

Towards the sustainable workplace?



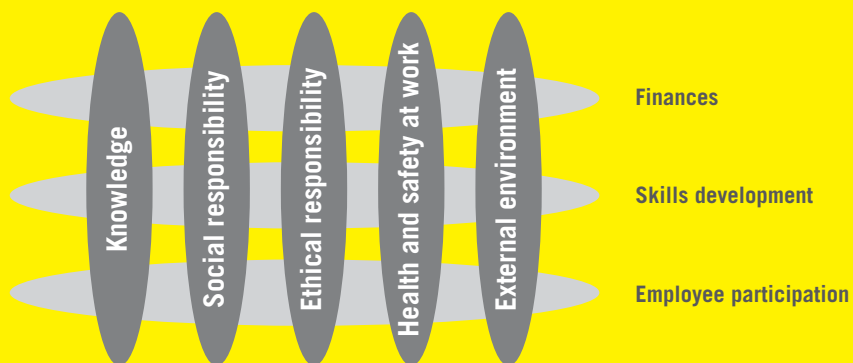
REFLECTION REPORT



Project "Towards the sustainable workplace"



The TSW project's definition of sustainability



The five sustainability themes illustrated in the vertical pillars are to be integrated into the workplace projects and the three sustainability factors listed across are to act as conditions for working with the themes.

Preface

The Danish Confederation of Trade Unions' (LO) political vision is for society to develop towards more sustainability. This vision can only be achieved if we develop sustainability from the bottom – in the individual workplaces. And this vision can only become a reality if every manager and employee takes responsibility and participates in the development processes.

When LO decided to launch a project on sustainable workplaces in 2001, we were aiming to create development processes in the participating workplaces – i.e. development processes pointing towards sustainable, socially responsible workplaces and workplace democracy.

For almost two years, a network between workplaces and educational institutions and a number of researchers and union people experimented with, visualised and discussed how to put the concept of sustainability into practice at the workplace level.

From the outset, we called the TSW project “Towards the sustainable workplace”, because a workplace cannot turn sustainable from one day to the other – or from one year to the next.

The TSW project has taught us that sustainability is above all a vision or a target for workplaces to focus on and move towards – step by step, and that there is no definitive finish line to cross when sustainability has been achieved.

Read more about the TSW project experience, results and reflections in the reports, thematic workbooks, dialogue tools, etc., prepared in connection with the project.

Finally, we would like to thank all the people who were involved in and contributed to the TSW project. A special thanks to the 15 workplaces – their management and employees – and the six educational institutions that had the courage to embark on a pioneering project like this one.

Sincerely



Marie-Louise Knuppert
Confederal Secretary LO

Contents

Introduction	5
What have we learned from the project?	6
From 'the developing workplace' to sustainable workplaces	8
What do we understand by sustainability?	10
10 The workplace as an arena for work with sustainability	
Between vision and everyday life	15
17 Sustainability – a difficult, but rewarding concept	
19 A vision is paramount – but when and in what form?	
Balancing act between many interests	22
Employee participation	26
Dilemmas and choices as regards content	30
Embedding and spreading of initiatives	33
33 Organisational embedding at workplaces	
34 Content embedding at workplaces	
36 Embedding at the educational institutions	
The role of TSW consultants	37
37 Different qualifications of consultants	
Working in networks	39
Workplace and society level – a perspective	42
Order TWS publications	44

Introduction

The project “Towards the sustainable workplace” (the TSW project), initiated by LO in 2001, is a joint project between 15 workplaces, six educational institutions, trade unions, researchers and external consultants. The aim was to create development processes at the workplaces and between all the players, thus paving the way for more sustainable workplaces and greater workplace democracy.

Together with consultants from a local educational institution, 15 workplaces formulated and worked on their own sustainability projects. During the project period, they were able to exchange experience with the other workplaces at joint seminars. In addition, TSW consultants held meetings focusing on their work with the companies and their own learning processes.

In this report, we (the LO project management and the Kubix consultants, who have acted as interdisciplinary consultants throughout the project) try to evaluate and reflect on some of the experience gained during the project. This report should not be seen as a final reporting or a systematic evaluation of the results – for this please refer instead to publications from the project. This paper comes closer to an attempt at addressing central themes and problems from the project and discussing them in light of the experience we have gained from the project.

The project had a double qualification perspective: it was meant to develop qualifications in both management and employees at workplaces and in TSW consultants to strengthen them in their sustainability efforts. Since the project was from the outset also defined as a joint learning process for everyone involved, we are trying to evaluate some of the key lessons we learned during the process. We hope that these reflections can inspire others who want to start similar projects. Our goal is not to make a handbook describing how to establish sustainable workplaces, but hopefully to provide ideas for the process.

The report targets employees in trade unions, educational, environmental and health and safety consultants, shop stewards and executives at workplaces.

TSW project

Contents: Reflections on the project process

Target group: trade unions, consultants, shop stewards and managers

What have we learned from the project?

The following briefly describes some of the things we learned from the TSW project. The report elaborates the individual items.

- Sustainability involves social problems at a global level, but it makes good sense to apply the concept at workplace level.
- Sustainability is a vision rather than a concrete goal. Its components are both content and process oriented: You must work with relevant themes and do so in a sustainable manner.
- Sustainability is largely a matter of having an eye for and an ability to handle dilemmas – an activity that addresses one element of sustainability may have negative consequences for another. There are no right or wrong answers and actions exist – choices also have to be made.
- Sustainability is a far-reaching concept that needs to be interpreted and translated to make sense at the workplace. It is difficult to pin down, but once grasped, it becomes a source of inspiration that ensures a broad perspective on development efforts – even broader than e.g. the strategy on ‘the developing work’.
- Skills development is paramount to the sustainability work. People who do not feel competent doing their own work will lack the resources to work with such issues.

- Employee participation is also a must for sustainability. Employees must participate through the formal channels and through informal participation in working groups, etc. This makes the most of both forums and allows employees to participate in different ways and in the areas where their individual strengths lie.
- Visions are important guides for the task, but can be developed during the course of sustainability work.
- As in other development projects, you will come up against various interests and stakeholders when working with sustainability. However, the number of conflicts is potentially greater when it comes to sustainability because its themes are broad and often involve the players' attitudes as citizens.
- Embedding results and ideas at the workplaces must necessarily be an integral part of the work towards sustainability – it is a part of being sustainable. Embedding should be approached both in terms of organisation and content.
- Gathering workplaces and other project players in a joint network has been productive – although the workplaces were only able to learn from each other once they had a grip on their own projects.

From 'the developing workplace' to sustainable workplaces

Direct line from sustainability to the TDW strategy

To LO, the commitment to sustainability is directly tied to the effort to create a developing workplace for employees in the LO area. At its core, the TDW strategy (The Developing Workplace) was meant as a sustainability strategy that combined consideration for employees (both as individuals and as a group) with consideration for companies and society. The strategy was meant to promote the concurrent development of good jobs, production of quality products and services benefiting society as well as socially sustainable production based on environmental and social responsibility.

TDW: focus on job and company-internal conditions

However, in its actual wording, the TDW strategy mainly focused on the development of work, i.e. focus was on the job itself and internal conditions at the workplace. Thus, most of the tools and publications developed as part of the efforts concentrated on these perspectives.

TSW: Greater focus outside the company

The launch of the sustainability concept increased the spotlight on the other two 'legs' of the TDW strategy, viz. social aspects like social responsibility, health and safety at work and the environment as well as the quality and nature of products and services.

Sustainability as a perspective is thus not a new concept in LO terms, but experience from the TSW project has shown that, as a unifying concept, the TSW concept has proved better than the TDW concept at retaining and coupling all the original elements of the TDW strategy. In this way, it appears to be innovative. At the same time, the concept has illustrated that work involving big visions like TDW and TSW is riddled with dilemmas that need to be addressed and compromises that need to be made. We will deal with this later in the report.

Focus on the special conditions related to sustainability – not development projects in general

The status as a concept both known and new is reflected in the concrete work with sustainability, as expressed by this project. The work with development processes in workplaces moving towards sustainability draws several parallels to other types of development projects and processes. The difficulties encountered during the processes, the methods applied and the actual measures taken will to some degree be the same. But some conditions will also be special and tied specifically to sustainability as a theme. These are the special conditions we will be pursuing in this report.

