

Conference on Area-based Initiatives in Contemporary Urban Policy

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Handling of complex coherent urban problems – an integrated approach based on the case of Vollsmose

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1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss possibilities for Danish local government to handle complex and integrated problems in urban areas. Starting from a description of a specific case this paper will try to show some structural and cultural barriers to handling of these kinds of problems.

Vollsmose in Odense is chosen as case, as the author was one of two project managers for a project on preparing a so-called total plan for development of the area in 1999/2000 for the municipality of Odense and the 3 organisations managing the public supported housing in the area¹. It is the experience from this and later assignments in the area that will form basis for this paper.

The conclusion of this paper based on the case of Vollsmose is that the traditional way of organising Danish local government is facing severe difficulties when handling complex and integrated problems. Organising the task of upgrading urban areas as a project may solve a lot of these difficulties.

2 An integrated approach to coherent upgrading of urban areas, some practical experiences

In this paragraph is presented the authors' definition of the concrete elements in an integrated approach to coherent upgrading of urban areas.

The elements in the integrated approach presented below were developed through preparation of an integrated plan for the area of Vollsmose in Odense in Denmark. The author has been part of the project management team who was responsible for preparation of the plan. The elements described below are therefore based on practical experiences using different planning tools such as LFA, stakeholder analysis, SWOT and anthropological methods.

As a result the team defined an integrated approach as a totality of problems and solutions connected to an urban area including:

- ✓ Functionality and physical settings of the area
- ✓ Social relations and conditions and (Un)employment
- ✓ Organisational factors in the area and affecting the area
- ✓ Cultural aspects
- ✓ Image of the area and political awareness
- ✓ Economic relations

An integrated approach acknowledges that no single problem can be solved without taking the totality into account. In practise that implies that at least all responsibilities and tasks undertaken by a Danish municipality should be taken into account when dealing with ghettoised urban areas. But also the physical surroundings of the area have to be taken into account.

An integrated approach will have as ambition to analyse all problems connected to an area and all problems related to inhabitants in an area.

Consequently, an integrated approach will cover all aspects of daily life such as:

- ✓ Physical settings and public facilities
 - Physical settings including local infrastructure and the physical environment
 - Public facilities such as schools, day-care for children and care elderly people, cultural institutions, public meeting places
 - Access to shops and other service facilities

¹ All figures in the present paper is collected from this study and no figures will be newer than from 1999/2000.

- Presence of places of work
- Housing conditions
- ✓ Social conditions and social organisation
 - Family structures and relations
 - Distribution of nationalities in the area and the impact on the area
 - Distribution of age groups
 - Influence on the environment made by alcoholics, mentally handicapped, drug abusers etc
 - Supply of places of work
 - Supply of leisure-time activities
 - Unemployment and use of social security benefits
 - Crime rates
 - Volunteers and NGO activities in the area
 - Local organisations and democratic forces and their impact on the area
- ✓ Organisation of and traditions in public service institutions and authorities
 - Approach to public service
 - The quantity of public service available for different groups of inhabitants
 - Organisation of the public service in the area
 - Ability to work cross-organisational in public service organisations
 - Ability to integrate local organisations, cooperative housing societies etc. in problem-solving activities
 - Effort regarding employment for inhabitants in the area, social welfare etc.
- ✓ Cultural activities
 - Local cultural activities, organisations and facilities
 - Supply of leisure-time activities (also mentioned under social conditions)
 - Traditions in the area supported by the authorities and/or by inhabitants
- ✓ Image of the area
 - Relations to the press
 - Relations to other parts of the town
 - Public attitude towards the area
- ✓ Political awareness regarding the area
 - National
 - Regional/local
 - Willingness to pay and to act
 - General interest in the area and in social problems
 - Public participation and discussions in the area
- ✓ Economic relations
 - Cash flow in and out of the area
 - The amount of access to national subsidies
 - Private investments
 - Public investments

How daily life in an area is organised and how the people who live in the area experience the daily life will be a key issue developing an integrated approach. So one of the key-instruments to identification of integrated problems and solutions will be living in the area and interviewing not only official stakeholders but also a large amount of “ordinary people” living and working in the area. Getting to know the area by living there provides a deeper understanding of daily life and the problems and advantages in the area.

