initiatives, public support was regarded as an important enabling factor for a broader transformation.

Businesses were frequently characterised as more flexible or quicker in their work than the administration itself. Several participants further affirmed that at least some businesses were ambitious with regard to sustainability, exceeding legal requirements or the performance of the public sector. Based on the MLP (see Geels & Schot, 2007), environmentally conscious citizens and ambitious businesses can be understood as actors who support innovations within the niche, which can enable larger-scale change by ultimately altering the existing regime. In fact, interviewees 6 and 15 acknowledged that projects by other fast-moving actors could inform and facilitate subsequent actions by the municipalities. Thereby, other stakeholders could pave the way for planners to enable a degrowth transformation.

Besides citizens, businesses, and politicians, interviewees also mentioned various organisations and associations working with sustainability, as well as the county and administrative board ensuring the respect of natural values. In short, participants affirmed that, at the very least, parts of many different actor groups cared about sustainability, with some of them being open to the vision or even working towards parts of it already. This is highly important, as Boström and Lidskog (2024) and the interviews showed that other actors held a lot of power for planning and sustainability transformations (see 7.2). Yet, the need for support by other actors goes beyond a question of power: As the challenges humanity faces today are multifaceted and complex, a multitude of actors, with different backgrounds, experiences, and tools, are required to understand and tackle them (Abson et al., 2017;

Boström & Lidskog, 2024; MacDonald et al., 2019). This resonates with interviewee 15's reflection that it is easier to get things done if more actors are involved. Collaboration thus seems essential for achieving a degrowth transformation, as no single actor holds all the power nor all the knowledge (Boström & Lidskog, 2024).

8.3 Planners' major potential contribution to a degrowth transformation

8.3.1 *Fostering collaboration*

Based on the interviews, urban planners seem to be in a particular position to enable and advance collaborations. Interviewee 9 described the formation of alliances as one form of power they held as planners. While others did not explicitly recognise it as such, all participants explained that they interacted and worked together with a variety of actors. Annex F includes a list of the actor's planners mentioned. A particular case of collaboration is citizen participation. Involving citizens was understood by some interviewees as a way to prevent opposition from their part, while others described it as important for making use of the knowledge they hold. Even though these statements did not necessarily relate to the vision, they nevertheless underscore the importance of support from other actors and of collaboration to achieve change.

Many participants explained different ways in which they tried to engage more citizens in planning. They mentioned, for example, the use of online surveys to gather the opinions of a larger part of the population, the targeting of specific groups like students or engaged 'neighbourhood mothers' acting as entry points to the larger community, and the relocation of meetings to informal settings like a bath to reduce hierarchies and hesitancy. These efforts are not only aligned with the vision's goal to increase participation and collaboration among citizens, but they also demonstrate that planners have the skills and tools to mobilise people and mediate dialogue among them. It can thus be concluded that, given their connection to various actors and their experience in collaboration, planners could advance a degrowth transformation by fostering collaboration, which both interviewees and the literature (see Bennet et al., 2025; Boström & Lidskog, 2024) describe as an important prerequisite for achieving transformative change.

8.3.2 *Planners' influence on space and norms*

One of the most important contributions of urban planning to a degrowth transformation, according to the literature, lies in the influence over the physical environment, which shapes behaviour and norms (Xue, 2022b). While they highlighted the limits to planners' power (see

7.1), the interviews also illustrated in which ways planning shapes space and infrastructure. Firstly, participants mentioned plans, which could include certain requirements, for example, regarding climate-proofing buildings. Interviewees further described plans as a basis for restricting or even entirely rejecting development projects, which private actors applied for at the municipality. According to the interviews, another tool for steering development is land allocations, with interviewee 16 specifying that different requirements may be set when selling land to someone. Furthermore, some participants described how they supported existing initiatives by helping them find or even provide suitable land or properties. With these different approaches and tools, planners could theoretically restrict projects that are unaligned with a degrowth vision and support those which align with it.

