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Challenges for transportation planning and organization in the Stockholm region

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Abstract

The current model for regional infrastructure and urban planning in the Stockholm Region emerged over the early post-war decades. It is a model that proved to be inadequate already early on. That the model does not work is partly due to the conditions for regional planning over the past half century being fundamentally altered in several important respects. There is a need to search for new alternatives for how to organize and fund the regional community planning and the vital infrastructure systems in Stockholm. A discussion of these issues needs to address both the level that is to apply for the organization, from the local level to the regional/central level, and how funding should be solved, with taxes or fees. Four different models for the future organization are discussed in the article. They are not mutually exclusive but demonstrate how different developmental pathways can be pragmatically combined in order to create a regional governance model that is suited for future challenges rather than for since long-gone social conditions.

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1. Introduction

The Stockholm Region\(^1\) has been growing considerably over several years in terms of number of residents. Economic growth is also above average in Sweden. It has become something of a given metaphor that in recent years “Stockholm is growing by two buses a day.” This gives an illustration of how many people the county is growing by as each day passes, if you put these people on buses. It is a useful and striking image. It has formed the basis for a series of discussions about what the requirements are in the region going forward, including infrastructure and housing construction.

Alongside this striking metaphor there are of course also a number of signs in everyday life that Stockholm is growing into a larger dimension of city. Congestion has become a hallmark of Stockholm life. This applies to public transport, it applies to road traffic and it applies to the housing market. Differences in status between residential areas are discussed in terms of segregation, both economic and ethnic. The differences between the city and the region’s extensive rural areas have risen. Life in Stockholm has become ever more complicated, while it is still attracting more and more people.

Apparently, the Stockholm Region is already experiencing a challenging situation in several respects. Looking ahead, several of the trends that we see at the present time will be accentuated. Moreover, the challenges that face the Stockholm Region are far more diverse and difficult to resolve than in previous decades. Despite this, policymakers are frequently looking for solutions to these challenges that are more rooted in the perception of society in the 1960s than the 2020s. The formation of the Greater Stockholm County Council (Stockholms Läns Landsting) in 1971, for example, was the result of a belief that a greater emphasis at a regional public sector level would address the problems, and many continue to state this as a fact. We believe it likely to be a fallacy. We cannot meet future challenges using past solutions.

In this paper we present four alternative routes towards modernised and streamlined regional planning. However, it seems unlikely that agreement could be reached in Stockholm about one of the proposed models for future development and organisation. We will likely see elements from all four models in the actual development. We therefore argue that the most fruitful way forward in terms of the continuing forward-looking community building process goes through a model where we take advantage of the best of the various models.

There is, perhaps needless to mention, an extensive previous literature on urban governance. Schematically, these studies can be divided into two main categories.

The first category comprises studies that focus on administrative boundaries within public sector. The perhaps most frequently analysed topic in these types of studies is the distribution of power and responsibility between different government levels (see, for example Lowery et al (1995) or Teske et al (1995)). A great deal of academic attention has also been payed to the coordination of government bodies on the same level (see, for example Hulst et al (2009) or Piemus (1999)). An area of research that combines these two dimensions of “intra public sector governance” is studies on administrative fragmentation (i.e. the discrepancy between the administrative and functional urban area) and its potential drawback regarding the creation of an efficient urban governance framework (see, for example Ahrend et al (2014) or Cheshire and Magrini (2008)).

The second category of studies on urban governance deals with the growing amount of models that involves private sector in the provision of public services. Public-Private partnerships (PPP), sometimes also referred to as new public management, covers a wide range of arrangements – from models similar to traditional public procurement to a profound transfer of financing, designing, implementing and operating to the private sector. Lately, a large number of ex post assessments of PPP-projects have been carried out. However, these studies are generally less than conclusive (see, for example Chen et al (2015)).

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\(^1\) The Stockholm Region refers primarily to the Stockholm County. The statistics and reasoning that follow later on in this report are based on the Stockholm County, i.e. the administrative region. However, the actual, functional region has a larger geographic distribution than this. According to Statistics Sweden’s classification of local labour markets, the Stockholm Region also consists of a number of municipalities in Uppsala and Södermanland Counties.
Unlike the vast majority of papers on urban governance, this paper is hard to put into any of the two categories mentioned above. The novelty of the paper lies in its truly agnostic view on urban governance. On one hand, we conclude that crucial parts of the governance model in the Stockholm region have to be considered outdated. On the other hand, we implicitly argue that an institutional re-design is more likely to be successful if it is characterized by incremental changes rather than one radical leap. Likewise, we regard market-orientated solutions and conventional public models as complements rather than competing routes.