One of the other instruments or analytical tools that may be of help in the process of working with an integrated approach will be a simple stakeholder analysis that can help to identify the interests that players in the area could have.

The stakeholder analysis will also help to identify or map the complexity of connections in the area. It will supposedly show that linear connection between the interest in the area and the actions taken are non-existing. Some stakeholders are represented at different levels, others have interests directly in the area as inhabitants but are also employed by authorities present in the area.

Another tool that could be useful working with a complexity of problems, players and possible solutions is Logical Framework approach (LFA)².

Using the problem analysis tool (making a problem tree) in LFA will help to identify causes and implications of problems in the area and thereby give an overview of problems and their causes. Knowing the landscape of problems it is possible to categorise problems in a crosscutting way and identify relations between problems that were not "visible" before. And this is crucial using an integrated approach – to analyse relations between problems independent from sectors, professions, individuals, groups or other prevalent ways we are used to categorise the society around us and then develop solutions that are based on coherent and integrated approach

The use of an integrated approach will also require a crosscutting working style from the team working with urban upgrading projects. All relevant expertise will need to participate in a common working process where exchange of ideas, working methods and results is a part of the daily working process. And it is important not to rely solely on electronic media, but an open-minded face to face working process.

The use of an integrated approach to problem solving in urban areas should be considered when both the area and the inhabitants need an upgrading. The area could face problems like a great proportion of inhabitants having heavy social problems, unemployment, crime and unattractive physical surroundings. Nobody really wants to stay in the area, and the so-called resourceful inhabitants move out and leave the less resourceful to stay. The image of the area makes it even more difficult for people to live there as they are stamped as low-class just for living in the area.

3 An urban area turning into a social and ethnic ghetto, the case of Vollsmose in Odense

In the following Vollsmose as a case is presented. Vollsmose is one Danish example on how the massive building of public supported housing during the 60'ies almost from the beginning became a mistake. It is interesting in this connection because it is one of the relatively few areas in Denmark where an integrated effort to upgrade the area and its inhabitants is undertaken in the same moment.

3.1 A short historic overview - from the 60'ties up till today

Architects', planners 'and contractors' belief in big plans and their fascination of the possibility of building fast, cheap and effective influenced the 60' ties. And the building of Vollsmose followed these trends. Parts of Vollsmose are characterised by tall concrete buildings placed in a nice area with a lot of open space, small lakes and playgrounds. This is where the most serious problems of the township appear. Other parts of Vollsmose is characterised by smaller grouped houses and catered for single families.

² Logical Framework Approach will not be described further in this paper. See Logical Framework Approach (LFA) Handbook for objectives-oriented planning, NORAD1992.

Vollsmose was built from the 60'ies up till the beginning of the 80'ies in the outskirts of one of the bigger cities in Denmark, Odense. Today, the number of inhabitants of Vollsmose is around 10.000 and the numbers of nationalities are around 80. App. 60% of the inhabitants are "non ethnic Danes" and there are a predominance of young people from the age of 0 – 18 compared to the rest of Odense and Denmark. The level of employment is very low (app. 32% of the workforce in the area) and 52% of all families in the area received their income from the public. As comparison, this figure was 31% for all inhabitants in Odense. Furthermore, 72% of the adult population in Vollsmose have no education except from primary and/or secondary school.

The inhabitants the area was meant for never inhabited Vollsmose. As it became much more attractive to buy your own house due to the Danish tax laws, the big modern apartments never got attractive for the middleclass citizens it was built for. More and more people unable to find other places to live and often with different kinds of social problems were placed in Vollsmose. This also encompasses refugees and immigrants primarily from third world countries.