A few interviewees talked about how their work combined theory and practice, breaking down overarching goals and connecting them to specific places. This resonates with Kaika et al.'s (2023, p. 1195) idea that “the interaction with space and planning is required for degrowth to expand beyond academia and activism and become a relevant concept in practice”. Some interviewees also explicitly acknowledged how their influence over land can and partially is used to create the possibility for sustainable practices, and to make them attractive. The most discussed topic regarded sustainable mobility, which planners are able to support through planning developments close to public transport infrastructure and the creation of safe cycling and walking paths. According to many participants, those efforts could contribute to a change in behaviour, and some interviewees argued that this would ultimately lead to a change in norms, in other words enable challenging existing paradigms. Similarly, several interviewees talked about the creation of attractive meeting places to foster a sense of community, which is a cornerstone of degrowth (D’Alisa et al., 2015; Yücel & Durán-Díaz, 2025). Interviewee 11 even hoped that such efforts could lead to the emergence of new, community-led initiatives. These examples illustrate the interconnectedness of space and norms, which has already been discussed extensively in the chapter on structural challenges (see 7.1). They demonstrate that the interdependence can also be used to foster positive change and exemplify planners’ power. While interviewee 16 clearly stated that urban planning is “very important, I’d say. It sets the physical conditions for societal change”, many other interviewees did not recognise the important role they played for transformations, even as their own accounts exemplified it.

8.3.3 *Planners’ knowledge*

The knowledge planners hold and how they use it represents another key possibility for their contribution to a degrowth transformation. Interviewee 9 explicitly identified knowledge as a source of power for planners, which resonates with Foucault (1981), who emphasised the importance of knowledge for power as well as the idea of discursive power. Other interviewees were less explicit in their wording, yet many of them described their responsibility as pointing out the positive and negative consequences of developments. Participants saw their role in enabling politicians to take well-informed decisions and argued that goal conflicts should, and often were, settled based on knowledge and assessments - illustrating the power of knowledge. More pointedly, interviewee 12 suggested that planners needed to remind politicians of previously set goals and commitments that have already been politically adopted, while also making clear what consequences may follow if political decisions move away from those objectives. This aligns with Xue (2022b, p. 417), who argued that planners should point out “how alternative spatial solutions are likely to affect the possibilities of reaching the environmental and social justice goals” to advance degrowth. The argument rests on the observation that among the variety of adopted goals, some already align with degrowth, giving planners’ an opening to work towards a transformation (Xue, 2022b). It thereby circles back to the importance of sustainability goals as a prerequisite for planners to work towards a degrowth transformation (see 8.2.1).

According to interviewees, their communication of knowledge and presentation of data could indeed convince decision-makers of a certain course of action, with interviewee 12 affirming that in most cases, politicians would listen to their recommendations. However, the effectiveness of data differs depending on the topic, with knowledge being more easily dismissed for human behaviour than physical questions like wetlands and peat, according to interviewee 6.

A particular case of utilising and communicating knowledge described by interviewees regarded the framing of specific issues. A few interviewees recounted that sustainability efforts, including some ideas from the vision, could and sometimes already were framed as part of preparedness, which currently receives a lot of attention and funding. This is relevant for the realisation of a degrowth future in two interconnected ways: Firstly, interviewees identified several synergies between the vision and the current concern for preparedness, particularly in terms of striving for localisation and even self-sufficiency in the case of the islands (Gotland and Mörbylånga, Öland) in regard to essential goods and services like food or energy. Secondly, the example illustrates that planners have a certain leeway, and they can try to present issues in certain ways to appeal to decision-makers. Planners, who are aligned

with degrowth thinking, may be able to present degrowth ideas besides localisation by framing it accordingly.

The interviews showed that planners had vast experience with communicating sustainability and other complex topics to different audiences, mainly citizens and politicians, and that they are able to produce various kinds of sustainability assessments, including climate calculations. Through their generation and communication of knowledge, planners may be able to foster acceptance and support among a larger public. Furthermore, the interviews demonstrated that planners held a lot of knowledge concerning various dimensions of the vision, like insights into biodiversity, adaptation to climate change, and traffic management. This underscores that degrowth could benefit from working with and learning from practitioners like urban planners, as suggested by Kaika et al. (2023). Several interviewees affirmed that the knowledge required for the realisation of the vision already existed within the municipality. However, they admitted that it remained underutilised today and better communication and collaboration, including with citizens, would be required to make full use of it. It further seems necessary for planners to learn more about degrowth, as most interviewees held no or limited knowledge about the theory, and they can only frame ideas and pass on knowledge that they hold themselves. In fact, a few participants specifically stated that they hope to learn and talk more about postgrowth within the administration.

