

Solving Municipal Paradoxes: Challenges for Swedish Local Democracy

David Karlsson and Stig Montin

The Public Administration of Scandinavia—especially in Sweden and Denmark—stands out in two major ways: The size of the public sector in relation to the private sector is the largest among all developed, democratic nations in the world, and the public sector is also the most decentralized. For many decades, the Swedish welfare state has been formed around the principle of local self-governance. The general goals and regulations of the welfare state are decided in the national parliament but the service production is almost entirely found on the local and regional tiers of government. Primary and secondary education, adult education, healthcare, care of children, the elderly and the handicapped, social services, culture and leisure, public housing, public transport, water and sanitation, city planning, environmental and health protection, fire brigades, business development etc. are all responsibilities of Swedish municipalities and regions. A third of a Swede's salary is paid as local and regional income tax. About a quarter of the Swedish workforce is employed by municipal or regional authorities. Swedish citizens can hardly leave their home without encountering different aspects of municipal activities. Local and regional politics determine the conditions for social life from the cradle to the grave (Sellers & Lidstrom, 2007; Wollmann, 2008; Karlsson & Johansson, 2008; Loughlin, Hendriks, & Lidström, 2010; Tsuchida 2011).

In many ways, the history of Swedish local government is a success story, where local citizens have contributed to the creation of the most ambitious welfare state in the Western World by engaging in local democratic processes. Admirers of the Swedish model keep coming from all continents to study Swedish local governance, and Swedish municipalities are doing their best to build partnerships and bring administrative aid and education to municipalities in developing countries.

However, the more recent history of the Swedish model is a tale of stagnation and change. In the 1980s, the expansion of the Swedish welfare state ended and in the 1990s the economic crisis forced both national and local governments to reduce welfare services and public jobs in order to cut public spending. And even though the service levels have been restored in many areas during the 2000s, the public trust in the welfare

system is no longer as steadfast as it once was (Edlund, 2006; Larsson, Letell, & Thörn, 2012; Wollmann, 2008).

The changes have also been accompanied by new political ideals. The social democratic hegemony was broken in the late 80s when liberal ideas of privatization, outsourcing and New Public Management were introduced in municipal politics (Montin, 2000). In 1995, Sweden entered the European Union, and even though the EU is not primarily concerned with how the member states organize their social welfare, the long term tendency seems to be one of “Europeanization” of Swedish welfare policies (Gould, 1999; Montin, 2011). Tax rates, social security and service levels are slowly converging towards a European normality.

In these changing times, Swedish municipalities are far away from their expanding heydays in the 60s, 70s and 80s. Instead, Swedish municipalities and regions are struggling to ride out economic downturns and retaining public trust. Furthermore, the Swedish municipalities and regions are facing a number of intricate challenges which all threatens to undermine the legitimacy of the whole political system. Our view is that several of these challenges have their roots in the construction of the Local Government system itself. A number of paradoxical goal conflicts have been built into the foundations of the Swedish decentralized welfare state.

One such paradox is the social democratic ideal of egalitarianism which contrasts with the ideal of strong local autonomy. Strong local self-governance will always lead to service variation rather than national equality. To honour both the value of national equality and of local autonomy is an almost impossible challenge for political leaders.

A second paradox concerns the political institutions and the practices of democracy. Historically, Swedish local democracy was consensus oriented and the law prescribes assembly government and collective political leadership in all political institutions. But over time, Swedish local democracy has become party politicised and today an unofficial quasi-parliamentary system is practised in Swedish municipalities and regions. The contradiction between formal and informal ideals of democracy strains Swedish local democracy.

A third paradox is the fact that even though the extensive Swedish welfare model is built on socialistic ideals of public control over service production, Sweden has also been a pioneer when it comes to marketization of public services. For political leaders in municipalities and regions, it is increasingly challenging to implement redistributive policies and produce social justice with the help of public authorities that more and more resemble private firms. Are the local population citizens or customers?

The aim of this article is to present and analyse these three paradoxical challenges for Swedish local democracy, and point towards possible scenarios of the future.

