An Overarching Model for Cross-Sector Strategic Transitions towards Sustainability in Municipalities and Regions

Lisa Wälitalo *, Karl-Henrik Robèrt and Göran Broman

Department of Strategic Sustainable Development, Blekinge Institute of Technology, 37179 Karlskrona, Sweden; karl-henrik.robert@bth.se (K.-H.R.); goran.broman@bth.se (G.B.)
* Correspondence: lisa.walitalo@bth.se; Tel.: +46-73-422-3727

Received: 9 August 2020; Accepted: 27 August 2020; Published: 29 August 2020

Abstract: Municipal and regional governments can play a key role in global society’s transition towards sustainability. However, municipal leaders often lack a sufficient overview and thereby the capacity to coordinate efforts across sectors. Several municipal planning frameworks are available but vary greatly in terms of definitions, scope, and hands-on advice on processes. To complement and unify approaches, the framework for strategic sustainable development (FSSD) has been developed. It utilizes backcasting from operational boundary conditions for the full scope of social and ecological sustainability. This study aims to evaluate a recently developed model for long-term implementation of FSSD across sectors for more cohesive cooperation towards sustainability. This is done through participatory action research (PAR) in ten Swedish municipalities and regions. The evaluation is done to examine if the implementation model (i) lives up to its purpose to help sectors cooperate effectively by using the FSSD as a shared mental model, (ii) aid the handling of previously identified barriers to strategic sustainable development in municipalities and regions, (iii) may contain barriers of its own for appropriate use and (iv) has room for improvement. We used observations, dialogues, and surveys to capture the strengths, weaknesses, enablers, and barriers of the preliminary implementation model. While the compliance of the model varied, our findings show a general appreciation and identified the needs for the approach. From experiencing barriers for the application of the model, practitioners provided several ideas for additional support, such as assessment and alignment support of on-going work and further developed guiding material. In a second phase of the PAR project, application of the implementation model will continue, and such additional support will be developed and evaluated.

Keywords: strategic sustainable development; cross-sector collaboration; participatory action research; evaluation; municipalities and regions

1. Introduction

Municipal and regional governments have a key role in global society’s transition towards sustainability e.g., [1,2]. However, municipal leaders often lack a sufficient overview e.g., [3,4], and typically fall short in terms of effectively coordinating sustainability efforts across sectors e.g., [5–7]. Furthermore, municipal and regional governments often perceive only vaguely what hinders them and consequently often only have vague ideas on how to mitigate barriers [8]—for example, a lack of know-how regarding cross-sector development of visions assessed from a sustainability point of view.

Several municipal planning frameworks are available [9]. However, practitioners’ awareness and understanding of these frameworks are fragmented and the frameworks vary greatly in terms of definitions, scope, and hands-on advice on processes. To come to grips with this, the framework
for strategic sustainable development (FSSD) seems well-suited [10]. Its basic approach is to backcast from boundary conditions for the full scope of social and ecological sustainability. This framework is also equipped with strategic guidelines for: (i) understanding and exploiting self-beneficial economic advantages from proactive responses to the dynamic sustainability challenges (“what’s in it for us”), (ii) cross-sector developments of scenarios or goals within the boundary conditions (so that solutions in one sector do not counteract necessary solutions in another sector), (iii) step-wise strategies towards sustainable goals (so that measures are not only mitigating current sustainability related impacts, but are also serving as flexible platforms, or stepping stones, towards the full scope of sustainability), and (iv) the selection and use of tools for decision support, monitoring and communication (so that tools and concepts are not “competing” with each other, but are used in cohesion).

Both in theory and practice, the FSSD is shown to serve as a unifying framework that increases the value of other frameworks, methods, and tools by putting them in context of the full scope of sustainability and stepwise strategies, and thereby each other [10]. A core part of the FSSD is the basic principles for ecological and social sustainability, tackling the sustainability challenge upstream in cause-effect chains at the first approximation level, where the clarity and strategic overview are as high as they get, and uncertainties as low as they get. This is done by formulating overriding basic mechanisms for the destruction of social and ecological systems, upstream in cause-effect chains, and reverting those as hands-on exclusion-criteria/boundary-conditions for redesign. Any sustainable scenario builds on sectors complying with the boundary conditions together, and sustainable strategies must build on measures that take the full scope of this into account, just as wise chess strategies do not build on moving towards one aspect of checkmate at a time.

The FSSD include a planning structure for concrete application of these boundary conditions, which also includes the strategic economic perspective on sustainability. The latter is derived from a deepened understanding of the self-benefit of being proactive towards more and more sustainability-driven markets and societies [11,12]. From 30 years of implementing and refining these FSSD core concepts, including action research in several municipal and regional settings across the globe, a long-term cross-sector implementation model has emerged. From those experiences, an ideal model for long-term cross-sector implementation of FSSD has been developed (Robért et al., 2017), presented in the next section of this paper. The FSSD has not only been empirically explored for more systematic hands-on practices around goal setting, monitoring and communication of transitions, it has also informed extensive theoretical research. An example of this is research on the social system [13] and another example is more systematic research and modelling of sustainable visions [14]. It has, for example, been shown that complex goals in complex systems are extremely difficult to model and assess scientifically, if not related to robust boundary conditions within which the modelling can occur. Yet another example is the use of robust boundary conditions when putting various theoretical frameworks, concepts and tools for sustainable development in the context of sustainability and of each other [15].

In Sweden, 111 out of 290 municipalities are members of the Swedish eco-municipalities association (SEKOM) [16]. Being an eco-municipality in this sense is voluntary and no audits are performed on members. However, to become a member of the association the municipality or region must have a board decision (the highest decision level) and must be able to display their sustainability ambitions through a sustainability plan, strategy, or similar. Furthermore, active participation in the association is expected as well as the adoption of the principled definition of sustainability that the FSSD provides. Still, these principles are not commonly applied and shared across sectors for practice and therefore, the association management along with several member municipalities and regions signed up to be part of a research project to test and develop the mentioned implementation model [14].

Consequently, our study takes off from the below presented preliminary implementation model of FSSD and aims to evaluate and develop its functionality, when introduced upfront, through participatory action research in ten Swedish municipalities and regions. The evaluation is done to examine if the implementation model lives up to its purpose to provide comprehensive cross-sector support for
strategic sustainable development, its user friendliness, and to discover room for improvement of the model as well as developing hands-on advice for applying it.

