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This is the published version of a paper published in *European Planning Studies*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Rodela, R., Norss, E. (2023)

Opening up spatial planning to the participation of children and youth: the Swedish experience

European Planning Studies, (2): 252-269

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2022.2041557>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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Opening up spatial planning to the participation of children and youth: the Swedish experience

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study examining the pathway to and practices for inclusive participatory planning in Sweden. Recently, the Swedish government has transposed the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child into national law, making it a requirement for Swedish planners to involve children and youth in participatory spatial planning processes. The challenges planners face when needing to open up planning and engage children and youth in more structured ways, have not been discussed very much just yet. This study uses Sweden-centered empirical literature together with interviews with a selected group of respondents to contribute at that debate.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 October 2021
Revised 19 January 2022
Accepted 7 February 2022


KEYWORDS

Spatial planning;
participatory processes;
youth; Sweden

1. Introduction

It has been estimated that by 2050, more than a half of the world population will be living in cities and consequently cities will be in need of more space, more resources, and more infrastructure (Bai et al. 2018). Yet, there is still too little debate about how fast-growing cities meet expectations our society is now formulating about the pursuit of more sustainable living environments, and whose needs, values, and ideas about the future of our cities shall be voiced and considered in that regard. Research into the use and access of urban nature, and urban infrastructure, raises important questions about inequalities (Anguelovski et al. 2020; Cole et al. 2020). This literature helps to unveil how the needs of some groups are acknowledged and their preferences mapped more frequently, and more effectively, compared to other groups (Hands et al. 2019). For instance, preferences and needs of the adult working population are those that more often feature in published research, while preferences and needs of children and youth oftentimes fall behind (Cele 2015; Chawla 2015). The younger demographic group traditionally has not been very central to urban spatial planning policy and practice, but

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2022.2041557>.

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this is slowly changing (Lundy 2007; Mansfield, Batagol, and Raven 2021; Heinrich and Million 2016).

In this regard, important milestones have been reached over the past thirty years of activism championing the rights of children and youth to more sustainable living environments. One such key milestone is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989) signed by 196 countries worldwide (United Nations 2021). This convention also contributed to opening up the public debate and sparked subsequent initiatives as for instance is the Child-Friendly City initiative, launched in 1996 by UNICEF in collaboration with the UN-Habitat, with the aim to support municipalities on this (UNICEF 1996; Mansfield, Batagol, and Raven 2021; Lundy 2007; Wood 2015). However, while multiple countries signed the convention and joined the 'Child-Friendly City initiative', the transposition and subsequent implementations of these principles into the national contexts remain slow. Researchers have already commented on this. The challenges identified by earlier studies can be grouped into two broader streams. On the one hand are the challenges associated with the institutional context and formal arrangements that shape spatial planning, city making and urban governance in local contexts (e.g. Mansfield, Batagol, and Raven 2021; Palmy David and Buchanan 2020), while on the other hand there are challenges associated with the involvement and participation of the younger demographic group. This is not only in relation to what children and youth can be engaged in, and see as a meaningful activity to them, but also in relation to the ways in which they are able to find a voice on matters that are prevalently being described, seen and done from an adult viewpoint. This is also often being the viewpoint of an (adult) expert (Lauwers and Vanderstede 2005; Heinrich and Million 2016; Severcan 2015).

Academic literature has been reporting for several decades on participatory activities centred on the younger demographic group and offering descriptive accounts of how these activities are designed, delivered and received by children and youth. This body of literature constitutes an important contribution in understanding participatory planning, and the challenges and opportunities for the younger demographic group to be engaged in planning. Several reviews of the literature are available on this (i.e. Ataol, Krishnamurthy, and van Wesemael 2019; Mansfield, Batagol, and Raven 2021), and these offer an excellent overview of this area of inquiry. However, a perspective that seems to be less well documented at present, and consequently less understood, is that of the planners who need to deliver participatory activities targeted to children and youth, and this to be carried out under given institutional demands.

