

Swedish disability policy

Ensuring that people with disabilities have power and influence over their everyday lives has long been the prime goal of Swedish disability policy. In pursuit of this goal, the focus has now shifted to democracy and human rights. Like others, people with disabilities must have the opportunity to exercise their rights as citizens – and to fulfil their obligations. The idea is for the disability perspective to be mainstreamed into Swedish society as a whole and not be confined to the health care and social services sector.

A national action plan on disability policy, “From Patient to Citizen,” adopted in 2000, has shifted the emphasis in Swedish policies targeting disabled people. Before, government action in this area largely centered on social issues and welfare matters. The emphasis today is on democracy and human rights. Swedish disability policy has been given a clear-cut citizen’s perspective.

The policymakers have also shown a determination to introduce broad-based solutions in the quest for a society that is accessible from as many aspects as possible and to as many citizens as possible. This is seen as a way of avoiding the need for special solutions for certain groups, an approach that tends to be costly.

Therefore, Swedish disability policy is now concentrating on

- identifying and removing obstacles to full participation and full equality in society,
- preventing and fighting discrimination,
- promoting equality between disabled girls and boys, women and men.

The disability perspective is to become a natural part of all policymaking and all public activities. Government agencies have begun to make their premises, activities and information generally accessible. Public officials are to be trained in disability issues so that disabled people are not prevented from exercising their rights as citizens as a result of ignorance or degrading treatment or both.

A historical review

Ever since the 1960s, the goal of Swedish disability policy has been to give disabled people the opportunity to live like others. In 1962, children with disabilities were for the first time required to attend com-

pulsory school (120 years after “universal compulsory attendance” was introduced in Swedish education). The passing years saw the gradual closure of the institutions that until then had provided the only accommodation available to many disabled people. However, it took time for institutional care to be replaced by other forms of public support. Nursing homes for certain groups, including people with learning disabilities, were still operating in the early 1990s.

General social welfare in Sweden extends to all citizens, but in addition special programs have addressed the needs of people with disabilities. One of the most important reforms concerning supple-

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mentary support and related measures was introduced in the 1990s. An important feature of this wide-ranging reform program was that it gave disabled people the right to personal assistance. For people with extensive disabilities, this represented something of a revolution. The assistance they received opened up opportunities that had not previously been available to them, such as deciding matters in their own everyday lives and managing their studies, a job and a home.

In 1993, the UN introduced the document “The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.” Ever since, these have been a cornerstone of Swedish disability policy.



People with disabilities must also be able to take an active part in the public debate. A deaf-blind person receives tactile interpretation during the International Disability Day. Photo: Fredrik Sandberg/Scanpix

In 1994, a Disability Ombudsman was appointed to supervise compliance with the rules.

When in 2000 the Riksdag adopted the national action plan for disability policy, Sweden moved a step closer to a universally accessible society. The plan extends to 2010.

The Swedish Government has also taken part in the UN's efforts to develop the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted in December 2006 that strengthens respect for the human rights of persons with disabilities. Unlike the Standard Rules, the Convention is legally binding. Along with other countries that have ratified the Convention, Sweden has thereby committed itself to ensuring that national legislation does not discriminate against disabled persons. Ultimately, this may necessitate the introduction of new laws that would guarantee these rights.

Disability movement a vital force

Disabled people's voluntary organizations have an important part to play in Swedish disability policy. The movement has been influencing policy direction in this particular sphere for over 50 years, and its cooperation with Swedish policymakers at all levels is well established.

Most of these organizations belong to the Swedish Disability Federation (*Handikappförbundens samarbetsorgan, HSO*), an umbrella body that seeks to influence official policy in the disability sphere.

The organizations provide crucial input by reporting on the positions and circumstances of persons with disabilities. They also help shape public opinion by presenting their members' demands and proposing improvements. Around 50 disabled people's organizations receive state funding to help them pursue their activities. Most are organized on the basis of their members' diagnoses. Many of them have special youth sections, and some focus specifically on children and the family.

The Government has established a disability commission to serve as a forum for discussions and exchanges of information between the state and the disabled people's organizations.

The current position

In Sweden, the predominant disabilities are mobility problems, hearing and sight impairments, reading and writing difficulties/dyslexia, and asthma/allergies.

Nowadays, virtually all disabled people in Sweden live in homes of their own, and the vast majority of children grow up at home, in their own families. Most

children and adolescents attend "regular" schools, although there are special types of schooling for pupils who are deaf or hearing-impaired, or who have severe mobility or learning disabilities. There are also plans to establish special schools for pupils with both impaired vision and other disabilities, and for pupils with severe speech impediments.

The Education Act states that children in need of special assistance at school are to be provided with it. Also, the law says, there must be equality in education for all children, wherever they may live in Sweden and regardless of any disabilities they may have.

Interestingly, the proportion of people with an upper secondary education is slightly larger among those with disabilities than among those without. The reverse is true, however, in higher education, although an increasing number of students with disabilities are now finding their way into the country's universities and colleges.

Unemployment is slightly higher among disabled people than among the rest of the population.

How public support is organized

- The Government and the Riksdag establish guidelines for disability policy, principally through legislation.
- Government agencies have a national responsibility for specific sectors, including education, health care and employment. Their task is to force the

pace of development in their particular sector and ensure compliance with established policy.

