

Human Rights Cities and Regions in the Embryonic Stage – the Swedish Case

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1. Introduction

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) has taken a unique initiative in establishing a policy platform for Swedish municipalities assisting the local authorities in their work ensuring human rights for all. It is one of the rare – if not the first – example of a national association assisting and inspiring its local members to move further in realising their human rights obligations.

The initiative followed from three consecutive national human rights action plans in Sweden. At the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 it was recommended that states should develop a national action plan in order to promote a stronger nationwide implementation of human rights. Sweden adopted action plans in 2002, 2006 and a national strategy in 2016. These plans were successful in getting human rights deeper integrated in the policymaking and implementation at the national level and contributed to awareness raising at the local and regional levels .

2. SALAR Human rights program 2014-17

In 2014 SALAR entered into an agreement with the Government with the aim to increase the awareness and understanding of human rights at the local level. In 2015 a plan of action for the three year program was adopted with the following four points:

- Gather information and knowledge through dialogue with civil society actors, research institutions, national as well as international institutions;
- Strengthen human rights education and learning;

- Exchange of experience through promising practices;
- Deepen the work by a. Mainstreaming human rights into the processes of leadership and governance and b. Creating a policy platform and criteria for Swedish human rights cities and regions.

The ultimate aim would be that everyone working in direct contact with the citizen should have solid human rights knowledge and carry out the work within a culture of human rights. This would apply to the doctors and nurses, social workers and schoolteachers alike. It was however, also realised that this would never materialise if those in leadership roles do not ensure that human rights are mainstreamed into equivalent policies and strategies as well as ensuring that human rights constitute the very basis of any management training. Finally, the citizens should equally have stronger human rights awareness in order to be able to claim their rights.

3. What are the challenges?

In order to ensure a suitable approach in identifying the specific challenges it was decided that the current situation needed to be mapped. In particular four issues emerged.

First, it was often stated that the municipality or region would adopt general policy documents underscoring human rights values in its policies. However, it was perceived that these general policy lines are difficult to translate into concrete action in busy everyday life in the frontline meeting the citizens. Thus, it was realised that the human rights norms need to be made more accessible.

Second, the respondents had the impression that, “we are already doing human rights”. This is true from a narrow perspective; however, at the same time it was realised that staff does not necessarily see the link between i.e. the different grounds of discrimination. Thus, the strength of human rights adding policy coherence is often not realised at the frontline.

Third, it was queried how the human rights perspective would add value to the everyday work in municipalities and regions. It was difficult to realise that a human rights based approach empowers the institutions to take a citizens perspective that sometimes is far from the daily reality where the institutional pressures and priorities are often given primacy.

Fourth, there is a certain degree of confusion about all the different labels that a city can add to its name, such as sustainable city, rainbow city, child rights city etc. How does that all link to being a human rights city overall? This is an issue that needs to be solved in order not to create a label fatigue.

4. Human Rights Education and exchange of promising practice

The second step was to establish a common online HR-education portal – in cooperation with Uppsala University, which had a Government “task” to educate all national/state bodies in human rights at a basic level. The target group of SALAR is all of its 1,1 million

members; politicians as well as employees in all Swedish municipalities and regions. The training will be blended learning, on-site training, easy accessible on-line tools and much more.

The systematic exchange of good practice is still to be developed further. A number of workshops and training sessions have been convened by SALAR at which good practices are exchanged and throughout 2017 these will be collected more systematically.

5. Human rights in management and leadership

A critical step was to develop tools for including human rights in management and leadership. Based on The Human Rights Based approach to Development Cooperation Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies from 2003 SALAR developed 10 key points relevant for the work of managers in Swedish municipalities and regions. They focus on vulnerable groups and non-discrimination principles as well as gender equality. It is underscored that the performance of the official shall be assessed according to how human rights have been included in processes and results. Very importantly it is mentioned that the human rights situation shall be assessed regularly and challenges shall be included in the following planning circle.

Furthermore, a project with 11 municipalities and 3 regions was designed, with the over-arching goal being: to develop ways and methods in which human rights can be better integrated into the processes of leadership and governance in municipalities and regions

The more specific goals were:

1. The top management of the partaking municipalities and regions experience that they have gained qualitative support and that their human rights work has improved by taking part in the project
2. Challenges and success factors have been identified. The project gave insights into how municipalities and regions can work more holistically and intersectionally with the processes of leadership and governance in regards to human rights-issues instead of dealing with them separately in silos.
3. The project resulted in promising practice to be distributed to other municipalities and regions.

This component of the program is key since it is well known that without management and leadership understanding commitment to ensuring human rights respect and protection it is next to impossible to have it mainstreamed throughout the organisation. In a complex organisational structure such as a modern Swedish municipality or region it would be next to impossible. To assist the leadership in a practical manner a human rights policy platform was developed.

6. Human Rights Policy Platform

The next move in developing a solid base for Swedish human rights cities and regions was therefore taken in 2016 in collaboration with the Raoul Wallenberg Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law: developing a policy platform – “Human Rights at local and regional level – a platform for policy and institutional development”.