8.4 How change can occur (with planners)

One tool for change towards degrowth discussed in the literature and interviews was experiments. Interviewee 16 explained that presenting more controversial measures as a trial period - such as temporarily turning a street into a pedestrian zone - could also help build public acceptance. They noted that people often become more supportive once they experience the project firsthand, if they were against it initially. Moreover, interviewee 15 proposed placing objects like a bench or mini library in public, aiming to generate some buzz around them and simply letting things happen. Participant 6 further suggested that easy and fast solutions could open up room for more profound changes. These ideas align with the concept of the MLP, insofar as they conceptualise innovation within the niche as “seeds for systemic change” (Geels, 2011, p. 27). However, some interviewees did point out that the scaling-up of experiments within municipalities often failed, partly because of insufficient efforts to follow up and learn from past projects. On the positive side, participants appeared to have experience with experimentation, describing initiatives ranging from small-scale interventions, such as de-sealing parts of streets to plant trees, to larger sustainability projects

involving entire city districts, such as Augustenborg in Malmö. This resonates with degrowthers' observation that cities represent places for experimenting (Kaika et al., 2023; Savini, 2021) and could, in the language of the MLP, help to further develop degrowth as a niche innovation (Geels & Schot, 2007; Vandeventer et al., 2019).

According to the MLP, another tool for advancing niche innovations like degrowth consists of formulating visions (Geels, 2011), which was also mentioned as an idea for creating change by interviewees 1 and 6. Several participants recounted that they use visions or scenarios in their work. Some interviewees even perceived planning itself as a form of visioning and backcasting. Interviewee 9 described planning as creating an image of the future and interviewee 1 conceptualised the plans as the goal which planners work backwards from to connect it with present actions. Furthermore, various interviewees stressed the importance of goals for realising the vision. They argued that goals should be shared among stakeholders and formulated clearly to guide the work of actors across the municipality. This resonates with Geel's (2011, p. 28) argument that "expectations or visions [...] provide guidance to the innovation activities". Interviewees further explained that written goals would be helpful in subsequent negotiations about developments with other actors.

Interviewees and the literature (Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2022; Wächter, 2013; Xue, 2022b) agreed that for realising the vision, a mindset change would be needed. As discussed in a previous sub-chapter (see 8.3.2), planners can impact societal norms through their influence on space. Nine interviewees discussed the need for a different mindset among other actors, and eight interviewees also saw this need for municipalities or planners themselves. According to Meadows (1999), the mindset represents a deep leverage point, as the entire system is built on the fundamental assumptions; hence, altering them leads to profound changes. For urban spaces more specifically, Jaber et al. (2025) described systems thinking more generally as a possibility to identify the root causes of problems and foster transformative change. While several interviewees alluded to the concept, and interviewee 6 specifically mentioned systems thinking as a part of urban planning, none of the interviewees discussed it as a tool for transformation.

A few interviewees pointed out that starting the process of change was one of the most difficult steps. Interviewee 11 wondered, "It's hard to imagine how we'll go from this today. What is it that will break the development? So, what is it that will make... How do you think about it? When do we start to turn things around?". While this sub-chapter started with a discussion of theories about transformations and interviewees' ideas of what would be

required, it is not possible to know with any certainty what will ultimately lead to the break. As Becker (2023, p. 26) argues, one “critical aspect of great transformations is that nobody could anticipate them beforehand, while they appear entirely self-evident in hindsight”. Fundamental transformations have occurred in the past (Becker, 2023), and many scientists and activists agree that another transformation is needed today (see, for example, Boström & Lidskog, 2024; Durand et al., 2024; Klein, 2014; Rockström et al., 2009; Schmelzer et al., 2022). As Klein (2014, p. 48) put it:

Our economic system and our planetary system are now at war. Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity’s use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it’s not the laws of nature.

Her statement not only underscores the necessity of change, but it also alludes to the possibility of change. In this sense, it resonates with interviewees’ comments that if there was the will to change and the right measures were taken, the vision could be realised. In other words, despite all the challenges identified in the previous chapter and the difficulty of imagining a completely different society, there exists possibilities for planners to work towards the vision.

9 Conclusion

This research has aimed to contribute to the limited and emerging literature on degrowth and urban planning by exploring the challenges and possibilities for urban planners within Swedish municipalities to contribute to a degrowth transformation. The findings highlight that urban planners have some possibilities for working towards a degrowth transformation, but their role is partial, constrained, and context dependent. Planners' operating space for transformative change is limited by the embeddedness of growth in societal structures, governance institutions, and the mindset. The major possibilities for planners to contribute to a degrowth transformation consist of (1) their influence on the physical space, (2) fostering collaboration, and (3) their knowledge and skills.