As countries make efforts to work on the UN Conventions, inclusive of the Sustainable Developmental Goals, and the policy landscape is changing, there is a need for changes also in spatial planning policy and practice. Current issues, challenges and needs that planners have are highly relevant subject matter and need to be documented, discussed and put forward for innovation. In the study reported here, we were interested to look further at recent changes in Sweden. Not only has the country led the sustainability debate globally for decades but also in 2020, the Swedish government has transposed the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child into national law (SFS 2018:1197), which makes it mandatory to include children and youth in participatory spatial planning processes in Sweden. There has been a moderate to limited public debate about this matter thus far in the country. While transposition of the law has been reported

and documented by research (e.g. Thorburn Stern 2019), less is known about how this now impacts planning in practice. Nordström and Wales (2019) comment that the participation of children and youth requires substantial changes. Yet, what such change needs to contain is subject to debate, and there is a need to continue research on this. By looking closer at the experience matured in Sweden with the new requirements, and challenges planners face on this matter, we aim to reflect on the lessons learned and contribute to the debate on participatory spatial planning.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we introduce the institutional context and locate Sweden as a progressive country that seeks to take the lead on contemporary questions pressing our society today and review selected Sweden-centred empirical literature. Section 3 describes the methods for data collection used for this study. Then, section 4 reports on and discusses interviews administered to Swedish planners during March and April 2021. Section 5 concludes this study with a list of lessons learned and core questions for future research and practice to work on. Despite the relatively recent introduction of the law and the explorative nature of the study reported here, our analysis offers inputs for more inclusive and participatory spatial planning practice within, and beyond the Nordic.

2. Opening up participatory planning to children and youth in Sweden

The role children and youth are given in society has changed over time and for very long there was not much concern about the consequences that an adult-centric built environment poses for the mental and physical health of youth and children. This has become a rather recent topic. As such it has been influenced by profound changes relating to contemporary adjustments of values linked to the private-public sphere, inclusive of changes in the way family, marriage, parenting and education are understood today. Such changes contributed to move children from the periphery of the adult-centric society and towards its centrality, where concern and actions for their mental and physical health became political. This subsequently led to activism – first by concerned adults and more recently also by concerned youth (Liou and Literat 2020). A key and contemporary policy document, known as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), has its roots in the policy action that followed some of these broader changes of values, and the repositioning of the figure of the child in society (Fass 2011; Heimer and Palme 2016).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted and opened for signature in 1989, it entered into force one year later (UNICEF 1989) and as of today, it has been signed by 196 countries (United Nations 2021). All UN member states have ratified this convention, with the exception of the US (OHCHR 2021). The ratification is a commitment that countries agree to be legally bound by the terms of the convention and will follow international law to realize what the convention states (UNICEF n.d.). The UNCRC consists of several articles allocating rights to children and youth but of special interest here is Article 12. What Article 12 states is that all children and youth have the right to express their views freely, in all matters that affect them, and should be provided the opportunity to be heard to have those views being given due weight (Lundy 2007; McMellon and Tisdall 2020; UNICEF 1989; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2003). Although the term ‘participation’ is not explicitly used in Article 12, this is what it commonly is understood to imply according to the UN

Committee on the Rights of the Child's general comment on the article (2009, 3). Alongside Article 12, there are further relevant provisions to include Article 13 (the right to freedom of expression), Article 14 (the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion), Article 15 (the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly), and Article 17 (the right to have access to information) (McMellon and Tisdall 2020).

The Swedish government ratified the UNCRC in 1990, and it entered into force in that same year (OHCHR 2021). However, an interest in society for youth and children's rights dates prior to that. Already in the seventies, Sweden was the first country to ban all forms of violence on minors with the adoption of the Children and Parents Code (1978/79, 67) and the favourable political climate in Sweden towards the rights of children and youth allowed for smooth ratification of the UNCRC and subsequent appointment of the Swedish Ombudsman for Children (Barnombudsmannen [n.da](#)). However, later some began to voice concern regarding how this should be positioned in Swedish legislation (Thorburn Stern 2019) and in the 1990s the political debate on the incorporation of the UNCRC led to several proposals. These were all rejected but led to the appointment of a parliamentary committee, which examined the pros and cons of incorporating the convention into Swedish law (Stern and Jörnruud 2011). The committee concluded that the convention, as a legal instrument, was incompatible with Swedish law and too vague in its provisions to be applicable in a Swedish court. In the following years, the disagreement on whether or not the UNCRC could be incorporated into Swedish law was considered an obstacle for the realization of children and youth's rights in practice (Heimer and Palme 2016; Thorburn Stern 2019). This issue has for instance been brought up by the Swedish Ombudsman for Children across various reports (Barnombudsmannen 2020). In a report about the impact of the child perspective in government agencies, they established how the implementation of the UNCRC is slow and that efforts from the government to accelerate the uptake of children's rights have a low impact on how authorities incorporate this in their work (Barnombudsmannen 2007).

