BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR THE INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANTS IN SWEDEN

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SUMMARY

Immigration has quite a long history in Sweden, reinforced by the free Nordic labour market which was created in 1954. Close ties with Finland implied that Finnish nationals would enjoy the same conditions as Swedish citizens. As a logical extension of the above, it was later taken for granted that non-Nordic immigrants should enjoy the same standards of life as well. This idea was given form in 1968 when the Riksdag, the Swedish Parliament, made equality the aim for all immigrants, providing them with the same rights, opportunities and duties as Swedes.

The year 1975 represented a turning point in Swedish immigrant policy with the addition of two aims: freedom of choice and partnership. By officially recognizing the importance of immigrants’ cultural heritage, Sweden moved from a policy of cultural and linguistic assimilation towards one of multiculturalism. The change, reflected in the Constitution, affirmed that ethnic, linguistic and religious groups should have possibilities to preserve and develop their own cultural and community life. These principles are concretized through programmes including: financial support to immigrant organisations and religious associations; a home language programme giving children the right to instruction in their mother tongue; Swedish language instruction for children and adults; and the right to vote and run for office in local and regional elections. Following almost twenty years of this ambitious, long-term policy of integration, the author assesses the results.

During the 1950s and the 1960s the unemployment rate for immigrants was approximately the same as that for Swedes. However since the 1970s, the situation has deteriorated, with unemployment among ‘foreign nationals’ about twice as high as among Swedish nationals. The ‘old migrants’, those who arrived in Sweden in the 1960s, are being excluded from the labour market while highly educated people face difficulty finding work corresponding to their educational background. Finally, non-Europeans, women and young people as well as recently arrived immigrants experience great difficulty entering the labour market.

In autumn of 1992, the government decided to set up a Parliamentary Commission to review immigrant and immigration policies with particular focus on the labour market situation, instruction in Swedish and the home language, and the specific problems of young people and women. The major question the Commission will deal with is the kind of policy that is necessary to improve the integration of immigrants and how to deal with a multicultural society comprised of a greater number of different linguistic and ethnic groups than ever before.
Basic Principles for the Integration of Immigrants in Sweden

In this paper I will give an outline of the philosophy and the basic principles underlying the policy for the integration of immigrants in Sweden. I will also give some examples of the results achieved and make some comments on the lessons that can be drawn from Swedish experience. Further I will make some reflections on the concept of integration and how to measure it.

Swedish integration policy - a philosophy develops

Swedish integration policy is often dated to 1975, when the guidelines for the immigrant policy were laid down unanimously by the Riksdag (the Parliament). The policy was based on three objectives: equality between immigrants and Swedes, freedom of choice on whether to maintain one’s own culture or not and partnership, implying co-operation and solidarity between immigrants and the native Swedish majority. The underlying philosophy of integration, however, can be traced back further.

Those who arrived in Sweden before 1965 had to rely on their own capacity, on relatives, friends and voluntary organisations to adjust to life in Sweden. As from 1965 the first measures were taken to facilitate the integration of immigrants, e.g. provision of basic information on Swedish society in several languages and funds for free instruction in Swedish. The first Immigrant Service bureaux, providing assistance to immigrants – where possible in their own language – were created at the end of the 1960s, and were soon established in a large number of municipalities.

In 1967 non-Nordic immigration was restricted and work permits were required prior to arrival in Sweden. The official argument to justify the change was that immigrants could not be offered a reasonable standard of living if immigration was not controlled.

This link between immigration and immigrant policies has been emphasized and referred to at other times, too, in spite of the difficulties maintaining it when the predominant part of migration was overtaken by secondary and refugee migration. Labour migration turned out to be controllable and the outcome was successful – since the beginning of the seventies the non-Nordic in-flow has been marginal. For various reasons the volume of other types of in-flow, such as refugee migration, cannot be as easily regulated as labour migration. Another example is Nordic immigration, the size of which cannot be regulated by immigration policy, as there has been a free Nordic labour market since 1954.
As restricted immigration was based on the prerequisite for a good standard of living for immigrants, it may appear strange that the shaping of Swedish immigration policy has been strongly influenced by free and massive Finnish migration. The reason is the close ties to Finland, which provided strong motives for offering the Finnish immigrants conditions in Sweden very similar to those of the native population. When people from non-Nordic countries were allowed to settle in Sweden there were reasonable arguments to treat them in the same way as Finnish and other Nordic immigrants.

In 1968 the Riksdag made equality the aim for all immigrants in Sweden. The generally accepted principle that society had a responsibility for all its members was extended to immigrants and their children without. Immigrants should therefore have the same rights, opportunities and duties as Swedes.

On the labour market, immigrants should be paid according to the same rules and norms as the native Swedish majority and concentrations in low-paid jobs should be avoided. Naturally Sweden had a responsibility to meet the special needs of immigrants according to available resources, and mainly within the welfare system. Regarding wishes to preserve "cultural traditions and language", contact with the mother tongue was considered important; beyond this there were few possibilities for accommodating the needs of particular groups. Initiatives had to come from the group itself. These are some of the views on integration expressed in the Riksdag debate in 1968.

