

SOCIO-SPATIAL ATTRIBUTES OF AGE-FRIENDLINESS IN SWEDISH MUNICIPALITIES' COMPREHENSIVE PLANS (CP): A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

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Abstract


Critical voices call for socio-spatial policy interventions to ensure health and well-being of increased proportion of older people. The municipalities in Sweden can decide and influence the socio-spatial environments through comprehensive plans to attain quality of life for older people. Qualitative content analysis of comprehensive plans of three Swedish municipalities – Sotenäs, Älvkarleby and Sundbyberg – was done using spatial justice theory and age-friendliness concept to understand how the socio-spatial justice for older people are portrayed in these comprehensive plans. The findings revealed that ageing population is viewed as welfare challenge and barrier to economic growth. Furthermore, abundance of physical services in promoting ageing-in-place, active and healthy ageing in the accessible private and public spaces and nature partly characterize spatial justice for older people. But there is a tendency of undervaluing the agency of older people by treating them as homogeneously vulnerable group in comprehensive plans which delimit the holistic spatial justice for older people.

Keywords: qualitative content analysis, comprehensive plans (CP), spatial planning, spatial justice, eldercare, age-friendliness, Sweden, social sustainability

1 Introduction

Sweden is undergoing demographic changes because people are living longer and healthier. By 2030, people above 65 years old will constitute 22% with higher population growth rate of 5.3% within the age group 80 years old and above (SCB, 2022). Managing such population growth with increased percentage of older people are described as a welfare challenge (ibid). In Sweden, it is a municipal concern to manage eldercare and housing provisions for older people. On one hand, the municipality, through the comprehensive plan (CP), are required to plan for society to ensure good and equitable living standards for human beings according to section 1, chapter 1 of the Planning and Building Act (2010:900). On the other hand, there are tangible challenges for small municipalities to offer eldercare services based on “the principle of equality” according to the Municipal Act (2017:725) because of the decreased economic and population growth. It is argued that older people’s health and wellbeing are shaped by socio-spatial environments (WHO, 2016). The municipalities can decide and influence the socio-spatial environments through plans. Thus, there are opportunities to ensure age friendliness and socio-spatial justice of older people. Critics in research and advocacy groups argue that cities and communities do not sufficiently safeguard good and equitable living standards for older people that has led to socio-spatial injustices. Thus, this paper examines the attributes of spatial justice and age-friendliness in the comprehensive plans. The study has a following research questions:

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- How are the ageing issues portrayed in the formulation of comprehensive plans?
- What kind of socio-spatial attributes characterize the formulations of age-friendliness of the comprehensive plans?
- How can the municipalities comprehensive plans understood from spatial justice of older people?

1.1 Theoretical framework

According to the American geographer Edward Soja (2009:2), spatial justice thinking recognizes “justice and injustices are embedded to space and geography” and advocates “for fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources”. Furthermore, spatial justice thinking revolves around three principles, namely: 1) human beings are spatial beings, 2) space is socially produced and can be changed socially: 3) dialectical relationship between spatial and social to shape each other (Soja, 2009). In terms of planning, place can shape people’s life opportunities and people can change the place. To apply Soja’s postulation from his book “Seeking Spatial Justice (Soja, 2010), principles of spatial justice can be used to analyze the older peoples relation to the geography they live in, understand older people’s agency/limitation in shaping the place they live; and finally the space and older people’s social relations can be dialectically linked. The theoretical framework of this study are made by combining the principles of spatial justice with elements of age-friendliness as per World Health Organizations’ (WHO) age-friendly guidelines (WHO, 2016). The age-friendly framework encompasses eight domains i.e.: 1) the community support and health, 2) outdoor spaces and buildings, 3) transportation, 4) housing, 5) respect and social inclusion, 6) social participation, 7) civic participation and employment, and 8) communication and information. The cumulative effect can contribute to attain spatial justice.

