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Policy Tools or Mirrors of Politics. Government-Voluntary Sector Compacts in the Post-Welfare State Age

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Abstract

Government-voluntary sector “compacts” have emerged in the recent years as an innovative nonprofit policy practice in many industrialized countries around the world. Originating in England in the late 1990s, the compact phenomenon has today spread to societies with relatively different tracks of inter-sectorial relations and different civil society regimes. This introductory article seeks to chart out the diverse functions that the compact solution seems to perform in different institutional surroundings, and it also opens up for a comparative discussion of the broader socio-political contexts in which this policy instrument has developed.

KEYWORDS: international, nonprofit sector, voluntary sector, government, compacts, agreements, regulation

An International Policy Phenomenon¹

One of the most interesting recent developments on the international nonprofit or voluntary sector scene has been the emergence in different parts of the world of so called “government-voluntary sector compacts”. These “compacts” are written agreements that seek to formally define and regulate the relationship between the sector² and the state. Since the signing of the first such compact in England in 1998, similar agreements have also emerged in countries as different as Australia, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, France and Sweden, among others. In some countries they have appeared at both the national and the regional or local levels.³

Although styled as formal agreements, compacts are usually not legally binding, and depend on the commitment of the involved parties for enforceability. Their focus lies for the most part on the central values and principles that are to guide the cooperation between the signatory parties; the latter’s respective roles and tasks; and the particular forms that consultation and cooperation between them may take. Although most of them seem in one way or another to have been inspired by the original English agreement of 1998, compacts differ significantly from each other in many respects when moving between different contexts; for example, regarding who the signatory parties are; the specified division of labor between them; the compact’s political status; as well as its scope and degree of precision (Johansson et al 2011, see also Bullain and Toftisova 2005).

Seeing the extent to which the contents of individual compacts are molded and adjusted to the institutional environments in which they appear, it is fair to assume that these agreements perform different functions and carry a diverse set of meanings in different socio-political contexts. The policy paths to the signing of a compact also differ significantly from case to case, as do the role and position assigned to the voluntary or nonprofit sector in each agreement.

For this special issue, we have asked authors from four different settings – England, Australia, Canada and Sweden – to provide us with a current analysis of

¹ We would like to thank the authors of the individual articles in this issue, as well as the anonymous reviewers who have commented on the article drafts, for their contributions. We are grateful to Steven Rathgeb Smith for his role as discussant in our panel on compacts at the ISTR 10th conference in Siena in July 2012 and for his commentary (also included in this issue). Finally, we would like to extend our gratitude to Dr. Mats Rolén and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond for a timely grant that made it possible for us to contribute to the development of the Nonprofit Policy Forum and to produce this special issue.

² In this article, the terms “voluntary sector”, “third sector” and “nonprofit sector” are used interchangeably, to denote the nonprofit, non-governmental voluntary organizations that are usually regarded as part of the wider civil society.

³ These agreements are given different labels in different countries. For the sake of simplicity, we will throughout the article use the term “compact” for the kind of formal inter-sectorial agreements between the government and voluntary organizations dealt with in this special issue.

the development of national, regional and/or local compacts in their respective home turf. We have specifically encouraged them to focus on the processes that have led up to the signing of the compacts and at the political and institutional conditions that have enabled their emergence. In addition, we are happy to include in the special issue a “practitioner’s testimony” from one of the policy entrepreneurs that have been involved in the process of “translating” the compact from one national context to another and his reflections upon that process; as well as a commentary by a colleague from the United States on where to situate the compact phenomenon historically and especially in relation to the idea of the welfare state, and what the challenges for the future might be.

The articles presented here analyze the emergence of government-voluntary sector compacts above all as policy processes, with concepts such as “policy diffusion”, “policy translation” and “policy entrepreneurs” taking a central place in the analysis. The analytical framework based on John Kingdon’s seminal concept of “policy windows” (Kingdon 1995), used here in different ways by Elson; Butcher, Casey and Dalton; and to some extent also by Taylor, provides a useful lens through which we can study the processes leading up to the signing of the compacts, but also the conditions necessary for their sustainability.

In our editorial article, we approach the compact phenomenon from a slightly different angle. First of all, we would like to draw on the individual contributions to reflect on the different functions that the compact seems to perform in different institutional surroundings, and to reflect on the various ways in which this policy package is being used both as a policy tool, and as a discursive arena for negotiating a new round of relations between the concerned parties. In this context, we also point to a number of peculiarities regarding the spread of the compact phenomenon to different parts of the world, where the difference in institutional settings seems not only to determine *what* is being transferred, but also *how* that happens.