Yet, Nordström (2020) reports on early examples of how children and youth's rights were given space in urban planning. For instance, the Swedish Transport Administration is seen as a forerunner in introducing a child perspective in urban governance and planning. They have been engaged in a collaborative project launched in the mid-1990s done in collaboration with 400 schools (Nordström 2020). In 1999, the Swedish government called upon the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning to investigate how children and youth's participation in spatial- and traffic planning could be realized (Larsson 2013). In collaboration with the Swedish Transport Administration and the Swedish National Institute of Public Health, they launched a subsequent project in 2010 that aimed at supporting and inspiring municipalities to engage in child-friendly urban planning (Nordström and Wales 2019).

According to Stenberg and Fryk (2021), there is a tradition in planning for considering child-friendly environments in Sweden. For instance, Cele (2015) reports on how children's needs, in terms of access to outdoor environments, were an important aspect of the Swedish welfare planning during a large part of the twentieth century. But, the urban planning system has been subject to extensive changes during the past 40 years. Starting from the mid-1960s and up until the mid-1980s, the so-called normative planning was put into practice. Normative planning concerning children and youth's living environments was defined in a public inquiry called Children's Outdoor Environment,

which highlighted the importance of children's access to outdoor space and safeguarded this when balancing land-use interests (SOU 1970, 1:30). During this period, urban planners were bound to follow legislation regarding the smallest accepted size of formal play spaces, such as schoolyards and other outdoor areas for play or physical activities (Cele 2015; Nordström and Wales 2019). This normative stand on planning focused on encouraging outdoor activities, as well as promoting children and youth's independent mobility and safety to move around by walking or bicycling (Nordström 2020). In the mid-1980s, the urban planning system shifted, and the responsibility to safeguard children's outdoor environments was placed on each individual municipality (Nordström and Wales 2019). Behind this, there was the 1987 Planning and Building Act and a progressive decentralization (Boverket 2020). Swedish municipalities are seeing value in the UNCRC and strive towards enabling urban planning that is in the best interest of children and youth (Cele and van Der Burgt 2015). To incorporate children and youth's interests in urban planning and evaluate possible impacts that planning projects pose on children and youth, planning instruments such as the Child Impact Assessment have been developed (Barnombudsmannen n.d.b). Today, these are implemented by municipalities and other public institutions, such as the Swedish Transport Administration and the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Cele and van Der Burgt 2015).

After several years of going back and forth within the government, with numerous rejections on proposals for incorporating the UNCRC in national law, the government voted in favour of a final proposal (Prop. 2017/18, 186) in June 2018 (Thorburn Stern 2019). Then with January 2020, an implementation of the Law (2018, 11197) on the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child has been introduced, making it now mandatory to include children and youth in participatory spatial planning in Sweden. However, while local authorities are interested to open participatory planning processes to children and youth, the way this is done in practice varies greatly. This topic made it into a public debate discussed in some press outlets, as is the magazine 'Arkitekten', where the absence of national guidelines and verified methodologies for involving children and youth in decisions on urban planning has been discussed (Ricci Saccotelli et al. 2019). Some municipalities, as is Stockholm, Huddinge, Gothenburg and Halmstad, are turning to the Child Impact Assessment tool (Nordström 2020; Huddinge kommun 2016; Halmstads kommun 2021), while other municipalities as are Uppsala and Lund have worked out guidance documents for allocating space for children and youth and developed pilot projects involving children and youth (Nordström 2020). Some further observers formulate more sceptical views and comment how eventually what is influencing the uptake of youth participation at the local level is the presence, or absence, of political interest in this subject across municipalities in the country (Cele and van Der Burgt 2015).

2.1. Planning and its challenges

The core objective of spatial planning is to design and organize infrastructure in ways that meet the different needs across local communities on the basis of current knowledge and known processes, and with a vision on how these (urban) areas might be developing in the future. It is assumed that the use of land that has been subjected to planning should be leading to better collective outcomes compared to land that has not. Historical,

political and social processes have shaped and influenced approaches to spatial planning and contributed to form different habitus in this field across countries. However, while traditions might differ from country to country, there is a list of basic tasks, or activities, planners need to engage in as part of the day-to-day planning practice. On this matter, Geertman and Stillwell (2004) note that a relatively high level of comparability of tasks in planning can be understood against what constitutes the very purpose of spatial planning and that is a process of ‘reasoned’ exploration of existing problems, search for resolution of these, and anticipation of the future.