- The county councils (20 in all) are responsible for health and medical care.
- The municipalities (290) are responsible for things like schools and social services.

People communicate with the public sector largely through the municipalities or county councils. The main emphasis in Swedish public administration is at the local level.

The municipalities

The municipalities are responsible for such matters as school education and social services. They also have ultimate responsibility for providing the individual citizen with basic security in the form of public support and services. Input such as the provision of personal assistance, personal representatives for people with mental disabilities, local transport services for the disabled, and grants for adapting homes or motor vehicles, is designed to enable people with extensive disabilities to lead independent and active lives. The government grants made available to the municipalities for such activities are an important feature of disability policy.

The county councils

The county councils are responsible for health and medical care, which includes rehabilitation/habilitation, assistive technology, interpreting services (for the hearing-impaired) and dental care for certain disabled individuals.

The state

Via its labor market agencies, the state's task is to make it easier for people to find and keep jobs. Employers who hire a person with a reduced work capacity are in certain cases entitled to wage subsidies. The state also owns an enterprise, Samhall, that provides employment for those who cannot find work in any other way. In addition, disabled people receive various types of financial assistance from the social insurance office to enable them to support themselves or to cover extra costs arising from their disability.

Legislation

A distinctive feature of Swedish legislation is its emphasis on framework laws. These establish the direction and objectives of government policy. Those responsible for the activity concerned, municipalities or county councils, then have considerable freedom in interpreting the objectives and shaping their activities themselves.



Under Swedish law, all children are entitled to the same standard of education, regardless of whether they have a disability and where they live. Photo: Martin Bodvidsson/Scanpix

Discrimination

Sweden has four laws prohibiting discrimination, one of the grounds cited being disability. The first, the Prohibition of Discrimination in Working Life of People with Disability Act, was adopted in 1999. This was followed in 2002 by the Act on Equal Treatment of Students at Universities and in 2003 by the Prohibition of Discrimination Act, which applies among other things to trading in goods and services.

In 2006, a law was added prohibiting the discrimination of children with disabilities, etc, at preschool and school.

Rights

Sweden does not have a law specifically establishing the rights of all people with disabilities. Instead, certain laws contain clauses that apply specifically to disabled people, including the Planning and Building Act and the Social Services Act.

Also, the Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments (LSS) was introduced in 1994. This is a rights law supplementing other legislation. Its aim is to give people with extensive disabilities greater opportunities for leading an independent life and to assure them of equal living conditions and full participation in community life. Support may take the form of personal assistance in everyday life, counselling, housing with special services, or relief provision for the parents of children with disabilities.

As its name shows, the law applies only to certain groups of disabled. People not covered by the law can seek assistance from their municipal authority under the Social Services Act. This law is currently under review and a report on it is due in 2008.

Links

All sites have information both in Swedish and English. Several provide information in an adapted form, e.g. in sign language.

Agencies

The Children's Ombudsman, *Barnombudsmannen*, promotes the rights and interests of children and young people as set forth in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the CRC), www.bo.se

The National Agency for Special Educational Support, *SISUS, Socialstyrelsens institut för särskilt utbildningsstöd*, improves the possibilities for disabled young persons and adults to obtain a good education, www.sisus.se

The National Board of Health and Welfare, *Socialstyrelsen*, national expert and supervisory authority for various policy areas, including disability, and the sectoral agency for the national action plan, reports, statistics, diagnostic information, www.sos.se/sosmenye.htm

The National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, *Boverket*, its areas of work include accessibility in built environments and the adaptation of housing, www.boverket.se

The National Public Transport Agency, *Rikstrafiken*, works with accessible travel, etc, www.rikstrafiken.se

The Swedish Agency for Disability Policy Coordination, *Handisam – Myndigheten för handikappolitisk samordning*, coordinates and proactively encourages work in the disability policy field, www.handisam.se

The Swedish Disability Ombudsman, *Handikappombudsmannen*, monitors disabled people's rights, www.ho.se

The Swedish Institute for Special Needs Education, *Specialpedagogiska institutet*, responsible for state support in this field, www.sit.se

The Swedish Library of Talking Books and Braille, *TPB, Talboks- och punktskriftsbiblioteket*, *TPB*, supplies the country's libraries and others with accessible literature, www.tpb.se

The Swedish National Agency for Education, *Skolverket*, responsible for educational matters, www.skolverket.se

The Swedish Road Administration, *Vägverket*, works with public planning of transport systems, road safety, etc, www.vv.se

The Swedish Social Insurance Administration, *Försäkringskassan*, information on social insurance in nine languages, www.forsakringskassan.se/sprak/index.php

The Swedish Work Environment Authority, *Arbetsmiljöverket*, responsible for the work environment, www.av.se

Disabled people's organizations

The Swedish Disability Federation, *Handikappförbundens samarbetsorgan*, an umbrella organization, www.hso.se

Others

The Centre for Easy-to-Read, *Centrum för lättläst*, network for easy-to-read books, newspapers and journals, readers' assistants, www.lattlast.se

The Swedish Handicap Institute, *Hjälpmedelsinstitutet*, national knowledge center working with assistive technology and accessibility, www.hi.se

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