

Challenges and opportunities in municipalities' work on sustainable consumption



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Recommendations for supporting sustainable consumption at the local level

- **Prioritize systematic monitoring and analysis of sustainability impacts of municipal purchases and investments. This will allow for better design of effective policies and measures to promote sustainable consumption.**
- **Enable better allocation of resources through increased political support for municipal work on sustainable consumption. This is key if Sweden is to achieve the established sustainability targets.**
- **Assign a larger role to the County Administrative Boards, to coordinate and facilitate synergies and the sharing of knowledge between municipalities while at the same time functioning as a strong link between local and national government levels.**

Against a background of environmental policy advances in recent years such as the 2019 in-depth [evaluation of progress on Sweden's environmental goals](#); the Paris Agreement; and the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Swedish municipalities are increasingly focused on creating the right conditions for transition to more a sustainable society. In these efforts, supporting and promoting sustainable consumption has come to play a central role. Its importance has also been acknowledged in Sweden's national [strategy for sustainable consumption](#), adopted in 2016, and in the overarching objective of Sweden's environmental policy, the [Generational Goal](#).

Sweden is a global frontrunner in policies and measures to address sustainable consumption. At the same time, Sweden's per capita climate footprint remains very large. In order for Sweden to succeed in reducing the impacts of its consumption, it is important to understand what drives consumption, and how it can be made more sustainable.

In 2018, SEI conducted a survey among Swedish municipalities to better understand how they work with sustainable consumption, what challenges and needs they have identified in this work, and what are some of the most important driving forces in their work.

The survey was web-based and aimed at sustainability officers in Sweden's 290 municipalities. Responses were received from 119 municipalities, a response rate of just over 40%.

IMAGE (ABOVE): © OLASER / GETTY

This brief presents the findings of the survey, as well as three recommendations based on the survey results for how municipalities work on sustainable consumption can be further strengthened.

THE UNLOCK PROJECT

The research project UNLOCK, Understanding local government drivers for sustainable consumption, ran between 2016 and 2020 with funding from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (environmental research fund).

The UNLOCK aim was to identify and analyse the potential for, and barriers to, sustainable consumption at the local level, focusing on three areas:

- Drivers and preconditions for work on sustainable consumption
- Policy instruments and other tools for reducing the impacts of consumption on the environment and the climate
- Indicators for measuring and monitoring progress towards sustainable consumption.

More information can be found at: www.sei.org/projects-and-tools/projects/unlock-sustainable-consumption/

What role can municipalities play in promoting sustainable consumption?

The Swedish public sector is responsible for almost 15% of Sweden's consumption-based greenhouse gas emissions (i.e. emissions linked to producing, transporting and using the goods and services consumed in Sweden – regardless of where in the world these products have been consumed), and households for about 60%. Private capital investments account for the remaining 15%.¹

If Sweden is to achieve its long-term climate objectives, including reaching net-zero territorial emissions by 2045 and the Generational Goal, the public sector must review how it can reduce its own consumption-based emissions and use of resources. Municipalities have a key role to play in this. They are responsible for a large share of public-sector consumption in Sweden. They can also work to facilitate sustainable consumption among households, businesses and organizations within their geographical area. This applies particularly to land-use planning, which affects development and patterns of transport, but also to areas such as waste management, education, cultural and leisure provision, and information campaigns.

What are Swedish municipalities currently doing on sustainable consumption?

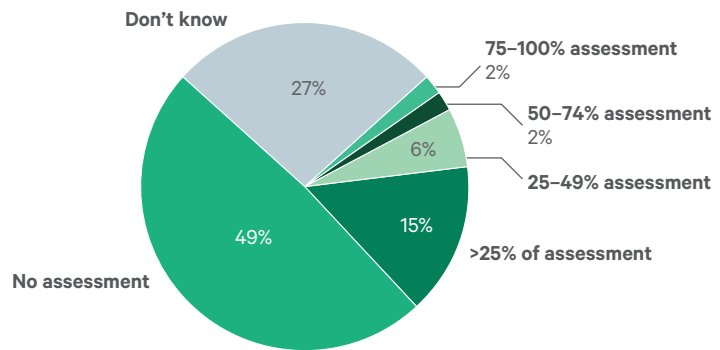
The survey results indicate that many municipalities are already active in promoting sustainable consumption. They appear to have a high level of awareness and reported having set ambitious goals and having instituted a substantial number of measures to promote sustainable consumption.

Almost 60% of the responding municipalities reported that they were working systematically to address consumption in relation to their own operations; that is, they had integrated sustainable consumption into their strategies, action plans, environmental programmes or similar. Around 30% said they were working on promoting sustainable consumption in households, and a smaller percentage that they were also working on promoting sustainable consumption among businesses and organizations.

The results also clearly show that a majority of municipalities do not monitor their consumption at all, and that fewer than half had assessed the impact of their purchasing on the environment or climate (see Figure 1). As a result, municipalities had only a limited understanding of the environmental impact of their own consumption.