Secondly, our ambition is to complement the country-specific analyses in the individual articles in this special issue by relating them to a comparative discussion of the broader socio-political contexts in which compacts have emerged in the different parts of the world. Our discussion, just as the special issue itself, covers the developments related to the compact phenomenon in three Anglo-Saxon, Commonwealth countries, as well as a Scandinavian case that in many respects differs from the other three. As the article by Butcher, Casey and Dalton provides an excellent discussion of the similarities and differences between the English, Canadian and Australian experiences, we will not dwell upon them here, but will instead focus on the comparison between the Anglo-Saxon countries and Scandinavia. In the special issue, as well as in our analysis, the latter is represented by Sweden; however, a compact – or a “charter” – is also in place in Denmark since 2001 (Kulturministeriet and Socialministeriet 2001),

and recently such an agreement has been proposed also in the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget), although it was at that time turned down by the opposition (Stortinget 2009). Because of the institutional similarities between the Scandinavian countries, we believe that our analysis of the Swedish case may to a considerable extent also apply to Denmark and Norway.

We would like to use the comparison between the manners in which the compact has been introduced in these two different systems or “civil society regimes” – the Anglo-Saxon and the Scandinavian one – as a platform for a more general discussion of the place of compacts in the international context of changing modes of policy-making, and changing relations between the voluntary sector and the state.

The many travels of an idea

One of the most remarkable aspects of the compact phenomenon that we explore in this issue is its apparent and very broad appeal. In a relatively short period of time - fourteen years since the signing of the first compact in England – this particular policy has managed to spread to very different institutional contexts, prompting analyses in terms of “policy diffusion”, “policy translation” and “policy convergence”. At least two dimensions of this transfer are approached directly by the articles in the issue. Perhaps the most striking one is the spread of the compact policy *across different national settings*. This theme is the main focus of the article by Johansson and Johansson on the “translation” of the compact idea from the English to the Swedish context. Also in the articles by Elson, and Butcher, Casey and Dalton, the authors elaborate on this topic, discussing the implementation of the originally English policy initiative in Canada and Australia respectively.

Another notable direction that the “travels” of the compact have assumed is from the national to the *regional and/or local levels*. The compact policy originally conceived at the national level is in this process translated downwards to the local or regional jurisdictions to be used by local authorities like municipalities, regions, or individual states (in federal systems) on the one hand, and their counterparts in the local voluntary sector on the other hand, to deal with certain aspects of their mutual relationship. This particular aspect is explored both by Elson; and Butcher, Casey and Dalton, in their respective articles.

To these two dimensions, which are discussed at length by the contributions in this issue, we could add two further ones that in our view deserve the attention of students of, and practitioners involved in, nonprofit policy-making. Firstly, there are signs of the compact phenomenon spreading into *new policy fields*. This is perhaps particularly notable in countries like Sweden, where the original compact of 2008 was established specifically in the policy field of

welfare and social affairs and directed at voluntary organizations working in this area. Since then, a similar agreement has emerged in the field of immigration, and another version has been discussed in the field of culture policy. These recent developments signal that the compact model has been judged appropriate also for other policy areas, despite the fact that the relations between the state and the voluntary sector in these fields look entirely different from those in the agreement's "original" field, social services and health care.

Finally, we would like to suggest that there is also a clear – although hitherto un-explored – *organizational* dimension to the spread of the compact phenomenon. As new voluntary organizations get involved in the compact negotiations, we can expect internal processes of organizational adaptation to the compact to be set off – as well as a process through which the compact itself is "translated" (see Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; Adam 2012; also Johansson and Johansson in this issue) into this particular organizational context. Just as we can note a process of adjustment and adaptation to the specific conditions when the compact travels into a new country, a new policy field or to the local level, it is fair to assume that there will be a similar process when the idea of the compact travels across the organizational borders into a specific voluntary or nonprofit organization.

The importance of the institutional context

As the articles in this issue demonstrate, the impressive spread of the compact phenomenon in various dimensions means that it is difficult to understand and interpret an agreement of this kind in isolation, and outside of its institutional, socio-political setting. The context seems to matter quite a lot in the case of the compact's diffusion. The compact's travels and "translations" across the national borders offer perhaps the most illuminating illustration of this, and we would like to take the opportunity to elaborate on this particular topic in a little more detail here.

Above all, we would like to reflect on the remarkable fact that the compact, which originally emerged in the specific institutional setting of England as a potential solution to the problems facing English voluntary and community organizations and their relations with the U.K. government at that time, has in the last fifteen years managed to spread not only to other jurisdictions similar to that of England, but also to countries that display both different institutional structures and different sets of problems or challenges confronting the voluntary sector and its relation to government. A useful approach to start unpacking this development is to analyze what functions the compact performs that make it an attractive option in these varied settings.

The three Anglo-Saxon societies analyzed in the articles in this issue: England, Canada and Australia; and the Scandinavian countries, represented by Sweden, might be characterized as embracing two rather different models or regimes of government-voluntary sector relations. Following Salamon and Anheier's (1998) seminal theory on the social origins of civil society, (inspired among others by the work of Esping-Andersen on welfare regimes), these countries may be regarded as belonging to different "civil society regimes". While we recognize the limitations of the "regime" concept as analytical tool and the danger of over-simplification that comes with it (see for example Evers 2006), we would like to take advantage of its main theoretical departure point: the realization that countries with relatively similar histories and socio-economic models resemble each other when it comes to the institutional structure and the overall direction of institutional transformation processes – not the least when it comes to the specific "welfare mix" that they have developed (Powell 2007, Evers 2006). For the purposes of analysis of the compact phenomenon and its spread, we believe it useful to assume that the path dependencies and related mechanisms in the two regimes discussed here play a significant role in determining the trajectories of development in the studied countries.

