New Models of Participation in Nordic Welfare States:
Can they also include groups at the margins of society?

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Paper for the Mid-Term Conference of the NCoE Welfare, ‘Reassessing the Nordic Welfare Model’, May 18-20, Oslo, Norway (www.reassess.no)
1. Introduction

It is a common saying that we should judge the quality of welfare states on the basis of how well they treat the most disadvantaged of their citizens. Our twist of this saying is that disadvantaged groups’ opportunities for participation and dialogue with the authorities – or the lack of such opportunities – are important indicators of the Nordic welfare states’ ability to achieve social inclusion and equality for all. In this paper we argue that the scope for ‘voice’ (Hirschman 1970), participation and influence of groups at the margins of society is a neglected and underconceptualized dimension of the Nordic Welfare Model (NWM).

Most scholars have analyzed the NWM as a system of distribution and redistribution of resources, based on political commitments to equality and universalism. Comparatively low levels of poverty and income inequality, both before and after taxes and transfers, are indeed major accomplishments of the NWM. Given the NWM’s emphasis on redistribution and the equalizing of life chances most scholars have seen Nordic social citizenship (NSC) as mainly concerned with citizens’ social entitlements or the relationships between the rights and the duties associated with full citizenship.

These conceptualizations of the NWM and NSC are, however, too narrow to deal with the significant challenges of social inclusion, identity, recognition, equal voice and equal treatment in contemporary Nordic societies. Their inhabitants exercise social citizenship in new contexts, as Nordic societies are becoming more open and diverse. The international shift towards emphasizing recognition (and not only issues of distribution; Fraser 2008a & b), human rights, equal treatment and anti-discrimination do also affect the Nordic countries. Citizens hold more variable values, preferences and beliefs, as established social structures give away to new social constellations. The subjection and relative inactivity of citizens we have traditionally associated with modern top-down governance of redistributive welfare provision and professional practice stand in sharp contrast to inhabitants’ ambitions to be recognized as autonomous individuals, as competent and knowledgeable citizens, demanding to be part of decision-making processes affecting their welfare, both in a broad societal sense and in the more narrow context as individuals in need of support (Barnes et al. 2007; Clarke et al. 2007). The paper asks how we can widen the NWM and NSC to give participation, recognition and inclusion a more appropriate place in these analytical constructions.

To contextualize the discussion of these issues we present a comparative case study of recent attempts to establish organized arenas for participation and dialogue between the governments and organizations of citizens with disadvantaged and marginal positions in the Nordic societies. We ask what factors have influenced the establishment of these arenas for participation and dialogue, and what considerations have informed the choice of models.

As sub-themes we discuss some of the challenges that efforts to establish such forums for participation and dialogue are faced with, e.g. a gap between officially stated aspirations and practical achievements, the ambiguous social position of the organizations and their constituencies, and possible mixed messages about what the NWM and the NSC should mean for citizens at the margins (e.g. keeping silent and invisible versus standing forward to be seen, heard and recognized as competent subjects on an equal basis with others).
2. The Nordic welfare model

Scholars have for more than two decades used the concept of the Nordic (or ‘Scandinavian’) welfare model to draw a simplified picture of the Nordic welfare societies (e.g. Erikson et al. 1987; Kautto et al. 2001; Andersen et al. 2007). In this picture, issues of distribution and rules of distribution play a key role. Many observers have pointed to NWM traits like the pursuit of egalitarian values, equal distribution of incomes, low poverty and the ambition to secure broad and universal access to income maintenance and services within health, care and education (e.g. Graubard 1986; Kautto et al. 2001; Rothstein & Uslaner 2005; Kangas & Palme 2005). We also find this emphasis on distributional issues in the close relatives of the NWM; the Institutional-Redistributive Model (Wilensky & Lebeaux 1958; Titmuss 1972, Korpi & Esping-Anderson 1987); the Social Democratic Welfare Regime (Esping-Anderson 1990, 1999) and Nordic Social Market Economy (Pontusson 2005).

The NWM is not exclusively referring to welfare state characteristics. Public efforts to equalize the life chances and living conditions of citizens have been mirrored by the way in which economic activity, working life and wage setting have been organized in the Nordic countries. The Nordic working life model has involved a wide-ranging institutionalized collaboration between the social partners (both a plant level and at national level), and between the social partners and national authorities (Gustavsen 2007; Dølvik 2006; Moene 2008). As shown by Moene and Wallerstein (2008) and Pontusson (2005), systems of coordinated wage setting have contributed to comparatively compressed structures of earnings (see also OECD 2008). We find a complementarity between the compressed structure of earnings and the profile of the public system of income maintenance. The interplay between the wage setting system and the income maintenance system has contributed to raising the lowest part of the distribution of disposable incomes (after taxes and transfers) and facilitated vertical redistribution (from those with more resources to those with less resources). The low proportion of inhabitants with very high market incomes has made it easier to maintain broad electoral support for and funding of a large welfare state providing income maintenance and services for the whole population.

Many observers have noted the ability of Nordic countries to combine economic competitiveness, growth, high levels of affluence, social redistribution and equality (e.g. Pontusson 2005; Palme & Kangas 2005). Important factors behind this successful combination have been efforts to mobilize a large part of the latent labour force for employment, increase the labour force’s education and skills, and more generally to restructure production systems to achieve renewal and higher efficiency. The linking of the income maintenance system and active labour market measures has together with vocational training systems facilitated upskilling, geographical mobility and labour force transitions from contracting to expanding sectors, branches and companies.

Additional and less obvious factors have also contributed for the relative economic success and viability of the NWM. The institutionalized coordination of economic activity and collective wage bargaining in the Nordic countries has been conditioned on fairly high levels of trade union membership (as well as of membership of employers’ federations). Relatively high levels of trust – between citizens and between citizens and the authorities – have served as ‘oil in the machinery’ in the sense of promoting collaboration and reducing transaction costs and the perceived risks of entering contracts with others in the market., and hence stimulated renewal and restructuring of the Nordic economies (Whiteley 1997; SPS 2003; Halpern 2005: 59-63).
Studies by Rothstein and colleagues suggest that near universal public provisions promote trust or ‘social capital’ and mutual perceptions of being interdependent and in similar situations, rather than sharp divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Rothstein & Uslaner 2005; Rothstein 2005; Kumlin & Rothstein 2005). Moreover, the high levels of generalized trust in the Nordic countries are likely to be related to their high number of organizational memberships. Even if we take into consideration that ‘voluntary association’ probably mean different things in different societies the findings of Curtis et al. (2001) indicate that among the 33 countries they covered the Nordic countries have had some of the highest rates of membership in such associations. To the extent that citizens are members of several associations at the same time this is likely to promote general social trust and social integration more broadly (Wollebæk & Strømnes 2008; Wollebæk & Selle 2002).

Moreover, the Nordic countries belong to a broader group of countries characterized by ‘corporativism’, e.g. a system of institutionalized contact, negotiation and joint decision-making between the state and organized social interests. One of the implications of this is that many citizens are able to influence public policies in two different ways; through voting at general elections (the ‘electoral channel’) and through membership in interest groups (the ‘corporate channel’, Rokkan 1999, Lewin 1992; Rothstein 1992). According to Rokkan (1999: 263-264), the power of organized interests in the corporate channel is largely depends on their ability to threaten to withdraw material inputs (e.g. commodities, labour, services, investments, etc) from the system.

Nordic governments have rarely included organizations representing poor, marginalized or excluded groups in corporate arenas. One obvious reason is that issues relating to social exclusion or poverty for a long period were not high-profile issues. Policy-makers did not regard combating poverty and social exclusion as separate issues requiring specific policy measures or for that instance, requiring specific arenas for dialogue and joint decision-making. The NWM have rather rested upon the assumption that these issues were residual problems best dealt with through active employment-promoting policies, combined with encompassing systems of cash benefits and services.