The first identified obstacles are rooted in broader structures rather than in individual planners' choices alone. Planning takes place within systems shaped by capitalism, growth dependency and competition, where municipalities remain financially dependent on economic growth. In addition, degrowth-oriented changes were illustrated as constrained by existing spatial arrangements, expectations of continued exploitation of urban development, as well as technical and infrastructural barriers for feasible changes to the built environment. However, the interviews also demonstrated that planners have some influence over space, including through tools like plans and land allocations. This, in turn, could help tackle the lock-in while impacting people's behaviour, the sense of community, and even societal norms. For example, various participants described how planning for better biking and walking infrastructure could motivate people to commute differently and shift the norms around mobility.

Urban planners' possibilities were also seen to be influenced by the state structures, municipal institutions, and the planning process itself. This was highlighted by shifting political priorities, conflicting goals, powerful external actors and institutional constraints that limit planners' agency and create tensions with degrowth objectives. In particular, planners' dependency on politicians and private developers seemed to restrict their possibility to act independently for a degrowth transition. On the contrary, other actors being supportive of sustainability projects and the high level of sustainability ambition within municipalities were seen as enabling factors for planners to work towards transformative change. Given the complexity of the system and the crisis it faces, collaboration was identified as essential for realising a transformation. Planners were considered to be in a good position to foster

collaboration due to their connection to various actors and their experience in enabling citizen participation.

Further challenges for planners regarded cognitive and normative aspects, including resistance from other actors, growth-oriented thinking within planning, the dominance of the weak sustainability approach within municipalities, and a sense of powerlessness in the face of complex systems. A broader shift in norms and mindset was seen as necessary for a degrowth transition. While planners could influence norms by changing the built space, their power was demonstrated to be limited and achieving a mindset change is overall considered very difficult. The hegemony of growth seemed to make it difficult to envision a radically different future. Nevertheless, most participants appeared open to postgrowth, and some clearly aligned with it in their reasoning.

To act towards degrowth, knowledge was identified as an essential power that planners held. Not only do planners appear to possess and produce knowledge that is important to the implementation of the vision, but the interviews also showed their experience in communicating it to other stakeholders, like politicians and citizens. Through their assessments and framing strategies, planners may be able to increase the legitimacy and acceptability of degrowth-related ideas.

Taken together, the findings showed that planning is embedded in the current growth-oriented system. Due to their role as civil servants, it seems unlikely for planners themselves to initiate fundamental changes. While planners operating space for transformative change is limited, they still seem to have some leeway, particularly in presenting concepts like degrowth. They can further amplify change, which emerges from the grassroots level or comes from the top.

This thesis contributed to the limited and emerging literature on degrowth and urban planning, but many questions remain. Transformations are complex, and it is unclear what will ultimately trigger the change process. While this paper suggested that planners may not be the main actors, especially not for starting the process, more research is needed to explore what exactly their role could be. Furthermore, future research should investigate interactions between planners and other stakeholders by including them in the research process to better understand how they could collectively act towards degrowth. At the same time, degrowthers need to further ‘spatialise degrowth’, developing a clearer connection between the concept and the physical environment and elaborating the concrete solutions. By engaging more in these topics, we might get closer to achieving the transformative change needed to stay within the planetary boundaries.

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11 Annex

Annex A. Participant distribution between municipalities

Gotland	3
Göteborg	4
Helsingborg	2
Lund	1
Malmö	2
Mörbylånga	2
Uppsala	1
Östersund	2

Annex B. Participants' numbers and their role

Number	Role
1	Comprehensive planner
2	Comprehensive planner
3	Comprehensive planner
4	Comprehensive planner
5	Comprehensive planner
6	Comprehensive planner
7	Ecologist
8	Planning architect
9	Planning architect
10	Planning architect
11	Planning strategist
12	Planning strategist
13	Planning strategist
14	Strategic climate adaptation planner
15	Strategic environmental planner
16	Strategic environmental planner
17	Strategic sustainability planner

Annex C. Consent form

Information till forskningspersoner

Vi vill fråga dig om du vill delta i ett forskningsprojekt. I det här dokumentet får du information om projektet och om vad det innebär att delta.

