

UCLG COUNTRY PROFILES

Kingdom of Sweden

(Konungariket Sverige)



Capital: Stockholm

Inhabitants: 9.223.766 (2008)

Area: 449.964 km²



1.1 Basic facts

Official name: The Kingdom of Sweden
(Konungariket Sverige)

Government: [Parliamentary democracy](#) and [Constitutional monarchy](#). Member of the European union since 1995 (not member of the monetary union).

Head of state: King Carl XVI Gustaf

Prime minister (*Statsminister*): Fredrik Reinfeldt, (The Moderate party –Conservative) since 2006

Capital: Stockholm (795 163 inhabitants 2007)

Area: 410 934 km²

Population: 9.2 million (2008) 22 inhabitants per km²

Life expectancy: 81 years (men 78, women 83) (2005)

Language: Swedish (not formally an official language). Recognised minority languages: Finnish, Sami language, Romani, Yiddish, and Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish)

GDP per capita: 36.500 US\$ (2007)

The multilevel government system:

First tier: Municipalities (*kommuner*)

Number of municipalities 2008: 290

Population of municipalities: Mean 31.665, median 15285, max 795.000 (Stockholm), min 2.549 (Bjurholm) (2007)

Second tier: Counties (*Län*).

Number of counties: 21, of which each has a County Administrative Board (*Länsstyrelse*) representing the state government. 20 of the counties have elected County Councils (*Landsting*)

(On the island of Gotland the municipality overlaps with the county, and no County council is needed).

Population of counties: Mean 435.000, median 274.000, max 1.932.000 (Stockholm), min 57.000 (Gotland) (2007)



1.2 Historical background on local government in Sweden.

Since the middle ages, Sweden is a unitary state, ruled by a monarch in the capital of Sweden. Being a vast and sparsely populated country, local self-governance has a long tradition (or at least the rule of local elites). The modern municipal and county system of Sweden was created 1862, and the first local elections to councils were held the same year. At that time, the number of municipalities was about 2500, most of which were very small. The first genuinely democratic elections, including both men and women, were held in 1919.

Following merger reforms in the 1950-70s, Sweden's local government units are now, by international standards, large. The 290 lower tier authorities (municipalities; *kommuner*) have an average population of around 32,000, while that of the 20 upper tier authorities (County Councils; *landsting*) is around 435,000. Both tiers constitute multi-purpose authorities and they are independent of each other.

1.3 Notions of local government in Sweden.

Sweden represents, together with its Nordic neighbours, a very particular case of welfare regime as well as local government system. In the Nordic or Social Democratic welfare model [1] welfare services are provided by the public sector rather than families, voluntary associations or the market. And, in the public sector it is local government that is the almost completely dominating service provider.

Local politics in Sweden has of tradition been described as pragmatic and consensus oriented, but during the last decades a rise in the level of political conflict has been noted. Today all practically all municipalities have adopted a

quasi-parliamentary system, with a ruling side and an opposition side in the council.

2. Territorial organisation

2.1 The Tiers and their nature.

The functions of municipalities include primary and secondary education, child care, assistance for the disabled and aged, personal welfare, culture and recreation. Almost all municipalities have responsibility for housing exercised through council-owned corporations. Another important area is infrastructure and the provision of technical services (local roads, water and sewage, gas and electricity, local and regional transport, garbage collection and disposal). The main function of the County Councils is health care (about 90 percent of their budgets). Other county functions are public transportation, culture, certain kinds of mid-level educations and regional development.

The state is represented in the counties by [County Administrative Boards](#) - CAB - (*Länstyrelser*). Their main function is to coordinate the implementation of state policies between different state authorities, and to some extent supervise the municipalities in certain areas. The County Administrative Boards are lead by a County Governor (*Landshövding*) appointed by the national government.

Two County Councils (Västra Götaland and Skåne) call themselves Regions (and Regional Councils) since they have taken over some of the duties from the CAB, especially in the regional development area. But their main function of both regions is still health care.



2.2 Financial indicators (from the year 2006)

Table 1: Financial indicators (2006)

	SEK Millions
+ State consumption	207.426
+ State investments	41.546
+ Local consumption	554.464
+ Local investments	40.460
Sum: Public consumption and investments	843.896
+ Private consumption and investments	2.055.757
SUM (GDP market value)	2.899.653

In 2006, 1 USD = 7,36 SEK, 1 EUR = 9,25 SEK (riksbank.se).