2. Model for Long-Term Implementation of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development

The model for long-term implementation of the FSSD is designed to aid systematic cross-sector development of regional goals, planning, decision-support, monitoring and communication of progress in context of such visions. Ideally this means that (i) all sectors and actors have a robust and shared principled definition of sustainability serving as boundary conditions for iterative co-creation of overarching sustainable goals, (ii) a process structure (ABCD—see below) is in place which works as a common language or taxonomy for applying the boundary conditions in hands-on practice, (iii) municipal and regional governments are actively a part of implementing and coordinating the systematic approach, and that (iv) tools for decision support, monitoring and communication of progress are aligned and cohesive with the overriding implementation model [14].

The common process procedure referred to above is also called the ABCD procedure [10]. This prompts the users to (A) build a shared understanding of the system at hand, its surroundings and the sustainability challenge and, based on this, to agree on a vision of success within the constraints of boundary conditions for sustainability; (B) assess the current reality in relation to the vision (backcasting); (C) find innovative measures to bridge the gap and; (D) prioritize those measures into a strategic plan. The long-term implementation model explicitly stresses the importance of iterative cross-sector learning by doing, i.e., the contents under the respective A, B, C and D checkpoints are allowed to iteratively and dynamically be modified as the strategic plan unfolds [14]. The ABCD procedure allows for separate planning of specific operations and sectors and to iteratively, during its use, develop the overall cross-sector vision (A). This planning methodology is inherently big-picture strategic, so it is important that relevant decision-makers are made active part of the cross-sector iterative learning and co-creation.

A simplified sketch of the implementation model is presented in Figure 1 and attempts to summarize how the ABCD mindset iteratively informs important stakeholder groups, individually and in dialogues between them.

**Figure 1.** Based on an overall societal vision, (A), framed by basic sustainability principles, experts and stakeholders from different sectors and operations draw conclusions, applying the ABCD procedure of the framework for strategic sustainable development (FSSD), respectively. The respective ideas regarding challenges and assets (B), opportunities (C), and prioritized steps (D) in each sector are compared across the sectors and stake-holder groups. This leads to modelled and coordinated solutions.
from numerous meetings within and across sectors—big and small, formal and informal, planned as well as spontaneous. Thus, the figure denotes the logic of sector-interdependencies to inform effective cooperation across disciplines and sectors, but it does not suggest to always organize big formal meetings. Adapted from [14] with permission from the authors.

3. Method

3.1. Participatory Action Research

Based on their interest in cross-sector strategic sustainable development towards compliance with robust boundary conditions for sustainability, seven Swedish municipalities, two Swedish regions and Åland (an autonomous protectorate of the Republic of Finland) participated in the first phase of the research project between 2015 and 2018 [17]. The selection of partners occurred through a process of introducing and discussing the research idea in different forums during six months before the start of the project. SEKOM was supportive in promoting the research project and to propose municipalities and regions with potential interest so that meetings could be set up. A majority of the project partners were eco-municipalities or regions, however some gained interest in the research project through SEKOM’s networking contacts, as in the case of Åland. Although being a part of Finland, people on Åland speak Swedish and their administrative structures are very similar. The following municipalities and regions signed up to be part of the project (number of inhabitants in parenthesis): Torsås municipality (7125), Nybro municipality (20,318), Oskarshamn municipality (27,102), Ronneby municipality (29,633), Åland (29,789), Västervik municipality (36,679), Hudiksvall municipality (37,607), Karlskrona municipality (66,622), Region Blekinge (159,606), Region Jönköping county (363,599). See Figure 2 for the geographical location.

Additionally, the Association of Swedish Eco-municipalities [18], which has endorsed the FSSD sustainability principles as its overall definition of sustainability, was a supportive partner to the research project. The association has 111 members, whereof 105 eco-municipalities and six eco-regions, out of Sweden’s 290 municipalities and 21 regions. Municipalities in Sweden are comparatively

![Figure 2. Geographic locations of participatory action research (PAR) project municipalities and regions.](image-url)
large to the surface and often contain both urban and rural areas. Swedish municipalities also have, relative to international legislation and norms, great freedom of action referred to as “municipal self-governance”. It aims at providing citizens with responsibility and influence over common issues [19]. Typical municipal government issues are childcare, all levels of school, elderly care, spatial planning, health and environmental protection, water supply and rescue services, and certain tax-reforms, for example, road-pricing. In collaboration with the regions, municipalities are responsible for public traffic. Regions are also responsible for health care and regional development [20].

The overall research methodology applied for this study is participatory action research (PAR). A characteristic of PAR is to focus on an inquiry that aims towards individual or societal change [21]. Additionally, PAR involves the co-creation of knowledge and active participation from both researchers and practitioners. The research participants are highly involved in tailoring procedures and actions decided during the project. By nature, PAR processes are recursive and include steps of questioning, reflecting and investigating, developing, and of implementing and refining specific issues (see Figure 3). McIntyre [21] (p. 5) describes PAR as “a braided process of exploration, reflection and action”.

When planning the PAR project, we considered how the preliminary FSSD implementation model could play out in a municipality or region based on previous experiences [14].

The following overarching process steps were planned upfront:

1. Decision to participate in the PAR project and set up. Establishment of a core team and internal communication channels with decision-makers. Good contact channels for interactions between the municipal partners on the one hand, and the university on the other.
2. Introduction of the FSSD, the preliminary long-term implementation model and the PAR project to decision-makers and people in strategic positions. Explaining the FSSD and its rationale of applying first-order sustainability principles as boundary conditions for cross-sector modelling of goals (A), sustainability analyses (B), brainstorming of options (C) and prioritized actions into the redesign (D).
3. Assessment of the municipality’s or region’s current strategic sustainability work seen through the lens of the FSSD implementation model.
4. Development, and/or scrutinizing existing municipal/regional vision from a sustainability perspective given by the FSSD boundary conditions.
5. ABCD procedures for the overall geographic municipality or region.
6. In parallel, ABCD procedures for more detailed focus areas, for example, individual sectors such as energy, transport, or the food system, but also smaller focus areas such as a specific municipal operations, processes, projects or efforts to design more strategic routines, for example, for procurement.

7. Comparisons of ABCD results through varying collaboration platforms between sectors and operations within, as well as between municipalities and regions. Shared reflections and co-learning between all participants in the study.

8. ABCD iterations, i.e., learning harvested from results, evaluation and comparisons of ABCD processes are fed into repeated ABCDs in an ongoing development process for a specific focus area, sector or the overarching municipality/region.