Based on that insight, Vonk and Ligtenberg (2010) distinguish seven planning stages as follows: (1) *problem definition*, with the tasks problem definition and agenda setting; (2) *problem exploration & analysis*, with the tasks related to inventory of conditions, analysis of trends, exploration of the future; (3) *change exploration and analysis*, with tasks linked to the development of alternatives/scenario’s, impact assessment research, evaluation of alternatives, development of plan etc.; (4) *consultation* with tasks related to discussion and negotiation of goals, alternatives, implementation modes etc.; (5) *decision* with the tasks about setting goals, alternatives and making decisions; (6) *implementation* with the tasks dissemination and starting actions etc. and (7) *monitor & evaluate effects*. Such a distinction, by means of describing well-defined steps shaping the practice of spatial planning, comes useful for our ambitions to explore the impact of the above-described changes. We were interested in the challenges and opportunities planners may face in relation to the demand for opening up participatory planning to include children and youth and find the subdivision into the seven planning stages a useful way to gather empirical insight. We use these as logic model to unpack and analyse more closely the Swedish experience on this matter.

3. Methodology

To gather insight into the present circumstances for planning practice in Sweden, we choose to use a mixed-methods approach and integrate secondary data, and we extracted from existing published literature, with the primary data collected via semi-structured interviews. This, we assumed, allows us to keep sight of what has been reported about local circumstances before year 2020 and thus it helps us to gather a rich picture of the current situation in Sweden in view of recent changes. We choose to use the logic model introduced in section 2.1 to analyse selected empirical literature first and then also to analyse interviews undertaken with Swedish planning professionals.

The decision to look at selected empirical literature reporting on the Swedish experience with children and youth participation is grounded in the assumption that there are important lessons that can be learned from the initiatives, efforts and tools used in the years prior to the changes of law already described in section 2. We have chosen to focus on the most recent academic literature which we retrieved by searching bibliographic databases. We did not use a systematic approach for this task but choose a narrative approach. The keywords used for this included planning, youth and children, participatory planning, participatory processes and Sweden. Papers that fitted the criteria were selected and used for the analysis. The criteria include the following: (i) the article is only about a Swedish case, (ii) grounded in empirical data, (iii) recently published and (iv) that is about participatory planning involving youth and children.

The decision to use interview data is grounded in the assumption that those who are asked to open up planning to youth and children have valuable insight to share about ongoing challenges and opportunities this has for planning practice, and urban areas in more general terms. Again, we resourced to the logic model and then used to analyse interviews undertaken with planning professionals in Sweden from March to April 2021. The respondents were selected on the basis of being practising professionals engaged in youth-centred planning i.e. urban- or spatial planners, project coordinators, and architects, based in the two largest cities of Sweden (Stockholm, Gothenburg). Owing to the public health restrictions (COVID-19 pandemic) in place during that year, all of the interviews were administrated remotely; six were administrated via a digital conferencing platform (Zoom), one on the telephone. These took around 30–40 min and upon consent were audio-recorded and safely stored for further processing. After the interview was completed, the audio recordings were transcribed *verbatim*. The interviews were semi-structured and included questions formulated to answer the following questions at issue:

- How is the participation of children and youth in planning processes defined and implemented in the two major Swedish cities of Stockholm and Gothenburg?
- What are the main challenges, and what are the current possibilities, for planning professionals in Stockholm and Gothenburg regarding the involvement of children and youth in participatory planning processes?

For our analysis here, we processed the transcripts of the interviews in relation to the planning stages as described by Vonk, Geertman, and Schot (2007). Therefore, the process involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. All descriptions of challenges with children and youth participation in planning projects and processes that were experienced by the planning professionals were highlighted as aspects of special interest. Then, these aspects of interest were categorized into broader descriptions of challenges as similar experiences of challenges expressed by the interviewed planning professionals were grouped together.

3.1. Limitations

A limitation of this study is the sample size as it is rather limited and thus warrants constraints on generalizability. However, it is also worth noting that the municipalities on which the study focuses are also those with a strong track record of activities related to inclusive participatory planning and have matured some knowledge, expertise and experience with different projects. Thus, these are in a good position to reflect on the past and on what has been carried out, when considering the challenges ahead for more inclusive participatory planning.

4. Results and discussion

In this section, we first discuss and analyse selected literature. Then we analyse semi-structured interviews and end the second with a few overarching points, where insight from both is brought together.

4.1. An analysis of published empirical literature

In the first step in this study, we looked closer at selected literature reporting on Swedish cases to establish what has been already reported, discussed and is known about the inclusion of children and youth in participatory spatial planning practice in Sweden. We have identified four articles, which report on Swedish empirical cases with a focus on children and youth, and proceeded to have a closer look at the selected aspects of interest (Appendix 1). Specifically, we were interested to extract information about challenges reported across the seven stages of the logic model.