1.2 Methodology

Municipal comprehensive plans constitute the data for this study. The comprehensive plans are selected by criterion-based purposive sampling (Patton, 2015:267). Two criteria were defined to select the municipalities. Inclusion and exclusion criteria. Within the inclusion criteria, three municipalities: one with highest percentage of 65+, another with median percent of 65+ and lastly with the lowest percent 65+, were selected. Exclusion criteria was applied to avoid the comprehensive plans which were older than 2018 to ensure that the municipalities take account of the Act (2000:1383) on municipalities' responsibility for housing provision. The municipalities selected are Sotenäs municipality, Älvkarleby municipality and the City of Sundbyberg having highest (34.9%), median (24.7%) and lowest (12.6%) proportion of older people; and economic dependency from older people with 46.5, 46.6 and 19 persons, respectively. The comprehensive plans were decided in 2012-12-14, 2020-03-16 and 2018-0516 respectively. As per the Planning and Building Act (2010:900) comprehensive plans shall provide normative directions (public interests/vision and goals) for the long-term use of the spatial environment (Chapter 3, section 2); and the strategic parts in the form of planning propositions to describe how public interests are to be addressed (Chapter 3, section 4). Thus, normative parts such vision and goals that are based on plannings presumptions as well as strategic parts such as planning propositions and planning consequences were studied, be able to identify ageing issues and municipal propositions on addressing the same. After reading thoroughly the comprehensive plans, relevant texts were extracted to excel table, then translated to English, and were thematically categorized according with spatial justice principles and WHO’s domains of age-friendliness. Qualitative content analysis (QCA) was used to deductively examine the

extracted texts. QCA was used in “identifying, organizing, and categorizing”(Patton, 2015:551) the formulations and latent analysis of the texts were done to explore the underlying meaning of the texts: “what is text talking about” (Bengtsson, 2016:10) to understand spatial justice and the age-friendliness of such formulations.

1.3 Findings

Aged population as welfare challenge: The comprehensive plans’ vision and goals are characterized by economic growth and development and portray ageing as welfare challenge. Sotenäs municipality’s comprehensive plans state that “continuous increase in percent of older people (65+)...is a big challenge for the municipality” as it result in “increase in homecare and special care residence”(Sotenäs kommun, 2022:9). Sotenäs municipality’s economic growth ambition depends on the “more balanced demography...to retain social service and welfare” (ibid, p104). Älvkarleby municipality faces the challenge of “unequal demography with many older people” (Älvkarleby kommun, 2020:14). Understandably, more balanced population structure is desirable in both Sotenäs and Älvkarleby municipalities. However, the formulation implicitly put the older people as a group that thwarts the growth ambition. Contrary to Sotenäs and Älvkarleby, Sundbyberg’s challenge, is not aged population. Even though Sundbyberg has “less pensioner” and more people in age-group 25-44 compared to national level, the formulation does not view older people as welfare challenge. Instead, Sundbyberg’s point of departure for planning is inclusion of “...older people’s perspective”(Sundbybergs stad, 2018:27) in planning process.

Eldercare and housing provisions: The findings reveal that eldercare and housing provisions are characterized by the concept of ageing-in-place i.e., homecare services to enable older people to stay at their own homes instead of moving to institutional care. Furthermore, current and future eldercare and housing needs are equated to services for older people with dementia and frailty needing old-age home and olde-age centre and senior residence. There is a tendency of mixing up older people with the older people with dementia needing special care. Sotenäs proposes to “provide affordable housing, affordable plots for villa as well as the development of elderly centre and alternative forms of residence for older people”(Sotenäs kommun, 2022:6). The comprehensive plans of Älvkarleby mention about the availability of services for “people with special needs” referring to older people (Älvkarleby kommun, 2020:100) in the form of “dementia centre and short-term residence” (Ibid). Sotenäs proposes to prioritize the “year-round housing” and “elderly center and alternative form of accommodation” (Sotenäs kommun, 2022:6-10) whereas Älvkarleby proposes to have “functions-integrated and varied buildings that enable different forms of house” for a positive “social development” (Älvkarleby kommun, 2020:86). Sundbyberg aims to construct apartment buildings (multi-generational house) to ensure that people continue to stay in the place even when the family size changes (Sundbyberg stad, 2018:95).