2. New social conditions – new model?

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the model for regional planning that was formulated in the early post-war decades has become outdated over time. Compared to how Stockholm looked 50 years ago, the planning conditions regarding a number of central issues have changed in a profound way:

- Population growth has a completely different structure with emphasis in refugee immigration and high birth rates. During the first post-war decades, population growth was driven instead by employment market related and chiefly domestic inward migration.
- Increasingly more of Stockholm residents’ daily life activities – work, consumption and leisure activities – are located outside their home municipality. The proportion of employed persons who commute to work in another municipality has doubled since the mid-1960s.
- The City of Stockholm’s dominant position in the county has diminished. This is a consequence of the increased geographical mobility and the county’s population increase has largely taken place in the surrounding municipalities.
- The dense city has experienced a renaissance as a planning ideal. The sparsity mindset that characterised physical planning in the early post-war decades has given way to a realisation of the importance of developing a dense urban and regional structure.
- The financial conditions of residential construction have fundamentally changed. State subsidies are abolished and the ability to engage in social housing through the public housing companies has been sharply reduced.

How would then an updated model which is better suited to manage the region’s future challenges appear? First of all, a new model should contribute to improved regional coordination. The municipalities are responsible for the essential elements of “community service” and, through its planning monopoly exert a significant influence on, and responsibility for, planning of new developments. A plan monopoly means that an individual municipality in principle also has a veto right for new roads and railways through new infrastructure as well as all other buildings requiring detail planning decided by municipality. In the regional development plan, certain guidelines are established for the location of housing and the routing of new infrastructure. But how the estimated necessary total volume of new housing is allocated over the county’s area is in fact the result of discussions between the municipalities and regional planning agencies, which means that the planned location of new housing is rather an expression of the individual municipalities’ interest in building rather than the actual demand for land suitable for construction.

A new model for regional planning should also include some form of mechanism that creates more market-driven public development planning. As long as housing construction was being heavily subsidized, it did not matter too much that the supply of land suitable for construction matched the actual, underlying demand poorly. You could also afford to remove a lot of power over the design of the houses from the developers through increased detail regulation. The combination of subsidies and regulated rental market still made it profitable to build new rental units, almost regardless of location and design of the homes. But now subsidies have been removed and thereby also the force that sustained new construction, despite an inefficient geographical distribution of land suitable for construction and limited opportunities for developers to adapt their product to match market demands.

Investments in the region’s transport infrastructure have been inadequate for a long time. There are clear indications that low government investment has been a major contributor to falling behind (see, for example WSP (2013)). The most obvious weaknesses with the current regional plan are that it lacks a relation to the economic
planning of new infrastructure and the government budget process. A more fundamental change to the State’s approach to infrastructure in Stockholm is though hardly a likely scenario.

In the coming decades, demographic changes are expected to mean a substantial increase in government consumption expenditure, which in all likelihoods will mean a narrower scope for government investment (NIER, 2014). A new model for regional planning should therefore also include a new funding structure that allows infrastructure investments in Stockholm relying less on funds from the state budget. A change of this nature also creates opportunities to better integrate the economic and physical planning of new roads and railways in the region.

It is likely that there will be a large group for some time to come which will be in a weak position to assert itself in the region’s housing market. This applies particularly to refugee immigrants who in the short term often has a weak position in the fairly regulated labour market and therefore limited financial resources. In order to take advantage of the significant long-term potential of immigration it is crucial to increase the receiving capacity of the Stockholm Region and in order to cope with it, it will likely require specific initiatives, as reforms of the labour market.

