

# **Institutional Limitations for Providing Co-operative Welfare in Sweden and Finland**

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## **Abstract**

*The provision of welfare services in co-operative form varies considerably between the Nordic welfare states of Sweden and Finland. The ability of the co-operatives to be competitive alternatives to public agencies is restricted without public financing in both countries. The relatively high numbers of co-operatives in Sweden and low numbers in Finland may be explained by the different policies of municipalities. Swedish municipalities finance co-operatives to a larger extent than Finnish municipalities. Views of political parties, which affect policies of municipalities, are generally positive towards the co-operative alternative in welfare provisions in both countries. Despite this, at least in Sweden, the leftist majority of municipalities has restricted the development of the co-operatives providing welfare services.*

## **Introduction**

Co-operatives that provide welfare services form a new group of enterprises in Sweden and Finland.<sup>1</sup> The first co-operatives providing welfare services were founded in Sweden during the late 1970s and early 1980s, but the rapid growth of this group of enterprises started at the end of the 1980s. Although growth has slowed during the 1990s, the number of the co-operatives has increased by about 100 each year during the last decade. Parent-owned day care nurseries formed by far the largest group of these enterprises; there were 1,016 enterprises in 1995. Employee-owned day care nurseries form the second largest group with 157 enterprises. There are also about 100 co-operatives providing medical and health care; employees own almost all of these enterprises. Due to the high number of day care nurseries owned by parents, the majority of the Swedish co-operatives providing welfare services are co-operatives owned by consumers (consumer co-operatives), even though the number of co-operatives owned by employees (worker co-operatives) increased during the 1990s (Pestoff 1998, 175; Widén 1998).

Co-operative welfare provision in Finland is, as in Sweden, a recent phenomenon, but there are remarkable differences between these countries. There were only 43 co-operatives in Finland at the end of the 1990s and most of them were started during the 1990s. The co-operatives provide such services as day care and home help services. The majority of Finnish co-operatives are worker co-operatives (Pellervo seura 1999). The importance of the co-operatives as providers of welfare services has increased in Sweden during the last two decades while in Finland the co-operatives play only a very limited role. The differences in extension of co-operative welfare provisions are noteworthy because of the similarities of development of these two welfare states. In both countries, economic and ideological reasons have led to discussions on the relative efficiency and flexibility of different providers of welfare services, and on alternative ways of managing economic imbalances in the public sector. Furthermore, in both countries serious cuts in provisions for welfare services have been made during the periods of economic imbalance and unemployment in the 1990s (Kosonen 1998).

The 'new institutional theory' assumes that different solutions in welfare provision are supported or prevented by formal and informal systems of rules, that is, by institutions. These enforce constraints on interaction between different 'agents', who may be individuals, organisations or the state (North 1990). Formal rules include legislation concerning the provision of welfare services, and informal rules include the views of different actors on what are acceptable alternatives in welfare provision. Formal institutions, just like those concerning the rights and responsibilities of the co-operatives, are formed in negotiations between representatives of different interest groups. One of the most important groups in these negotiations are the representatives of the political parties that to a large extent develop social policy both at national and local levels of Nordic welfare states.

The first aim of this paper is to analyse whether institutional differences - especially rules concerning the role of the public sector in welfare provision and the relationship between the public sector and co-operatives providing welfare services - may explain differences in the development of co-operative welfare provision in the two countries. The second aim is to examine the future development of co-operative welfare in Finland and Sweden. For this reason, the views of the political parties on different providers of welfare services also are discussed.

## **The roles of municipalities and organisational alternatives in welfare provision**

During the 1990s, changes in legislation in Sweden concerning the provision of welfare services have increased the responsibilities of the municipalities (local authorities), which have consequently become more independent. Since the conservative government came into power in 1991, the municipalities have been able to choose to a greater degree how the money received from the central government for welfare services is used. From 1993, the municipalities have received resources according to a block-grant system in which they are allowed to allocate resources either to public or non-public providers of services. Furthermore, resources received from the central government have in general decreased during the 1990s (Lundgren 1999, 4-10; Pestoff 1998, 174).

Legislation in Finland has developed in the same direction as in Sweden. Public financing reform (*valtionosuusuudistus*) in 1993 gave the municipalities the freedom to decide how the welfare services were arranged, and the favourable position of the public agencies was challenged. Before the reform a certain percentage of the costs of the public agencies was paid for by the state. After the reform, the form that welfare provision took - whether municipalities or non-public providers of services provided services - did not affect the amount of money received from the central government. The reform and the economic difficulties have also led to decreased amounts of money being received from central government (Kosonen 1998, 364-366; Granqvist 1997, 4-5).

