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Swedish Research Council's Program for Research on the Civil Society - Summary and Discussion of Preliminary Results September 2013

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Introduction

In the Swedish Parliament's 2009–10 decisions regarding policies on civil society, the Swedish Research Council was to launch a long-term research programme targeting that subject. In the following a summary of the preliminary results from the projects that got funding from this research program is presented. These preliminary results serve as input to the program for the announcement in the beginning of next year 2014. This announcement is the second part of the research program about the civil society.

The summary presented here covers the preliminary results in September 2013 from the 15 research projects. Eleven of these projects got funding for the first five years of the program. These projects started in January 2011 and will continue until the end of 2015. In addition to these projects, four new projects got funding for three years. This summary is based on abstracts with the preliminary results in September 2013 from every project.

A preliminary reflection upon the research projects so far is to highlighting the research project's problematizing of civil society. This problematizing of civil society takes place in the perspective of processes of globalization, individualization and the development of new information technology, and focuses on the *transformation* of civil society.

In summary, this transformation of civil society raises questions about the *civil society's new ecology* and on issues about the fundamental changes of civil society as such, its roles and functions, as well as the civil society's condition, and its new arenas and forms. The new ecology of civil society is associated with its two main themes: on one hand, *civil society as a problem of social organization in a globalized network society*, and, on the other hand, *civil society as a discursive field and processes with new arenas for the public*.

The civil society's new ecology can be regarded as a synthesis of these two principal research approaches. Research treating civil society as a *problem of social organization* is largely based on "classical" Western European and American concepts. In such studies, civil society has primarily been operationalized in terms of formal organizations. But recent research has given a more nuanced picture of civil society. For instance, the view of what consolidates civil society is substantially more complex now compared to fifteen years ago. The relation between civil society and democratization has also been problematized, to mention just two examples.

It is in the field of *civil society as a discursive field and process, with new arenas for the public* that theory development has advanced most rapidly. Starting from the theory of communicative action a view of the public has developed that is primarily oriented in postcolonial and feminist theory. This research is based on the new ecology of civil society and seeks to identify alternative new publicities for civil society. It sees civil society as a discursive field for citizen involvement and public debate. At the same time, it questions the delimitation of civil society as formal organizations. This problematization also entails consequences for the view of social capital and trust as a foundation for civil society.

It is in this field that the research is most clearly moving towards a reconsideration of the concept of civil society as a process rather than as a structure. The new ecology of civil society thus entails that the analysis of civil society's formal organizations also focuses on civil society's practices, its processes and arenas for interaction and public staging.

A vital issue for research on civil society is the theoretical foundation of the concept. The delimitation that has hitherto been in place between civil society, state, and market is questioned by the hybridization of forms of organization and forms of governance that has taken place both between the public sector and civil society and between the market and civil society. The borderline between the family and civil society is also reconsidered. The discussion has moved from attempts to establish borders between sectors in society on the basis of organizational preconditions and towards viewing the practices of civil society in a pluralistic and global perspective.

Summary of Preliminary Results

The preliminary results from the ongoing projects in the research program on the civil society can be summed up into four themes: *1. Civil society: Globalization, social movements and resistance, 2. Civil Society: New Borders, norms and values,*

3. *Civil society: New forms for democratization* and 4. *Civil Society: New arenas*. The following summary of the preliminary results will be based on these themes.

1. *Civil Society: Globalization, social movements and resistance*

One project (Vinthagen) seeks to understand how various civil societies and their resistance transform under the impact of an increasing globalization. Preliminary results indicate the key importance of resistance *practices* emanating from the civil society in order to understand social change in general and democratization in particular. Hence, it seems to be the *quality of the resistance practice* that matters for the outcome of demo-advocating activities of civil society organizations.

Findings indicate that not only power relations cause actors to resist, but also that resistance feeds resistance. Resistance seems often to be both rational and irrational, producing new forms of power in the process of resistance. The social construction of memories matter for resistance, as well as actors' creative utilization of universal and particular qualities of global and local processes. A key problem has been identified, namely: How to understand the relations between individual and non-organized everyday forms of resistance and mass-based resistance and organized campaigns? Consequently, the researchers have initiated to develop the concept of "everyday resistance" to include forms of everyday resistance in the studies.