Today, Vollsmose is known as one of the worst ghettos in Denmark and as a settlement for people who never had a choice to select where to live.

3.2 Turning into a ghetto, causes and implications

The modern well-planned urban area turned into a ghetto. Vollsmose soon became an area whereto the local government moved citizens who were unable to find anywhere else to live. Firstly, Danish citizens and secondly refugees and immigrants from third world countries and Turkey were sent to Vollsmose. The area slowly became more and more unattractive for "ethnic Danes", as they found it hard to live in an area characterised by foreigners and foreign lifestyles. This development went on for app. 30 years as the flow of social problems into the area went on supported by the allocation procedures followed by the local administration and the cooperative housing societies.

There are several reasons for the non-willingness to intervene. Firstly, there has been a tendency to close ones eyes. If the problems was not visible and would stay out there in the outskirts of Odense, no one felt any incentive to take any action.

Secondly, it has been the common understanding that only a minority of voters would vote for a candidate to the local government whose intention was to spend a lot of money on a problematic area. And the few enthusiasts gave up facing a severe resistance from the majority of members of the local government.

Thirdly, it has been the view of many politicians that a lot of money was spent on the area already and it would have been wrong to pour out more money to the area.

Fourthly, is seems as if the problems just grew slowly and it became an insurmountable task to solve the integrated problems of the area and its inhabitants.

More explanations may be found, but these are the main reasons for the area slowly turning into one of the worst ghettos in Denmark marked by crime, unemployment, low income, low education, unattractive buildings and surroundings, social problems including young violent 2. generation immigrants, alcoholism, drug abusers etc.

Although, the area face these severe problems, the problems of Vollsmose are tiny compared to those of ghettos in some of the other European big cities. Though, in a Danish context, they seem very severe.

3.3 Today's problems in Vollsmose

Today, Vollsmose is facing a conglomerate of integrated problems:

- ✓ A segregated public effort in the area spread in public departments with no or little cooperation or even communication and most important with their own budget-lines
- ✓ 3 cooperative housing societies with minor tradition for collaboration with each other
- ✓ An everlasting effort from the cooperative housing societies to keep up the standards of the houses and the surroundings
- ✓ Very large spending on fighting of vandalism or just incompetent use of the building and their facilities
- ✓ A relatively small group of youngsters having fights with the local police, making robberies, and giving the area an insecure image
- ✓ A very high concentration of inhabitants dependent of social security benefits who have never been active on the labour marked
- ✓ Visible problems regarding mentally ill people, street alcoholism and drug abuse
- ✓ So-called resourceful people moves out and less resourceful people move into the area
- ✓ A very low association to the labour marked, that is relative few people with an "ordinary" jobs
- ✓ A concept of normality that depart from the outside worlds'
- ✓ 80 nationalities some from conflicting nations
- ✓ An earlier understanding in the area of the local government as hostile or just not interested

As it may be clear, these problems call for a long-term effort from a lot of professionals and volunteers using a lot of resources involving all positive forces in the area. The integrated approach or the holistic way of viewing the problems and their solutions will be needed because non of these problems fit into a single sector or a single administrative entity or a single profession. Handling of the problems will call for integrated teams including different kinds of expertise.

3.4 Actions towards the problems?

Some efforts have been carried out in Vollsmose before the Danish Government set up a Government Committee on Towns (Byudvalget). Up till then the problems of Vollsmose were handled by the ordinary or normal measures offered by the local government of Odense. But no outstanding effort was initialised regarding the ever-growing problems faced by Vollsmose.

The Government Committee on Towns made it possible from 1994 for the cooperative housing societies to employ 3 advisers in the area to start some social activities aiming at the citizens of Vollsmose.

In 1999 COWI consulting engineers and planners were engaged to prepare an integrated plan for Vollsmose which formed basis for an action plan made by the local government of Odense.