Vad är det för ett projekt och varför vill vi att du ska delta?

Projektet syftar till att undersöka hur kommunala samhällsplanerare tänker att deras arbete kan bidra till hållbarhet. Vidare kommer studien undersöka post-growth-tänkande inom stadsplanering, med särskilt fokus på hur beslut fattas. Syftet är att bättre förstå vilka ramar, antaganden och förutsättningar som i dag präglar det kommunala planeringsarbetet samt var det kan finnas utrymme att tänka och arbeta annorlunda.

Forskningsansvarig för projektet är Agnes Jönsson Roseen och Laura Eberhöfer.

Hur går projektet till?

En intervju kommer att göras mellan 1–1,5 timme på teams eller i person utifrån överenskommelse med deltagaren.

Vad händer med dina uppgifter?

Projektet kommer att samla in och registrera information. Intervjuerna kommer att spelas in men enbart att sparas på forskarnas datorer och en extern hårddisk. Intervjuerna kommer att transkriberas och analyseras med hjälp av ett transkriberings- och kodningssystem godkänt av Lunds universitet.

Ditt namn kommer att anonymiseras men arbetsrollen och kommunen kommer att specificeras. Om direkta citat kommer att användas i uppsatsen kommer du att få en förfrågan om godkännande.

Dina svar kommer att behandlas så att inte obehöriga kan ta del av dem.

Deltagandet är frivilligt

Ditt deltagande är frivilligt och du kan när som helst välja att avbryta deltagandet under intervjun. Om du väljer att inte delta eller vill avbryta ditt deltagande behöver du inte uppge varför.

Ansvariga för projektet

Ansvarig för projektet är Agnes Jönsson Roseen och Laura Eberhöfer [email and number were included in the original version]

Samtycke till att delta i projektet

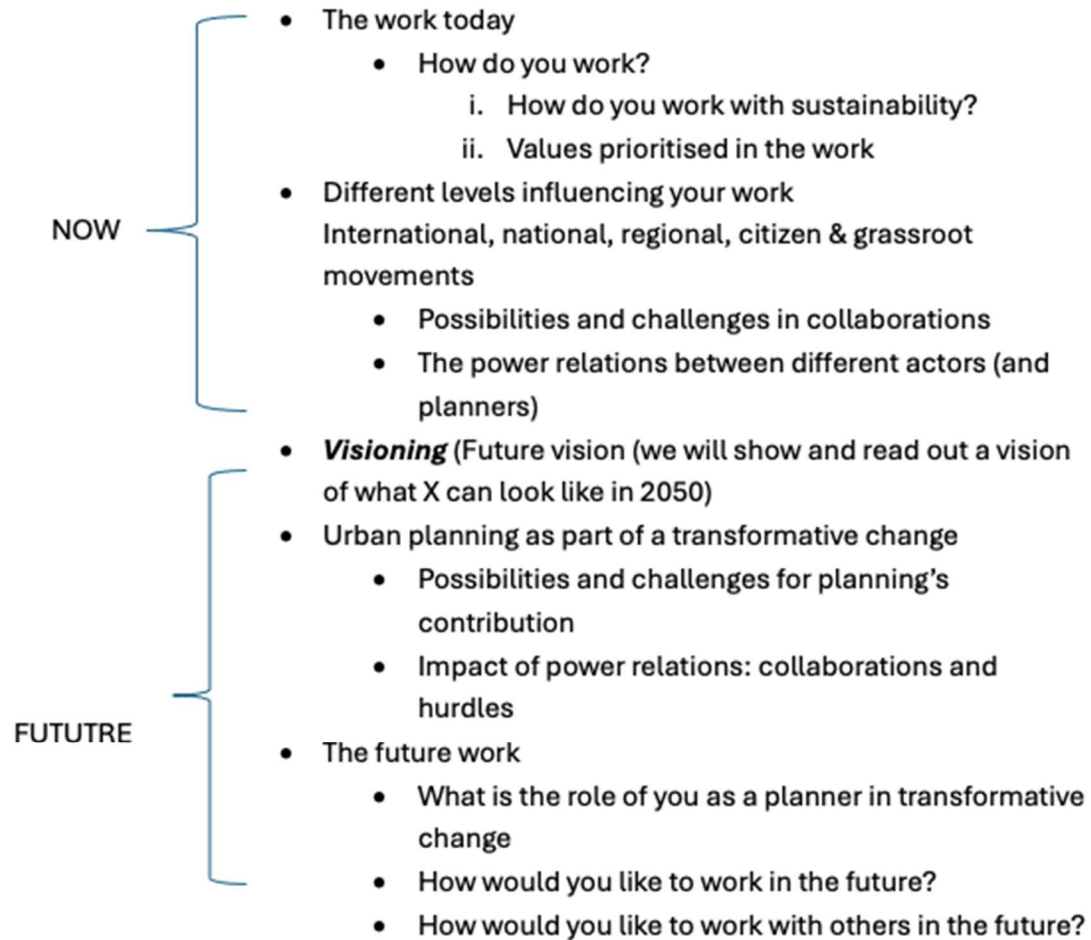
Jag har fått muntlig och/eller skriftlig information om studien och har haft möjlighet att ställa frågor. Jag får behålla den skriftliga informationen.

