



Democracy and Government On-Line Services

Contributions from Public Administrations Around the World

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Chapter 14 Public Dialogue and Citizens' Bureaux in Sweden

Ministry of the Interior, Sweden

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Background

Like many other industrialized countries, Sweden is entering into a new society where the emphasis is increasingly put on the importance of knowledge for development. This has created a new climate for public administration.

As a result of the general rise in levels of education and civic consciousness, many citizens are now demanding greater influence and participation possibilities. They want greater influence over their lives in their neighbourhoods, at work and in the community at large. A meaningful democratic dialogue is only possible if citizens are well informed and can find their way in the public system, if they know where to turn to obtain more information about public functions and services, and about their rights and obligations.

Different types of citizens' bureaux

In Sweden, and in the other Nordic countries, a number of measures have been taken over the years to facilitate increased contacts between citizens and authorities. In recent years, citizens' bureaux have been set up in a number of municipalities as a result of a new approach to the organization of public administration at the local level.

There are today (mid 1997) about ninety citizens' bureaux in Sweden, started or planned, which may be divided into the following three main categories:

Coordinated information bureaux, which may include an information desk, for example at the public library, where officers representing the municipality, the local social insurance offices, the county council and other authorities can inform the public about their activities.

Joint service bureaux, where both municipal departments, local social insurance offices and central government authorities may be represented.

The staff are authorized to deal with matters within their remit at all levels. The local and central government departments have a joint reception, where they can inform the public about their activities, issue forms etc.

Non-sectoral front offices, where various municipal departments collaborate in the provision of integrated services, i.e. where "generalists" deal with matters involving several different departments up to a certain level of responsibility.

The purpose of citizens' bureaux

The main activities of citizens' bureaux consist of providing information and administrative services and processing routine on 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. The division was based on public government concerns, and many citizens find 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, and also to a strengthening of local democracy.

The view that citizens' bureaux could help to improve the performance of local government has also gained ground during the 1990s as the need to cut expenditure has become increasingly acute. Citizens' bureaux are regarded as a means of making the core operations of municipal departments more effective by relieving the departments of "simple" pure information and service functions and the processing of routine matters. This enables the departments to concentrate their resources on more qualified administrative tasks.

Development at central government level

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

When the idea of citizens' bureaux emerged in the mid-1980s, the original purpose was to provide meeting-points where the authorities could give citizens information. Subsequently the trend has been to extend this service to include certain administrative matters.

At the end of the 1980s the Ministry of Public Administration analyzed the idea of "local offices". The purpose was to enable public authorities to collaborate and thus make it possible to maintain public services in sparsely populated areas. The results of these investigations were published in the report (SOU 1990:72) "Lokalkontor" (Local Offices).

At the same time, another project - Coordinated, Local Public Services - was under way in Västernorrland county in northern Sweden and this resulted later in the establishment of a joint service bureau in a place called Fransta. The results of this project were published in the Report (Ds 1990:22) "Samordnad lokal offentlig service" (Coordinated Local Public Services).

In the spring of 1992 the Government authorized the Minister of Public Administration to appoint a committee to study citizens' bureaux. It was instructed to monitor and develop pilot projects in this field, analyse the regulatory framework applying to collaboration between authorities, encourage the establishment of public databases for use at citizens' bureaux and disseminate the results of the pilot projects and the legal analyses. In the autumn of 1993 the committee submitted its report (Ds 1993:67) "Servicesamverkan vid

medborgarkontor", (Coordinated Service Provision at Citizens' Bureaux).

In December 1993, this committee was replaced by a smaller central coordination group. Its brief purpose was to coordinate future development work on citizens' bureaux, administer a network of citizens' bureaux representatives, provide information about pilot projects, launch training programmes for personnel at citizens' bureaux and monitor and evaluate pilot projects.

Public bill on pilot projects

In the spring of 1994, a Government Bill on pilot projects relating to citizens' bureaux was presented. The purpose of these pilot projects was to try various models for citizens' bureaux, including ones that did not require the enactment of any new legislation. It was hoped that they would provide further experience of arrangements for organized inter-authority cooperation. The object was to gain experience of practical activities as a basis for evaluation with a view to establishing a permanent system.

The Bill, which was passed by Parliament in June, 1994, proposed a five-year trial period starting on July 1, 1994. Under the Pilot Projects and Programmes Act a municipality can enter into agreements with government and other agencies enabling it, on their behalf, to perform administrative functions that do not involve the exercise of authority, i.e. the provision of information, certain services and advice.

Exercise of authority at citizens' bureaux

In order to further investigate the issue of the exercise of authority in certain application areas the Government appointed a special investigator in the spring of 1994 to prepare proposals relating to services by the police, social insurance, taxation, enforcement and labour market matters that could appropriately be dealt with at citizens' bureaux by staff representing several authorities. The investigator submitted his report (SOU 1994:61) "Myndighetsutövning vid medborgarkontor", (The Exercise of Authority by Citizens' Bureaux), in the summer of 1995.

On March 20, 1997, the Government presented a Parliament Bill extending the scope of inter-authority collaboration at citizens' bureaux. It was passed by the Parliament on May 28, and the new law will be in force on July 1 1997. The extended pilot projects will continue until the end of June, 2002.

