

A perfect 10: Why Sweden comes out on top in early child development programming

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Sweden ranked first in the United Nations Children's Fund 2008 league table of early childhood education and care. In a book published 74 years previously, *Crisis in the Population Question*, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal outlined many of the features that were later assessed by the United Nations Children's Fund. Three aspects may have affected the implementation of Myrdal's ideas. First, the Social Democratic Party has been in power for 85% of the time since 1932. They often had to form coalitions with other parties that supported a nonpartisan stance. Second, according to evidence from the World Values Survey, Swedes are more individualistic than people in any of the other 64 societies included in that study. The State is expected to create social conditions on equal terms for individuals to realize their own goals. Finally, schools and other social services are managed by 290 semi-independent municipalities. Thus, reforms can be tested in a few municipalities before others follow suit.

Key Words: *Child welfare; Early childhood development; History; Public policy; Sweden*

In 2008, the United Nations Children's Fund presented a league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced nations (1). A research group compiled information on 10 benchmark characteristics of the system in 25 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. These benchmarks include parental leave of one year at 50% of salary, subsidized and regulated child care services for 25% of children younger than three years of age, a minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education and a child poverty rate less than 10%. The only country that passed all 10 benchmark characteristics was Sweden. The aim of the present paper is to explain some features of the historical developments in Sweden that might have contributed to this outcome.

ALVA MYRDAL'S PROGRAM

In the 1930s, Sweden was affected by the Great Depression. It also became apparent that the birth rate in Sweden was far below the reproduction or replacement rate. If that trend were to continue, Sweden would eventually cease to exist as a nation. It was obvious that something had to be done.

Un dix parfait : Pourquoi la Suède arrive-t-elle en première place en matière de programme de développement de la petite enfance

La Suède arrive en première place au tableau de classement 2008 des services de garde et d'éducation du Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance. Dans un ouvrage publié il y a 74 ans, intitulé *État critique du problème démographique*, Alva et Gunnar Myrdal ont fait ressortir bon nombre des caractéristiques que le Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance a évaluées par la suite. Trois aspects peuvent avoir influé sur la mise en œuvre des idées des Myrdal. D'abord, le Parti social-démocrate a été au pouvoir 85 % du temps depuis 1932. Il a souvent dû former des coalitions avec d'autres partis qui favorisaient une position non partisane. Ensuite, d'après les données probantes du *World Values Survey*, la population suédoise est plus individualiste que les populations des 64 autres sociétés incluses dans cette étude. Elle s'attend que l'État crée les conditions d'égalité sociale nécessaires pour que les individus puissent réaliser leurs propres objectifs. Enfin, les écoles et les autres services sociaux sont gérés par 290 municipalités semi-indépendantes. Ainsi, il est possible de mettre les réformes à l'essai dans quelques municipalités avant que les autres emboîtent le pas.

Universal suffrage had been introduced only a decade before, at the end of World War I. The first Social Democratic government had been formed in 1932 at the time of the Great Depression. Many policies that would attend to the needs of the majority of the population had to be formulated. At that point Alva Myrdal, a sociologist and politician, together with her husband Gunnar Myrdal, an economist and later Nobel laureate, published a groundbreaking book, *Crisis in the Population Question* (2). The aim of their book was to discuss social reforms that would promote child-bearing while also allowing for individual liberty, especially for women.

An important starting point was Alva's own situation as a mother of three children. She had to combine her working life with her obligations as a mother. Belonging to a relatively affluent family, she could afford to pay another woman to take care of her children. Yet, such an arrangement was not an option for most families. Many women with children had to work for economical reasons. Care of their children was often inadequate. Children often had to look after themselves or were taken care of by an older

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sibling. There was seldom any extended family to turn to because many families had recently moved away from the countryside to urban areas.

The Myrdals proposed many measures to help improve the situation, including that parents be offered paid parental leave during their child's infancy, that child daycare and education be available, that families receive financial support and that universal child health service be offered. They also suggested that collective houses be built to provide domestic liberty for women.

REALIZATION OF ALVA MYRDAL'S PROGRAM

None of these proposals were realized immediately. However, after World War II (WWII), these ideas served as a blueprint for the development of the Swedish welfare state (3). Nonetheless, their ideas were only gradually implemented. For example, the present system of daycare for preschool children was introduced in the beginning of the 1970s. In 1975, approximately 100,000 children aged one to five years were enrolled (4). It was not until 2005 that an enrolment level of 90% of the age group was achieved, ie, approximately 420,000 children.