While these steps were initially proposed to each partner municipality and region, an ongoing dialogue took place throughout the PAR project to adopt the process steps based on specific circumstances. The overarching steps of PAR (questioning, reflecting, developing, and implementing) occurred all the way through the above steps.

We have collected and analyzed data specific to the application steps of the implementation model. Below, data collection methods are described, followed by a description of data analysis processes.

3.1.1. Data Collection

Data were collected throughout the PAR project using observations/dialogues/reflections, surveys, and round table discussions, see Figure 1. These activities went on continuously for the different steps of the implementation model and intensified during project meetings, specifically in May 2017 and June 2018. The survey and round table discussions were planned to coincide with the April 2016 annual meeting for the Association of Swedish Eco-municipalities to seize the opportunity of having inputs included from a majority of Swedish eco-municipality representatives.

- Documentation of Observations, Dialogues, and Reflections

Process outcomes, prerequisites and reflections of the overall process for each partner have been documented in relation to each process step. For transparency and affirmation, the research team prepared project report drafts that were sent to key contacts for each partner, giving them the possibility to check and adjust if needed. Additionally, notes from common workshops, seminars and webinars were taken and shared throughout the PAR process. Similar questions were grouped and discussed at meetings. Reflections were welcomed also in between meetings. In the latter half of the PAR project, key contact persons were generally well initiated in the FSSD, the implementation model we are testing in this study, and local and regional progress made from this.

- Survey on the Presentation and Round Table Workshop at SEKOM Conference April 2016

A presentation of the FSSD and the implementation model was done at the SEKOM conference in April 2016 and was followed by a paper survey to gain participants’ views on its purpose and rationale for implementation and testing. The survey consisted of nine questions with the possibility to leave comments. Political and administration representatives from a majority of the Swedish Eco-municipality network, in total 85 people, participated in the conference. Typically, one politician and one civil servant responsible for sustainability work represented each eco-municipality. In groups of seven to eight people, the conference participants discussed current barriers and enablers (B) in relation to the idea of any attractive future within the FSSD boundary conditions for sustainability (A) and, to that end, the relevance of the proposed implementation model for the systematic exploration of regional-specific opportunities (C) and prioritizations of such into actions decided upon across sectors (D). These round table discussions, and a concluding joint dialogue, ran over one to two hours, spread over two days.
3.1.2. Data Analysis

As a first step of analyzing collected data we decided on organizational categories [22] in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed implementation model as well as the barriers or enablers for applying it. Additionally, reflections were noted on actions taken, or not taken, by partner municipalities and regions throughout the PAR process. The data were then analyzed and put into substantive categories (ibid) through open coding to describe the content of the data and to structure all the information into manageable pieces. The data sets from the different data collection methods were merged into one big matrix of data. While the organizational categories remained the same, the substantive categories underwent minor adjustments to avoid overlaps. Our categorized data were then analyzed to discover connections between the different organizational categories and in relation to the outcome of the processes in the PAR project. All while considering the preliminary implementation model in terms of if, and how, it could be improved and what additional support might be of need. The analysis is developed in the discussion and synthesis of this paper.

4. Results

4.1. Actions and Results from Processes within the PAR Project Phase 1, 2015–2018

Over the three years PAR period, over 230 meetings, workshops, seminars, and IT communications between meetings took place within the frame of the research project. Tables 1–8 give an overview of what happened during the PAR processes for each participating municipality and region in relation to the planned process steps (see Section 3—Method). More details are to be found in project reports for each partner and can be received upon request. In relation to each process step, the most commonly mentioned reflections from observations and dialogues with project partners are stated. Thereafter, we present collective descriptions from the reported strengths, weaknesses, barriers, and enablers based on all data collection.
Table 1. Summarized outcomes for each partner municipality and region, and example reflections related to the first process step in the planned PAR process: decision to participate in the PAR project, establishment of core team and communication channels.

| Partner              | Decision to Participate in the PAR Project, Establishment of Core Team and Communication Channels | General Reflections from Observations and Dialogues with Project Partners |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hudiksvall           | Participation initiated by civil servants and politicians. Good political buy in and support sticks out in this municipality. Good relationship with administrative head and leading politicians through steering group for ecological sustainability. | Knowledge and understanding of the intendent process should be well established with decision-makers. More action related to the PAR project could be seen when initiative to participate came from both civil servants and politicians. Initial support for anchoring the purpose and need of the FSSD implementation model is requested from key contacts as a prerequisite for them to independently be able to continue the work (presentation material, videos, good examples and best practices etc.). Part time politicians in small municipalities and multitasking civil servants lack time for strategic sustainability work. A well working core team and good political anchoring are key to deal with for example (sudden) personnel turnover, re-organizations and elections. Practitioners pointed out that having a network appointed upfront is crucial for evolving traditions and norms for sharing results and good practices. |
| Karlskrona           | Initiated by civil servants. Moderate political support. Contact persons and core teams were assigned dependent on ABCD focus. Politicians briefed informally and through occasional presentations to the municipal board, but no clear commitment nor decisions on communication channels for the PAR project. | |
| Nybro                | Initiated by civil servants. Moderate political support. One key contact. No clear core team. Politicians briefed informally and through occasional presentations to the municipal board, but no clear commitment nor decisions on communication channels for the PAR project. | |
| Oskarshamn           | Initiated by civil servants. Moderate political support. One key contact. No clear core team. Politicians briefed informally and through occasional presentations to the municipal board, but no clear commitment nor decisions on communication channels for the PAR project. | |
| Region Blekinge      | Initiated by civil servants. Moderate political support. One key contact. No clear core team. Politicians briefed informally and through occasional presentations to the municipal board, but no clear commitment nor decisions on communication channels for the PAR project. | |
| Region Jönköpings Län| Initiated by civil servants. Moderate political support. Initial key contact left his position within one year of the project. Consultant took over. No core team. Politicians briefed informally and through occasional presentations to the municipal board, but no clear commitment nor decisions on communication channels for the PAR project. | |
| Partner | Decision to Participate in the PAR Project, Establishment of Core Team and Communication Channels | General Reflections from Observations and Dialogues with Project Partners |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ronneby | Initiated by civil servants. Low political support. Initial key contact left her position halfway into the project. No clear core team. Politicians briefed informally and through occasional presentations to the municipal board, but no clear commitment nor decisions on communication channels for the PAR project. |  |
| Torsås  | Initiated by civil servants and politicians. Moderate political support. One key contact on half time and occasionally on sick leave. No core team. Politicians briefed informally and through occasional presentations to the municipal board, but no clear commitment nor decisions on communication channels for the PAR project. |  |
| Västervik | Initiated by civil servants and politicians. Moderate political support. One key contact. No core team. Some political commitment but poor internal communication between politicians and administration. |  |
| Åland   | Initiated by civil servants and politicians. High political support. One key contact changed after one year. Core team established through ambitious regional initiative. Politics involved and briefed on a regular basis through the specifically established network of a viable Åland (www.barkraft.ax). |  |
Table 2. Summarized outcomes for each partner municipality and region, and example reflections related to the second process step in the planned PAR process: introduction of the FSSD, the implementation model and the PAR project to decision-makers and people in strategic positions.