Example: Employee participation is a theme that emerges in many change projects. How much, when and how employees should be included in creating a successful process are recurring questions. In our case, however, the interesting point to examine is whether the theme sustainability and its broad and complex nature place special demands on employee participation (its form, scope, the people involved, etc.) or raise new issues. We will not be able to give precise answers to this question, but it is a theme we will reflect on in the report.

The report will identify themes and problem areas requiring special attention or issues that need to be brought into play in this type of project. We cannot say when they will be relevant but rather that most of them are likely to come up at some point. As with other development projects, each sustainability project is unique and has a specific life of its own, but still some problems and dilemmas recur and need to be tackled. The report will address these problems and attempt to solve them.

The following themes and dilemmas will be considered in the report:

- What do we understand by sustainability?
- Between vision and everyday life
- Balancing act between many interests
- Employee participation
- Dilemmas and choices regarding content
- Embedding and spreading of initiatives
- The role of TSW consultants
- Working in networks
- Workplace level and social level

No handbook, but identification of problem areas and dilemmas and how they have been addressed

What do we understand by sustainability?

Starting point: Environmental sustainability

Generally, the concept of sustainability has been associated with protecting the environment and ensuring that future generations will still be able to produce and consume. A sustainable way of life involved ensuring that resources were only exploited to the extent that they could restore themselves within a foreseeable future.

Social and economic perspectives are included

At a later stage – particularly after the Brundtland report – the concept was extended to encompass social and economic elements: Like nature, people must be able to reproduce, which can impose limits on the intensifying and impairing effects of work, job opportunities, access to welfare schemes and the individual's possibilities of self-determination. Moreover, this must all occur on an economically sustainable basis that does not give one generation priority over another.

Overall perspective: global, generational and thematic – democracy as the fulcrum

Today, sustainability is about applying an overall perspective, one that spans various elements (environment, health and safety at work, social matters and economy) and a global, generational and democratic perspective. In a sustainable society, resources must not be earmarked for part of the population or specific generations and all citizens must be able and have access to participate in relevant contexts (education, parliamentary elections, etc.)

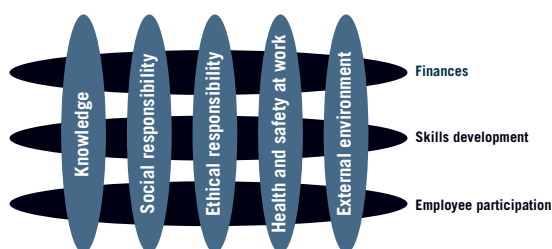
One perspective and one vision rather than a set target

There are no concrete targets that, once achieved, will mean that a sustainable workplace or society has been established. Sustainability is more a perspective and a vision indicating the desired direction to take, but which, in principle, can never be fully realised. It represents a ceaseless process of change also seen in other ideal concepts like 'the developing workplace' and 'the learning organisation'.

A more in-depth discussion and definition of the sustainability concept can be found in the report "A trade union for sustainability – part 1".

The workplace as an arena for work with sustainability

In many ways, the above formulations on sustainability set the stage for discussions and activities that fundamentally question the way our society works today. National and international players alike need to address these issues. However, in the TSW project, the workplace and its players have been the pivot of the work with sustainability. In an attempt to operationalise the concept at workplace level, we based our project on the 'lattice model' developed by LO:



The five sustainability themes illustrated in the vertical pillars are meant to be integrated into the workplace projects and the three traversing sustainability factors to act as conditions for working with the themes.

The TSW project's definition of sustainability

The three horizontal pillars – finances, skills development and employee participation – should be viewed as conditions for establishing sustainable workplaces. They are expected to form part of the foundation of all workplace projects and are in that sense included in the project definition of sustainability: Sustainability is beyond reach if the workplace is financially unsound, if employees and managers cannot use the necessary skills and if employees play no role in the decision processes affecting their own working lives.

Horizontal pillars: Conditions for sustainability

The five vertical pillars contain the themes concerning the contents of the sustainability concept. In practice, the five pillars were gathered into three at the beginning of the project: knowledge, social and ethical sustainability as well as health and safety and environmental sustainability.

Vertical pillars: Themes of content – to pick from

The overall model indicates that all the pillars are interrelated and interwoven, but still remain partially individual elements.

The starting point for the workplace projects was fairly concrete: They were to be based on problems that people at the workplace defined as relevant and urgent, but that also matched at least one of the three thematic sustainability pillars (knowledge, social/ethical responsibility, environment/health and safety at work). This meant that the individual workplace could confine itself to working with one of the three content themes but would have to address all three horizontal pillars. In the long run, this was meant to open up work in relation to other areas.

Self-inflicted problems at the workplaces

Inherent ambiguities in the model

In retrospect, this model has given some mixed signals in a number of areas, which affected the work. The fact that skills development on the one hand was viewed as a condition for developing sustainable workplaces, while 'knowledge' on the other hand appeared as an optional element of content caused confusion – not least because knowledge in many cases was translated into knowledge development/skills development. Consequently, the more or less same element was represented twice in the model but with different statuses.

At the same time, skills development as a theme held a special status in the project: This is partly because it is the pivot of the European Social Fund, target 3, which supports the TSW project financially, and because skills development activities have contributed significantly to the co-financing required in social fund projects.

Can 'pure' skills development projects be sustainability projects?

Apart from the interpretation difficulties engendered by these ambiguities and double functions, this construction helped justify some workplaces' choice to define a 'pure' skills development project as their sustainability project. This made it difficult for us as project managers to define how these projects differed from other skills development projects and what qualified them to be termed sustainability projects.

... or 'pure' health and safety at work projects?

Similar questions could be raised in relation to projects defining themselves within the other two pillars. Is the mere fact that a project deals with e.g. health and safety at work sufficient to constitute a sustainability project? As mentioned, the three horizontal pillars are defined as decisive to sustainability, so they must naturally be brought into play. But other contexts offer many examples of health and safety and skills development projects that more or less explicitly worked with employee participation, etc. Have these really constituted sustainability projects? Or does the TSW project's approach contain special perspectives that cannot immediately be inferred from the lattice model?

Characteristics of sustainability projects

In our conceptual framework, a sustainability project at workplace level contains the following elements:

1. It deals with problems within the outlined themes (social conditions, environment, etc.)
2. It develops from three basic presumptions (employee participation, skills development and finances); these are not just measures but targets in themselves.
3. It looks outside the company (also), i.e. it relates to how its own practice affects and interrelates with the surrounding society; social responsibility, long-term perspective.
4. It looks across the themes of content and is aware of possible dilemmas in their interrelations; an attempt at an overall perspective.

Re. item 1: In terms of content, sustainability projects should work with the themes described in the lattice model, i.e. knowledge, health and safety at work, environment plus ethical and social responsibility.

Focus on the content element of knowledge, environment, health and safety at work and social responsibility

Re. item 2: Unlike in other change and development projects, employee participation is, in this context, not a primary means of reaching certain goals. It is a goal in its own right as well as a fundamental condition for sustainability. In our conceptual framework, sustainable workplaces cannot be developed without a democratisation process – employees must participate actively in formulating and implementing ideas. (Read more about employee participation and its many forms, etc. in theme booklet 2: “Employee participation and sustainability”.)

Employee participation as an independent goal

Re. item 3: In a market economy, the primary function of the workplace is to deliver the best possible products and services within its area of expertise, subject to the current financial framework. The primary goal is not to create more jobs, integrate employees with a non-Danish ethnic background, etc. However, this is not to say that the companies have no social responsibility. In our project, we have tried to put this theme on the agenda – not by asking the participating workplaces to formulate projects targeted at solving social problems, but by asking the workplaces to consider how their respective projects and practice in the pertinent area could have an impact outside the companies. Examples include how the organisation of work and working-hour rules affect employees’ private lives and how the composition of employees reflects the local society. The objective was also to make the workplaces think more ahead and see beyond the immediate gains and advantages of certain measures.

Social awareness

Re. item 4: The TSW project was structured to allow the workplaces to formulate their projects within one of the three overall sustainability themes. However, the project managers understood and expressed their expectation that, during the process, the projects should extend their perspectives to include one or more of the other themes – primarily by being aware of how the measures already launched could affect other areas – e.g. considering whether hiring more employees in various types of flexible working arrangements could create health and safety problems for other employees. Greater awareness of and the ability to handle such dilemmas were cornerstones of the TSW project. To the extent it made sense at the workplaces, considerations about new activities and measures within other themes were quite welcome – also after the TSW project had formally ended.