From 2001 a significant investment in the area will take place as the area is pointed out to be one of the "Kvarterloeff"-areas (urban upgrading areas)

in Denmark. Further more funds from a re-mortgage process is allocated to the area.

This paragraph will comment on some of the initiatives taken as a consequence of the integrated plan for Vollsmose and their possible effect. It will comment on two initiatives one from the local government and one from the cooperative housing societies.

3.5 The Vollsmose-secretariat

As a consequence of the acknowledged lack of focus on the area, the local government of Odense decided to establish a secretariat in Vollsmose in 2000. The aim of the secretariat was to coordinate and initialise activities, stemming from the local government's action plan. Further more the secretariat should act as secretariat for the "kvarterloeft"-project.

The idea of establishing a secretariat and in that way put focus on the area is very positive. This is one of the first integrated and forceful initiatives taken by the local government regarding the area. Other attempts to cooperation between the local government and the inhabitants of the area has been made earlier through a Vollsmose Committee, but not as powerful as the secretariat.

The first results have already shown up, as support from the secretariat to volunteers in the area is felt strongly. The role of the secretariat as present and future coordinator and initiator should not be underestimated.

But, and there is a but, the secretariat has no economic power in itself. All the ordinary or normal measures in the area are still placed in the central public administration of Odense. No economic power or any resources are allocated to the secretariat to e.g. undertake the heavy so-called "normal" social duties in the area. It is still the single department in the local administration that takes care of their defined tasks independent of other departments of the administration and with very little interaction between them. The secretariat has no or little influence on how the public service is done in the area of Vollsmose and the teamwork between employees from different administrative units in the local public administration is not developed to the extent possible.

Integrated problem solving is under development in parts of the local administration but has not yet reached all parts of the administration and the influence of the secretariat on the ways to solve the basic duties of the local public administration is very small. Further more the transfer of knowledge from the secretariat to the local public administration is in danger of being quite small.

Time will show, maybe the power of the secretariat will rise as their result gets incontestable.

3.6 The cooperation between the 3 cooperative housing societies

Another initiative stemming from the integrated plan has been trying to set up a closer collaboration between the cooperative housing societies that owns all dwellings in Vollsmose.

In August 2000 the 3 societies decided to try to formulate a common platform for their future work on upgrading the area. Management and employees from the 3 societies met during 3 seminars and discussed common problems, common solutions and ways of organising a common secretariat for all three societies. The idea was to set up an organisation that could match the secretariat of Vollsmose and work as a common entity in the area, solving common integrated concrete problems.

In November 2000 rules for a collaborating organisation was agreed upon by the members of the 9 committees of the cooperative housing societies. In March 2001 the ordinary members approved the collaborative organisation.

The next step will be to staff the organisation and to begin working on solving the problems connected to the dwellings and their surroundings.

The challenge for the organisation is to take responsibility for the inhabitants in Vollsmose and their complex problems. This implies to cooperate with the Vollsmose secretariat, who are employed by the local government, and take part in solving common problems in the area, also problems that could be defined as a responsibility for the public sector. Hopefully better solutions will occur if both parts, public as well as private, will participate in solving them on a holistic basis.

4 Local governments' ability to handle complex problems

The organisational structure of local government in Denmark could be characterised as technical bureaucracy, where responsibility, competence and the decision-making processes are clearly defined and determined using a traditional hierarchy as organisational principle. A complex and coherent problem is very difficult to analyse and deal with in this kind of organisational structure, as the organisation will treat any problem as it is used to. This paragraph will discuss barriers and possibilities for organisational change in these kinds of bureaucracies.