| Partner                  | Introduction of the FSSD, the Implementation Model and the PAR Project to Decision-Makers and People in Strategic Positions | Overarching Reflections from Observations and Dialogues with Project Partners |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hudiksvall               | September 2015—about 40 people. Politicians from sustainability and welfare committees + some civil servants participated. Continued and broadened introductions outside the core team, including offered training/education. | Introduction and learning regarding the processes introduced through FSSD and the implementation model must happen continuously. A majority of partners did not plan for a continuous introduction and was not sufficiently instructed to do so. At the same time, not everyone in a municipality/region is in need of knowing all details about specific concepts and methods for strategic sustainable development (SSD). Participants emphasized the need for a communication plan regarding SSD and to clarify sufficient levels of information for specific target groups (e.g., leading politicians, managers and people in operational roles). Further, for successful anchoring of the FSSD implementation model, practitioners highlighted a need to clarify alignment between what the model proposes in context of existing governance and management systems. |
| Karlskrona               | September 2015—about 20 politicians in the municipal board and a few civil servants. Continuous introductions of the implementation model within specific focus areas (see ABCD processes for focus areas below). |                                                                                   |
| Nybro                    | November 2015—about 40 people. Politicians from the municipal board + other councils and civil servants |                                                                                   |
| Oskarshamn               | August 2015—35 people. About 20 civil servants and 15 politicians. |                                                                                   |
| Region Blekinge          | October 2015—About 20 politicians in the regional board. Further introductions in relation to focus area ABCDs (see ABCD processes for focus areas below). |                                                                                   |
| Region Jönköpings Län    | August 2015—About 25 people, whereof 10 civil servants and 15 politicians in the regional board. Further introductions in relation to focus area ABCDs (see ABCD processes for focus areas below). |                                                                                   |
| Ronneby                  | January and April 2016—January: heads of departments—10 people. April: Politicians in the municipal board and heads of departments—30 people. |                                                                                   |
| Torsås                   | May 2015—Politicians in the municipal board and heads of departments—30 people. Further introductions in relation to focus area ABCDs (see ABCD processes for focus areas below). |                                                                                   |
| Västervik                | April 2015—About 15 people. Mainly civil servants in Västervik Sustainability network. |                                                                                   |
| Åland                    | June 2015—About 20 people, mix of civil servants, responsible politicians and engaged sector representatives. Continuous broad introduction and introduction through focus areas (see ABCD processes for focus areas below). |                                                                                   |
Table 3. Summarized outcomes for each partner municipality and region, and example reflections related to the third process step in the planned PAR process: assessment of the municipality’s/region’s current strategic sustainability work through the lens of the FSSD implementation model.

| Partner                     | Assessment of the Municipality’s/Region’s Current Strategic Sustainability Work through the Lens of the FSSD Implementation Model                                                                 | Overarching Reflections from Observations and Dialogues with Project Partners                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hudiksvall                  | Analysis of the current situation, viewed through a lens of the implementation model, aimed to highlight and take advantage of everything that was already done in relation to the various steps in the process and at the same time to see if it was possible to discover any gaps for strategic sustainability work in the municipality/region. Interviews, observations and reviews of partners’ websites, as well as document analysis of strategies/plans/policies were carried out. | These assessments are work in progress and will continue over phase two of the PAR project. Many dialogues have been carried out based on preliminary results, however, these are not yet summarized. |
| Karlskrona                  |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                               |
| Nybro                       |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                               |
| Oskarshamn                  |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                               |
| Region Blekinge             |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                               |
| Region Jönköpings Län       |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                               |
| Ronneby                     |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                               |
| Torsås                      |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                               |
| Västervik                   |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                               |
| Åland                       |                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                               |
Table 4. Summarized outcomes for each partner municipality and region, and example reflections related to the fourth process step in the planned PAR process:
Expert moderated developments/quality checks of municipal/regional visions from a sustainability perspective (A).

| Partner          | Expert Moderated Developments/Quality Checks of Municipal/Regional Visions from A Sustainability Perspective (A) | Overarching Reflections from Observations and Dialogues with Project Partners |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hudiksvall       | Workshop Sept 2015: quality check of existing vision. Led to supplementation of text in the specification of the overall goals. | Conceptual confusions regarding visions were relatively common among practitioners. What is a vision? Is it synonymous to an attractive goal co-created across sectors? Less or more specific than that? And what has sustainability got to do with it? Support and examples are asked for. The FSSD visioning process is perhaps the first-time practitioners realise the need to integrate sustainability into what kind of desired overall future they want for their municipality/region, which can reveal conflict of interests and initial resistance. |
| Karlskrona       | Workshop Sept 2015: quality check of existing vision. No specific improvements.                           |                                                                                  |
| Nybro            | November 2015: Visioning workshop carried out. Results applied in continuing visioning processes outside of research project. |                                                                                  |
| Oskarshamn       | August 2015: quality check of existing vision. Result implemented in new Sustainability programme.         |                                                                                  |
| Region Blekinge  | No workshop done. Vision already in place that refer to the FSSD sustainability principles.                |                                                                                  |
| Region Jönköpings Län | No workshop done. Vision already in place and not considered necessary to update at that time.           |                                                                                  |
| Ronneby          | December 2016: Process input to visioning workshop. Resulted in new overarching vision presented in budget 2017. |                                                                                  |
| Torsås           | Spring 2017: Input to Torsås’ vision through ABCD processes with eight graders.                           |                                                                                  |
| Västervik        | Planned October 2015 but cancelled. Postponed to spring 2016 but not realised.                           |                                                                                  |
| Åland            | March 2016: Visioning workshop with approx. 100 participants from all societal sectors. Vision developed in spring 2016 and elaborated in a development and sustainability agenda for Åland including a vision statement and seven overarching development goals (see https://www.barkraft.ax/). |                                                                                  |
Table 5. Summarized outcomes for each partner municipality and region, and example reflections related to the fifth process step in the planned PAR process: ABCD procedures for planning in the overall geographic municipality or region.

