The Role of Public Transport in Society—A Case Study of General Policy Documents in Sweden

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to study how local governments in Sweden view the role of public transport in society, and to investigate how public transport is used in a strategic capacity. By studying general policy documents, the ambition is to gain a wider understanding of the role of public transport based on the societal context it is situated in. Documents from 15 regions and 27 municipalities have been analysed by a qualitative content analysis. Results show that public transport is regarded as an important factor towards achieving other goals and other public values, particularly those related to economic and environmental issues; and that the social dimension is not as prioritised. Rail-bound public transport is often advocated, as are collaboration between organizations and integrated land-use and transport planning. However, the studied documents showed large overall differences in how counties and municipalities address public transport issues. It should be a priority in Sweden's main steering documents to treat public transport consistently and give it the same priority as other societal functions—not least because Sweden's treatment of public transport is a reasonable reflection of its overall society and can influence prioritisations and considerations in counties and municipalities across the country.

Keywords: sustainability; public values; benefits; impacts; qualitative content analysis; local governments; strategy capacities

1. Introduction

Strong forces at the local and regional government levels argue for the importance of good living conditions in terms of economic well-being and beneficial business conditions. Citizens expect acceptable income levels and good local services—a combination that is often referred to as "welfare". Local and regional politicians are expected to ensure that people have a good life at home and at work, and one in which conditions continue to develop; that is, a life in which there is some kind of growth. Local and regional municipality growth is basically about developing welfare. In practice, growth is often synonymous with local economic growth, which is seen as essential for improving community welfare [1]. The aim of economic development is to stimulate the development of society and create viable communities where people can live, work and have a good life. In Sweden, the public transport service should be an important factor towards increased welfare, not least because it is both subsidized and publicly controlled [2]. One of the most important welfare effects of a well-functioning public transport system is considered to be the creation of a fair and publicly accessible transport system [3].

Sustainability issues are a crucial component in growth and development. Sustainability practices in public sector organizations have been a focus of academic attention for some time [4]. Sustainability issues are considered to be increasingly important and a foundation for decisions in a number of

different areas [5], such as transport-related issues and public transport. In Sweden, for example, national transport policy objectives are mainly focused on a long-term sustainable transport system [6], related to a number of challenges. Givoni et al. [7] (p. 10) describe the situation as follows:

> There is clearly a new agenda for transport policy. In the face of anthropogenic climate change and rising emissions from transport; peak oil uncertainty and oil prices variability; urban sprawl, car dependency and the associated sedentary life style; and the long-standing concern with accessibility and safety, current transport policy efforts must address and account for numerous challenges.

Transport system challenges can be economic, environmental or social in character [7].

Within the last decades, society has witnessed a fundamental change, as urbanization progresses faster than ever before [8,9]. The global number of people living in urban areas (54 per cent in 2014) exceeds the number of people living in rural areas, and urbanization is expected to continue in coming decades [9]. Consequently, urban areas often face significant transport and mobility challenges, at the same time as the environmental, economic and social footprints of the urban transportation sector expand. Many of today's challenges with fossil fuel dependency, global warming, poverty and social exclusion are highly relevant for the transport sector [10]. The transport sector is responsible for a quarter of global energy-related greenhouse gas emissions, and shows an increase in emissions that is faster than that of any other sector [11]. In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in the concept of transport disadvantage as well and its possible consequences—such as the social exclusion of low-income groups and communities [12]—and in the transport-based barriers that contribute to social injustices—especially along the lines of race and class [13]. These are sometimes referred to as "transport poverty" [14]. Since large challenges involve congestion, pollution and accessibility for all to central nodes [8,15], the role of public transport in society is obvious. Public transport presents several benefits: environmental sustainability and the reduction of fossil fuel usage; the building of a strong economy by transporting people to and from work; the maintenance and creation of jobs; congestion prevention; and the provision of access for all ages (e.g., [16]). Veeneman and van de Velde [17] discuss public values of public transport. According to the authors "a public value is a value government decide to try to safeguard following a public demand and within the self definition of the governments role" (p. 3). Values are less specific than goals. Public values of public transport is accordingly quite stable over time, yet priorities of certain values can shift. In tougher times for example, economic growth often is the primary priority, while in more stable times the focus tends to be on more social issues such as quality of life [17].