It can be concluded that decentralisation in the formation of social policy has taken place both in Sweden and Finland. This development has led to a situation in which the municipalities enjoy a higher degree of freedom than before regarding how welfare services are organised and, to some extent, which services are provided. However, at the same time as the degree of freedom has increased for municipalities, economic resources have decreased. These changes have led, as noted earlier, to cuts in services. But even more importantly, the organisational structure of how services are provided may change due to this development (Ståhlberg 1998, 85-89; Baldersheim and Ståhlberg 1998, 216-222). As Table 1 shows, the provision of welfare services can be divided according to location of responsibility and three basic activities: regulation, financing and production. Public regulation means that political decisions regulate the quality and quantity of service production in contrast to private regulation in which market processes regulate quality and quantity. Financing refers to how services are paid, and

production refers to ownership and management of the means of production. At the far left in Table 1, all responsibility for the three activities is placed within the public realm. At the far right, on the other hand, we find an organisation of services that is fully privatised. Between these two extremes are a number of alternatives in which public and private responsibilities are mixed into different combinations.

*Table 1: Different organisational alternatives for provision of welfare services*

	Location of responsibility							
Regulation	Public				Private			
Financing	Public		Private		Public		Private	
Production	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private

Note: Cf Lundqvist, 1988, 15

It has been assumed that the changes in roles and opportunities of municipalities described above, as well as the other changes in national and European politics, may lead to increased plurality in welfare services (Pestoff 1995). Public regulation may decrease since the tasks of the municipalities are not as clearly defined as before. Co-operation between the public sector and private providers of welfare services may make the distinction between public and private regulation more vague. Forms of financing may become more heterogeneous, and private production may become more common. These developments do not necessarily mean a dramatically changed role for the public sector if it still guarantees access to services. The main difference is that, due to decentralisation and the increased power of the municipalities, the differences between the municipalities may increase and lead to varying solutions for providing welfare services. This may open new possibilities for private providers. In general, this development may be seen as a move towards welfare pluralism with relatively extended public regulation.

The presented alternatives in welfare services may also clarify how the activities of the co-operatives may be organised. To start from the bottom, the production of the co-operatives is private as long as the public sector is not the owner of the co-operatives. Financing opens several possibilities for co-operatives. If the co-operatives receive public financing, it is possible that they are at

least partly under public regulation. Naturally, the public sector may finance the activities of the co-operatives without changes in regulation, but in practice public financing and public regulation are related. The co-operatives may serve as para-governmental organisations when their activities are financed by tax money and when their responsibilities are defined in contracts with the public sector. In these types of cases, the co-operatives are integrated into the public provision of the services, lessening the differences between the co-operatives and public agencies. However, the co-operatives may also finance their activities privately without public regulation; public regulation is uncommon in cases of private financing. In principle, however, the public sector may guide the activities of the co-operatives by legislation, even without public financing.

### **How are the relations between the public sector and the co-operatives formed?**

Relations between the public sector and co-operatives have always varied considerably between countries and fields of activities. Generally, the public sector has become involved in the activities of the co-operatives when the political leadership has supported a regulated economy. In addition, the public sector has often become involved when the activities of the co-operatives have been seen as an important part of the national economies and when the co-operatives have not been successful without public financing (cf Carlsson 1992). The views of the Swedish and Finnish political parties towards the co-operatives providing welfare services will be discussed later. The focus of the current section is on the economic situation of co-operatives.

The public sector may affect the economic situation of the co-operatives in a variety of ways. It may finance as well as create a favourable position in the markets for the co-operatives. A favourable position is created, for example, when, owing to contracts with the public sector, a co-operative serves the inhabitants of a certain area without competition from public agencies. Therefore, it is possible to divide the co-operatives to find out a) how they finance their activities and b) how they gain their customers.

*Table 2: Financing of the co-operatives and relation to consumers*

	Private financing	Public financing (+ private financing)
Relationship based on choice of customers	1	3
Relationship based on contracts with the public sector	2	4

The first type of co-operative is a competitive alternative for its members and for its customers and staff, without public financing. This is possible when it provides commodities demanded by its members or customers, and when the commodities are economically and qualitatively competitive alternatives. The second type of co-operative does not receive public financing, but certain groups of members/customers cannot choose between the co-operative and other providers of services. Instead, the co-operative receives certain members/customers due to contracts with the public sector. The third type competes with other providers of services and receives public financing, while the fourth type gains its customers through contracts with the public sector and receives public financing.

