

Research Article



Accessibility in public transport policy and planning practice in the Uppsala region – A Swedish case

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Introduction

The transport system is important for individuals' possibilities to work, educate themselves, participate in societal services, shop, etc. Shortly, the transport system is essential for the individual's possibility to take part in society in an urban context for the individual's "right to the city" (Lefebvre, (1968). However, the individual's possibilities to transport him- or herself differ depending on geography, income, social group, age, sex etc. The recognition of unequal possibilities to be mobile is increasingly acknowledged within the scholarly debate on transportation, which has led to the emergence of the research field of transport justice (Verlinghieri, Schwanen, 2020). Accessibility is a fundamental concept within this research field, as it is considered an essential requirement for a just transport system that it provides good accessibility for citizens. In his pioneering work on transport justice, Karol Martens (2017) concludes that a fair transport system should provide all citizens with a sufficient level of accessibility. A classical definition of accessibility is "the potential of opportunities for interaction with locations dispersed over space" (Martens, 2017, p. 10). Scholars often distinguish between person accessibility and place accessibility. Person accessibility is a characteristic of persons and stands for the set of locations to which an individual has access. Place accessibility is instead the characteristic of a place and signifies which persons have access to it and from which places (Martens, 2017, p. 11). In this article, we understand accessibility as person accessibility, as this definition makes the most sense in the context of transport justice. Accessibility varies significantly between individuals due to factors such as income, gender, age, physical abilities/disabilities and ethnicity.

Accessibility is also a key goal for transport policy, both internationally and in the Swedish context, which is in focus in this article (Swedish Government 2008/09:93). The most recent Swedish Government bill on transportation says that the design and function of the transport system should provide everyone with good accessibility with good quality (Swedish Government 2020/21:151).

Read from a more critical point of view, this statement gives rise to several questions, such as who is "everyone" and what is a "good" level of accessibility? As accessibility is a fundamental requirement for a just transport system, but at the same time, a broad concept with different possible meanings, our objective is to study how accessibility is interpreted by politicians and civil servants in policymaking and planning practice. Hence, policy and planning are processes moving on different levels, from ideas and formulations to implementation in practice. To make this distinction and consider the relevance of different levels of policy for accessibility in public transport practice, we use the perspective of the transport researcher Angela Hull (2010) from the research field of public administration who suggest that the integration of an issue in policy happen on two levels; a conceptual and a performance level. The conceptual level is the level of ideas and goal-oriented policy. The performance level contains different explanatory factors and we have chosen to focus on the decision-making organization, and its internal organizational processes to manage transport policymaking. Thereby, we can discuss the institutional preconditions for the conceptual interpretations of accessibility and analyze the possible outcome in terms of integration of accessibility in practice.

In this article, we contribute to the scholarly debate on accessibility by focusing on the region of Uppsala, which is one of the Swedish regions that has as a comprehensive goal for the transport system to provide accessibility for “everyone”. The analysis builds on a study performed during 2019–2022 about the future development of public transport in Region Uppsala and a material of policy documents, as well as interviews with two politicians and five civil servants.

The region of Uppsala is situated just north of Stockholm. The distance between the main city Uppsala and Stockholm, is 63 kilometers. The university in Uppsala is the oldest in Sweden and has around 50,000 students. The population in the region of Uppsala is around 397,000 and in the municipality of Uppsala around 238,000. The inhabitants in the region have access to a large labor market and many of them are relatively well-off, but there are also areas in the region of Uppsala where the level of unemployment is high (Region Uppsala, 2021).

Region Uppsala is the decision-making organization that decides how public transport will develop in the region. More specifically, it is the Political Committee of Traffic and Society which is the decision-making body and its administrative body, the Department of Traffic and Society (DTS), implements the decisions. These parts of the regional organization hold the direct responsibility for public transport, but the Department of Regional Development (DRD), which, as the name suggests, holds the responsibility for the entire regional development, works with issues connected to accessibility and public transport. The DRD holds much expert knowledge of different groups of society, and the DTS holds the public transport knowledge. How these two departments relate to each other in practice is in focus in this article for understanding the performance level of accessibility for all.

The view of accessibility in policy documents and among politicians and civil servants

The national political goal that the traffic system should be accessible for everyone is mentioned in regional documents, such as the regional traffic supply programme for Uppsala. The concept of accessibility is not clearly defined in the documents, but in most cases, it seems to be understood as personal accessibility. It is interesting to note that accessibility sometimes is used in a wider sense than the possibility of traveling to different places. The regional traffic supply programme for Uppsala county for the period 2020–2030 says, for example, that the most sustainable alternative can be to reach the same accessibility without travelling at all (Region Uppsala, 2019, p. 5). Here accessibility seems to stand for an ability to conduct a certain activity, implying that digital solutions can make certain journeys unnecessary.