- Jag samtycker till att delta i projektet Urban Planning for Post-Growth in Swedish Municipalities.
- Jag samtycker till att min intervju får sparas för framtida forskningsprojekt av projektansvariga.

Plats och datum	Underskrift
	Namnförtydligande

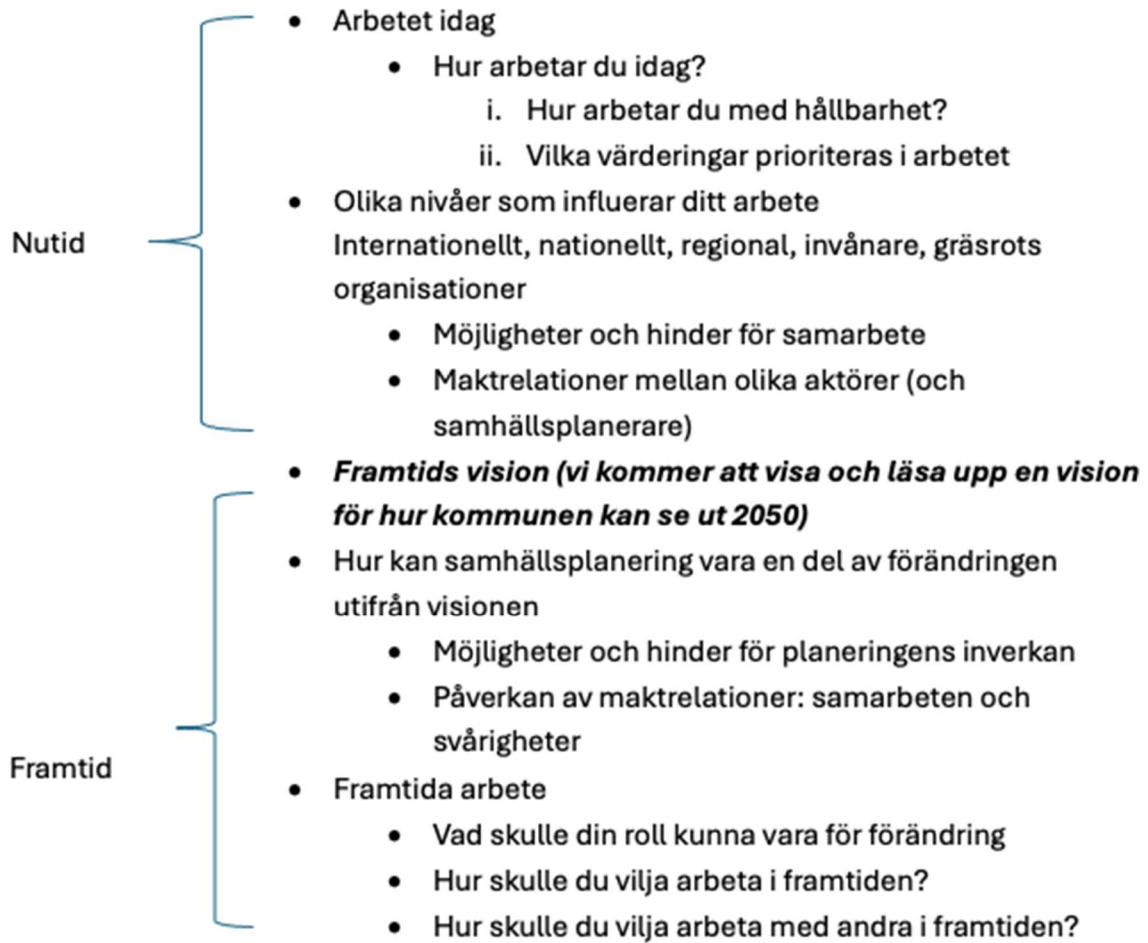
Annex D.1 Interview guide (ENG)