| Partner | ABCD Procedures for Planning in the Overall Geographic Municipality or Region | Overarching Reflections from Observations and Dialogues with Project Partners |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hudiksvall | Initiated an overall baseline/sustainability analysis (B), including a process for scrutinising social sustainability through social boundary conditions. To be continued. Additional support was asked for. Identified a need for capacity-building within the organisation and launched broad educational support to staff (mainly on C/D steps of the ABCD). | The visioning process took a lot of energy and, due to generally weak mandates for the whole process in partner municipalities and regions, not enough initiative could be gathered for full B, C and D steps at an overarching level. Instead, this happened in a more ad hoc, unprepared way. This step is closely related to the step Assessment of the municipality’s/region’s current strategic sustainability work through the lens of the FSSD implementation model (see above). Baseline analyses were initiated in partner municipalities that had key contacts well informed about the PAR project, FSSD and preferably had a well working core team. Insufficient defining of the gap between baseline (B) and a vision of success (A) risks resulting in insufficient actions from a full sustainability perspective. Clear instructions for how to perform a FSSD Baseline analysis for a whole municipality/region were missing. Such instructions were identified as needed support and can be developed from initial experiences. It was noted as important to make use of existing data, solutions and ideas for baseline analysis (B) as well as idea generation (C/D). |
| Karlskrona | Baseline/sustainability analysis (B) discussed but not initiated. | |
| Nybro | Initiated a baseline/sustainability analysis (B). Additional support was asked for. Initiated work towards a Sustainability programme for the whole municipality (mainly on C/D steps of the ABCD). | |
| Oskarshamn | Initiated baseline/sustainability analysis (B). Additional support was asked for. | |
| Region Blekinge | No. However discussed ABCD procedure of forthcoming revision of the Regional development strategy. | |
| Region Jönköpings Län | No action during PAR project. | |
| Ronneby | No action during PAR project. | |
| Torsås | No action during PAR project. | |
| Västervik | No action during PAR project. | |
| Åland | The PAR project gave process input to overall baseline analyses (B). Internal experts with FSSD competence ran process. Annual progress reports were produced (three so far 2017–2019). Development and sustainability agenda produced to guide continuous work (mainly around C/D of the ABCD). Network established (www.barkraft.ax) to be the hub for the coordination of developments aligned with the sustainability agenda. Road maps for different organizations and sectors are developed, as well as road maps for the seven development goals which will be launched digitally during year 2020. The ABCD process is communicated and partially applied as a common planning procedure. | |
Table 6. Summarized outcomes for each partner municipality and region, and example reflections related to the sixth process step in the planned PAR process: ABCD processes for focus areas.

| Partner       | ABCD Processes for Focus Areas                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Overarching Reflections from Observations and Dialogues with Project Partners                                                                 |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hudiksvall    | Initiated: Planned application of ABCD for developments of the new comprehensive plan. One initial half-day workshop with politicians and civil servants. No results during phase one of the research project.           | Besides visioning workshops, most actions during the PAR project occurred within focus area ABCDs. Focus area ABCDs are more hands on than overall planning and show concrete results faster. Although, long term application of the ABCD procedure within municipalities and regions is ideally an interplay between the overall perspective, societal sectors and focus areas. Specific results should be related to a common vision of success and other specific ABCD procedures for comparison and search of synergies/conflicts. Specific ABCD procedures (focuses) can create more and more ripples on the water, leading to extended knowledge and increased interest about the approach. A potential “back door” to establishing political good will and mandate. |
| Karlskrona    | Completed first ABCD round: Social sustainability for children and youth. Strategy and action plan developed and completed. Many different stakeholder groups participated during several meetings and workshops; youth, teachers, the police, NGOs etcetera. Completed first ABCD round: The municipal procurement process. Goals, baseline and solutions were identified through workshops resulting in an action plan for sustainable procurement. A core team around head of procurement met several times and civil servants from all municipal departments participated in a half-day workshop. Initiated: Department for operations and services. Introduction at department meeting and one 3 h workshop with management group completed. |                                                                                                                                 |
| Nybro         | No action during PAR project.                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                 |
| Oskarshamn    | A group of spatial planners tested the ABCD process at the focus “infrastructure” as a sub-part of the comprehensive plan.                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                 |
| Region Blekinge | Completed first ABCD round: Procedures for Regional growth funding. Led to developed instructions for applicants and a foundation for an online web tool that position applications in relation to sustainability. People from the Project office participate in two half-day workshops and continuous work. |                                                                                                                                 |
| Region Jönköpings Län | Initiated ABCD process for the regional administration and its operations. Input to a sustainability programme for internal operations. https://www.rjl.se/om-oss/Budget-och-utvecklingsplaner/program-for-hallbar-utveckling/. Representatives from different operations participated in a full-day workshop. |                                                                                                                                 |
| Ronneby       | No action during PAR project.                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                 |
| Torsås        | Initiated ABCD process for development of strategy towards Fossil-fuel free municipality 2030. The municipal administration’s manager group participated in a full-day workshop.                                                        |                                                                                                                                 |
| Västervik     | Process input to work with water quality.                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                 |
| Åland         | Completed first ABCD round within research project: Sustainable food system. Input to Strategy for a sustainable food system at Åland (https://landsbygd.ax/livsmedelsstrategin). Executed through a Delphi procedure (three web-based survey rounds) with 80 participants from all societal sectors and ended with a half-day workshop. Process input to: Sustainable drinking water supply (https://vattenskydd.ax/en/sustainable-drinking-water). Additional processes can be found at https://www.barkraft.ax/english. |                                                                                                                                 |
Table 7. Summarized outcomes for each partner municipality and region, and example reflections related to the seventh process step in the planned PAR process: comparisons of ABCD results through collaboration platforms within, as well as between municipalities and regions.