The results also show that actors might move from a position within civil society to one as government (e.g. Hamas) and combine strategies of civil work and armed resistance. It has also become clear how civil society resistance from actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah promotes non-Western forms of "democracy". Civil society actors might combine a broad range of tactics on several intersecting societal levels.

One preliminary result (Lilja) is that civil societies are often treated as unitary actors and the conflicting struggles within the civil society sphere, not least when exposed to various globalizing trends, are either overlooked or treated in vague terms. Thus, it is important to emphasize the fragmented and contradictory nature of the resistance performed by different civil society actors and their strategies that either fuels the conflict or have a peace building effect. The strategies have to be analyzed in the nexus between resistance, power and memory. In other words, the construction of history and memories are central for the resistance.

Another project (Jacobsson) examines the changed conditions for civil society mobilization and collective action in post-communist societies by comparing different civil and social movements in Poland, the Czech Republic and Lithuania. The result questions the conventional view of the weak civil society in these countries and shows a more dynamic civil society than previous research states. There exists grassroots activism as well as mobilizations but in less structured format and of temporary character. These findings have tended to be neglected by researchers, as focus often has been on NGOs. One example is the new wave of urban grassroots activism that has developed in Poland, but also in other CEE countries, the past 5 years. The result also identified new forms of partnerships and collaboration with local authorities as well as new forms of civil society coalitions (such as the Congress of urban movements in Poland). The project's studies of fathers' movements as well as social mobilizations around infertility also fill a gap in the existing literature.

2. Civil Society: New Borders, norms and values

The notion of civil society has challenged feminist scholars. In gender and feminist studies, there has been a reluctance to engage in civil society debates because rigid distinctions between the public, private. And civil society appears to be insufficient to capture women's contribution to the production of civil society. Data from on of the projects (Mulinari) clearly indicate that "women's issues" cannot be reserved to the private sphere which in mainstream civil society literature is separated from the public and marginalizes the family. As indicated in this project alternative spaces, counter spaces, and soft power organizations are critical to be addressed in order to highlight the ways in which women participate in configuration of civil society.

Civil society has in this project been approached as a practice; as a *doing of the gendered social* in particular locations. Ethnographic methodology has been used as an entry to grasp local ways of constructing social and gendered movements and strategies to obtain gender justice. Project members thus have gathered data in Argentina, Chile, Germany, Iraqi Kurdistan, Japan, Pakistan, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The gathered material is rich in diversity and provides a unique resource for comparisons of gendered movements in different parts of the world.

The project examines the ways through which gender norms and specific forms of demands define the boundaries of civil society in urban and rural areas in the studied countries, and how these boundaries perpetually are challenged and

transformed. The universality of the concept of civil society is challenged by this project when related to field sites in The Global South; project data highlight how the notion of civil society privileges western-centric definitions of the state, society, and citizens.

Despite its shortcomings, the project clearly indicates that the notion of civil society holds potentials for future feminist research in western as well as non-western societies. That is provided the notion is nuanced analytically by the aid of feminist and postcolonial perspectives and, moreover, by engaging into a dialogue with scholars and citizens located in The Global South.

Another project's aim is to contribute to the theorization of the relationship between civil society and personal life (Lindberg). Using an alternative understanding of a more flexible intertwined, and seamless relationship as a point of departure, the aim is to develop an analytical framework that combines a focus on practice with the importance of context, embeddedness, and relations. This framework will also include cognitive dimensions of how individuals interact within, and with, this borderland, such as through imaginations, memories, and meaning-constitutive traditions.

So far, valuable theoretical themes have been found in the discussion of how the process of individualisation has affected family and friendship relations, as well as the feminists' critique of the public-private distinction. As analytical frames, the conceptual shift within family research, from institutions to practice, together with, the description of personal life as both doing and thinking, provide tools that are also useful for the 'civil society' part of this borderland.