Focus on one theme, but awareness of the other themes

Sustainability: both content and process

Overall, sustainability in this context can be said to involve both a content and a process aspect. It is not enough to raise relevant themes such as limiting employee impairment or taking social responsibility. The way a company works with these themes, the actual development process, must also be sustainable (employee participation, social considerations, etc.)

Part of this 'characterisation' of sustainability projects at workplace level emerged during the project process – at any rate, it was continuously defined more precisely. However, expectations were far from explicit at the outset, and the process of making them more succinct in the course of the project, gave rise to certain discussions among the participants. We will take a closer look at these discussions in the next section.

Between vision and everyday life

An independent objective of the TSW project was that the work with sustainability had to have a concrete basis defined by the employees and managers at the participating workplaces. In our opinion, this was necessary to ensure commitment to and ownership of the project. Ambitious project plans with nicely formulated goals developed by project makers or inspired individuals at the workplace would undoubtedly look impressive on paper, but would in our opinion stand little chance of being realised as the sustainability projects we envisioned. They would probably generate temporary, respectable results, but the process would hardly be sustainable and the chances of the initiatives' being viable and continuously developing would be minimal.

Another argument for starting with the concrete, down-to-earth basis was to enable the workplaces to start at their own levels. Some of them had many years' experience in project-oriented development work, and a few had experience in some of the content elements of the sustainability concept. For others, this type of project work and the themes were relatively new. To set uniform, exact project goals would therefore make no sense.

Concrete starting point as a condition for commitment

Example:

A production company has many employees with non-Danish ethnic backgrounds among its production staff. Some of these people speak little Danish and they are unaccustomed to relating to and participating in developing their work. However, the workplace's ambition is to include this group in the project work aimed at developing health and safety at work, quality and the environment, etc.

As a first step in this effort, the company decided to establish 'mini teams' where a small group of foreign-language employees held weekly meetings with the work manager over a period of approx. four weeks. During these meetings they received information about workplace conditions (finances, order situation, etc.) and were given the opportunity to comment on the daily work, make suggestions for improvements, etc. After the four weeks, another mini team was established.

The idea was both to ensure that necessary information reached this group and to create a small and clear context where the participants hopefully would find it easier and safer to ask questions, express their points of view, etc. The language barrier was just one element. In the long run, the company hoped that this would make the group more accustomed – both in terms of language and working methods – to being active participants in contexts where they would be expected to express their opinions and take part in the development.

Actual employee participation for this group could only become a reality once they were more familiar with the language and the working methods in the project. Establishing mini teams was the first step in this direction.

Another company had worked for many years to develop good jobs, strengthen social responsibility and establish close interaction with customers and the local community. This took place in cooperation between management and employees. The company had prepared social accounts, the organisation had a flat structure with self-management as the ruling principle and project/development work was part of the day-to-day work for most employees.

The conditions for working with sustainability were thus good: Management and the employees enjoyed close cooperation based on mutual trust, they were used to collaborating even when tackling even complex matters in project-similar constructions, and they had learned a great deal about interaction with employees, customers and the local community.

This workplace was able to take some areas for granted in formulating its sustainability project and was thus able to address an entirely new area, viz. environmental conditions.

In natural continuation of this understanding, we as project managers did not provide a key to what makes a sustainable workplace or to what a sustainability project is – or a recipe for how to work with sustainability for that matter. This decision was founded on the notion that no single correct way of approaching or tackling such a project exists and that, thematically, this was in many ways a new project with little previous experience to rely on. Hence, even if we had wanted to, we would have had a hard time providing any concrete instructions. Instead, we formulated the overall project as a mutual learning process where all parties involved were to gain insight into the work with sustainability from their various positions – employee, shop steward, manager, consultant, project manager, etc.

Besides this concrete and enquiring approach, we expected the individual projects to relate to a vision or a focal point that would make the project part of a larger picture and indicate its direction. But the workplaces did not know what shape the vision should take or what expectations other players had to it. (Read more about these dilemmas in thematic workbook 1: “Basis for learning sustainability”).

This approach was not without its problems. From the beginning, the workplaces were unsure of the content of the sustainability concept. For some, this uncertainty turned into frustration and aversion – they saw the concept as too comprehensive, complex and idealised and thus difficult to grasp and, not least, difficult to work with in practice. At the same time, the initial expectation was that the ‘experts’ would give directions for approaching the projects without setting themselves up as judges of the individual projects’ content. The workplaces lacked benchmarks both in terms of content and the process, but were also more preoccupied with finding their own feet in the projects than participating in broad discussions of what sustainability and the visions could be.

At the end of the TSW project, we asked ourselves how we could find a suitable balance between what is defined, manageable and concretely embedded and the vision, as well as whether the sustainability concept served as an inspiration and a guide in the work or instead created regrettable uncertainty and confusion.

Sustainability – a difficult, but rewarding concept

To begin at the end: The attitude to the sustainability concept was ambivalent throughout the TSW project – and probably still is. Since the ‘project managers’ and the ‘experts’, not the participants, initially chose the concept, the participants were unable to relate the concept to their own daily work life. Still, some workplaces adopted the concept and imbued it with their own meaning. Some workplaces replaced the word sustainability with related words and concepts that were easier for their colleagues to recognise, e.g. social responsibility, inclusiveness and improved health and safe-

No key – the project serves as a mutual learning process

Important to have visions to indicate the direction

Difficult to navigate between everyday life and vision

Ambivalent attitude towards the sustainability concept

ty at work. Only very few workplaces avoided using the word entirely, at least outside the narrow project group, for fear of scaring their colleagues away.

Example:

During the project period, the workplaces in the day-care area developed their own interpretation and understanding of the sustainability concept. Initially, people were uncertain about the meaning of the concept. To varying degrees, people found the concept difficult to understand, but over time they translated it into a model that made sense in their daily work.

Sustainability was thus understood as showing mutual consideration, cooperating seamlessly with colleagues, management, children and parents and making the most of each other's differences and resources. These elements made sense to those involved and were thus directly relevant work points for the project. During the process, those involved came to see these elements as almost synonymous with the sustainability concept, meaning that they used the concept more and more actively – they were not afraid of using the concept.

Interpreting the concept in light of one's own everyday life – inspiration and perspective

However, as it looks now, the concept has mainly left a positive impression. In some cases, this has served as a stone in a shoe – something one is made regularly aware of and must relate to. This meant that the projects could not rest on their laurels, but had in principle to consider content and direction continuously – not only because unexpected issues are bound to arise during development projects, but because the projects had to place themselves within a sustainability framework at regular intervals. At practically all participating workplaces, the established project/working groups can now relate to the sustainability concept and can describe how it relates to their workplaces. These understandings differ greatly from one workplace to another – and perhaps even internally in one workplace. Some understandings are broad, others are narrow, yet they are always adapted to the work and the type of organisation in which one takes part. Regardless of its actual content, however, the concept has sparked discussions about the direction people want their workplaces to take.

Throughout the TSW project, it was important for the 'leading' concept to be sustainability and not quality, customer orientation, the learning organisation, etc. The sustainability concept provided the theme for much broader discussions than any of the other concepts would have done, thus affecting the direction the various projects chose to take.

A vision is paramount – but when and in what form?

As with the sustainability concept, the vision concept also gave rise to some uncertainty and discussion during the project. From the outset, the project management emphasised that the workplaces needed to give their projects a vision from which to work. The vision indicates the direction of the work and where the company wants to move in the long run. It shows that not all approaches are equally good if sustainability is the goal, and it helps prevent the lowest common denominator from controlling the project.

However, the workplaces had more difficulty formulating such a vision and understanding what a vision should contain – and, initially, to see its purpose – than the project management had anticipated. For example, the workplaces involved were unaccustomed to working with the relatively long timeframe a vision implies, especially the production employees. The rhythm of other development work at the workplace had usually been quite different. Then the work was dictated by the demand for quick results and solving specific problems – e.g. to show employees that action has been taken. As a result, the work with sustainability introduced an entirely different timeframe and rhythm at the workplace, ones that had to be reconciled with and function simultaneously with existing timeframes and rhythms.