The reforms that took place in the 1970s had been preceded by intense discussions since 1934. Opposition was not only found in conservative groups, but also among the voters of the dominant Social Democratic Party. Because of the economic growth after WWII, male blue-collar workers could afford to let their wives stay at home to take care of their children. This was a privilege that only the well-off had been able to afford before WWII. Thus, blue-collar families were often not willing to give up the idea of the mother as a housewife. When daycare started to expand in the 1970s, high- and middle-income families used these services to a markedly greater extent than low-income families (5). The idea of universal preschools continued to be questioned even after the 1970s reforms. The system was not completely embraced until the majority of parents of preschool children themselves had experienced preschools during their own childhood, ie, circa the mid-1990s.

Ideas similar to those presented in *Crisis in the Population Question* have been formulated by other writers in other countries, although maybe less comprehensively. Thus, an important question to pose is: "Why were these ideas supported and eventually implemented in Sweden but not in countries outside Scandinavia?"

Since the beginning of the 1970s, it has been apparent in political science that the lack of implementation of political ideas is the norm rather than an exception (6). Implementation is greatly affected by history and values in a society. Thus, to explain why Alva Myrdal's program was implemented, it is helpful to consider some features of Swedish history.

THE SWEDISH SOCIAL DEMOCRATS

Since 1932 and up to the present day, the Social Democratic Party has been in power for 85% of the time, which is quite

exceptional. However, for most of this time, the Social Democrats did not have a majority in the parliament. Thus, to govern, they had to form coalitions with other parties. During the first decades, their most important ally was the small Centre Party, the farmers' party. This coalition-building supported a nonpartisan stance, which is an apparent contrast to the political development during the 1930s in continental European countries (eg, Germany), and in which the Social Democrats kept a clear distance from other political parties (7). An illustration of the tendency toward wide consensus in Sweden is the concept of the State as "The People's Home", or *folkhemmet* in Swedish. The term was coined by the Prime Minister when the Social Democrats first came to power in 1932. It reflects the idea that the State should care for all citizens irrespective of background, just like people in a family who take care of each other.

The dominant position of the Social Democratic Party might also be related to the composition of the population at the time of the industrialization in the late 19th century. At that point in time, Sweden was a poor country, which, in turn, reflected the relatively low productivity in the agricultural sector. Only a few individuals were wealthy. When the country was industrialized, social reforms were needed to solve the problems that had been dealt with differently during the agricultural period. At that time, only a few people could afford private solutions for old age, health and other social services. Thus, the majority were supportive of universal solutions (8). In other European countries, more people were wealthy, and accordingly, were able to deal with such issues independently.

The Social Democrats in Sweden favoured universal solutions financed by taxes and was supported by underprivileged groups. In contrast, well-off people often will resist the idea because they need to pay more, compared with a system with private solutions. On a theoretical basis, the pivotal group might be the people with mid-range incomes (9). If they can obtain services and security at an equivalent or better level as they would be able to afford privately, it is rational for them to support a universal system because in this way they also contribute to a higher social stability. This is true of both the child health care service and the preschool system in Sweden, which are provided on a universal basis. Most parents would not be able to afford better quality services even if they paid for them themselves. Thus, universal services have adapted to the needs and perceptions of middle-income groups.

The Swedish voucher system for preschools might serve as an example of an adaptation to middle- and high-income earners. These groups increasingly demand choice and flexibility of services. Thus, at the beginning of the 1990s, a voucher system was introduced whereby parents could choose between different preschool service providers: the municipal preschool provider, which still is the dominant form, or an independent preschool provider, still funded by the municipality. The independent providers are run by either a nonprofit or a for-profit organization.

An interesting alternative is cooperatives that are run by the parents themselves. A voucher system also exists for compulsory schools whereby parents are freer than in almost any other country to select a school for their children. In Sweden, there seems to be a slight positive association between average compulsory school performance and the share of independent schools at the municipal level (10).

A high-quality, universal, public tax-financed system for preschool children needs support not only from low- and middle-income families with preschool children, but also from the majority of citizens in a country. Thus, support of the State needs to be forthcoming. According to the most recent Eurobarometer survey (11), support for both regional and national governments is higher in Sweden than in most other parts of Europe. This positive view of the State might be related to Swedish history during recent centuries.

A POSITIVE VIEW OF THE STATE

During the 17th and early 18th centuries, Sweden was a great military power in northern Europe. The State, ie, the King, needed a large proportion of the male population as soldiers for the army. The King had to negotiate with the peasants to get these soldiers (12). The negotiations took place at both the national and local levels; peasants were represented as one party in the national parliament and the local villages kept substantial rights to handle their own matters.