This classification helps us to determine how the economic situation of the co-operatives varies between Sweden and Finland. The Swedish co-operatives receive on average as much as two thirds of their financing from the public sector. In addition to direct economic help from the municipalities they may also indirectly receive public financing when their members or customers receive vouchers to buy services from different service providers. In addition, one quarter of the co-operatives receive indirect economic help, for example, when they pay subsidised rents to the municipalities (Küchen 1994, 60-67). Public financing may also be received without the involvement of the municipalities. Some members/customers of the co-operatives have the legal right to certain services that may be received from public agencies, but also from the co-operatives or other private providers of services. This is a new phenomenon in Sweden, which has led to an increase in the third type of co-operative. For example, some groups of handicapped people have gained the right to organise personal assistance for themselves, which has led to the starting of co-operatives that finance their activities indirectly through tax revenues. In these cases, economically unprofitable enterprises are able to continue, due to public financing and the high quality of their services (Laurinkari et al 1997, 56-60).

The development of the provision of welfare services in

co-operative form has been strongly related to the development of public financing. Although it is not a simple task to answer how many co-operatives would have started and survived without public financing, today the activities of most of them depends on such financing. Nearly 90 per cent of the co-operatives have some type of contract with the public sector, involving the provision of services and receipt of public financing (Küchen 1994, 61). The development of the co-operative day care nurseries provides an example of this; the first co-operative day care nurseries were owned by parents and started in Sweden during the 1980s without public financing. Legislation changed in 1985, and co-operatives gained the right to receive public finance which led to an increase in the number of these co-operatives: from 150 in 1985, by 1990 their numbers had reached 600. In a similar way, co-operatives owned by employees gained the right to receive public financing in 1992. Their numbers increased from 13 in 1991 to 157 in 1995 (Pestoff 1998, 175; Nyberg 1995, 56-57). This development cannot be explained by changes in general demand for day care services, though it may partly be explained by increased demand for special forms of pedagogy, increased parent involvement and other qualitative aspects of day care (Pestoff 1998, 196, 217).

The Swedish co-operatives primarily belong to types 3 and 4 in Table 2. Most of the consumer co-operatives (such as day care nurseries) receive public financing, and they compete with public agencies and private enterprises. Worker co-operatives, on the other hand, often have detailed contracts with the public sector and they serve inhabitants of certain areas, which means that the relations between them and their customers are at least partly based on their contracts with the public sector. Some examples of these kinds of co-operatives are health care centres and dental care clinics. They also have in most cases characteristics of both types 3 and 4 (Lindkvist 1996a, 72-91; 1996b, 69-75). The situation of the existing Finnish co-operatives differs from the situation of their Swedish counterparts. The Finnish co-operatives do not finance a significant share of their activities by money received from the public sector. This is because of the policy of Finnish municipalities not to buy services from private providers; for example, only one fifth of the municipalities buy in childcare services. With some exceptions, the statistics from other areas of social policy are quite similar. The number of the municipalities that buy more than one third of their services is very low; for childcare the number is 5.6 per cent (Granqvist 1997, 243-245).

These differences in municipal policies are noteworthy. The Swedish municipalities finance activities of private providers of

welfare services more than the Finnish municipalities. Unfortunately, it is not possible to discuss the reasons for these differences in this paper. However, the differences are visible even in the legislation; according to current laws, Swedish municipalities should support private day care nurseries so that the financial resources they receive does not differ remarkably from the financial resources received by public nurseries (Lindkvist and Karlsson 1996, 40-42). This kind of recommendation is not found in Finland.

### **The political majority in the municipalities and number of co-operatives**

It was stated above that the development of provision of welfare services in co-operative form is connected to the policies of the municipalities. Statistics from Sweden strengthen the picture of the municipalities as important actors in formation of social policy and so raise the question: what are the views of the political parties on different types of service-provider? A comparison between the Swedish municipalities in 1994 showed that the number of non-public providers and type of political control were strongly related. Of those municipalities that had extensive private and co-operative provision, most were led by conservative parties (Loord-Gynne and Mann, 1995). In addition, some researchers have found that restrictive or hostile attitudes of municipalities have, at least so far, restricted the establishment of worker co-operatives providing welfare services in Sweden. This means that co-operatives providing welfare services have, in practice, always been started in municipalities with either positive or neutral policies towards them (Lindkvist 1996c, 93-95).