| Partner               | Comparisons of ABCD Results through Collaboration Platforms within, as Well as between Municipalities and Regions                                                                 | Overarching Reflections from Observations and Dialogues with Project Partners                                      |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hudiksvall            | Most of the partner municipalities and regions did not reach this step and we realised it was unrealistic within the limited project period. Nevertheless, Karlskrona and Åland were able to run two separate ABCD focus procedures which led to informal comparisons through people that had participated in both processes. Additionally, Åland launched a broad collaboration platform, www.barkraft.ax. The network is the hub for the coordination of the work to realize the development and sustainability agenda and was formed at the initiative of the stakeholders from the public sector, businesses, associations, and education sector. Comparisons between partner municipalities and regions happened during annual project meetings and webinars, 11 in total. Comparisons focused on procedures rather than concrete results. Indirect comparisons/learnings happened through intermediation of results between researchers and the partners during meetings. Project participants also shared results and experiences through a common and web-based workspace. | Practitioners found it helpful to learn from each other and emphasized a desire and need to continue doing that. For example, through study visits, attending workshops as observers and by exchanging of guest lectures. Identified additional support: A tool (digital) for communication of results, comparisons for inspiration and learning and celebration of victories. Practitioners also reflected of the importance to make use of, be inspired by and/or invite existing collaboration initiatives to co-creation. |
| Karlskrona            |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Nybro                 |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Oskarshamn            |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Region Blekinge       |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Region Jönköpings Län |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Ronneby               |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Torsås                |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Västervik             |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Åland                 |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |

Table 8. Summarized outcomes for each partner municipality and region, and example reflections related to the eight process step in the planned PAR process: ABCD iterations based on results of processes, comparisons, and evaluation.

| Partner               | ABCD Iterations Based on Results of Processes, Comparisons and Evaluation | Overarching Reflections from Observations and Dialogues with Project Partners                                      |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hudiksvall            | No iterations of specific or overall ABCD processes happen for any of the participating partners during the limited PAR project period. |                                                                                                               |
| Karlskrona            |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Nybro                 |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Oskarshamn            |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Region Blekinge       |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Region Jönköpings Län |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Ronneby               |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Torsås                |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Västervik             |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
| Åland                 |                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                               |
4.2. Learnings from Applying the Preliminary Implementation Model

Compliance with the model varied. An overall reflection shows that despite all the activities throughout the different process steps, partners did not fully adopt or undertake all the steps proposed by the implementation model. Having said that, Åland is a noticeable exception. The autonomous and demilitarized archipelago region in Finland represents a model of a country. Government, parliament, municipalities, civil society and business are unified around an attractive future cross-sector modeled vision within the sustainability constraints of the FSSD [23]. Cross-sector workshops iteratively develop this vision (A), challenges and assets in relation to it (B), co-create laundry lists of optional future steps (C) and prioritize actions amongst those (D) as plans unfold in reality—all in agreement with the tested implementation model.

The testing and evaluation of the preliminary implementation model resulted in lists of strengths and weaknesses of the model as such, and of barriers and enablers for applying the strategic sustainability approach.

4.2.1. Reported Strengths of the FSSD Implementation Model

General appreciation of the model as such. The presented model was generally perceived amongst participants as logical, intuitive, and highly needed for comprehension and a strategic overview. Collaboration through a common language in terms of the sustainability principles and the ABCD process logic for strategic thinking in general were generally mentioned as strengths. Additionally, the initial visioning workshops and focus area ABCD processes which were moderated by participating researchers were well received. The creative tension field between the ABCD checkpoints, one triggering ideas in the other in a noninterrupted flow, facilitated group dynamics and creativity in the ABCD workshops of the study. Practitioners considered the structure of the ABCD mindset to have a capacity for enhancing the effectiveness of dialogues and co-creation by using goals, challenges, proposed measures, and prioritized actions more dynamically by keeping them clearly distinct and avoiding confusion between them. For example, one key contact from the Nybro municipality (sustainability strategist) revealed that the way they speak about sustainability in the municipality is very different after the PAR project. Previously perceived goal-conflicts from a mindset of comparing snap-shot “pros” and “cons” in relation to one problem at a time, for example, “climate”, could now be managed by a more strategic mindset in line with the model: cross-sector innovation of stepping-stones towards the full scope of co-created sustainable goals.

4.2.2. Reported Weaknesses of the FSSD Implementation Model

Model failed to survive on its own. The model worked for as long as research team members moderated sessions. However, when continued steps were to be taken without expert-moderation of workshops, the model ceased to be applied. No specific weaknesses regarding content of the core concepts of FSSD, nor the drafted implementation model have been reported. Nevertheless, weaknesses were mentioned in terms of theory not being sufficiently backed-up with concretization examples. Practitioners state that the implementation model contains many concepts to keep in mind for an early adopter, and that it is not possible to digest it all from one single introduction and that a person with no previous experience of strategic sustainable development (SSD) work risks being overwhelmed by this, or in other words, it is difficult to move from theory to practice without expert help and more training than the project offered. Manuals for hands-on use, with concrete examples to deepen the understanding of the model with its concepts, were called for. To this end, we have listed barriers and solutions/enablers more in detail:

4.2.3. Reported Barriers of the FSSD Implementation Model

Hard to go from theory to practice. While many practitioners appreciated the FSSD implementation model upfront, they were also specifically saying that the model’s big picture
theory is perceived as hard to implement for real-life changes in the individual region or municipality. Therefore, a given challenge lies in providing advice for how to concretely translate and apply the overall sketch and concepts to municipal and regional specific contexts.

**Moderators for forthcoming workshops were not identified and trained upfront.** After introducing the model in this study, we had expected forthcoming processes to spontaneously select and train moderators. This only happened uncommonly, and we believe this must be corrected upfront in forthcoming implementation efforts. This will also give us an opportunity to provide special moderator trainings and handouts to this group of practitioners.

**Leaders, political and nonelected, for governance and dissemination of the implementation model, were not identified upfront.** Many participants experienced a lack of committed leadership of the procedure which, in turn, created a lack of spread and understanding of the procedure outside of the core team.

**Lack of norms and infrastructures for cross-sector cooperation in general.** Many practitioners declared that municipalities and regions did not have working routines, functional infrastructures, and norms in place for any type of action-oriented cross-sector cooperation. When discussed, no participants, except Åland, explicitly announced the existence of such structures.

**Resistance based on misconceptions.** Yet other barriers noted were financial concerns and conceptual confusions, for example, not considering the FSSD’s guidelines for how to align tools, concepts, and methods with the FSSD’s ABCD procedure.

### 4.2.4. Reported Enablers of the FSSD Implementation Model

Several enablers were suggested throughout the PAR project as a consequence of practitioners appreciating the purpose of the implementation model and from experiencing strengths, weaknesses, and barriers for its implementation.

**Education and learning by doing is needed.** The most commonly mentioned enablers were promoting education, in particular to preselected moderators and coordinators to promote the model’s implementation. Further, stressing harder, and implementing faster, that the ABCD processes of the implementation model is all about learning by doing (see also [24]).