An important exception to this overall ‘mainstream’ approach has, however, been Nordic governments’ relationship with organizations of persons with disabilities and elderly persons. These organizations have been invited to participate in consultative bodies together with government officials, being regarded as reliable partners in discussions about adjustments and further development of largely redistributive welfare provisions (Lundström 2004; Feltenius 2004). Only from the late 1990s have the need for social regulation, e.g. non-discrimination legislation, been put on the agenda in the Nordic countries, and then with uncertainty and reluctance from the more established sections of the disability movement (Whittle & Halvorsen 2007).

The social partners, being used to having a privileged access to policy-making, tend to emphasize that they – in contrast to organizations from the social and voluntary sector – are partners, able to assume responsibility for the implementation of joint decisions, and not just ‘participants’ in general discussions. Trade unions have sometimes questioned the representativeness of organizations from the social and voluntary sector, arguing that these only represent themselves, while the trade unions have internal democratic structures for representation and high membership numbers. Moreover, trade unions often see themselves as representatives of all relevant interests; at least as far as labour market policy is concerned. On the other hand, organizations from the social and voluntary sector argue that trade unions
fail to represent people outside of – and sometimes distant from – the labour market, such as the long-term ill, immigrants, persons with disabilities, poor and homeless people, who have difficulties in entering the labour market.

All in all, we can identify a broad configuration of citizens’ organizational affiliation, trust, perceptions of trustworthiness and mutual identification. Even if it is differentiated by the degree to which citizens control resources valued by others, partly by the kind of social provisions they are entitled to, the configuration points towards what we may call a participatory and inclusionary dimension of the NWM. An important issue is the extent to which this configuration can be opened up to citizens currently at the margins of the Nordic welfare societies. These citizens are less likely than the majority to have organizational memberships. They are more often than the majority recipients of selective and means-tested provisions, rather than universal ones. Citizens at the margins more rarely control material resources they can threaten to withdraw. However, as also suggested by Rokkan (ibid.), even marginal groups may have the ability to withdraw symbolic resources. Marginal groups may question the legitimacy of policy-makers on the basis of their espoused values, goals and commitments. This capacity to discredit those in power may be a paradoxical source of influence and political impact. We will return to the conditions for organizational mobilization and participation among the disadvantaged sections of the Nordic populations. Now we engage with the current conceptualization of social citizenship.

3. Nordic social citizenship

In the social citizenship literature one of the most important contributions is still T. H. Marshall’s 1950 essay ‘Citizenship and social class’ (Marshall 1950/1965). At the outset, Marshall defined citizenship… “… as a status bestowed upon those who are full members of a community. All those who possess that status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which that status is endowed” (Marshall, 1965: 18). Marshall outlined how civil, political and social citizenship had developed, first for a small section of the population, subsequently to be widened out to a larger part of the population. Even if highly contested Marshall’s essay can be interpreted as a story of a progressive process of societal integration. He saw the three types of citizenship as mutually supportive, in the meaning that a person needs to enjoy all three in order to be able to exercise the rights and duties of full citizenship.

At the same time Marshall asked how the emerging equal status of citizenship for all inhabitants of a country was compatible with the continued existence of the substantial class differences in income, wealth and living conditions of a capitalist market economy. He did not claim that social citizenship had a potential to completely change the capitalist system. Being a ‘socio-liberal’ – rather than a ‘neo-liberal’ or ‘libertarian’ (Miller 2000) – Marshall believed that a certain vertical redistribution of resources between citizens was required. He argued that everybody was to be granted a minimum of economic and social welfare, that is, enjoy a minimum level of social and economic rights (economic security, care, protection against various risks, etc.). In return each individual had to fulfill a mix of legal duties and broader social obligations vis-à-vis the community.

Marshall did not go into details with the exact content of citizenship rights and obligations; rather he claimed that there was no universal principle to define the rights and duties of citizenship. As an emerging institution, citizenship implied a vision of what each inhabitant of a society could become, an image for societies and their citizens to strive for. Nevertheless,
there should be a fair balance between rights and obligations. The latter might include contributing to the welfare of society, for instance by performing paid work, paying taxes and doing military services. In addition, each citizen had to work hard and put one’s heart into one’s job, and live the life of a good citizen. Today most of us would probably add social obligations like taking responsibility for and providing care to children and other dependants, and participating in other socially valuable activities.

Feminist scholars have for good reasons criticized Marshall for almost exclusively focusing on the situation of men and the historical development of citizenship for men. For instance, he did not acknowledge the significance of motherhood; that is, giving birth to children and providing nurture and care in their upbringing, as essential conditions for the continued existence of society. Marshall did not consider whether social citizenship rights, including an individual right to economic security and independence, applied to women who were carers and housekeepers the greater part of their adult life (Pateman 1988a & b; Lister 2003, Siim 2000, Dietz 1992).

Despite this bias and the restricted geographical reference of Marshall’s condensed and stylized description of three centuries of citizenship history we would still argue that his socio-liberal concept captures core elements of social citizenship (NSC) as policy-makers and scholars have understood them since the formative years of the Nordic welfare states in the 20th century. The complementarities of rights and duties and between the responsibilities of public authorities and citizens described by Marshall have been important premises for the development towards encompassing and near universalistic welfare provisions (both cash benefits and services).

Admittedly one may ask whether the NWM has involved vertical redistribution and access to social security provisions at higher levels than the more limited transfers and basic minimum suggested by Marshall. Do we find a distinct Nordic or ‘Social Democratic’ version of social citizenship, different from Marshall’s? We see several reasons for doubting whether this is a fruitful idea worth pursuing. Arguably, many of the more generous provisions in the Nordic context have been based on contributions or the exercise of duties on the part of the recipient. The Nordic countries have a long tradition of constructing the citizen primarily as a worker. A strong commitment to achieve maximum participation in paid work (the ‘work-line’) has been associated with the goal of turning all adult (male) citizens into workers. More recently this aim has increasingly been extended to women as well. The founding-fathers and mothers of the Nordic welfare states considered high rates of employment essential for ensuring sufficient tax revenues to finance an expanding set of welfare provisions, both cash benefits and services. More generally, they viewed employment-promoting policies as tools for increasing society’s productive capacity and for using available resources as effectively as possible.

In addition to such instrumentalist reasoning, a strong popular belief in the moral virtues of work supported the promotion of the work-line. The Nordic work ethic has much in common with the Protestant ethic. For instance, from their early beginnings, the Nordic labour movements gave the duty of contributing to the common good a moralistic overtone. The early trade union banners encouraged members to ‘perform your duty, demand your rights!’ (in that order of priority). Similar norms were later incorporated in the emerging system of public welfare provisions, e.g. in the form of the close link between previous records of employment, earnings and contributions on the one hand and entitlements to social insurance benefits (e.g. unemployment insurance) on the other.
Arguably there has been a dualism underlying the Nordic systems of social protection for people of working age (Marklund and Svallfors 1987). We need to understand the rights to social benefits enjoyed by citizens of working age in the light of the duties (past or current efforts and contributions) they are expected to fulfill. For a long time this dualism has been most evident in the Nordic systems of social insurance (e.g. unemployment insurance). Entitlement to relatively generous benefits of fairly long duration has presupposed that the individual is more than a mere member of an insurance plan, with a sufficient record of contributions. In addition, an unemployed individual must be prepared to do what he or she can to return to work as soon as possible. This duty includes registering at the employment office, actively seeking work, and accepting all suitable jobs or offers for participating in labour market measures. Similarly, sickness and disability insurance benefits have combined conditions in the form of sufficient prior earnings or a contributions record and the willingness to comply with the current requirements of the authorities. These aspects have contributed to limiting the actual degree of universalism of the NWM (Edling 2006).

