

## The environmental task and work at local level

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### **Background**

This study is a part of the research project »The Municipality and the Territory» (Asplund et al 1997), and will result in a licentiate degree. The theme for my project is the development of the environmental task within the Swedish local administration, with focus on the profession of environmental and health officers. The aim is to create a base for understanding of the way the environmental work at this level has been performed until today, and to find mechanisms and prerequisite for change, or in other words to uncover what I will call breaking points. Today »planning for sustainability» has become a concept (see for example Orrskog 1993). However, the link between environmental and health protection and planning is not new. Planning is, and has been, seen as an instrument for prevention of environmental and health problems, caused by the built environment (Törnqvist 1961).

The environmental field has its origin in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the work to stop epidemics, for instance cholera. About 1850, this work come to be linked to hygienic issues and sanitary problems through new findings in the bacteriologic field of medicine. Human health was threatened by bad living conditions, and diseases were to a great extent spread by drinking water, sewage and waste. During the last 150 years technical systems for distribution of water and care-taking of waste and sewage have been built up and developed continuously, as well as the development of knowledge and methods for control and reduction of pollution. The field has also its roots around 1900, when discussions about saving »nature» for recreational, cultural and scientific reasons started. During the last century, technical development and industrialisation have led to considerable changes in life-styles and consumption, and new problem areas as for example pollution from cars have appeared. An increased use of land for expanding urban areas

and communication lines as roads, railways and airports have led to debate of preservations of green areas (Lundgren 1989, Törnqvist 1961). In the 1960ies, "environmental issues" appeared as a concept, both in language in general and in the common debate. During the same period there seems to be a widening of the focus from human health to animals and plants, and more generally to preservation of nature for its own sake (Hedréen 1994, Sörlin 1991).

I find it fruitful to use the concept of culture, when studying professions and their development. Every group can be said to have, or develop a culture, to meet specific problem and handle situations they usually face (Frost 1985). Culture mainly rise from the needs of the members, by social processes (Alvesson 1995), and is affected by education and practice, as well as personal qualities and the institutional context. A culture includes shared valuations, fundamental assumptions of for example definitions of work and working methods, a common language, myths, and codes for behaviour. The culture thus includes the prerequisite for how to view the world and work, identification of problems and possible solutions; in other words: approach to work and working methods, most of it taken for granted, not being reflected in the day-to-day-work (Morgan 1996, Schein 1992). In situations of co-operation with other professional cultures, or when new tasks arise, this may raise a need of reflection, because of difficulties in understanding other actors and make the own standpoints clear (Schon 1995).

The analysis will lean on theories of systems of professions (Abott 1988), which handle competition and changes in a work-area when new tasks arise. A profession is linked to a work-area for example by legalisation (jurisdiction), but there are also choices by the professionals. When changes occur in the area, or new tasks arise, occupational groups have to widening or deepening their knowledge, change working methods etc, otherwise other groups may take over, entire or part of the tasks. In a already existing profession subgroups can develop due to changes in the work-area, which might form new professions over time. The analysis will also be linked to a theoretical framework of experience and performance of professional life, how we create meaning and use/create knowledge and skill by practising (Dreyfus, Dreyfus 1986, Flyvbjerg 1991, Ramirez 1995, Silverberg 1996, Schon 1995)

*Study design*

The study will include a general description of the development in this work area, and a theoretical discussion, the aim of which is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the story. Some key-words for the analysis are professions, competition, skill, experience, culture, and language. The study will include three deepening parts, high-lighting different periods:

- \_ The first part is a study of the content in the journal »Hygienisk Revy»<sup>6</sup> from 1915 and 1919. The years are selected due to a revision of the public health legalisation. The committee gave their utterance 1915, and the new law came into force 1919.
  
- \_ The second part will be carried out by means of interviews with former officers (health inspectors), in duty during the 1950 - 60ies. During this period a new revision of the public health act took place, according to changes in society, leading to new tasks to be handled. In the law from 1958, it was stated that every local health committee had to employ at least one inspector, with valid education. There was also during this period the concept of »environmental issues» were born, not in reality, but in language and the general awareness.
  
- \_ The third part of the study, which also is the main part, consists of interviews with leading officers in local environment protection departments, about their experiences from their occupational life from the 1970ies until today. During this period there has been changes in organisation, an increased, even if fluctuating, debate of environmental issues, several changes in legislation and regulations, and also an increased interest from other groups for tasks in the work-area. The stress will be on the latest ten years. The implementation of Agenda 21 work at local level will be used as an example especially on changes, and the maintaining of roles and positions by the professionals.

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<sup>6</sup> The journal was published by Svenska kommunförbundet and Riksförbundet för allmän hälsovård, from 1912 until 1973.

*Method*

The historical overview is the result of a literature study. The deepening parts have been chosen based on the collected information. The study of the journal will be carried out as an inventory of what issues are dealt with in the articles, carried out with a discourse analysis approach (Burr 1995). The interviews (ongoing) will be unstructured to semi-structured to their nature, and made with a biographic/life-story methodology approach. The interviews aim at covering the main structure of the interviewees' occupational life, and the experiences gathered (Arvidsson 1997, Kvale 1997). They will include information of the interviewees' view of how the societal development and other factors have influenced their work. This includes changes in organisation, working methods, co-operation with other departments, organisations and other actors, public as well as private ones, attitudes and perspectives, and aims and scope of the work-area. In the third part questions about their role in the planning process will be added.

*Tentative results of the study*

In the presentation made in Bergen, some results from the study will be presented. The historical overview will contribute to an understanding for the context in which environmental issues are handled in local practice, both in acting and thinking. In this description, as well as in the material from the interviews I expect some events to show up, which can be characterised as breaking points. Changes in legislation can for example in general be categorised as breaking points, but have varying importance. Agenda 21 seems to be one breaking point with considerable impact on the working area. The implementation of local Agenda 21 work has in some cases led to increased resources to environmental work, but also sometimes a competition, as new groups claim for legitimation to handle environmental tasks. Often the same task has already been handled by the environmental and health department during a long period. Employment of local co-ordinators for Agenda 21, recruited either from inside or outside the administration, has developed a new sub-group. This sub-group is, from the outside, often looked upon as a new separate profession, with different tasks and aims. Agenda 21 has sometimes worked as an impulse for the traditional environmental profession to take action in order to keep the position and the right to formulate the problem.

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