Building on the previous work the RWI conducted a series of interviews with key high officials and had a number of researchers developing articles on “what are the characteristic profiles of a human rights city and region?” highlighting promising practices and experiences. These studies and interviews were published in March 2017. This material established the planning base for understanding the particular needs experienced by some of the key actors in municipalities and regions as well as gaining insights to experiences harvested in other countries from similar developments.

The work made up the basis for an intensive three days workshop in September 2016 where experts and politicians from municipalities and regions met together with experts from SALAR, Swedish and international researchers and representatives from civil society. 35 persons met to co-create the first Swedish Policy Platform on Human Rights at local and regional levels. Previously SALAR had developed a policy platform on good local democracy that had a considerable impact on developing new ways of dialoguing with and engaging citizens in the policies and strategies of local authority.

The working method was important in the sense that 35 people with individual insight and rich experience contributed on an equal footing. No one had the final say nor was one insight considered of higher value than another. Thus, it was a true co-creation in a very new area in the human rights field. The outcome of the three days work was subsequently analysed and edited by SALAR and RWI experts. Finally, the governing board of SALAR adopted it in March 2017 as a key platform to assist the leadership in municipalities and regions and to guide the work of SALAR in coming years.

The aim of the platform is to clarify what decision makers in municipalities and regions need to do in order to strengthen their work on human rights. The platform has its outset in the international and regional human rights conventions however; it is not a legal exercise but rather an attempt to translate the legal norms into everyday language and realities of life in Sweden in the beginning of the 21-century. Furthermore, in recognizing the good work already being done, the aim of the document is to assist in taking this to a new level.

The general finding of the seminar was that it would be useful if more cities and regions pronounced themselves as human rights cities. Nonetheless, most importantly the everyday life of people living in Sweden at the local level should be characterised by a high level of human rights protection whether the local authorities chooses to label the city or region this way or not.

Based on the research, interviews and discussions six key criteria were identified as essential when aiming at being a human rights city or region. There is a commitment:

- 1) To be a local community where everybody takes an active responsibility to realise human rights and in that regard collaborate with civil society and other relevant actors;
- 2) To ensure knowledge and insight about human rights with politicians, officials, citizens and in civil society;
- 3) To include human rights in official policies, procedures and actions in order to strengthen the respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights;
- 4) To make visible the dilemmas and potential conflicts that emerge when rights are to be realised;
- 5) To ensure that human rights are respected, protected and fulfilled when signing contracts and other legal documents; finally
- 6) To develop manageable mechanisms for regular reporting and communication of the results.

These six points were considered essential as overarching issues to be included in any development of a human rights city or region, but in no way exhaustive. Other issues were discussed but a line had to be drawn. The remaining part of the document is divided into four small chapters. Each chapter highlights a key function for local authorities with a short explanation of the function followed by 6-10 points on what would be expected from a human rights based approach to local governance.

The four chapters first look at the local authority as an actor in relation to the local community in general ensuring a knowledge base in the community and an inclusive and non-discriminatory approach in all aspects of the community life, including segregation in housing.

Second the focus is on the role of the local authority as a democracy actor. The local authorities have a strong role to play in engaging the citizens and giving them the space and possibility to exercise their freedom to speak out and engage in public affairs. In this way human rights play a key role in building trust and understanding between authorities and citizens as well as between citizens.

Third, the local authorities are frontline service providers in areas such as education, health, care of the elderly, water and sanitation. In this regard it is of key importance that human rights are part of the management values and that those with direct engagement have a solid understanding of their human rights responsibilities including non-discrimination. The documents underscore the importance of ensuring that private companies acting on behalf of the public authorities understand their human rights responsibilities and that mechanism for complaints in these cases are established.

Finally, the internal dimension is mentioned, namely the authority as an employer. The employee has a double role as duty bearer vis a vis the citizen and as rights holder vis a vis the municipality or region. The leadership and management role is of essence in creating a culture of human rights inside the institutions. This includes the freedom of expression, non-discrimination, rights to privacy, etc.

All the areas described in the document are to be made accessible with a rich catalogue of promising practices from across the local life in Sweden.

7. Conclusion

The Swedish governments have for years taken serious the conclusions from the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights that took its main focus on how to implement human rights in every day realities. With three human rights strategies and many other initiatives it is obvious that human rights are better rooted today than ever before in Swedish society. At the same time it is a long journey with no fixed end point. The next stage in this journey has been, as described above, to anchor human rights more firmly in the day-to-day work in the municipalities and regions with the aim to ensure that staff meeting citizens act according to and work within a human rights culture.

The policy platform as the most recent development is a prototype, which needs to be tested and evaluated as well as developed further in the coming years. There is already significant interest from Swedish municipalities and regions and the city of Lund has already a political decision in place stating that they are to become the first Swedish Human Rights City.

The follow-up to and outcome of these efforts are important, however more important is the common journey of politicians, officials, experts, civil society actors and many more. The process facilitates important discussions about how to make a dignified life materialise in the space (municipality or region) that citizens share for the moment. That is the essence.