In international comparison, Sweden has a very high level of public expenditure. The taxes are high and the public welfare system is extensive. The sum of public consumption and investments was 29 percent of GDP in 2006, and of that 71 percent (or 20 points) was consumed and invested on the local level. Of all investments in the country 2006, 13 percent was public (of which about half – 6,7 percent or 4.440 SEK per capita was local). [3]

2.3 The capital city – Stockholm

According to The Local Government Act of 1991, the municipality of Stockholm should be governed according to the same rules as all other municipalities, with two exceptions: the County Council of Stockholm County is empowered to administer certain business normally left to municipal authorities, for example co-ordination of regional planning and transport in the metropolitan area. And Stockholm has a political institution which no other municipality has: under the Executive board, there are a number of Commissioners (*Borgarråd*), each of whom

heads a department and chairs each of the committees belonging to it.

2.4 Metropolitan areas

SEK Per capita	Percent of GDP	Percent of public consumption and investments
22.761	7%	25%
4.559	1%	5%
60.841	19%	66%
4.440	1%	5%
92.601	29%	
225.579	71%	
2.5		
318.180	100%	

2.5 Territorial reforms

During its first 90 years, the Swedish local government system consisted of about 2 500 municipalities (*kommuner*). Of these, 95 percent were so-called rural municipalities with very small populations. During the 20th century, two major amalgamation reforms were carried out (*Storkommunreformen* 1952 and *Kommunblocksreformen* 1962-1974). After the second reform, in the 1970s, the number of municipalities had shrunk to 277. In 2008 there are 290 municipalities as a result of 13 municipality partitions where parts of municipalities have seceded and founded their own municipalities.[4]

On the county level, the borders of most counties (*län*) have been consistent since the 17th century. In the 1990s however, two new counties (Skåne län and Västra Götalands län) was founded after amalgamations of two and three old counties, respectively. At the same time, some duties normally belonging to the County Administrative Board (*Länsstyrelsen*) was transferred to the self governing county unit (*Landstinget*). These two new counties have therefore taken to call themselves Regions (*Regioner*).

In 2007 a national committee, The Swedish National Committee on Public Sector Responsibilities, put forward a suggestion



of reducing the number of counties in the whole country in a manner like the 1990s's reform in Skåne and Västra Götaland. [5] However, there is yet not a political consensus in this matter, and it is not likely that a regional reform will be carried out in the near future.

3. Local democracy

3.1.1 Role of the parties

During the last 50 years, only eight parties have been represented in the national Parliament, and of them seven are presently represented. The national parties, ranked according to the traditional left/right scale are: the Left party (socialist) furthest to the left, joined on the left side by Social democrats. On the right side of the centre we find the Liberals, the Centre party and the Christ democrats, and a bit further to the right the Moderates (conservatives). The Green party sometimes claims to be independent of this scale, but in attitude surveys, Green sympathizers are almost always placed firmly on the left side of the scale.

The Social democratic party has been the largest national party since democracy was introduced in Sweden, and it held the office of prime minister during long periods. The Social democrats have also dominated many municipalities during this time, especially in the north and centre of the country. The strong ties between local and national level of the Social democratic party is one of the factors which led to the strong position of municipalities in the Social democratic welfare state of Sweden. But the electoral map on local level is more diverse and centre right parties have been successful in southern parts of Sweden and in metropolitan areas.

During a Swedish election, voters choose between party lists, and the election system is designed so that the scope for

voters to overrule the parties' ranking of candidates on the party list is strictly limited. Ninety-nine percent of the councillors elected in 2006 would have been elected even if there were no personal votes at all [7, 8]. Very few local politicians therefore have grounds to say that they have any kind of a personal mandate. Almost 100 percent of councillors in municipalities and counties are party members. The few who are not are mostly people excluded from their party during their time of office, or people who have left the party in protest. Swedish local government is therefore in a comparative perspective firmly in the hands of the political parties.