There is an extensive field of research showing the importance of public transport from a sustainable perspective and to the different dimensions of sustainability—not least the ecological and economical dimension. The interest for the social sustainability has increased as well, from foremost being dominated by ecological and economical perspectives since the late 1980s. Within the area of transport policy, for example, the social dimension now constitutes an important challenge all over the world [18], even though it still needs further simile [19]. Social impacts are, however, often hard to measure and quantify, not least since there is no single definition of social sustainability [19,20]. Social sustainability concerns places where people want to live and work, both today and in the future, and is closely related to well-being [20].

Research has shown that the impacts and the benefits of public transport are several. According to a recent research review on co-benefits of mass public transportation, several studies were shown to focus on environmental benefits related to emissions and air pollution. These were both in the form of reduced emissions by a modal shift to public transport from the car, and in the form of transformation to alternative fuel for buses and climate change mitigation. Other benefits were related to a decreased number of traffic injuries (since a well-developed public transport system can help to reduce the number of vehicles on the road) and health benefits (such as increased physical activity since people with good access to public transport tend to walk more) [21].

Other studies suggest how proximity to public transport can have impacts on land-use and land values with higher housing prices and higher density around bus stops and stations (e.g., [22–25]).

From a social perspective, the Social Exclusion Unit in Great Britain, for example, published a report [26] that has been meaningful for highlighting transport and social exclusion, and for developing methods for analysing the accessibility of different groups in society [12]. The report points out how transport related challenges can "contribute to social exclusion by preventing people from participating in work or learning and from accessing healthcare, food shopping and other local activities" [27] (p. 5). Findings from recent research studies support this statement by highlighting the importance of serving peripheral (and more isolated and deprived) areas with public transport, which has been shown to have a reducing effect on social fragmentation and social exclusion (i.e., [28–30]).

Thus, the central questions affecting many municipalities and regions deal with economic, social and environmental sustainability. However, working with sustainability issues in the local government context is a difficult and complex task, especially in growing cities. In the case of public transport, it is increasingly important to deal with the challenges caused by denser urban areas and greater mobility volumes. At the same time, financial resources are scarce, creating a strong focus on business conditions and economic growth. Public transport is crucially important to create mobility, as well as to promote beneficial conditions to increase business profits and provide employment to citizens [16]. In other words, there are various demands on the public transport facilities and these are expected to bring many impacts and benefits to society. However, regardless of how great these ideas may be, they still have to come into effect at the local level affecting the local conditions. Political forums at the local level have to take decisions and make priorities where issues of transport and sustainability need to be balanced with other interests and community needs.

It has also been suggested that sustainability can be considered as a guiding principle in public management [4] or as a conceptual focus for public administration [31]. Sustainability initiatives and studies have long focused on cities and urban areas, with studies of American cities finding that "local sustainability is tied to local governments' need to deal with environmental pressures and the characteristics of local governance" [4] (p. 841). Similarly, Nilsson et al. [32] find that national initiatives regarding climate change-related policy implementation are weak compared with local-level activities. Therefore, from a sustainability viewpoint, it is crucial to approach public transport as an important component of a viable local government strategy for developing the local community as a whole. For a local public organization, successes are defined externally and in terms of the extent to which they serve general public purposes, such as welfare. A high degree of success is based on the ability to interact with different stakeholders and meet their different criteria for satisfaction [33]. It is a challenge for local government organizations to balance different stakeholders' views, especially in times when both financial resources and peoples' trust are lacking. An important key to success for a public organization is to identify and build strategic capacities to create value in the different activities of the organization—either within a service, or through a combination in which one service supports value creation in another service [4,33]. The building-capacity approach is based on the idea that an organization needs a certain level of institutional capacity in order to be able to carry out its responsibilities. An organization's capacity is connected to its ability to set goals, acquire necessary resources and adjust its internal configuration so that all parts of the organization are a good fit for citizens' expectations.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to study how local governments in Sweden view the role of public transport, and to investigate how public transport is described as a strategic capacity for creating success by fulfilling the public purpose. By studying general policy documents, the ambition is to gain a deeper understanding of the role of public transport, based on societal context. The documents reveal how local political forms value the benefits of public transport in relation to other societal needs such as healthcare, education, culture, road infrastructure, energy supply and many more. Indirectly, these statements set the frames for priority in the local context and allocation of resources, financial and physical, to public transport. By answering these questions, this paper contributes an empirical analysis of local governments' ambitions to create and use public transport as a basis for strategic capacities for success.

