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On the Dialogue between the Swedish Government and Civil Society Organizations

Peter Orn

Abstract

The vision was to form an agreement between the government, idea-based organizations in the social sphere, and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. One of the aims was to clarify the role of the idea-based organizations in the social sector, making it possible for them to operate and compete on equal terms with the public and private actors. I was to lead a small group of people working in the ministries of Integration and Gender Equality and Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. The working group would report to Christer Hallerby and his colleague Karin Johansson.

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On the Dialogue between the Swedish Government and Civil Society Organizations.

It all began with an invitation to lunch early in the summer of 2007, a lunch with Christer Hallerby, then state secretary for the Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality. I had just left my job as director manager for The Swedish Radio and was looking for a new challenge.

Christer Hallerby introduced me to his idea. “I want to find a political way or method to confirm the important role of idea-based organizations (“idéburna organisationer”)¹ in producing social welfare and playing a democratic role beside political parties. One might describe this as a way to recognize the role of the voluntary and nonprofit sector in Swedish society as they have never been recognized before. These organizations must be producers of welfare within a market and give voice to vulnerable people and groups. Moreover they must cooperate with the political and public sector while maintaining their ability to criticize political decision makers.”

The question was how to do this. Over lunch we discussed a few international examples from Denmark, Estonia and England. The English Compact seemed to be the most interesting and even inspiring model because it was built on an agreement between the government and civil society sectors. As I recall, we had already used the words “dialogue” and “agreement” as essential dimensions of a future process.

I was, of course, interested in being the government’s representative in a tentative process. I saw it as a possibility to strengthen the nonprofit work in social, humanitarian, and health sectors.

A few months later a process was designed and the government had decided on its framework. The vision was to form an agreement between the government, idea-based organizations in the social sphere, and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. One of the aims was to clarify the role of the idea-based organizations in the social sector, making it possible for them operate and compete on equal terms with the public and private actors. I was to lead a small group of people working in the ministries of Integration and Gender Equality and Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. The working group would report to Christer Hallerby and his colleague Karin Johansson.

Still, there were questions to be answered: (1) how to design a “dialogue” and which organizations should be invited to participate? Perhaps the most essential question was: (2) what did the Government mean by the term

¹ “Idea-based organization” (sometimes also translated to English as “value-based organization”) is a term often used in Sweden in reference to organizations driven by the logic of ideas, values, ideologies and/or ideals rather than by the logic of state administration or of economic profit. In practice it roughly corresponds to the concept of “civil society organization”.

“Agreement?” Was it possible, from a legal basis, for a government to make agreements with organizations?

Our early conclusion was that it had to be an exploring and learning process. With that attitude, it was possible to accept mistakes and failures. It also meant it was important to learn from other actors and examples in other countries.

We needed time to think and reflect. The first activity of the working group was to visit London in the autumn of 2007, before the process itself started. The schedule was heavy, with a few days of meetings with some of the architects behind The English Compact from the civil society sector and government.

Our conclusion was that for ten years The Compact had had an influential role in the relations between the political sector and civil society organizations. The Compact clarified their respective roles and put a great deal of pressure on the organizations to develop their work at the community level, their institutions, as well as their working methods. The idea of a “compact” had been accepted by the government and by Prime Minister Tony Blair, who saw it as an important part of the New Labour program and a way to develop the social welfare sector. The Swedish government intended to move in the same direction. The example of New Labour was to be followed by “Nya Moderaterna” – the New Moderates (the former conservative party, now described as centre-right), with similar motives.

We soon realized, however, that the English circumstances differed substantially in several respects from those in Sweden. For example, differently from the situation in England, there was no umbrella organization for civil society organizations in Sweden, something that would complicate the process of designing a Swedish “compact”.

We concluded thus that we could learn from, and be inspired by, the English Compact, but that it was a model impossible to copy right off and transform into a “Swedish Compact”. We had to proceed in our own way. We decided that the dialogue, in itself, was the answer to our questions. It had to be a dialogue among three entities: the government, the nonprofit sector, and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, and it had to focus on *principles, relations* and *roles*. The dialogue was intended to identify the obstacles and enable us all to learn how to develop the full potential of the sector. It had to be a learning process. With that in mind, we returned to Sweden.

In late autumn of 2007 the working-group invited more than one-hundred social oriented organizations to meetings. Each meeting discussed principles and obstacles and after three or four hours of discussion, participants elected two or three representatives to comprise a smaller group. That group of representatives would discuss and review a document that would ultimately become an agreement. Step by step the hundred organizations that had been invited joined the dialogue. These organization made decisions together and shared the

responsibility for the process. The key to success was a process built on participation, transparency and trust.

In late 2008, the dialogue phase was finished. The result was an agreement drafted during a process of growing acceptance. The Agreement is built on principles that aim to develop the relationship between the signatory parties – the government, the nonprofit sector, and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions – and clarify their respective roles. Principles like autonomy and independence, dialogue, continuity, and diversity guide each respective entity to engage in a number of activities and measures. These are monitored by a joint group of the three signatory parties, and an annual conference.

The government, as well as the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, approved the document in October 2008. Today more than 50 organizations have signed the Agreement; there seem to be several more to follow.

In my view, the Agreement can be seen as a living process. The Government has in several contexts indicated that dialogue is an important basis for its policy on civil society. Conferences and other consultations that are open for all civil society actors are held regularly.

Local authorities and civil society organizations on local level use today the national Agreement as a tool when they discuss how to develop and clarify their roles. Let me add this: it is my conclusion that the national agreement can be an inspiration for the local level. But it cannot be copied or transferred without alterations; it has to be adapted to the local conditions.

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