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Scandinavian Environmental Policy in the Pacific Century?

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Biographical note:

Dr Rasmus Karlsson is an Associate Professor in political science at Umeå University. He has published widely on climate mitigation policy, development ethics, and global affairs. After receiving his PhD from Lund University, he has worked for more than three years in North-East Asia before returning to Sweden. His work has appeared in leading journal such as Global Policy, Environmental Politics and Globalizations.
Abstract

The Scandinavian countries like to think of themselves as leaders in the transition towards environmental sustainability. Yet, when applying consumption-based accounting of carbon emissions or when taking into consideration the displacement of environmentally destructive industries to Asia (including everything from shipyards to tanneries), a more multifaceted image emerges. The aim of this paper is to examine to what extent perceived Scandinavian leadership has in fact contributed to more sustainable outcomes at the global level. Particular attention is directed towards the Asia-Pacific region and its many environmental challenges ranging from energy to transportation. The paper concludes that while Scandinavian environmental leadership does include potentially transformative elements such as urban environments suitable for biking or walking, the recent trend towards small-scale renewable energy in Scandinavia may in fact have had a detrimental effect on the prospects for effective climate action in Asia and elsewhere.
Introduction

In terms of environmental policy, the Scandinavian countries have long been regarded as pioneers or even leaders (Andersen & Liefferink, 1999). Acting as “norm entrepreneurs” in global eco-politics (Ingebritsen, 2002), these small states have come to exercise outsize “social power” in a world searching for a more sustainable socio-ecological regime. Nowhere is the need for greater environmental sustainability felt more acutely than in East-Asia and the Pacific region (Harris & Lang, 2014). Thanks to the rapid industrialization of China in particular, hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out poverty, yet leaving behind a mounting environmental toll. As such, it is not surprising that the Scandinavian countries often come up in political discussions about how to better balance economic growth and environmental responsibility.

Focusing on the intersection between perceived Scandinavian ideational leadership and Pacific environmental realities, the aim of this paper is to critically examine to what extent the example of the Scandinavian countries may actually contribute towards more sustainable outcomes in Asia and elsewhere. The reason for such an undertaking is that symbols tend to greatly influence public deliberation over “wicked” problems that do not have a simple set of solutions. To the extent that the Scandinavian countries are seen as role models in the transition to a low-carbon economy, it becomes important to investigate if it is model that others can really replicate or if part of the perceived success in fact stems from the displacement of environmental harms.

Optical illusions, geographical luck and nuclear

- Some of the improvement in environmental indicators in Sweden is an “optical illusion” caused by the displacement of polluting and energy-intensive industries to Asia in particular from where the final goods are then imported
- Fortunate geographical circumstances, such as numerous rivers suitable for hydropower, have made a low-carbon development trajectory relatively easy for Sweden and Norway
- The rapid expansion of nuclear energy in the 1970’s and 1980’s further reduced carbon emissions, yet policy-makers today rarely acknowledge the crucial role that nuclear has played in decarbonising the energy supply of Sweden (and also providing surplus baseload electricity for other Scandinavian countries thanks to grid integration)

Good things

- Beyond energy, the Scandinavian countries are indeed leaders in urban development and the building of more bike-friendly and walkable city centres
- Yet, in the country-side, still overwhelming dominance of fossil fuel for transportation

A Scandinavian cul-de-sac?

- If environmental elites in Asia, inspired by Scandinavia, would demand more variable renewable energy it is likely to lead to long-term fossil lock-in (gas for balancing) and prove insufficient to displace coal as baseload source of generation
- Important to not reject the Scandinavian example as a whole but to draw the right lessons
- If the Scandinavian countries were serious about being environmental leaders, they should focus on developing globally scalable technologies
References