The election system is proportional and it usually takes only 2-4 percent of the votes in a municipality for a party to gain representation in the local council. In many municipalities local parties are represented but in the local election of 2006, 92.7 percent of the voters chose one of the seven national parties represented in the national parliament (*Riksdagen*). In some municipalities local parties plays a vital role, but in most the seven national parties are dominant. However, the number of local parties has risen slowly during the past decades.

3.1.2 Pluralism

The multi-party election system provides a wide scope of ideological alternatives for the voter on Election Day. About 40,000 Swedes hold positions within the local democracy, either as councillors or committee members, this represents 0.6 percent of the grown up population. In smaller municipalities, this percentage is considerably higher. In the local Councils, 42 percent of the councillors are women, on county level 47 percent. Swedes with foreign background are somewhat underrepresented, especially in minor municipalities. Unlike many other European countries, Sweden has no major



nationalistic party. But during the election 2006, the right wing Sweden Democrats gained about 3 percent of the total votes in local elections, and the party now has seats in over 140 municipalities. In most cases the party representatives are marginalized by other parties, but the relative success of the party 2006 has started a debate over if the traditional open and tolerant political climate in Sweden might be changing.

3.1.3 The executive

In the self governing local and county level administrations, the Councils are the only bodies directly elected by the citizens. The Councils in turn elect the members of the Executive Committee (*Kommunstyrelsen*) and other Standing Committees (*Nämnder*). The political executive on local and county level is vested these committees. The Executive Committee is formally a committee among others, but it has a coordinating role, especially in economic matters, that in practice make the other committees subordinate.

In a traditional municipality, there are normally committees for social service, for education and child care, for care of the elderly and handicapped, for culture and leisure, for environmental issues, for planning, and for infrastructure and security. With the Local Government Act of 1991, the municipalities were given the right to arrange their committee structure pretty much as they pleased, resulting in a great local variation. It is probably impossible to find two municipalities with identical institutional structure.

The members of the committees are nominated by the parties and elected by the Council, but they do not have to be members of the Council. In fact, a majority of them are not. The parties are represented in committees in relation to their size in the council. If the committee is too small, there are for mathematical

reasons no seats for the smallest parties. Since both the governing side and the opposition are represented in committees, the political executive bears the appearance of an assembly government model. But in reality, ruling parties (or coalitions of parties) and oppositions are formed in almost every municipality. Institutionally, this majoritarian government is manifested only in the choice of committee chairmen. This system of a sort of informal majoritarian rule has been labelled quasi-parliamentarism by a leading scholar.

There is no mayor in the Swedish local government system. If one reads the Local Government Act one is inclined to believe that there are no political leaders at all – and that everything is run by collective bodies: council and committees. But in reality, the chairmen of these committees are powerful figures, normally leading party representatives. And the political leader of a municipality is the chairman of the executive board. Since the responsibilities of these chairs are not regulated by law, there are great local variations in the degree of influence of these leaders.

3.1.4 Principles of representation

The Swedish election system is built on the principle of proportionality, and the goal is that the size of the party groups in councils and parliament should mirror their support among the voters as exactly as possible. In the national election, only parties with more than 4 percent of the voters in the whole country can gain mandates in the parliament, in the County Council election this limit is 3 percent. In municipal election there are no such limits. In most municipalities, there is only one constituency, and one list per party. If the number of inhabitants is higher than 24,000, the municipality must have at least two constituencies according to the Local Government Act. The number of



council seats and the number of constituencies put natural limits on how large a party must be to be represented.

3.1.5 Attitudes of the citizens

The attitudes of citizens are often collected in different surveys, but very rarely on the municipal level. Public attitudes in general to services produced by the local government is normally very positive.

3.2 Citizen participation

3.2.1 Turnout in local elections.

The mean turnout in the local elections of 2006 was 79.3 percent. The highest turnout was in the municipality of Lomma in southern Sweden (89.4) and the lowest in Haparanda, a northern town by the Finnish boarder (59,5). The mean result among the county elections was 79.1. The turnout in the national election (which is always held the same day) was 82 percent. In local and county elections, newly arrived immigrants who are not yet Swedish citizens, are allowed to vote. This is the explanation to some of the slightly lower turnout in the local elections.

3.2.1 Direct democracy.

Local Councils can, if they want to, arrange advisory local referenda. Such referenda are usually held on Election Day in a handful of municipalities, and sometimes (but more rarely) in the years between. The referenda are regulated in a special law, and not in the Local Government Act.