All in all, the NSC has been characterized by fairly generous but differentiated rights to income maintenance. These entitlements have to a considerable extent been premised – explicitly or implicitly – on the expectation that most citizens during their life course would be both contributors to society and beneficiaries of the welfare state’s provisions. The NWM has made allowance for citizens’ different capacity or practical opportunities for being contributors through gainful employment by guaranteeing access to basic services and income support to all inhabitants (legal residents). Citizens with long and stable employment careers and fairly high earnings have, however, also been better off in terms of their overall income package when they because of age, the onset of health problems, disability or other reasons stop working. On the other hand, persons of working age who are not prevented by such factors for being employed will generally be unable to continue receiving generous cash benefits unless they demonstrate that they do what they can to return to work. The NSC is in this sense differentiated by gender and other factors. The aspects summarized here do not give support to the claim that NSC is qualitatively different from the socio-liberal citizenship outlined by Marshall. Nevertheless we will now show that Marshall’s conceptualization is insufficient to capture the participatory dimension of the citizenship exercised by inhabitants in the Nordic countries.

4. Why the NSC needs to include the participatory dimension

Since the 1980s a renewed international debate on social citizenship has on the one hand returned to and reappraised Marshall’s original codification, on the other hand asked what social citizenship had become to mean in practice. Scholars and other observers have to a considerable extent approached what they saw as empirical trends in how people exercised their citizenship by criticizing what they interpreted as the gist of Marshall’s theoretical conceptualization of citizenship. Although this two-edged debate has not exclusively referred to the situation in the Nordic countries many of the critics’ claims should be of particular relevance in this context.

First, a major criticism has been that Marshall put an excessive emphasis on individual social rights, especially formal and enforceable rights, while having too little to say about the duties or responsibilities of citizens (e.g. Marquand 1991: 337; Turner 2001:191). Here Marshall have often served as a straw man for a more general criticism of how generous redistributive
welfare arrangements, especially income maintenance, are supposed to have an adverse effect on citizens’ attitudes to self-reliance and paid work, responsibility for personal welfare and risk protection. The critics have argued that the proliferation of unconditional social rights, underpinned by welfare provisions, have led to widespread passivity, even economic and social exclusion, and a weakening of the work ethic (e.g. Mead 1986, 1997a & 1997b).

Many participants have called for new conceptions of citizenship, involving a better balance between individual rights and duties. The slogan ‘No rights without responsibilities’ expresses the common core of these conceptions (Giddens 1998: 65; Dwyer 2001; Driver & Martell 2001; Levitas 1998; Lister 1990, 2001 & 2003). Since the early 1990s such arguments have served as justifications for tightening income maintenance provisions, reinforcing obligations to be actively seeking work and take part in activation or ‘welfare-to-work’ measures and using threats about sanctioning by reducing or terminating benefits if the person does not comply with such requirements (Johansson & Hvinden 2007). Although the Nordic governments appeared to be among the earliest to make this shift from ‘passive’ to ‘active’ these governments often returned to, refreshed and more consistently enforced citizens’ duties that had been original premises for the NWM and the NSC, rather than introducing something completely new and innovative.

Second – and in our context more significant – many scholars have criticized Marshall for his failure to recognize citizenship as practice, i.e. as agency exercised by citizens. We need to see citizens as active subjects, with capabilities to take part in decision-making (Deacon & Mann 1998; Le Grand 2003; Hoggett 2001; Deacon 2004; Jensen & Pfau-Effinger 2005). On an empirical level we can observe the development of a more dynamic relationship between welfare states and citizens. One important reasons for this development is that citizens themselves expect (or are expected) to play more active roles in handling diverse risks and promoting their own welfare. Marshall could not foresee this development and, anyway, he was mainly interested in (social) citizenship as a status, and not so much the participatory sides of citizenship (Turner 1990, 1993 & 2001). Recent calls for a more participatory and active form of citizenship can be seen as a reaction to Marshall-inspired understandings of social citizenship.

Consequently we need to complement and enrich Marshall’s notion on social citizenship with a participatory dimension (e.g. citizens in the roles as users, partners in dialogue with the authorities, self-organizers, etc). In the following discussion we aim to clarify the main elements of the participatory dimension and their relevance in relation to current changes in Nordic welfare states.

For political theorists an active and participatory dimension of citizenship is hardly new. For instance, Janoski and Gran (2002: 39-40) delineate the active citizen as someone who participates in many political activities, has concern for people belonging to the same group, identifies with altruistic goals, opposes established elites, and pursues some form of social change. Others list active citizenship as one on several aspects of ‘thick citizenship’, together with elements like mutually supportive rights and duties, participation in a political community, interdependence of public and private, and civic virtues (Faulkes 2000: 11, 108).

Current debates around citizenship in a participatory or ‘civic-republican’ vein tend, however, to rest on a simplified use of the active/passive divide, unable to handle the historical exclusion of women and marginalized social groups from the public sphere (Siim 2000, 2005). Siim proposes to let the active/passive axis include the activities of various social
groups, formal and informal associations in civil society, as well as the degree to which they are included or excluded from the public sphere. Williams (1998) and Lister (1998) raise similar concerns and direct attention to notions of active citizenship involving mutual aid and collective self-help, and efforts of citizens to create themselves as subjects rather than objects for others, for instance expressed in self-organization and social movements of poor or disadvantaged people.

The proliferation of user organizations, citizen groups and new social movements challenges much of the existing scholarship on state/citizen relationships and more particularly, most of academic reasoning about the NWM and NSC. Criticizing established models of social citizenship, Williams (ibid.) calls for a new analytical framework that ‘… involves a shift away from seeing people as passive beneficiaries of welfare provided through state interventions and professional expertise…’ As a way to conceptualize this new relationship between states and citizens, she puts forward a notion of ‘welfare agency’ to address the strategies and activities of citizens in need or receipt of welfare provisions. Citizens are not occupants of fixed social categories, for instance as ‘the poor’, ‘the unemployed’, ‘clients’ or ‘diagnosed patients’. The task of research is to approach citizens as creative and reflexive agents who do not respond to benefits and services in uniform ways. Fitzpatrick (2002) has made similar comments in relation to notions such as ‘welfare democracy’. He claims that even though people in marginalized positions in society are subordinated to existing power structures and possibly denied full citizenship by public institutions, they are still active agents, capable of exercising power and affect their own welfare and well-being (see also Lister 1990, 1998 & 2003; Lister et al. 2007).

Moreover, the increasing significance of networks, organizations and social movements of disadvantaged citizens, including in the Nordic countries (Halvorsen 2002; 2005, Anker & Halvorsen 2007; Johansson 2007), has undermined the conventional wisdom that such groups are unable to organize, step forward in the public domain or play a role in the corporate channel of influence. Scholars have assumed that the stigma and humiliation associated with being poor, workless or having other discreditable characteristics have made these groups unable to organize become socially visible and give voice to interests and identities of their members. Members of such groups would rather seek protective strategies like hiding and concealment to avoid the control, contempt or other openly negative sanctions of mainstream society (Hvinden 1995). Since the members are not working they do not control material resources they can threaten to withdraw they should be unable to exert power in relation to the authorities or other corporate actors.