Therefore, we observe that Cele and van Der Burgt (2015) and Nordström and Wales (2019) report on the initial planning stage of **problem definition** and mention how there is a lack of planning guidelines regarding children and youth's needs in the field of the built environment. Three of four articles (i.e. Cele and van Der Burgt 2015; Stenberg and Fryk 2021 and Wales, Mårtensson, and Jansson 2021) mention aspects related to **problem exploration and analysis** and describe methods that are developed to enable children and youth to transfer the knowledge they have about their living environment (e.g. mapping, GIS, child-led walks) and used for inventory. Furthermore, Cele and van Der Burgt (2015) and Stenberg and Fryk (2021) report on the use of Child Impact Assessment in the stage of **change exploration and analysis**, which serves as a tool to assess developing plans based on criteria for making sure that these are in line with the best interest of children and youth. The stages of **consultation** and **decision** are covered in all selected articles. In relation to this phase, scholars comment on the value of engaging children and youth in consultation or participation processes who are described as active agents of change. This is, however, reported to be surrounded by difficulties in discerning consultation from participation and by the difficulty in allowing children and youth to gain influence when discussing and negotiating planning goals and alternatives. When it comes to **decisions**, children and youth are described more as recipients than participants in decision-making. Interestingly, we note how the **implementation** is not so strongly present in the selected literature with exception of Cele and van Der Burgt (2015) who write about the recurring issue of lacking information on whether the involvement of youth and children has got an actual impact in practice. Then, in relation to **monitoring and evaluating**, Cele and van Der Burgt (2015), Nordström and Wales (2019) and Wales, Mårtensson, and Jansson (2021) defend the need for this in the context of urban sprawl which is known to impact children and youth's mobility. Monitoring and evaluating the effects of implemented plans are further connected to the initial planning stage of problem definition, as spatial planning is to be viewed as a circular rather than a linear process.

Overall, we observe that from across the selected literature, most stages are being considered with the exception of **implementation**, which is the least discussed. This is an interesting observation as it points to how children and youth involvement is reported mainly up until the point of decision-making, and consequently, it is less understood how giving space and voice to children and youth in spatial planning influences the actual implementation of plans in practice. But also, if and how opening up the participatory space for this demographic group influences the realization of planning projects and whether it contributes to better outcomes after all.

Therefore, overall several broader categories of challenges emerge as discussed in the selected articles. These include: (a) the lack of planning guidelines, legislation and norms for how children and youth's needs, and interests, are to be inventoried and used in planning; (b) the challenge of setting up participatory processes that are meaningful in content, scope and design for the children and youth, as much as they are for the planners; (c) the challenge of providing what is needed for children and youth to articulate on and be able to voice their needs and opinions; (d) the challenge of low attendance at such processes/events; (e) the challenge of differing values and needs across social and demographic groups of youth, and interest groups representing them and (f) the challenge of children and youth being seen as passive and to be acted upon rather than having allowed agency. Interestingly, by overlapping these challenges with the seven stages we observe how these are most often reported for the stage of **decision-making**.

4.2. Semi-structured interviews with planners and practitioners

In this section, we discuss the qualitative interviews undertaken in March and April 2021 against the stages of the planning process (after Vonk, Geertman, and Schot 2007) and analyse how respondents have referred to and talked about challenges in relation to youth participation in reference to these stages (Table 1). Of the seven stages, our interview data refers to three stages (Table 1) with the other stages not being very explicitly commented on, or referred to in relation to the work done, while answering to the questions asked.

Thus, for the stage of **problem exploration and analysis**, we find that respondents referred to how an unclear agenda, and insufficiently defined aims and objectives at this planning stage, could cause issues with clarity on what is to be done with the involvement of children and youth, and how to go about it. Interview data reveals that the existence of previous research, or existing inventories, might impact further prospective dialogues with children and youth. For instance, it might contribute to shaping a view that new dialogues might not be needed after all since several were already made. In turn, this can contribute to making it harder for such dialogues to be prioritized, amidst other pressing activities which require resources and effort.

