

# Malmö's path towards a sustainable future: Health, welfare and justice

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This is a very interesting and inspiring document for those readers, like me, who live outside Sweden. The report is a major achievement. The benefits of multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary cooperation are evident. Above all, arguments from the social and natural sciences are interwoven to produce a well-presented and accessible text that makes a connected series of recommendations and translates them into action points that can be used to monitor progress in future. The most impressive feature is the persistent and multidimensional concern with human flourishing and equity and, in this context, the critique, sometimes explicit, more often implicit, about the limits of one-sided concern with economic growth.

The report of the Malmö independent commission is a serious, knowledge-based, and innovative inquiry into the social determinants and social effects of individual, family, and community health inequalities in Malmö and its surrounding region. It was one of the first local commissions anywhere in the world to describe the incidence of inequalities and inequities in health and welfare, to identify their consequences not only for individuals and families but also for the ecological, economic, and social well-being and long-term sustainability of society as a whole, and, on this basis, to propose a radical, comprehensive, and collective solution that does not 'blame the victims' but seeks to educate and empower them a coordinated set of actionable recommendations within the powers and capacities of the Malmö city-region.

In short, it addresses in a systematic and accessible manner the conditions for healthy individuals and families in a healthy society. Furthermore, its recommendations go far beyond the personal responsibility of individuals and families for their own health and well-being to include fundamental questions of empowerment, institutional design, the need for joined-up policy thinking, and concerted community strategies. Thus the report is directly addressed to the politicians of Malmö and other interested citizens and organizations with a stake in sustainable development in Malmö.

The report considers not only the social epidemiology of long-established patterns of inequality and, more significantly, *inequity* in health and welfare but also the various interrelated con-

ditions that can be targeted to reduce them. These include the built environment, pathogenic features of key social and institutional arrangements, and prevailing social outlooks and policy paradigms. The report likewise identifies and elaborates carefully considered and interconnected policy recommendations that, together, could address the multifaceted causes and effects of these inequities.

It might seem unusual or even perverse to the layperson that the chosen entry point into questions of social sustainability is health and welfare rather than inequalities in wealth and income or the crisis-prone nature of the capitalist market economy and the growing integration of the Malmö region into the world economy. The report addresses this issue head-on. Its authors argue that health should be at the centre of societal planning and the collective effort to secure the conditions for sustainable societies. This is partly a reflection of the mandate given to the authors and of their background and partly a reflection of the role that health plays in the report. For health is the lens through which many other factors in society are explored. Thus, in addition to its detailed analyses of the uneven quality from day to day, over the life-course, and from generation to generation, the report also explores many different factors that combine to create the social aetiology of inequalities and inequities in health and, in addition, consider the consequences of these inequalities and inequities for the ecological, economic, and social viability of contemporary society. Perhaps

other lenses could have been adopted but the commissioners justify their choice in the first instance in terms of the ethical imperative to do something about inequitable differences in health. This is because they regard health as a human right, noting in particular that children, who are essentially blameless in this regard, have a right to health. Moreover, together with poverty and lack of opportunities for political influence, the authors consider health to be the key not only to individual flourishing but also the flourishing of society as a whole. Measures taken to enhance individual health also promote a healthy society. Yet this is often ignored in the one-sided concern in public debate with economic growth both for its own sake and as the source of legitimacy for elected politicians and state officials. In highlighting the significance of health, therefore, the report also criticizes – not just implicitly – the emphasis on growth as the *ultima ratio* of business and politics. Indeed, in a neat and powerful argument they argue that society cannot afford not to invest in health and welfare because this pays economic as well as social dividends.

This is a very interesting and inspiring document for those readers, like me, who live outside Sweden. With the exception of some conservatives and neoliberals who still regard Sweden as a social democratic but authoritarian, if not totalitarian, state that dominates business and civil society, people in the United Kingdom still regard the economic order and welfare state with envy. For us it is still a glass that is at least half full – whereas the finance-

dominated economy and the politics of austerity in our country mean that our glass is rapidly emptying. Indeed, the report affirms that Sweden remains one of the healthiest, most prosperous and least precarious societies in the world. But it also notes that Sweden is characterized by marked and growing economic, health, and welfare inequalities and that, among Sweden's major cities, this is particularly evident in Malmö. In this sense it conveys a sense of a glass being steadily drained so that it is now half-empty but then counters this impression by arguing that concerted action can halt this process and replenish the glass. As such it illustrates the well-known motto – 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' – that was posted on the masthead of a radical Italian newspaper edited by one of the best-known Western Marxists, Antonio Gramsci.

It is not my task in this commentary to reprise the findings of a 168 page report. It deserves to be read in full and other contributions to this journal will no doubt summarize and comment on them too. Instead I will comment on the document from the viewpoint of a sociologist with strong interests in political discourse, socio-spatial organization, and governance failure and responses to such failure. This prompts me to make the following six comments.