As we have already indicated, this theorization underestimates the significance of symbolic resources in contemporary societies like the Nordic ones where policy-makers have committed themselves publically to goals like equality and inclusion. With competitive media always looking for news about gaps between stated objectives and achievements, deviations from official standards of conduct or other factors that can undermine the reputation and credibility of those in power, the ability to claim to be the weak part or victim has increasingly become a source of power. Moreover, to the extent that we have witnessed a shift towards greater tolerance of diversity and non-conformity over time in the Nordic countries the conditions for self-organization among groups at the margins of society may also have improved. To the extent that stronger official commitments to recognition, human rights and equal treatment means that Nordic societies have become tolerant of diversity and non-conformity this may also have made it easier for disadvantaged groups to organize and become visible.
Yet, it is not self-evident that public authorities in the Nordic countries would actively encourage the self-organization of groups of citizens with disadvantaged positions, providing financial or other support to such associations or inviting them to participate in dialogue and consultation. Given the official commitment to the work-line in the NWM policy-makers might regard it as undesirable that groups of citizens of ‘working-age’ organized on the basis of their status or identity as being economically excluded, out of work, poor, recipients of income benefits, etc. According to the rationale of the NWM such statuses and identities should in principle be temporary and transitional, at least if the person does not have a permanent and severe disability clearly preventing him or her being gainfully employed. Policy-makers might be concerned that self-organization on the basis of such statuses or identities has a conserving or stabilizing effect, keeping some persons in excluded positions, even if their prospects of finding work and becoming self-sufficient improved should happen to improve. In interviews with Halvorsen (2002: 283-286) leading representatives of the largest Norwegian trade union expressed such concerns.

Despite decision-makers’ potential reluctance and ambivalence vis-à-vis organizations of citizens with marginalized positions we have found some interesting cases of recognition, active support and inclusion of such organizations in dialogue and consultation with central and local governments in the Nordic countries. In the rest of the paper we will present two such cases, one Norwegian and one Swedish. We ask what factors have contributed to the inclusion of these organizations in arenas for dialogue and consultation and the choice of models for the arenas. We will also discuss what implications these innovations have for our understanding of NSC and especially how one can reconcile issues of distribution versus recognition, participation and inclusion in practice. Finally we ask what challenges these arenas may be faced with. What will the reactions be when citizens claiming welfare provisions question their ascribed identities as silent objects or occupants of fixed social categories? What responses will their organizations meet when they demonstrate capability to develop strategies and give voice on their own, contesting established public bureaucratic and professional practices?

5. The Norwegian case: the establishment of a Contact Committee between the government and organizations of poor and disadvantaged citizens

Since the first years of the millennium Norwegian governments have sought for new models for dialogue and consultation with representatives of organizations of poor, disadvantaged and marginalized citizens. We will describe the background for this search, the actors and their agendas in the process, where the actors looked for inspiration and good examples, and what considerations that influenced the choice of models1.

We need to see the search for new models for dialogue and consultation with associations of poor and disadvantaged groups in Norway against the broader backdrop of the government’s strategy to combat poverty. To most people’s surprise, poverty and the best ways of combating of poverty emerged as key issues in the 2001 parliamentary election campaign. The incoming centre-right coalition government (‘Bondevik II’) – consisting by the Christian-Democratic Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party – followed up this focus on

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1 This description is based on interviews with some of the key actors, documentary material and participation observation at meetings, partly in the role as speaker at the meetings, in the period 2007-2009.
poverty by arranging a hearing with a great number of social researchers in the autumn of 2001. One year later the government published a ‘Plan of action for combating poverty’ (St.meld. nr. 6 2002-2003). In this plan the government stated that there were few ‘user associations’ among persons living in poverty but that a number of other user associations organizing person at risk of poverty through disability, illness, etc. (ibid., p. 26), and that the government would seek active cooperation with these organizations to find appropriate and user-responsive measures within the work to combat poverty.

In a slightly different context, the government declared that it would establish a close dialogue with the voluntary organizations more generally to ensure that they could play an important role in combating poverty. The government argued that these organizations already made substantial efforts by speaking on behalf on and delivering services to persons living in poverty, by providing peer support and facilitating self-help. Among issues to be discussed with the organizations the Bondevik II government mentioned:

- Activation and work training for persons have problems in finding work,
- Yearly poverty hearings with the voluntary organizations,
- Providing contributions to yearly poverty reports,
- Service offices for voluntary organizations and self-help groups (ibid. p. 32).

The plans for this dialogue were only partly brought to fruition. Yearly poverty conferences have been arranged. More significantly, however, the government in 2003 granted the Church City Mission funding for setting up a service office as a nation-wide resource centre for organizations and self-help groups working against poverty and social exclusion. The service office, called the 'Battery', is meant to be a meeting place for groups and persons to establish networks and support for self-organization, advice and guidance for organizational development, etc. After a two-year pilot period, the Church City Mission has been granted yearly grants for the work of the Battery.

After the 2005 parliamentary election the incoming Centre-Left coalition government (‘Stoltenberg II’) – comprised by the Labour Party, the Centre Party and the Socialist Left Party – committed itself not only to reduce but to eradicate poverty in its joint policy platform (Soria Moria 2005: 3). Furthermore, in preparing and implementing a comprehensive plan for this eradication the coalition pledged that it would arrange a hearing with representatives of poor people’s own organizations and relevant professional groups (ibid. p.36). In the plan the government presented in the autumn of 2006 the government stated that it would strengthen the dialogue and cooperation with voluntary organizations and representatives for disadvantaged and marginalized groups. The government also committed itself to facilitating self-organization, self-help and peer support, as well as to continuing the funding of the Battery (AID 2006a: 7). Similarly, in its budget for 2007 the government pointed to the gradual increase in the financial support to voluntary organizations as a way of promoting the dialogue and cooperation with these organizations as parts of the efforts to combat poverty (AID 2006b: 189).

The government made an important further step when it in the budget for 2008 allocated 10 Mill NOK specifically to promote a close dialogue with voluntary organizations and representatives for disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Yet, at this point – in the early autumn of 2007 – it was not yet clear exactly how this dialogue was to be organized. There had been some internal discussion in the Ministry for Labour and Social Inclusion and the
Ministry also engaged the Directorate for Health and Social Affairs (now: the Directorate for Health) to clarify possible models for the dialogue.

The discussion about models continued until March 2008 when the Ministry for Labour and Social Inclusion decided to introduce a model where the three main elements were:

- A ‘Contact Committee’ with representatives of the government and organizations of poor and disadvantaged groups of citizens;
- a ‘Collaborative Forum’ of capacity-building, cooperation and joint policy articulation between organizations and groups representing poor and disadvantaged groups, and
- the Battery in the role of serving as secretariat and provider of practical support, assistance and backup for this forum, promoting organizational development and training and the agreements on joint policy positions and demands on the part of the associations and spokespersons of poor and disadvantaged citizens.

In the process leading up to the decision about this model we could witness an interaction between different actors, sources of learning and concerns.

5.1 The different actors

On the government side the political leadership of the Ministry was obviously an important driving force in the search for models. But the work to clarify possible models was very much in the hands of a relatively small group of senior civil servants. This group interacted with their colleagues in the Directorate but did also invite outside researchers to present a short review of other countries’ experience with models, including the experiences made within the Commission of the European Union (Hvinden et al. 2007). The idea was to look to other countries to identify best practice and – if possible – emulate models and approaches adopted and tried out in practice that had proved workable and appropriate.

Another important set of actors were representatives of the organizations, alliances and networks of poor and disadvantaged groups. As already suggested such actors had become more visible in the public domain since the mid-1990s. Their stronger presence had been facilitated by considerable and largely sympathetic media attention and by financial support granted by the central government and some municipalities and counties (Halvorsen 2002). Although the organizations were without the sanctions at disposal for trade unions or similar actors, they had launched successful campaigns impacting on the legitimacy and credibility of the government, especially the both the major parties in power and opposition had committed themselves to eradicating poverty. An illustration of the organizations’ potential impact of the government’s credibility is the ‘poverty camp’ they organized outside the hotel where the three parties behind the Stoltenberg II government negotiated about their joint ‘Soria Moria’ platform in the autumn of 2005.