We were told by our respondents that in Sweden some municipalities have been using for several years the Child Impact Assessment tool (as a decision support tool). This tool helped planners determine if children and youth should be involved in dialogues, and then when it is believed they will be impacted by proposed plans, children and youth would be consulted on the matter (Stockholms Stad 2017; Göteborgs Stad 2016). However, three respondents identified a difficulty with how children and youth dialogues oftentimes only allow for answers that are relevant to the specific planning task at hand. A dialogue, as a method to be used in participatory processes, is usually based on selected leading questions, most often determined by those overseeing the process, or in central roles, which leaves less room for children and youth to express their own views that might not be well-fitting within the planning challenge at hand, but be laying at it proximity. Respondents expressed interest and appreciation for emergent processes. At the same time acknowledged that these would require skill and mastery, noting how planners busy with (other) very specific tasks might not always have succeeded in maturing the type of skills that would be needed for a more emergent,

Table 1. Challenges expressed by Swedish planning professionals, located on the Vonk, Geertman, and Schot's (2007) core planning tasks.

Challenges located in stages of planning	
Problem definition Involving tasks of defining problems and setting an agenda	– NA
Problem exploration and analysis Involving tasks to inventory conditions, analyse trends and explore the future	Unclear setting of agenda and aims Dialogues based on leading questions Low priority when previous knowledge is available
Change exploration and analysis Involving tasks of developing and analysing plans and alternatives, and doing impact assessment research	– NA
Consultation Involving tasks related to discussing and negotiating goals, alternatives, and implementation modes	Hard to keep up social relations/interest from participants Limited resources to develop skills among practitioners Issues with allowing children and youth influence Unclear definitions of norms to follow Lack in providing proper information Not a priority within tight time frames Need to develop communication tools and methods Skewed focus on participation quality but not quantity
Decision Involving tasks of setting goals and alternatives, and making decisions	Issues of communicating feedback Lack in providing children and youth with proper information Weighing interests from different groups Children and youth's proposals get lost in the mass
Implementation Involving tasks of disseminating and starting actions	– NA
Monitor and evaluate effects Involving tasks of monitoring and evaluating effects of implemented plans	– NA

and child-/youth-centred participatory process. Planners might not always know so very well this group in comparison to other stakeholder groups who, for instance, sit at common gatherings in their role as experts, or representatives of certain interests. Structure in how things are done/defined with working with youth seems to be a way planners try to keep up with the task of delivering participation with a target group of non-experts, as youth and children are.

On the other hand, this also brings up questions about children and youth agencies. What seems to come forward is the existence of a demarcated space where children and youth are invited to express their views, which however is shaped by the very tools used to engage children and youth, by the questions and topics on which youth is asked to comment, and by the level of structure how all this is kept together for the purpose of fitting ongoing institutional needs. How well such structure is seen meaningful to children and youth is something that needs more research and attention.

Interesting is also that respondents acknowledged that children and youth are often-times regarded as less competent compared with adults when it comes to observing important aspects in their living environments, which weighs on how their proposals on measures that are relevant for urban planning and developments task are received. Respondents expressed appreciation for these, and their view is that children and youth's proposals should be brought up and noticed to a greater extent. This both to

acknowledge and show appreciation for the contribution children and youth give at such processes but also to exert some level of influence on the planning practice and raise awareness across the many and different actors involved in urban governance about the potential of children and youth involvement in planning. One respondent, who had a leading role in coordinating plans, highlighted how other actors and in particular building companies are influential in formulating how areas are to be built and how will these areas look like in terms of infrastructure and amenities. Building companies have a major role in defining the development of urban areas, and while they work in close collaboration with different local interest groups, they rarely are exposed to the ideas and needs of children and youth.

Limited resources to develop skills for planners, and others involved in the planning stage of **consultation**, was brought up by several respondents. Knowledge about how to communicate with children and youth was highlighted as an important aspect in need of attention. There are several well-established methods and tools developed and used in Sweden, such as child-led walks, place mapping and digital tools grounded in GIS (Wales, Mårtensson, and Jansson 2021; Kahila-Tani et al. 2016). Respondents are aware of these. But also mentioned that in practice things might not always work out as first planned, and occasionally some of these well-established methods might fail on supporting practitioners, and planners, in understanding and interpreting opinions and views that children and youth express.