SELF-GOVERNMENT AND NATIONAL EQUALITY

Local government is the “government of difference” (Page, 1982). The purpose of local autonomy is to let the local citizens decide the political priorities and make sure that their public service production is adapted to local needs. In a political system founded on the principle of strong local self-governance, tax rates as well as service production will vary between autonomous units. However, the Swedish welfare model is also heavily based on social democratic values of social equality and redistributive justice. In relation to the welfare state, people have the expectation of being treated uniformly as equals and not be discriminated against on arbitrary grounds. Citizens often feel that the egalitarian aspect of the system is compromised when the quantity and quality of public services varies depending on where you live. The support of local government is generally high, but when service equality is threatened, the legitimacy of the system is compromised (Stjernquist & Magnusson, 1988).

The national government tries to handle these contradictory expectations on the welfare state mainly with the help of two strategies: 1) to ensure that all local and regional authorities have equal economic opportunities to carry out their responsibilities, and 2) to ensure by regulations and supervision that the service provided by local and regional authorities live up to acceptable service levels.

Economic equality is reached by an extensive tax redistribution system—“the Robin Hood-tax” (Berggren & Hermansson, 2008). Richer municipalities and regions contribute to the system while poor municipalities receive substantial subsidies. In the end, the tax revenues per capita of each municipality—deprived and privileged alike—are about the same. This system is necessary to enable poor, scarcely populated municipalities to carry out their duties, but the system is also heavily criticized, especially by wealthy municipalities in metropolitan areas who feel that their hard-earned revenues are harvested (Karlsson, 1997; “Politicians demand changes to ‘Robin Hood’ tax”, 2012). A consequence of the system is that a municipality is not economically rewarded for lowering unemployment or strengthening local growth, which means a lack of incentives for solving a bad economic situation. On the other hand, one can assume that the gratitude of thankful citizens is incentive enough for most politicians to achieve economic growth.

An on-going demographic transformation is fuelling these tensions. For a century, urbanisation has slowly depopulated large regions of Sweden. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the northern parts of the country were receiving considerable immigration of labourers, aiming for the expanding mining, water-power and forest industries. Today the number of jobs in the North is steadily decreasing and the educated youth move to the more urban South (Lundmark, 2006). The aging population in the scarcely populated areas will soon be needing elder- and health care. How the northern municipalities will solve the problem with increasing demand for services and decreasing supply of service personnel on the local labour markets is yet to be seen.

The national government's ambition to steer local and regional authorities through regulation and supervision is a delicate balance act. A review of historical policy documents reveals that the Swedish government used to be very much aware of the implications of decentralising responsibilities to the self-governing level (Bengtsson & Karlsson, 2012). To decentralize a public service is to put it in the hands of local politicians, and national goals and regulations must leave room for local political discretion. However, over time the decentralisation of responsibilities has taken place without much thought on the importance of local democracy. In reality, the municipal and regional authorities are the only viable public organizations capable of producing welfare services, and the national government keep decentralizing on routine without much consideration for whether the regulations accompanying the reforms recognize the role of local politics. In some areas the municipal authorities are so heavily regulated that they almost resemble local offices of national agencies.

Even though Swedish local politicians have larger budgets and responsibilities than most of their European colleagues, they are at the same time deeply concerned about the involvement of national authorities in local business. Adding to this discontent is the fact that the national level is notoriously uninterested in ensuring that new decentralization reforms are fully financed (Zapata & Malmer, 2010).

What then is keeping these contradictory forces from breaking up the system? One answer lies within the Swedish party and election system. It is largely the same parties that are represented in the national parliament as in the councils on local and regional level, and since the cohesion is relatively strong in most parties, the national and local interests are balanced by the political elites on different tiers of government (Bäck, 2005b). Adding to this, the common Election Day ensures that the electoral trends nationally normally translates into similar trends in regions and municipalities. A separation of elections would probably result in protest-voting against the national government (Oscarsson, 2001), securing opposition victories in local and regional councils and increasing the tensions between local and national levels.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

The party and election system is thus one of the factors holding the Swedish multi-level government together, but it also contains institutional paradoxes. When Swedish local democracy is described in contrast with national democracy, values such as participation, pragmatism and consensus are often mentioned. Representative democracy, principled debates and party strife is described as traits of the national level (Karlsson, 2003; Sanne, 2001). The Swedish Act of Local Government regulates the political institutions on the local and regional levels, and the main principles of the law are assembly government and collective leadership. The executive power of municipalities and regions are invested in committees with members from all parties represented in the council.