The Role of Public Transport and the Importance of Political Visions for Strategy Development

By studying policy documents, which contain the visions and priorities of leading policymakers, this paper describes the role of public transport in counties and municipalities in Sweden and investigates how public transport is described as a strategic capacity for fulfilling the public purpose. Public transport should not be viewed as a single element; rather, it is situated within a societal context. Often regarded as essential for other public interests such as housing and working issues, public transport can be closely related to the everyday lives of many citizens [16,34]. Integrated public transport provision and coordinated land-use and transport planning are important from a sustainability perspective [8,35]. From a top-down approach, we argue that it is important to clearly pronounce the role of public transport early on in the development of hierarchal organizations. Therefore, in order for the significance of a specific service (such as public transport) to be understood, we argue that the role of the service at the local government level should begin with an understanding of how local conditions are interpreted and transformed into local political ambitions and priorities. We see these ambitions and priorities as the starting point for the execution of the service, and we consider that they set the conditions for the development of resources into capacities for long-term successful activities and a sustainable provision of welfare services.

However, good organizational performance is evaluated in different ways in different contexts. In private firms, for example, good performance is often a matter of profits and long-term return on investment. In public organizations, on the other hand, the situation is somewhat different: societal interests are generally expected to be in the foreground, and are often seen from a political viewpoint [36]. The implication is that the objective of a public organization is more ambiguous, and different stakeholders expect different output/outcome [37]. Nonetheless, public organizations act in competitive environments, as the resources for funding are scarce and trust from citizens is crucial. Even in the public sector, we have seen the use of a strategic approach to communicate the ambitions and performance of an organization [38,39]. Minimizing costs and maximizing performance (in terms of service delivery) appear to be two general overall objectives in public sector activities [40].

In the last decade or so, public sector strategy has been vitalized by the resource-based view (RBV) of strategy, which focuses on an organization's internal resources and capabilities as a source for success [4,33,41]. The idea is that imbalances in the possession of resources and capabilities among organizations explain differences in performance over time despite the same market conditions, and therefore become a determining factor of organization success. When an organization is conceived as a set of resources, an internal analysis of the organization's idiosyncratic resources can explain its ability to perform.

However, it is not enough to simply have access to valuable resources. In this context, the organization's ability to use these resources is critical—that is, its ability to deploy and combine resources in an effective way [36,42]. Important resources do not emerge by themselves out of nowhere. Rather, they arise from specific local conditions, as a result of a combination of particular needs and accessibility of particular resources. Conscious decisions made and actions taken by local government officials affect the consumption of resources and the services these resources can give to inhabitants. Organizations can also develop capabilities [36] or capacities [4] from resources by deploying or combining resources in an efficient way in order to achieve a desired outcome. An organization's collective ability to learn to combine resources is therefore the basis of its capacity to develop good performance. In order to understand why some local governments perform well, it is important to capture these organizations' ability to use strategic capacities.

The RBV approach enables organizations to develop these capacities by highlighting the need to develop political support, financial resources and managerial execution in building organizational capacity for successful policy implementation [4]. Capabilities are cumulative and develop over time, and different types of capabilities—including economic, social and environmental—mutually reinforce each other [43]. Backman et al. [41] discuss how resource analysis can be used and how it can provide public policy recommendations on specific issues, such as the mitigation of climate change footprints. One of their main conclusions is the importance of establishing a common vision as

a way to organize the focus and attention of other actors towards the common goal. The importance of initial political support is emphasized as necessary for successful and stable relations and support from various stakeholders.

At the local government level, the political support is formulated in terms of plans [39] and political visions that are based on local conditions and that describe priorities and desired policy outcomes in line with historical decisions and prevailing conditions. The political vision directs priorities and determines what activities to focus on [44], and is based on local conditions [45]. Knutsson et al. [45] show how a formulated political vision is the basis for strategy development—that is, the use of resources and building capacities—within a local-level public organization. Against this background, our ambition is to analyse policy documents that contain visions and priorities from leading policymakers, in order to gain a wider picture of the role of public transport from a societal context.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Public Transport in Sweden

National objectives and local-level ambitions form the policy implementation for public transport. Public transport in Sweden is regulated by the law of public transport [46], which was implemented in 2012. In brief, this law declares that every county or region should have its own regional administrative authority. The regional administrative authorities are responsible for regional public transport, which means that they are responsible both for public transport within that region/county and for public transport that crosses county boundaries. Goals are established within a policy document called "trafikförsörjningsprogram", in consultation with municipalities, authorities, organizations and other stakeholders.

Public transport needs are also defined in a number of overall planning documents such as regional development plans, comprehensive plans, budget documents, visions and so forth. In this paper, we focus on primary steering documents that are composed by leading politicians in regions and municipalities, such as budget documents, visions and other equivalent documents (which can differ, especially among municipalities). Even if large parts of the public sector are regulated in terms of supply and implementation, local decision makers can still choose the level of ambition and the objectives of the activities to be conducted, such as public transport.