This realization makes it possible for us to organize the studied societies into clusters and to make more nuanced comparisons than if we had focused on individual countries only. While we do not want to negate the significant differences *within* the Anglo-Saxon world and Scandinavia respectively, we believe that a reflection upon the differences between these two "clusters" may give us important insights about the functions performed by the compact policy in each of them. Such insights might help us to understand both the continued spread of the compact phenomenon in general, as well as its introduction into other regimes than the Anglo-Saxon and the Scandinavian, in particular.

The compact in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Scandinavia

The idea and inspiration from the very first, English, compact was first carried into other locations in the Commonwealth, where the many institutional – political, legal, economic and cultural – structures arguably are relatively similar to that of England. In these settings we can identify a rather liberal model of welfare provision; the recent introduction and growth of "welfare markets" with market-like arrangements in many welfare fields; a fairly pronounced and strong role of both voluntary organizations and commercial actors in these pseudo-markets; and a traditional openness to policy solutions based on instruments other than direct intervention of the state. Already within this relatively similar set of national contexts – as the articles by Taylor; Elson; and Butcher, Casey and Dalton illustrate so well – we can identify differences in the way in which the

compact policy was conceived, how the compacts have fared since their introduction and what purposes they serve.

We can however also note important basic commonalities here, related to the similar institutional structures in the Anglo-Saxon countries. The emergence of compacts in societies such as England, Canada or Australia is usually interpreted as an attempt to redress some of the problems stemming from the excesses of New Public Management (NPM) policies and the rise and expansion of the so called “contract state” in the 1980s and 1990s. In the wake of Thatcherism (in the UK) and the neo-liberal wave of reforms of the welfare system during that period throughout the Anglo-Saxon world, the gradual transfer of responsibility for welfare services production from the state to the voluntary sector had created considerable challenges both for the voluntary organizations and for the responsible government agencies.

These challenges included, among others, an increasing funding dependency on the state (or municipality) and a limited capacity to shoulder the growing burden of and expectations on social responsibilities. This led, among other things, to rising concerns that the extensive practice of contracting out of social services to voluntary organizations risked turning them either into semi-official branches of the government or into quasi-commercial service providers not very different from for-profit actors. These developments have already been explored by several scholars – see for example Casey et al (2008); Kendall (2003) on England; Lyons (2001) on Australia; as well as Smith and Lipsky (1993) on the situation in the United States⁴.

In the context of the Commonwealth countries, the emergence of formal agreements between the sector and the government is usually analyzed in the light, and as a consequence, of the above developments. As Butcher, Casey and Dalton (this issue) propose, we could see compacts as an attempt by the involved parties to take a step away from the strained, contractual, hierarchical and instrumental relationship between the voluntary sector and the state in these countries, towards a more “relational” mode of governance based – at least in theory – on trust and horizontal networks of cooperation between the representatives of the two sectors.

All in all, the articles on England, Canada and Australia point to several commonalities between the institutional settings and processes in which the Anglo-Saxon compacts are embedded (see also Kendall 2003), as well as between the political and economic developments in these countries that have resulted in a need for compacts in the first place. This might be an indication that there is also

⁴ The developments discussed here have, however, so far not lead to any national-level compacts in the U.S., a fact that Smith also notes in his contribution to this volume. See Casey 2011 for a thorough analysis of the current U.S. development of state-sector relations.

some degree of commonality when it comes to the functions performed by these agreements.

Against this background, the spread of the compact phenomenon to countries outside of the Anglo-Saxon, liberal zone, presents something of a puzzle and an analytical challenge. Scandinavian countries such as Sweden (or Denmark, where a “charter” is in place since 2001, and Norway, which presently seems to be in the political process of discussing a compact) are a case in point here. Despite the fact that the Swedish compact, signed in 2008, was very clearly inspired by the original English agreement of 1998 (see Johansson and Johansson, as well as Örn, in this issue), the Swedish case differs from the Anglo-Saxon ones in several crucial respects, carrying seemingly instead more similarities to its sister countries in Scandinavia.

First of all, the overall make-up, structure and character of the Swedish civil society and nonprofit sector are very different from those of the Anglo-Saxon countries. Using the above-mentioned typology of “civil society regimes” we might say that Sweden in many dimensions has for the most part of the 20th century been the textbook example of a “Social-democratic” civil society regime (Lundström and Wijkström 1997). The central features of this regime have been a solid base in large mass-membership popular movement organizations; a strong focus on interest mobilization and advocacy as well as on the provision of leisure activities primarily directed at the members of the associations; and only a very small and marginal role for voluntary organizations working with some forms of welfare service provision. Welfare and social services have traditionally instead been both perceived and carried out as the exclusive responsibility of the state (Klausen and Selle 1996; Lundström and Wijkström 1997).

