
Searching for a Homeless Strategy in Sweden

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› **Abstract_** *The aim of this article is to critically review the Swedish Government's Strategy against Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, operational between 2007 and 2009. This is done through, first, a discussion on the functions of national action plans in general and a brief comparison with homeless strategies in other Nordic Countries. Secondly, the Swedish strategy is presented and put in a context of other government initiatives against homelessness since the early 1990s. These are then compared to a previous, comprehensive housing policy between 1947 and 1990. The recent state initiatives against homelessness and the previous housing policy differ not so much in their explicit ambitions to combat housing exclusion, but rather in the relationship between such words and ideas and the governments' actions. Nils Brunsson's theory on political hypocrisy as a way to handle contradictions between actions and ideas, and to understand the difference between decisions and actions is then presented. In testing this theory, government actions and decisions of relevance for housing access and housing exclusion in 2007 are reviewed. Most of these decisions implied increased difficulties for homeless people to access housing. Hence, the main conclusion is that in 2007, the Swedish government launched a strategy that it probably never intended to follow up with actions. Rather, its main function may have been to divert public attention from an implicit strategy, the realisation of which implied more market-oriented public housing, higher rents, withdrawn building subventions and massive subsidies to home-owners.*

› **Keywords_** *national action plans, homeless strategies, housing policy, political hypocrisy*

Introduction

In Europe, in general, public concern and state involvement in the problem of homelessness have grown in recent decades, and measures to counteract housing exclusion are developing. There are also indications of progressive success and a growing professionalism in handling homelessness at the local level, with support from the central state levels in terms of resources, research funding and highlighting evidence-based methods. The proliferation of Housing First as a privileged model (Busch-Geertsema, 2014) and ambitious national strategies to prevent and counteract homelessness in many EU Member States are apt illustrations of this new awareness and attention.

In this respect, Sweden is an interesting deviant case. Up to 1991, preventing housing exclusion in a broad sense was high on the political agenda, and in the late 1990s, interest in homelessness and in developing measures to solve the problem was growing. A public investigation was set up in 1999 and its final report was published in 2001 (SOU 2001: 95). Between 2002 and 2009, limited state funding was given to local development projects and their evaluation, and the government adopted a strategy to counteract homelessness for 2007-2009. Since then, however, no official strategy or action plan on homelessness has been presented.

The limited resources invested in, and attention to homelessness at the central state level in Sweden stand in stark contrast with the actions of its neighbouring countries and with their interest in the issue. Among the Nordic countries, only Sweden has no national strategy to reduce homelessness, despite statistics showing a growing number of homeless people. There is also an intriguing inverted link between suggestions based on research, evaluations and inquiries into homelessness, and the government's initiatives and activities in terms of budgets and tax legislation. The fact that the situation was rather the opposite during most of the twentieth century, when research, public policy and state decisions and legislation were integrated and harmonised, adds to this paradox.

The aim of this paper is to try to understand why Sweden has no national strategy or action plan aimed at combatting and preventing homelessness, and why it did have such a strategy for 2007-2009, and what that meant. In addition, I will search for the existence of a homelessness strategy, whether or not it is named as such, through reviewing government actions and decisions of relevance on housing access and housing exclusion in the past decade.

After a discussion on the phenomenon of national action plans and their functions in general, I will briefly present state initiatives on homelessness in recent decades, with a special focus on the only homeless strategy that Sweden has had and its results. I suggest that these initiatives – and the lack of response to them by the

governments – indirectly result in ‘responsibilization’ (Rose, 2000), where access to housing has been defined as a responsibility for ‘consumers’ in the housing market, or as an issue for the municipality alone. The rest of the article comprises a discussion of how this apparent withdrawal of the state from the homelessness issue might be understood. I present Nils Brunsson’s (1982; 1993) theory on hypocrisy as a convenient way for politicians (and other organisational actors) to act in a way that is contradictory to their explicit ideas, and then briefly review the history of policies on counteracting housing exclusion during the last century, including the rise and fall of a general, inclusive housing policy.

I claim that this inclusive housing policy was achieved in accordance with the ideas that it was explicitly based on, while its destruction was not presented as a way to improve housing conditions but accounted for in other ways. I suggest that a lingering image of Sweden as a modern, inclusive welfare state blocks some solutions to homelessness that are common or emerging in other countries. The relevance of Brunsson’s theory is finally tested through a more detailed review of government decisions affecting homeless people’s access to housing at the time of the homelessness strategy. Was the explicit strategy against homelessness actually only a way to divert attention from the implementation of an implicit strategy, which, instead, aggravated the problem?

A Note on National Action Plans

National Action Plans (NAPs), strategies or programmes emerged in the 1990s as a common way to coordinate, launch and attract attention to the government’s ambitions within various policy fields. These plans may be either time-limited with a prospect of evaluation and revision, or intended to be valid until they are revised at a time not settled in advance. In Sweden, NAPs have been issued for crime prevention; disability policy; elderly care; combatting drugs, alcohol, tobacco and doping; for health care, elderly care, dyslexia, the reduction of traffic accidents and the prevention of chlamydia, to name just a few targeted problem areas. Some of these plans have been underpinned by comprehensive public investigations and government propositions, and subjected to debates and decisions in the Parliament,¹ while others, such as the late homelessness strategy, are adopted by the government alone, possibly after consulting statutory bodies and national organisations, and then communicated to the Parliament as ‘government strategies’.