Public spaces and transportation: The findings reveal that the public spaces and transportation are characterized by the ambitions to promote older people’s mobility and active lifestyle. Sundbyberg city’s planning assumption is that comprehensive plans aim to enable “mobility for various functions in the spatial environment regardless of mobility and orientation ability” and identify older people as one of the “vulnerable groups” (Sundbybergs stad, 2018:47) when it comes to mobility in the spatial environment. Sotenäs municipality aims to build the housing for elderly “in the proximity of the “quality area for recreation and outdoor life” (Sotenäs kommun, 2022:10-12). Älvkarleby’s planning orientation is not so different compared to Sotenäs as there is a formulation such as “provision of old-age home near nature, consideration of “blue and green belt”, playgrounds and area for walk and

relaxation, provision of access of outdoor environment without sound pollution” (Älvkarleby kommun, 2020:38). Expansion of catchment-area for public transportation, housing and services accessible by walking and cycling are recurrent planning propositions in the comprehensive plans of all three municipalities. Sotenäs aims to minimize the vehicle dependency and expansion of new area to be covered in a “cycle and walking distance” which is stated to be beneficial for older people (Sotenäs kommun, 2022:132). Sundbyberg’s strategy to create cohesive city is about “good access to public transport and clear and safe routes for pedestrians and cyclists to provide the conditions for good mobility for everyone”(Sundbyberg stad, 2018:25).

Social participation, inclusion, and respect: The study findings indicate that social aspects are treated sparsely compared to the spatial aspects. Sotenäs has “schools and sports arena” as meeting points for young people while church for the old people – segregated meeting venues. Formulations such as earmarking of land for the development year-round housing (Sotenäs kommun, 2022:54), grouping of older people as “certain groups in the society”(Ibid p56) and development of housing for older people with focus on “elderly center and alternative forms of residence for older people” (ibid, p6) indicate quite a segregated treatment of older people and their needs. Älvkarleby emphasizes on “positive social development” through planning to address “unequal demography with many old people” (Älvkarleby kommun, 2020:86,14). Sotenäs’s comprehensive plan aims to promote social inclusion through “spontaneous meetings and activities” (ibid, p45) in outdoor spaces and though condensed living in the form of multi-generational apartments and city-terraced houses. In terms of inclusion, Sundbyberg’s comprehensive plans stand out as it aims to construct housing suited for both older people and youths and students in new residential areas (Sundbyberg stad, 2018:28). Sundbyberg plans to promote older peoples participation and integration of their perspective in planning process to create “even better public environment with meeting places” (Sundbybergs stad, 2018:27). Sundbyberg recognizes the digitalization as one of the challenges to create safe home as well as to counteract exclusion of increased number of older people (ibid); but such formulations are nowhere to be found in Sotenäs and Älvkarleby’s comprehensive plans. Civic participation and economy are not formulated in any comprehensive plans except the mention about civic participation of older people in Sundbyberg’s comprehensive plans.

1.4 Discussion and analysis

It can be asserted that formulations in the comprehensive plans regarding eldercare, public space and transportation are based on “universalist understanding of justice as equal access to all life’s necessities” (Pries, 2022:286-287) formulated by technocrats (the planners) with limited validation and control from the older people. This tendency, like the post World War II planning tendencies in Sweden as observed by Pries (2022), echoes even in the comprehensive plans studied. The municipalities aspirations are economic growth and older people are viewed as welfare challenge and hindrance for economic growth. Such view can lead to the risk of downranking the priorities for older people and valuing other priorities (Weicht, 2013) thereby putting in stake the older people’s rights and relation to space. Change in the perception of old age (Rémillard-Boilard, Buffel and Phillipson, 2021) is thus important to envision an age-friendly city and community. A dominating idea is that abundance of physical infrastructure suffices. Eldercare is motivated by ageing-in place for younger older people; and institutional care for oldest older people, the ones with dementia or are physically frail. Production of housing for dementia care sound as a need-based intervention but the question is what affects the isolation of older people with dementia have for cognitive degradation among older people. Studies have showed that social connectedness promotes cognitive skills (Samtani *et al.*, 2022:e749). Even

