



THE CHURCH OF SWEDEN AND THE QUEST TO BOUNCE BACK BETTER



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The Role of Civil Society in a Resilient Society¹

Civil society organizations have distinctive roles to play in every society. They collectively contribute to the very communal fabric that enables a dynamic social contract, and provide the space and the opportunity for matters not easily handled in the other spheres of society. In those roles civil society is also a crucial part in the resilience of any society and a key force in its capacity to cope or even grow with the various, sudden and unexpected jolts that strike from time to time. One such situation was the novel coronavirus that impacted the world in the spring of 2020.

→ In the wake of a tsunami, periods of rapid transnational migration and the displacement of huge populations like the situation in many European countries in late 2015 following the war in Syria, or during a global pandemic – civil society needs to be both strong and agile.

In the article, we focus on organizational learning and use the response of *Svenska kyrkan* (the Church of Sweden, henceforth “the Church”) during two emergencies. We examine how the Church and her parishes helped their local communities and Sweden through the crisis created by the coronavirus in spring 2020. Our discussion also addresses how organizational learning – the acquisition of new skills and knowledge – contribute to society’s resilience.

“A period of crisis is essentially also a period of learning. We know that each new crisis also opens windows of opportunity.”
(Archbishop Antje Jackelén, 2020, p. 10, our translation)

We consider two factors particularly relevant to enable civil society to perform at its best during extreme circumstances: (1) a capacity for

organizational learning and the transfer of knowledge between individuals and organizations. We introduce the concept of **organizational slack** where either internal assets can be re-deployed or new external resources attracted.

We introduce a fourth category of slack tentatively labeled “organizational memory”. This form has its most explicit manifestation in the capabilities that emerge and evolve when new knowledge and skills are acquired or new social networks develop, for example during an emergency. We call this “organizational memory” the “memory” of the organization.

Thus, our perspective is informed by the assumption that also organizations can acquire new knowledge and skills, which increases the ability of people in the organization to take action in the future. The new capabilities are the result of organizational learning and these capabilities can – which is the basic idea behind the concept of organizational slack – again be brought forth and re-deployed in new tasks.

To identify the role and position of civil society in the general society in which it is embedded has been the object of intense debate. Depending on the interests, normative positions, as well as on the disciplinary emphases are added, but the contribution of civil society to the overall social contract can be located in three broad areas.

Organizations of civil society are seen as key actors in the formation of social cohesion, and creation of trust and social capital. “Schools of democracy” is a term often repeated in both policy and scholarly work.

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In this role, civil society also functions both as a hotbed and a preserve
for ideologies and norm systems – new and old – in society (Reuter,

also be referred to other expertise if needed. More hands-on support was also arranged to ease anxiety over practical matters. Primarily elderly members of the parish used the hotline, but younger people were calling in from other parts of the country too since they were worried about their relatives living in the parish without being able to visit them.

Advocacy. Since the very start the Archbishop has been substantially more active in the media than a normal spring, and the most vulnerable and their situation, in Sweden and globally, has often been the focus. Both migrants and the homeless have been a topic in the Archbishop's messages during the COVID-19 crisis. One such example is a debate article in one of the dailies and a following open letter to the Swedish government from the Christian council. The Archbishop – together with other church leaders – demand more support for the homeless, asylum seekers, and migrants waiting to be deported:

The government and relevant authorities must now intervene as soon as possible with measures aimed at these groups, in order to save human lives. It is a matter of concrete help with money and food, but also clear health information, health care, and hygiene options, such as public toilets and washing stations. This is absolutely necessary for people at risk but good for our entire society. (Open letter from the Christian Council, May 2020)

Welfare. On March 24, 2020, a national declaration of intent on cooperation for how to deal with the coronavirus crisis – a "Corona Compact" – was signed between a handful of civil society actors, on the one hand, and the public sector, on the other hand, represented by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (*Myndigheten för samhällsberedskap*) and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (*Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner*). Together with the Church also the Swedish Red Cross, the Swedish Sports Confederation (*Riksidrottsförbundet*), Save the Children Sweden, and the national umbrella association for city missions (*Riksföreningen Sveriges Stadsmissioner*) signed the compact.

The declaration contained a proposal to coordinate national and local voluntary support to assist municipalities. Concretely, municipalities in need of support from volunteers to, for example, buy groceries or a YX|WbYZf dYcd Y|b h Y|Xyb|UXf|g [fci dgk \c k YfY|bgfi W|X|e remain at home, reported this request to a national coordination center headed by the Swedish Red Cross. A local chapter or association of one of the organizations was then assigned the responsibility to both coordinate the local volunteers and cooperate with the municipality.