¹ This is the case for the Government’s Action Plan against alcohol, illegal drugs, doping and tobacco, which is based on a parliamentary decision from 2010 (Government Offices of Sweden, 2014a).

The motives for issuing NAPs are diverse. For the central authorities in charge of their coordination, dissemination and implementation, they usually mean both extra work and additional funding; other stakeholders, including NGOs, may view them as an option for influencing national policies, while the government can treat them either as actual plans or only as a way to demonstrate decisiveness and capacity to act. External parties, such as political opponents, interest organisations and researchers, may appreciate NAPs because they make the government's goals for, and views on, a certain problem area explicit and thereby subject to possible debate, suggestions for change and external monitoring and evaluation. It is probably for similar reasons that the central state, in turn, encourages or demands that municipalities adopt local action plans against various problems. However, when the EU requested at the beginning of the 2000s, as part of the 'open method of coordination', that all Member States adopt and issue National Action Plans for Social Inclusion (NAPsincl), there was a considerable variation in the extent to which the resulting plans were actual plans for action or merely descriptions of what was already going on in the member countries. National strategies may not serve the same symbolic function for the government when they are requested from above (or below) as when they are introduced on the initiative of the government itself.

Many western countries, including the EU Member States, have adopted explicit national policies, strategies or action plans to combat homelessness. Norway, Finland and Denmark all have rather forceful national strategies, which besides quite ambitious goals involve partnership with a number of major cities and considerable funding for local development projects (Dyb, 2005; Benjaminsen and Dyb, 2008; Benjaminsen *et al.*, 2009; Tainio and Fredriksson, 2009; Pleace *et al.*, 2015).² As Benjaminsen and Dyb (2008,) have shown, the national strategies in Denmark, Norway and Sweden differ more in their implementation than in their wording. An interesting and somewhat surprising conclusion, presented in Benjaminsen *et al.* (2009), is that liberal welfare regimes (as defined in Esping-Anderson's typology of welfare regimes) tend to focus more on rights and on housing policies in their homeless strategies (the UK and Ireland in their study) than do the social democratic regimes (represented by Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden). Another paradox at first sight is the fact that the strategy against homelessness adopted in Sweden was actually issued by a neoliberal government.

² The Finnish homelessness strategy 2008–2011 had funding of €48 million. In contrast, the 2007–2009 strategy against homelessness in Sweden had 46 million SEK in funding (approximately €4.8m), of which two-thirds was spent on local development projects.

Before presenting state interventions and policies against homelessness it may be relevant to note that Swedish elections to the parliament are held in September every fourth year (previously every third year) and that the majority party (or coalition) forms the government immediately after that. The Social Democrats dominated the governments in the years 1982–1991, 1994–2006 and 2014 to date, while the Moderates (right-wing and neoliberal) dominated in the years 1991–1994 and 2006–2014.

State Initiatives to Counteract Homelessness since 1990

During most of the twentieth century, homelessness was conceptualised and approached as a housing issue, as ‘houselessness’ (*bostadslöshet*). Up to 1990, the word ‘homeless’ (*hemlös*) was rarely used in Sweden. In the mid 1980s the ‘noisy neighbour’ was constructed as a social problem in housing projects, and the municipal housing companies (MHCs) started to evict tenants and reject housing applicants that they viewed as risks. A new discourse on homelessness developed when the image of the unwanted tenant was integrated into media reports on growing numbers of rough-sleeping homeless people in foreign cities like New York and London. By 1990, several major cities had already divided off sections or staff in the social services especially for homeless clients. One of their services was to make homeless people ‘capable of independent living’. Another one was to allocate accommodation controlled by the social services: a mixture of traditional shelters and supported housing, training flats for substance abusers, and scattered or grouped flats that the social services rented and then sublet to homeless clients – the emerging secondary housing market. These different forms of housing for homeless people were – and are – often organised as a ‘staircase’ between shelters and the envisioned goal: regular tenancies (Sahlin, 1996).

Mapping and defining the problem

These activities were all shaped and implemented at the municipal level. However, in 1993 the government requested that the National Board of Health and Social Welfare (NBHW) map the number of homeless people who were clients of the social services or staying in treatment institutions or shelters (NBHW, 1993). A new mapping was carried out by the NBHW in 1999, and then again in 2005 and 2011, with gradually refined definitions, questions and analyses.

By Christmas 1999, the government had appointed a parliamentary committee to conduct a public investigation of homelessness. Two years later, the committee presented a report called ‘*Counteracting Homelessness. A Comprehensive Strategy for Society*’ (SOU 2001: 95), which contained a number of suggestions, including regular homelessness counts every third year, reintroduced subventions

for rental housing construction, modified rules for evictions, subsidies to NGOs working with homelessness and, above all, a right to housing. However, the suggestions were not followed up with government bills or legislation, with funding or further investigations by the social-democratic government, much less a strategy against homelessness. One of the explanations given was that since 1991, housing policy issues had been spread over a great number of ministries, none of which took any interest in homelessness issues, and that this facilitated tactics of non-decision (Sahlin, 2004). In addition, between the homeless counts, there was no central authority in charge of these matters.