Since the 1990s, this order of things has been slowly changing in Sweden as well as in the other Scandinavian countries, in a process described as a shift “from voice to service”, but also through both marketization and commercialization of the welfare and social policy fields (Lundström and Wijkström 1995; Lundström and Wijkström 2012).

For the voluntary sector, an even more fundamental change has been the subtle shift in the character of its relationship to the government. The primary role of the Swedish sector during most of the 20th century has been, through different forms of political action or interest mobilization (including the activity of trade unions and political parties), to point out the general direction for society – and thus also the policy direction for government. Challenging this main function of the sector in society, another function has appeared – or maybe re-appeared – in the recent decades, with the government and the municipalities instead increasingly treating voluntary organizations as mere tools for provision and delivery of various welfare services. This tendency has been described as a “reversed order of dialogue” where the state to a wider extent than earlier sets the

agenda for the organizations of civil society, rather than the other way around (Wijkström 2000).

These transformations notwithstanding, the Scandinavian countries arguably still have a long way to go before we can speak of a full-fledged “contract state” in the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the concept. The opening up of provision of welfare services by nonprofit actors as well as commercial enterprises during the two most recent decades has in most fields so far had the character of an experiment or at least a reform rather than an institutionalized status quo. Even though today the Swedish “welfare market” may be leaving the first experimental phase in its development, it must still be understood as lagging at least a couple of decades behind that of the Anglo-Saxon countries, if this indeed is the direction the development will continue to take.

Neither has the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector in Sweden during the period been particularly frosty or in need of improvement (the same is true also for the other Scandinavian countries, as was argued early on by for example Klausen and Selle 1996). For one, this relationship rests on a long, heavily institutionalized and solid tradition of intricate corporatist arrangements, where the popular movement organizations and other voluntary associations have had a fairly clear and given place and an active role in the public policy-making processes. In this way, the major civil society actors of the previous regime thus have had a relatively easy access to political decision-making arenas.

At the same time, one of the main characteristics of the so called “Swedish model” has been the clear division of labor between the sectors (already indicated above), with the state shouldering the responsibility for both the funding and the provision of social and other welfare services, and voluntary organizations channeling their activities towards advocacy, political work and the provision of non-welfare related services (for example in recreation and culture), often to their own members. Even though both the earlier corporatist order and the fairly strict division of labor between the sectors are since a few decades being re-negotiated in several policy areas (Wijkström 2012), their legacy has meant that the relations between the state and the voluntary sector as such have traditionally been quite good, with few conflicts that would have created a need for a formal compact between them.

In the light of the above we can assume that the Swedish compact – or its sister initiative in Denmark and the on-going process in Norway – is not very likely to serve the same purposes or perform the same functions as its counterparts in England, Canada or Australia. What are we then to make of the spread of this particular policy package to societies steeped in Social-democratic traditions, where the structure and position of the voluntary sector has been significantly different from the setting in which this policy was first conceived?

Similar challenges, different points of departure?

One way to approach this puzzle may be to see it in the light of the more or less universal transformations that the modes of governing society have been undergoing in the recent decades, affecting both the individual roles of the different organizational sectors, and their mutual relationships. As Butcher, Casey and Dalton (in this issue), but also other authors elsewhere, such as Johansson et al (2011) and Casey et al (2008), have pointed out, the compact phenomenon can be conceptualized as part of the oft-quoted shift towards a new paradigm of *governance* (replacing the old paradigm of *government*), with its emphasis on a more withdrawn role for the (welfare) state and on more “interactive socio-political forms of governing” (Rhodes 1996).

This shift has notably led to an increasing heterogeneity of the actors involved in policy-making and implementation; to increasing numbers of more or less formal cross-sectorial partnerships emerging in different policy fields; and to mutual dependencies increasingly linking different types of actors (Osborne 2009). To this we may also add a simultaneous process of increasing “marketization” and commercialization in different public policy fields, with the language and practices borrowed from the for-profit sector increasingly spreading to the other spheres in society (Rombach 2010; Wijkström 2011). This could be seen as a logical consequence and continuation of the earlier New Public Management trend that had already begun to infuse both the public and the nonprofit sectors with values and norms derived from the sphere of markets and business (Donahue and Nye 2002; Osborne 2009).

In parallel, and connected to these changes, we also find the process of transformation of welfare systems in most industrialized countries, prompted by demographic, economical, political and normative challenges to the post-World War II model of a largely state-centered, state-funded and state-led service provision. These challenges have led to a wave of profound reforms throughout the industrialized world, aimed almost universally at the retrenchment of the welfare system, through various “workfare” programs, increased means-testing, restriction of eligibility for benefits etc. (see for example Gilbert 2002 and 2005). Privatization, selected targeting, as well as the focus on employment and individual responsibility seem to be parts of a wide international trend affecting both the more progressive and the more restrictive welfare states.

