



SOCIETY

THE CHURCH OF SWEDEN AND THE QUEST TO BOUNCE BACK BETTER



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The Role of Civil Society in a Resilient Society¹

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

In such extreme situations – be it a natural disaster like a wildfire or a tsunami, periods of rapid transnational migration and the displacement of huge populations like the flow of refugees to many European countries in late 2015 following the war in Syria, or during a global pandemic – civil society needs to be both strong and agile.

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

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

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

¹ In this article, we draw on a multi-year study of the Church of Sweden and its welfare governance. Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (under Grant P15-0377:1), Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, the Diocese of Västerås (Västerås stift, Church of Sweden) and the European Social Fund (Svenska ESF-rådet) have all during different stages of the study graciously provided us with the necessary funds. Under all these contracts we have been completely free to develop the study, gather empirical material and conduct our analysis

organizational learning and the transfer of knowledge between instances of system shock and (2) a sufficient degree of *organizational slack* where either internal assets can be re-deployed or new external resources attracted.

Three types of slack are identified in the literature (discussed later on) but we introduce a fourth category of slack tentatively labeled *indefinite slack*. This form has its most explicit manifestation in the capabilities that emerge and evolve when new knowledge and skills are acquired or new social networks develop, for example during an emergency. New skills and social networks are codified, stored and shared in the “memory” of the organization.

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

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

The first contribution is situated in the community dimension. The organizations of civil society are seen as key actors in the formation of social cohesion, and creation of trust and social capital. “Schools of democracy” is a term often repeated in both policy and scholarly work. The democratic function is often intertwined or overlapping with an advocacy role.

Advocacy – both as the mobilization of interest and identity and as the expression of voice – is the second dimension. Social movement scholars as well as political scientists studying civil society often refer to this as an important role for social movements and other civil society

actors – parties, trade unions, think tanks or different interest groups. In this role, civil society also functions both as a hotbed and a preserve for ideologies and norm systems in society (Reuter, Wijkström & Meyer 2014).

Finally, civil society is also visible in its provision of welfare services. Nonprofits offer their services either as a substitute or in a complementary function to the health care, education, or other welfare provided by the public sector. They have a special role in highly institutionalized welfare societies, where they serve in a complementary function as the protectors and providers of alternative modes of welfare delivery to specific communities or serve a niche function, catering to particular needs among minority groups.

We see civil society as a crucial component not only in the social contract in a society, but also in the resilience of society. Originally, resilience signified a capacity not only to survive a catastrophe or a crisis but also the ability to “bounce back” to the same levels of social well-being as before the shock impacted the system. Resilience can be seen as a measure of the ability of society to absorb changes and still persist.

We use data to illustrate how the Church and its parishes responded to two very different systemic shocks to Swedish society. The first was the wave of refugees arriving from the Syrian conflict in the fall of 2015. The second shock followed in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020.

The Church of Sweden in the COVID-19 Pandemic

The role of *community building* is central to the Church and its parishes. Public worship, church choirs, and other types of meeting places are core examples of parish activities that contribute to knitting the local community together, cultivating social cohesion.

We also realize the importance of strong institutions like schools and hospitals, and the necessity of a vibrant civil society with religious communities, associations and relief organizations. A basic

trust in our society is an asset that should not be underestimated. (Archbishop Antje Jackelén, 2020, p. 9)

Many parishes were able to adapt to the health recommendations by the authorities and still continue providing its core services. A huge increase in digital activities for closed groups such as choir practicing online as well as open activities for everyone to attend digitally such as digital *fika* (coffee breaks), singing activities for small kids, quiz nights, and regular worship. At the beginning of May 2020, for example, more than 1000 open digital or online activities all over the country could be found in the Church’s online calendar. The message to the parishes from the Bishops’ Conference was that the Church should adjust rather than cancel their activities (“*Vi ställer inte in, vi ställer om*”).

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Känner du oro? Behöver du någon att prata med? Vi finns för dig!
Med anledning av rådande Coronapandemi öppnar Svenska kyrkan - Ljusnans pastorat ett journummer att ringa vardagar mellan 09.00 och 18.00. Linjen är öppen för alla! Vi lyssnar och svarar på allt vi kan och hänvisar vidare om vi inte kan svara.

Tillhör du riskgrupp och är i behov av praktisk hjälp?
Vårt journummer är även till för dig i riskgrupp som behöver hjälp med vardagliga. Svenska kyrkan i Ljusnans pastorat har startat ett samarbete med Ljusnals kommun, Rödå Korset, Rädda Barnen och Riksdrottsförbundet (RSU) för att vägleda till möjligheter för riskgrupp. Du som ringer till oss får ett personligt samtal om just din situation och hur den kan lösas utifrån individuella förutsättningar.

Behöver du någon att prata med kvällar eller nätter?
Ring 112 och be att få bli kopplad till Jourhavande präst. Den som svarar är präst och har absolut tystnadsplikt. Telefonlinjen till jourhavande präst är öppen alla dagar mellan 17.00 och 08.00. Samtal är gratis. Du kan även chatta med jourhavande präst på svenskkyrkan.se/jourhavandepraest/chatta söndag-torsdag mellan 20.00 och 24.00. Du är anonym och inga chattar sparas.