The 2007–2009 strategy to combat homelessness in Sweden

The right-wing – neoliberal – government that came into power in 2006 was the first one to adopt a strategy against homelessness and housing exclusion. It was announced in February 2007 and was set to end in 2009, and it had the title '*Many Faces: The Responsibility of Many*'. It had four goals:

1. All people shall be granted roofs over their heads and be offered continued coordinated interventions according to their needs.
2. The number of women and men staying in prisons, treatment units and supported housing with no housing arranged at the time for their discharge shall be reduced.
3. Access to the regular housing market shall be facilitated for women and men, respectively, who reside in housing staircases, training flats or other forms of housing supplied by the social services.
4. The number of evictions shall be reduced and no children shall be evicted (NBHW 2010, p.7; author's translation).

The main activity set out for achieving each of these aims was the support of local development work. In its final report, NBHW (2010) concluded that none of these goals had been reached, although the conditions and motivation for obtaining them in the future had improved. An external evaluation of 23 local development projects found that no consistent results of relevance for future homelessness policies could be identified, and the researchers' recommendations were similar to the ones already formulated in various other contexts, namely that there is a need for a working national housing policy and housing provision, and that Housing First should be tried out on a larger scale than previously. They also suggested that future project funding should focus on larger and better prepared initiatives, rather than on small *ad hoc* projects (Denvall *et al.*, 2011).

Since the NBHW published its final report, conditions have deteriorated somewhat. A great number of people,³ mostly poor Roma people from Romania, are now in Sweden on a temporary basis, begging in the streets during the day. A few night shelters for this group have been set up in the big cities but the great majority sleep rough, in caravans, cars and tents or on the streets. Hence, goal No 1 has not been met. According to the NBHW's own mapping in 2011 (NBHW, 2012), the number of homeless people had increased substantially since 2005, especially on the secondary housing market, which comprises dwellings that the social services rent and then sublease on special terms – with special contracts – to their homeless clients. Since 2008, the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (NBHBP) has counted the number of such special contracts every third year, as well as the tenant households that have been allowed to become regular, first-hand tenants of these flats (which is generally the explicit plan).

Table 1. The Size and Efficiency of the Secondary Housing Market (Goal 3)

Year	Number of flats sub-leased with special contracts	Share (%) of households allowed to take over the lease 1st hand	Share (%) who got regular leaseholds somewhere else
2008	11,270	10.0	4.5
2011	13,359	9.5	3.5
2014	16,386	7.5	2.5

Source: NBHBP reports on the secondary housing market (NBHBP, 2008; 2011; 2014).

The NBHBP (2008, p.18) concluded as early as 2008 that “(i)t appears to be an extremely small share of all homeless people in the great city regions and other bigger cities that get a home of their own through the secondary housing market”. It should be obvious from Table 1 that the result has not improved since, so goal No 3 in the national strategy is also very far from being reached. Children are still being evicted from regular leaseholds (goal No 4), although the number of such evictions have decreased, and evictions from the secondary housing market are still not recorded as such.

Post-strategy initiatives

In 2012, the government appointed a national ‘homelessness coordinator’, who approached many municipalities and completed his mission with a final report on 30 June 2014 (Government Offices of Sweden, 2014b). Among his suggestions were that a new homeless strategy be adopted; that the MHCs’ role in the housing market be reviewed with special attention to the possibility of reintroducing social goals; that an investigation into the possibilities for people with poor resources to access

³ By the end of April 2015, there were approximately 4,000 EU migrants begging in Sweden, according to a survey by Swedish Television (Svt, 29 April 2015).

housing be carried out; that the municipalities provide more permanent, normal housing to homeless people; that eviction prevention be strengthened; and that more regular homeless counts be carried out that should include migrants from EU and third countries. However, as was the case with the public investigation published in 2001 and the evaluations of the homeless strategy in 2010 and 2011, none of his suggestions has (so far) been followed up by the government through propositions, legislation, subventions, research initiatives or the like.

Apart from attempts by the NBHW to encourage municipalities to develop and adopt their own local strategies, and the appointment in February 2015 of a National Coordinator for Work with Exposed EU Citizens in Sweden⁴ there is currently no formal state involvement in homelessness issues, nor any valid strategy or action plan; there is no funding of development projects or research; and there is no investigation or commission working to suggest policy measures or reforms. The need for a new strategy and measures against homelessness and for a housing policy is sometimes highlighted in the Parliament, but neither the former, right-wing government, nor the one in power since September 2014 (consisting of Social Democrats and the Green Party), have indicated any such plans.

The new minority government did not put homelessness and housing exclusion on the agenda when it came into power in 2014. The social democratic Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, did not mention housing and homelessness at all in its 'Government Declaration' of October 2014, and only a few sentences on homelessness appeared in the Budget Proposition (Government Proposition, 2014/15: 1).⁵ Furthermore, it is hard to see where the issue could be initiated in the current organisation of the government. There is still no housing ministry and homelessness is not mentioned as a problem area for any of the ministries.⁶ However, since spring 2015, rapidly growing house prices and the shortage of rental dwellings have attracted substantial

⁴ This Coordinator has publicly criticized local attempts to find temporary accommodation and camping sites for the Roma beggars, claiming that the latter should not be treated better than other homeless people (Ankersen, 2015), and requested that the police 'step forward' and evict those who set up camps without permission (Radio Sweden 31 Oct. 2015). He is expected to publish a final report in February 2016.

⁵ In Sweden, the government's general plans for its future four years in power are presented in the Government's Declaration, while its detailed plans for the year to come are presented in the so-called Budget Proposition.