Is there a model that could satisfy all the needs identified above? Maybe, but the path there is not clear. In fact, there are several possible options. Four different models are conceivable. These are not mutually exclusive but demonstrate how different developmental pathways can be combined. The four “basic models” can be grouped under the headings:

- The public regional model
- The municipal based public model
- The global efficiency model
- The fees, corporate and commercial model

From a theoretical point of view these reflect the two major strands of studies and analyses carried out as described above in section 1. Discussions where a planned development is contrasted towards a more spontaneous development based on many actors on different levels is also thoroughly discussed by scholars like Hayek (1944, 1960) and Ostrom (2005). Chisholm (1989) has discussed spontaneous planning models in the field of transportation. Klein (2012) and Wagner (2007) have analysed how coordination in the economy can come about through coordination between actors in the public and the private sector, and combinations thereof. There is clearly a sound background for the discussion in this article on future possible organisational models.

3. The public regional model

For this model the infrastructure issues and responsibility for housing construction is organized at an overall level within a strengthened regional community level. The County Council is converted into a more developed region similar to other Swedish regions such as Region Skåne or Region Västra Götaland and takes over the regional development tasks from the Government’s County Administrative Board (Länsstyrelsen). It can also be considered if it is appropriate to provide regional planning, that is already being run by Stockholm County Council, with a more formalized role, something that has been considered by a recent government investigation (SOU 2015:59), proposals that have though finally not been given.

It could be possible that in this model to take a step further than today in terms of ownership of regional transport through the new region assuming responsibility for regional roads, railways and airports that are currently managed by the Swedish Transport Administration (Trafikverket) and the government’s Airport Corporation Swedavia. Responsibility for the ports could also be transferred to the regional level. This would provide the region with overall responsibility for transport infrastructure.

The infrastructure could be organized either in a management form of as a corporate entity. A corporate form would likely offer more opportunities to work freely on various forms of financing. The financing of activities in the field of urban planning and community development/infrastructure could, in this model, be based principally on tax revenue, but with fee income for airline operations, harbours and public transport.

If an interest to proceed with expanded tax financing is at hand, the government can of course introduce some kind of regional property taxes or increased development charges, a model that has already been discussed in the
government’s 1989 Metropolitan Investigation (SOU 1989:112), which received renewed interest through the former center-right government’s decision to investigate the introduction of a special infrastructure tax on commercial properties. The Metropolitan Investigation suggested that the formation of specific infrastructure companies, one company for each metropolitan region. The aim was that these companies should build and manage new infrastructure which would be financed partly by user charges, and a special statutory land charges. The starting point for the investigation’s proposal to use land charges as a funding base for the infrastructure was improved transportation systems and the increased availability that this implies to a significant extent capitalized in increased land values. Funding via land charges would, according to the investigation, provide four obvious advantages:

- It creates incentives to guide investment to projects that provide the greatest accessibility effects, i.e. the most economically profitable projects.
- The strong link between income and expenses creates strong incentives for efficient resource utilization in the individual investment projects.
- As funding is borne by those who benefit from the investment, the system is fairer than traditional financing where instead the entire taxpayer collective is responsible for the costs.
- The interaction between infrastructure planning and the location of dwellings and workplaces is improved. As the basis for levying land fees is heavily influenced by the volume of housing and business premises in the new infrastructure’s area of influence will create incentives to concentrate new development there.

This public regional model would affect the relationship with the municipalities relatively strongly, which would be responsible primarily for providing local services and be responsible for the detailed design/regulation of construction and urban planning. The advantages are that the regional perspective in the Stockholm Region would be bolstered. The challenging aspect would be to increase public support for the regional level in the social structure. This is a development that takes time and that is likely to be supported by extensive work on communications and various forms of direct democracy elements, probably based on modern IT solutions.

It is questionable whether this solution provides sufficient flexibility when it comes to growth issues. A region that is growing rapidly needs a light-footed dynamic organization that coordinates a range of social issues. Policy-based decision forms are unfortunately often not that flexible. They are often dominated by tensions and conflict rather than by consensus and goal orientation. Herein lies perhaps the public regional model’s great weakness.

4. The municipal based public model

In this model, it is the local municipal level that is to be put in focus. The logic would be that it is the local perspective in the municipalities that creates a sense of home and belonging among the citizens, not the regional perspective. Instead of increasing the regional level influence this model would rather reduce the influence of this level. The infrastructure may, for example, be run in a government agency or corporate form, but with the possibility for increased influence of the individual municipalities or associations of municipalities. On the whole, regional interests with this orientation can be expressed through local municipal cooperation, not by increasing the influence of the regional political level.