At the end of the TSW project, we see two possible ways of handling this dilemma of needing a vision, but then needing to keep a concrete focus. The two paths are not mutually exclusive, but may in fact supplement each other:

- The work involved in 'translating' the vision concept into a meaningful and manageable tool in parallel with the process we described earlier relating to the sustainability concept.
- Development of a vision in tandem with the project or after some experience is gained.

An overall vision to become a sustainable workplace can be difficult to relate to and use in the daily work because it has a long timeframe. However, this vision can also be 'translated' into sub-visions, i.e. steps on the way to the overall vision. Such sub-visions should not be taken as concrete goals

Sustainability sets a broad agenda

Visions as a guideline

Difficult to formulate visions

Several ways of working with visions

Operationalisation of the overall vision

for the development work. Sub-visions must have broader ramifications and include a social perspective. They must go hand in hand with the company's strategy.

A sub-vision might be one of the following:

- The workplace must be open to all regardless of gender, age, ethnic background, etc.
- The workplace must be a place where a person has the capacity and option to work at the age of 65.
- The workplace must to the extent possible reuse all materials (raw materials, paper, water, etc.)

Naturally, the vision should be adapted to the individual company.

Example:

One company has made a conscious effort to create a visible connection between the company's strategy and its social responsibility initiatives. The company's vision is to become a diverse workplace, an objective it has worked towards in several ways:

The works council prepared a staff policy incorporating diversity in a way that makes refusing to work constructively with a non-Danish colleague grounds for dismissal.

The company traditionally lays down long-term goals with organisational measures in written agreements to ensure that people take them seriously. Consequently, the new goals on inclusiveness, diversity and social responsibility were included in a new framework agreement for the production groups' work. In this way, the company ensured that its social goals were given the same weight in practice as its technical-financial goals.

The work surrounding the preparation of the framework agreement was a crucial element in creating cohesion between strategy and practice for the employees. The agreement was prepared in open dialogue between levels of management and shop stewards. This helped ensure that previous experience was included and that scepticism and reservations could be brought up legitimately. Furthermore, the open dialogue helped carry on the spirit of the agreement as it was subsequently realised.

Several of the workplaces involved in the TSW project started outlining a vision during the process or at the end of the project. As they gained experience in sustainability and launched initiatives in the area, the need for a vision became evident. The concept was 'demystified', the workplaces became more comfortable with the concept and learned how to approach the work of formulating a vision.

At some workplaces, the vision work performed by the people involved has had ramifications higher up in the system. Thus, the experience that a day-care project gained in formulating values and social responsibility has become part of the overall local authority's plan for future development.

Experience from the TSW project points to the advantages of reconsidering the connections between vision and project regularly. A sustainable strategy requires that goals and means are continuously reconsidered and possibly adjusted. Therefore, work on visions also offers an opportunity to assess current activities and put them into perspective.

To formulate a vision may in itself be seen as a significant element in the work towards sustainability. The vision must cohere with the other workplace goals and strategies, and it must make sense to the employees. Consequently, the employees must also play some part in this work – not everyone and not to the same degree, but at a viable level where the visions can get the necessary backing and be realised. Paper is a grateful medium, and there are many examples of nicely formulated policies developed by staff functions or at management level that fail to gain any substantial penetration power in the organisation because other employees have not been involved in the process.

Sustainability is about being able to see the possibilities in small things and being able to make the link between concrete measures and overall visions. One key is to have a qualified idea of what is needed to create the desired changes at the workplace – how to approach the process. Experience from previous projects and knowledge of workplace culture, conflict areas, etc. can be developed into an overall understanding of the mechanisms at play at the workplace when new projects are launched on, e.g., sustainability – an understanding of action or action theory. An action theory entails allowing players to make suggestions about how to start a project, how to involve more people, which players to include, which means and tools to apply, pitfalls to avoid, etc. One action theory might dictate that some groups must participate from the beginning, while others are best included at a later stage, and that one theme, e.g. social responsibility, stands a greater chance of succeeding than others. This knowledge is a permissible and necessary resource. However, one must also consider the long-term perspective and think about when and how other themes and employee groups can be included.

Development of a vision during the process

Ongoing revision and discussion of goals and means

Preparation of a vision as a crucial element in itself

A qualified understanding of actions may help the process

Balancing act between many interests

Differences in interest exist in all change processes...

Virtually all change and development projects at the workplace will encounter differing opinions about what priorities to set, whether changes should take place at all and, if so, how to meet the objectives established. This could be because groups of people or individuals have differing interests – for instance, some groups may want to protect the privileges they already enjoy. Or some people may be uncertain about what the new measures will entail and are therefore sceptical of changes. Performing a balancing act between such differing opinions and approaches is an element in every change process. Moreover, the stakeholders do not share the same possibilities for attracting attention to their interests. Power at all levels plays a role and means that the balancing act is not “fair”.

...but pose special challenges in sustainability projects

Having sustainability as the overall theme of the changes does not make the balancing act any easier. This theme is very broad and complex and contains a number of potential dilemmas to be addressed – and typically many more than in, say, a skills development project or in projects on technological renewal. Furthermore, sustainability will often involve moral and ethical considerations compelling both management and staff to deal with opinions and points of view beyond the workplace.

Decision to be made as a citizen and not “merely” as an employee

Obviously, morals and ethics can play a role in skills development projects, e.g. when companies consider whether planned initiatives will exclude certain groups of employees. However, when it comes to sustainability, differences in opinion and dilemmas are more multi-faceted. For instance, a wish to recruit weak groups in the labour market might clash with the interest of health and safety at work for the present employees. Priorities in this respect may be quite different, depending on what a person considers most important. In such cases, a person makes a decision not only as an employee of a workplace, but also as a citizen, which could open up for many different interests and opinions that are not easy to combine.

Cross pressure on primary players in the TSW project

In the TSW project, the issue of interest became even more topical because the players involved extended beyond management and staff of the workplaces to include a large number of external players and stakeholders. TSW consultants, their institutions, LO, researchers and Kubix consultants each had their own agenda and interests that they continuously tried to further. The interests of the many different players coincided in some respects, but they also differed. In brief: The closer players have come to completing their projects, the more matter-of-fact and specific they wanted the formu-

lation of and work on the projects to be. The further removed the players got from everyday problems, the more they tried to stick to the overall, ideal principles of the project.

In some ways, the roles were deliberately distributed and all players were given their own sets of lines – the project management was to guarantee that the sustainability aspects were maintained and the workplaces and the TSW consultants were to ensure that the general ideas were realistic and meaningful to put into practice, etc. Hence, unsurprisingly, in practice the primary players of the project at times felt under a “cross pressure” that forced them to combine very different considerations and interests.

Example:

In one day-care facility, the training consultant, the department management and staff members quickly came to an understanding and established an alliance. The group agreed on many aspects of what the project should be about: skills development of childminders and early childhood educators to strengthen cooperation and mutual responsibility both internally and between the two groups.

A few educators and childminders felt insecure – above all by the prospect of new types of task and methods of working, but also by the mere thought of attending courses. This was the apparent extent of the conflicting interests, so an open dialogue was initiated to counter the scepticism expressed.

On several occasions during the project, the project management and the Kubix consultants attempted to formulate broader goals and visions. The purpose was not to redefine the entire project, but to put the activities launched into a broader perspective, e.g. by not only thinking of good social working conditions for the present staff members, but also trying to formulate a staff and employment policy that enabled the facility to retain older staff members and recruit new groups. On the other hand, the intention was to get the workplace to include other elements of sustainability such as environmental matters in the project. However, since the training consultant was on

continues >

somewhat shaky ground about the concept of sustainability, she wanted the project to concentrate on areas with which she was familiar. The workplace was also interested in maintaining the chosen focus, one reason being to exploit the commitment shown by many staff members.

At the end of the project period when the original initiatives had gained a good foothold, new perspectives were gradually addressed. The differences in interest were less pronounced – perhaps because many things had been accomplished, thus making room and generating the energy for greater output.

Example:

A major company is publicly known for making sustainability a high priority, both in terms of the environment and inclusiveness. The company saves on energy and materials and attempts to retain employees with considerable sickness absence. Hence, the top management has been interested in working on sustainability in the broad sense and, to some extent, also in involving staff members actively in the work to achieve visible results. However, the sustainability project was not embedded in top management, but in a staff function in a specific department. The staff function focused on performing the department's own environmental certification task, which, besides the aim of securing production and doing the piece-work, is why the staff members were only involved in the project at foreman level and why mainly themes directly relevant to the certification process were addressed.