While some observers see in it an international convergence towards a new market-based model of welfare provision (Gilbert 2002), others point to the fact that this new model largely resembles the Anglo-Saxon liberal welfare state model as described by Esping-Andersen (1990) and suggest that we may in fact rather witness a convergence of previously more generous welfare states towards the Anglo-Saxon model (Beckfield 2003). Importantly, what has also been noted

in this context is the shift, both in the practice of welfare provision and in the analytical concepts used to describe it, from a focus on the welfare *state*, to a focus on “welfare pluralism” and on the “mixed economy of welfare”, with an increased importance of both nonprofit and for-profit actors involved in the provision of welfare services (see also Smith in this issue).

Naturally, this wave of transformations affects different societies differently, as the institutional points of departure differ so significantly. We may assume that these shifts go faster and meet less obstacles in societies where the economic system, the welfare system and the structure of the voluntary sector (the “civil society regime”) are of the liberal type, with non-state actors such as for-profits and voluntary organizations having already previously played a significant role in various policy fields, and with the market having already previously served as a model of social relations in several areas. This would also confirm the argument of Powell and Barrientos (2004) about strong path dependency mechanisms in welfare regimes.

In a similar vein we may assume that the relative effect of these transformations on the fabric of the society will be felt more acutely in societies with a legacy of less liberal socio-economic models, such as Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries, where the shift “from government to governance” and the gradual departure from a welfare system based on the state as the sole service provider is not only one of degree, but of a more comprehensive and systemic character (see, for example, Blomqvist and Rothstein 2000).

Who is there to face the challenge?

There is however one more crucial difference between the Anglo-Saxon and the Scandinavian settings that has had direct consequences for the way in which these societies have responded to the above-outlined transformations, and for the role that the voluntary sector has played in that response. In Anglo-Saxon societies such as the UK, Canada and Australia, the transition “from government to governance”, the dismantling of the welfare state and the opening up of the previously state-run welfare services to other providers occurred in a situation where a service-oriented segment of the voluntary sector was already in place, was relatively well-developed, and had a relatively long tradition that could be called upon. Most importantly, in the public mind there already existed a “voluntary sector” as such, which could be referred to and summoned to perform the new and challenging welfare tasks.

In Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, on the other hand, the transformation of the welfare system and the opening up of this system to providers other than the state and/or the municipalities occurred after nearly a century of Social-democratic rule that had effectively erased most, if not all,

forms of service-oriented organized voluntary activity – that had thrived in the 19th century – from the official map of the Swedish civil society (Lundström and Wijkström 2012). In fact, neither the prefix of “voluntary” nor the concept of a “sector” as such did even appear in the post-World War II Swedish public civil society discourse until the early 1990s. The various forms of existing nonprofit, non-governmental groups and associations had for most parts of 20th century been instead understood and discursively framed as parts of a “popular movement sphere”. It could be argued that the efforts of the Conservative-Liberal government of 1991-94 and related programs were instrumental in providing both the means and the inspiration for the introduction of novelties such as the “voluntary” prefix and the idea of a “sector” into the political agenda as well as in the academic discourse, among others through the funding of research and the development of statistics.

The fact that the Swedish civil society was almost entirely movement-based and mostly advocacy and member-oriented in comparison to many other countries, meant that relatively few voluntary organizations had the experience or capacity needed to meet the challenges and opportunities related to the opening up of the welfare system starting in the late 1980s. The few existing organizations were not able or willing to – at the rate that would have been possible – fill the new “service provision vacuum” that developed as a consequence of the liberalization. Therefore, in a very first wave in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the older, more established actors were complemented by alternative providers, among which new, smaller community initiatives, often in the form of small-scale social co-ops, were given an important role (Stryjan and Wijkström 1996).

Notably, however, in a later stage of the development it was various forms of commercial for-profit providers that took the opportunity and seized large portions of the emerging public services market, especially in the area of social welfare services as well as in the field of education. This development has recently become the subject of a heated public debate and criticism (Hartman 2011; Vlachos 2012; Rothstein 2012; Lundström and Wijkström 2012).

A tool to different ends

We would like to suggest that in the both cases outlined here – the Anglo-Saxon and the Scandinavian one – it is possible to interpret government-voluntary sector compacts as attempts by different actors to find new ways of coping with the above-described transformations and to achieve an upper hand in them. However, because of the differences in the institutional points of departure, compacts as tools have clearly been used to very different ends.

For the voluntary organizations involved in drafting of the compacts in the Anglo-Saxon countries, the agreement seems to have meant a way to improve the

strained relations between the two sectors, as well as to strengthen the relative position of voluntary organizations in their dealings with state agencies, while at the same time also clarifying, at least partly, the new division of responsibilities between the two sectors.

For their Swedish counterparts in the field of social welfare, on the other hand, the compact has instead signified an important step towards being officially awarded greater recognition and, in fact, any societal responsibility at all. Here we would like to argue that for the hitherto marginalized voluntary organizations in this field, the above-discussed systemic changes and the shift “from government to governance” has even presented a sort of a window of opportunity, opening up new spaces in the public arena to them and placing them more firmly on the new “civil society map”. These organizations’ support for the compact should be seen in the light of that opportunity.