Responsibility for urban planning and housing construction should remain at the municipal level. Maybe it is a really efficient and citizen-friendly model that municipalities can individually develop communities and their attractiveness in competition with surrounding municipalities. Interaction between blocks of municipalities can occur spontaneously to further common interests. Government coordination needs can be solved by the County Administrative Board and other government agencies.

If a community development of this type would encourage or discourage development of the region, is a matter of discussion. It is likely that municipalities may exhibit greater differences over time than they do today. But is this development a good or a bad thing? A significant equalization of opportunities between municipalities takes place regardless through various forms of government income redistribution policies and transfers. Maybe the regional level is simply not necessary, and this model would free the Stockholm Region of unnecessary centralized/regionalized planning bureaucracy and control. Accountability requirements on the political level are e.g. often considered to work better at a local rather than at a regional level. This advocates a decentralized model.
A model using this formula could fail when it comes to funding opportunities in comparison to a regional model. But if regional initiatives with this model can be handled by the state, the needs of regional funding can be smaller. It is not easy to determine if the decentralized model provides better or worse conditions for the Stockholm Region from a growth perspective compared to the regional model. Perhaps the regional aspects are exaggerated and maybe a situation with less optimal resource utilization in the economy will be the result as more public funds are allocated to a higher societal level with lower efficiency incentives? It may be the case at local level, of course, combined with the global dimension that modern information and communication provides, that we find the best prospects. The regional model may belong more to the outlook of society of the 1960s than of the 2020s.

5. The global efficiency model

Sweden is a small, sparsely populated country in an open global economy with a high, sometimes very high, pressure from competitive forces. Sweden has a high standard of living (measured in economic terms but also in most other measurements). This means that productivity is highly driven and only activities that can generate high added value can survive. If we are to maintain our high standard of living in the Stockholm Region, this trend must continue.

The industry is small and the service sectors predominate in areas such as banking and finance, with its support operations, the IT sector, education, health care and nursing, consulting engineering operations and head office functions in general. As a supplement to these sectors, there is a service with lower added values in several different industries such as transport, care services, property management, restaurants, cleaning services, etc. Only in industries with highly developed specializations and positively charged brands with high quality can production in Sweden with Swedish labour costs be justified. The luxury segment is growing, however, which is also part of an international trend.

Efficiency improvements in various industries lead to different processes. In general economies of scale and standardization of concepts is the dominant way of improving efficiency in most industries. This generally leads to a small number of dominant companies in various industries and a number of smaller, locally active ones thereto as a complement. This is particularly pronounced in technological dynamic sectors with major investment needs, but service industries also have similar processes; with internationalization and standardization. It gives us more efficient services but also less site-specific solutions. For the majority of citizens and consumers, this appears to be a desirable course of events. Even in those areas that have traditionally been in a monopoly formation with tax financing, i.e. the dominant share of services in the public sector, there is a need to increase productivity. If these services are to be provided in the future, or could even increase in the share of consumption space with sustained wage levels, these must either be streamlined or the tax ratio must be significantly increased. However, it is difficult to see a trend where tax can be substantially increased in the economy without this impeding the economic development. How this challenge is to be met in a political landscape where awareness of these challenges is currently not allowed to lead to the implementation of the necessary efficiency measures is one of the major dilemmas of the national economy.

It seems nevertheless probable that the ongoing specialization in the economy will continue, especially in the areas under discussion here. The construction, transport and infrastructure sectors are therefore areas where it is reasonable to assume that an increasing proportion of operations will be conducted by companies based in other countries and on a global arena. We have already seen it in the civil engineering industry and among contractors in public transport. Further development in this area could likely be expected.

It is therefore one conceivable way forward for the Stockholm Region. An increasing part of the regional urban construction arena may be taken by globally active and highly productive companies. This will in all likelihood lead to further internationalization to the range of services and products. Likely a relatively diminishing share of the available resources in the national economy needs to be allocated to these sectors, or alternatively, a higher quality (better roads and railways with higher quality in construction, etc.) will be in reach at a given cost.