In the course of development projects, compromises regularly need to be made between differing opinions and interests. Some of these may not be clearly articulated and are therefore particularly difficult to handle. A relatively open dialogue about these matters can facilitate a resolution, but it is also important to realise that it may prove impossible to accommodate all parties. Choices and priorities need to be made along the way, and some parties may get the short end of the stick.

The fact that differences in interest and dilemmas go hand in hand may make sustainability projects difficult to navigate. Differences in interest are a matter of setting different priorities. Even when interests are shared, however, a sustainability project will still involve dilemmas that need to be dealt with along the way. Such dilemmas and examples of how they were dealt with appear in more detail in the following section.

Need to distinguish between differing interests and dilemmas

Employee participation

A central element

Employee participation was a pivotal element in our approach to sustainability. It may also be the area in which the TSW project was most successful. Employees at practically all the workplaces involved played a central role in the design and completion of the sustainability projects. Participation varied significantly – some places were closely tied to the formal system of cooperation and some places not at all – but participation was the focal point for the workplaces and TSW consultants.

What are they participating in, how and who?

Our second thematic workbook (“Employee participation and sustainability”) addresses this theme in more detail and points out, for instance, that it is important what the employees participate in, how they participate and who participate.

- As a group, employees must be able to influence both the definition of relevant themes for the project work and the strategic priorities and decisions the work might concern and they must be equipped to play this role through skills enhancement, etc.
- Employees need to join the project at an early stage where content and form are still undecided, they must have an opportunity to contribute their experience from other aspects of life, and a combination of formal and informal participation is usually an advantage.
- Shop stewards or trailblazers should not be the only ones representing the employees. As many people as possible should be involved in some way – also the critical and the sceptical. Participation should ideally be adjusted to match individual requests and strengths – some are good at planning and meetings, while others are better at solving practical problems.

Focus on formal and informal participation

This report concentrates on one element in the discussion about participation, viz. the relationship between formal and informal participation. Formal participation is understood as participation primarily embedded in existing formal bodies and institutions, such as works councils and safety committees as well as shop steward and safety representative functions. Informal participation relates to persons, working groups, etc., without formal decision-making powers. A number of combinations, such as working groups with special tasks and skills, lie between these two extremes.

In our view, the fact that employee participation extended beyond the shop stewards was a great strength in the TSW project. The majority of projects involved a broader group of employees and middle managers through working groups, seminars, ad hoc tasks, etc. This paved the way for relatively broad embedding of the projects at the workplaces. However, both formal and informal participation offer advantages and disadvantages.

Hence, employee participation is not a question of either-or, but of both- and in terms of formal and informal participation. All resources must be brought into play to achieve the goals.

Embedding in the formal system ensures that the employees enjoy a right to be consulted. Special rules have been laid down for interaction in these bodies, rules that employees can rely on, e.g., if the management is a little too busy introducing certain measures.

This organisation also helps ensure that all employee groups, at least in theory, are briefed on the sustainability project and that the project has formal support at the workplace. Strategic considerations and decisions will typically also have a place in these forums, so raising such matters there is legitimate.

The strength of the formal bodies is also their weakness, however. The rather well-described rules on their function and not least many employees' ideas about the nature of the rules, often give them a tinge of rigidity and slowness. Many believe that the rigid routines of these formal bodies will prevent them from conceiving new inter-disciplinary ideas.

Moreover, many ordinary employees feel that involvement in the proceedings of works councils and safety committees is not their concern. So embedding in these places is no guarantee of support and commitment – even if active shop stewards can help involve colleagues regularly in council and committee activities.

The fundamental problem with informal participation is that it typically grants employees no formal rights, but a chance to be consulted. However, if management disagrees there are no rules for handling these disputes. So mutual trust is the best bases for informal participation, provided that management and the various employee groups know how to talk to each other.

On the other hand, informal participation can be adjusted to the specific project and the people who feel strongly about those precise topic themes can become committed and involved. This increases the chances of exploiting the various potentials and the knowledge employees possess from other contexts. For instance, if an employee has been involved in voluntary social work, association work, etc.

Formal as well as informal participation

Formal participation: Grants rights and access to the strategic level...

...but is seen as rigid and slightly “dry”

Informal participation: Requires mutual trust...

...but can then exploit potential and commitment where found

Example:

One company decided to appoint a new steering committee, consisting of the general manager, the production manager, a works manager, a shop steward and three employees from three different groups. This made the steering committee a kind of enlarged works council, but it saw itself as having been appointed specifically for the sustainability project. Although the shop steward and the management participated, they did not play very prominent roles, mostly giving latitude and support to other employees. The actual main activities were in the hands of the employees that showed a particular interest. This more informal employee participation clearly produced the project's actual results.

One workplace had established fixed routines for how to approach the development work. A team was appointed with both management and employee representation. One manager was responsible for collecting knowledge, results, etc. Shop stewards often represented the employees. However, it became evident during the sustainability project that the shop stewards could not cope with participating in 10-12 teams simultaneously, and that they were not necessarily the employees with the greatest knowledge and interest in the area concerned. Consequently, attempts were made to include more participants – also ordinary employees – on the basis of those committed to the theme.

In the context of sustainability, the problems will often run across the existing committees or areas of cooperation. Moreover, the shop stewards or members of standing committees are not necessarily the best and most obvious candidates for working on the themes chosen. So participation may have to include a larger number of people. Innovative ideas may depend on creating a new framework and new constellations of staff members. On the other hand, sustainability also relates so strongly to strategic matters and matters concerning collective agreements that a parallel embedding in more formalised entities could prove both an advantage and a necessity.

Hence, formal and informal participation need neither be mutually exclusive nor clash with each other. In fact, the TSW project has seen many workplaces work on the two levels at the same time. And some examples show that participation in informal forums has increased the desire to commit to the formal system and its bodies.

Example:

An industrial company had conducted a study of health and safety at work that pointed to a number of problems in the production department. For instance, the study pointed out that the operators lacked influence on the planning of their daily work and that communication was very poor. Wanting to rectify the situation, the company appointed a working group consisting of management and shop stewards. Unfortunately, the operators had no shop steward and nobody seemed to want to represent the group. “We’ve tried it so many times before and nothing ever comes out of it” was the group’s attitude. At the request of the management and the other shop stewards at the workplace, one operator volunteered to participate in the steering committee. She gave the job a chance and discovered that she was consulted, that her wishes were taken seriously and that management’s assertions that it wanted to improve conditions in the department was serious. As a result, she decided to persuade the other operators to elect a shop steward and gain formal representation in the works council. She was nominated as the only candidate and was elected.

An interesting aspect of the TSW project was that shop stewards played a less important role in workplace projects than has often been seen. Many participated in the projects, but more often as ordinary committed staff members rather than as shop stewards. In most cases, they were not selected for participation automatically, but volunteered due to their interest in specific themes. This helped make the project work more “grass roots” in character. Signals were sent that, for better or for worse, the normal rules on representative cooperation at the workplace did not govern the area.

On the other hand, the shop stewards and the employee organisations played an important role in disseminating activities and ideas. Both parties have joined networks granting them access to other parts of the workplace as well as new workplaces.

The second thematic workbook and the research reports “A trade union for sustainability”, parts 1 and 2, offer a more detailed description of the relation between formal and informal participation, including the roles of shop stewards.

Shop stewards as ordinary participants...

...but, together with the trade union, they play an important role in disseminating ideas, etc.

Dilemmas and choices as regards content

Inherent dilemmas

Working on sustainability is widely a question of making choices and handling dilemmas. Various considerations often need to be weighed against each other. For example, the use of more environmentally friendly, but perhaps also less effective, cleaning agents can make the work of cleaners manifestly tougher and harder on their health. Likewise, assignment of less strenuous tasks to employees with reduced working capacity puts the other employees under a heavier burden and thus at risk of impairment.

Example:

In one workplace, the aim was to retain the present employees and integrate new groups of employees. The management was most preoccupied with the latter and wanted to strengthen the company's work to integrate new Danes and people with reduced working capacity, among others. This represented a continuation of the management's work to prepare a social report on the company's initiatives aimed at boosting inclusiveness and assuming social responsibility.

