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## Towards more citizen participation in Sweden

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As a result of a general rise in the level of civic consciousness, citizens in Sweden towards the end of the 1990s are demanding increased influence and participation possibilities. Citizens want greater influence over their work, their private lives and in the community at large. But the present forms for this are apparently unsatisfactory. There is questioning, emotions are being showed. Apparently there is a need for contact, some kind of more active public dialogue — but how?

Meaningful democratic dialogue is only possible if citizens are well informed and can find their way in the libraries of public domains, if they know where to turn to for information about public functions and services, and about their rights and obligations. And if they are happy with the shapes for this that are available. Also and, perhaps most important, there must be forms for expression of the public will, channels that are available to express the citizens' desires, using the people's language.

In Sweden, a general election took place in September 1998. The result showed a move from the political centre and outwards, both to the left and the right. Especially interesting in this discussion is that participation decreased so clearly. Earlier elections, in Sweden now every four years, had collected close to 90% of the total voting population. This time it was 80%. In an international perspective, this is high. But a decrease of close to 10% is worth concern. It points at increased voting uninterest, and, in fact, interviews with voters confirm this. There is a language problem. The established political parties fail to attract voters, but — as a matter of fact — voters are *not* uninterested in political matters as such. On the contrary, new forms of spontaneous political action and participation are asked for and tried, new discussion groups, local interest organizations, new gatherings, protest and open demonstration at times.

So there is a language problem. Citizens want to speak, but there is a mismatch, the established political parties “do not focus on the interesting issues”, they do not seem to listen. This is a reality not only in Sweden.

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One conclusion might be that there is a need for new forms for the political dialogue, new forms for political listening to the voice of the citizens. It can also be that new political organization is asked for, organization that makes it more easy to mirror and carry the voice of the people. This is being discussed in Sweden. Certain measures are being tried. Widened analysis of possible new democratic participation forms is being supported. In late 1998, there was even appointed a new "minister for democracy" in government, Britta Lejon. One of her tasks is to find ways — and forms — to increase political participation.

What is the organizational background for this? In Sweden, and in other Nordic countries, a number of measures have been taken lately to facilitate increased contacts between citizens and public authorities. "Citizens' bureaux" have been set up in large numbers of municipalities — a new approach to the organization of public administration at the local level.

In 1998 there were about a hundred such citizens' bureaux in Sweden. They resemble public libraries, but are aimed at provision of public service. They may be divided organizationally into three main categories:

- Coordinated information bureaux, which may include an information desk where public officers representing the municipality, including local social insurance, or the county council or other authorities can inform the citizens on general matters of interest.
- Joint service bureaux, where both municipal departments, local social insurance and central government authorities may be represented. The staff is authorized to deal with matters within its remit at all organizational levels. The local and central government departments have a joint reception for public contact.
- Non-sectoral front offices, where various municipal institutions collaborate in the provision of integrated services, and where staff "generalists" deal with matters involving several different departments up to a certain level of responsibility.

Main activities of citizens' bureaux comprise providing information and administrative services and processing routine and administratively uncomplicated matters, and matters subject to specific well-defined rules. The creation of citizens' bureaux may be regarded as a response to the problems caused by the strict division into sectors and spheres of responsibility in central and local government. Many citizens found this division artificial and hard to understand.

Therefore, by applying an intersectoral approach, citizens' bureaux may help to improve functions and make them more efficient. This could lead to an institutional renewal of public administration, offering citizens better and more accessible services, guaranteeing services in sparsely populated areas and in the suburbs of the large towns, increasing the efficiency of services in socio-economic terms. It can also be a base for strengthening of local democratic contacts.

Citizens' bureaux can be looked upon as a means for making core operations at municipal departments more effective by relieving departments of the provision of "simple" pure public information and the processing of routine matters. This makes

107 it possible for the departments to concentrate their resources on the more qualified  
108 administrative tasks.

109 The practical work of developing and configuring citizens' bureaux is being done  
110 locally in the municipalities themselves. This process started in the late 1980s. At  
111 the same time analysis had been started by central government, chiefly initiated by  
112 the Ministry of the Interior (previously the Ministry of Public Administration).