One research project has focus on the process of individualization and its importance for wellbeing (Stensöta). An increased individualization in society is documented with Sweden being at the frontline in this development. Individualization has been regarded as negative for civil society and thereby also affecting the production of social trust. This project hypothesized that the high levels of individualism in Sweden hampers inclusion and is part of the reason for why Sweden youth does not score so high on subjective wellbeing measures among youth. The question is if the variation in material/post-material values explains the variation in subjective wellbeing among youth? The results, when ready, will shed light on the extent to which individualization/post material values play a role for subjective well-being in Sweden and other countries.

This project also examines an issue related to the comparative welfare state debate: If there is a gap between the capacity of different welfare state types to provide well-being along material dimensions and subjective dimensions of well-

being for the group of the young? Analysis shows that there are differences between wellbeing of children/youth and the general population when countries are compared along rank order. But there is no systematic variation between welfare state types. Further, there is a clear pattern where the Nordic welfare states are superior in terms of traditional material wellbeing (poverty measured in relative terms, but that this pattern gets blurred when more post material dimensions are examined).

3. Civil Society: New Forms for Democratization

A serious problem in the current transformation of civil society is decreasing democratic participation and deliberation, from local, to national and global levels. Declining participation in political parties is contributing to legitimacy crisis in public policy. Democratic institutions from local and national parliaments to transnational-national bodies are in need of practical solutions for participation and more democratic decision-making and public participation.

One of the research projects takes these challenges seriously and investigates the conditions for civil society to contribute to democratic public policy in the face of power, via collaborative governance, participatory public administration, deliberative public events as “minipublics”, and the use of new media (Öberg).

Results show that traditionally strong organizations still dominate public policy, especially within traditional welfare politics. But participation has been more professionalized and to a certain extent less public, i.e. lobbying increases but participation in public debates do not. There are also other problems in the horizon, e.g. membership in organized interest groups has decreased and the link between members and the leadership has weakened.

Preliminary results about collaborative, participatory public administration are more encouraging. Citizens that contact Swedish municipalities appear to behave more deliberative than expected. Even an act of protest can be constructive. When complaining on issues citizens often clearly formulate a position, deliver arguments for it, provide evidence, and suggest alternative solutions. Hence, direct participation in public administration does not only consist of outcries, but also of deliberative claims. These results relate to more general research questions on how norms of deliberation are developed in certain contexts.

There is a strong global trend to involve civil society in public policy in various deliberative public events, often referred to as ‘minipublics’, where citizens are invited to discuss, develop and influence public policy. While these experiments are becoming increasingly common, it also raises issues such as its democratic

legitimacy and how results from deliberative civic events can be integrated into public decision-making. This project has collected data from deliberative events in Italy and Australia and have prepared for comparative studies in Sweden. Analysis so far has revealed that there is a strong link between citizen's personalities. Citizens with certain personality traits tend to be more likely to sign up for deliberative events, participate more active in discussions, and engage the information relevant to the issue.

New media is regarded as an important vehicle enabling marginalized groups to organize and participate in public discussions. Results indicate reason for caution in embracing new media in the democratic process. It may well be that new media can be used by marginalized and otherwise disempowered groups in civil society. However, results from this project has shown that new media is also used by counter movements to prevent marginalized groups from influencing public policy. It has also been demonstrated that new media is used by already powerful groups with resources from "old media", which distorts power relations in civil society even more. This illustrates that new forms of participation has to be critically scrutinized both theoretically and empirically.

Another issue for one of the projects is the challenge of globalization threatening trade unions' traditional roles (Räthzel). In times of individualization this project focus on what is the role of individuals in organizations like unions, where acting collectively is the aim. Preliminary results from a comparative study between Brazil, India, South Africa, Spain, United Kingdom and Sweden show different models of the 'individual – organization' relationship which needs to be understood through the countries' and unions' differing histories:

European model, UK and Sweden, which is institutionalised and formalised, individuals, pass through different organisations, using them as a means to realise their worldviews and values. They have developed their capacities to act through education, family and friendships.

Brazilian model, which is less institutionalized and formalized, individuals come from poverty and receive education and capacity for action from organization. Trade unions are used as a springboard to universities or politics.