In the 2006 Norwegian national study on ‘Mainstreaming social inclusion’ the researchers carried out a survey including participants in organizations of poor and disadvantaged persons (Fløtten & Nuland 2006). According to this study the interviewees were critical to the yearly poverty hearings arranged by the government and argued that these hearings had little practical impact, apart from the symbolic value. Furthermore, the interviewees felt that the
central and local government did not really understand the hardship of poor and disadvantaged people. Few interviewees meant the organizations’ views had any real impact on the government’s policy. Given this, it is no surprise that the organizations were keen to obtain better channels to influence the government’s programme and priorities and that they wanted more regular and institutionalized forms of dialogue and consultation with the government, as complements to their campaigning through the media and otherwise.

Professional providers of services and assistance to poor and disadvantaged groups had also an interest in the models to be adopted. Voluntary organizations like the Church City Mission and the Salvation Army have extensive experience from working for and with the most disadvantaged and were through the Battery already involved in providing support to self-organization and collective voice on the part of poor and disadvantaged citizens. The major trade union of social workers similarly expressed interest for the search for models, and as we will see, also one of the main colleges for training of social workers engaged itself in the discussion.

5.2 Different models and sources of learning

Early in the process leading up to the chosen model the Ministry was impressed by what came to be called the ‘Danish model’. Denmark has since 2002 had a ‘Council for Socially Marginalized People’ (CSMP 2008). This council aims at developing more effective measures to improve the situation of the most disadvantaged, including facilitating the representation of disadvantaged groups. The CSMP describes their two main strategic objectives as: ‘One will be to increase the understanding in society of socially marginalized groups and the other – closely related to the first – will be to increase socially marginalized people’s own chances of making themselves heard in the public debate’ (ibid.).

The council had a strong participation of professional experts and providers, both public and private, and a more limited involvement of persons with experience as socially excluded and users of services. The Council had achieved a high profile in Denmark, through its numerous and thorough proposals for reforms in different areas of public provisions for disadvantaged persons. From some quarters in Danish society the council had been criticized for having become ‘too political’.

In the Ministry the key senior civil servants gradually became less convinced about the desirability of the Danish model, being concerned about what appeared to be the experts’ dominance of the council. The civil servants wanted to give priority to how the model for dialogue and consultation could give representatives of poor and disadvantaged groups a more prominent role, promote collaboration between the organizations, and facilitate their voice but also to contribute to capacity-building in the organizations.

The senior civil servants also considered recent and on-going reforms in other European countries, especially the model first introduced in Britain with a ‘Compact’ between the government and the voluntary sector more generally about more institutionalized collaboration, a stronger role of the voluntary sector in service delivery and more predictable financial conditions for the voluntary sector. Similar formalized agreements have later been made in a number of other European countries, including Denmark. In Sweden the government initiated a process towards a compact in 2007. Yet, in Norway the ‘British model’ - in its different national versions - was not seen as meeting the more specific
requirements for a model of dialogue and consultation between the government and poor and disadvantaged groups.

These reservations about existing national models stimulated an interest in the forms of collaboration and consultation established within the European Community. As an outcome of the ‘poverty programs’ of the European Community since the late 1970s the Commission granted financial support to what became the ‘European Anti-Poverty Network’ (EAPN). The support continued even after the last poverty programme ended in the first half of the 1990s. The Commission has given EAPN a recognized position as a body it regularly consults with on the formation and assessment of EC policies to combat poverty and social exclusion.

This role of EAPN has later been developed further with the advent of the open method of coordination (OMC) in the area of social inclusion since early 2000s. In the guidelines for the process of development national action plans to promote inclusion the European Council has also obligated the Member States to actively involve also representatives of groups experiencing or at risk of exclusion, as an important set of stakeholders (Johansson 2007). Norway has participated in the EC action programs on social inclusion and later in the Progress programme but has not been part of OMC process.

Of great significance in this context is that the Welfare Alliance – an umbrella 23 organizations for and of poor and disadvantaged people in Norway — is a member of the European Anti-Poverty Network (Welfare Alliance 2008; EAPN 2008). Key members of the Welfare Alliance had worked in the Brussels Secretariat of the European Anti-Poverty Network and participated in EAPN projects. This meant that these participants had first-hand knowledge about the experience of EAPN from its dialogue and consultations with the Commission. They also had detailed knowledge about the successful models of contact and collaboration between the government and poor and disadvantaged people’s organizations in Flanders (EC 2004). The Welfare Alliance used the experience and knowledge they had gained in the EAPN context to substantiate their demands for more regular and closer forms of dialogue and consultation in Norway.

Furthermore, in the process of operationalizing the ideas for a lean model, giving representatives of poor and disadvantaged citizens a prominent role, the government could draw on experience with established models for dialogue and consultation in Norway with other groups, e.g. in relation to the main organizations of the social partners and the communities of citizens with immigrant or ethnic minority background.

For instance, Norway’s ‘Contact Committee for Immigrants and the Authorities’ (KIM 2008) was first appointed in 1984 and the committee was now in its eight four year period. KIM has seventeen representatives of immigrant communities in twelve regions of Norway, eleven representatives of government Ministries, directorates and other official bodies and seven representatives of parties represented in the Storting. KIM has widely been regarded as a success and has also met interest from the governments of other countries.

During the early winter of 2008 the Ministry invited different stakeholders to submit views on the proposal for a model, with a contact committee or forum for direct dialogue between the government and representatives of organizations of poor and disadvantaged citizens as one of the key elements. All in all, the written submissions were largely positive although for instance the main trade union of social workers, a major research institute and a university college involved in training social workers had some reservations and evidently would have
preferred something closer to the Danish model, with a council or expert standing committee that could present evidence-based knowledge and policy advice to the government.

As we have seen, the government in the end decided to establish a model with a Contact Committee, but with the two important additional elements of (i) a Collaborative Forum for organizations of poor and disadvantaged citizens, and (ii) enlarged support to the Battery to provide practical support and training for the representatives of the organizations. The contact committee had its first meeting 17 April 2008, with participants from the Ministry for Labour and Inclusion, the Welfare and Labour Directorate, the Battery and ten different organizations and groups (representing poor people, survivors of child care measures, self-defined losers, ex-prisoners, drug users, tenants, and African women in Norway). The meeting was chaired by the Secretary of State [Statsråden]. The forum of organizations had their first two-day workshop 10-12 June 2008, with participants from twenty organizations and groups, facilitated and coordinated by the Battery. Both arrangements were successful and encouraging from the participants’ point of view.

5.3 Approaching the ‘moment of truth”

Since the summer of 2008 the Contact Committee has met twice, in the autumn 2008 and in the early spring of 2009. In both cases the organizations had preparatory meetings in the Collaborative Forum to discuss the items on the agenda and agree on the issues and demands they wished to prioritize at the meeting with the minister in the Contact Committee. The Battery has helped to facilitate these meetings, giving advice on how to have a productive, effective and focused process of exchange.

Judged on the basis of the minutes from the meetings in the Contact Committee information and self-presentation from the individual organizations have still taken up a substantial part of the time. One reason could be that Bjarne Håkon Hanssen – the Secretary of State for Employment and Inclusion who played a main role in the process leading up to the model with the Contact Committee and the Collaborative Forum – was appointed as Secretary of Health during the summer of 2008. The new Secretary of State – Dag Terje Andersen – obviously needed some time to familiarize himself with the model and develop ownership to it. Another reason might be that challenges related to the implementation of a new integrated Labour and Welfare Administration took a lot of the Ministry’s attention in the autumn. Both meetings of the Contact Committee discussed some of these challenges, e.g. delays in payments.