At the same time, the systemic transformations have also created greater uncertainty as to the rules of the game regarding the place and responsibility of voluntary organizations in the rapidly changing society, and the character of the new relationship to the state. The national compact can thus be interpreted here as offering a way to disperse – at least partly – that uncertainty. It has done so by affirming, on the one hand, that the provision of welfare services still remains the main responsibility of the state, while at the same time confirming that voluntary organizations from now on have an important role to play in the actual production and delivery of welfare services (see Reuter 2012). This is also consistent with the developments in Denmark, where the government-voluntary sector agreement of 2001 also attempts to reconcile the traditional view of third-sector organizations as vehicles of democracy and political empowerment, with their new role as welfare service providers.

Similarly, the governmental actors involved in the development of the agreements in the different countries seem to have had different goals. It is important to note that compacts in the Anglo-Saxon countries have consistently been the result of Labor governments policies. Butcher, Casey and Dalton (this issue) attribute this on the one hand to a greater ideological affinity of center-left parties with the causes of (at least the social-movement-based parts of) the voluntary sector, and on the other hand to a greater propensity of Labor parties to adopt a partnership-based approach to the sector, as opposed to what could perhaps be seen as a more instrumental approach of center-right parties. At the same time, the substantial revision of the English compact by the Coalition Government of David Cameron in 2011 has been widely interpreted as an effort to turn what has been perceived as a successful Labor policy into a part of the conservative-liberal government’s Big Society agenda (Taylor in this issue).

Contrary to the Anglo-Saxon cases, the Swedish national compact of 2008 was developed under the auspices of a conservative-liberal coalition government

– with only a tepid support of the center-left opposition parties (see Johansson and Johansson in this issue). This government’s overall ideological profile has little in common with the Labor governments that were involved in the development of the English, Canadian and Australian compacts. Its rhetoric in the area of social affairs, with its emphasis on individual responsibility and on the importance of communities as primary carriers of social cohesion, has in fact in many respects instead resembled the Conservative British Prime Minister’s David Cameron’s more recent rhetoric on “Big Society”.

Those provisions of the Swedish compact that express the government’s standpoints and ambitions demonstrate, that at the heart of the conservative and liberal coalition parties’ involvement in the compact process has lied the introduction and institutionalization of the very idea of voluntary organizations as legitimate and important welfare service providers. In the Swedish context, this goes very much against the 20th century public aversion towards any forms of private service provision that could be interpreted as “charity” – which in the public discourse has traditionally had very negative connotations as a symbol of pre-modern and pre-Social-democratic paternalism and social inequality. The Social-democratic and Left parties’ initial opposition to, and their subsequent half-hearted support for, the compact can be explained by precisely the same aversion – and the coalition government’s support for the agreement can be explained by its desire to challenge and ultimately start changing the very norms and values in society that underpin that aversion (Reuter 2012).

The compact as a discursive arena

This leads us to the suggestion that one of the main functions of compacts may be as the arenas where the discursive struggle over the ideas concerning the place and different roles of the voluntary sector in society, and over the direction of policy directed at the sector, takes place. Especially at transformative points in time when wider political struggle is surfacing in society, compacts may provide the public venue where different ideological visions of the voluntary sector’s role and its relationship with the other spheres in society are vented, and clash with each other in competition for normative domination. In this way, the compact could be seen not only as a testing ground for the introduction or re-launch of new or different civil society paradigms that in following steps, if successful, might also spread to further policy fields. They might also be seen as the place where new compromises are struck on how to understand civil society and its new role(s).

Moreover, compacts, being – at least initially – high profile, formal agreements, give the signatory parties an invaluable opportunity to insert their own standpoints, interests and ideas into the public agenda. Particularly, those

compacts where the signatories formulate their ambitions and objectives in (at least partly) separate sections, as in the case of the Swedish agreement, allow the representatives of the government and of the sector to differentiate themselves from each other and underline the subtle differences of opinion in order to send the “right” signals to the public (Reuter 2012). The compact gives the signatories the opportunity to discursively frame the problems that they perceive, and formulate solutions to them, while at the same time having to take into account, and accommodate, the points of view of the other parties, as well as of earlier dominant civil society discourses.

The discursive function of compacts is illustrated by the language used in these agreements, and by the subtle shifts in terminology that may occur when the political “ownership” of a compact – and of the whole policy field concerned with the voluntary sector – changes. As all students of the sector are aware of, the notions used to define and describe voluntary organizations both across the world and across different institutional settings are numerous. More often than not, these concepts also reflect different ideological standpoints with respect to the role of these particular organizations in society. Terms such as “third sector”, “community organizations”, “civil society actors”, “nonprofit institutions”, or “social movement organizations” are often enough used interchangeably, but in fact they at the same time convey subtle differences in the understanding of the nature and purpose of the concerned sphere in society. These differences are often embedded in broader, and competing, ideological worldviews, at the same time as the local flavor of these different terms also play an important part in this conceptual game.

From this point of view, the terminology used in the different compacts becomes quite interesting. For example, as Taylor (in this issue) points out, the revised English compact of 2011 introduced for the first time the term “civil society organizations” where previously the terms “voluntary and community organizations” dominated. The use of this term seems to be closely linked to the Conservative government’s theme of “Big Society” and has also met with some criticism within the sector itself.