All people given a permit to stay in Sweden were considered "immigrants". This is still the case and means that there is no sharp boundary between refugees and other immigrants regarding integration. An exception is the introductory programme for refugees. Normally "immigrant" is used for people of "foreign background" whether born abroad (first generation) or in Sweden (second generation) and whether holding a foreign citizenship or having acquired Swedish citizenship.

In 1975, freedom of choice and partnership were added to equality as aims of immigration policy. This was the final break with the cultural and linguistic assimilation policy prevailing until the end of the 1960s – beginning of the 1970s. In 1975 the importance of immigrants’ cultural background was officially recognised and the first step towards a multi-cultural society was taken. What a multi-cultural society is, should or could be and the consequences of such a society were, however, never discussed in great detail. The change of direction is reflected in the Constitution where, from 1976, it is stated that the possibilities of ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities to preserve and develop their own cultural and community life must be promoted.

Integration – what is that?

So far I have used immigration policy and integration policy as synonyms, which is becoming more and more common in Sweden, and I will continue to do so, in relation to each of the three goals mentioned above. But in the documents and decisions I refer to the word "integration" is not frequently used. "Adjustment" and "adaptation" to "life in Sweden" or to the "Swedish way of living" are more common expressions. If "integration" was used in political
discussions at the end of the 1960s, it was mainly used as an alternative to "assimilation". When the assimilation policy was rejected in 1975, "integration" first came to be very closely related to the goal of equality. The guidelines were sometimes expressed as "structural integration", referring to the goal of equality, and "cultural pluralism", referring to the other two goals.

In the course of time the cultural dimension has become increasingly associated with the integration issue. Different aspects - normative and instrumental - of the role of culture can be distinguished in public discussions. For example: integration which does not accept at least a certain degree of cultural difference is not acceptable (which is in accordance with the official line). Sustaining the culture of immigrants is therefore often said to be the best way to facilitate integration - or the contrary - and is sometimes said to be a hindrance to integration. Integration has also been discussed in terms of immigrants’ participation in political life.

Finding a job has always been regarded as one of the most important ways for immigrants to become integrated. Given the current economic situation, with severe labour market problems, especially for immigrants, integration of immigrants is often identified with their position in the labour market position.

The reason for paying attention to the concept of integration is, of course, that it is difficult to speak about the outcome of integration policies and how to measure integration without keeping in mind that the word is used in different ways, both within a country and among countries. In this paper, integration is perceived in a broad sense, comprising all kinds of activities within the framework of immigration policy.

Another aspect is how to judge and interpret the results of integration. When is integration "good" or "satisfactory" and from whose point of view? And what criterion shall we use to measure integration? If we use a defined native majority as the criterion, under what conditions can differences be acceptable? When is a person or a group integrated? I will not try to answer these or other similar questions, but I think it is important to bear them in mind.

Instruments to achieve integration

Swedish immigration policy is mainly implemented within the context of its general welfare policy. All government agencies and authorities are responsible for carrying out the policy and the same welfare offices serve both immigrants and Swedes. An increasing awareness of immigrants’ special needs has resulted in certain adjustments, especially in areas where many immigrants live together, e.g. by providing special reception times and service in various languages at the maternity and child care offices.

The general policy is supplemented by specific policy measures and reforms directed exclusively to the immigrants. The 1975 parliamentary resolution on immigration policy is the starting point of several reforms and programmes carried out to promote the integration of immigrants. Financial support to immigrant organisations and religious associations, the home
language programme giving children the right to instruction in their mother tongue, instruction in Swedish language for children and adults and the right to vote and run for office in local and regional elections are important examples. The right to vote in parliamentary elections is, however, restricted to Swedish citizens. It has been made easy to qualify for Swedish citizenship, which also reflects the integration philosophy.

The Swedish Immigration Board, established in 1969, was given the task of co-ordinating and monitoring issues concerning immigrants and taking initiatives for improvements. Other tasks are including information to and about immigrants and acting as a link between Swedish society and immigrant organisations (concerning immigration policy the Board is responsible for the regulation of immigration and administers the refugee reception system). The Ministry of Culture is responsible for immigrant as well as immigration issues. Local authorities are responsible for a major part of policy implementation. Integration issues are current in practically all sectors of the Swedish society.

The outcome - and how come?

Sweden has a long-term and ambitious integration policy, as well as an elaborated administration and, to some extent, earmarked funds to implement policy. The policy has been in force for about 20 years. But what has been achieved? What are the results? And how can they be explained? Of course there is no simple answer. It varies depending on who is asked, what aspect of integration is deserved and which immigrants are considered. Furthermore, the answer - or at least the reliability of the answer - is confined to what kind of information and knowledge can be obtained.

In Sweden there is a long tradition of collecting statistical data. Since immigration policy was first laid down, many empirical studies have been carried out and evaluations have been made in order to get information on immigrants and their situation in Sweden. But there is still a lack of knowledge, especially when it comes to more detailed information. The category "immigrant" has, for example, often been used when the outcome of integration has been described. Such a category is, however, too broad to catch all the differences and nuances regarding nationality, sex, age, length of stay in Sweden and so forth. Unfortunately the kind of data that is needed for a deeper understanding is not always available.