¹ www.naturvardsverket.se/Sa-mar-miljon/Statistik-A-O/Vaxthusgaser-konsumtionsbaserade-utslapp-per-person/. Calculated using methods developed under the PRINCE project (www.prince-project.se).

Figure 1. Percentage of municipalities that have assessed the impact of their purchasing on the environment or climate

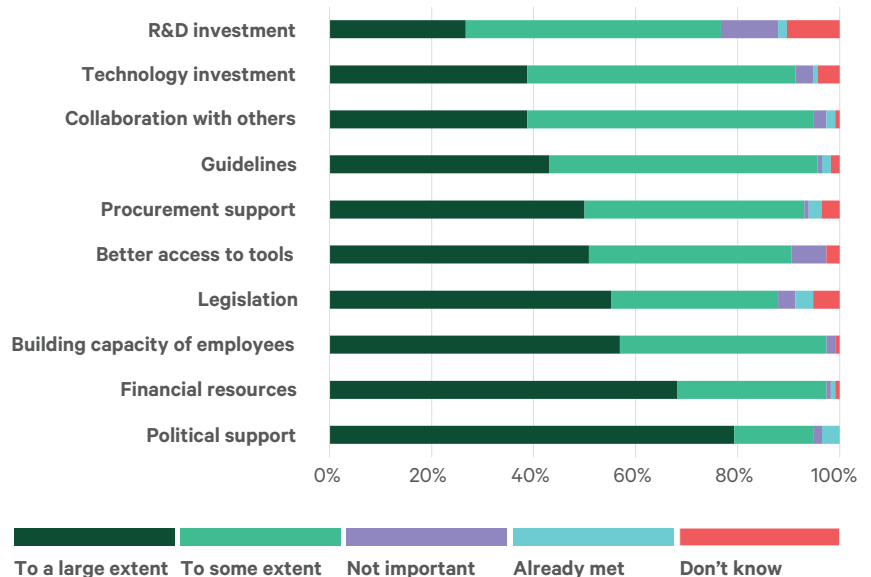


Around 40% of municipalities had, or were in the process of establishing, a consumption-based sustainability objective at the time of the survey. The municipalities also reported that their own officers and local politicians were the key actors in driving their work on sustainable consumption.

What do municipalities need to advance their work on sustainable consumption?

Overall, the survey respondents said that in order to initiate or continue to develop work that facilitates sustainable consumption, they needed both more resources (e.g. funding or competence) and support from their local politicians. They would also like to see more supportive legislation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Support and resources municipalities report needing to advance their work on sustainable consumption



Municipalities also indicated that they had a considerable need for tools and methods to improve the way they collect and process data about their activities and their consumption and to enable them to monitor progress towards their objectives. The respondents said that their work on sustainable consumption was primarily driven by financial incentives, followed by national guidelines and policy instruments.

Recommendations

Drawing on these findings, we offer the following recommendations:

- **Prioritize systematic monitoring and analysis of sustainability impacts of municipal purchases and investments. This will allow for better design of effective policies and measures to promote sustainable consumption.**

Municipalities generally do not monitor their sustainability impacts or performance in several areas of consumption, meaning they can have limited control over them. Municipalities should establish processes for systematic monitoring and analysis of all purchases and investments. This will allow them to also assess the overall environmental impacts of the activities and establish smart measures for reduction.

- **Enable better allocation of resources through increased political support for municipal work on sustainable consumption. This is key if Sweden is to achieve the established sustainability targets.**

Survey respondents frequently highlighted the importance of sustainable consumption work having the support of local politicians, but indicated that it often did not. If Sweden is to achieve its long-term environmental objectives, it is vital that local politicians improve their understanding of sustainable societal development and the potential role of municipalities, and make sustainable consumption a policy priority.

- **Assign a larger role to the County Administrative Boards, to coordinate and facilitate synergies and the sharing of knowledge between municipalities while at the same time functioning as a strong link between local and national government levels.**

For Sweden to achieve its long-term environmental objectives, transformative societal changes will be required. This will require broad, society-wide solutions, including action coordinated among municipalities, to be effective and resource-efficient.

Municipalities indicated that their work on sustainable consumption requires considerable financial resources and competence. An approach whereby each municipality works in isolation to identify solutions for sustainable societal development is not efficient.

Many respondents also noted the importance of national guidelines and policy instruments and of opportunities for stakeholders to collaborate and engage with each other. Another recurring issue is the need for support with procurement and monitoring. There would seem to be an urgent need for the government, public-sector agencies and County Administrative Boards to work together to coordinate municipalities' learning in relation to sustainable consumption and to develop clearer instructions and guidance to improve their work in this area.

It would be helpful for this support to be coordinated by the County Administrative Boards, providing a framework for municipalities' work on sustainable consumption that could include establishing shared objectives and visions.

The full survey report is available in Swedish here: www.sei.org/publications/utmaningar-mojligheter-kommunernas-arbete-hallbar-konsumtion.



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