

Sweden: National report on future socio-economic trends

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Leila Billquist, Linda Lane, Margareta Bäck-Wiklund and
Ingegerd Franzon – Göteborg University



Universiteit Utrecht



institutionen för socialt arbete
Göteborgs universitet

Quality is an innovative, quantitative and qualitative research project that aims to examine how, in an era of major change, European citizens living in different national welfare state regimes evaluate the quality of their lives. The project will analyse international comparative data on the social well-being of citizens and collect new data on social quality in European workplaces in eight strategically selected partner countries: UK, Finland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Hungary and a candidate country for EU enlargement, Bulgaria.

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Universiteit Utrecht



*Institutionen för socialt arbete
Göteborgs universitet*

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Introduction

The Swedish team organised an expert meeting in scenario thinking on February 21, 2008. The objective of the meeting was to encourage participating experts to reflect on the quality of life and the quality of work by creating scenarios that elaborated their ideas of the future. By allowing Swedish experts to evaluate thinkable future scenarios, chiselled out within their specific national context we aimed to inspire experts to think about future trends and public and organisational policies as they relate to the quality of life and work.

The use of scenario analyse as a method of gaining insight into future trends is an innovative element of Project Quality where one of the goals is to augment policymakers capacity to meet future problems and uncertainties by inspiring them to think about the future from the perspective of the present. The central question for the meeting was: *What is the greatest challenges Sweden face in the next ten years in regards to the quality of work and quality of life?*

The Swedish scenarios will be collated on a more aggregated level where they will be compared with those from the other partner countries. Results from the expert meetings will be made available to meeting participants (form not decided) where hopefully they will stimulate continued research and policy recommendations.

The meeting took place at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, between 12.00 and 17.00. We began with lunch to give the participants a chance to meet each other and also to ease their transition from their workplace to a new environment and new tasks. After the session ended, we offered participants an opportunity to “mingle” to provide further room for reflections, a feature that was much appreciated. The session was conducted in four hours with a pause for coffee. The time allotment of four hours was insufficient and as a result there was not enough time discuss in depth all of the themes that arose in the groups. In addition, the state of exhaustion experienced by both participants and leaders as a result of the extreme intensity of the process and the demands of personal commitment to the process was unexpected.

The Swedish scenario team was composed of four members; a coordinator/leader (Leila Billquist) with primary responsibility for the meeting and who also served as one of two group leaders, an additional group leader (Linda Lane) and two observers (Margareta Bäck-Wiklund and Ingegerd Franzon). The role of the observers was to study communication patterns - activity and interaction between group members, and the development of the scenarios as regards both content and process.

The Swedish team invited 16 experts to the meeting; representatives from the four organisations participating in project Quality's survey, politicians, media representatives, trade unions, as well as expertise in global, regional and local issues, family and work, equality and labour law. Of those invited 11 accepted and 10 actually participated in the meeting. All of the above named areas of expertise were represented among the participants.

The process

The expert meeting was conducted in a manner usual for “scenario planning”, i.e. alternation between discussion in plenum sessions and discussion in small groups within a structured time schedule. Participants were divided into two groups based on two principles: one, that group members did not have personal or professional relationships with each other and two to facilitate an even gender distribution. In each group were three women and two men. Already at the start of the session we assured our participants that strict anonymity would be observed both in what was said during the session and what would be written afterwards.

The meeting was opened by Margareta Bäck-Wiklund who welcomed the participants and made a short presentation of research project Quality with special emphasis on where scenario thinking fitted into the overall project plan. This was followed by an introduction of the other team members. Afterwards the participants introduced themselves including a few words about their areas of expertise.

The next phase was an introduction to scenario thinking and scenario methodology. The coordinator described scenario thinking – what it is, its background, what it contribute to its users and how it can be used. The goal with scenario thinking is to create future scenarios by identifying “uncertainties,” i.e. uncertainties related to the expert meeting’s central question – to those challenges that we expect to face in regard to quality of work and life, or as it was expressed in one of the groups – *“what is it that we don’t know?”* The starting point for discussions both in plenum and in the smaller groups concerning future challenges revolved around this issue – *“how should we know anything about the future?”* (see below, Group 1).