Interview guide



Annex D.2 Interview guide (SWE)

Intervjuguide



Annex E.1 Vision (ENG)

It is 2050, Malmö has managed to become climate-neutral, but it is also prepared for dealing with the consequences of climate change, which could no longer be avoided. The city no longer measures success in terms of economic growth (GDP), but through indicators of ecological integrity, social equality, and collective well-being. Resource use has declined significantly compared to 2020. This is the result of a conscious reduction in material throughput and energy demand, rather than a reliance on technical solutions. Thereby Malmö today can provide a safe home for its diverse population and nature.

The city consists of a multitude of neighbourhoods, all of which provide diverse spaces and services within. Neighbourhoods like Värnhem, Kirseberg, Rosengård, Möllevången, offer most things residents need locally and hold more power to self-organise. Mixed land-use has reduced distances between housing, working, essential services and nature and makes more efficient use of space. Thereby urban sprawl could be avoided and the need for people to travel by car reduced.

More areas have been transformed into pedestrian zones, leading to most people walking or using their bikes to get around. Parts of old multi-lane roads have been desealed to plant trees, vegetables and flowers, providing food for humans and animals alike. The remaining lanes are used for free public transport and all other essential motorised vehicles. When repairs of the roads become necessary, materials like porous asphalt or permeable paving are used. In combination, these measures lower the temperatures in proximity to roads and provide better drainage, reducing the risk of floods.

There are no longer any empty buildings. Over the years, many existing houses had been refurbished, avoiding demolitions. In the process, old windows and doors were re-used and combined with innovative materials and technologies for a lower ecological footprint. New houses are built with a mix of recycled materials and natural, plant-based ones like wood, straw and seaweed from Sweden or nearby countries. All houses are well insulated, which provides a high standard of living even during extreme cold and heat waves. The good insulation reduces the need for heating and cooling, which saves energy and resources. In areas with district heating, this means that less fuel needs to be used in heat production, and in electrically heated houses, electricity consumption is reduced. Most of the buildings include green elements on their roofs or the facades.

Many houses are owned by cooperatives, made up by their residents. There exist different models of sharing the space among all inhabitants, which represent a mix from students to elderly people with different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Besides kollektivhus, other forms of co-living have developed and spread through Malmö. Individual buildings host businesses and services like kindergartens and health clinics on the ground floor and living quarters above. The ongoing transformation process of the city, as well as the resulting new structures created new employment opportunities. Consequently, most people work locally, for example in restaurants, small-scale agriculture or the repurposing industry. Everyone's working hours have decreased, giving residents more time for other activities. More generally speaking, the economy has been localised and downscaled.

Numerous spaces for meeting exist without the need to consume. Various urban gardening projects and open kitchens managed by the community provide organic food for residents. Every neighbourhood has a park inspired by folkets park and Davidshallstorg, as well as rooms spread throughout the neighbourhood for playing, crafts, working out and meeting others. From these interactions new opportunities for mutual help arise. Objects from sport equipment to toolboxes are shared through fritidsbanken, libraries and more informal means. Residents are also more involved in planning, being well-informed about upcoming projects and participation opportunities. More people are now involved and have the opportunity to express their opinion in various ways.

Annex E.2 Vision (SWE)

Året är 2050, Malmö har lyckats bli klimatneutralt men är samtidigt beredd på att hantera olika konsekvenser av klimatförändringarna som var omöjliga att undvika. Staden mäter inte längre framgång i termer av ekonomisk tillväxt (BNP), utan genom indikatorer på ekologisk mångfald och hållbarhet, social jämlikhet och kollektivt välbefinnande. Resursanvändningen i Malmö har minskat avsevärt jämfört med 2020 för att de arbetade medvetet med att minska materialförbrukningen och energibehovet i staden istället för att förlita sig på tekniska lösningar. Därför kan Malmö idag erbjuda ett tryggt hem för sin mångfaldiga befolkning och natur.