Public transport in Sweden is largely funded through taxes, with ticket revenues covering approximately half of the total cost on average [47]. Thus, a large part of the funding occurs locally through taxation, implying that counties and municipalities are able to balance out the level of ambition with the actual costs. According to the local government law [48], counties and municipalities are commissioned to prioritize and balance between different needs, based on the resources and capacities that are available at that time.

Public transport is viewed as a vital planning instrument for structuring the Swedish landscape [49]. In the proposition to the current transport policy goals, public transport is described as a key factor towards attaining a number of societal goals, such as employment, education, improved environmental conditions and more [50]. In "Vision for Sweden 2025", the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning advocates the development of polycentric cities and regions as well as urban train-station communities where municipalities and regions are connected by public transport—and foremost by rail-bound public transport [51,52]. The importance of public transport is also the focus of the national negotiation on housing and infrastructure, in which the construction of high-speed railways between Sweden's three largest cities is the main concern [53].

2.2. Studied Documents

The Introduction outlines that there is a variety of demands on the public transport facilities and these are expected to bring many benefits to society. However, regardless of how great these ideas may be, they still have to come into effect at the local level take into account the local conditions.

This paper analyses the main leading policy documents from counties/regions and municipalities in Sweden from year 2015. In every county/region and municipality, a general vote is taken in the city council regarding a manifesto for the whole term, i.e., policies and future directions for the local community in terms of goals and ambitions. These documents cover the full period and deal with all overall societal issues, not explicitly focusing on public transport. Policy documents that deal with transport issues more explicitly were excluded from this study, since the aim is to examine how local Swedish governments and their political leadership view the role of public transport, and to investigate how public transport is described as a strategic capacity for successfully fulfilling the public purpose in general. Thus, this study illuminates how the main political leaders of counties/regions and municipalities deal with issues around public transport as the means for a successful policy implementation in general and the conditions to develop public transport solutions to support sustainability. In theory, we know what to expect, but how are these ambitions realized in practice?

Public transport is primarily the responsibility of the local government; a responsibility that is divided between counties/regions and municipalities. The goal of this study is to cover both situations empirically. The local governments of all 21 counties/regions in Sweden (18 counties and three regions) were contacted by email, asked about their main policy documents. These are public documents and often available online but to make sure we got correct versions and all appendices, we asked them to be sent to us. After three weeks, a reminder was sent out to the non-responding local governments. This process yielded documents from 15 counties/regions in total (see Table 1 for an overview).

Table 1. Overview of the counties/regions and municipalities included in this study.

Counties/Regions	Stockholms läns landsting, Västra Götalandsregionen, Region Skåne, Landstinget i Dalarna, Region Gotland, Region Halland, Region Jämtland Härjedalen, Landstinget i Jönköpings län, Landstinget i Kalmar län, Landstinget Sörmland, Landstinget i Uppsala län, Region Västerbotten, Landstinget Västmanland, Landstinget i Västernorrland, Örebro läns landsting, Landstinget i Östergötland
Classification of municipalities according to the classification system by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2011.	
Big cities (inhabitants > 200,000).	Stockholm, Göteborg, Malmö
Larger cities (50,000–200,000 inhabitants and urban density > 70 per cent).	Gävle, Karlskrona, Karlstad, Norrköping, Skövde, Sundsvall
Suburbs to big cities (more than 50 per cent of residents commute to work in another municipality, most commonly to one of the big cities).	Kungsbacka, Lerum, Sollentuna, Solna, Staffanstorp, Vellinge
Suburbs to larger cities (more than 50 per cent of residents commute to work in another municipality, most commonly to a larger city).	Eslöv, Höör, Kil, Mörbylånga, Timrå, Trosa
Municipalities with a high degree of commuting (more than 40 per cent of residents commute to work in another municipality).	Alingsås, Alvesta, Bjurholm, Bromölla, Degerfors, Höganäs

Since there are significantly more municipalities than counties/regions (290 municipalities), it was necessary to make a selection. Since resource development and capacity building depend on local contextual conditions, it was essential to choose municipalities from different contexts that were operating under different conditions. Since there are substantial differences between Swedish municipalities in terms of size, structure, economic situation and geographical location, it was important to have a sample covering a maximum of these differences. Therefore, first different types of municipalities were identified, and then the individual municipalities were chosen within these categories.

