



GOVERNANCE AND PARTICIPATION. CAN ANTI- POVERTY NGOS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Håkan Johansson (Dr., Associate Professor in social work),
Växjö University, Sweden.

Hakan.Johansson@vxu.se

NGOS PARTICIPATION AND INFLUENCE IN NORDIC POLICY-MAKING

- Corporatist tradition in Nordic welfare states (institutionalized consultation, membership in committees, negotiation and joint decision-making between the state and social partners).
- Few social welfare NGOs similar status or recognition. Why?
 - 1. Social exclusion or poverty have not been high-profile issues in Nordic welfare states
 - 2. Social welfare NGOs generally limited organizational resources
 - 3. Social welfare NGOs, a fragmented sector with no peak organizational structure.
 - 4. Social partners critical to social welfare NGOs (regarding representativeness, internal democratic structure, and capacity to be a 'reliable' partner in policy discussions and implementation).



NEW OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES FOR PARTICIPATION?

- Greater interest on part of Nordic welfare states to involve social welfare NGOs and also anti-poverty organizations in (formal/informal) consultation
 - Increase of formal committees involving users and user organizations, at national and local levels
 - Recent establishment of Dialogues/Compact models, involving a large number of social welfare NGOs in negotiations on welfare state development
 - Importance of structural funds, e.g. Equal programmes promoting partnership arrangements between social welfare NGOs, public and private actors.
 - Introduction of OMC on social inclusion, requesting governments to mobilize all relevant partners



PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL COMMITTEES (I)

- User Committee between Government and social welfare NGOs (2003 - ...)
 - Committee dedicated to issues on social exclusion, marginality and poverty
 - Led by the Minister of Social Affairs (Social Democratic Minister until 2006, and Christian Democrat from 2006 and onwards).
 - Other members of the Committee are top officials from the National Board of Health and Welfare as well as top officials from the organization for local authorities.
 - Initially eleven representatives of social welfare NGOs, now fifteen (church organisations, social economy organisations, immigrant groups, organizations of homeless people, user groups etcetera).



PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL COMMITTEES (II)

- Background to the establishment of a user committee
 - General **growing interest in involving users in policy debate** and policy making procedures, improving the effectiveness and legitimacy of services
 - Social welfare **NGOs extensive lobbying activities** to institutionalise contact patterns with government
 - **Personal interest of Minister** in building closer cooperation with social welfare NGOs: to know what is taking place 'at the ground'; 'to test ideas' and to create a forum for information exchange and discussions.
 - The government responsibility for completing **National Action Plans on social exclusion**



PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL COMMITTEES (III)

- The scope for participation of social welfare NGOs?
 - Representatives of social welfare NGOs **generally pleased with how Minister(s) lead the Committee**, not excluding people from discussions; open attitude and general interest in the perspective of users.
 - Committee members **initially had difficulties in influencing the agenda** and discussions (lack of information, late information etcetera).
 - Yet, **working methods have become more transparent and participatory**, e.g. possibilities to influence agenda, development of joint seminars and workshops, NGOs can inviting 'their' experts etcetera.



PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL COMMITTEES (IV)

- Participation with or without influence?
 - 'I do not think that we do so much of a difference.'
 - 'I want to believe that we can have influence, yet think that we are **there to legitimize decisions** taken elsewhere.'
 - 'They want to hear the views of users, yet **we do not set the agenda.**'
- Different views on participation and influence:
 - Some were highly critical arguing that they were '... in a hostage situation.'
 - Others more pragmatic, '... **good to have an established contacts with the Minister** and high officials'.



PARTICIPATION IN THE OMC PROCESS

(I)

- Social OMC in Sweden:
 - Mobilization of a **loose and informal network** of top spokespersons from a majority of social welfare NGOs working
 - EAPN one among many actors
- Initially, the **Ministry questioned the legitimacy of the Network**
 - ... a group of persons, lacking representation in a national context
 - ... too much focus on EU issues
 - ... at the same time pleased to have one 'partner' to approach



PARTICIPATION IN THE OMC PROCESS (II)

- The first NAPs on social inclusion, the government expressed limited 'need' for consultation.
 - ... the **government dismissed input** from the Network
 - ... the government argued a **NAP is a state-of-the-art document**, written for and by the national government
 - ... being a 'universal welfare state', the OMC/incl was considered of **limited significance** for Swedish policy-making



PARTICIPATION IN THE OMC PROCESS (III)

- Following NAPs/Strategic reports
 - **Organized consultation** between the Ministry and the Network, yet of an informal nature
 - Network invited prior to completion of NAPs/Reports, yet with short time span.
 - Network **invited to comment and discuss** policy development
 - Network **possibility to state its positions** on the issues raised in the NAP/Report in an appendix.



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD (I)

- Obstacles and institutional barriers
 - Consultation processes relating to social exclusion and/or poverty tend to have **limited recognition in relation to formal decision-making process.**
 - Neither OMC nor Committee and mandate for formal decision-making
 - The social OMC is mainly a bureaucratic process with limited interest shown from key politicians
 - The Committee much higher interest for politicians, yet fo personal nature.
 - Greater participation and **more participatory modes of governance, yet within limited spheres and with no real possibilities to influence.**



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD (II)

- **Obstacles and organizational barriers:**
 - **A unknown processes/arenas/actors:**
 - An informal network dealing with the social OMC; social welfare NGOs show limited interest in the social OMC
 - Information campaigns (external/internal)?
 - **Competition between NGOs:**
 - Resource control and opportunity hoarding among certain social welfare NGOs; membership based on unclear principles
 - Sharing of contacts and transparent processes?
 - **Lacking capacity:**
 - Some expressing an abyss between the 'political world' and the 'grass-root world'.
 - Support and training: less experienced accompanion more experienced NGO representatives



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD (III)

- **Welfare state changes:**
 - Social welfare NGOs requested to become more of service providers
- **Political and ideological changes:**
 - Increasing interest and support for social welfare NGOs, as a main player in welfare state development
- **Economic crisis:**
 - National government and local authorities start to cut spending on social welfare NGOs
- **A Swedish Compact on social welfare issues:**
 - Uniting a fragmented sector or increasing power/resource differences within the sector?



THANKS FOR LISTENING!

○ Contact details:

- Håkan Johansson, School of Health Science and Social Work, Växjö University, 351 95 Växjö, Sweden.
- Hakan.Johansson@vxu.se