Only a few weeks after the declaration was signed, the Church had taken on the responsibility for local coordination in about 70 of the 290 municipalities in Sweden. Various guidelines and checklists were prepared and distributed from the national level to ease implementation for the parishes. According to the national coordinator for the Church, Dy`GHf`Yzh Y`cW`WcdYfU|cb`VYk Yb`h YX|`YfYb|cf|U|rl|cbg worked well. In many cases, the experiences gained and the networks established between some of the organizations during the reception of h YfYZ [YgZca`h YGmf|U|Wb|U|WUYXh Ykcf`g VgUbh|U`n|

Local cooperation during the Corona crisis was facilitated in many places by the fact that we already knew each other since the refugee crisis. We worked together already then, both with the Red Cross and with the sports movement.

Per Starke, Church of Sweden coordinator in the Swedish Corona compact

In another example of the services organized by the Church, the growing levels of anxiety due to the coronavirus crisis led to a rapid increase of calls and online chats to "Priest on duty" (*Jourhavande präst*): cf`a`cfYh`U|*`S`nYf`g`Wb`UXyb|U`hU`g`X|`f|b|`h`Yb|`h`k`|h` a priest on duty have been possible via the national emergency number 112. Early on, the calls and online chat-requests more or less exploded.

9300 calls and had 2227 online chats, as compared to 6306 calls and 916 chats during the same month the previous year. With 50 percent more incoming calls and double the amount of chats, this was a substantial increase. Nina Sagovinter, the national coordinator for “Priest

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retired priests were especially willing to step in. Due to the health re-
Wa a YbXU]cbgh YmWi `Xbc`cb[Yf Û`]bUrcfX]bUfngYj]Wgcf Z bY-
rals as they normally would.

K \YbHU_]b[rc 7\i fWgHU UhX] YfYbh`Yj YgUbXUWcgg h YWi b-

In the fall of 2015, many European countries experienced an rapid-migrating in Syria. Hundreds of thousands of refugees suddenly migrated during a short period and some 163,000 people applied for asylum in Sweden, which was about twice the number of migrants compared to the entire year before. This was a considerable jolt both to the welfare systems (schools, hospitals, social services), but it also added pressure on municipalities across Sweden after an initial port of entry in the major urban areas.

A wide range of organizations quickly became involved as early responders with a large amount of volunteers in the forefront of the reception at major train stations and other ports of entry, like in so many other European countries: receiving, providing accommodation, and caring for the refugees. More than 80 percent of the parishes in the Church of Sweden organized some form of activity for the refugees during this period. Both long- and short-term housing, language training courses, counseling, and help with asylum applications, to a wide range of social activities like cooking classes, music and sports events,

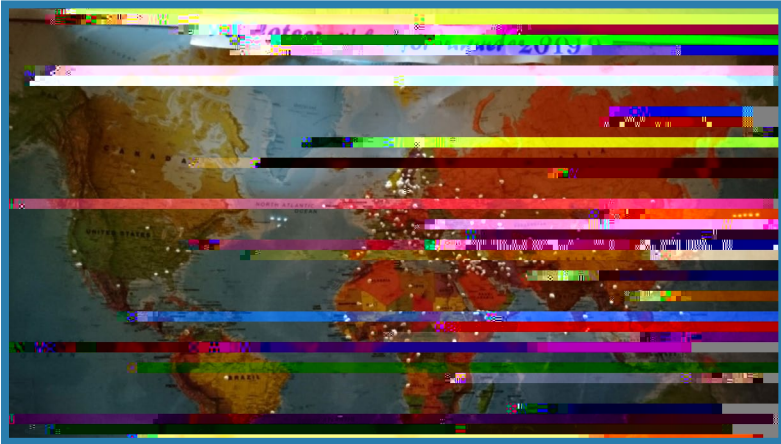
Saltsjöbaden parish is situated in a rather wealthy suburban community located about 20 km outside of the city center of Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. The share of refugees or immigrants in the population is rather low, and in 2016 as many as 72 percent of the population (10,600 inhabitants) were members of the Church (7,600 members). Prior to autumn of 2015, the Saltsjöbaden parish did not organize any particular services or activities catering to refugees, asylum seekers or newly arrived immigrants. However, this would change dramatically during the fall of 2015.

The vicar of the parish told us in an interview that he had listened to a speech delivered by the Pope in the early fall of 2015 where he called on every Catholic parish in Europe to house a refugee family. This speech inspired the vicar to consider how their own parish could contribu-

te. In the parish was also a priest with a special interest in refugee matter who would eventually step in and coordinate all the refugee-related activities in the parish.

One day the parish received a phone call. A woman living close by but until then unknown to the vicar asked if they had any spare space for refugee families. Meetings were organized and after some discussions, it was decided that the parish would open the church building for two refugee families every Thursday to Sunday. A Facebook group was also set up for other people in the community wanting to get involved. The group quickly grew to initially include over 50 volunteers which eventually became 400 volunteers, many of whom had not been involved in the Church beforehand.

ly members of the Church in 2016 (2 700 members). Given the mixed ethnic composition of the population, the people in the parish have a`cb[`Y dY]YbWcZkcf_]b[k]h`X] YFbh[fci dgcZ]a a][fUhgZcZ]b` undocumented.