After a few questions about the idea and philosophy behind scenario thinking a review of the known trends for Sweden in respect to demography, economy, labour market, integration of minorities, equality issues and welfare policies was presented. Because Sweden recently changed government from a left-centre to a centre-right majority a few words about the impact of this change on known trends was mentioned. Participants contributed by adding their expert knowledge of these trends from different perspectives, e.g. changing parenting roles, consumption and living arrangements, working patterns and changes in the domestic division of labour. This phase took slightly longer time because the majority of the experts had not read our national report and it was imperative that they understood the background conditions upon which they were to build their scenarios.

Before we describe the group work and the different future scenarios that grew from these groups, we present a few reflections concerning the process from both the plenum sessions and group work. We have already mentioned the observers’ role and function, but we should also add that they were not “passive observers” but could and did intervene and assist the group leaders by explaining and/or summarising issues during the discussion. A much appreciated role since in this manner the observers helped to keep the group focused.

The group leader role can be compared to that of a moderator in focus groups, i.e. the moderator/leaders role activity level varies during the process between high and low depending upon the group (cf. Cronin 2001). The role of our two group leaders was shaped by and in interaction with their group. In Group 1, the leader was more active and steering in the beginning of the session, i.e. with the formulation of the two axes (see below) while group leader in Group 2 was more active during the second part of the session,

with developing of the scenarios. A strong influential factor during the group process was the limited time, which in itself is an integral part of the idea of future scenarios, however, for the novice group leaders it was an aspect that was difficult to manage. As a result group leaders perhaps steered the groups too much, e.g. attempted to “hurry” the participants to arrive at a decision in those moments when the time schedule was all too pressing. The group leader role was also to assure that all participants were active, to keep the discussion centred on the primary theme and to raise problematic and provocative questions; even this is a part of the ideas behind future scenarios thinking.

All of the participants were active and interested in the plenum discussions. Naturally, there was a cautious attitude to the proceedings since none of the participants had heard of nor participated in scenario thinking previously. However, as the session neared its end with the final summary in plenum, activity was high and participants were eager to participate in the conversation and comment each other experiences. Seen as a whole, a cheerful, inquisitive and committed tone characterised the expert meeting.

The group work

At the beginning of the group work the participants were asked to take 2-3 minutes to think about and list the greatest challenges (uncertainties) facing Sweden in the next ten years when it comes to quality of work and life – *what will it be like in 2018?*

The process in the two groups differed. In Group 1 the participants were very engaged in understanding the concept “uncertainty,” most uncertain – what is it that is uncertain/certain; ... is it the problem that is uncertain/certain or is it the result; or is it “if” the uncertainty/certainty will happen or not? Similarly, the concept “impact” raised the same types of questions but became more understandable when the English word instead of the Swedish translation was used. A reflection that can be made here is that the academic researcher representatives were prominent in this part of the group discussions, i.e. concepts should be well defined and operationable. At the beginning of the group discussions, participants’ professional functions and expertise dominated the discussion, however after a while as the participants felt more comfortable in the group they were able to drop their “expert role” and show interest for those aspects of the problem where they were not experts, i.e. they dared to move away from their “usual” way of thinking. In summary Group 1 was a creative and committed group where the group leader tried to stimulate to free thinking. Initially, in Group 2 the process was the same as in Group 1 with a concentrated note-taking to find the uncertainties. The group leader attempted to help the process by asking; *what is it that we don't know*, in an attempt to help the participants to leave their expert roles, i.e. to both know and not know. A certain amount of confusion arose as the group attempted to prioritise their uncertainties primarily because the group leader could not manage to convince the politician to abandon the “politician role.” We describe both groups work separately.

Group 1

Among the uncertainties that Group 1 discussed were the following: commercialism, mental health, health questions in general, increased individualism, the threat of social exclusion with respect to employment and education – stigmatisation, the risk of not belonging, exclusion from the labour market, increased flexibility in employment – what are the benefits of flexibility, climate/ecology and social consequences of climate change, what will it mean for different groups of people, what are the consequences (which groups

Gender equality and gender equity

Control over time is characterised by:

A lifetime (life course)

A revaluation of children's needs

A freedom of choice concerning work time

Scenario 1: "Network House" – the inclusive society

Group 1 built a society with an actor "Ali" that immigrates to Sweden from a country in the Middle-East and in 2008 is 23 years old. He enjoys parties, loves music and girls and works in the black market because he does not have a work permit. In 2012 a new labour reform is introduced which introduces an apprentice system and a life work time (none obligatory full-time, work time adjusted to meet the needs of each individual and can change over time). It is an inclusive society where sex segregation and discrimination no longer exist. There is growth in the service sector. The reforms have a clear focus on the needs of children and at its centre is time/work time, income (money) and health.