113 In order to further investigate the issue of exercise of authority in certain public  
114 application areas, the Government appointed a special investigator in the spring of  
115 1994 to prepare proposals relating to services by the police, social insurance, tax-  
116 ation, enforcement and labour market matters that could appropriately be dealt with  
117 at citizens' bureaux by staff representing several authorities. In 1997, a bill extending  
118 the scope of inter-authority collaboration at citizens' bureaux was passed by the  
119 Parliament. This makes it practically possible to deliver a more full-flavoured service  
120 at the citizens' bureaux, for the benefit of the citizens.

121 Evaluations have been made concerning the use of citizens' bureaux. These show  
122 that these bureaux so far mainly are used for public service, and only to a limited  
123 extent for political contacts.

124 In Sweden, like in many other countries, public information can also be accessed  
125 via citizens' terminals or information kiosks in public libraries, post offices, hospitals  
126 and other public places, including citizens' bureaux. There is a risk, however, that  
127 such systems will invite non-public use, stressing entertainment and electronic com-  
128 merce of goods and services.

129 A complementary form for possible democratic contact has been introduced lately  
130 in Sweden. It is recommended to build "local democracy centres" as citizen meeting-  
131 points, and for public contact. A democracy centre could be located in a citizens'  
132 bureau, in public libraries, civic halls or public premises, or it could be housed in  
133 premises of its own. As yet, it is not known to what extent these will be used for  
134 political contacts.

135 Like in the case of citizens' bureaux, several of the functions of democracy centres  
136 may be supported by contacts that are taking place online.

137 Citizens' bureaux and democracy centres are examples of organizational public  
138 forms to increase government efficiency and to support closer relations between the  
139 citizen and government, including more intense democratic contacts. However, in a  
140 geographically vast country like Sweden, access to these offices is demographically  
141 unbalanced, and for many citizens difficult.

142 Increasing numbers of Swedish households are connecting to the Internet. The  
143 figure of households with a personal computer in late 1998 was of the order of  
144 30%. This technology naturally may support more close democratic contacts, as a  
145 complement to use of today's representative democratic functions. Horizontal com-  
146 munication between different local actors, associations, schools, action groups, etc.  
147 and — naturally — the citizens themselves is now possible in new forms. Contact  
148 "from the bottom and upwards" is on its way, contacts between citizens and their  
149 elected representatives. With relevant organization, public power may be distributed  
150 to the citizens. This may ultimately transform each citizen into a "politician". But  
151 for this to happen, both organization and technology must be developed further.

Sweden can show the highest telephone penetration in the world (earth-bound and mobile), and it is natural to expect a continued fast increase of net access in this country. The technological prerequisites are positive. There is availability based on efficient producer competition in most parts of the data communications market. Prices for personal computers and TV network devices are decreasing rapidly. Technology is available.

During the 1990s, extensive public databases with local municipality as well as central authority information were built up in Sweden — as in many other countries. Increasingly advanced network search engines are being tried out, to facilitate citizen access to many types of public service. However, many citizens express that it still must be made easier to use these systems, and to participate. Research projects are theoretically analysing widespread access to public services, with focus on online political contacts. Up until 1999, few such empirical experiments had been carried out, however.

Summing up, Swedish citizens' bureaux, democracy centres, public terminal systems, and the online PC at home, define a scale, a ladder. The steps on this participatory ladder follow a natural line of development. We are facing a social activity that may take time.

The first step on this democratic ladder concerns how to provide further access to public information. The second step concerns inviting the citizens to participate. How? To start with, by sending a citizen data, facts and questions, by e-mail, or by the use of online bulletin boards. We are motivated to use the word "invite" here, because it may be that the citizens will appreciate some kind of exceptionally friendly system interface in order to accept to participate regularly. Will an economical or social public asset of some kind be needed?

Many citizens will want to participate out of personal interest, but probably not all. Especially, spontaneous participation will probably be motivated from the already socially and publicly active groups. Some public action to receive contact from other groups will probably be needed.

In Bologna in Italy, the system IPERBOLE provides the citizens with free Internet access, or at least free access to the publicly supported parts of the net (provided they do not use this for commercial purposes). Access to other parts of the net is received as a bonus, as a "reward" for participating in the public part.

In principle, several types of sophisticated public "rewards" to further active online citizen participation can be thought of, to be used in the dialogue between the community and the citizen. The community may provide a certain citizen with valuable detailed public information, such information that is relevant especially for this citizen. The citizen may respond by providing the public community with data on her specific social environment, for which the community has specific interest. Give and take, a "public market" may expand. Different currencies may be used. In the end, if the state really wants full-scale citizen participation, perhaps selectively used reduced tax may be thought of?