One of our respondents explained that even if the parish formally is part of the Evangelical Lutheran tradition of the Church of Sweden, the worship services normally attract people from various faith traditions. There is a map of the world on one wall where the participants can mark a place for which they pray, and the pattern of marks is illustrative of the of the diversity of the population in the parish.

The activities organized for immigrants by the parish started well before the extreme situation in 2015. One early step was an initiative by the parish deacon to gather a group of women for sewing and Swedish language training. An unemployed teacher joined in as a volunteer, and the initial initiative developed further into a program consisting of education and training. The ambition was to develop long-term services to complement the pure emergency aid. A folk high school (*Helsjöns folkhögskola*), a second hand shop (*Erikshjälpen Secondhand i Kortedala*) and two other parishes of the Church (*Örgryte and Kortedala*) became dUhbYfg]bUbYkcf_`Y cfhk]h`h`Yl dfYggX]bh]h]cb`c`g`ddcfh`h`Y

gYZYghYa`cZ]h`Y]a a][fUhgUbXc`Yf`E`Ugh`Ydfc[fUa`9BJ`Gk`Ugh` be labeled – “a way into the Swedish society”.

=b`&S%`E`S%`z`Ubch`Yf`dU]g`]b`U`X]`YfYbhdUfhcZ;`ch`YbVi`f[` wanted to start a “language café” (*språkcafé*) as a response to the new [fci dgcZ]Y] [Y]g]c`YfUck!h`fYg`c`Xcddcfli`b]mZcf]h`Ya`lc`dfUW` tice their language skills. Volunteers from this local inner-city commu- nity, some without earlier experience from the Church, signed up. But no refugees showed up. The new volunteers were instead invited to take part in the activities organized by the suburb parish in Bergsjön. Learning developed between two parishes, also creating a situation where dYcd`YZ`ca`X]`YfYbhdUfhcZ]h`Y]m]Wi`Xa`YhUbX`c]b`Ug]c`i`bhYfg”

Since 2004, the parish has also been cooperating closely with a local Gothenburg-based philanthropic foundation, *Rosengrenska stiftelsen*,]bUb`Y`cfh]c`dfcj`jXY`YU`h`WfY` A`E`

turned into a new asset in the organization with the potential to become a special form of slack (when not actively used). This particular type of slack is closely related to organizational learning and is tentatively

In order for organizational learning to happen, the new skills and experiences won by the individuals involved during a particular situation are a 'memory' of the organization. This organizational capability is "stored" in new routines, documents and practices. This decouples the new organizational members. It becomes a new organizational asset with the capacity to increase the ability of the organization to take action. It becomes a new organizational asset with the capacity to increase the ability of the organization to take action. It becomes a new organizational asset with the capacity to increase the ability of the organization to take action. It becomes a new organizational asset with the capacity to increase the ability of the organization to take action.

Available slack including the untapped resources most easily converted, like excess liquidity or retained earnings. Our case examples include physical facilities quickly made accessible for the housing of refugee families, but also the use of available parish funds, i.e., excess liquidity. Recoverable slack, on the other hand, are assets already assimilated into the organization and when necessary. Excess overhead costs are mentioned in the literature, and our own account points to the capacity of the Church to quickly adapt and go beyond job descriptions as instances of recoverable slack being re-applied.

The third category, potential slack, is rating new or additional resources from external sources: new loans or are through available but not yet explored fund-raising events or grant

applications not yet written. In our case, an important potential slack released is the ability to attract new volunteers previously not engaged within the Church during both the 2015 refugee reception and the 2020 Coronavirus crisis.

The new category of slack, is internal to the organization like available and recoverable slack, but with the unique characteristic that it will not be reduced or spent when used. It is also being stored and shared in the organization but this particular kind of asset does not disappear when used. It can instead both be re-used and applied in several parallel settings without "being spent", which reminds us of Robert Putnam's discussion of social capital or some of Pierre Bourdieu's empirical account are:

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more holistic approach to the world and to the individuals coming in for community, participation and support, both in contrast to government U YbWgUbXhc Zc!dfcÙhWfdcfUjcbg"K YUF[i Yh UhVVM gYcZh]gž the organizational learning taking place between extreme and sudden ^c'lg]ga UXYa cfYYUg] nrcgg]VY"=b h Ydi V]VgYMcfa UbmX] YFyb national authorities are involved and take center stage "in silos" depen- X]b['cb'h YgdY]UWj U]YmcZYa Yf[YbWzUbX'bY]h Yf'cZh YbUjcbU agencies have the extended local network like the parish and diocese level, which in the Church are tied together in one and the same organi-