though, formulations such as affordable housing, accessible housing, multi-generational buildings characterize need-based housing propositions, the comprehensive plans largely focus on housing provisions to address the care needs of older people by treating older people homogeneously as a passive, sick and too old to take care of themselves. Idealizing aging-in-place has limitations because it treats place as static (Dahlberg, 2020:2249). The heterogeneity of older people regarding socio-economic background, age-differences, gender and ethnic differences and the agency aspect of older people are found to be overlooked in the housing propositions in comprehensive plans. Ageing in place is the talk of the town but changing urban scenario and neighborhood change can be problematic for place attachment of older people (Billeard and Higgs, 2006:128 in Dahlberg, 2020:2249).

Transportation and public spaces in the planning propositions can be attributed to promoting active and healthy aging which are the core concepts in the age-friendly guidelines. Proximity to services and parks, residences near nature, walking and cycling, public spaces without sound and air pollution increase quality of life and the propositions align well with the age-friendliness guidelines. However, the comprehensive plans are silent on how older people's agency in the co-production process of these physical environment was used especially in Sotenäs and Älvkarleby municipalities' comprehensive plans. Soja (2008:3) argues that spatial justice and injustices can be observed both in the outcome and the process whereas process refer to the involvement of people in co-production of the physical environments. This aspect is difficult to see in the comprehensive plans. Research has shown that co-creation is important to ensure the needs and expectations of older people in designing the neighborhood and the surrounding built environment (Von Faber, Tavy and Van Der Pas, 2020).

The prominent issues which the comprehensive plans have largely overlooked are the social aspects of the justice. As discussed earlier, emphasis on the physical abundances to qualify justice by building affordable housing, accessible public places and transportation, greenery and parks contribute to increase quality of life among older people. However, the missing point in the studied comprehensive plans is the social aspects, in terms of respect and social inclusion as well as civic participation and employment. These are missing especially in the plans of Sotenäs and Älvkarleby. Both the plans identify aged population as the welfare challenge but are silent on how the older people's agency can be capitalized to promote the growth. Respect and inclusion can be reflected on the social and spatial arrangements and these aspects largely contribute to health and "wellbeing, intergenerational relationships and feelings of inclusion and connection and social inclusion" (Ronzi *et al.*, 2020). As discussed above, there is a tendency to 'manage older people' and 'aspire to achieve economic growth' through the comprehensive plans. In this process, older people's agency to achieve growth are silenced. If "spatial organization of human society" is a production of human action which provide jurisdiction for the production and consumption of spatial aspects (1980:210:210); and if older people's agency is not recognized in the production process, whose interests does the comprehensive plans serve or which spatial justice do the comprehensive plans achieve?

1.5 Conclusion

The Swedish municipalities can influence the direction of age-friendliness though policy interventions such as comprehensive plans. However, older people are portrayed as receiver of welfare provisions in the form of eldercare, housing and accessible public places by overlooking their agency to contribute in the co-design of these services and spaces. Over emphasis on physical services based on the planners prejudiced view on the older people's needs may lead to risks for de-prioritization - if not abandonment - of social aspects such as social inclusion, civic participation, and respect. As these unbalanced formulations about spatial and social aspects of age-friendliness are observed, it can be concluded that

more needs to be done in social aspects to promote holistic spatial justice for older people and to attain social sustainability. With this conclusion, the research questions are answered cumulatively.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

The paper is written by me, and I agree to be accountable for the content of the work.

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