For the meeting in February 2008 the Ministry invited the organizations to present specific proposals for the preparations of the coming state budget (to be finally decided in the parliament in late autumn 2009). The rationale here is obviously that the more specific demands of the organizations tend to involve increased public spending on cash benefits and services (or in some cases; a change of priorities for spending). The Secretary of State did not make any commitments to the list of specific demands presented by the organizations but promised that the government would take them into consideration. For instance, one of demands was that the government should introduce social insurance coverage of expenses for dental care in order to diminish existing social inequalities in dental care. The first moment of truth for this and other demands will be when the government presents its budget bill in early October 2009. The second moment of truth will be which demands pass into budget decided by the parliament later in the autumn. Especially as Norway will have a General Election in
September 2009 it is not obvious that a majority of the representatives of the ‘Storting’ will accept all the budget lines proposed by the current government. If hardly any of the financial demands of the organizations survive this process the result is likely to be disappointment and doubts about the value of the Contact Committee on the part of the organizations, unless the government manages to accommodate other of the organizations’ concerns and demands to a significant extent. Representatives of the organizations have obviously appreciated the official recognition and the increased visibility in the public domain they achieved by being members of the Contact Committee. At the same time it seems improbably that these gains will be sufficient in the long run and the organizations may become concerned that they are offered. The representatives wish to see actual changes to the benefit of their members or constituencies, not to be involved in ‘phoney participation’ without influence (CPPP 2000: 18).

For the time being the organizations appear to be largely satisfied with the work of the Battery within the framework of the Collaborative Forum and new organizations want to become included in the Forum. Stimulated by their participation in the Forum some of the organizations have entered into closer cooperation on specific issues and events, despite disagreements on more general and ideological issues. These organizations have for instance agreed to arrange joint training courses or establish more tactical alliances to promote the interests of their members.

6. The Sweden case: the establishment of a User Committee on Social and Welfare Issues

The relationship between the Swedish government and voluntary associations representing socially excluded and marginal groups has changed considerably over the last decade. As in many other European countries the Swedish corporatist system started to give away at the beginning of the 1990s, above all due to the decision by the employer organizations to leave partner discussions and arrangements (Hermanson et al 1999). This was a major set-back for the labor movement, yet also an indication for other organizations that they could start to play a role not previously admitted. At the late 1990s, state committees started to show greater interest in new models for political participation, as a complement or even an alternative to the model of representative democracy (SOU 2001; SOU 2007). Ideas related to participative democracy, direct democracy and deliberative democracy were seen as possible solutions to decreasing voting rates in public elections (Esaiasson & Westerhom 2006).

Even though these ideas never really left the political and academic spheres, they spurred and influenced a parallel debate on new forms of user influence in welfare services. Key actors within the field of social policy and social exclusion (such as the National Board of Health and Welfare and the Swedish Association of Regions and Local Authorities) developed pilot projects to strengthen user involvement in service planning and delivery. Local authorities institutionalized user involvement in decision-making structures relating to welfare services, yet still mainly restricted to issues relating to disability and old age yet with a growing interest

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2 The following analysis is based on a larger set of data collected between 2005 and 2009. We have observed approx. 10-15 Network meetings. We have conducted three interviews with key public officials and politicians, one of them including the Minister of Social Affairs. We have conducted approx 10 interviews with members of the Network and the Committee. We have also analyzed written documents from the Network, i.e. strategy documents, minutes from meetings and reports being sent to the government.
also for issues relating to homelessness, drug abuse, poverty, violence against women etcetera (Socialstyrelsen 2001).

Voluntary associations were encouraged by the introduction of new EU programmes within the fields of social inclusion and anti-discrimination. As elsewhere, the European Social Fund (ESF) has been a major financial contributor to Swedish associations, providing them with ample financial resources for developing their organizations and activities. The ESF has also fostered a closer cooperation (at least formally) between different actors, as one of the main programmes within the sector prescribed partnership arrangements between the public, private and voluntary sector for any financial support. In practice this has mainly implied partnerships between voluntary associations and public authorities.

Another EU related process has also had significance for the relationship between voluntary associations and the government. Social partner organizations have continuously been consulted within the European Employment Strategy, however as the Commission initiated a process on social inclusion, a new window of opportunity opened up for a different set of actors to organize and to claim recognition (Johansson 2007). Previous studies have demonstrated that the OMC on social inclusion was fundamental in the establishment of a completely new actor – a Network against social exclusion – with the ambition to unite a large variety of voluntary associations and to form a reliable partner in relation to the government. Hence, since the EU required the Swedish governments to ‘mobilize all relevant bodies’, this OMC not only made poverty and social exclusion a political issue, yet also challenged existing actor relationships and institutionalized patterns of consultation (Jacobsson & Johansson 2009). However, in comparison to the situation in Norway, neither the Social Democratic government (until 2006) nor the present Conservative Liberal government have made any attempts in putting forward poverty as such as a key political goal, yet focused more on issues like homelessness, drug abuse etcetera.

6.1 A new actor in the field

The established network has some resemblance to the Welfare Alliances in Norway, yet with a slightly different background and membership profile. It constitutes an innovation in relation to the existing social field, since it is the first national network gathering a majority of social NGOs working in the field of social welfare and social exclusion. It has established itself as a collective actor for a spectrum of national organizations that previously worked individually or with different agendas. In contrast to the Welfare Alliances, it has gathered a broad coalition of organizations belonging to the Swedish movement of people with disabilities, religious organizations and communities, user organizations, client organizations, social economy organizations, immigrant organizations and ethnic associations. Some of these organizations provide services while others express a voice. Several organizations are large, in terms of members and resources, and have a central position in Swedish social policy. Others are small, with few members and limited resources. Whether all these organizations represents people actually being socially excluded or marginalized is a matter of definition, yet these notions tend to be part of the glue that keeps the Network together.

The Network gathers top spokespersons (general secretaries, chairpersons or senior advisers) which has provided the Network a fairly high status among social NGOs. Choosing the network model, top spokespersons do not have to comply with formal or long-term obligations; instead they use the Network as a general framework for interaction and
communication. This proved to be an important strategy in mobilizing the Network, yet also difficult to handle. Members have pointed out its weak legitimacy, as not being a ‘democratic’ organization with formal standards and clear membership regulations.

The Network is one of the few national actors which actively have used EU policy processes to put pressure on the Swedish government. Since its start in 2000, the Network have had a threefold aim: i) to explore the possibilities of the OMC incl.; ii) to form a network capable of speaking to the Swedish government with one voice; and iii) to become the one recognized actor for co-operating with the government in writing NAPs on social inclusion. This means that the OMC incl. constitutes the ‘common discourse’, ‘common framing of claims’ and ‘conception of problems’ which the Network needs to keep together. Hence, the Network became the gate-keeper in relation to voluntary sector/government discussions on poverty, social exclusion and marginalization.

Despite its innovative profile the Network has remained largely unnoticed in the public sphere and it has had some difficulties to develop a detailed program that goes beyond the OMC process and its ambitions to influence the Swedish National Action Plan (NAP) against poverty and social exclusion. Even though internal working groups have tried to come up with some more detailed aims and objectives, this remains a largely unresolved issue and the Network has mostly been re-active rather than pro-active in relation to government’s policies. Some general statements have been made, regarding a society based on solidarity, social justice and strong universal welfare policies; claims to give the most vulnerable in society a right to a decent standard of living, equal treatment, and access to welfare services such as care, education and housing etcetera; demands that the Swedish government to take a more encompassing and integrated approach to social exclusion etcetera.

6.2 Demands for institutionalized participation

Besides trying to influence the OMC process on social inclusion, another main objective for the Network has been to demand participation of users and citizens in the decision-making process. The Network has urged the government to develop partnership agreements with the social NGO sector, in terms of clarifying resources and agendas. One has continuously lobbied extensively to change the ways in which the government ‘speaks with’ sector representatives and – from its perspective – the Network proved successful in its lobbying activities. In 2003, the Swedish government decided to initiate a forum for information exchange and consultations with user organizations, i.e. a ‘User Committee on Social and Welfare Issues’. The committee’s main aim was to highlight the perspective of poor and socially excluded people and to strengthen user involvement and influence related to outlining and implementing the NAPs on poverty and social exclusion. To some extent, the Network played a part in the establishment of the Committee as ideas to form such an arena had been proposed by Network members and picked up by ministry officials, proposing them to the Minister.