⁶ There is indeed a 'Housing Minister', but he is also Minister for 'Urban Development' and for 'Information Technology' and is actually only one of four ministers placed at the Ministry for Enterprise and Innovation. In the Ministry for Health and Social Affairs, there are three ministers, responsible for 'Social Security', for 'Health Care, Public Health and Sport', and for 'Children, the Elderly and Gender Equality', respectively. Hence – and despite the great number of issues that have been assigned a special minister – it is difficult to find somebody whose natural remit would include developing a homelessness strategy.

media attention and debate, and in August 2015, the government announced plans to allocate 5.5 billion SEK (approximately €574m) to investments and subsidies in the housing sector in the 2016 budget (Löfven *et al.*, 2015).

Dislocated and obscured responsibility

The missing homeless strategy and policy might be captured as an instance of an on-going responsabilization process. The title of the government's former strategy was *'Many Faces: The Responsibility of Many'*, which is similar to the name of the National Crime Prevention Strategy adopted in 1996: *'Everyone's Responsibility'* (Ds 1996: 59). The concept of 'responsibilization' has mostly been used to describe the new way of making individuals (within one community or another) responsible for their destiny, thus substituting the fading state (see e.g., Rose, 2000). However, it can also be used to conceptualise the transference of responsibility from the central state to the local one (Garland, 2001).

The responsibility for the homelessness problem has, in some respects, been spread 'horizontally' from the NBHW to other authorities on the state level. One aspect of the strategy was that other central authorities should be more actively involved in the work of following up on and counteracting homelessness. The NBHBP in particular has published a series of reports on obstacles to housing access, the secondary housing market etc., and the Enforcement Services have improved their statistics on child evictions. This shows that responsibility has been spread to more authorities at the central level than just the NBHW.

The special investigators appointed for homelessness in general (2012–2014) and for begging EU migrants in particular (2015) have been called 'coordinators'. They have not been offered any staff or any mandate to direct other government agencies but are expected to communicate, start dialogues etc. with all relevant parties in a somewhat vague assemblage of stakeholders. Coordination is in line with the current mode of governing through governance: informal partnerships with local and central authorities, NGOs, companies etc., which entails obscured accountability and unclear responsibility for the problem at hand.

However, while coordinating the government's former strategy, most efforts of the NBHW targeted the municipalities, which were encouraged to make their own mappings and follow-ups of the local homeless population, to work towards evidence-based solutions to the homelessness problem and to make their own local plans for combatting homelessness. The municipalities, in turn, transfer the responsibility for homelessness to their clients, who are offered services and accommodation only on certain conditions.

When the welfare state is contracting, and deregulation makes national legislation and funding less important for the outcome of different policy areas, expectations on the municipalities grow. It is illustrative that the homelessness strategy primarily tried to impact the municipalities, but did not imply any changes on the central level in terms of legislation or subventions. Like in the other Scandinavian countries, Swedish municipalities tax their inhabitants – most people pay income taxes only to the municipalities and counties – and have always had the main responsibility for social welfare, care, housing provision, etc. But they cannot adopt laws or constitute individual rights, they are not in the position to coordinate or oblige other municipalities to take action or to make local action plans, and they have lost essential tools for housing provision. Instead, they transfer the responsibility for homelessness to homeless people themselves – people who are quite powerless in relation to property owners and landlords, especially in a situation where there is a surplus of housing applicants with good income and references.

Political Hypocrisy

When rationality in terms of consistency between ideas and actions is impossible or difficult to obtain, organizations may apply *organisational hypocrisy* (Brunsson, 1982; 1993). This concept may offer a way to understand how the Swedish homeless strategy operated. Brunsson's point of departure is the observation that organisations' decisions are sometimes at odds with their actions and that political ideas do not control or steer actions in the rational way that might be presumed. This may be due to the fact that actions and measures are commonly influenced by other forces than the will of politicians or electors, such as power relations, co-optation, shortages of time, funding and other resources. Or it may be due to ambivalence. In this situation, politicians may choose between two possible solutions. One is to justify their actions as, nevertheless, the best possible and most feasible measure, which implies to modify their ideas; the other is what Brunsson terms 'hypocrisy', which "means that what can and should be said is said... but without the talk leading to the corresponding action" (Brunsson, 1993, p.502). This implies that the rhetoric is separated from the practice. In this way, parts of the constituency will be content with the message, while others will be satisfied by the actions. In this conceptual framework, many national action plans would belong to the sphere of words and ideas rather than the sphere of action, and might even facilitate actions that are at odds with the articulated policy.

In his analyses, Brunsson first disentangles decisions from actions, claiming that "there exist both decisions without actions and actions without decisions" (Brunsson, 1982, p.32), and then he detaches ideas from actions (Brunsson, 1993), as if these phenomena were relatively independent of each other, while recognising

that the belief that ideas control actions and that actions are consistent with ideas is an essential condition for the legitimacy of politics. Thus, he argues that an efficient organisation or agency may consciously do things that cannot be talked about and say things that it will not do. The constituency can only control what the executives say, and maybe what they decide, but not so easily what they actually do. This provides an opening for acting at odds with what is said, but also for balancing contradictory opinions: "It may be necessary to compensate for socialist actions by liberal talk, as well as the other way round. In this way both liberals and socialists may be relatively satisfied" (Brunsson, 1993, p.501). Likewise, a government might talk about people's need for affordable housing but act for higher rents in order to satisfy different groups of voters.