The bill provides for the extension of ongoing pilot projects, including authorization to perform tasks involving the exercise of authority or access to personal files. In addition to the municipalities' powers under the existing legislation, the Bill proposes that government agencies, local social insurance offices and county councils should be authorized to enter into collective service agreements within the framework of pilot projects for the purpose of providing administrative services on behalf of each other or on behalf of a municipality.

The bill also envisages allowing the collaborating authorities to use one another's personnel to carry out certain specified administrative tasks involving the exercise of authority or access to personal files. This would be arranged by concluding separate employment or order contracts. Decisions on additional housing allowances to elderly pensioners and on tax adjustment for students, the issue of birth certificates, the assignment of public child care places, and decisions on parking permits for disabled persons are examples of tasks that could be dealt with by a citizens' bureau, according to this bill. This makes it practically possible to deliver a more full flavoured service at the citizens' bureaux, for the benefit of the citizens.

A committee on citizens' bureaux development

A committee has recently been set up at the Ministry of the Interior for the purpose of monitoring and supporting development on citizens' bureaux and related forms of contact between citizens and authorities. This committee includes representatives of the Ministry of the Interior, other ministries, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and the Swedish Federation of County Councils. Experts from municipalities and universities are also associated with the committee. One of the authors of this article, Berndt Lindholm, is the secretary general for the committee.

The committee is preparing comprehensive documentation on ongoing pilot projects involving citizens' bureaux and plans to issue reports on the experience that has been gained from these activities. An important starting-point for this work is the evaluations that have been made so far, or are in progress, at universities and colleges.

The committee will, moreover, through contacts with municipalities, county councils and government agencies, study proposals for changes in the present activities or the establishment of new citizens' bureaux. In this connection the committee will report on the problems that exist at the local level when it comes to implementing necessary changes with respect to citizens' bureaux. The committee will assess the need for change and prepare proposals designed to intensify the dialogue between citizens and the authorities.

An important task for the committee will be to monitor and support the development of citizens' bureaux considering also other forms of contact between citizens and authorities. The establishment of "integrated citizens' bureaux" and the question of how to make information and services available in electronic form to as many people as possible are examples of issues to which the committee will pay special attention. Background data will also be produced to assess the potential of the bureaux for contributing, by applying an intersectoral approach, to the development work now in progress in the metropolitan regions in conjunction with special measures for residential districts with a high proportion of immigrants.

In addition, the committee will undertake future-oriented studies and discussions on forms of contact and information strategies. An important task will be to disseminate the results of this development work. The committee is to submit a report on its activities to the Minister of the Interior by the end of the year 1997.

Democratic dialogue

Recently the dialogue focus has shifted towards the democratic aspects. Predictions indicate that applied information technology may distinctly support local democratic contact. According to different observers, large numbers of Swedish households will soon have access to the Internet. This technology then has potential for renewal of democratic form, to support more direct democratic participation, as a complement to the representative democracy. It makes possible an increasingly horizontal communication between different local actors, associations, schools, action groups etc. It also makes possible a dialogue "from the bottom and upwards" within organizations. It may support more intense dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives as well.

New information systems have facilitated exchange of information by electronic means between citizens, representatives of small businesses and other groups on the one hand, and local and central government departments on the other. These services can be accessed via citizens' terminals or information kiosks in public libraries, post offices, hospitals and other

public places, including citizens' bureaux.

Both information and services can naturally also be exchanged electronically, directly from the home or from the workplace via the electronic networks. Present technological development indicates that the television sets made interactive through links to the Internet, or specialized network computers, will give large quantities of households interactive network access. There is a risk, however, that the use of these systems will be dominated by non-public powers, stressing entertainment and electronic commerce of goods and services. In that case truly democratic participation may be challenged.

We believe that open network access for citizen activities is fundamental to online democratic development. Public domains, or freenets, on the Internet, therefore should be supported. Within these domains, it should be made possible for the citizens themselves, their organizations, popular movements, educational associations etc to access the network for their dialogues at no, or very low, cost. Moves in this direction may build on a number of late Swedish network developments. In a Swedish perspective, it could be formed cooperation between the School Network, the Cultural Network, the Environmental Network, the Youth Database. Connections could be established to public library online developments. Local and regional public networks, as well as the central government database system that are being expanded on the Internet at present, form excellent online platforms for such cooperation.

It is important that old and new organizations and popular movements make active use of the new technological possibilities. This may be supported by organizational developments of the type that the Commission for the Development of Democracy proposed in its report On the Citizens' Terms (SOU 1996:162) in the autumn of 1996. Here it is recommended that municipalities build up "local democracy centres" so as to offer citizens meeting-points, information and openness, thus increasing public influence and participation. A democracy centre could be located in a citizens' bureau, or vice versa, a citizens' bureau could be located in a democracy centre. Centres could also be located in public libraries, civic halls or public premises, or they could be housed in premises of their own.

Regardless of the arrangement, one important object of these centres is to make it easier for citizens to obtain community information, as a basis for public action. Democracy centres may also make it easier for citizens to influence developments in their community in new ways. Such centers could, for example, more easily provide information about public activities, networks, committees and projects in the municipality, including information about how to get in touch with these. Citizens who wish to undertake volunteer social work could more easily be informed about volunteer centres etc.

Like in the case of citizens' bureaux, several of the functions of democracy centers may be supported by contacts that are taking place online. Citizens' bureaux and democracy centers are examples of new organizational forms that are being developed lately in Sweden, to further increase government efficiency and closer relations between the citizen and government, as well as more intense democratic contacts.

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