In interviews, the previous Minister stress that he had several reasons for installing such a forum (Interview 2007). His ambition was to institutionalize the contact with organizations having direct and personal experience of people being socially excluded, poor and marginalized, as a way to get information and knowledge on what took place ‘at the ground’. His key concern was then to have face-to-face discussions with key stakeholders working on the field regarding the effects of public interventions and upcoming social problems. Another
objective was also to give associations a forum to express ideas and proposals, and for him an arena to test ideas and proposals before presenting them to the parliament, i.e. to limit the risks for political failures and setbacks.

For the Network, the establishment of the Committee represented substantial progress as it gained access to a forum in which top politicians and also top public officials participated. As in Norway, the Swedish Committee has been chaired by the Minister, accompanied by political advisers. The Swedish Committee has also been attended by the Director General of the National Board of Health and Welfare and higher officials from the Swedish association of local authorities. Despite the participation of key actors, the Committee has never had any formal power to make decisions; it has remained a forum for information exchange, discussions and analyses regarding the possibilities and challenges for extended user involvement (Socialdepartementet 2004).

6.3 Who will represent users?

One key issue for NGOs concerns whom one represents, which has also been a key issue in the work of the Committee. Since its start, the Network has had the possibility to nominate representatives to the Committee. Hence, what initially had been a Network mainly involved in EU related affairs and ambitions to influence the OMC process, now turned into a Network with a privileged position in relation to domestic affairs as Network membership potentially meant direct contact with the government and the Minister of Social Affairs.

These new opportunities caused some tensions within the Network, and above all concerning election procedures. Communication with Network members reveals that some individuals claimed a dual role, in terms of on the one hand representing the Network, and on the other hand representing their individual organization. The complex nomination and election procedure that followed demonstrates that the relationship between the Committee and the Network is ambiguous. To become a delegate one had to fulfill a long list of criteria, such as having the ability to express the voice of users and their organizations against the Ministry in a critical and constructive manner; experienced of working in organizations with socially and economically vulnerable (at grass-root level); capable to contribute to the committee’s role as strengthening user involvement in the completion of the NAP. The Network also emphasized that delegates had to include spokespersons for women and ethnic groups and on top of that the Ministry required an equal gender profile (Minutes Network meeting 28th of August, 2003).

After a complex nomination process, the Network decided that the Committee should include representatives from church organizations; disability organizations; social economy organizations; immigrant organizations; organizations for homeless people; and the client movement umbrella organization. However, despite lengthy discussions and ambitions to come to an agreement, the Network could not come up with ten delegations. Instead it put forward 11 people as its representatives, later accepted by the Ministry. Since then it has expanded and now includes 15 delegates from different user groups/organizations (Minutes Network meeting 26th of February 2005).

Despite these formal criteria, some members of the Committee have expressed some confusion whether they represent the Network, their own organization, a specific group of users or just themselves (having a background as users). The Network has continued to stress
its mandate, i.e. delegates represent the Network, solely. However, observations at meetings demonstrate that some organizations have adopted a dual position in contacts with the Minister (and partly also in the Network), as both representatives of the Network and their individual organizations. Others claim that they firstly represent a group of users and secondly their organization. These persons have no knowledge of being ‘nominated’ or ‘elected’ by the Network (Interview 2009). They rather expressed some loyalty to the delegate who contacted them and asked whether they had an interest to participate in the Committee. During the last years, we have also observed a high turnover of delegates within the Committee. This has made it difficult for the Network to upkeep its control of the Committee. New delegates tend rather to be elected on personal recommendations that any kind of informal membership in the Network.

6.4 The scope for participation and influence

During its first years the Committee met twice a year, yet have expanded its activities and now meets at least four times a year. Every meeting is being chaired by the Minister (Social Democratic, Morgan Johansson 2003 – 2006, and Christian Democrat, Maria Larsson from 2007 and onwards). Except these meetings, the Committee has arranged annual seminars on different topics with an interest either for the Minister or for members of the Committee: for instance, two seminars in 2005 on homelessness and on the encounter between people and power; two seminars in 2006 on homelessness and social enterprises.

Members of the Committee state that they are generally pleased with the Ministers, who have showed interests in issues of user involvement (Interview 2009). They argue that Ministers have not excluded anyone from the discussions, yet admitting that some people from the NGO sector tend to claim more space than others. They also maintain that the discussions have been open and that the Ministers have shown interest in their opinions, experiences and views. When the Ministers have had another opinion, he/she have been clear in explaining their way of reasoning, inviting members of the Committee to general discussions. Members of the Committee further express that often the Minister asked everyone for their opinion, making sure that everyone in the room had had the possibility to express their voice.

The shift in government (from a Social Democratic to a Liberal – Conservative) has not affected the work of the Committee, regarding working methods etcetera. Despite the Network’s fear, the new government has been even more interested in issues relating to the voluntary sector, however, with a slightly different profile than the previous government. It is possible to identify a certain shift concerning the topics being discussed. The Social Democratic Minister had a great interest in issues relating to drug abuse, which also were on top of the agenda during his years. The current Minister from the Christian Democrat party has a different agenda and pays much more focus on issues relating to violence against women, homelessness, single mothers and the role of NGOs as service providers (Minutes Network meeting 1st of February, 2007). This changed the agenda within the Committee, and the power-balance between Committee members and the Network, above all as key persons within the Network had better connections with the Social Democratic government (Interview 2007).

The Network has continuously tried to influence the agenda of the Committee. Since the start of the Committee, Network meetings have been held just before Committee meetings as a way to come up with joint positions on key issues and also which topics that one would
propose the Minister to focus. These pre-meetings have also aimed to help new delegates – as a form of capacity building – and to distribute information among delegates before the start of the formal Committee meeting. However, it has been an issue for constant debate within the Network whether delegates follow the decided strategy. Some organizations appear to have developed strategies on their own, as a counter-action to the Network’s steering strategies, e.g. representing only their own organization or a group of users, and not the Network.

Despite these unresolved differences, members of the Network and the Committee express different views on their ability to exert influence on the policy agenda. At first, delegates reported that there was very limited scope for influence and even participation. Even though the Committee was formally presented as one of consultation and information exchange, they had limited influence on the agenda. During the first year, the Committee held meetings mainly concentrating on topics of interest to the Minister. When the government invited external experts to meetings, NGOs were not allowed to invite their own. The agenda for meetings was distributed only a few days in advance, restricting Network to limited preparation and the Minister tended to leave the meetings early (minutes Network meeting, March 2004).

The government’s behavior in this context draws attention to the disadvantaged role of social NGOs in public policy-making. Some members of the committee even called it ‘a hostage situation’, in which they mainly functioned as ‘experts’ on the user perspective, answering questions from the Minister when asked. Other members of the Committee believed that these problems merely resulted from the committee having just been established and not yet having found its procedure or form. They expressed a pragmatic approach, arguing that social NGOs had to accept some difficulties when working closely with public authorities, as a necessity for gaining additional influence. Moreover, some Network members criticized the Network itself for focusing only on establishing contacts with the government and failing to develop an agenda for further action.

However, communication with members of the Network indicates that some of the unresolved ambiguities were worked out after a short time (even though some of the principal issues tend to remain unresolved). They express that recent meetings, hearings and seminars have resulted in new working methods, and greater opportunities for NGOs to present their views and opinions. At Network meetings it is being reported that they can actually have an impact on the topics being discussed (Minutes Network meeting, February 2005). They also stress the significance of the seminars being arranged, as these tend to be very popular among civil servants and decision-makers. Having the opportunity to influence the agenda at these seminars, e.g. being invited as a speaker, is naturally chance for NGO representatives to explain their view on key issues to an important audience.

