

Collaboration between Haparanda and Tornio on climate smart mobility

An interview with Göran Wigren, City of Haparanda and Kirsi Ylipiessa, City of Tornio.

A cross-border collaboration

Göran and Kirsi were telling us the story about the long and continuous collaboration between Haparanda in Sweden, and Tornio in Finland. This cooperation covers several sectors and is so strong that the two cities are called the twin-city TornioHaparanda. In the year 1987 an official collaborative organization was established, called Provincia Bothniensis, which constitutes of elected representatives from both cities. Their collaboration includes both passenger as well as freight transports, which is the focus of this interview.



Map of Haparanda and Tornio. Source: City of Haparanda and Lantmäteriet, 2019-05-02.

Cross-border passenger transports

Since many years the two cities are working together on issues related to passenger transports. One part of their joint work is to combine the cities via pedestrian and bike path networks. The inhabitants of the two cities are commuting on a regular basis across the border for work and school, as well as shopping and pleasure.

Previously, the Finnish and Swedish buses, both regional and national, had different bus stops in the TornioHaparanda region. It changed in January of 2014 when a joint travel center opened, which is a good example of international cooperation. Since then all local, regional and national buses make a stop at the travel center with the aim of having a smoother transfer and facilitate commuting with public transport.

The continuous work focusses on setting up a single, common public transport operator for the city buses, instead of having two – one Finnish and one Swedish – which is the case today. On a local level there is no set, specific, objective for increasing the share of pedestrians as well as bikers and public transport passengers. However, both cities are aiming at increasing these shares. To reach this, an investment was recently made to build a bridge for biking and walking south of Victoriatorget (a city square) close to road E4, and at the border between the cities and the countries. The bridge was opened on the 10th of June 2019.

The cities are also collaborating on having better train connections for passenger trains to their region, both day and night services. Since these decisions are made on national and regional levels, the local authorities have less influence on this issue. Hence, it is perceived as more difficult to achieve this, compared to improvements in public buses, and pedestrian and bike lanes. To achieve better train connections, a good collaboration with the regional and national levels is required, and also a cross-border collaboration between the transport administrations in Finland and Sweden. So far it has been difficult for Haparanda and Tornio to get an insight of the collaboration between the two national transport administrations, and feedback on how their issues of interest are being handled.

“We have a strong collaboration with both Sweden and Finland to get better train connections since this is a key issue for us to be able to switch to fossil free transports in Haparanda and Tornio” (Göran Wigren, City of Haparanda)

On the website of the Trafikverket it states that the Haparanda railway line (Haparandabanan, a railway connecting Boden with TornioHaparanda) is part of the so called Bothnian corridor, which is an important and strategic transnational link for freight transport in Europe. This link entwines the east-west and north-south transnational axis in Sweden, Finland, Norway and Russia. Göran and Kirsi state they already before the opening of the Haparanda railway in 2013, had expressed a wish for using it also for passenger transport, not only freight. This due to the importance of train access for better commuting possibilities both for work and education within the region, but also for the tourism and hospitality industry. Today it is not possible to reach Haparanda with train from the Swedish side. However, measures are now taken to make this possible. Trafikverket is planning on building a new platform in Kalix and renovate the existing one in Haparand during the spring of 2020¹. This will open up for passenger transport on the Haparanda railway and contribute to the two cities accessibility and development. On the Finnish side the train connections are better, with night trains stopping during the winter season and from 2019 this traffic will be extended to run all year around. Both cities had rail passenger transport until the 1990's, so the return of the passenger transport from the Swedish side is much longed for.

Part of the link, Kemi and Tornio, is not electrified today which would be desired. It has been up for debate for many years, but now the new Finnish government have promised 10 million Euros, according to Kirsi². The same is valid for the train bridge over Torne river, which, to make the situation more complex, has the ownership divided equally between Finland and Sweden. Kirsi and Göran perceive there are deficiencies in the border crossing collaboration on the national level for both the railway and airport. They state that Finland and Sweden are the only two neighboring countries within the EU that today do not have any cross-border rail passenger transports. Both municipalities are also working on improving their hospitality industry. They see the train connections as key to receive an increase in visitors in a sustainable way. Epecially since the view of the railways, taking on a more important role in the transport network, has changed in both Finland and Sweden in recent years.

Cross-border freight transport

¹ <https://www.trafikverket.se/nara-dig/Norrbottnen/vi-bygger-och-forbattrar/haparandabanan-nya-plattformar-i-kalix-och-haparanda/>

² https://valtioneuvosto.fi/sv/artikeln/-/asset_publisher/10616/sallistava-ja-osaava-suomi-sosiaalisesti-taloudellisesti-ja-ekologisesti-kestava-yhteiskunta

For freight the railway works better, but there is the issue of different track gauges (i.e. widths) between the two countries, which makes it more complex and expensive to use the train from which heavy road transports benefit. Göran wishes for solutions, such as more efficient terminals where the freight easily, cheap and safely can be transferred. An alternative is gauge changer, which are in use e.g. at the borders between Spain and France. However, this requires wagons of special design which, according to Göran, speaks in favor of a terminal instead. Today, the land is owned by Trafikverket, just like the tracks and the marshalling yard. The representatives for Haparanda and Tornio think that these kinds of problems should be solved on a national level and via cross-border collaboration. In Kemi there are now plans to build a big cellulose factory which will have an impact on the region in form of high increase in transporter freight to and from the factory, including cross-border transports. When a similar factory was built in the south of Finland, approximately 190 million Euros was spent on connecting infrastructure according to Göran and Kirsi.

Factors for success in the cross-border collaboration

Haparanda and Tornio have belonged together historically. Therefore the border between the cities from early 1800 can be seen as relatively new. Hence, there is a long history of community and the possibilities to freely move across the border. Haparanda and Tornio have also found a good way of working together through Provincia Bothniensis. Thanks to relatively similar planning processes in Sweden and Finland, with similar regulatory framework, a common municipal planning has worked out well. Further, there are common needs for the citizens where they also can see the benefits of a collaboration; in the sense of being cheaper and have access to a greater supply. It is seen as a strength to work closely together, which could serve as inspiration to others, including neighboring municipalities within a country.

“We are two nations and two cities, but we are like one family with open borders. It is a strength to work together like this, any many can learn from our way of collaborating. It has become a part of our branding.” (*Kirsi Ylipiessa, City of Tornio*)

Possibilities for increased sustainable mobility

Both Kirsi and Göran would like to see a greater collaboration between the countries transport administrations, both on a regional as well as a national level, but also between the countries and governments. They request a higher priority of the north east and east borders crossing links, like the ones in the south and to continental Europe. Along with this, they wish for a development of the night train services to their region, which they found to be particularly relevant for their cities which lack their own airports. They also believe that better night train connections would enable sustainable travels to and from the region for both citizens and visitors.

”We would like to see at better collaboration between Trafikverket and Traficom, with regular meetings. We are facing the same challenges, and there are common solutions for them” (*Kirsi Ylipiessa and Göran Wigren*)

Finally, Kirsi and Göran also raise awareness on the importance of their region since TornioHaparanda has a high rate of border passages. The 5 Finnish municipalities in the region contributes to 9 % of the Finnish export in the gross domestic product (GDP); and in Sweden the Haparanda railway is an international important railway relation connecting Sweden with both Finland and Russia.

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