



# THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION FINDINGS FROM A CASE STUDY IN THE REGION OF VÄRMLAND, SWEDEN

CRS, CENTRE FOR RESEARCH  
ON SUSTAINABLE SOCIETAL  
TRANSFORMATION

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The focus of this research is the – possible and actual - role(s) that local civil society plays in the processes of transformation towards a sustainable society. The background to this interest is to be found, firstly, in the acute and thoroughgoing challenge to transform a society based on fossil raw materials into a society based on renewable raw materials produced through the sustainable use of ecosystems; a bioeconomy. Secondly, the project is based on the emerging insight that the development to a sustainable bioeconomy needs to be inclusive, both for democratic reasons and for the sake of utilizing the knowledge of different stakeholders that are needed for innovation in the broadest sense of the word and thereby contributing to solutions to the challenge of climate change.

## The role of local civil society

To include stake holders active within the frame of civil society is in line with (principles such as) co-creation of knowledge and participatory innovation thinking. However, this also involves expectations placed on agents within civil society, such as civil society organisations (CSO), voluntary networks, and engaged citizens, to be active in transformation processes. Consequently, our research question is: “How can we understand the role of civil society in sustainability transformation?” To answer this question, we have studied a selection of CSO’s active on a district level in the Värmland region in Sweden. The study reveals that the participation of local CSOs as agents in local transformation to a *forest-based bio-economy* is still at an early stage.

### About the project:

This policy brief reports back from social science research within the project Paper Province 2.0. - A large-scale demonstrator of forest-based bio economy, phase 2. Paper province 2.0 is a ten-year Vinnväxt initiative, led by the cluster organisation Paper Province. The aim is to create sustainable growth by developing internationally competitive and attractive research and innovation environments in the region. In conjunction with regional clusters and other private and public research efforts, Paper Province aims at building a large-scale demonstrator to show how bioeconomy works in practice.

**Participating researchers:** Margareta Dahlström, professor in human geography (contact person), Hanna Martin, PhD in human geography, Ida Grundel, PhD in human geography and Marie Nordfeldt, professor in social work.

**Project period:** 2017-2019



Torsby District with main settlements.



The Region of Värmland in the Nordic Countries.

## Commitment keeps the countryside alive

From our case study we can conclude that local CSOs are definitely engaged in, and in practice work with local sustainability. Taken together, the CSOs in our study cover social, economic as well as environmental sustainability, with a primary focus on social sustainability. However, the engagement can be described as quite disparate and not in a significant sense aiming towards transformation. The purpose of some activities can be described as aiming for *duration* rather than transformation. The quote from one of the interviews; “to keep the community alive” represents this orientation of activities.

## Good opportunities - and challenges

In relation to their becoming actors in sustainable transformation to a forest-based bio-economy, we can identify challenges for civil society stakeholders. In the region there is a strong and

active triple helix model involving actors that know each other well and have developed a close working relationship. Attempts to invite and include civil society actors through, for example, local workshops with a focus on sustainable transformation are quite recent. An interesting question that appears when analysing the role of civil society is therefore if there actually is a “clearing”, that is a space in the social landscape, available for local civil society to join and be involved in this process? And, if so, we can also identify challenges related to filling that clearing with an ageing local civil society, fewer members in the CSOs, and the fact that the engagement rests on voluntary work.

In conclusion, we can note that there is definitely potential within civil society to contribute to sustainable transformation, for instance through a broad base of knowledge, diffusion of information, mobilisation of citizens, participation, cooperation and co-creation. However, to involve civil society actors and turn them into more equal stakeholders in sustainable transformation, for democratic reasons and for utilizing the collective knowledge of civil society, a greater knowledge of the pre conditions for and activities of the local civil society is needed.



Photo: Sigrid Josefsson



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## Centre for Research on Sustainable Societal Transformation (CRS)

The Centre for Research on Sustainable Societal Transformation at Karlstad University conducts multidisciplinary research on current and historical trends as well as future challenges. Our researchers work collaboratively across local, regional, national and international issues, and aim to contribute new research results and methods to the field of sustainable development and a range of other societal challenges.

CRS is an inclusive center that unites researchers from many different areas and with different approaches, which fosters a dynamic research environment. Some of the research questions in which our researchers are engaged include: How can we jointly use all the forest's resources in a sustainable way? How does digitization affect tourism and the development of visitor destinations? How is the day-to-day life of a family affected when moving from the big city to an urban area? How can we learn from local and historical knowledge for a sustainable future? These are just some of the issues within CRS's broad research fields.

CRS also runs a graduate school for doctoral students from a variety of disciplines. In addition to offering PhD-level courses, doctoral students are offered activities such as seminars and workshops, often with a special focus, such as academic writing or career opportunities after graduation.

In addition to research projects and postgraduate programs, CRS regularly organizes writing workshops, seminars and networking breakfasts to promote academic writing, research communication and networking.

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