4.1 Public organisational structure and culture as a barrier

Local governments in Denmark are divided into politically headed service entities specifically devoted to undertake defined tasks. A typical local public administration will consist of 4 – 5 service entities or departments covering the following working areas:

- ✓ Department for technical matters
- ✓ Department for social security and health
- ✓ Department for children and culture
- ✓ The Mayors' service department

This may vary from one local government to another, but the departments will cover the same working areas. As these departments or entities have their own budget and working plans and political agenda they will tend to use their own resources to reach their own goals. Using funds on reaching other departments goals may reduce the departments' own ability to serve their own politicians and their goals, and that could cause a criticism or worse that some of the department is handed over to another department. So very shortly, as top-manager of a department in a local administration you have to make sure that your crucial or main tasks are performed as well as possible, and afterwards you can consider whether some resources could be used to promote other goals set by other departments.

This will naturally form a barrier to integrated problem solving, as management will be unwilling to participate in something new that might not be a success but surely use some resources.

Typically, a great amount of employees will work in a local administration for many years, and they will carry myths and stories about the department with them. Additionally, as structural barriers are functioning, departments in a local administration could tend to lock itself in as a system and act self-sufficient. Seen from the outside, from other departments, the barriers for teamwork can be felt very categorical. A lot of well-meaning employees will not be able to eliminate the cultural barriers that will emerge.

Also professional traditions can function as barriers, as professionals establish their own working environment, traditions and ways of working. Lack of respect between professionals may create a very difficult environment for crosscutting teamwork.

Networking between colleagues can overcome some of these problems, but networking and establishing good crosscutting connections between

employees in different departments will not be sufficient to overcome these structural and cultural barriers. It can only reduce the problem.

4.2 Possibilities in and barriers for cooperation with local partners

In the case of Vollsmose and other urban areas with heavy integrated problems, one of the most important partners in the work on upgrading the area will be one or more cooperative housing societies. Also other local organisations and private citizens will be potential partners to make the project succeed, but the process of involving inhabitants in urban renewal will not be described in this paper.

Especially the democratically working cooperative housing societies will be important partners in the upgrading process as almost everything that will influence their houses has to be decided by a majority of the residents. The committees of the societies will normally have an invaluable knowledge on residents' needs and wishes. Further more, the societies will be necessary during the process of physical renewal.

The democratic organisation might also work as a barrier to comprehensive urban renewal. Residents might fear that house rent will rise or they might be resistant to change for other reasons. When decisions regarding resources have been taken, the committee has to call for a meeting open to all residents and in that forum the majority decides. If an urban area consists of several cooperative housing societies the decision making process will be further complicated as more people will need to reach consensus.

In the case of Vollsmose, three cooperative housing societies, as mentioned earlier, were and still are involved in upgrading of the area. As shown the societies have formed a new organisation that is able to handle the process of urban renewal on behalf of all three. This is a practical arrangement and a wise decision as unity could safeguard the positions of the housing societies in the strongest way.

Conclusion

Can local governments handle complex coherent problems in an organisational structure divided into politically chaired sectors with own budget lines?

The conclusion of this paper will be no, not to a satisfactory extent. As seen in the case of Vollsmose, the tasks and resources were not decentralised to a secretariat placed in the area. This will imply an obstacle to solving the problems close to the inhabitants in area and to perform integrated solutions, which are independent of the structure of the local administration. But there is a much higher awareness regarding the area and its problems than was the case earlier.

Solving integrated problems implies at least three things:

- ✓ Firstly, that the relevant experts and volunteers are allocated to and participate in development and implementation of the solutions.
- ✓ Secondly, that the relevant resources are allocated directly to the project management.
- ✓ And thirdly, that the management of the team is devoted to the job and the process towards solving the integrated problems.

These three factors are some of the main elements in project management. Organising working processes as long lasting projects may overcome the earlier mentioned obstacles regarding focus on the problem and not the structures of the local administration and the loss of power that can threaten a department management. Further more, all the relevant expertise could be gathered to find as optimal solutions as possible no matter which department

or organisation either private or public it comes from. And no one will have to fight to keep their resources, as they are allocated directly to the project.

Nothing is perfect and project management is not the solution to all problems when the task is to upgrade urban ghettoised areas. But this way of organising has among other things been used to build bridges and it may be worth trying.