Indian models, which is less institutionalised and less formalised, individuals see themselves as being absorbed by the organisation. In alternative contexts individuals create several organisations themselves, since they find the traditional ones bureaucratic and corrupt.

South African model which is less institutionalised and formalised, trade unions are places of capacity learning and education. Individuals feel strong identification and thus remaining in trade unions even when disillusioned.

In less institutionalized societies civil society organizations serve as educators, shaping individuals' capacities to act. In more institutionalized societies capacities for action (identities) are acquired in state institutions. Organizations are a means for the realization of individual's goals. Transformative agents are marginalized in their organizations. Marginalized individuals tend to become transformative when there is a time of crisis for the organization or changes occur in society at large.

General findings from the project show that there is no society without civil society. Even in dictatorships alternative and resisting organizations develop. Civil society is a Western concept. To understand its forms in different contexts the question has to be posed more generally: How do alternative perspectives become hegemonic?

Under reforming regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, organizations, such as universities, research centers, critical journals and magazines, etc., that were officially state-run and thus not part of the traditional civil society, played a major role in bringing about the democratization of society. This project (Saxonberg) analyze if the semi-civil society might have been more important than the "pure" civil society in bringing down the regimes. The analysis is based on a case study in Vietnam of universities and trade unions, to see whether they are becoming more autonomous from the state and a greater force for the democratization of society.

Preliminary results show that in many ways the official organizations in Vietnam have become much more autonomous than previously and even been able to change the policies of the government. Governmental proposals nowadays sometimes get voted down in parliament. Interviews with the youth organization activists show that many no longer believe in the ideology. An interesting finding about the unions is that far from being the type of "totalitarian" mass organizations, which all citizens must join, so that the state can control them, almost the opposite seems to have happened: the unions are facing great problems in recruiting members. To some extent the state is even pressuring them to become more autonomous so that they can represent the workers better and get more members.

The ongoing globalization, increased use of communications technology and social activism challenge in a similar way the state power in China. The purpose of one of the projects is to investigate the challenges against Chinese state power emanating from civil society and actors inside the party-state apparatus, resulting from formation of new citizen norms and social media (Lagerkvist). Empirical evidence is collected in four issue-area: The social arena of new citizen activism; Party-state institutions and government bureaucracy; Mainland

Chinese business communities; The expanding arena of transnational Chinese networks and Chinese citizens.

The project scrutinizes how transnational human rights activism impact on emerging civil society inside Mainland China and how the party-state respond. The project's preliminary findings has revealed the ideational, legal, and quasi-legal, and practical political limits of citizen activists, business people, and state officials for a rapid transformation of state– society relations. Likewise, a continued “freeze” on more autonomous social mobilization of citizens and the opening up of a public sphere seems increasingly harder and untenable to maintain.

Ongoing processes of negotiation, cooperation, and contestation *within* current state–society arrangements in China are generating increasing awareness on the part of authorities at different administrative levels how to better accommodate social and political conflicts. New social norms formed by Chinese youth and through new forms of citizen activism are increasingly challenging – but, crucially also impacting – state power. The preliminary findings of this project show that due to social, ideational and technological changes and pressures, a new rationale for governance is in the offing – propelling more inclusive politics in China.

4. Civil Society: New arenas

The development of the information technology with internet and digital media for communication has created new global arenas for the civil society. One project in the program (Segeberg) analyses this transformation of civil society with respect to the organisation of national and transnational, global publics. It focuses on how digital communication is involved in diffusing and sustaining common ideas and action and creating new structures and arenas in fluid multi-cause, transnational, and virtual public spaces. The aims are to analyse how digitally networked advocacy and protest networks work and their democratic quality.

Theoretically this project has contributed to developing a communication perspective on contentious action by identifying logic of connective action. This connective action is in turn associated with distinctive organizational dynamics at the scale of the larger network. This framework contributes to understanding civil society in contexts marked by personalisation, globalisation and digitalisation.

