

SWEDEN'S SOCIAL DEMOCRACY SPIRIT AND ITS SUCCESS STORY ABOUT CHILDREN RIGHTS

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This paper examines the role of grassroots activities in Sweden concerning children rights protection and how the country has become a role model for the whole world in terms of human development and children rights, with special reference to the best practices they have elaborated throughout their history in order to tackle each specific problem regarding children who are classified as full human beings having the same rights as adults. This paper emphasizes that the Swedish children's rights' protection model should become a reference point for all other countries, including Turkey, in improving policy paradigms and ways of doing things when incorporating grassroots organizations' energy and innovation into the problem-solving mechanisms.

Sweden, famous for some people for its white nights during the long summer days and to others for its freezing cold weather during wintertime, is incontestably one of the most advanced models of social progress and human development.

Having these presumptions in mind during my three-day visit to Stockholm as a guest of the Swedish Institute, I had an idea of what is the meaning of children's rights for Swedish public opinion and how to tackle

with the social problems of Swedish children, and also how the civil actors have been struggling to fight for the protection of children's rights in society through innovative and socially engineered solutions. In Turkey, where we are still discussing children's rights from a top-down approach without involving civil initiatives, it has become clear that we need a renovation of our children's rights' protection policies and mechanisms in favor of sound and inclusive governance.

It is noteworthy that a broader understanding of the Swedish model will provide influential and relevant opinion-molders and decision-makers as well as civil society actors with innovative tools to re-frame the protection of children's rights in all countries, including Turkey. In other terms, the protection system in Sweden for children's rights is one of the most concrete examples to exemplify to what extent grassroots movements can have a direct influence in shaping relevant policy paradigms in a country. This grassroots approach has paved the way for the local ownership of rights and civil mobilization for the problems that Swedish children face.

The Social Democratic order –also known as the Scandinavian model- came into being in Sweden and Norway during the 1930s and has since become deeply rooted in the regional social order. The Scandina-

vian model is mainly marked by the institutionalization of universal social rights, the powerful ideal of equality among social segments, and the promotion of dialogue for finding sustainable solutions to social problems as a way of reconciliation corresponding to the Swedish concept of *folkhemmet* (the “people’s home”). In other words, discussion, compromises and consensus are important components of this model.

According to the United Nations Development Index 2011, Sweden ranks 10th out of 187 countries and territories in terms of its social progress in health, education and individual wealth indicators (UNDP, 2011). On the other hand, Democracy Index, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, places Sweden as 4th out of 165 states and two territories based on 60 indicators including electoral processes, civil freedoms, functionality of the government, political participation and political culture (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2011).

This original Scandinavian social democracy model emphasizing social progress find directly their footprints in the protection of children rights in Sweden being one of the leading Nordic countries in this issue. The key argument of this approach is based on the fact that adults are obliged to listen to children and give them a say when making important everyday decisions that can have a huge impact on their lives. This child-focused approach renders Sweden 2nd out of 44 countries in the Children’s Index Rank prepared by International Save the Children Association each year (Save the Children, 2012).

As a strong supporter of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child since its early stages, Sweden was one of the first countries to ratify the treaty and its two optional protocols, on 29 June 1990 – it is worthy to note that the Country had given priority to meeting children’s needs much

earlier than the Convention (United Nations, 1990). The Convention also requires Sweden to allow children to participate in decision-shaping and to have a say in each decision that affects them. In other words, Swedish authorities are aware that they should look out for the best interests of their children – not only through words but also through deeds.

However, the Country is not content with its brilliant record and has continued to develop its system by finding adaptive solutions to newly emerging problems and needs. “It takes 18 years to raise a new generation”, they say, in order to emphasize the importance of children’s rights in the Country.

Over 20% of Sweden’s population - nearly 2 million - is under 18 years old and as they are not allowed to vote, Swedish decision makers, school staff and other adults feel a special responsibility make their thoughts and requests known. This is a relatively new practice in Turkey which finds its closest comparable with Children Parliaments (*Cocuk Meclisleri*), established under the municipality structures. Accordingly, children’s views should be presented at all decision-making platforms concerning the decisions that concern and have consequences for them, at the local, regional and national levels.