In order to make a structured selection that maximized differences, the classification system developed by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) was used. This classification system is generally used in public analyses in order to cluster municipalities into categories depending on aspects relating to size, structure, economic situation and geographical location [54].

The classification system consists five main categories—big cities, larger cities, suburbs to big cities, suburbs to larger cities and municipalities with a high degree of commuting [54]. Within these, there are subgroups described as "others" and sorted by size. To maximize the differences, we chose to use the five main categories to investigate potential differences, not blurring the picture with unclear categories (others).

Out of 290 municipalities, six municipalities per category were chosen from the criteria that all parts of the country should be represented. One exception is big cities, of which there are only three in Sweden according to this classification. In total, 27 municipalities were studied, covering all the main municipality types and all parts of the country, i.e., giving a good empirical representation while covering a variety of different local (municipal) conditions. Table 1 presents an overview of the counties/regions and selected municipalities.

2.3. Content Analysis

Content analysis is an empirically grounded method that follows an exploratory process [55]. This method can be used as either an inductive or a deductive approach, depending on the subject under study [56,57]. Content analysis can be either qualitative or quantitative; this paper conducts a qualitative analysis only. Content analysis commonly focuses on the manifest content—that is, the content that is clearly pronounced in texts; however, interpretations of latent content can occur. The core feature of a qualitative content analysis is the creation of categories [58].

The analysis was conducted in a stepwise manner. Initially the texts were glanced through to find the parts covering public transport. Then keywords were used to locate relevant text within the documents (i.e., text dealing with public transport in some way), since these documents are general policy documents that cover all societal issues where the political councils wants to express ambitions. A number of keywords were used to avoid missing any relevant text; these included "public transport", "connections", "bus", "railway", "tram", "transport", "commuting", "mobility" and "movement". Relevant text was collected and saved in separate documents. Several documents were created (and divided into counties/regions and municipality groups) in order to break down the text into manageable units for analysis. A number of readings were made in order to gain knowledge of the content of the text. Initially, the statements were preliminarily organized into categories of economic, environmental and social issues (and a category of "others") before a more nuanced analysis could be done. It was considered important to capture other dimensions in addition to economic growth, which usually plays a major role in policy development. Thereafter, the final thematic coding was conducted.

3. Results

3.1. Counties/Regions

Differences were noticed in the studied documents regarding the space given to public transport; overall, there was a higher focus on public transport in the three counties/regions that contain Sweden's three largest cities. However, in general, a relatively consistent picture of public transport was presented. Public transport was typically described as important for regional development and for reducing environmental impacts. Other benefits of public transport that were mentioned included its role in linking destinations and nodes, its promotion of a polycentric urban structure, and its contribution to increased accessibility, both within the county/region as well as for trips across county/regional borders. Based on these characteristics, public transport was described many times

as being essential for economic growth, in that it creates opportunities for increased labour markets, thereby strengthening the commercial and industrial life in a region. Table 2 presents themes that were distinguished in the texts from counties/regions through the content analysis.

Table 2. Distinguishable themes in documents from counties/regions.

Economic growth and development	• Region for labour market and studies • Attractivity and development of industrial life
Movement	• Connections (within and between regions) • Making everyday life easier • Polycentric urban cities and areas • Health and culture
Environment and sustainability	• Less impact in the environment
Accessibility (for all)	• General accessibility • Accessibility for older people and people with functional limitations
Other (single observations)	• Segregation/integration • Increased quality of life • Contributing to increased equality

In documents of Stockholm County, for example, they describe public transport as follows: [59] (p. 17)

> *Important to strengthen regional linkages, tie together different parts of the region and create polycentric urban structure. A well-functioning public transport is crucial for the labour market in the region and to counteract segregation.*

A well-developed public transport system is generally regarded as necessary for well-functioning everyday lives among the residents of a region, in that it permits residents to easily travel to and from work, school, cultural activities and leisure activities. A well-developed public transport system is also frequently described as being important for creating an attractive county/region.

Public transport is generally referred to as environmentally sustainable, and is viewed as a better alternative than the car, both for the environment and for the prevention of congestion. It is a common goal to increase the number of trips by public transport. Another common goal is to replace old buses with new ones that run on renewable fuels.