Similarly, “civil society organizations” is a term used in the Swedish agreement alongside such signifiers as “association” and “idea-based organization”. In the Swedish public debate, the concept of civil society is relatively new and it has since its introduction in the 1990s been associated mainly with liberal or conservative intellectual circles and sometimes with a value-conservative worldview (although an earlier route to the concept was clearly more left-wing – see, for example, the different contributions in Trägårdh 1995; 2005). Its use in the text of the compact in the Swedish case signals a change of direction in the public discourse on voluntary organizations, from the Social-democratic era’s focus on the democratic and empowering potential of the

popular movements and their organizations, to a more diverse view of the sector epitomized by the broader term “civil society”, including for the first time also those organizations that work in the field of social welfare and recognizing them as important contributors to society. This is a development also noted in other recent works (Wijkström and Zimmer 2011; von Essen and Sundgren 2012).

Different functions, different travel modes

The above discussion of the functions of the compacts, and of the different institutional contexts in which the compact policy seems to flourish, is by no means conclusive. We argue, however, that the comparison between the Anglo-Saxon and the Scandinavian settings offers a number of illuminating insights into the different roles that a more formal agreement between the state and the voluntary sector can perform, and the different meanings that may be attached to it. Before closing our discussion, we would like to reflect on a few other aspects of the compact phenomenon which we believe important, but where more research is needed.

“Package” or “piecemeal” transfer?

First of all, we have in this article sought to underline the importance of the institutional context for the understanding of individual compacts. To the above discussion we might perhaps add that this importance is visible not only in the way in which compacts are designed or used by different parties, but also in the manner in which the compact policy has traveled between different settings and between different civil society regimes. Notably, several of the policy elements associated with the original, English compact – such as for example an extensive research program and the very idea of political support for different voluntary efforts – seem to have spread to other countries within the Anglo-Saxon world as parts kept together in one and the same, more coherent policy package. Sometimes the compact itself has served as the “package” containing also other policy directives, and sometimes it has instead signified one of the components in a larger “package”. The Canadian and Australian national agreements thus share many components that they seem to have more or less directly inherited from the English original, which was “imported” in a policy package to these countries.

The travel or translation of the compact and its policy siblings to Sweden and the other countries in Scandinavia seem to offer us a different story on how policies spread. In fact, the spread or “import” of such policy elements from the Anglo-Saxon to the Swedish context instead seems to have taken place on more of a piecemeal basis, and over a much longer period of time. The transfer has for the most part also been unrelated to the national compact of 2008. Thus, in

Sweden, a first large effort aiming at mapping and researching the voluntary sector was introduced by the center-right government in the early 1990s, together with a first thrust at a number of efforts aimed at both gaining more knowledge about “the volunteer”, and improving the situation and possibilities for volunteering.

The advent of better times for voluntary work was signaled through these efforts, and at this time both the establishment and public support of voluntary centers (*frivilligcentraler*) also gained momentum. “Volunteering”, as a different and wider phenomenon than the idea of unpaid work provided by the “active members” (as in the traditional popular movements and their many local associations), had hitherto not been in use as probably too close to the long-disgraced and for a modern welfare state anachronistic “charity paradigm”. And early on in the first decade of the 21st century, a major effort to improve both statistics and research in the field was launched by government, in a way harking back politically to the Liberal-Conservative government and its nonprofit sector policy of the early 1990s, but not presented as an integrated part of the compact that was introduced in 2008.

These different policy elements – aiming at making a nonprofit or voluntary sector both more visible and accepted, as well as highlighting and facilitating the welfare-relevant segments of the sector – have been introduced in Sweden from the early 1990s and onwards one by one. This has gone on without much political ado and initially also without any seeming coordination between the different efforts. Only afterwards were many of the various individual initiatives and different policy components fused together in a more coherent policy package that has been labeled “*A policy for the civil society*” (“En politik för det civila samhället”, Utbildningsdepartementet 2009).

The possible implication of this is that policy transfer or translation between more similar regimes seems to be more easily conducted as a “package deal”, where more or less all the components travel to the new policy context in a more coherent fashion and at the same time. This while the introduction of the policy into a new policy environment that differs considerably from the original setting might require a more step-by-step and piecemeal export/import operation. Part of the reason for the time lag and such a one-by-one process could be that the new “host regime” needs time to adjust to be able to receive a type of policy elements that are so different. Another explanation could be that certain values and principles must have proper time to mature before the process of translation or transfer can continue. Yet another possible reason is that the field perhaps needs to organize itself better and establish the necessary umbrella or peak organizations that can represent and promote the interest of their members.

A question worth exploring in further research is thus how factors such as institutional resemblance of societies, and ideological proximity of governments,

influence the ways in which policy travels – or are hindered to travel – between different countries and/or civil society regimes, as discussed in this article.