Disabled people are the social group that receives the most attention in both documents and interviews. In the regional traffic supply program, there is a separate chapter about accessibility for individuals with disabilities, which concerns both physical and mental disabilities. It says that all travellers should be able to plan a trip, buy and use the ticket, transport themselves to the station or bus stop, orient themselves and understand

information at a station or bus stop, get on the vehicle, find and use a seat and get off the vehicle, and transport oneself from the station or bus stop (Region Uppsala, 2019, p. 23). The county plan for regional transport infrastructure in the county of Uppsala also emphasizes that the transport system should be accessible and inclusive (Region Uppsala, 2017, p. 7). A section on deficiencies in the transport system points out the need to improve accessibility for disabled people (Region Uppsala, 2017, p. 34).

In the interviews, we used the concept of accessibility in the sense of personal accessibility. In line with the policy documents, the respondents also pay the most attention to disabled people when discussing the meaning of accessibility. For example, a politician from the opposition states that one of two possible meanings of accessibility is that public transport should be accessible for people with disabilities. It is an ongoing process to make bus and train stops more accessible. In addition, several of civil servants say that an important aspect of accessibility is that the needs of disabled individuals should be considered when designing trains and buses.

There is also some concern for the accessibility of other groups in the policy documents, although less so than for individuals with disabilities. For example, the regional traffic supply plan says that women, children, and elderly persons are important groups to recognize (Region Uppsala, 2019, p. 5). Moreover, accessibility for individuals with low socioeconomic status is considered. The regional traffic supply plan states that public transport should contribute to increased access and, thereby, better matching in the labor market (Region Uppsala, 2019, p. 16). Furthermore, the document says that the public transport system should be equal. By enabling more people to take an active part in society, public transport contributes to reducing the differences between socioeconomic groups and strengthening integration (Region Uppsala, 2019, p. 19).

Some of the respondents also mention accessibility for groups with low socioeconomic status, although in less detail than the accessibility for disabled people. One civil servant states that there has been a discussion on identifying socially challenged areas and then building especially good public transport connections to areas with good job opportunities. Another civil servant who works with issues related to the labor market stresses the importance of public transport to increase the level of employment and integration.

Some of the respondents mention other groups, such as people in rural areas and children and young people, but rather briefly. In addition, women as a social group are mentioned in the regional traffic supply plan, but only very briefly. However, to mention women as a social group is problematic as it is not homogeneous. Gender intersects with other factors, such as ethnicity, in determining individuals' accessibility (Verlinghieri & Schwanen, 2020).

Some concerns about accessibility are related to digitalization. A few respondents point out that it can be difficult for elderly people to use apps to buy tickets. However, other respondents question whether elderly people really have more difficulties than others when using digital technologies. A civil servant states that it is a problem that the region cannot afford to have staff that can answer questions and instead rely only on apps,

especially for elderly people and people with limited knowledge of Swedish.

To conclude, disabled individuals are the group whose accessibility receives the most attention in the studied material. As emphasized in the scientific debate (Banister, 2018), we have strong reasons for also recognizing the accessibility of other groups, but they are less acknowledged. Women, children, and elderly people are groups that the policy documents mention, although very briefly. Some of the respondents discuss groups with low socioeconomic status and residents of rural areas. However, only a few mention children and younger people. In addition, some of the respondents recognize the situation for elderly people, but mostly in the context of digitalization. The respondents have vaguer ideas about what accessibility means and how it should be accomplished for other groups than disabled individuals. In the next section, we discuss how organizational factors determine which groups are acknowledged.

Accessibility in organizational practice

We have observed that there is a divide in the interview responses between those who *decide and plan* for public transport development (thus have the direct power) at the Department of Traffic and Society (DTS), and those who work on a strategic level with issues *relating* to public transport, as regional labor market development, integration, and young inhabitants etc, at the Department of Regional Development (DRD). As described in the introduction, these two departments are connected to two different political assemblies. It is foremost officials at the DTS and politicians in its assembly who express that accessibility is the same as accessibility for disabled people. They are aware of other social groups and their possible accessibility problems connected to public transport, but their work is focused on disabled people. The officials at the DRD, on the other hand, work with the consequences of accessibility problems for other social groups and thereby rather discuss that in the interviews.