The homelessness strategy was initiated in 2007 and was valid for the first two years of the right-wing Reinfeldt Government, which simultaneously implemented a series of decisions that were clearly neoliberal and can be reasonably assumed to have obstructed a reduction in homelessness (see below). It acted in a way that was not possible to justify in the homelessness debate, while it launched a strategy that it did not intend to follow up with actions. Likewise, the social democratic government that commissioned the homelessness investigation in 1999 took no notice of the suggestions that resulted from it, and despite their criticism of the right-wing government's actions in the early 1990s and from 2007 on, the Social Democrats did not restore the housing policy when they came back into power 1994 and 2014 (see also Bengtsson, 2013).

Swedish Housing Policy: Ideas, Images and Actions

Considering Brunsson's thesis that political actions may well be relatively independent of expressed political ideas, I will now go back in time to discuss the emergence of the Swedish housing policy that dominated the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as its rapid destruction in the 1990s, with a special focus on explicit policy ideas and their relationship to action at the state level, as well as on images of the country's policy.

The Swedish model

Throughout the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century, the Swedish parliament and governments were explicitly reluctant to being involved in housing issues, referring instead to the old tradition that employers are responsible for their employees' housing, as well as to the growing liberal belief that an unregulated market would fix temporary unbalances, such as housing shortages in the growing cities (Sheiban, 2002).

In the turbulent 1920s, the Swedish housing market was characterised by severe shortage of housing and increasing rents (SOU 1945: 63; Eriksson, 1990), and at the beginning of the 1930s miserable housing conditions and overcrowding were considered a danger to public health. Birth rates decreased to very low levels, which was defined as a severe social problem. In their seminal book on the 'population crisis', Myrdal and Myrdal (1934) linked the declining birth rate to the housing issue. Their thesis was that in the absence of good housing, young couples could not form families and did not want to give birth to children, but that improved housing conditions – in addition to more developed services for families, including child health care, nurseries, etc. – could reverse this tendency. It seems as though homelessness and housing problems were not taken seriously until they affected the image of the future of the people, or of the nation. This idea would later result in political activity.

At about the same time, in 1933, the state appointed a Housing Social Committee (of which Gunnar Myrdal was a member) to suggest, first, short-term measures to deal with slum dwellings and housing for poor families with children and, secondly, to develop a robust, long-term housing policy, including systems and standards for the financing, planning, construction and allocation of housing, as well as the means to counteract homelessness and segregation. In its first report, the Committee suggested inspections and the improvement of slum housing, and subsidized housing for poor families with three or more children (including unborn children) (SOU 1935: 2), but in the following decade it outlined a new, comprehensive housing policy, which was worked out in detail (SOU 1945: 63). This policy included subventions for housing construction in accordance with local plans for housing provision and land use, which the municipalities were to develop and adopt regularly; housing allowances for families and pensioners; the constitution and financing of MHCs as tools for the municipalities when implementing good housing for all inhabitants; the redevelopment of deteriorated housing blocks; rent regulation, and many more. The result was a proposed 'universal' policy, where public housing was accessible for all and housing allowances were available for all terms of occupancy, while all kinds of builders were eligible for state loans. State subsidies were allocated through the municipalities on the condition that new homes were constructed according to local plans and needs and distributed through municipal housing agencies. Social housing for families with several children was phased out, and low-income families would instead be granted integrated housing through the MHCs.

This 'Swedish model', which meant strong local, democratic control over the allocation of building rights, subsidies and actual dwellings was adopted by the Parliament, and then established and implemented as a great modernisation project from 1947 on. Actions and ideas, rhetoric and practice seem to have accorded at this stage. However, the intensified efforts in the 1960s and 1970s to modernise cities and

dwelling and to eradicate homelessness – including through the provision of one million uniform multi-family or single-family dwellings in large residential areas on the outskirts of the cities between 1965 and 1975 – gradually came under question by both left and right.⁷ When municipal parliaments and MHCs acted at odds with the expressed will of many local resident and citizen groups or failed to provide promised services, their legitimacy was threatened (see e.g., Soidre-Brink, 1991). In the following decade, the reform agenda was implemented more gently but without any radical change of either the goals or the means of the housing policy. Rather, actions were modified to fit the ideas and, in the main, ideas and actions still accorded.

The 'system shift'

After several decades of predominantly Social Democratic governments, the appointment of a right-wing, neoliberal government in 1991 enforced a rapid 'system shift' in housing policy (Bengtson and Sandstedt, 1999; Lindbom, 2001; Bengtsson, 2013). This second turning point involved the immediate dissolution of the Housing Ministry, the phasing out of state subsidies for building and the repeal of the 1947 legislation regulating the provision and allocation of housing and of special financing for public housing. The eviction of misbehaving tenants was facilitated and municipal control over housing allocation impeded, with the result that almost all municipal housing agencies closed down within a few years. The conversion of rental dwellings into tenant-owner societies – TOS: where tenants can sell (the right to) their flats on the market – was facilitated and the MHCs were allowed to sell properties to TOSs. This system shift is an apt example of 'neoliberalism as creative destruction', an expression coined by David Harvey (2006). However, it was not articulated as a new housing policy or as a departure from previous, inclusive ideas; rather, it was enforced primarily on the basis that the country was in a severe economic crisis in terms of the expected requirements for joining the EU, and with regard to general ideas on the need to make citizens more responsible for their consumption, increase their freedom of choice and promote private ownership (Government Proposition, 1991/92: 34; 1991/92: 150; 1991/92: 160). Hence, the neoliberal ideas behind the changes were spelled out in general terms but acted out in detail and – in the absence of a housing minister or ministry – presented by the Minister of Finance as parts of a new economic regime more than as a way of providing good housing for the people.