Practitioners said that it is primarily important to lift all employees to a common basic level in the knowledge of sustainable development and what it means, i.e., devoting early ABCD procedures to deal with problems and tasks people are actively involved in—to help people understand the general applicability of the model by “digging where they stand” upfront.

**Participation and mandate from top management is needed.** As a direct response to the experienced lack of committed leadership as a barrier, civil servants throughout the project emphasized the importance of receiving mandates from top managements for advancing the sustainability work. Such mandates must also come with directions of follow-up procedures.

**Collaboration platforms between sectors and other municipalities/regions.** Many different types and forms of collaboration platforms exists within municipalities and regions [25], such as for businesses, industry, or rural development. However, these do not generally exist between sectors.

Being introduced to the implementation model practitioners further emphasized the importance of networking and the co-creation of infrastructures and norms for an enhanced collaboration between sectors, preferably by making better use of existing structures.

**Providing good examples and practices.** Perceiving the difficulty of moving from theory to practice, practitioners (civil servants, politicians, and sector representatives) asked for good examples and best practices for all the different steps and concepts as this would support a broader anchoring and understanding of the procedures.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusions

In this study we have tried out a model for the implementation of strategic cross-sector cooperation towards sustainability in local governments and regions. Through participatory action research,
we evaluated the implementation both regarding the model itself (strengths and weaknesses) and in terms of barriers and enablers for its application. We intended to investigate if the implementation model lives up to its purpose to provide comprehensive cross-sector support for strategic sustainable development as well as its user friendliness and discover room for improvement of the model as well as hands-on advice for applying it. The study confirmed that sustainability practitioners in local governments and regions realized the need for, and appreciated, the model’s (i) basic design, i.e., robust principles for social and ecological sustainability applied as boundary conditions for cross-sector re-design, (ii) logical guidelines for the modelling of cross-sector sustainability within the boundary conditions and step-wise approaches towards such goals (ABCD procedure), and (iii) overall guidance to develop norms and structures for long-term implementation of this ABCD logic (see the sketch in Figure 1).

The study also confirmed that expert moderated ABCD dialogues and workshops managed to arrive at, and document, a higher clarity as regards a need for more stringent modelling of cross-sector sustainability (A), clearer baseline assessments as regards the big picture of challenges and assets in relation to sustainability (B), group creativity regarding the brain-storming of lists of possible measures and actions (C) and concrete decision-logs regarding prioritized actions (D).

We did not expect a simple process when launching the PAR project and the results also pointed to a number of barriers, and solutions, that we believe can be generalized to be valid for any type of municipal planning framework. The most essential of barriers was perhaps the difficulty for core teams to recruit leaders and decision makers into active participation. We also witnessed exceptions to this observation, a broad anchoring and commitment to the process was the result in the case of Åland where the government as well as parliament has endorsed the project, and partly also in Hudiksvall.

The nature of PAR means that researchers’ participation and performances have a significant impact and it is important to reflect if something could have been made differently to improve on the chances for the model to survive in the longer term. Potentially, more time with each partner would enhance processes. However, at the same time, we see it as essential that people within the municipalities and regions are the ones taking over the longer-term implementation of cross-sector strategic sustainable development. Indeed, our research discovered a number of barriers, as well as enablers, for refining the implementation model and equipping it with hands-on structures for autonomous longer-term implementation.

To this end, we believe our results point to a major structural deficiency in many local governments and regions: there are in general too few infrastructures and norms in place for effective cross-sector cooperation. To this end, it seems well-advised to apply the ABCD mindset, iteratively across sectors, to become more strategic in decision-making of any kind. In this case, when we address the greatest challenge to municipalities and regions since the dawn of civilization, its survival, we argue that universal or generic sustainability principles applied as boundary conditions for redesign represent the most commonly and dangerously missing piece of “A”, setting goals, in local and regional developments: There are in general no visions or goals cross-sector modeled within robust sustainability constraints (A), no cross-sector baseline assessments in context of such goals (B), no creative cooperation across sectors to come up with proposed measures to deal with challenges (C), and no concretizations of prioritized actions into plans that could work synergistically for the sectors (D). Strict models for systematic co-creation for sustainability across sectors will not work unless there are structures and norms in place for using them in team-work across sectors. Vice versa, structures and norms in place for regular cross-sector meetings are of relatively low use unless there are shared mental models in place that make it worthwhile from an economic, social and ecological action point of view.

In summary. The implementation model has been appreciated amongst practitioners as theoretically valid and highly called for, while at the same time being in need of more hands-on manuals for concrete implementation. We could identify deficiencies in our own implementation, and more specifically, there were clear deficiencies in the instructions and training given to project partners for how to build up capacity for the facilitation of ABCD work on their own, and for how to
anchor the model at governance levels. Reflections and observations from PAR processes as well as the reported strengths, weaknesses, enablers and barriers from the other applied methods, provided input to some ideas for hands-on advice in the future:

- **Guidance for how to better introduce the FSSD and its implementation model amongst leaders and decision makers—their active part in the co-creation of plans, monitoring of progress and communications is key.** For example, presenting the concrete “business case” (economical self-benefit) for sustainability [11,12]. Furthermore, showcasing how the strategic methodology is designed to (i) support strategic leadership of any kind as well as (ii) providing know-how regarding the integration of sustainability with all other goals and finding synergies between them, and (iii) create comprehension and cohesion of concepts and tools for decision support, monitoring and communications.

- **Instructions for initial capacity-building ABCD procedures and workshops to be run with top management, assuring that enough resources will be allocated over time, such as sufficient competence, prerequisites for cross-sector collaboration and decision-making capacity, and, additionally, to anchor the need of infrastructures and norms for active cross-sector cooperation of any kind, preferably by developing more effective relationships between already active platforms.**

- **Inspiration of how to put together a core team helping to release individual burdens and balance potential staff turnover—making what they need to do anyhow easier.**

- **Upfront training of moderators.** This includes an ABCD manual for practitioners, both for running independent ABCD processes and as education material for train-the-trainer procedures.

- **Instructions/inspiration for how to keep up processes and momentum, for example, how to transfer results from one ABCD workshop (measures under previous D-list) to the next (new ABCD workshop’s B list) and good examples and best practices of supportive structures and tools (such as innovative collaboration platforms, communication strategies, and hands-on advice for how to apply the ABCD mindset to use various support-tools and concepts effectively in cohesion).**

Next, our PAR project with selected partner municipalities and regions will relaunch and take off based on the herein presented learnings and identified needs for more in-depth instructions and additional support. We also believe that our result can be generalized into learnings valid for any type of municipal planning framework [26–28].