Ali has become a Swedish citizen; he married and has one child. Unfortunately his wife died, and as a widow he and his child moves into a "network house", where he meets Stina, a 75 year old woman. In the network house, people of different age groups and with different ethnic backgrounds, with different family- and work situations – a type of collective living. Stina takes care of Ali's child and encourages him to vote, to use his citizenship rights. In the network house Ali meets Nisse, a Swedish man of about the same age; they fall in love, get married in the local mosque and adopt a child. This is the open "network house".

The central chain of events can be summarised as following:

Work reform with introduction of apprentice system (everyone has a chance to use after their individual capability).

A growing service sector

A lifetime work reform – individuals can organise their work time in so called good life-cycle periods – parents with small children can choose to work less and more when their children are grown up.

Scenario 2: "The horror scenario" – the exclusive society

The opposite of the network house scenario is a society where the individual has little or no control of over time and social exclusion is accepted. If we return to Ali, his life looks very different in this society. He never gets a work permit and continues to work in the black market. Now he is employed by a Swedish family as a live in servant. He is always available, he is watched and security control with cameras is everywhere. A new 9/11 occurs in 2012, this time in Paris and as a result there is even more security control, gated communities become common in Sweden. Ali has less and less leisure time and can no longer take care of his child. Social services step in and the child is put into care. He is more and more alone, it is a lonely society.

The central chain of events is the terror attack on 9/11-2012 in Paris that leads to increased control and security where citizens are excluded and where the final consequence is isolation and loneliness.

Both scenarios were drawn on paper in a way that is impossible to reproduce in this report.

Group 2

In Group 2 it was the following areas that the group thought contained the greatest uncertainty: health – both physical and mental, increased individualism, lost of work due to outsourcing, globalisation, climate and environmental issues, loss of control over political issues due globalisation/EU, deconstruction of the welfare state. The following themes emerged from the clusters:

The quality work

A child perspective

Health

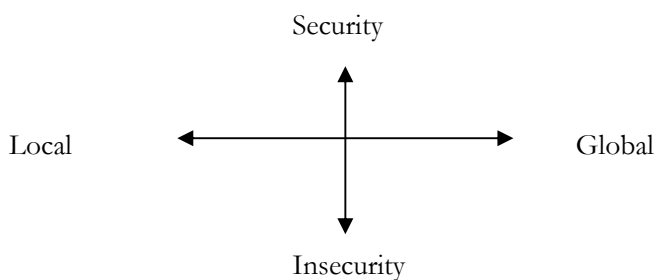
Retain social security but be open and flexible to change

Communication – at all societal levels, of central importance communication between government – citizens – and their elected representatives