The implicit or silent social contracts

Secondly, it is perhaps worth to reflect on what types of already existing older – but perhaps more “tacit” or “invisible” – agreements between the state and the voluntary sector that the compact might replace, or at least challenge. In the Scandinavian context, at least, the national compact emerges in an institutional setting with a long history of numerous and parallel, more or less informal, corporatist arrangements between the two sectors. Such “implicit” contracts have for example been flourishing in a field such as sports, and they are also salient in areas such as labor market relations, national defense, popular (adult) education, as well as guiding the actors in religious and faith-based matters. Through a fine-spun, multi-layered fabric of such micro-agreements, economic support but also other benefits have been systematically channeled to segments of the voluntary sector in exchange for the support from these organizations for the consecutive (and for the Scandinavian countries earlier primarily Social-Democratic) governments’ ideals and political aims in these policy areas. These “implicit” or more tacit arrangements have recently been described in the Swedish context as important parts of a much more comprehensive “social contract” that is currently being re-negotiated (Wijkström 2012).

There is an obvious risk that by treating the new formal compacts as something inherently “new” on the policy arena, we will miss the importance of many of their more silent forbearers or alternative arrangements that for decades may have led a quiet, but nevertheless influential, existence mostly away from the limelight and big politics.

Symbolic versus “real” consequences of the compacts

Finally, as we have sought to show here, and as the articles in this special issue demonstrate, the roles of the compact oscillate between the substantial and the symbolic. The signatories of the compact in the Anglo-Saxon countries seem to have intended to create a policy instrument that would through a number of concrete and coordinated mechanisms facilitate the interactions between the two sectors. The task for their Swedish and Scandinavian counterparts has been slightly different, where the compacts instead seem have been instrumental in creating acceptance for the provision of social services by voluntary agencies, for example by stressing the importance of the democratic values and practices of the popular movements of the 20th century. By underscoring the importance of (specifically) the social care-oriented component of the voluntary sector, this part

of the sector has also come more directly into the public limelight. In this process, the introduction of a compact in Sweden has also served the function to legitimize and institutionalize the rather new and hitherto controversial idea of having voluntary organizations operating as providers of welfare services, which have so far been understood as the task of the welfare state.

Importantly, however, this symbolic and discursive function of the compact in Scandinavian context may have consequences that are no less real than those of the Anglo-Saxon compacts: the “symbolic” compact might pave the way for a “really” new character of the welfare system as well as a new composition of the nonprofit sector in the previously so state-centric and movement-dominated Scandinavian societies. Whether it will do so in the longer run is an empirical question. At the same time, more research is needed on the manners in which the symbolic and the substantial functions of compacts and similar policies interact with each other – irrespective of which regime they are operating – and on the mechanisms through which they affect both the lives of these actors and, perhaps more important, the people being served by them.

By way of conclusion: the compact as a mirror

As the analysis in this article indicates, compacts can be interpreted as very plastic and flexible political instruments shaped and molded by different actors to serve different purposes. They can also be understood as arenas for negotiation, where different ideas about the very place and role of voluntary organizations in public life and in society compete with each other for normative primacy – a function especially interesting today, when the 20th century welfare state, its institutions and previous policy instruments are being re-negotiated in many countries, through a change process that often seems to stretch over more than a single century, and whose perhaps most decisive dimension is normative.

However, for students of the voluntary sector and of sector-related public policy, compacts are interesting not only in terms of what they themselves perform (as in the discussion above), or as illustrations of how nonprofit policies come into being, what processes facilitate them and what conditions make them successful (as in the articles in this special issue). They are also useful analytical windows through which we can peek at wider societal developments.

We would like to suggest that compacts act as early windows or mirrors that both reflect the current state and the direction of the relations between the voluntary sector and the state in many different societies and contexts. Through these phenomena we believe that we can study the direction in which these relations are heading, as well as how the current ideas develop and are being challenged about the proper and desirable role and place of civil society and its organizations in our societies of today as well as tomorrow.

On the one hand, a careful reading and analysis of a compact's actual text will tell us a lot about the hopes and aspirations of the various signatory parties in a particular setting when it comes to their relationship and mutual obligations and rights, as well as about their potential anxieties about the direction in which that relationship is developing or might develop (Reuter 2012).

On the other hand, compacts also mirror the wider public – and political – conversation about the preferable nature and status as well proper role and position of nonprofit and voluntary organizations in society. As such, they can tell us more about the current evolution of the norms and values that underpin that conversation, than what prevails on the more shallow policy surface. The actual contents of a compact provide us with useful insights into those ideas – sometimes competing – about the proper role of the voluntary sector that are at the center of the current public debate. An in-depth reading of a compact will probably also provide us with a hint as to which ideas are considered to be too radical, too unrealistic or simply too irrelevant for that particular institutional context to be part of that debate – what we might call the “non-existing” or “unwanted” civil society paradigms – that will most probably be screened out of the compact texts.

In this sense we can regard compacts as a sort of “snapshots” of, or window into, the current dynamics in the borderland between state and civil society. We believe that this perspective opens up for a promising future research direction when it comes to both the maturing and developing compacts in those settings where such agreements already exist, and the continued diffusion of the compact policy into other contexts.

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