Forthcoming research and support to be developed include, but are not limited to, developments of (1) detailed instructions for the broad implementation of FSSD in municipalities and regions, based on outcomes of the first phase of the PAR project (2) assessment and alignment support as a foundation for capacity building, (3) an ABCD manual for in-house facilitation and train-the-trainer approaches and (4) further collection and gathering of good examples and best practices (such as a case study of Åland).

**Author Contributions:** All three authors conceived and designed the analysis. L.W. collected the data and led the analysis with support from K.-H.R., L.W. and K.-H.R. wrote the paper with support from G.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by The National Association of Swedish Eco-municipalities, the municipalities of Hudiksvall, Karlskrona, Nybro, Oskarshamn, Ronneby, Torsås and Västervik, Region Blekinge, Region Jönköping County and Åland’s Provincial Government. The APC was funded by Blekinge Institute of Technology.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors are grateful for the time and effort spent by municipal and regional practitioners in meetings, dialogues and discussions that provide a foundation for this study. Financial support was provided by the Swedish Association of Eco-municipalities and the municipalities of Hudiksvall, Karlskrona, Nybro, Oskarshamn, Ronneby, Västervik and Torsås, and Region Jönköping, Region Blekinge and the Government of Åland. These organizations were not involved in the writing and submission of this paper for publication.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.
References

1. Krause, R.M.; Feiock, R.C.; Hawkins, C.V. The Administrative Organization of Sustainability Within Local Government. *J. Public Adm. Res. Theory* 2016, 26, 113–127. [CrossRef]

2. Rosa, W. (Ed.) Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In *A New Era in Global Health*; Springer: New York, NY, USA, 2017; ISBN 978-0-8261-9011-6.

3. McLean, B.L.; Borrén, T. Barriers to implementing sustainability locally: A case study of policy immobilities. *Local Environ.* 2015, 20, 1489–1506. [CrossRef]

4. Van Bueren, E.; De Jong, J. Establishing sustainability: Policy successes and failures. *Build. Res. Inf.* 2007, 35, 543–556. [CrossRef]

5. Burch, S. In pursuit of resilient, low carbon communities: An examination of barriers to action in three Canadian cities. *Energy Policy* 2010, 38, 7575–7585. [CrossRef]

6. Ekstrom, J.A.; Moser, S.C. Identifying and overcoming barriers in urban climate adaptation: Case study findings from the San Francisco Bay Area, California, USA. *Urban Clim.* 2014, 9, 54–74. [CrossRef]

7. Ling, C.; Hanna, K.; Dale, A. A template for integrated community sustainability planning. *Environ. Manag.* 2009, 44, 228–242. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

8. Wälitalo, L.; Callaghan, E.; Robért, K.-H.; Broman, G. Identifying barriers to effective transitioning towards sustainability in municipalities and regions. 2020; submitted.

9. Vogel, C.; Stamer, A.; Heckathorn, A. A Guide for the Strategic Analysis of Frameworks for Municipal Sustainability Planning. Master’s Thesis, Blekinge Institute of Technology, Karlskrona, Sweden, 2019.

10. Broman, G.I.; Robért, K.-H. A framework for strategic sustainable development. *J. Clean. Prod.* 2017, 140 Pt 1, 17–31. [CrossRef]

11. Holmberg, J.; Robért, K.-H. Backcasting—A framework for strategic planning. *Int. J. Sustain. Dev. World Ecol.* 2000, 7, 291–308. [CrossRef]

12. Robért, K.-H.; Broman, G. Prisoners’ dilemma misleads business and policy making. *J. Clean. Prod.* 2017, 140, 10–16. [CrossRef]

13. Missimer, M.; Robért, K.-H.; Broman, G. A strategic approach to social sustainability—Part 1: Exploring the social system. *J. Clean. Prod.* 2017, 140 Pt 1, 32–41. [CrossRef]

14. Robért, K.-H.; Borrén, S.; Ny, H.; Broman, G. A strategic approach to sustainable transport system development—Part 1: Attempting a generic community planning process model. *J. Clean. Prod.* 2017, 140, 53–61. [CrossRef]

15. Robért, K.-H.; Schmidt-Bleek, B.; Aloisi de Larderel, J.; Basile, G.; Jansen, J.L.; Kuehr, R.; Price Thomas, P.; Suzuki, M.; Hawken, P.; Wackernagel, M. Strategic sustainable development—Selection, design and synergies of applied tools. *J. Clean. Prod.* 2002, 10, 197–214. [CrossRef]

16. SEKOM. Sveriges Ekokommun—Världens Äldsta Kommunnätverk för Hållbar Utveckling. Available online: http://www.sekom.se (accessed on 1 January 2018).

17. Blekinge Institute of Technology (BTH). Stöd för Ökad Hållbarhet. Available online: https://www.mynewsde sk.com/se/bth/pressreleases/stoed-foer-oekad-haallbarhet-1135433 (accessed on 21 August 2020).

18. Sveriges Ekokommun. Available online: http://www.sekom.se/In-English (accessed on 10 May 2020).

19. SKR. Kommunalt Självstyre. Available online: https://skr.se/demokratiledningstyrning/politisktystorningfort roenndevalda/kommunaljsjalvstyreastyrskommunenochregionen.380.html (accessed on 6 May 2020).

20. SKR. Regionernas Åtaganden. Available online: https://skr.se/tjanster/kommunerochregioner/faktakommu nerochregioner/regionernasataganden.27748.html (accessed on 21 August 2020).

21. McIntyre, A. *Participatory Action Research*; SAGE Publications, Inc.: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2008.

22. Maxwell, J.A. *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*; SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2013.

23. Bärkraft.ax. Available online: https://www.barkraft.ax/english (accessed on 1 May 2020).

24. Bryant, J.; Thomson, G. Learning as a key leverage point for sustainability transformations: A case study of a local government in Perth, Western Australia. *Sustain. Sci.* 2020. [CrossRef]

25. Ansell, C.; Gash, A. Collaborative Platforms as a Governance Strategy. *J. Public Adm. Res. Theory* 2018, 28, 16–32. [CrossRef]

26. Cittaslow International. Available online: http://www.cittaslow.org/ (accessed on 3 June 2019).
27. LEED for Cities and Communities. Available online: https://new.usgbc.org/leed-for-cities (accessed on 3 June 2019).

28. OnePlanet. Available online: https://www.oneplanet-ngo.org/ (accessed on 3 June 2019).

© 2020 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).