There really is nothing that says that this development model is associated with just one specific model for the organization at a regional or local community level. It can be combined with both regional centralization and with municipal decentralization. It could though perhaps be argued that the contracting entities in the public sector could benefit more from the profits of internationalization unless they are too small. The model of regional centralization
might therefore be more rational to combine with internationalization rather than with the decentralized model. The decentralized model could lead to a cost level in Stockholm that will be higher due to a weaker negotiating position in the procurement process, and therefore growth would be lower. Purchasing co-operation between municipalities is quite obviously a good idea to implement as an alternative to regional centralization.

Another issue that is likely to arise with a longer-driven specialization and internationalization is the question of who should be the owner of the resources that are managed at a regional and local level. There can be assumed to be a high acceptance among citizens that companies established in Sweden, and that are regionally or nationally owned, assume responsibility for various services and systems that were previously operated under public management. That an increasing proportion of these areas of the economy have been taken over by non-Swedish players and owners, perhaps with only a fleeting connection to Sweden and the region, however, may face greater scepticism and become an additional challenge for the region with this model.

The paradox is in this situation that a short-term reluctance to take efficiency enhancing measures within the dominant monopoly areas may in itself lead to a long term development where the Region is being forced to open up more to internationalization than would otherwise be necessary.

6. The fees, corporate and commercial model

If the previous models discussed various forms of balance between the public and private sector and various forms of public organization, it may of course be possible to choose a more radical market-oriented organizational model. This could be based on trying to increase the efficiency of urban planning, infrastructure planning and infrastructure systems as much as possible.

Different forms for opening up market mechanisms could be the focus of this model. Corporate forms can often be more resource efficient than those of the public sector and markets can be better at channelling individual’s preferences than politicized decisions. It could therefore be a goal in itself to establish market model in as many areas as possible.

The regional and local social structure in the Stockholm Region could focus on offering institutional conditions that are so good they pave the way for market-driven players to act in a direction which is deemed as political desirable. Regional and local social planning, for example, would be able to express clear framework conditions for the construction sector but leave it open for companies to build within the framework of these. This in itself would be a way of meeting the perceived lack of housing in the region, and perhaps especially the lack of housing to meet the challenges faced when receiving refugees.

A re-regulated housing market with freer rent setting could in the same way become a well-functioning market where supply and demand across the entire housing market would comply with each other more effectively.

Transport infrastructure would be open to players who are focused on operating these facilities efficiently. Here too, strict “license terms” need to be set up, and monitoring and supervision strengthened. Services on the railway and public transport could be opened up to more competition than experienced today, probably with additional purchases of services from the regional or local level.

Fee financing could be introduced in general in road traffic, either through tolls or municipal charges. The degree of self-financing in public transport could be increased. Here, the public sector could take on the role of regulator and monitoring body. Various forms of advanced pricing and ticketing systems, probably with increased IT support, could contribute to additional increases in efficiency.

The faster pace of innovation that a more market-driven development might generate could lead to the quicker introduction of intelligent traffic management systems and sustainable transport solutions, if necessary supported by taxes at a national or regional level. In this model, the need of controlling fees and redistributive tax instruments is greater while the need for funding tax instruments may be greater in public-sector models.

Whether the public sector is to be organized according to the model for regional centralization or municipal decentralization or not is of course an open question in this model. You might conclude that both models are likely to work but with different outcomes. The model in which strengthened markets and decentralization are combined would undoubtedly provide a more pluralistic and diverse systems than we have today, while regional centralization may be a way to fend off the market’s less desirable effects in certain situations.
7. Conclusions

As we previously noted, investments in the Stockholm Region’s transport infrastructure have long been scarce and there are indications that a substantial investment need has been built up. An important reason for this is that the Stockholm County’s share of total government investment spending is low in relation to its region’s contribution to Sweden’s overall GDP growth.

Given the pressure on public finances, which will occur as a result of changing demographics, it is hardly likely that there will be any more dramatic increases in government investment in the county’s infrastructure. Against this background, our assessment is that the Stockholm Region needs to look for new solutions that allow the Stockholm Region to become less dependent on the state to meet important future investments in infrastructure.

As already discussed, a new funding structure of this kind could be created by finding tools that makes it possible for the government to assimilate the land value effects that occur when the infrastructure is being expanded and accessibility improved. Funding models like these are likely to have significant potential in relatively central areas where land values are both high and relatively sensitive to changes in availability.