However, during recent decades the local political culture has changed. Three coinciding trends have transformed local politics: political elitization and professionalization, party-politicisation, and adaptation to parliamentary logics.

A traditional characteristic of Swedish local democracy has been the high number of elected and indirectly elected political representatives. The opportunities for a politically interested Swede to get a political position in local government have been very good, thanks to the large number of executive committees in each municipality. Over time, the numbers of committees as well as the number of members in the council have decreased significantly. Each year the total number is reported as lower than the year before (Karlsson, Rommel, & Svensson, 2009). The remaining representatives are becoming more professionalized and less like political laymen (Montin, 2005). Behind this trend are, on the one hand, new management philosophies which promote slimmer government and less sectorial thinking and, on the other hand, rising difficulties in recruiting willing and qualified representatives—especially in smaller municipalities. With fewer local politicians, the relative influence of local top leaders has increased during recent years. The chair of the executive board has no formal powers but over time, according to informal practices, the chair has more or less become the equivalent of a mayor in other European countries, with at least as much influence as that of a traditional European mayor (Bäck, 2005a; Karlsson, 2006).

During the same time, party politics and political conflicts have risen continuously in Swedish local government (Bäck, 2000; Henry Bäck, 2003; Gilljam, Karlsson, & Sundell, 2010). The major explanatory factor is the municipalities' growing importance as producer of public services in a time when public management models have been heavily politicised (i.e., the degree of privatization/socialisation etc.). This trend has developed along with the establishment of a quasi-parliamentary system (Bäck, 2006). Even though assembly government is still the formal frame for political institutions, each municipality and region is in reality ruled by a majority party or coalition (Bäck, 2003). Like in other parliamentary systems, different parliamentary situations creates variations in levels of conflict and influence patterns (Gilljam & Karlsson, 2012), and the parliamentary positions of councillors affect their political attitudes (Gilljam, Persson, & Karlsson, 2012; Karlsson, 2010).

To summarize, Swedish local government is on the formal surface a collectively governed assembly government political system with strong participatory values, while the informal reality is a heavily party-politicised parliamentary democracy with a dominant mayor-like leader (e.g., Karlsson, 2012).

This huge distance between formal and informal institutions creates challenges for the political system in several ways. One aspect is the unconstitutionality—if a major rift should occur between the actual and the formal rules, there are no legal protections for the commonly accepted political practices. Another aspect is the pedagogical challenge of explaining the system for the citizens. Most Swedes have very limited

knowledge of the informal arrangements or the composition of the actual ruling coalitions of their municipalities. This is of course a considerable obstacle for their ability to hold the local leaders accountable on Election Day. And the system might be just as puzzling for some national decision makers. An indication of this is the recurring proposals of various participatory reforms in order to solve perceived democratic deficits on the local level, when the actual heart of local politics is party-based electoral democracy (Montin 2007). In fact, local political leaders in Sweden are the most supportive of party-based electoral democracy—and the most critical of participatory democracy—in Europe (Karlsson, 2006).

A recent national inter-parliamentarian commission (SOU 2012:30) has suggested a voluntary experiment where municipalities could apply for an exception from the Act of Local Government and introduce a parliamentary system with only majority representatives in the Executive Board. Our prediction is that the national government will turn down this proposal, or—if such an experimental law is eventually passed—that few municipalities would apply for an exception. The main reason for this is the fear that opposition representatives would be severely disadvantaged if they were to be excluded from executive boards and committees. And, as each of the established parties are well represented among both ruling majorities and oppositions around the country, most feel that they would lose more influence than they gain from such a reform. The question now is how much longer the system will hold together with growing splits between formal regulations and informal practices.