During the two-day visit, I observed that Swedish NGOs have assumed an important role as an intermediary between children and decision-makers. The Swedish branch of Save the Children has conducted a Young Voice programme with the participation of 25.000 children and young people throughout the Country since 2011. The aim is to reveal how children perceive that their rights are respected nationally and locally, and to gain a deeper understanding of the results. The results show that there is still much to do in Sweden concerning a comprehensive standardiza-



tion in children's rights implementation, especially at the municipal level. Children also asked Swedish authorities to be more active in priority areas such as child poverty – especially among immigrant families and children of single parents – as well as regarding bullying. This model speaks of itself – it is a real local democracy!

On the other hand, proud of being the first country in the world to introduce legislation on banning corporal punishment in 1979, Sweden encourages a change of attitudes among parents and promotes non-violent methods of child rearing in difficult situations. In other terms, Sweden, unlike many members of Council of Europe, respects children's equal fundamental rights to benefit from the same legal protection as adults. People breaching these rules can be sentenced to imprisonment for up to ten years. In eliminating corporal punishment through legal means, the Country has also engaged in sustainable public education and raising awareness with the help of influential NGOs such as Save the Children Sweden and Children's Rights in Society (Durrant, 1996).

The Country, through its Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, has also engaged in the preservation and development of children's rights across the developing world through issue-focused investments.

During our interview on 4 March at the Royal Palace of Stockholm, H. M. Queen Silvia of Sweden talked to us as the founder of the World Childhood Foundation, whose mission is to improve living conditions for children all over the world, and also emphasized her individual responsibility for maintaining interest for children's rights at both the national and global scales. The Foundation supports a number of projects in 15 countries all

around the world – in total around 600 projects have been financed so far.

Asked, by me, about whether the Foundation can provide help to projects focusing on children's problems in Turkey, the Queen stated warmly that the Foundation is open to any type of cooperation likely to overcome key problems in Turkey, and that she would discuss this issue with Turkish First Lady Hayrünnisa Gül who visited Sweden with the presence of President Abdullah Gül one week after my interview on March 11, at the invitation of King Carl XVI Gustaf.

Kent Homström, head of the Pedagogic Resource Centre at the Astrid Lindgren Children's Hospital, explained the philosophy behind the child-specific healthcare system in Sweden during our interview on 4 March. Without doubt, Astrid Lindgren is Sweden's most famous and influential author in children's literature, with *Pippi Longstocking* leading her to instant fame all around the world and becoming a touchstone in children's literature after being translated into ninety of languages. Lindgren was emotionally involved in matters concerning the well-being of children and reflected this through her innovative writing style which was highly controversial during her time – particularly on issues of death and suicide.

The hospital, taking the name of the Swedish author due to her interest in the well-being of children, is known by its team work of "Play Therapy", where artists and entertainers meet the children to complement their treatment in an innovative way. The hospital's initiatives are supported by a volunteer team of 30 people, including clowns and other entertainers.

Receiving free-of-charge medical services in all public, and most private, hospitals until 18 years, hospitalized children have had the right to an access to education and psychological development opportunities

according to their individual needs in a suitable environment since the mid-1970s. Through this system, parents are also encouraged to stay in hospitals with their children both as emotional support and to play an active role in the childcare system.

The activities, held in an open area with the attendance of nearly 130 visitors per day, aim at giving the children more independence. The illnesses of the children range from diabetes to cancer, brain damage and sometimes relatively unimportant cases like broken legs. During the play therapy the children are also encouraged to touch and play with special dolls where they can learn how and where on the body the treatment and operation will be performed in order to be aware of their sicknesses. This is in line with the Swedish National Health Care Law that states that every patient has the right to proper information regarding their illnesses without any distinction between adults and children. The Centre employs 13 people for play therapy, and throughout the Country approximately 130 therapists are employed in this area.

According to the democratic and humanist approach of the Swedish childcare system, children have the right to be treated and considered as full human beings, benefiting from the same rights as adults. And, as underlined by Homström during our interview, one of the most important aspects of the treatment given to hospitalized children is the attempt to reduce moral discouragements and fears while increasing the sense of participation by keeping children well-informed about the treatments and tests that will be performed on them.

As in other countries, the Swedish children protection system is not immune to online child abuse and bullying cases. According to the data of the Friends Association, 7-8 % of Swedish boys and girls are bullied,

while 1,5 % are bullied for a year or longer – these percentages remain a constant topic of discussion among the public. According to the Education and Equality Acts all schools have to ensure that no child is violated or discriminated at school.