> *Public transport capacity to transport numerous people environmentally and safely is superior* versus *by car. A well-developed public transport system therefore enables a sustainable society. It also allows for a strong and diverse labour market, which facilitates business and public organizations' supply of competencies, including the County Council Västmanland.*
>
> —Västmanland County Council [60] (p. 22)

Documents from Stockholm County and the Västra Götaland region highlight public transport as counteracting segregation and framing integration. However, these two counties/regions were the only ones to mention this kind of social value. The value of public transport in contributing to an increased quality of life and to increased equality also came up occasionally.

Furthermore, a variety of characteristics were considered to be important for public transport: it should be accessible (for everyone), be easy to use (from buying a ticket to being on board), offer empty seats, be fast and efficient, be praiseworthy, be safe and secure, be competitive (i.e., provide high accessibility, offer short travel times and meet the travel needs of both women and men), have a high capacity and offer attractive nodes with an extended service.

3.2. Municipalities

The municipalities studied showed great variation in terms of structural and contextual factors; in other words, different municipalities operate under different conditions. Despite these differences, a number of recurring themes were observed that characterized the contents of the studied documents. However, it is worth noting that the municipalities differed in priorities and emphasis. In general, large differences were observed within groups of municipalities regarding the space given to public transport in studied documents. Tables 3–6 present the themes in different categories of municipalities that were distinguished through content analysis.

Public transport was mentioned in the studied documents from all the municipalities in the group big cities (Table 3), although more space was given to public transport in the documents from Stockholm and Göteborg (the two largest cities in Sweden) than in the document from Malmö (the third largest city). As was observed for counties/regions, the public transport focus for municipalities was strongly related to economic and environmental perspectives. Public transport was regarded as important for increasing labour markets, strengthening the commercial and industrial life in the region, and reaching environmental goals. Municipalities emphasized that road traffic should be reduced in favour of public transport, cycling and walking. The benefits of reducing car traffic include better air quality, lower noise levels, reduced congestion, and a reduced overall environmental impact; the latter was also described as contributing to improvements in public health.

Table 3. Distinguishable themes in the documents from big cities.

Economic growth and development	• Strengthening the labour market • Establishing a hub in the region
Movement	• Connecting region/work/knowledge • Making everyday life and movement easier
Environment and sustainability	• Reducing environmental impact • Reducing car use/improving accessibility
Accessibility (for all)	• Providing accessibility for older people and people with functional limitations
Other (single observations)	• Counteracting segregation • Contributing to increased equality

Another common aspect of public transport that was described as important was its linkage of different nodes, which is regarded as necessary for well-functioning everyday lives among residents. An additional common aspect concerned accessibility (for everyone), in that a well-developed public transport system was regarded as fostering accessibility in general and, more specifically, was seen as important for the accessibility of older people and people with functional limitations. Inaccessibility was described as inhibiting both individuals and society in general. The benefit of counteracting segregation was only mentioned briefly by one of the municipalities within this group.

Other aspects that were emphasized as important included collaboration with other municipalities and with counties/regions, and the coordination of public transport planning with residential planning. Like the documents from counties/regions, municipality documents strongly focused on rail-bound public transport, describing it as something to foster and as important for connecting central nodes.

In the group larger cities (Table 4), public transport was mentioned in all municipality documents.

In conformity with earlier groups, the focus was primarily on economic growth and environmental issues, as well as on public transport's role in linking different nodes, which was regarded as necessary for daily mobility. Accessibility (for everyone) was only mentioned occasionally. Several of the

municipalities highlighted geographic location as valuable, with public transport acting as an important link between different nodes. Public transport was also described as essential for local and regional development, and as vital for the establishment of companies within municipalities. Public transport was described as increasing the flow of the labour force into the municipality, since not all municipalities have enough labour in their own area. As was observed for counties/regions and big cities, public transport in larger cities was described as a good alternative to the car and as a more environmentally friendly option; much of the focus concentrated on reducing car usage in favour of public transport. Rail-bound public transport was highlighted as especially important. Some municipalities were also discussing BRT (bus rapid transit) as a possible efficient solution.

Table 4. Distinguishable themes in the documents from big cities.

Economic growth and development	• Developing attractivity and good business conditions • Establishing a region for labour market and studies • Creating development for municipality and region
Environment and sustainability	• Reducing environmental impact • Replacing private cars
Movement	• Improving geographic position and role in the region • Making everyday life easier
Other (single observations)	• Providing accessibility for everyone • Permitting inflow to leisure, culture and trade

The documents in both of the categories concerning suburbs—suburbs to big cities and suburbs to larger cities—varied greatly in to which extent public transport was discussed. Some municipality documents had extensive presentations about public transport, while others contained only a few short sentences with goals, or nothing on the topic at all.