The low number of Finnish co-operatives makes it difficult to draw conclusions on this question. However, a conservative majority in the municipality does not correlate with extensive private provision of welfare services. According to some calculations, it is even possible that the municipalities with leftist majorities have more extended private provision. It is obvious that the conservative majority has not led to extended private provision of welfare services, and other factors may explain differences between the municipalities (Granqvist 1997, 116-117, 190-193). It is still possible that the political right is more favourable to the co-operatives, because all municipalities with at least two co-operatives providing welfare services have either a conservative majority, or no overall majority with left and right having approximately equal power. However, other factors in these municipalities may explain why co-operatives get started.



## Views of political parties on different providers of welfare services

The views of the political parties affect both national legislation and policies within the municipalities. Representatives are to some extent bound by the policies of their parties. On the one hand, politicians have to base their decisions on rewards and sanctions connected to the views of the parties, and on the other hand the ideologies within the parties may affect the understanding of right and acceptable behaviour (cf Gidlund 1997, 70-72). It is not a simple task to clarify the views of the political parties; there are in most issues conflicting and changing views within them. In this paper, we present findings based on the answers of the representatives of the parties to a questionnaire. It has been assumed that these representatives are able to interpret the situation within their parties so that the answers give information on general attitudes. They were asked to choose the alternative that best describes their party's position regarding the role of service providers in the provision of medical and health care, childcare, elderly care and care for the disabled. All parties with seats in the Nordic parliaments were asked to participate in the study. Parties that chose to participate are shown in the appendix (Table 5).<sup>2</sup>

In the cases of medical/health care and childcare, the clearest cleavage between the political left and right is found in views on roles of the state, municipalities and private enterprises. The parties from the right are more often than the left parties in favour of a decreased role of the state and municipalities, and an increased role for private enterprise. The differences are clearer in Sweden than in Finland. Views on the role of the family do not differ as clearly as views on public and private enterprises. In contrast, the parties showed similarities in their view of voluntary organisations and co-operatives; the parties from the right were, just as in other cases of private actors, for an increased role of voluntary organisations and co-operatives. The parties from the left, however, were also for an increased or status quo role for these actors. In particular, all parties agreed on an increased role for co-operatives regarding childcare.

*Table 3: The role of different service providers: medical and health care and childcare<sup>3</sup>*

Question: Indicate your party's position regarding the following service providers' role in providing each service. Alternatives: (A) Should increase, (B) Status quo, (C) Should decrease.

		Medical and health care						Childcare					
		Sweden			Finland			Sweden			Finland		
		A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
State and Municipalities	Left parties	2	1	0	0	2	0	1	2	0	0	2	0
	Right parties	0	0	4	0	1	4	0	0	4	0	3	2
Private Enterprise	Left parties	0	2	1	0	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	0
	Right parties	4	0	0	4	1	0	4	0	0	2	3	0
Family	Left parties	1	1	1	2	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
	Right parties	3	1	0	3	2	0	4	0	0	4	1	0
Voluntary org	Left parties	2	1	0	2	0	0	1	1	1	2	0	0
	Right parties	4	0	0	3	2	0	4	0	0	4	1	0
Co-operatives	Left parties	0	2	0	1	1	0	3	0	0	2	0	0
	Right parties	4	0	0	4	1	0	4	0	0	5	0	0

The answers concerning elderly care and care for the disabled showed few differences, in comparison with the answers regarding medical/health care and childcare. One of the interesting differences was, however, that most right parties in Finland supported the current role of private enterprises in care for the disabled, which may indicate that these parties are not in favour of an increased role of for-profit enterprises in this area of social policy. Moreover, there existed a clear bias in favour of an increased role for co-operatives as providers of elderly care and care for the disabled.