Labour scarcity

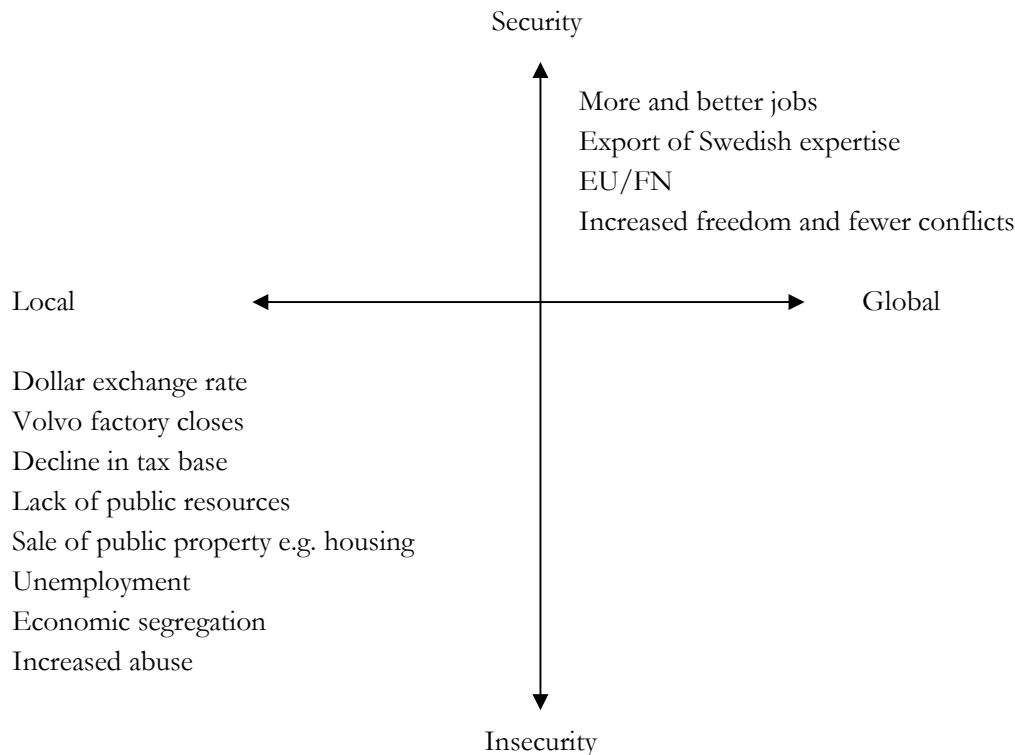
A central question raised in Group 2 was how could we in a more globalised world and at the same time behold Swedish social security and retain our values and norms. What will these changes mean for questions concerning gender, class and ethnicity? The following axis emerged from the group discussion.

Figure 2: Axis for Group 2's scenarios



When the group's axis was discussed in plenum a discussion arose over the meaning of local/global. The discussion followed two themes, one in which globalisation is experienced through a number of local uncertainties most of them already mentioned in the text, but compounded with further uncertainty and marginalisation. The other theme was that the local level is characterised by the development of “anti-movements” “social movements” as protection against a future that appears to uncertain or threatening. Results of this form of development are observed in the way people in marginalised regions of the world build alliances and develop alternatives. Because of time parsimony, the discussion was not taken further. The discussion however does give an insight into a more reflexive attitude to future thinkable courses of action (events) and that definitions of global problems can give many different visions of the future. Discussions in Group 2 on the way to creating a “story” is presented in the figure below. Because of the time limitation the group did not create a story with a developed chain of events for the individual/family.

Figure 3: Group 2 scenario axis with themes



In Group 2 it was the “short” time perspective with a strong political discourse that dominated the conversation. This may be interpreted as we mentioned earlier an inability within the group to disengage themselves from their everyday realities and political debates e.g. the aftermath of the election of a liberal government and the uncertainty of that government’s intentions concerning the Swedish model.

The group leader was unable to liberate the group from the politician’s rhetorical arguments which coloured the discussion and inhibited the discussion of the scenarios in a broader time perspective. In this respect the two groups differed significantly, they worked with different time perspectives and reacted differently to the possibility to think about the “future.”

Final discussion and recommendations

In the final discussion when the groups presented their ‘stories’ different thoughts and ideas arose that concern central areas that are in need of a strong and capable government and a EU with a strong social policy dimension. The importance of global thinking was pointed out as we are a part of the world. A great deal of thought was given to moral and political implications. A central reflection was which norms and values will steer political decision-making processes and in general guide society. The choice, the participants meant, will determine the outcome of all of the presented scenarios. A change of norms is needed and demand that - which was clearly pointed out, a consideration of the importance of ‘soft values,’ human beings – their needs, experiences and feelings.

Further questions/areas that were brought forth and were determined desirable for both research and politics were:

A children's perspective – what does the future hold for children? Political reforms required

Children's right to grow up in an "ecological balanced" environment

Work time, length and placement must be revised. Increased flexibility connected to parenthood and their responsibilities. Father's roles must be strengthened and mother's two roles supported, i.e. it must be possible for women to both have a career and children (e.g. periodised careers!), to create a balance between family and work life that supports increased life quality.

Decreased unemployment levels

New living arrangements (how, who – reform required)

Increased contact over boundaries (old-young, Swedes – non-Swedes, etc.)

Reference

Cronin, Ann (2001) "Focus Groups", In Nigel Gilbert (ed.) *Researching Social Life*, London: Sage.