First, the report draws explicitly on sociological insights as well as social medicine. While it is theory-light (certainly compared with anything that I might have written), it introduces re-

levant sociological concepts, explains their significance in lay terms, and deploys them critically with a view to shifting perceptions and policies. This approach is combined with relevant statistics and serves to put them in their place. Facts and numbers matter but their knowledgeable interpretation matters more. This is a classic role of the public intellectual and one of the levers through which social scientists may influence public debate, change public awareness, and, through that indirect mechanism as well as through direct appeal to politicians, to transform policies for sustainability. In short, commissioners aim to speak truth to power.

Second, the report aims to generate knowledge about *the hidden Malmö* – all those individuals who are not documented at all, not counted in one or more key statistics that serve as a basis for policy-making, or are otherwise rendered invisible to the state. Identifying *the hidden Malmö*, which includes privileged as well as marginal groups, is a key contribution of the report. To refer to Donald Rumsfeld's often scorned but insightful distinctions, it is better to have known unknowns than unknown unknowns because this creates incentives to fill the knowledge gaps and improve the prospects of effective empowerment and policy-making.

Third, a significant feature of the text is its use of history to make history. I refer here to the ways in which the authors describe three stages in the development of post-war Malmö and use this narrative both to indicate that

there is nothing inevitable about the current conjuncture and to make suggestions based on historical analysis on how things might be different. In particular, the report notes that Malmö prospered during the development of Fordism, with its mass production and mass consumption dynamic and its strong Keynesian welfare state; that it suffered de-industrialization and depopulation in the crises of the 1980s and 1990s; and, more recently, has experienced regeneration based on the creative economy, a turn to entrepreneurial city strategies, and a rejuvenation of the population. Nonetheless this third phase is more technocratic as well as neo-liberal in orientation and has tended to reinforce inequalities and inequities and to justify them as the more or less inevitable outcome of market forces. The report dissents from this rationale. It traces these outcomes in part to unquestioning acceptance of new economic orthodoxies, poor coordination between regional economic policy and municipal welfare policy, and the erroneous belief that spending on economic infrastructure is productive and spending on social policies is a wasteful deduction from profits and wages that could be better spent by firms and households without state interference. The report counters this argument by suggesting that the benefits of the welfare state can still be secured today if there is a political will to create an effective and socially beneficial 'social investment state'. This would be linked to proportional universalism, i.e., universal measures that are nonetheless adapted, in extent and design, so that they target the greatest

need. It is also linked to a green agenda that is not just concerned with the green economy but also with the healthy recreation, social integration, and social empowerment that is enabled by green spaces and recreation areas.

Fourth, as the previous sentence illustrates, this text is also strongly influenced by sensitivity to the importance of place and a sense of place. This is just one aspect of its engagement with the socio-spatial complexities of ecological, economic, and social sustainability and the importance of finding ways to connect different sites and scales of social organization in designing and coordinating policies to overcome social exclusion and build social cohesion. This involves more than mapping exercises, whether in the strict cartographical sense or the more general sense of knowing how social processes play out in different ways in time-space. It also requires using that knowledge to identify the most appropriate sites of intervention. This could be seen as another aspect of proportional universalism but actually involves far more because it requires complex and differentiated forms of spatio-temporal geographical where one size does not fit all territories, places, scales, and networked relations. This is another area where empowerment strategies can provide crucial information and knowledge about changing needs and policy impacts.

Fifth, given the strong emphasis throughout on the conditions for human flourishing, the report is rightly concerned with changing attitudes, expect-

tations, norms and values. It highlights the need to empower citizens, to promote gender equality, to overcome stereotyping and discrimination, to build bridging social capital, to build on an individual sense of responsibility to create a collective sense of responsibility to the community. This is where education from an early age matters and the same approach extends to building opportunities for social interaction, overcoming social exclusion, and building social cohesion based on trust and solidarity. The importance of personal identity and shared narratives is also evident in the interweaving of personal stories and experience with historical narratives and sociological accounts of the bigger picture

Sixth, and finally for the purposes of this commentary, the crucial issue of ecological sustainability is also highlighted. Indeed the authors emphasize that ecological, economic and social sustainability should be given equal weight when formulating policies. However, given the Commission's mandate to focus on health and justice, ecological sustainability has a minor role in this report. While this is certainly a challenge that cannot be resolved purely through municipal or regional action or even at the national or European scale, it would have been interesting to see some links made between social investment and green investment. Perhaps this should be the topic of another Malmö Commission.

To summarize, the report is a major achievement. The benefits of multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary coopera-

tion are evident. Above all, arguments from the social and natural sciences are interwoven to produce a well-presented and accessible text that makes a connected series of recommendations and translates them into action points that can be used to monitor progress in future. The most impressive feature is the persistent and multidimensional concern with human flourishing and equity and, in this context, the critique, sometimes explicit, more often implicit, about the limits of one-sided concern with economic growth. In societies where the capitalist mode of production dominates, Marx once remarked, accumulation, accumulation, accumulation is Moses and the prophets for the capitalist. This report moves some way to substituting another imperative: ecological sustainability, economic sustainability, and, above all, social sustainability. I will be intrigued to read the follow-up report in 2018 to discover how, how far, and with what effects this new agenda has been pursued.