Many members of the group of employees were more focused on retaining employees and establishing good conditions for the present employees. They feared that recruitment of new, presumably weaker groups would increase the workload on the present employees. To some extent, the employees felt under pressure (from management) to address inclusiveness at the workplace and tried to express the best possible intention from their point of view – to consider impaired colleagues.

At the same time, it was important that this group did not worsen conditions for the others. In the words of one employee: "Otherwise, you will soon have to be impaired to get one of the good jobs."

Not all considerations are compatible

Dilemmas may be rooted in conflicts of interest between different groups of employees. However, they may also be seen as a sign that various sustainability elements are pulling in opposite directions. When employees, as in the above example, point out that consideration for impaired employees may create problems for other employees, it is more

than just an example of a group trying to maintain privileges acquired. On the contrary, it emphasises that good intentions are not always compatible. All specific initiatives require that choices be made between the various considerations. Compromises must be struck – not only between the interests of different groups of employees, but also between the individual elements of sustainability.

Eksempel:

A public corporation worked intensively to reduce sickness absence and boost the well-being of its employees. It attempted to prevent sickness absence and retain long-term sick employees at the workplace. All employees were involved in the project and sickness absence fell during a period. The employees also took active part in a number of joint activities that created greater job satisfaction.

Concurrently with these activities, a central decision was made to tighten the rules on the dismissal of long-term sick employees, which brought the date of resignation forward. The aim was to secure immediate budget reductions.

The local management found itself in a dilemma between maintaining its great commitment to the work of social consideration, which was given high priority locally, and favouring politically defined financial considerations. This was a classic dilemma that also shows how power may be a factor in the handling of dilemmas. The rules on dismissal were not directly negotiable – to a large extent, local activities had to be adapted to them.

A sustainability perspective can help clarify that it is a matter of choice and thus of rejection – that the workplace, as far as possible, deliberately and openly prioritises between various considerations. Hence, making the dilemmas visible and thus qualifying the choices becomes a goal in itself in a project of this kind. Unlike problems, the dilemmas cannot be solved – as a player one may become better at handling them and “switching” between them, but they do not go away. They will remain, but perhaps in a slightly different form.

The example about integration of new groups of employees also illustrates a general feature of the projects on social sustainability – that being socially responsible and inclusive is easier and more obvious when it comes to addressing fellow colleagues as opposed to recruiting employees from outside the workplace. This comes as no surprise – analyses of the inclusive labour market suggest the same.

Project ambition: to make more deliberate and open choices and to handle dilemmas

An interest in internal inclusiveness may be the first step

Developments at several of the workplaces in the TSW project show, however, that this work on “internal inclusiveness” may be the first step towards looking to groups outside the workplace. This applies, for instance, to the day-care facilities involved. In each their own way, they have all worked to increase social responsibility and improve cooperation among childminders and early childhood educators as well as between the two groups. They have now come a long way today; for example, one day-care facility has shown more courage in receiving children from socially disadvantaged families (an area that was previously left more or less to the institutions). Moreover, the interest in recruiting new groups such as new Danes was much greater.

Is sacking by definition unsustainable?

A workplace may face another type of dilemma where efforts to increase sustainability clash with other agendas at the workplace. Other development projects have taught us that major imminent staff reductions or reorganisations/mergers may render it difficult to mobilise staff members' time and energy for involvement in development initiatives. The TSW project also provides examples where one workplace abandoned the project because discussions about mergers and the ensuing positioning were on the minds of employees and managers.

Another workplace was about to carry out a major round of staff reductions. This led to uncertainty and many frustrations among the people involved and brought the sustainability project to a complete standstill during the period. Furthermore – and perhaps by virtue of the nascent discussions about sustainability – the workplace considered how to approach the process, both in terms of the staff members dismissed and the ones staying. The laid-off staff members were offered courses and other types of supplementary training, and efforts were made to find new jobs for them. The staff members staying were offered teambuilding courses; this made them stronger and raised their awareness of what they wanted to and could do at the workplace. The entire process highlighted issues that would benefit from being addressed the next time a similar situation arises.

Initially, sacking and sustainability seem to clash, but it is worth considering whether such processes could be undertaken in a sustainable manner.

Embedding and spreading of initiatives

Checking whether the initiatives launched and the underlying ideas continue after the formal completion of the project is an important element in the discussion about whether a project like this helps develop more sustainable workplaces.

Embedding at the workplace has an organisational side and a content side. Organisationally, it is relevant to establish who at the workplace supports and shows a kind of ownership of the initiatives launched – how broad is this support and do both managers and employees show it?

Focus on both organisational embedding and content embedding

In assessing the content side, an interesting discussion would ensue from focusing on whether the embedding of the concept and the perspective of sustainability has been successful or whether the participants are primarily committed to the specific initiatives. Some embedding may be required if the current projects are to be designated as sustainability projects at all, since this is essential to the launch of the next step towards the vision of a more sustainable workplace.

A special element in the organisational embedding could be to establish whether routines and practices have been laid down at the individual workplace that could help ensure the continued existence of initiatives – e.g. have the possibilities of learning been improved? This problem is described in more detail in the research report “Sustainability at work – reflection and learning at work”.

Organisational embedding at workplaces

In our view, the relatively broad employee participation in the activities at the majority of workplaces created a solid basis for organisational embedding. The project managers agree.

Embedding was thus a separate theme at one of the joint TSW project seminars. The local project teams consisting of workplace representatives and the attached training consultant were asked to discuss a number of issues related to the theme. The intention was to raise awareness in the area and to give the projects an opportunity to come up with new relevant initiatives to secure embedding, if need be.

Embedding as the theme at a joint seminar

More people to share the responsibility among management and employees is a strength

The projects are strongest when both management and employees have played active roles and the project is not mainly related to one or two trailblazers among managers or employees. Obviously, particularly committed people play an important role in a number of the projects, but the projects ran into trouble when these people did not manage to or did not want to involve others. The same was seen in other situations where key persons got new jobs. For instance, at one workplace, the project came to a halt when a new manager took over, because he had another agenda and wanted to allocate resources differently.

Trailblazers are both a resource and a risk

Trailblazers may become a problem because there is a risk that they will take over the project. The running of the project may become dependent on them. They may constitute a bottleneck, since everything must go through them, and they may gain too much control of the content. However, trailblazers are also an important resource, and forming a large group of them would be a strength that allowed dependence on individuals to be avoided.

Important to involve informal leader figures

It may also be important to involve informal leaders – persons who for various reasons enjoy status and legitimacy in the organisation – as they are particularly able to secure additional support and spread initiatives. Moreover, they can be difficult “adversaries” if they do not support the project.

Spreading responsibility and commitment among several persons – both at management and employee levels – has thus strengthened the embedding of the workplace projects. Other development projects have yielded the same experience. What is more interesting in this respect is perhaps that projects focusing on sustainability also on the process side should have the issue of embedding not as a special theme, but as a natural element. Keeping the process in a project sustainable means one has also come far in embedding sustainability.

Embedding and spreading initiatives occurred in many different ways: through working groups, cooperating on performing specific tasks and presentation meetings, etc. Some of this has been staged and some has been informal. One of the participating educational institutions, for instance, presented the experience from the TSW project to its board, which seats representatives from the various trade unions. The hope was that the representatives would introduce the ideas at home.

Content embedding at workplaces

To establish whether a content perspective has been embedded, and preferably widened, one should measure whether a workplace launches new initiatives after the formal completion of the project, and, if it does, what kind of initiatives they are. Many of the workplaces are already busy planning the next step, the next project. Others continue their current work, hoping that it will spread throughout the organisation. A few of the projects were so ambitious from the outset that much work remains to put

policies, ideas, framework agreements, etc., into practice. At one company, for example, all production groups have drawn up their own framework agreement for retaining and integrating staff, but have yet to finish testing and assessing the agreement. Similarly, another workplace, where some initiatives are yet to be launched, set high targets for the reduction of material and energy consumption. These two companies only saw the current sustainability project as a single step in an ongoing process.

Some of the new initiatives being planned seem to indicate that a sustainability perspective plays an important role. For instance, the workplace may address another general sustainability theme. One day-care facility talked, for example, about building a green playground. And one person in a group of childminders was very interested in environmental issues and is therefore considering taking new initiatives in this respect. Even more so now that a new green housing society has been established in the vicinity and the group will be receiving children from this area within the near future.