PRIVATISATION AND CHANGING ROLES OF CITIZENS

In the decentralised welfare system of Sweden local political responsibility and accountability and a coherent organisation of public services have been of great importance. The purpose of the welfare state was formed around the values of democratic socialism, such as social justice and redistributive politics. Citizen influence on policy-making should accordingly be carried out through democratic processes and contacts with elected politicians. The third paradox put forward in this article concerns the fact that while the political responsibility still formally remains, the service organisation is becoming more and more fragmented, and citizens tend to be regarded as costumers rather than members of a local community. Sweden has been a pioneer in the effort to adapt management ideals from the private sector into the public service production, and values such as consumer choice and competitiveness between service producers are promoted.

The dominant view among those who reformed the Local Government Act in the late 1980s was that provision of public service should be municipal. They stated that “public tasks should to the greatest extent be managed within public juridical and democratic forms”, which refers to “committee management” (*nämndförvaltning*) because this is the most “natural” (SOU 1990:24, p. 86, own translation). Hence, at the time it

was considered as evident that municipal services and care should be provided within a self-contained municipal organisation. Until the 1990s, the social services were almost completely provided in-house in what was part and parcel of the local welfare state. Schools (primary and secondary) were also almost exclusively municipal managed.

An ideological change begun in the Social Democratic Party (SAP) from the late 1980s, which became expressed as “increased freedom of choice”, “increased competition” within welfare production and “alternative modes of productions”. This paved the way for coming changes in the 1990s. After the election of 1991 the new right-wing majority in the Riksdag declared a “system change”, but the fundamental welfare system (general welfare) did not become an object for substantial change at the time. The right-wing government did, however, stress the importance of change within the public sector, such as more customer choice, internal competition and alternative social service producers. Later on, during the first decade of the new century, it has become more relevant to speak of system change. As shown below, an increasing privatisation has taken place within social services and education (for an overview see Hartman, red, 2011).

The share of children in so-called independent pre-schools (public financed and regulated private school) increased close to 20 per cent between 1990 and 2010. Correspondingly, the share of pupils in independent primary schools changed from one per cent in 1992 (when the independent school legislation was put in force) to eleven per cent in 2010, and from two to above 20 per cent in independent secondary schools (*gymnasium*). The expansion of independent schools was prominent from the year 2000. Private independent schools are mainly run by for-profit companies. Within the field of social care of children and youth, and municipal care of drug addicts there has also been an increase in the number of private providers, but this increase developed during the 1990s. Measured in terms of share of employed, about 45 per cent work in private (mainly for-profit) care providers within these two areas. The county councils (*landstingen*) are responsible for health care and hospital care and they have since 2001 increasingly purchased services from private companies. In Swedish crowns the purchase more than doubled between 2001 and 2009 (from 7.7 billion to 18 billion). Excluding the county council of Stockholm, which is the main purchaser of health care and hospital care, the national increase was six per cent and represents about ten per cent of the total net expenditure of all health care and hospital care in Sweden. The fastest expanding sector is primary care, especially since 2010 when a system of free choice of primary care providers was introduced as obligatory for all county councils.

Privatisation within care for elder and disabled people has been continuously expanding since the 1990s. In 2010 private companies provided 19 per cent of all care contributions of home services and in homes designed for the elderly (special housing accommodations) measured in working hours. The private providers consist mainly of rather large for-profit companies, and there are tendencies of an oligopolisation. Elder

care market is dominated by four companies (Attendo Care, Carema Care, Aleris and United Care), of which Attendo and Carema are the largest ones. Hence, privatization of elder care in Sweden represent a shift in policy from non-profit municipal organisations to for-profit (Stolt, Blomqvist & Winblad, 2011). In this context it should be mentioned that when “freedom of choice” was nationally launched by the right-wing government as an important reform for increasing quality in health care for old people, it was assumed that there would be a large number of non-profit organisations providing elder care. However, according to the procurement act the price of the services is the most important criteria and smaller companies and non-profit organisations could not compete with the big ones. The tendencies towards a situation where only a few companies dominate the market became one of the motives behind introducing a new but voluntary legislation in 2009 (*Lagen om valfrihet*), which is supposed to encourage municipalities to find smaller and not for-profit providers. In those municipalities who have introduced freedom of choice within elder care in accordance to the new legislation, “home service costumers” (old and disabled persons) can choose a provider from a list of approved public and private providers.