⁷ Protests were invoked by the extensive clearance not only of uninhabitable slum dwellings but of housing blocks which residents were attached to and which architects appreciated.

Post-destruction development

When the Social Democrats, who were opposed to the dismantling of the housing policy, came back into power in 1994, they did not try to restore it (Bengtsson, 2013). On the contrary, they reduced housing allowances sharply in 1997, referencing the severe national financial crisis with subsequent budget cuts in the early 1990s. Since then the number of eligible households and the total cost for these allowances have declined substantially.⁸ Explicit ideas, including those contained in a government report on 'Just and Equal Conditions on the Housing Market' (Ds 2006: 9), were actually very far away from government actions in this period, which lasted until the 2006 election.

Without subsidies, very few homes have been built in Sweden since the early 1990s. As the conversion of rental flats into TOS dwellings has been strongly favoured by tax rules and profitable for both property owners and purchasers, the ownership structure on the housing market has changed. Stockholm City, in particular, has sold many MHC properties to TOSs, while some municipalities have sold their whole housing companies to private companies. This means that the stock of public housing has declined in absolute as well as relative terms in the country,⁹ particularly in the Stockholm region.¹⁰ An uncontrolled urbanisation process and increased shortage of rental housing have led to a dramatic growth in the prices of private homes, including TOS flats, and to very high levels of indebtedness (EU Commission, 2015).¹¹ Through more recent legal changes, rents on newly-built housing and subleased homes have been partly deregulated, resulting in considerably higher rents.¹²

⁸ According to Social Insurance (2014), the number of households that received housing allowances in 2013 was 184,000, which corresponds to 3.6 percent of all households in Sweden. The total sum was 4.5 billion SEK (approximately €0.47b).

⁹ By 31 December 2013, there were 4.63 million homes in Sweden, of which MHCs owned 720,000 or 15.5 percent (excluding special housing for the elderly). About the same share was private rental housing while 39.5 percent was owner-occupied housing and 21.5 percent was owned by TOSs (NBHBP, 2015). The share of housing that is public has decreased from 22 percent to 15.5 percent in two decades.

¹⁰ In the years 2008–2013 Stockholm City sold 35,857 MHC flats, more than two thirds of which (69 percent) were converted into TOS dwellings, while the rest were sold to private housing companies (NBHBP, 2015).

¹¹ According to Brokers' Statistics, the prices for TOS flats increased by 64 percent between July 2008 (before the recession) and July 2015 (<http://www.maklarstatistik.se/foerklaring-till-statistik/foerdjudad-statistik---augusti-2015.aspx>). Even the director of the Swedish Central Bank has called the housing issue a 'blind spot', warned about rapidly rising house prices and claimed that a system was developed over decades in Sweden that does not work but that 'strong interests want to keep the current order' (Stefan Ingves in Lucas, 2015).

¹² The average rent for a 3-room apartment allocated by the Stockholm Housing Agency increased by 48 percent between 2005 and 2014 (Gustavsson, 2015), while rents on subleased dwellings in Stockholm have risen by 40 percent in three years (TT News Agency, 2015)

In retrospect, the socially ambitious ‘universal’ housing policy in place during the four decades after World War II appears to be only an historical parenthesis (Strömberg, 2001). However, it seems to have had a more lasting impact on a symbolic level. Although inequality is clearly growing in the country,¹³ Sweden has developed, and still defends, an image of itself as a genuinely equal country – a reputation that the nation also gained abroad in the decades after World War II, when its relative wealth, stability, equality and progress was uncontested.¹⁴ The consistently negative view on social housing in Sweden is illustrative of the power of this national self-image. Sweden is one of very few member countries in the EU that has no social housing, and governments and parliaments, regardless of their political colour, have repeatedly turned down suggestions to provide such housing (Sahlin, 2008). A common argument is that Swedish public housing (the MHCs) is a more effective and less stigmatising solution to homelessness and housing exclusion, which was, indeed, a strong argument for the inclusive housing policy set out in 1947. However, today, these companies are not expected or even allowed to have regard to any social considerations unless they are profitable (see below), which is why they cannot be an alternative to social housing any more. This is also a serious obstacle to the introduction of Housing First, which has been tried on a project basis and has proved effective in several cities, but which cannot be fully implemented in practice as neither public nor private landlords will provide flats for first-hand leaseholds to the target group.

Hence, some possible solutions to homelessness may be rejected because they are at odds with this country’s self image as an inclusive country with a universal housing policy, despite the fact that this policy is since long dismantled. Other solutions – including public control over housing allocation, rent control and continuous housing construction for rent and for low-income tenants – have been abandoned since 1991 or made impossible because the municipality has no power over housing allocation, which is the case for Housing First. In a situation where neither traditional domestic or international measures to counteract homelessness nor any new ones are accepted, what remains are staircase models and secondary housing markets and shelters – that is, special local solutions for a minor portion of those who lack housing.