In general, public transport was connected to environment and mobility (Table 5). Public transport was mostly discussed in relation to environmental issues (as a good alternative to the car, and in terms of reducing environmental impacts); as important for daily mobility, particularly to and from workplaces and schools; and as important for connecting nodes and municipalities within the county/region.

The group of municipalities with a high degree of commuting varied widely in the extent to which public transport was discussed; in some cases, municipality documents did not mention public transport at all. The municipalities that did cover public transport explicitly stressed living conditions and residential factors as the main aspects of public transport (Table 6).

Public transport was described as important for creating an attractive municipality to live in (since many residents work in nearby municipalities), and for easing residents' daily lives and commutes to work and school. Public transport was also highlighted as a good alternative to the car in terms of environmental issues.

Table 5. Distinguishable themes in the documents from suburbs to big cities and from suburbs to larger cities.

Environment and sustainability	• Reducing environmental impact • Reducing the use of cars
Movement	• Connecting places in the region • Commuting for work and school • Managing population growth without more cars

Table 6. Distinguishable themes in the documents from municipalities with a high degree of commuting.

Attractive place to live	●	Commuting to nearby towns for work and school
Movement	●	Making everyday life easier
Environment	●	Reducing environmental impact

4. Discussion

This study provides a comprehensive view of the role of public transport in Sweden and the conditions required to create capacities to make sustainable public transport solutions a vital factor for local government development. Findings show that local government organizations view public transport positively in all cases and that they describe public transport as something that contributes to sustainability and to other public values. When discussed in policy documents in regions and municipalities in Sweden, public transport is associated with important contributions to the local society and to living conditions, especially from an economic and environmental perspective. In many instances, public transport is further described as vital for the existence of the local community and essential for other public values such as economic growth and environmental sustainability. In other words, it is clear that public transport is highly valued in different ways, both in itself and as a way of reaching other goals (or dealing with challenges), or contributing to other public values.

From a national perspective—that is, from outside local government organizations—public transport is described as a strategic tool by the Swedish government's official investigations [3]. In the proposition for national transport policy objectives, an effective transport system is described as a prerequisite for reaching general societal goals, for example in relation to economic growth and sustainable development [6]. In general, public transport is described as a tool to gain public values such as enhancing the attractiveness of a region or municipality, and as a necessary factor for development within counties and municipalities; this study confirms these views.

From a local government perspective, it is clear that the studied political forums generally consider public transport as an important way to achieve other societal values and goals. Not least from an economic and environmental angle, for example, by creating increased attractiveness through higher density around bus stops and stations and through reduced emissions by a modal shift to public transport from the car, and in form of transformation to alternative fuel for buses. In other words, economic growth, business climate and employment are placed in the foreground as crucial components for development in local visions in combination with environmental issues. Overall, literature shows that growth is an important factor for local decision makers, and that finding is confirmed by this study.

Increased economic activity generally requires increased movement and transport. A well-functioning public transport supply is crucial to meet the demands of increased mobility for several reasons. Local decision makers must set priorities and do trade-offs of different societal needs. Available space in central locations, available financial resources and sustainability issues are all crucial prerequisites to the public transport that is required for sustainable development and other public values at the local level. Depending on local conditions, different aspects of public transport are emphasized. Big cities experience complex matters of sustainability and connect many objectives and public values to public transport issues. More remote communities or municipalities that depend on major urban areas accept their role as residential areas and therefore emphasize and focus primarily on public values of public transport related to attractiveness and living conditions.

However, even though there is increasing interest in research into the social challenges of transport and into issues of social exclusion, transport poverty and transport disadvantage (e.g., [12,30,61,62]), this study found the social dimension to be almost absent from policy documents. Aside from brief mention of the words "integration" or "segregation" in a few cases—and only among larger counties/municipalities—social challenges of transport were more or less ignored, which can be a question of priorities. Although the social dimension of public transport is more recognized today, transport poverty

is, according to Lucas et al. [19] (p. 1), "an issue that never fully captured...interest". Social issues related to transport and transport poverty are difficult to define and are often handled with inconsistency, which is a problem "that requires...urgent attention given the continuing trends for mass migration, urbanization and wealth concentration within and between the Global North and South". At the same time, Sweden is no exception to the global trend of development with growing income inequality and segregation. Within the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), Sweden was the country in which the growth in inequality increased most between 1985 and 2010 [63], making social issues related to transport highly relevant. However, this study showed the focus of policy documents at the local government level to be on public values of public transport related to economic and environmental sustainability, with the social dimension left underdeveloped. Social issues related to transport revolve around individuals' inability to fully participate in society for different reasons that may depend on income inequality, ethnicity, gender and so forth, and which can include reduced accessibility to employment, education, services and more [64].