The accessibility concern of disabled people is a matter both on the strategic level and the more daily planning level. There is not a specific individual official at DTS who is in charge of accessibility for disabled people, but we have seen that all officials, regardless of position, bring that perspective with them. This is the crucial difference compared to accessibility for other social groups; accessibility of disabled people is well-integrated by all officials in their daily work. It may be considered a structural issue. Although they are aware of the potential problems that people of low socio-economic status, people in rural areas, the elderly and young people may face in their use of public transport, it is not integrated into everyone's work as a variable in planning the public transport system. These accessibility issues could thus be considered conceptual and not part of the organizational structure and performance (Hull, 2010).

The specific concern of disabled people is following the Swedish Public Transport Act, which prescribes a specific focus on disabled people in the development of each regional public transport authority's central steering document. The Act prescribes that one chapter should discuss consequences and development for disabled people in regional public transport. The national Public Transport Act and its focus on disabled people seem

thus to have been successfully implemented in the regional public transport policymaking and planning in Uppsala. However, even though the focus concerning accessibility is on disabled people, officials express that they lack national or regional guidelines (or similar) that prescribe the accepted level of accessibility for disabled people, as, for example, how high the entrance in busses or trains is allowed to be, or the maximum meters there may be from the entrance of important societal service, as health care, to a bus or train stop (as there is concerning car-parks for disabled). The officials demand this sort of national or regional guidelines as they consider them to be an important support in negotiations with other involved authorities. Accessibility of disabled people seems thus to be well-integrated on the conceptual policy level and in the organizational structure at the performance level. But, in the details, there are still possible improvements to make accessibility for the disabled even more in focus in practice.

The divide between the public transport department DTS and the strategic department DRD is clear in the matter of what accessibility is and who is in focus. It also visualizes an organizational divide between the two departments: as they seem to have little contact in their everyday work. Officials at DRD working with labor market development, improving living conditions for specific groups such as newly arrived refugees from other countries and young people, consider accessibility a core issue for their work. But they also express that they have little or no contact with DTS and public transport planning, which is an important component in accessibility for their groups in focus. The knowledge of different social groups and their needs concerning accessibility that is known to the officials at DRD is thus not spread and considered in public transport planning. For example, concerning labor market issues, it is the commuters who demand Wi-Fi and working space on the train or bus at long distances or the aggregated number of commuters along a certain bus line that are in focus for public transport planning, not labor market access for all societal groups.

The contact between DTS and DRD is only done through individual initiatives concerning very specific issues. The officials at DRD describe that they have a more integrated collaboration with the health department within the Region and more cooperation with the infrastructure planning part of the DTS than public transport. This organizational divide between the region's various departments means that subject areas that have a close relationship across administrative boundaries do not have continuous structures for how they can be jointly planned and managed. The organizational structure within the Region is thus not encouraging performance in integrating a wider view of accessibility in public transport planning (Hull, 2010)

Concluding discussion

The Uppsala case shows how accessibility is interpreted and managed in the policy and planning practice of public transport. The major focus for public transport planners and politicians concerning accessibility is accessibility for disabled people. Our analysis shows that accessibility for the disabled is a well-integrated issue in the public transport planning practice at a conceptual level and in the organizational structure at a performance level. However, in some details, it lacks sharp policy measures to be used for

full implementation, which is why it is not entirely integrated into practice, and there is room for improvement.

Among public transport planners and politicians, accessibility is interpreted as a matter of accessibility for the disabled, which may be based on the national Act, which prescribes a specific focus on these groups of people. However, the organizational divide between the departments within the Region is also a factor. As the public transport planners have little or no contact with the other experts within the organization who have knowledge of other social groups and their use of public transport, they have little opportunity to develop their interpretation of accessibility beyond the regular public transport planning interpretation.

The wider debate on transport justice (Martens, 2017) and the awareness of accessibility for other social groups is current among public transport planners and politicians. But since it is not part of the organizational work practice for public transport and because there is an organizational divide between the public transport planners and experts of other social groups at the other department, accessibility for all social groups is only a conceptual issue, not integrated into the organizational structure of everyday public transport planning at the performance level (Hull 2010). For transport justice to become more integrated in practice in Region Uppsala, it is necessary that the organizational divide is bridged. Such organizational changes have proven to be rather hard, and previous research on the integration of issues such as transport justice and accessibility in planning practice shows that it is hard to change the current practice (Winter, 2021). Such difficulties in changing current practices caused by a strong tradition on how to plan and on which knowledge the planning should be based is described by the concept of path-dependency. It describes how planning follows a predestined path from history to the future based on the same kind of knowledge and practice. The Uppsala case shows such path-dependency among the public transport planners, following the public transport planning tradition with little possibility or will to take “new” issues, such as accessibility for all social groups, into consideration. The organizational divide within the Uppsala region seems to conserve this path dependency and deteriorate transport justice implementation in the planning practice.

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