The Friends Association, founded in 1997, has become one of the most powerful voices in Sweden working towards ending bullying and discrimination among children. The Association supports schools in their preventive work against bullying, while providing trainings for teachers, students, parents and other staff of the schools. In addition to the Association's initiatives, the Swedish government also appointed a specific ombudsman tasked to help schools prevent bullying and overseeing their efforts in this regard.

According to the Friends' data, 98% of youth in Sweden use the Internet on a regular basis, 91% of youth in Sweden engage in social networks, and 50% of children age 3 started using the Internet last year.

However, this advanced framework of child protection is not without its own challenges. Like other countries around the world, Sweden is experiencing an increase in the malign use of the Internet leading to the breach of the users' privacy.

In December 2012, a social media account in the Swedish city of Gothenburg caused protests when it posted inappropriate pictures of young girls with insulting accusations. More than 200 pictures of girls in their early teens were uploaded on both Instagram and Facebook accounts, sparking debate about how strict the oversight of social media by the authorities should be.

Swedish local experts emphasized that children should not fear technology, but rather should acquire enough skills and knowledge to properly handle social

relations occurring in this sphere. “We have to help children create positive social relations online and find reasonable boundaries”, said Olle Cox, project manager from Friends. The organization also encourages parents to be aware of this problem and take precautions. However, Sweden sees Internet use as another area of freedom, and laws are not updated in time to shut down harmful sites – this is currently one of the most discussed issues in the Country. Nevertheless, civil society members still insist that this problem can be overcome through dialogue, discussions, education campaigns and awareness raising.

Sweden has many other organizations that children can turn to in case of need for help. The Children’s Rights in Society (BRIS) offers efficient support services such as telephone helplines, as well as chat and e-mail counseling. In 2012, BRIS had a total of 28.000 calls from children and teenagers. The organization is dedicated to stop bullying in and out of schools. Since its establishment in 1997, the BRIS team has cooperated with over 1.500 schools. Through the contacts they establish with the children, they try to encourage them to establish contact with the authorities and not to hide any intra-familial abuse they witness. Only 4% of their funds come from the Government, the Organization is mainly supported by companies and the work of the volunteers - 600 people around the country, making them one of the most well-known organizations advocating for children’s rights and victims of abuse. The question of financial survival is not a big issue in Sweden as the majority of private sector and the Government finds children’s rights primordial.

Since 1993, Sweden has also had an ombudsman to protect children’s rights and look after their interests. The ombudsman is obliged to follow UN directives and

the Convention, propose legal changes, as well as to enforce Swedish laws. He pays regular visits to schools, promotes relevant legislation, emphasizes children’s issues through media campaigns, and addresses individual complaints from children. The Ombudsman office has a special telephone line, which children can call and ask about their rights or ask for advice. He also submits a report every year to the Government concerning the situation of children’s rights and their implementations, highlighting the obstacles being encountered.

In Sweden, people who have acquired a national education that pays attention to grassroots initiatives become especially concerned about doing *something meaningful* for specific segments of the society where they think there is a dysfunction. Improving the children’s rights record of Sweden – which is quite successful compared to many other advanced countries around the world - has become a cause worthy of their time, energy and means for motivated civil actors. They initiate projects, establish associations and put their hearts and souls into this issue all because of their belief in the democratic credentials of the Country, who’s established political culture has encouraged them rather than discourage them through some “sticks” and authoritarian control mechanisms.

It is also worth emphasizing that the relationship between civil society organizations and the state in Sweden is not characterized by clientelism. Rather the relationship is visibly independent and they have a significant role in shaping social policies – even through the ombudsman who is appointed by the Swedish government via objective criteria.

“Give the children love, more love and still more love – and common sense will come by itself”, once said Swedish author Astrid Lindgren during a debate concerning



children's rights. From a country that invests a total of 6.3% of its GDP in education, while the OECD average is 5.7%, and from a social welfare state approach allocating 71.7 million Euros in 2012-2015 to improve student health, not only Turkey but many other countries can learn a lot from one of the best countries in the world to be a child.

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- UNICEF Sweden: www.unicef.se