*Table 4: The role of different service providers: elderly care and care for disabled*

		Elderly care						Care for disabled					
		Sweden			Finland			Sweden			Finland		
		A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
State and municipalities	Left parties	1	2	0	1	0	1	2	1	0	1	1	0
	Right parties	0	0	4	0	3	2	0	0	4	3	1	1
Private enterprise	Left parties	0	2	1	2	0	0	0	2	1	0	2	0
	Right parties	4	0	0	4	1	0	4	0	0	1	4	0
Family	Left parties	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0
	Right parties	3	1	0	5	0	0	3	1	0	2	3	0
Voluntary org	Left parties	2	1	0	2	0	0	2	1	0	2	0	0
	Right parties	4	0	0	5	0	0	4	0	0	5	0	0
Co-operatives	Left parties	2	1	0	2	0	0	2	1	0	2	0	0
	Right parties	4	0	0	5	0	0	4	0	0	4	1	0

Question: Indicate your party's position regarding the following service providers' role in providing each service. Alternatives: (A) Increase, (B) Status quo, (C) Decrease.

These findings show that an expanded role of co-operatives is generally supported and accepted both by the political left and right. It is also interesting to note that the answers concerning the co-operatives and voluntary organisations do not show major differences between political parties, while in the cases of the state and municipalities and private enterprises, the cleavage between left and right parties is more obvious. The similarity in views on co-operatives and voluntary organisations raises the question of whether the co-operatives are understood as associations without a strong profit-orientation. This is one possibility that may explain why some of the parties, especially from the left, show more openness for co-operatives than for private enterprises. The conservative parties have, in turn, been positive to all non-public providers of welfare (Helander 1998, 12; Gidlund 1997, 65-70).

## Discussion

The material presented in this paper shows that both Swedish and Finnish legislation give municipalities a decisive position to formulate how welfare services are provided. They are able to limit the ability of other providers of welfare services by directing public production and financing. In practice, the activities of the Swedish co-operatives depend on public financing. The answers of the representatives of the political parties did not show major differences in how the political parties view co-operatives as providers of welfare services. However, the establishment of the Swedish co-operatives is connected to a political majority in the municipalities - a conservative majority is associated with a high number of co-operatives in that municipality. The findings show contradictory results from Finland where high numbers of private providers and a conservative majority in municipalities do not correlate, even though co-operative forms of providing welfare services are associated with a conservative majority in municipalities. It is even possible that the conservative majority as such does not correlate with the expanded provision of welfare services in co-operative form. There may be other factors in the municipalities that explain the high number of co-operatives.

Other actors in addition to politicians may limit the establishment of co-operatives that provide welfare services. According to some studies, Swedish public sector officials and union representatives

are more often negative or restrictive towards the co-operatives than are politicians. These actors may also influence the attitudes and interest in the co-operative alternative within the public sector and among the workers and users of the welfare services (Lindkvist 1996c, 99-104). The comparison between Sweden and Finland shows that the existence of formal institutions that allow co-operative forms of providing welfare services does not automatically lead to an increase in the number of these enterprises. The policies of the municipalities, and willingness to invest tax money on private providers of welfare services, explain at least to some degree differences between these two welfare states in the extent to which they provide welfare services in co-operative form.

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## Appendix

*Table 5: List of participating parties*

	Sweden	Finland
Left socialists	Left Party	Left Wing Alliance
Social democrats	Social Democrats	Social Democrats
Centrist parties	Centre Party	Centre Party
Liberal parties	Liberals	Swedish People's Party
Christian parties	Christian Democrats	Christian League
Conservative parties	Conservatives	Coalition Party, Young Finnish Party
Environmental parties	The Green Party	

## Notes

1. Most co-operatives in Sweden are registered as economic associations. There is no separate legislation for co-operative enterprises. In Finland, in contrast, there is specific legislation concerning co-operatives. However, in practice co-operatives in both countries are enterprises owned and democratically led by their members, dividing limited rent for the invested capital and serving interests of the members through their own economic activities.
2. Anders Nordlund collected the material in 1997 and 1998. When parties were invited to participate in the study, an interview with a party official or a politician at the highest level in each party was requested. Furthermore, it was requested that the interviewee be involved with general political areas rather than the spokesperson for social policy. The reason for this request was that we wanted the party's position regarding social policy to be interpreted by someone that was not personally involved in the party's daily work with social policy. The assumption was that the opinion of the parties' elite might in some cases be heterogeneous due to different perspectives on social policy, eg that the individuals personally involved in formulating social policy propositions might have a different view from individuals working with economic issues. The respondents were asked to answer the questions in perspective of the short-term future (no longer than 5 years) and were reminded to answer as a representative for the party rather than expressing personal opinions.
3. The Green party in Sweden is for analytical reasons included among the left parties in Table 3 and 4. The reason for this is the fact that the Swedish Green party has co-operated on several occasions with Social Democratic governments. There has never been any co-operation with the conservative parties.

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