However, findings did show that the public value of public transport in form of accessibility for people with functional limitations and for older people was discussed in many of the counties and at least in the larger municipalities. Although, the discussions of this value was more or less absent in the smaller municipalities. The probable reason for accessibility for people with functional limitations and for older people being brought up as a public value of public transport in many of the counties and in the larger municipalities is that Sweden approved a law in 1979 on the adoption of public transport for people with functional limitations [65]. The functional goal of accessibility [36] and the goal of an accessible public transport were added in 2010 [66]. However, the latter goal was shown to be difficult to reach. Today, there is an ambition for 80 per cent of public transport in Sweden to be accessible for people with functional limitations and for older people by 2021 [67]. Thus, even though steps are being taken towards accessibility, there is still a lot to do [68]. It is important that this topic continue to be highlighted and viewed as generally important across all counties and municipalities in order to reach the given objectives.

Furthermore, rail-bound public transport is often advocated as a sustainable alternative of transport, often regarded to provide urban development and density and generally viewed as an environmentally-friendly alternative. In many of the studied cases, documents explicitly stated that rail-bound public transport should be prioritized to support a sustainable development. A focus on rail-bound public transport is a trend in many different parts of the world [69]. Another recurrent theme was that public transport planning should be considered in relation to residential planning; this point is advocated by the OECD, among others [8]. In addition, collaboration is highly promoted in the studied documents, in line with Hrelja et al. [70] (p. 1) who point out that "an efficient public transport system requires collaborations".

Overall, the studied documents varied widely in how they addressed issues of public transport and how public transport is expected to contribute to sustainability and other public values. Some county documents had only a sentence or two on public transport, and the documents from several municipalities had nothing at all. However, documents from other counties and municipalities had several pages designated for public transport. To some extent, these differing focuses on the role of public transport can be related to the number of residents, in that larger counties and municipalities tend to give a more comprehensive description of public values of public transport (although not in all cases). It was remarkable, however, that a societal function that was described as vital for sustainability issues for some counties or municipalities was totally ignored by others (at least in the studied documents). This finding is even more notable considering the importance of planning and overviewing outcomes in public organizations [39].

It should be a priority to treat public transport with consistency and give it the same priority as other societal functions in main steering documents, especially since the long-term focus in Sweden has been to shift more people into using public transport [3]—not least because public transport reflects society in general and can influence how prioritizations and considerations are made in counties and municipalities in Sweden.

From a resource-based perspective, it can be noted that local governments attempt to create capacities to execute their vision. It is essential to make trade-offs on which factors to focus on and how these factors can be combined. It is worth noticing that there are strong similarities between the documents in terms of the aspirations of the local government organizations—that is, the functions and needs at this societal level are somewhat homogenous. Economic and environmental sustainability issues are seen as superior, and guide other activities. However, methods of dealing with these challenges may differ. Politicians set visions and aspirations in relation to actual conditions, either to offer services or to solve problems. This study indicates that abilities differ between organizations and that the overall strategic capacity consists of a combination of the external environment and internal resources. Each organization makes choices based on its specific situation. Based on these choices, local government organizations build up their capacity to deliver to citizens. The specific conditions for the organizations show that the organizations are forced to take action in different areas [4,36,42].

In terms of practical implications, our results suggest that the importance of public transport is generally well known and is taken into consideration at the local government level (albeit to different extents). However, the studied vision statements do not cover distinct public transport priorities for some activities, although such priorities are often generally appreciated. Since public transport is regarded as a means to achieve other goals and other public values, the documents indicate that it is not likely that these ambitions will be given a high priority in relation to other ambitions. To obtain management's attention the representatives for public transport need to clearly highlight its importance for the development of the local community in many different ways.

The findings show that local governments make use of local conditions and build their capacities around these conditions in ways that are expected to contribute to the local governments' visions. The fact that local government organizations offer acceptable welfare services is not a competitive factor; rather, it is a prerequisite for an ability to work in other contexts. Once basic services to citizens are established, local governments can look outside their immediate boundaries and work with a more external orientation. It is crucial that there be a correspondence between different factors so that the public transport system contributes to a realization of counties' and municipalities' visions, and so that the internal local government organization focuses on these factors. The point is not to carry out the different activities on its own, but instead to make it easier for other actors to act and contribute to realizing the local government vision.

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