In sum, the local government democratic system is based on the ideas of representative political steering and control of public services, political equality and social justice. However, while these ideas are still regarded as fundamental the actual development has moved towards a situation where the linkage between politicians on the one hand and public services and citizens on the other hand has weakened. The local welfare service system has developed from coherence to fragmentation. Local citizens have become accustomed to the benefits of consumer choice but there is also strong criticism in the political debate targeting the perceived faults and irresponsible behaviour of for-profit private entrepreneurs. The image of Swedish local government as both a poster child of the Social Democratic welfare state and a frontrunner of liberal deregulation and New Public Management, creates a complicated self-identity for many municipalities.

FUTURE SCENARIOS—SOLVING THE PARADOXES

Our argument throughout this article has been that some of the largest challenges for municipalities and local democracy in Sweden are goal conflicts built into the local government system. In this concluding section our intention is to discuss possible future scenarios on how these challenging paradoxes could be solved.

In general, paradoxical conflicts could be resolved in either of three ways, of which the first is system collapse. A system built on contradictions and goal conflicts carries within itself the seed of its own destruction. When achieving one important value obstructs the achieving of another, the failures of the system could compromise its legitimacy and right to exist. However, in many ways the local governments of Sweden is a system too important to fail. A collapse of the system would not just endanger the

values discussed in this article but the service production of the welfare state itself. The Swedish people would simply not allow such a breakdown.

A second and more likely scenario is therefore that the goal conflicts are solved by the triumph of one political value over the other. For example, reforms where local responsibilities are nationalised may accomplish more national equality (at the cost of self-governance), reforms which institutionalise binding local referenda may undermine the party-based representative democracy, and further de-regulation and marketization reforms may undermine remaining socialistic ambitions within the system. All of these examples are quite realistic and would only be a slight extrapolation of on-going developments.

However, even if such scenarios could eliminate contradictions in the local government system and ensure the service production of the welfare state, important values would be lost. In the light of these gloomy predictions, we have to ask ourselves whether there in fact is a third way to solve the paradoxes, strategies that would allow Swedish local governments to eat and keep their cakes. And yes, we do indeed believe there are scenarios wherein the balance act of honouring conflicting values could be continued for yet some time.

Regarding the conflict between national equality and local autonomy the most urgent task is to secure the ability to produce high quality social services in the whole country. An amalgamation reform on the regional level, as well as among smaller municipalities in the North and Central Sweden may be a solution here. Foreign labour immigration targeting Northern Sweden may also be a lifesaving injection to the municipalities and regions in the area.

The democratic dilemma might be eased by a constitutional reform eliminating the gaps between the formal regulations and the informal practices. Adjustments that would codify the existing practices would make the political system more transparent for citizens and facilitate their opportunity to hold local leaders accountable. Reforms identifying new institutional solutions enabling dialogue between citizens and politicians are possible on the condition that such reforms reinforce rather than destabilize the institutions of representative democracy.

Finally, we believe that reforms limiting and regulating the growing private sector of service production entrepreneurs would prevent the excesses of vulture capitalism without eliminating the positive effects of producer competition and consumer choice which Swedes have learned to appreciate. In fact, the introduction of such regulations is presently one of the most debated issues in Swedish politics, and political actors both to the left and to the right are seeking innovative solutions. Sweden has traditionally only limited experience of private, non-profit service production—but the outcome of the on-going debate may very well be the initiation of legislation supporting establishment of such organizations.

The third way-strategies suggested here are all ideas present in the Swedish political debate, and the scenarios are not implausible. But whether Swedish local government will apply them and succeed in keeping up its many balance acts remains to be seen.

David Karlsson is an Associate Professor in Public Administration at the School of Public Administration, University of Gothenburg. His research focuses on local and regional democracy, especially political institutions and representatives.

Stig Montin is a Professor in Public Administration at the School of Public Administration, University of Gothenburg. His general research interests are local and regional politics, governance, and democracy, and especially institutional change within the context of urban and regional sustainable development.

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