There has been some experimenting on opening up the local political process to the citizens. There are examples of advisory committees, corporative arrangements, possibilities for individual citizens to write proposals to the councils etc.[13] But none of these experiments have been made compulsory by law, and the interest for such reforms is limited in most municipalities.

3.2.3 Democracy below local level.

A municipality can, if it wants to, use a Neighbourhood committee model (*Kommundelsnämnder*) for the local administration. These committees handle and coordinate a number of responsibilities within its territorial part of the municipality. But the committees are not directly elected by the neighbourhood citizens but by the Council according to the same principle as other committees. This means that it is the same majority of parties that rule all the neighbourhoods, irrespectively of local political opinions. Even if parties mostly tend to nominate candidates from the neighbourhood to such committees, this is not compulsory. In conclusion, the system of neighbourhood committees are not an instrument for elective democracy on a sub-local level, but it brings the decision makers closer to the citizens and facilitate the dialogue between politicians and the voters. The three largest municipalities in the country: Stockholm, Gothenburg (*Göteborg*) and Malmö have all chosen this model of governing. [14]

3.2.4 New practices – e-democracy.

With the Internet revolution, many new ways of communication between the elected and the voters have occurred. Most councillors have public e-mail addresses and communicate regularly with citizens. Council debates are broadcasted and/or transcribed on the Internet sites of municipalities. However to our knowledge, no particular permanent institution of citizen participation has yet been established.

One noteworthy invention is the small local party Demoex, which for two mandate periods has been represented by one of councillor in the municipality of Vallentuna outside Stockholm. The party has no agenda of its own in the election. It is instead run by the principle of direct party democracy. Registered party members can



vote electronically on the party's website on all issues that the council is debating. The party representative in the council then follows the result of the internal electronic referendum.

4. Central-local relationships

4.1 General issues

4.1.1 Legal notions.

The details regulating local government are found in the Local Government Act of 1991 (*Kommunallagen*). The general competence clause of this act has been regarded as an important foundation of local self-government:

Municipalities and county councils may themselves attend to matters of general concern which are connected with the area of the municipality or the county council and which are not to be attended to solely by the state, another municipality, another county council or some other body (Local Government Act, 2nd Chapter 1).

This clause states that local governments are free to undertake whatever actions relating to their own affairs that they like. There are, however, many exceptions to this rule: Local authorities are not allowed to carry out activities that according to law are allocated to some other branch of government and the activities must, in principle, affect only the territory of the local authority. Without authorisation by law municipalities must treat all their members equally. Finally local governments are not permitted to own and run profit-aiming businesses. The general competence clause is understood to refer to all those activities that are not explicitly delegated by central government to local governments.

In reality, most major local government undertakings are regulated by special

national laws, leaving the general competence clause to sound far more empowering to the local level than it actually is.

4.1.2 Central government structure.

Since the local level is responsible for most of the implementation of the extensive Swedish welfare policy, most national institutions, political and administrative, have close relations with the municipalities and their representatives. In the national Parliament (*Riksdagen*), the Finance committee (*Finansutskottet*) is responsible for general local government matters. In the government, the assistant minister of finance is responsible both for local government and public administration in general.

4.1.3 Constitutional guarantees for local self-government.

Local self-government is recognised in the constitution as one of the cornerstones of democracy in Sweden. The first article in the most prominent of the Swedish constitutional laws, The Instrument of Government, (*Regeringsformen*) reads:

All public power in Sweden proceeds from the people. Swedish democracy is founded on the free formation of opinion and on universal and equal suffrage. It shall be realised through a representative and parliamentary polity and through local self-government. Public power shall be exercised under the law.

There is, however, no agreement about what protection from central government intervention that is implied by this statement of the constitution. It should also be understood that the constitution in an international comparison has a weak position in the political system. The constitution is relatively easily amended; there are practically no possibilities to have the constitutionality of political decisions



tried in courts, and the constitution generally is not an important object of affective identification.

4.1.4 Legislation on local government.

The Parliament (*Riksdagen*) is the only public body with the authority to adopt new laws or to amend existing legislation. The Government can also adopt rules – ordinances (*förordningar*) that everyone residing in Sweden must follow. The Instrument of Government (*Regeringsformen*), which is one of Sweden's fundamental laws, stipulates what must be decided by law and what can be decided by an ordinance. Further on, central national authorities can through delegation from the Government and the Parliament issue regulations (mandatory rules) and general advice (strong recommendations).