A further aspect that emerged from our interviews is that while there are methods and tools available for planners to facilitate participation, they still face difficulties in integrating the outcomes of such processes into planning practice. This being an aspect also raised by Cele and van Der Burgt (2015) in their study. On this, however, it is interesting to note that the development of skills and knowledge needed is only one element, as often this links back to the institutional context and the possibility to balance, and account for, the values and needs children and youth raise. For instance, respondents acknowledged how lack of information on pre-set frames causes projects to lose focus. Asking participants to wish freely for changes or improvements in the built environment that are not possible to impact might prove to be challenging for the practitioners to deal with in terms of managing expectations, meaningful engagement and ideas about what contributes to shape public spaces in the eyes of youth and children. Another challenge that respondents brought in relation to consultation relates to an unclear understanding of why children and youth should be involved in urban planning. The perception of effort versus gain was described by one respondent to vary with different actors involved. Participatory processes with children and youth can be hard to fit in within tight time frames of planning projects. Lack of clear definitions of norms to follow, regarding how many children and youth to involve in participatory processes and to what extent they need to be involved might contribute to that. Interestingly, respondents also noted how at times these challenges result in some individuals stepping forward as driving forces in these processes. This issue was expressed together with a call for the need of developing both qualitative and quantitative measures in participatory planning projects, where a greater focus on gathering a higher quantity of children and youth's views and opinions was highlighted.

Challenges in the planning stage of the **decision** were also discussed by several respondents. On that, a prominent topic was the communication between planners, or others

involved in participatory planning, and the children and youth involved. For example, the way planning decisions turn out, after consultation with children and youth is carried out, is not always being communicated back to the participants. This, both in terms of what decisions have been made, what information has been used, and why certain ideas and proposals have been picked up, while others have not. Cele and van Der Burgt (2015), have already commented on this. They identify this as a problem that is well known to the professionals. Feedback is closely related to aspects of providing participants with influence in the decision-making process. On this Lundy (2007) discusses how children and youth's rights, as defined in the UNCRC and more specifically in Article 12, require open and transparent decision-making processes in order for children and youth's views and opinions to not be overlooked. Also, our respondents acknowledge the value of a two-way communication which might need to be incorporated in ongoing practices a bit more and developed as part of ongoing routines. This, we note, is also a matter linked back to institutional structures that define spatial planning which has traditionally been done within a close circle of experts, decision-makers, investors and other influencing figures, and only in the last twenty years have begun to open up to the non-experts and citizens. Further, children and youth are not always informed about how decision-making processes work in practice, which the respondent sees as an important topic and an opportunity for youth and children to understand more about planning and urban governance. Finally, three of the respondents brought up the challenge of dealing with different interests, needs and values that need to be collected from several stakeholder groups during participatory spatial planning. When multiple stakeholder groups who are being involved in participatory spatial planning end up having conflicting views, it might be that those held by the adult working population, are given higher priority compared with those expressed by groups of children and youth. Imbalanced power relations in participatory planning processes is a larger challenge that begins to be discussed more by the literature.

Overall, we trace four broader categories of challenges emerging from the interview data. These include (a) continuity with children and youth participation in planning over time; (b) skills and knowledge planners need to set up and to run such participatory processes with this group; (c) children and youth's agency and (d) the institutional context where participation takes place.

4.3. Overarching considerations

After having analysed published literature on Swedish empirical cases and recent semi-structured interviews with practitioners, there are few points we like to raise for further consideration. These not only are cutting across both data set but also are points that we identify are of special interest for future research.

The way participatory processes are designed and delivered: it is interesting to note this being a topic of earlier research and other researchers already reported on how participatory processes with youth are most often structured, often designed from the top-down, and most of the time adult-led. Thomas (2007) points out how participatory initiatives involving children and youth most often consist of an already made selection of topics and themes to be addressed in the dialogue sessions. These being entirely decided by the adults, and this based entirely on the needs that the experts have in relation to the

task at hand. Some of our interviewees reported on this specific aspect but also commented on the value of less structured dialogues, which might allow for a more open, and perhaps even emergent agenda where youth could act more on their agency and bring forward topics that are relevant to them in their role as residents of an area with certain needs, preferences and ideas of what a good quality of life for a child or young person is. However, we also know from current literature that it is not yet well understood what type of participatory processes could better suit children and youth, and be seen as meaningful to them, thus better allowing us to express their needs, values and preferences. And this in ways that are usable by the experts.

