

The Malta based project aimed to prevent the risk of exclusion of children and families

Leif Klingensjö

Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions

We have studied the host report as well as the discussion paper with great interest. First of all we would like to express the importance of preventing children and families from exclusion. In Sweden the responsibility for preventing exclusion is very much a matter for the local level. These questions are of great interest both at the local and government levels.

The outline of this comment paper is that first a brief description of the Swedish context in terms of preventing exclusion of children and families will be presented, followed by the main comments.

1. The Swedish context

The Swedish economy is now growing strongly. Growth in GDP is expected to be 3.3 per cent in 2007. The public finances are also developing strongly and there has been an upturn in employment from the autumn of 2005.

In Sweden the universal welfare is the foundation of social protection and social inclusion. The overall objective for society is to promote social cohesion with equal opportunities for all through adequate, accessible, financially sustainable, adaptable and effective social protection systems and social inclusion policies

The Swedish welfare system comprises general health care and social care, social insurance that provides financial security in case of illness, disability and old age and for families with young children and basic supplementary protection in the form of financial assistance.

Swedish welfare policy faces a number of challenges. The most important task of the Government is to implement measures that lead to more employment and less unemployment, measures that reduce exclusion from the labour market. Work, and the participation in society that work provides, are key factors in tackling exclusion and social marginalisation.

In Sweden a large number of young people are seeking employment. At the same time young people are usually unemployed for only a short time. In 2007 a job guarantee for young people under 25 will be introduced. The job guarantee includes training and practical experience. The job guarantee will replace the previous municipal youth programmes and the youth guarantee.

The municipal social services are responsible for individual and family care, care and nursing of the elderly and people with disabilities according to the Social Services Act. Together this makes up a third of the activities carried out by the municipalities. The Swedish childcare services (primarily preschools and after school care) have become part of the welfare system and of the everyday lives of most families. Well organised childcare services are absolutely essential to meet the changes that have taken place in family patterns and enable both parents to combine parenthood and work.

The social welfare committees in the municipality shall work actively to prevent and combat the use among children and young people of alcohol, other addictive substances and doping substances as well as in general terms prevent exclusion. The committee is also responsible for support and protective measures for children and young people.

2. Assessment and reflections

One of the measures in the Swedish policy is to shorten the increasingly lengthy period of time it takes for young adults to establish themselves on the labour market and start a family. These circumstances mean that young adults now face more difficulties than previous generations.

Young people who neither work nor study also find it particularly hard in the long term to find a foothold on the labour market. Young people with a foreign background have more difficulties than young people born in Sweden.

Much more efforts have to be taken regarding offering better services and support to families on the local level. The time children and young people are placed in foster homes or institutional care must be shortened. In Sweden children and young people who are placed in foster care or institutional care appear to be especially at risk of unfavourable development in the future.

2.1 Possible relevance of strategy to Sweden

The municipal social welfare committees shall endeavour to ensure that children and young people grow up in secure and good conditions. Particular attention is to be afforded children at risk of developing in an unfavourable direction. Close co-operation with families is stressed.

In Sweden we have around 100 "one-stop shops" for social welfare services, unemployment issues, social insurance policy and health care. Different municipalities offer different kinds of services. The main target group for the "one-stop shops" is adults between 20 to 64 years of age seeking employment.

2.2 Similarities/differences with the experience of Sweden

Differences

- One aspect is that there seems to be a stronger appearance of the state sector on the local level in Malta. In Sweden the intervention has a local perspective but the Government has provided designated funding in areas with special needs.
- From the 1990s the municipalities have developed various forms of non-residential care for children and young people to reduce the number of expensive placements outside the home. The services include family counselling, activities for parents and babies to improve attachment between parents and children, group activities for young people and/or single mothers and various structured daytime activities for young people.

- The strong general welfare systems in Sweden, which in most cases provide sufficient financial compensation when someone in the family is affected by illness, unemployment or if the family has a child with a disability.
- Child care in Sweden has been developed over a long period of time and is now an integrated part of our welfare system. In the early years the government gave grants to municipalities in order to stimulate the development of the system. Since the late 1990's child care is a part of the education system and is regulated by the School Act instead of the Social Services Act.
- The tax-financed social welfare system, with such elements as free schools, subsidised child care, health care, care for the elderly and people with disabilities, social services and various economic security systems.

Similarities

- The close co-operation with the home to ensure that children and young people who risk developing in an unfavourable direction receive the protection and support that they need.
- One of the most interesting co-operation projects between municipalities and county councils are the so called "family centres". Family centres include social services, maternity health care services, child health care services and open preschools (a preschool open to parents with their children free of charge).
- New forms of parenting support and training programmes for parents to enable them to become better parents are being developed and used.
- The steadily aging population.

2.3 Transferability

Many aspects of the Malta strategy seem to be transferable to the Swedish context.

- Most of all we refer to the important co-operation between the education system, social welfare and the labour market. In Sweden there is no such clear common policy. However we have examples in a number of municipalities where employment office, social welfare, the voluntary sector and above all the business community work closely together.
- In Sweden it is also common that municipalities co-operate regarding matters that they are too small to handle by themselves.
- Many municipalities in Sweden are of the same size as Cottonera and Kalkara.
- The importance to have a good education up to the high school level.

2.4 Important questions about the strategy that are being debated in Sweden

- Activation is an important principle in our universal welfare policy.
- Compared to the rest of Europe Sweden has a high unemployment rate when it comes to younger persons. As a result of this the need for social assistance are on a high level in these groups. Assistance recipients are to greater extent younger persons. In the two youngest age categories, 18-19 and 20-24 respectively, the proportion of assistance recipients was around ten per cent of all inhabitants. Of the total number of assistance recipients, aged 18 and over, just fewer than 40 per cent were aged between 18 and 29.
- The different needs for social assistance in the different countries.
- Studies of the quality and productivity of activities run by the Local authorities must be stressed.

2.5 Possible contribution of the strategy to the objectives of the Swedish NAP

We consider to evaluate these matters in the next NAP.

2.6 Main questions proposed for debate

- How do we provide work of good quality based on knowledge and evidence in the municipalities?
- The importance of evaluation and follow-up of projects being included in the planning from the very start of a project to be able to follow that the expected changes occur.
- The importance of all agencies involved in the "one stop shops" having the same vision.
- The staff in Sweden has often a university education. Despite that, it is vital to find ways uphold the skills on a high level in order to provide high quality services.
- How can society prevent social exclusion going from generation to generation?
- The lack of comprehensive data and the need to carry out research on issues relating to social inclusion.
- The need of spreading examples of good practises to inspire others.