This legislative hierarchy repeats on most policy areas, where laws provide more general goals, and where ordinances and regulations are much more detailed and specific. All three types of legislation are of great importance for the local administration.

On the local level, municipalities are authorized to create local regulations which are mandatory within its borders in areas such as public order, traffic, planning, tax levels etc.

4.2 Supervision of local government

4.2.1 Oversight.

Sweden's County Administration Boards (CAB) function as representatives of central government at regional level. It is their responsibility to ensure that the decisions taken by the Parliament and the national Government are implemented in the manner intended. One important mission of the CAB is to take action if national targets are not attained and to

control that the rule of law is complied with through supervision and inspections. The central government agencies and the CAB are further commissioned by the government to supervise that the municipalities comply with the regulations.

Notable is that over the last years there has been, in state government, a shift from input to output oriented policy instruments. The use of different monitoring instruments such as evaluations, inspections, benchmarking systems and follow-ups has grown and there are constantly recurring demands from media, politicians and citizens to expand and increase the use of this kind of instruments in old as well as new policy areas. [15] In public opinion making there is a clear tendency that the tolerance for local differences is becoming lower.

4.2.2 Dismissal, revocation and dissolution.

The council can not be dissolved during its time of office. The chairman and/or members of the committee can be recalled if she/he has committed a serious crime, or if the Council concurs to a proposal from the yearly Audit Commission that the member or the committee should not be granted discharge from liability. And the Executive Committees and other committees can be recalled by the council if the majority in the council has changed, or if the general committee structure in the municipality is altered.

4.2.3 Central sectoral bodies.

On practically all policy areas, there are state sectoral bodies corresponding with its counterpart in the local administration. In some areas the state authorities have a coordinating and supporting role, in others they are more active in regulating and supervise the local administration.



4.3 Protection of local self-government rights and interests

4.3.1 Judicial remedies.

If a municipality finds that the state in some way have breached their rights, there is practically nothing it can do about it in legal terms. Formally, if a law or regulations is found to be in conflict with the constitution by an authority, as for example by a municipality, the law should not be followed. But this occurs extremely rarely. This does not mean that municipalities are silent in these matters – there is often a lively public debate every time someone thinks the limits of self-government are altered.

4.3.1 National institutions representing local government.

There are no state institutions designed to represent local government with respect to the central government. Sometimes the County Governor (*Landshövdingen*) take upon her-/himself to represent regional interest in Stockholm. The office of the Governor has during recent years gained an intricate dual role where the office holder is expected to both represent the central government regionally, and representing the region in Stockholm when needed.

4.3.3 Associations of municipalities.

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions - SALAR (*Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting - SKL*) represents the governmental, professional and employer-related interests of Sweden's municipalities and County Councils.

Every municipality and county in Sweden is a member in SALAR, and the Association is financed by the fees paid annually by these members. It is also politically controlled since the members appoint representatives to the Association's congress, which is the highest decision-making body. The congress elects the board of directors,

which is responsible for the day-to-day activities of the organization. Normally, the political appointed leader of the organization is of the same party affiliation as the prime minister, but it is notable that party representatives within SALAR very often take a united stance, especially when the state is trying to limit the scope of local self-government

SALAR plays a very important role in national politics as an influential lobby organisation. It is always consulted when policy decisions that concern local and regional levels are to be made. SALAR is also influential through its advisory role towards municipalities and counties. Municipalities and counties can always rely on SALAR to distribute relevant information and recommendations.

4.3.4 Conflict resolution procedures and practices.

There are no general procedures for resolving conflicts that occurs between local and national level. Municipal representatives that are unsatisfied with state policies have to make do with participating in the political debate and trying to influence the state by arguments and appeals to public opinion.

Municipal decisions that interfere with state law could be abolished by court, but only if a member of the municipality makes an appeal. In special cases, local politicians and personnel could be held personally responsible for breaking laws in their line of duty. But mostly there is very little the state can do if a municipality chose to deviate from national policy in some way.