There appear, however, to be little evidence of any greater impact on the Ministers policy agenda or the government’s for that matter. Common comments on this topic are rather: ‘I do not think we do so much of a difference’; ‘I want to believe that we can make an influence, yet think that we are there to legitimize decisions taken elsewhere’; and ‘They want to hear the views of users, yet we do not set the agenda’ (Interviews 2009). Others express a more pragmatic view, stressing the advisory role of the Committee and the sovereignty of the Minister to make decisions (Interviews 2009).

6.5 Barriers for voice and participation
Members of the Committee with limited or even no experience of lobbying and strategic policy work, and with limited knowledge on the policy-making process expressed the situation as conflict between ‘two worlds’, a political world and a grass-root world. They identified a clear difference between themselves representing small grass-root organizations or even having a personal background as users and Committee delegates who worked as were representatives of NGOs, i.e. having extensive networks with decision-makers, personal contacts with public officials, long experience of working with the government and being backed up by large resource-rich NGOs. To take part in the ‘other world’ was a major barrier for them above all as they meant to lack the necessary ‘language’: on what to say, how to phrase it, to whom and at what timing. Taking part in the Committee they observed how other delegates had these skills and experiences.

Personal experience of being a user puts extra pressure on delegates. Even though they expressed a great privilege of being invited to participate, they were uncertain what the government really was after and what ‘they as users could offer’. One delegate even expressed that taking part as a user in similar forums often felt as one prostituted oneself, providing decision-makers with personal stories without any control of what happened afterwards.

The Swedish government has not taken any initiative to a similar support structure as one finds in Norway and the pre-meetings organized by the Network appears to have had limited relevance. Expressing ways in which these barriers could be reduced, members of the Committee suggest internships at other NGOs, learning about the policy process and lobbying strategies from more experienced colleagues and draft documents on the topics being discussed at the Committee so that one could prepare before meetings (interviews 2009). However, despite these barriers people with personal user experience, meant that membership in the Committee was of great significance for them personally and for the organizations they represented. Participating in the Committee provided them with a different status. They acclaimed being met with greater respect in their local municipalities and thought membership had made them (and their organization) a more trustworthy partner for public actors.

### 6.6 A new process with a broader scope

The Network had a momentum to influence issues relating to social exclusion and marginality, however, in 2007 the Swedish government decided to initiate a Dialogue with all interested voluntary associations working with social welfare issues. In his first speech, the new Prime Minister had already expressed a more positive standpoint to a redefined relationship to the voluntary sector – not only for general ideological reasons, but also this could serve the government’s reform plan. In summer 2007, two Social Affairs Ministers hence launched the idea of a broader Dialogue with the sector about each partner’s rights and responsibilities in a newspaper article (Sabuni and Hägglund 2007).

The two Ministers claimed that the Swedish welfare state was facing a number of different challenges, such as an increasing number of people at old age and a large number of immigrants without an established position in the labour market. However, the central message in the article was an explicit criticism of the previous Social-Democratic government and its way of working with voluntary organizations. The Ministers argued that the traditional
way of dealing with new welfare issues had been to increase the involvement of public authorities and developing new forms of public services. They claimed the previous government for being ideologically blinded and failing to realize what the voluntary sector actually contributed and could contribute with, in the Swedish welfare state. For these and other reasons, they expressed the ambition to increase the number of private service providers combined with an expanded role for the voluntary sector in service provision.

However, the idea of setting up a dialogue with stakeholders was not only a response to the domestic situation and needs. The Ministers referred explicitly to changes taking place in other countries, stating that their role-models were the agreements made between the state and the voluntary sector that are already in place in several EU Member States, in particular the British Compact, but also the agreements in Denmark, Estonia, Canada and France’ (ibid.). Moreover, different voluntary associations or coalitions of associations had also lobbied the government to initiate such a process. For instance, one member of the Network had lobbied to change the ‘rule of the game’ between state and the voluntary sector. The umbrella organization is called the National Forum for Voluntary Social Work (hereafter ‘the Forum’) includes members like the Salvation Army, the Swedish temperance organization, Save the Children, Lions Club International, Swedish Red Cross and others. Its efforts to change the rules were strongly inspired by the processes leading to the establishing such agreements in a number of European countries.

These activities led up to a formal Agreement on the 23rd of October 2008, between the government and voluntary associations working in the field of social welfare. The Agreement aims to secure the status of voluntary associations as interest organizations and representatives of citizens and users in the Swedish welfare state, as well as to promote their role as providers of services (Integrations och jämställdhetsdepartementet 2008). The process leading up to the formal Agreement and the content of the Agreement have been analyzed elsewhere, yet previous studies demonstrate that the Dialogue process was innovative as representatives from the sector was directly involved in writing a draft proposal to an Agreement together with Ministry officials (Johansson & Hvinden 2008). This process will not replace the role of the Committee as it takes a broader and slightly different scope, regarding the issues being discussed (broad topics regarding voice and service delivery, the role of the sector etcetera) and the actors involved (open to almost every voluntary association working in the field of social welfare). The Agreement have even spurred voluntary associations (Forum association taking the lead) to form a broad umbrella association, aiming to bring together all voluntary associations in Sweden.

7. Discussion and concluding remarks

The two national case studies display both similarities and differences. The Swedish process towards the establishment of bodies for consultation and dialogue between the government and the voluntary sector, including organizations giving voice to vulnerable groups of citizens, has taken longer time and been more complex than the process leading up to the establishment of the model chosen in Norway.

The resulting bodies in the two countries are also somewhat different in their aims and the political and financial constraints they are exposed to. The Norwegian model is somewhat more narrowly focused on strengthening the dialogue between the government and organizations of poor and disadvantaged groups of citizens while the Swedish model(s) are broader in scope and also addressing slightly different issues. Since Norway is not an EU-
member and not involved in the EU’s open method of coordination (OMC) processes to combat exclusion one may see the Norwegian model as a partial substitute for this structure. Through the Collaborative Forum and the role of the Battery the emphasis on capacity-building and organizational development to promote involvement and joint policy articulation has so far been stronger in Norway.

In both countries the future of the specific models chosen will probably be sensitive to the stakeholders’ perceptions of their usefulness and the gains provided, both in symbolic and practical terms. Even so, the national processes we have described are interesting since they have sought to clarify what role the recognition, voice and influence of organizations of disadvantaged citizens should have in welfare policy formation. The new bodies for dialogue and consultation established in the two countries can be interpreted as an enlargement of the more established ‘corporative’ channels, dominated by powerful interests, e.g. the social partners. In this sense the establishment of the bodies introduces new elements in the NWM, complementing those elements usually mentioned or made explicit in analyses of this model.

At the same time, it is difficult to see that organizations of citizens with marginalized positions in society over time will be able to sustain a meaningful role in arrangements for policy dialogue and consultation unless they are granted a minimum of resources for the daily operation of organizations (offices, technical equipment, travel, fee for management, accounting, etc). Today the availability of such grants is unpredictable and uneven, at least for the less established and professionalized organizations, e.g. for persons with disabilities. Cynics might say that providing grants for these purposes will be spending for increased future spending, since the organizations are likely to present claims leading to larger welfare expenditure (if accepted). But this perspective neglects the significance of social inclusion, not only as an objective in itself but also as an instrument for the formation of better, more relevant and appropriate policies of the prevention and amelioration of social problems. In addition, there are good reasons to see low-threshold organizations of and for citizens in marginalized positions as important sources of self-help, peer-support, training, information and protection against social isolation. Through a redirection of some of the current expenditure on public welfare provisions the Nordic governments may strengthen the participatory dimension and reconcile it with the distribution dimension, not only of the NWM but also of the NSC.

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