The way capacity is generated for spatial planning to grow as a more inclusive, fair and learning-based policy area: as the country is moving towards certain normative ideals and, from the very beginning has been very supportive to children's, we seem to be noticing a need to develop support structures for the recent change of the law. Planners are experts and so very knowledgeable of their area of expertise. That required dedicated education and on-the-job training, and it does seem to be a bit of a challenge for them to develop expertise also on questions relating to children and youth affairs. Knowing how to design a participatory process and what tools to use that are meaningful for children and youth requires a good understanding of this socio-demographic group, of its contradictions and complexities. Youth is a diverse group of individuals, and it is a bit of a stretch to consider them as a homogenous stakeholder group. During the interviews, the challenges of facilitating participatory processes were mentioned, and the need to develop skills on this was acknowledged. At present, there are universities that offer modules on this subject as part of MSc degrees (e.g. The University of Agricultural Sciences n.d.), there are support networks (e.g. BUB -- the Children, Young People and the Built Environment network), and there are other non-academic institutions (e.g. ARKiS, mentioned by the industry organization Sveriges Arkitekter n.d.) who offer a network supporting professionals in engaging children and youth in spatial planning and architectural learning; however, opportunities for practitioners and planners to gain knowledge and mature expertise in participatory planning with children and youth is not so very abundant. For several practitioners, this remains a type of expertise they mature as part of their job on subsequent projects, which means that it is often shaped by a trial-and-error type of learning rather than featuring as an institutionalized vocational training opportunity they could access in other ways. Also, we see still unexplored opportunities of working across municipal departments in ways that could be generative for different policy areas and in support of this recent change of law. In almost every municipality in Sweden, there is a youth affairs office, or department, which runs projects, programmes and employs professionals specializing in youth affairs. They could be an important ally in supporting participatory planning in ways for these processes to better capture the needs of a diversity representing the diversity of youth in a given area and thus working towards more inclusive and meaningful participatory planning also in the eyes of the young.

The way children and youth agency is allowed to manifest in formal processes: already Cele and van Der Burgt (2015) have highlighted how views and proposals from citizens with limited resources, such as children and youth, are less influential in decision-making regarding the implementation of plans. Their views tend to weigh lighter when put against proposals from stakeholders with better economic and political resources (Cele

and van Der Burgt 2015). But also, from our interviews, we gathered that there might be views that regardless the suggestions, feedback and ideas that children and youth could come up in connection to their living environments. This points to a tension between the normative ideals that have driven a rather progressive policy agenda resulting now in a legal requirement to involve children and youth in spatial planning, with the very practical aspects of who has a say, on what, and in which way different groups exert their influence about how cities develop. This goes beyond the dichotomy of adult- versus children-centric city and could be better understood against the values shaping our visions of how cities should develop and the power relations that cater to these values.

5. Conclusions

This study has surveyed selected empirical literature on youth-centred participatory planning in Sweden and used that insight to analyse interviews with practitioners. This allowed us to further understand the current situation on the ground and identify aspects of interest also in view of the recent institutional change, which puts forward more firmly the request to include youth and children in participatory spatial planning. With the recent changes in the Swedish institutional planning context, the country is an interesting example of how the UN Child Convention can contribute to shaping urban governance and contribute at promoting social and environmental justice in urban governance. The insight that emerges from the qualitative interviews offers valuable input for both the theory and the practice of participatory spatial planning in the context of changing institutional frameworks.

This article's contribution is threefold: first, it provides a descriptive account of the slowly developing institutional changes ahead of the transposition of the CRC into national law; second, it discusses interview data reporting on the participatory planning with youth in Sweden and describes some of the needs identified on the ground; and third, it maps challenges and needs across the stages of spatial planning.

Reviewing the slowly developing institutional change ahead of the transposition of the UNCRC into national law reveals how changes in positioning the child in society, and the questioning of the adult-centric view on the built environment, contributed at paving the way for a shift of values and subsequently priorities. In describing the changes that occurred over a prolonged period, this article demonstrates how progress on safeguarding human rights and a better living environment for children and youth is marked by changes that cut across several policy areas that cut across multiple areas. Too often questions pertaining to the well-being of youth and children are approached rather narrowly within one, or two, policy domains. This most often being social policy e.g. family support, or education. However, a narrow view overlooks how their well-being is shaped by further policy areas e.g. spatial planning. In fact, the combination of multiple policy areas ends up having tremendous implications to the mental and physical health and well-being of youth and children.

Acknowledgements

The work reported here has been done in the context of the research project 'PLANNING with YOUTH: a tool and a framework for an engaging, meaningful and forward-looking participation

of youngsters in shaping attractive and sustainable living environments' (project number 2019-01887). We thank all of the respondents for their time and for sharing important insight into current contemporary matters. Project updates can be followed at: <https://medium.com/youth-plan>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This project is funded by FORMAS – the Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development under the targeted call: National Research Programme for Sustainable Spatial Planning. The qualitative data collection reported in this manuscript has been undertaken as part to the MSc thesis research done by Emma Norss at Södertörn University, thesis paper available for download at: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:1574098>

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