Another variant is to try more systematically to link the activities of the sustainability project with other types of workplace initiatives – if possible to the strategies devised for development of workplaces. This appears from the following example.

Example:

One company was working on a host of development activities at the same time. Each project had been narrowly formulated, and attempts were made to delineate the projects clearly, thus making them easier to grasp and more feasible within a relatively short time horizon of a couple of months. This facilitated the completion of the individual projects, but also meant that they were not necessarily linked.

Initiatives originating in the work on preparing for health and safety at work certification were not directly coordinated with the quality and environmental activities taking place concurrently. The two groups could develop the same ideas and initiatives in parallel, while others of them perhaps clashed. It was up to the management to prevent this from occurring, but the possible overlaps and problems may not have emerged until late in the process.

At the end of the project, the plan was to gather working groups across the organisation, so content issues in the project could be more completely discussed across the organisation and in its entirety and greater coordination ensured.

Embedding at the educational institutions

A particular aspect relates to embedding the idea of sustainability at the educational institutions involved. The TSW project also wanted to establish organisational learning at the associated institutions regarding consultation on sustainability. The success of this part of the project was limited, however.

Individual culture

As is common in this field, the educational institutions were characterised by a rather individual culture. Typically, the individual teacher exclusively plans classes within an overall framework, and the individual TSW consultant has usually been responsible for his or her own project. Some institutions had only a single workplace project and thus only one consultant directly involved in the TSW project. This made the link to the TSW project vulnerable and rendered it difficult for the consultant to bring back the experience to his or her own organisation. One institution solved the problem by having two consultants on the same workplace project, but this drains many more resources, and is thus not always a possibility.

Poor tradition and possibility of internal spreading

Even when several TSW consultants from the same institution ran parallel projects, they had only limited success in using each other as sounding boards along the way and in embedding principles and methods from work in the institution. Most of the institutions have no tradition for prioritising this type of activity, and so there are no obvious forums for doing so. Moreover, this type of project activity at workplaces may not necessarily take up as much room at the individual educational institution.

New initiatives to strengthen embedding

However, one of the educational institutions tried to establish an educational, professional environment where teachers meet once a week to exchange experience and discuss certain subjects – sustainability or aspects of sustainability, for instance. The institution also tried to include and present the aspect of sustainability in various course programmes where deemed relevant.

Towards the end of the TSW project and at the request of the project management, the initiative was taken to launch a range of activities at the educational institutions, aimed at presenting and discussing learning from the TSW project. The initiative includes in-house seminars where knowledge sharing in general and especially in relation to sustainability is on the agenda and discussions are held about where to put experience from the TSW project to use in the many activities undertaken by the educational institutions.

Additional information about embedding at the educational institutions is available from the third thematic workbook: “Consultant roles and sustainability”.

The role of TSW consultants

Just as the workplace starting points and conditions have influenced the work, the backgrounds of the TSW consultants have affected the workplace projects. We have previously pointed out that the TSW project should be regarded as a learning process for all involved players, a process in which nobody knew the exact targets and means beforehand. Of course, this was also true for the TSW consultants. They were not used to working with sustainability as a concept and barely knew what the concept meant when the project started, plus some people were relatively new at working as process consultants at workplaces.

This being the case, at the beginning of the project – when the TSW consultants were to find workplaces to participate in and help design the project – they understandably relied on areas with which they were familiar, viz. knowledge sharing and skills development. This may be one reason why such a relatively large number of the workplace projects were based on the knowledge pillar. Had occupational health service consultants been performing the task, focus on health and safety at work issues would probably have increased.

A lack of familiarity with the process consultant role may also have spurred some TSW consultants to turn to tasks they knew they could manage at a relatively early stage, i.e. planning and completion of skills development programmes. The other sustainability elements were, however, put on the backburner because they were too immense to address. It was hardly a deliberate process or an open rejection of themes and problems, but more a matter of creating a foundation to allow action and continuation of the project.

Different qualifications of consultants

The projects and the approaches of TSW consultants varied greatly, of course. Some consultants started thematising broader problems from the outset. They were typically experienced process consultants and therefore confident that they could manage the process.

As the TSW consultants generally improved their grasp of sustainability, they became bolder in terms of bringing other sustainability elements into play. This could also be because they established close ties with the workplaces and thus no longer felt that they as TSW consultants had to address significant and slightly more fanciful concepts and perspectives so cautiously.

The TSW project as a learning process – also for the consultants

Starting from what is familiar and safe

Process consultation is new to some consultants

Who is the consultant's primary "customer" and partner?

The attention and uncertainty surrounding workplace response to the thematisation of and work on the sustainability projects almost certainly played a significant role in the consultants' actions. They were sometimes more reserved and apprehensive about using the concept of sustainability than the workplaces were. They had many notions about how the workplaces would respond and were therefore reluctant. The workplaces and their contact persons were the TSW consultants' primary partners – the ones they were closest to, the ones they wanted to please most and the ones who were potential customers. The project management/LO appeared more distant in this context and was not a direct customer for the educational institution's products.

A more detailed presentation and discussion of the role of TSW consultants appear from the third thematic workbook: "Consultant roles and sustainability".

Working in networks

One idea behind the TSW project was to allow individual players to be inspired by and learn from one another through various forms of network activities. This was to be achieved through joint seminars for workplaces, TSW consultants, researchers and project managers and special seminars for TSW consultants as well as regional assemblies across local TSW workplaces and consultants.

Network activities were given priority, not least because the extreme complexity of working with sustainability creates a need for external inspiration to handle the task at the workplaces. Also, as already mentioned, the experts have no clear, “easy” answers, one reason being that their experience in the area is still limited. Even if the experts had wanted to, they would not have been able to handle the task satisfactorily, and an expert-oriented approach would also clearly have clashed with the intentions of the project. This made interaction with the other players in the TSW projects an excellent and obvious opportunity for getting ideas and processing and discussing own experience with others experiencing similar problems.

The seminars where different players contributed each their own skills and perspectives of the work on sustainability formed the core of the network activities. Researchers contributed knowledge and analyses, the workplaces experience and reflections and the TSW consultants their perspectives, etc. Public and private-sector workplaces learned about each other’s practice and problems – both in terms of the specific projects and the thematically defined areas such as health and safety at work and retaining and integrating employees.

An important part of a network is that it allows participants to articulate their own practices, “forces” participants to describe their actions and explain the course they are taking. Others may ask inquisitive, clarifying questions about these practices, thus compelling participants to reflect on their ways of understanding and approaching things. Having to explain one’s practice to others can be useful, one reason being that some practices – being implied – do not become clear or fall into a context until they are to be presented to outsiders.

At the beginning of the TSW project, participants at the workplaces were generally interested in hearing about and talking to people from workplaces similar to their own. Employees in the private sector did not think they could learn anything from public-sector employees and vice versa – although to a lesser extent. However, as the participants got a better handle

Networks as a learning forum

Participants contribute each their own skills and perspective

Learning by describing own practice

Networks require meaning, trust and qualifications...

on their own projects and became better acquainted with the other participants, they became more open toward and curious about each other. So now that the TSW project is close to its official completion, many participants are very interested in continuing some of the network activities – preferably with as broad participation as possible.

Experience from other network-based projects also shows that networks are not established merely by bringing a range of people and workplaces together. Moreover, a network can certainly not be expected to function from day 12. Above all, participants must be able to see a point in talking to each other, and they must believe that they will benefit from exchanging experience. Furthermore, they must establish a bond of trust and in a project where they participants are initially strangers, such a bond can only be established along the way.

The participants must also possess the required qualifications, e.g. the ability to listen, to put themselves in the place of others and to apply the experience from other areas to their own everyday lives. Not every participant automatically has these qualifications from the beginning, but can develop them along the way.

...and equal relations

Finally, equal relations between the participants need to be established for a network to function. Especially at the beginning of the TSW project, some workplaces felt they had come further than others and thus found that they might not benefit as much from exchanging experience with the others. Conversely, the others felt like the “little sister or brother” who was less developed than the others and thus believed to have less to contribute. In other words, the process was self-reinforcing.