The same applies to a large extent to the ability of financing new infrastructure through user fees. International experiences from fee-financing infrastructure projects show that these are mainly suitable in sections that have large traffic flows and where there are no real alternative routes. Furthermore, it appears that fee-financing works best for road projects, while experiences in terms of fee-financing infrastructure are more discouraging (see, for example US Department of Transportation (2007)).

We believe that alternative financing based on user fees and increased land values should be routinely tested for all major infrastructure projects in the county, especially projects related to the more central parts of the region. Projects that have no traditional tax financing for implementation should obviously, if possible, be financed by user fees. One such example is the road project East of Stockholm that remains to complete the ring-road around the center of Stockholm.

As we have described earlier in this paper, coordination between the economic and physical infrastructure planning in the Stockholm Region is substandard. The physical regional planning, where the transport system constitutes the bulwark, is still essentially without knowing what financial frameworks are in place that relate to future investment. When the financing issue is put on the table, the Region is therefore periodically side-tracked into negotiations with the help of government negotiating agents.

In many respects, the system of state negotiating agents has been successful. There are several examples where negotiations have paved the way for important infrastructure projects that would otherwise likely never be implemented. But the negotiator system is also associated with problems, and many of these can be linked to the failure to offer continuity. The negotiators are appointed as needed and conclude their assignment when there is a full agreement that regulates how the main features of the agreement should be funded and implemented.

During the implementation process, after the negotiator has completed the assignment, new problems and conflicts often arise that need to be resolved. These logjams have often originated in the changed external conditions that are difficult to predict the course of the negotiations, especially since the contract period often extends over at least ten years. This may involve significant economic fluctuations that alter the public financial conditions, and political majority shifts at a national and/or regional level, and changes in public opinion regarding the projects that are included in the settlement. For example, as regards the major transportation package from the early 1990s the “Dennis package”, all three of these components to some extent contributed to the constitutive elements of the agreement never being implemented.

Another problem that occurs when the negotiations are used as a temporary initiative to solve a well-defined task is that the state counterparty, the regional players, is never really given time to coordinate and form a common perception of the objective of the negotiations. Consequently, the state thereby meets a poorly coordinated counterparty, which of course gives a very favourable negotiating position.

In order to provide better conditions to continuously deal with new conflicts of interest and to create a purer two party relationship in the negotiations between the state and the region, we believe that the current intermittently recurrent rounds of negotiations with a permanent negotiating team should be replaced.
The delegation may tentatively be put together by representatives of the state, all municipalities in the county and Stockholm County Council. To create a balance between the negotiating parties, it is reasonable to allow the Presidency of the delegation to alter between the state and the region.

The primary task of the negotiation delegation should be to reach agreements concerning the direction and funding of the future transport needs in the region, as well as ongoing follow up agreements previously concluded in terms of investment in transport infrastructure. In light of the transport system’s close interaction with the housing market, general issues relating to the location of new housing and workplaces should also lie on the delegation’s table.

As we have argued for, this connection is particularly relevant from a financing perspective, as improvements to the transport system in many cases gives rise to significant land value increases through development agreements and other negotiated solutions that can be transformed into an important funding base for investment in the region’s infrastructure. As described above, the better coordination of infrastructure planning with other building planners also helps to make the planning of the new housing more market oriented. A more coherent regional spatial planning program may further discourage the tendency towards sparsity and contribute to a denser and therefore economically, socially and ecologically more sustainable Stockholm Region.

This is a model in which the state, county and municipalities come together in a more continuous discussion of the development of the Stockholm Region by forming a standing forum for discussion. A “development agreement” between the parties could be concluded that provides the basis for an organizational solution such as a 10–20 year perspective. Any extensive organization or bureaucracy should not be built, rather a standing meeting place, based on the existing resources.

In this way we can create an arena where a long-term initiative to develop community building can occur. Thereby, we can avoid the recurring intergovernmental negotiators and move from individual efforts to a more permanent learning process concerning the conditions and implementation of community building. The Stockholm Region could take advantage of the government’s financial strength, the County Council’s overview and municipal consensus in the everyday lives of the region’s citizens. The interests and initiatives of the business community can also be channelled through various reference groups and venues for dialogue, negotiation and debate. This could be something of a new “social contract” for the Stockholm Region.

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