5. Local responsibilities

5.1 Main functions.

The functions of both municipalities and counties are dominated by welfare services, including among others primary and secondary education, child care, assistance for the disabled and aged, health care, personal welfare, culture and recreation. Almost all municipalities have responsibility for housing exercised through council-owned corporations. Another important area is infrastructure and the provision of technical services (local roads, water and sewage, gas and electricity, local and regional transport, garbage collection and disposal).

5.2 Tendencies in distribution of powers.

The development of the late 20th century further has strengthened the position of local government as service provider. New public tasks often have been allocated to local government and re-allocations of tasks have strengthened local government at the expense of central government and within the local government sector municipalities at the expense of county councils.

The responsibility for primary and secondary education was in 1991 transferred from the state to the municipalities and the elderly reform (*Ädelreformen*), which made the municipalities comprehensively responsible for long-term service and care for the elderly and people with disabilities, came into force on 1 January 1992.

The provision of electricity used to be an important area of local government operations. Local government has now almost completely withdrawn from this arena. Although some electricity distribution companies may still be owned by local governments, the local character of many others is partly fictitious, as many

have been bought by the big companies, only existing as daughter-companies.

During the last decades of the 20th century there also has been a trend of moving the responsibility for different services from the counties to the municipalities. A third trend to be noted is the privatisation in many authorities of the provision of services. This has for the most part taken the form of contracting out the production of services, but there are examples of a full-scale privatisation of for instance housing and electricity companies. But regardless of these changes the public sector has not as many believe diminished in size, it has grown, mainly due to expanding public responsibilities in old policy areas and due to an aging population.

5.3 Three decentralised local government tasks.

If we by decentralised tasks mean tasks where the state has little or no influence over local policies, then culture, leisure (administration of parks, sport arenas etc) and tourism are areas that are the most prominent examples.

5.4 Three centralised local government tasks.

If we by centralised local government tasks mean tasks where the state by regulations and oversight has a very high influence over local policies, then environmental protection, social service and education are among the most prominent examples.

6. Local finance and management

6.1 Local government incomes

6.1.1 Tax powers.

The most important sources of finance are today local income taxes (65 percent of the total incomes for local government). Since



the early 1960s, the municipalities' dependency on taxes has increased noticeably while the reliance on state subsidies has decreased. One explanation of this development is of course that local municipalities have taken over responsibilities that previously were the responsibility of state and/or county councils, which means that the whole budget for the municipality sector has increased in size.

The local income tax is decided by the local council, and is for most municipalities around 20 percent, and for most counties around 10 percent, of the income.

6.1.2 Charges and fees.

Charges and fees sum up to 22 percent of the local government income. In sectors like child care and care for the elderly, culture etc fees finance a lower percentage while in areas as transportation, sanitation, water etc, the percentage is close to 100. Education is free.

In some areas there are state regulations concerning fee levels, but generally the municipalities are free to decide the proportions of tax and fee financing. But fees can never be higher than the cost for the service in question, since the municipalities by law are forbidden to make profit from high fees.

6.2 Local government personnel and management

6.2.1 Personnel.

About 21 percent of the Swedish work force, or 662 000 persons, was employed by the local government sector in 2007. 58 percent of these did work full time, and 10 percent had temporal employments. [16]

There are no major differences in regulations between public and private employments in Sweden. There is a Law of Public Employment from 1994, which

mostly regulate state employees, but in some respect it also refers to those employed in the local administration. By this law, municipal personnel is forbidden to engage in private activities that could damage the public trust of the local administration, and in some crucial sectors there are restriction on the possibility of local personnel to go on strike.

6.2.2 Integrity and corruption.

In international comparisons, Sweden has a very low level of corruption (www.transparency.org). Cases of corruption in the public sector and especially in local government are very rare.

6.2.3 Management reforms.

The number of management reforms in Swedish public sector, and in local government in particular, has been extensive during the last decades. Democratization, decentralisation, amalgamation of policy sectors, privatisation are some of the trends. It is paradoxical that Sweden, a country normally described as a social democratic welfare state with (together with Denmark) the highest taxes and the largest public sector in the Western world, for a long time has been one of the most eager to adapt to New public management ideals of marketisation. [17] These reforms have affected the organisation of the local administration in many ways, but the local "constitution", that is the rules regulating political leadership have been stable for a long time.

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