¹³ According to the OECD (2015), “Sweden still belongs to the group of the 10 most equal OECD countries, despite a sharp rise in income inequality since the mid-1980s, the largest among all OECD countries (more than 7 points in terms of the Gini inequality coefficient).”

¹⁴ Another curious example of the mismatch between image and reality, or perhaps of political hypocrisy, is the fact that the Moderate Party, which is responsible for the second step of the system shift in housing policy, introduces itself as ‘A Modern Labour Party’ (Moderaterna, 2013).

To sum up: the housing policy designed after World War II and implemented in the following decades was an example of actions and ideas being consistent, and of ideas controlling actions. But then this policy was dismantled through a series of decisions, leading to drastic deregulation and active measures to turn the policy over to neoliberalism. These latter decisions, however, were not set out as a means to solve homelessness and segregation, or even as a new housing policy, but rather they were justified as necessary due to problematic state finances, and with reference to the idea that a 'free' market was something good in itself.

In the next section I will look more closely at governmental decisions in the same year as the homelessness strategy was issued. The aim is to find out if there is, indeed, a link between the ideas and goals of this strategy and actions at the level of the central state.

An Implicit Strategy?

In 2007, when the government adopted its two-year strategy to combat homelessness and housing exclusion, it made many other decisions of clear relevance for housing access and housing exclusion. The overall goal for the housing policy was cleansed of previous references to housing as a social right or objectives like 'good housing for all'. Instead, it was formulated in the following way: "The goal for housing issues is housing markets that function well in the long run, where the demand from consumers meets a supply of housing that corresponds to the needs" (Committee on Civil Affairs, 2008), and a great many Commissions were appointed for the deregulation of housing construction, land use, building standards, rent setting and so on. However, a series of decisions were also made without being preceded by special inquiries and these were implemented very quickly: 1) a rather modest – but effective (see NBHBP, 2005) – subsidy for the building of affordable rental flats, introduced in 2002, was abolished; 2) rents for newly-built flats were deregulated (during the first 15 years); 3) MHCs were allowed to sell their properties to TOSs without asking permission from the counties; 4) home-owners, including TOS tenants, were afforded a specific subsidy, through which half of the labour costs for repairing, rebuilding and extending privately owned dwellings were paid by the state;¹⁵ 5) property taxes were abolished and replaced by a small, almost flat annual fee;¹⁶ and 6) taxes on assets were repealed (inheritance taxes had been removed in 2005).

¹⁵ In 2014, the total state cost for this so-called ROT-deduction for home owners was 17 billion SEK (approximately €1.84 billion), which is about four times the total sum for housing allowances that year.

¹⁶ The annual real estate fee is 0.75 percent of the taxation value up to a ceiling of 7,112 SEK (approximately €755), which is already reached when the house is valued at half of the current average price for owner-occupied single-family houses.

Combined with the fact that 30 percent of interest costs are tax-deductible, which amounted to 30 billion SEK (approximately €3.2b) in reduced tax income in 2014,¹⁷ the favouring of owner-occupied housing in Sweden is obvious, albeit it was never launched as a strategy. Although this trend is not unique to Sweden (Elsinga, 2015), this country stands out within the EU for this reason, according to a recent country report by the EU Commission:

The current taxation system in Sweden tends to push up house prices. Sweden (together with the Netherlands) applies the highest incentives in the tax system for home ownership. Taxation of properties in Sweden is below the EU average, producing revenues equivalent to 1% of GDP in 2012 /... /. In addition, the most generous tax subsidies to mortgage interest in the EU are recorded in the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark, which further incentivise household to take debts. While most countries made efforts to reduce tax incentives and to apply more neutral tax treatment to home ownership (also due to strong fiscal consolidation needs), these incentives have been unchanged in Sweden (EU Commission, 2015, p.18).

In 2007, the government also changed its directives to an on-going public investigation on the future of public housing. When the EU Commission concluded that Swedish MHCs were run in a way that could not justify them being defined as providers of social housing – that is, as services of general interest (EU Commission, 2005) – a committee was appointed to consider whether the Swedish MHCs should be re-oriented either to deal with social housing or to become pure for-profit companies. However, in 2007, this committee was told by the government *not* to consider social housing as an alternative. The end result was new legislation, valid since 2011, obliging the MHCs to act in a business-like manner and in just the same way as for-profit housing companies, which is often interpreted to mean that they are prohibited from taking social considerations into account in their allocation, eviction and rebuilding practices, and obliged to ensure a return for their owners (the municipalities). In combination with still valid rent regulation for older housing, this has provided the MHCs with incentives to rebuild their properties in a way that allows them to increase rents, instead of merely carrying out regular maintenance (which is not accepted as a ground for increasing rent) and to build new homes in expensive sites, where they will be able to charge higher rents in the first 15 years.¹⁸

¹⁷ According to research by Statistics Sweden, commissioned by Swedish Television, the wealthiest 50 percent of households receive 85 percent of this subvention because they have much more expensive homes (Svt, 24 March 2015).

¹⁸ According to statistics from Stockholm's Housing Agency Ltd., the average rent for a three-room, apartment allocated by the agency and owned by the MHC 'Stockholm Homes' has increased by more than 80 percent in ten years (Gustafsson, 2015).