Use each other despite diversity

Such a development was also seen during the project. The participants came to see that development projects like these rarely follow a straight line. A number of areas usually has to be covered and a number of problems addressed, but they do not necessarily appear at the same time. So even if a workplace seems not to have come so far with its own project, a number of considerations and the surprises encountered may certainly be relevant for others. And the network is not just for discussing sustainability. It also paves the way for a broader exchange of experience in respect of other indirectly related issues, such as staff policy, planning of training and safety work.

Networks were meant to be not only a method of working internally in the project, but also a way of communicating the experience from the TSW project to other workplaces and players. This was achieved by using some of the networks in which the workplaces involved already participated and by launching special initiatives targeted at players in their own local areas or in their own industries. The following box offers a couple of examples.

Example:

For quite some time, one of the workplaces had been participating in a regional network with other workplaces, vocational schools and local authorities. The experience from the sustainability project was also communicated at network meetings – both formally and informally.

The network further functioned as an extra forum where the workplace could show its social responsibility. If, for instance, an employee was for various reasons no longer able to do his job and there were no internal redeployment opportunities, the network was used to find a workplace suitable for the employee. On the other hand, the workplace also used the network to employ staff members with reduced working capacity from other workplaces. In this way, the network became a way of opening the company's doors to the surrounding society.

The three day-care facilities teamed up to pass on their experience to other workplaces, local authorities and other interested parties. They had fitted out a bus, called a fun bus, and drove around the two regions telling people how to establish modern, sustainable day care based on skills and committed employees. The bus stopped at town halls, etc., offering dialogue and theatre shows.

Workplace and society level – a perspective

The TSW project focus on the workplace as the environment for the activities and on the “small steps” towards greater sustainability have produced a number of opportunities, but also dilemmas and limitations. We have spent a good deal of this report on describing the opportunities and strengths. In the following, we will therefore take a brief glance at some of the things such an approach cannot capacitate or has difficulty capacitating.

Limitations in workplace approach at two levels

The general limitations in this approach appear at least at two levels. First of all, the logics of a workplace may make it difficult to put broad social perspectives on the agenda, and, second, a number of problems will neither be in focus nor handled at workplace level (e.g. where is the optimum place to manufacture certain products to reduce transport and thus pollution?). Ideally, the TSW project should be able to come up with some suggestions for working with the first. The TSW project deliberately avoids the second level, a decision that can, of course, be debated, but which was never the project’s ambition to “solve”.

The two levels are discussed in more detail below.

Level 1: Is it reasonable to impose social responsibility and perspective on the workplace?

In a society based on market economics, the extent to which a workplace should assume social responsibility is debatable. Can society or the party responsible for the TSW project on the basis of such logics and understanding place companies under an obligation that goes beyond what they regard as expedient in terms of finances and image? And can different requirements be put on public and private-sector workplaces? The emphasis on financial sustainability at workplace level as the TSW project defines the concept of sustainability, makes it slightly more difficult to cite social considerations as independent or equal arguments in favour of a certain practice. The project approach has made it legitimate for workplaces to concentrate on their interests in their own businesses and to include social interests only to the extent manageable.

Spearheads think in social terms...

For various reasons (typically a mixture of financial, image and idealistic/humanistic reasons), a few workplaces nevertheless adopted a social perspective. These workplaces already saw themselves and were seen as spearheads, and they had widespread experience in workplace development, certification, etc. They regarded themselves as active players in the development of the community in a number of the areas included in the TSW project (environment, retaining employees, recruiting vulnerable groups and developing good workplaces that do not impair employees).

At some of the other workplaces, willingness and the mental resources to consider certain social perspectives have increased as the project progressed – and increased knowledge in these areas has made it easier to address the problems. However, the development and well-being of the workplace still control its actions – a dilemma that is difficult to overcome – both with this approach and perhaps even with a more overall approach. The extent to which social aspects will affect future projects and efforts at the workplaces remains an open question that could be very interesting to follow.

Whatever approach a player takes to sustainability, a social perspective must be included. This may be at a more modest level, as described in our definition of the TSW project's version of the sustainability concept, but it must be there.

However, a social perspective must not be confused with sustainability work at a social and global level. By choosing the workplace level as basis for the work, right from the beginning we have precluded ourselves from working with a wide range of overall problems relating to sustainability. Consequently, global and social economic considerations do not come into play.

The TSW project has not allowed us to raise issues such as where a certain product could be produced most expediently globally considering the materials used, the primary customer groups, etc. For example, is it sustainable to transport organic apples from Brazil to Denmark? Is it sustainable to ban child labour in third-world countries or does this only contribute to ruining the survivability of the families and societies in question? No clear-cut answer can be found to these questions – the answer will depend on the perspectives and parameters chosen for inclusion in the assessment (environment, social considerations, health and safety at work, global vs. local considerations, etc.).

Furthermore, work on such themes will require the involvement of a wide range of other and more powerful players than we have seen in this project. However, regardless of the precise assessment parameters, the TSW project has not had room for such issues, meaning that the project's scope for action has been similarly less extensive.

In light of these considerations, it is relevant to ask whether the definition of sustainability as applied in the TSW project will become so diluted as to rob the concept of its meaning. Is the workplace level too narrow? Is it meaningless to talk about sustainability in a workplace where production is characterised by uniform, repetitive machine work and mass-produced products?

... but this only applies to a limited extent for the others – despite development throughout the project

**Level 2:
Basic conditions in the preparation of production, etc. are not challenged**

More players needed on the field to work globally

Sustainability at workplace level is not the solution – but makes good sense

On the basis of the experience gained from the TSW project, there can be little doubt that the answer to these questions is a clear no. Indeed, working with sustainability at workplace level makes perfectly good sense. There are limits to the ambitions one can have when it comes to workplace projects as well as to the things a player in a workplace can immediately influence and affect – but small steps also make an impact. A sense of confidence and interest in sustainability was generated among the participants in the TSW project, which affects the way they act at the workplace and to some extent affects their lives in general. Establishment of further networks between workplaces and other regional players may help strengthen this process and spread the ideas.

Just like the players at the regional, national and global levels, the players at the workplaces have important roles to play in the effort to develop sustainable work and sustainable workplaces. They have different skills and cover different areas, but all have a role to play.

TWS publications and tools

Publications and tools are available from LO while stocks last or at www.lo.dk/dba.

- Basis for learning sustainability – Thematic workbook 1*
- Employee participation and sustainability – Thematic workbook 2
- Roles of consultants and sustainability – Thematic workbook 3*
- Towards the sustainable workplace – Reflection report
- Sustainability at the workplace – Reflection and learning at work*
- Sustainability at the workplace – presentation of selected development projects*
- A union movement for sustainability – Part 1: Discussion paper offering ideas for a new union strategy and practice*
- A union movement for sustainability – Part 2: Union perspectives on the TSW project*
- Knowledge index of the workplace – www.videnindeks.dk – Dialogue tool*
- The sustainable workplace – an introduction to the concept – and some good advice for those who get started
- The group’s social responsibility – Dialogue tool
- Dialogue on environment and sustainability – Dialogue tool*
- The company’s values and ethics – attitudinal tyranny or democratisation of the workplace Discussion paper*
- Towards the sustainable workplace – Publications and tools*

*) Only danish versions available.



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Facts about the TSW project

The TSW project is funded by the EU's Social Fund and was conducted between the autumn of 2001 and the spring of 2004. LO launched the project and handled the project management.

The TSW project involved 15 private and public workplaces and a number of educational institutions.

The participating workplaces include: NKT Cables, NCC, Sanistål, Egtved Local Authority Daycare, Danpo, Sky Light, HTH Køkkener, Esbjerg Local Authority Cleaning Service, EC-Maskinfabrik, Børkop Local Authority, NS Maskinfabrik, Chr. Henriksen & Søn, Aarhus Local Authority Daycare, Middelfart Sparekasse and Silkeborg Local Authority Daycare.

The participating educational institutions include: The Workers' Educational Association – day school in Aarhus, Vocational school/Workers' Educational Association in Silkeborg, Esbjerg High School, Give Training Centre, Workers' Educational Association Vejle and VET Copenhagen.

The project also involved a focus group in which a broad group of people discussed the TSW project. The focus group consisted of approximately 30 representatives from various research institutions and LO's associations and cartels.

Finally, the project saw the establishment of work groups that have contributed with ideas and acted as a sounding board for the three workplace tools developed as part of the project.

**Read more about the TSW project at www.lo.dk/dba
(Danish page).**