To repeat, seen in a Swedish perspective, the first step on the participatory ladder concerns provision of public information, relevant to citizen participation. The next step concerns participation as such, to invite the citizen to participate.

197 The third step concerns influence. This is where the discussion is aimed at present.  
198 Unless the citizen can feel that the public system listens, that what he/she says mat-  
199 ters in the public decisions taken, he/she is probably not going to stay in contact for  
200 long. The forming and expressing of multi-faceted public opinions are thus central  
201 in the process. This is where the elected politicians may find a new role to play. It  
202 may be necessary to give up part of the personal decision-making power, and increas-  
203 ingly accept to work as an implementor of citizens' desires.

204 In an online world, it is possible that these citizens' desires will be quite frequently  
205 presented, that they are detailed, and sharply formulated. To listen to these, to  
206 reformulate some of them in implementable form, and to implement as many as  
207 possible as soon as possible, may to some extent be a new role for the elected  
208 politician. It may take time.

209 An example. In Sweden there is fresh legislation that forces communal politicians  
210 to put on the "agenda for consideration" citizen suggestions that are supported by  
211 at least 5% of the local population. It is remarkable to note that in spite of several  
212 citizen attempts, so far extremely few communes have responded to that.

213 The time needed for implementation of this increased citizen participation may  
214 be substantial. We are talking about a transformation that may need numbers of  
215 years. Especially the third step may be a challenge. However, steps towards more  
216 active democracy must be allowed to take time. They touch the need for cultural  
217 change that is deeply rooted in citizens' minds. We may need "second thought" in  
218 new forms. Filters against ever faster technology may reflect the human presence in  
219 the thinking, resembling the social presence in the open political discussions around  
220 the coffee table.

221 To support relevant deliberation forms is fundamental, if we want to move towards  
222 implementable citizen empowerment. How can citizen deliberation be organized?  
223 Many of its parts are social. Can this process be treated formally? Are large efforts,  
224 large resource portions needed for deliberation concerning far-reaching decision-  
225 making, and the contrary for "short", more shallow, decisions? Can this resource  
226 planning be formalized?

227 In a situation that starts from the thousand-fold local decision discussions, we are  
228 facing a quantitative situation. How can we formulate the results of the many dis-  
229 cussions? It should be relevant to answer these questions after having tried different  
230 formal models in experiments. We are facing thousands of human meetings, mostly  
231 with limited numbers of citizens present. To communicate the results from all of  
232 these meetings in a meaningful way is a challenge. Perhaps the syntactical parts of  
233 this may be supported by some formal activity. It might be of value to construct,  
234 and make generally available, simple administrative software that documents online  
235 the results of local deliberation processes. Fundamental is that these results then  
236 could be packaged in forms that show the opinions of differing groups of citizens.  
237 This provision of standardized software for expressing the results from the local  
238 deliberation processes could be defined by the community.

239 We face a delicate balance here. On one hand, citizens want to be heard, and  
240 probably would support a public "large citizen screen" at the electronic town meet-  
241 ings, a screen where their many opinions are presented. But, as soon as we start to

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compile opinions into integrated conclusions, we are approaching the danger of heavily centralized decision-making. In the online world, we may and should be able to show citizen plurality in its full bloom. It is fundamental that this plurality is not melted down to a “single voice”. The deliberation support software discussed above should present output that is not “result compatible”. It should be very difficult and extensively time-consuming to integrate the different parts of the output. The voice of the people is multi-faceted, many-folded, and not one-dimensional. The many minorities as well as the majority opinions must be shown.

With a generous and sensitive system for expression of the opinions of many groups of citizens, a minority feeling of dissatisfaction may be reduced by a documented knowledge that “we have participated in the decision-making”. It is important to be aware of all who participated. With such citizen contact available, the political decisions taken may be much closer to the desires of the people.

With its history of public openness, Sweden can point at practical experience from providing open public databases to citizens. The next step is technological, to actively further citizen access to the Internet. This is what public Sweden is stressing at the end of the century. The third step, organization of the deliberation process including expression of the multi-faceted opinions in a system for increased citizen influence, is the challenge for the change of the century.