Put succinctly, while the strategy against homelessness was not followed by any legislation or redistribution aimed at facilitating housing access for homeless people, a lot of effective decisions were taken that have had a clear impact on the distribution of wealth and rights in the housing market. Therefore, there is much to indicate the existence of an *implicit strategy* to pave the way for and fortify market forces and to benefit home-ownership at the cost of public control and social concerns, and to subsidize private property owners at the cost of tenants and low-income home-seekers. Some resulting market effects – hardly unexpectedly – are increased rents, quickly rising prices on owner-occupied dwellings, including TOS flats, a massive shortage of rental housing and, consequently, homelessness. The result is “a huge success from the standpoint of the upper classes” (Harvey, 2006, p.152), but a big failure for those less privileged and a tragedy for homeless people.¹⁹ According to Brunsson (1993, p.501), decisions “can be part of hypocrisy; they can be contrary to actions, compensating for action rather than controlling or justifying it.” The decision to launch a strategy against homelessness in 2007 was clearly that kind of decision.

Conclusion

In this article I have deliberately presented a contradictory image of Sweden. This country has a proud history of comprehensive housing policies and well-developed welfare arrangements, aimed at ensuring safety and equality for its population, since a time when ideas and actions seemed to reinforce each other. However, from the beginning of the 1990s and onwards, the previously inclusive housing policy was dismantled and welfare policies slimmed down, due to a neoliberal turn that meant welfare austerity and promoted a free market, private ownership and institutions that favour owners. This ‘implicit housing policy’ was initiated by a neoliberal government in 1991, sustained by the social-democratic government in the following decade, and then pushed a step further by a new neoliberal government upon its return to power in September 2006.

Since the system shift, there have been sporadic initiatives on homelessness. Homeless people have been counted every sixth year since 1993, and the size and efficiency of the secondary housing market have been analysed since 2008. A parliamentary committee was appointed between 1999 and 2001 to suggest measures to counteract homelessness, a time-limited national strategy against

¹⁹ This is certainly a tendency that is common to many European countries (see Elsinga, 2015), but Sweden seems to be an extreme case. It deviates from other countries, e.g. from the UK, in its negative attitude to social housing, in its previously very comprehensive housing policy, and the lateness with which it was dismantled. Another difference is that the more local financial crisis of the early 1990s was more severe in Sweden than the international one in 2008.

homelessness was in force from 2007 to 2009, and a national coordinator for homelessness was appointed from 2012 until June 2014. All of these initiatives have resulted in similar conclusions and suggestions, but the different governments they were presented to have remained passive and undertaken none of the recommended measures. None of the governments has responded to the shared conclusion that homelessness cannot be solved by social services alone and that a solution must involve some kind of provision of affordable housing and norms for its allocation.

A weak or absent homelessness strategy could have been balanced by a strong housing policy, or vice versa: a vigorous strategy against homelessness could have mitigated the effect of a deregulated housing market on the most vulnerable. The latter seems to be the choice of several other countries, not least the other Nordic countries. However, in Sweden, the governments have instead taken forceful measures to implement an implicit strategy that is at odds with proposed solutions to homelessness.

The Swedish homelessness policy is characterised by contradictions between rhetoric and practice at the level of government. Formally, the state has obliged the municipalities to provide housing for its inhabitants and shelter for homeless people, but in practice it has deprived them of the means to do so. In 1998, Sweden ratified the revised European Social Charter (see Helenelund, 2015), and thereby committed itself to implementing a right to housing and to working towards the reduction of homelessness and improved access to housing for vulnerable groups, “in particular social housing” for “in particular the most disadvantaged” (ECSR, 2008, p.173). The parliamentary Homelessness Commission and the 2007 strategy against homelessness have been useful to refer to in country reports to the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR, 2012; Government of Sweden, 2014), but they have not had any impact on domestic policies. On the contrary, at the time the strategy was launched, the process of ‘liberalisation’ of the housing market was especially intense.

State subsidies are today predominantly directed to home-owners and home-buyers, and indirectly benefit primarily the most wealthy home-owners (and their heirs) through almost flat-rate property taxes, tax deductions of mortgage interest, heavily subsidised re-building and repairs to private homes, and tax-free private capital and inheritance. Considering the fact that homelessness has grown substantially and that the secondary housing market has failed to provide homeless people with regular housing, while an increasing share of the population is being excluded from the housing market due to a serious shortage of rental housing, quickly rising prices on owner-occupied homes, high (and unregulated) rents on newly-built flats and subleased homes, and unregulated allocations of

the diminishing share of public as well as private rental housing, it is not going too far to identify an implicit policy on housing, which promotes homelessness, or at least accepts it.

Decisions on taxes, subventions and regulations should be placed in the domain of actions, since they regulate rights and/or can be implemented by force. Decisions to ratify a social charter or to adopt strategies and action plans, on the other hand, are, in this context 'decisions without actions' (Brunsson, 1982, p.32) and could be viewed, rather, as parts of the state's 'impression management' and located in the domain of ideas and images and as enabling strategic hypocrisy. Therefore, the problem is not that there is currently no homeless strategy, but rather that an implicit strategy is being executed through governmental and parliamentary actions, with or without specific decisions being made. It seems apparent that this implicit strategy is set to increase rather than reduce homelessness. Hence, in retrospect, Sweden's short-lived strategy against homelessness is best understood as a way of diverting attention away from the expected victims of the policy changes: as hypocrisy.

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