Staden består av en mängd olika stadsdelar, som alla erbjuder mångsidiga platser och tjänster. Stadsdelar som Värnhem, Kirseberg, Rosengård och Möllevången erbjuder det mesta som invånarna behöver lokalt och har större möjlighet att organisera sig själva.

Blandad markanvändning har minskat avstånden mellan bostäder, arbetsplatser, viktiga tjänster och naturen vilket gör att utrymmet utnyttjas mer effektivt. Därmed har man kunnat undvika utglesning (urban sprawl) och minskat behovet av att resa med bil.

Fler områden har omvandlats till gågator, vilket har lett till att de flesta människor går eller cyklar för att ta sig runt i staden. Delar av gamla flerfiliga vägar har asfalterats bort för att plantera träd, växter och blommor, vilket ger mat åt både människor och djur. De återstående filerna ges plats för gratis kollektivtrafik och alla andra nödvändiga fordon. När vägarna behöver repareras används material som porös/dränerande/öppen asfalt eller genomsläpplig markbeläggning. Tillsammans sänker dessa åtgärder temperaturen i närheten av vägarna och ger bättre dränering, vilket minskar risken för översvämningar.

Det finns inte längre några tomma byggnader i Malmö stad. Under årens lopp har många befintliga hus renoverats, vilket har gjort att rivningar har kunnat undvikas. I samband med detta har till exempel gamla fönster och dörrar återanvänts och kombinerats med innovativa material och tekniker för att minska det ekologiska fotavtrycket. Nya hus byggs med en blandning av återvunna material och naturliga, växtbaserade material som trä, halm och tång från Sverige eller närliggande länder. Alla hus är välisolerade, vilket ger en hög levnadsstandard även under extrema kyla- och värmeböljor. Den goda isoleringen minskar behovet av uppvärmning och kylning, vilket sparar energi och resurser. I områden med fjärrvärme innebär det att mindre bränsle behöver användas i värmeproduktionen, och i elvärmda hus minskar elförbrukningen. De flesta byggnaderna har också gröna element på taket eller fasaden.

Många hus ägs av kooperativ som består av invånare i området. Det finns olika modeller för att dela utrymmet mellan alla invånare, som representerar en blandning av studenter och äldre med olika socioekonomiska och kulturella bakgrunder. Förutom kollektivhus har andra former av kollektivt boende utvecklats och spridit sig i Malmö. Enskilda byggnader rymmer företag och tjänster som förskolor och vårdcentraler på bottenvåningen och bostäder ovanför. Den pågående omvandlingsprocessen i staden, liksom de nya strukturer som skapats, har skapat nya sysselsättningsmöjligheter. På grund av detta arbetar de flesta lokalt, till exempel på restauranger, inom småskaligt jordbruk eller återvinningsindustrin. Allas arbetstid har minskat, vilket ger invånarna mer tid för andra aktiviteter. Mer generellt sett har ekonomin lokaliserats och skalats ned.

Det finns många mötesplatser i staden utan krav på konsumtion. Olika stadsodlingsprojekt och öppna kök som sköts lokalt i områdena förser invånarna med ekologisk mat. Varje stadsdel har en park inspirerad av folkparker, samt lokaler som bygdegårdar och medborgarhus spridda över stadsdelen för lek, hantverk, träning och möten. Ur dessa interaktioner uppstår nya möjligheter till ömsesidig hjälp. Föremål från sportutrustning till verktygslådor delas via fritidsbanker, bibliotek och mer informella platser. Invånarna är också mer delaktiga i planeringen och är väl informerade om kommande projekt och möjligheter till deltagande. Fler människor är nu involverade och har möjlighet att uttrycka sin åsikt på olika sätt.

Annex F. List of actors mentioned by urban planners

- National level and governmental agencies
 - o National government
 - o National Board of Housing, Building and Planning
 - o Swedish Transport Administration
 - o Geological Survey of Sweden
 - o Swedish Civil Defence and Resilience Agency
 - o County administrative board
- Region including different committees
- Courts including Land and Environment Court
- Health care services
- Public transport providers
- Energy providers & energy centre
- Municipal companies
- Universities
- Schools
- Parishes
- Military
- Business & business associations
- Developers
- Architects including construction and landscape architects
- Consultants
- Landowners
- Property owners
- Associations and NGOs
- Interest organisations
- UNESCO
- OECD
- Artists & cultural actors
- Citizen
- Politicians

The list does not include actors within the municipal administration.