The status of the Swedish Church was also important. In the 17th century, the King became head of the Church and the State confiscated all property that had previously belonged to the Church. The clergy became State employees and so the Church was no longer an independent force in society. In southern Europe, the Roman Catholic Church continued to be independent of the State. In these countries the Church often opposed the State's social policies, especially those relating to families, because such policies might weaken the position of the Church. The village clergy were not only engaged in indoctrination but also in practical matters. They arranged parish catechetical meetings where the parishioners had to demonstrate that they were able to read. Consequently, the literacy rate was high at the time of industrialization, which probably affected the social development during this period.

Historically, Sweden has a relatively homogeneous ethnic composition, which may have also contributed to the Swedes' positive view of the State. Yet, after WWII, there has been considerable immigration. In 2008, 14% of the population was foreign born (13). The World Values Survey study (14), however, indicates that immigrants in Sweden have approximately the same attitude to the government as Swedish-born individuals. This attitude is also reflected in the use of preschools. In 2005, 88% of all children aged one to five years were enrolled in preschools. There was no difference between children with two Swedish-born parents and children with two foreign-born parents (15).

INDIVIDUALISTIC ATTITUDES, WOMEN'S AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Another factor that may have contributed to Swedish policies for preschool children is individualistic attitudes. According to evidence from the World Values Survey, Swedes are more individualistic than people in any of the other 64 societies that had been included in the study (16). On a scale with traditional values (relying on authorities like the Church, the King, etc) at one end and secular-rationalist values at the other end, Swedes represent the individualistic extreme. Swedes think that each individual is capable of forming an opinion on what is best for him or her. On another scale, with material values at one end and self-realization at the other end, Swedes represent the self-realization extreme.

The population's individualistic attitude is reflected in the relationship between the individual and the State. The State is expected to guarantee the right of an individual to realize his or her own goals. This is reflected in the marriage laws that were passed in the 1920s (17). In contrast to many other European countries, a married woman was understood to be primarily an individual in her own right and not simply a part of a family. That understanding later influenced tax laws for married people. A similar attitude prevails regarding children (18). They are primarily understood to be individuals with their own rights, rather than being a mere part of a family. Thus, parents have no right to mistreat their children. Sweden was the first country to abolish parents' rights to subject their children to corporal punishment in 1966. This attitude is later manifested in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (19), which Sweden endorsed.

The arguments for preschool policies in Sweden have increasingly been built on children's rights to equal opportunities, independent of their parents' social position (20). Thus, a Swedish governmental commission to suggest new methods for parental support in 2004 based its work on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (21). Individual rights, women's rights and children's rights are all related to an emphasis on equality in the Swedish society. People expect that the State will support these rights, especially for children. Because preschool children are especially vulnerable, policies for this age group are specifically required.

DECENTRALIZATION

An important feature of Swedish society is the decentralization of social services. In Sweden, 290 municipalities are responsible for preschools, schools, social services and other services. These activities are financed by local taxes, which amount to approximately 20% of a taxpayer's personal income. There is also a system of tax equalization between rich and poor municipalities, whereby wealthy municipalities subsidize poorer ones. The locally elected municipal representatives must adhere to a national framework and only then can they decide what is best in their own specific municipality. This decentralized system has its roots in the relatively independent villages during the preindustrial period.

This decentralization has been important for the implementation of preschool policies. Following the reforms in the early 1970s, preschools expanded in some municipalities but not in others. Gradually, parents learned to demand more capacity and the elected municipal assemblies became convinced that it was worthwhile. This is how the system developed over the next 30 years. Quality preschools, however, are comparatively costly. The United States High/Scope Perry Preschool Program cost for each child was US\$12,356 (1992 dollar value) (22). This program included 15 h per week of preschool and weekly home visits. The cost for one child per year in a Swedish preschool is comparable (average cost of US\$10,000) (4). In Sweden, there are no home visits but longer hours in the preschool (average of 29 h) (15). The parents pay 10% and the municipality pays the remaining 90% of this cost. Obviously, preschools are quite costly for a municipality, a cost that has to be financed by local taxes. However, because preschools enable more parents to work full-time, the municipal tax base increases and, accordingly, the net cost for the municipality is lowered.

The emphasis on the increase of the tax base was also evident in a national reform on reduced parental fees for preschools that was launched in 2001. In the governmental background papers for this reform, the rationale given was to motivate more parents to work full time.

CONTRIBUTION FROM SCIENCE

During the implementation process of the preschool policies, references were occasionally made to scientific evidence regarding what is good for the child. These kinds of arguments, however, did not form a major part of the discourse (3). Scientists influenced the development in a more direct way. Alva Myrdal, a social scientist, as well as other researchers in social science, economics and pedagogy, participated in several governmental commissions that formed the Swedish welfare state. The ethos was on 'social engineering', ie, on a society built on science and rational analysis. This rather elitist inclination was balanced by the popular base of the Social Democratic Party.

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