Workshop Sustainable Societal Structures (May 8)

- Overarching theme: Which societal structures are necessary to enable governance and planning of a society in the digital age, aiming to keep within the planetary boundaries and to support equal opportunities?
- Initial question: “How optimistic are you about the potential of uniting digitization and the environment in a future society that is sustainable and offers equal opportunities?”
- Around 30 participants from Swedish organizations: public sector (municipalities, regions, government agencies), industry (big companies and SMEs) and civil society
- Challenges and opportunities relating to the environment, digitization, equal opportunities, welfare, and spatial and urban planning in a future society were discussed, and each group had a different focus
Group 1 – Equality and the welfare state

- Increased inequalities in the Swedish society, power being concentrated in fewer places. Those with power act against evening out differences.
- Vulnerable groups (immigrants, unemployed) being pushed against one another and a populist rhetoric has become mainstream.
- The wealthy are creating environmental problems by their luxury consumption which depletes natural resources.
- The consumerist society is being challenged – but what can it be exchanged with? Small-scale, local solutions being explored in some parts of the country. Focus on aesthetics?
- Urbanization is a strong trend – challenging but at the same time offering possibilities.
- Frugal behavior and innovation – low tech solutions and bottom-up perspectives on innovation.
- Do we need a new social contract? Transformation and robotization of job market will mean more unemployed people. How can we all contribute?
- How can trust and democracy be revived? Give children and young people a stronger voice – lower voting age. Knowledge is key.
- Can we share a joint vision about the society we want to live in?
Group 2 – Digitalization

• A coin with two sides

• Digitalization as enabler: to decrease the distance between people, strengthening democracy and our institutions, supportive for rural areas, solving environmental problems and increasing the security of our society

• Digitalization as challenge and threat: surveillance, diminishing personal integrity, individuals tracked through social media, private companies and government

• Polarization and exclusion - a digital divide. New conflict areas as traditional industries are being shut down and established ways of living are being challenged. Environmental measures can then be seen as unjust and not inclusive. How can we achieve a just transition?

• Ethics /AI – human-centered development and human rights are key. Crucial that not only tech companies and engineers drive this development. Philosophers, legal experts, social scientists must become involved in the discussion. Which are our values and our needs?

• What would be needed for a positive, joint vision around the digital transformation?
Group 3 – spatial and urban planning

• Who is in charge of technological development? Big companies drive change, not democratic institutions.
• Private actors are dominating the planning process today.
• How can citizens gain more influence in the future?
• Loneliness and isolation is a huge problem in our society today – especially in urban areas. How can we create built environments that create a sense of community and belonging?
• Need to make the planning and building processes more environmentally efficient and creative.
• How can cities and urban areas become more sustainable? Producing and consuming more goods locally. Urban farming on roofs and between buildings, underground farming.
• Examples of previously segregated areas becoming popular – how can it be scaled up?
• Children and young people consider digital solutions as an integrated part of life.
Group 4 – environment

• Discussions in this group tended to focus on social aspects (in spite of the heading)
• Increased awareness - IPCC and IPBES reports, Greta
• Planetary boundaries – an absolute, not a relative
• Democracy, justice and short-termism – can corporations make more long-term decisions than our politicians? Companies are asking for stricter environmental regulations
• Individual responsibilities vs policy change. Consumers should not always have to make an active choice.
• Politicians are not braver than us. Sensitive to trends.
• Need for transparency, also regarding smaller local issues, to enable a feeling of inclusion
• Consumers expect food, goods and toys to be free of toxins, but they are not. Difficult to constantly make informed decisions as a citizen.
• Policy level needs to step up and create playing field for private sector
• Local/small-scale solutions and a circular economy
• The environment is not a question of technological solutions
• Climate adaptation and equality – how can our societies prepare for the crises to come and become more environmentally and socially resilient?
Final joint discussions, some additional thoughts

• Change in behaviour faster than ever – social media. In what direction and why?
• Politicians not in the lead but following citizens and businesses
• What is the ”good life”?
• We talk about needs but should also consider dependencies (what are we dependent on?)
• The human being in the centre or as one part of the whole
• Local vs global communities – which are the effects?
• Technology strengthens the ”here and now”, how to connect ”there and then”?
• Digitalisation should be supportive for the individual, not steering us
• How is climate adaptation related to equity?
• Flexibility in urban planning
• In planning and technology development - first priority needs to be to decrease greenhouse gas emissions and act on biodiversity, all other comes second
• Closeness – to problems, to democracy, to society, to community, to neighbours
• We need to consider more extreme scenarios
• Policy and politicians are crucial