Empirically examining how connective networks work as action networks and publics, the researchers identify two key types ('organizationally enabled' and 'crowd enabled') and analyse how they organize, when they are politically effective, and what the challenges and trade-offs are in terms of commitment, sustainability, and flexibility. Political context also plays into network character, dynamics and quality. Preliminary evaluations of democratic legitimacy in terms of depth and breadth in online publics suggests that more highly institutionalised networks, such as those at the EU level, are thinner than their less institutionalised counterparts.

Parallel to civil society's global arena there is a growing interest of the European Union to involve civil society organizations to revitalize democracy or even to create a European civil society, as an arena for discussion and decision making. Two of the projects in the program study the European arena. One (Naurin) describes and analyzes who the lobbyists are. A comparative population study is made of the population of organized civil society interests in Swedish national politics. The comparison is made with populations in other European countries.

The focus is on 1) the degree of representativeness of the Swedish interest group population visavi public opinion, in terms of which issues that are raised, and 2) the degree to which there is a mismatch between the actual population of groups, as measured by bottom-up census, and the top-down constructed population in the government consultations. They are also preparing for a comparative survey of a random sample of the population, which will be used also in similar projects in several other European countries.

The other research project (Meeuwisse) analyzes how processes of Europeanization affect Swedish civil society organizations working with welfare policy and how they, strategically, make use of the EU as a new political opportunity structure. The project analyzes in particular organizations that represent groups such as poor, homeless, irregular migrants, immigrant women and disabled people.

Preliminary results indicate that the field of civil society organizations representing marginal groups is well established at EU-level. The Commission has been pivotal in setting up and sustaining some of these organizations, but in some cases there is 'bottom-up' mobilization. The field is diversified as a minor group of civil society organizations are better equipped (resources and capacities) and positioned (invited/embedded in Commission activities) than others. Internally, EU based civil society organizations rest on weak chains of political representation, illustrating the difficulty to say whom they represent. Participation is limited to a few devoted members, who also express extensive

barriers for participation. Besides cooperation, there is also competition regarding resources, identity formation and organizational goals etcetera in these organizations.

This project also comprises a large survey of Europeanization activities among Swedish CSOs. The sample was extended from the marginal groups/welfare policies to also cover religious groups, unions, environmental groups. This allows for comparisons both of policy areas and organizational composition. Initial result indicate that very few Swedish CSOs Europeanize in terms of being member in EU network, trying to lobby at EU level or getting funding from EU sources. These differences are currently analyzed.

There are two research projects in the program about the voluntary sector's changing role in the welfare society. One of the projects (Svedberg) focus on voluntary work and informal help and care giving in Sweden. Building on a unique empirical material, it aims at following volunteering to the present day with parallel projects in the other Scandinavian countries for purposes of country comparison. This project contains two sub-themes. Firstly, to study how the new media and emerging, so called hybridized, forms of organization affect engagement and voluntary work. Secondly, to follow up previous surveys with continued attention to voluntary work and informal efforts. This approach makes it possible to follow the process of both change and continuity, and to adopt a Scandinavian comparative perspective. The specific sub-surveys on Internet-mediated involvement and on voluntary work in so-called hybrid organizations will give new knowledge on how such changes in society and technological advances influence people's engagement, both in terms of form and content.

The other project (Johansson) focus on the voluntary sector's changing role in the local welfare society. The aim is to analyze how voluntary organizations representing marginalized groups are dealing with the potential conflict between representing and defend their users' interests, while in the same time acting as an efficient service provider commissioned by the municipalities. The study is comparative with case studies in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmo. It mainly with qualitative methods, but will also contain a quantitative survey of voluntary organizations in the three municipalities. The project focuses on three areas of the local welfare policy: disability, homelessness and violence against women. Changes in the 2000s are studied.

The analysis of the case studies reveals significant differences regarding civil society's welfare policy role in the three cities. Their role as voice is acknowledged in a similar manner in the three cities, but their role as service providers is acknowledged and favoured very differently in municipal policies.

The differences can to a great extent be explained by the existence of local networks and traditions, and also partly by differences in political majorities. In the concluding phase the implications of this for the voluntary organizations and for citizens who live in the three metropolitan cities will be investigated.