Having a job has been considered to be of vital importance for the integration of immigrants. For that reason direct measures to facilitate the conditions for immigrants in the labour market have been, and still are, given high priority in labour market policy. Different kinds of programmes and projects, funds to strengthen the work of the local employment offices and develop new methods of counselling, are some of the instruments used. In spite of good intentions and special efforts many immigrants face severe problems in the labour market - even in times of economic prosperity.

During the 1950s and 1960s unemployment rate for immigrants was about the same as for Swedes. In the 1970s the situation changed and for a long period of time the unemployment among foreign nationals (the category normally registered in statistics) has been about twice as high as among Swedish nationals.
The situation of immigrants has been aggravated by the deteriorating labour market situation. Unemployment is now increasing twice as fast among foreign nationals and as fast among non-European nationals. During the first half of 1992 the unemployment rate among non-Nordic nationals was 13.5 per cent as against 3.9 per cent for Swedish citizens. For young people (20-24 years) of foreign citizenship the unemployment rate is 18.9 per cent as against 9.75 per cent for the corresponding Swedish age group. The variation among nationalities is large.

Besides increasing unemployment there are other signs of integration difficulties. In the 1960s, the employment ratio for immigrants was higher than for Swedes, but since the beginning of the 1980s the employment ratio has decreased constantly. It is especially low among women and non-European groups (Arabic-speaking immigrants have the lowest ratio).

Another problem is the exclusion from the labour market of the so-called "old migrants", i.e. migrant workers who arrived in Sweden in the 1960s. Many of them are on long sick leave or have early retirement pensions. Women from former Yugoslavia and Greece are topping the statistics.

Many highly educated people have problems finding employment commensurate with their educational background. There is certainly more than one explanation for this, but studies show that their situation cannot be understood without taking discrimination and xenophobia into account.

The situation of those who arrived in Sweden during the last few years is also very difficult. Efforts to support their introduction to the labour market do not appear to be sufficient. On the whole they face great difficulties finding a job. It is estimated that 25-30 per cent of the recently arrived immigrants have an educational background much lower than that corresponding to Swedish compulsory schooling, which lessens their chances on the labour market.

It is assumed that the waiting period in the refugee reception system has negative effects on the integration process. To counteract passivity and acquaint asylum-seekers with Swedish society, various measures are taken soon after entry to Sweden. By starting integration activities at an earlier stage, it is hoped that the future situation will improve, should the asylum-seekers in question be allowed to stay. But the problem is probably more complex. In a study carried out last year, the expected negative correlation between waiting times and future possibilities on the labour market was not found. On the contrary, the waiting period provided them with greater cultural knowledge about Sweden, which appeared to be a positive factor when searching for a job.

There are also alarming reports regarding knowledge of the Swedish language. In spite of the Swedish instruction programme, many people experience great difficulties with the Swedish language - even among those who have lived and worked in Sweden for many years. Still more alarming is that children in certain areas where immigrants are concentrated, seem to have problems learning Swedish. There are simply not enough Swedish speaking children, living in the same areas. This situation was also a result of the housing policy in the 1960s, which unintentionally led to housing segregation on the outskirts of the bigger cities.
In studies carried out in the seventies and in the first half of the eighties, the differences in housing, work, income, social welfare etc. between immigrants and Swedes could to a certain extent be explained by differences in socio-economic background. When comparable groups were studied, the differences were - not always, but often - relatively small. Even if there were complaints and heated discussions about the gap between immigrants and Swedes, it was still possible to argue that the results were fairly good, at least compared to the ambitious aims. It was also possible to seek comfort in arguments like "integration takes time". But today?

Many descriptions - not only those mentioned above - are pointing in the same direction in autumn 1992 in a report on immigration policy to the Riksdag, the Parliamentary Auditors provide examples leading to the same conclusions. Integration is not proceeding as satisfactorily as is wished. The gap between some immigrants, or some categories of immigrants, and the native Swedish majority is widening.

To be able to explain the deficiencies, several factors must be taken into account and some further evaluation is needed. To this end the government will appoint a Parliamentary Commission to review the immigrants as well as immigration policies. In March 1994 the Commission will make recommendations concerning immigrant policy, and a year later, recommendations concerning immigration.

In the terms of reference, concerning policy towards immigrants, some areas of special importance are indicated: the labour market situation, instruction in Swedish and the home language programme. The situation of young people and women is also of special interest.

The Commission will evaluate the effects of general welfare policy compared to the effects of special measures directed to immigrants. It will also consider how responsibility for various aspects of integration can be allocated to different bodies and levels as well as how the individual’s own initiative regarding integration can be promoted.

Swedish policy towards immigrants was created about 20 years ago. The situation today, in Sweden as well as in the world, is different in many ways. A fundamental question for the Commission to address is the kind of policy necessary today to improve the integration of immigrants and how to handle a multi-cultural society, composed not of a few but of hundreds of different linguistic and ethnic groups.
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