Tillhör du riskgrupp och därför inte kan komma till kyrkan?
Ta gärna del av olika typer av andakter här på Facebook eller följ söndagens 11-åriga gudstjänst på SVT. Du kan också skriva en bön eller tänka ett digitalt ljus på be.svenskkyrkan.se

PICTURE PUBLISHED ON THE FACEBOOK PAGE OF LJUSNAN PARISH ON APRIL 29 WITH THE PHONE NUMBER TO THE NEW HOTLINE OFFERING BOTH COUNSELING TO EASE ANXIETY AND PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE

New initiatives that spoke both to community building and to the provision of welfare can also be found. The rural parish of Ljusnan, for example, established a local hotline for worried people in the parish. Priests, deacons and other staff and volunteers in the parish took turns. Support was offered through short conversations, but the caller could

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

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

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

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

pact.

The declaration contained a proposal to coordinate national and local voluntary support to assist municipalities. Concretely, municipalities in need of support from volunteers to, for example, buy groceries or medicine for people in the identified risk groups who were instructed to remain at home, reported this request to a national coordination center headed by the Swedish Red Cross. A local chapter or association of one of the organizations was then assigned the responsibility to both coordinate the local volunteers and cooperate with the municipality.

Only a few weeks after the declaration was signed, the Church had taken on the responsibility for local coordination in about 70 of the 290 municipalities in Sweden. Various guidelines and checklists were prepared and distributed from the national level to ease implementation for the parishes. According to the national coordinator for the Church, Per Starke, the local cooperation between the different organizations worked well. In many cases, the experiences gained and the networks established between some of the organizations during the reception of the refugees from the Syrian conflict eased the work substantially.

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

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

In another example of the services organized by the Church, the growing levels of anxiety due to the coronavirus crisis led to a rapid increase of calls and online chats to "Priest on duty" (*Jourhavande präst*). For more than 60 years, confidential talks during the night with a priest on duty have been possible via the national emergency number 112. Early on, the calls and online chat-requests more or less exploded. It was decided to expand the opening hours and staffing were quickly scaled-up by 50 percent.

During the month of April in 2020, the priests answered in total 9300 calls and had 2227 online chats, as compared to 6306 calls and 916 chats during the same month the previous year. With 50 percent more incoming calls and double the amount of chats, this was a substantial increase. Nina Sagovinter, the national coordinator for “Priest on duty”, however claimed it was easy to fill the gaps because older and retired priests were especially willing to step in. Due to the health recommendations they could no longer fill in at ordinary services or funerals as they normally would.

When talking to Church staff at different levels and across the country about the response to the virus outbreak, they often mention in passing the experiences, contacts and new ways of working acquired during the sudden influx of refugees in 2015. We understand this as a form of organizational assets which were re-applied and used also in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In some of the very short examples given above, we see how networks developed during the refugee reception have been re-activated to meet the new challenge. The advocacy practice developed during the migration wave to provide the refugees with a voice was also a practice reapplied during the coronavirus emergency. There is both a kind of weaving-together of different topics and a transfer of practices and contacts between these distinct emergencies.

Our assumption is that an important share of the skills and new knowledge gained in a society during this kind of extraordinary circumstances surface and become manifest in some form of organizational setting. In this setting, there is a potential to make explicit, gather, summarize, and “store” the results of the hard-won experiences from the individuals involved. We define this as organizational learning.

Another example of how stored knowledge is transferred within the organization between the two jolts discussed in this article is the new support service set up during the Corona pandemic. In late 2015, a new national function called *Support Migration* was established where staff members were re-assigned and re-deployed to run it. Facts, experiences and salient examples from parishes and dioceses all over the

country were gathered and made available through a dedicated webpage. A direct internal hotline for questions and further contact was also established for the parishes and dioceses and functioned as an internal knowledge resource and contact hub for people in the field during the refugee reception.

When the amplitude of the coronavirus outbreak became obvious, relevant experiences and many of the methods originally developed for *Support Migration* were quickly shared and copied. In only a few days, an entirely new support function – *Support Diakoni* – was launched. It served the entire Church, but this time its mission instead focused on supporting people in the parishes and dioceses to help their communities get through the Corona crisis.

In this way, hard-won experiences and knowledge from one unexpected jolt to Swedish society – the wave of refugees in 2015 – became a new organizational capability surviving well beyond both the specific situation and the experiences and knowledge of the individuals involved. These individuals might at some point leave the organization, or move on to new tasks. However, properly codified and stored this new capability or competence becomes an asset for the organization to tap into and make use of again. In this way, it also becomes part of the organizational slack.

Organizational slack is the excess capacity maintained by an organization. The concept is discussed in more detail later, but slack is traditionally understood to appear in three main forms ranging from *available slack* – which is the most easily accessible form – via *recoverable slack* over to the most difficult category to engage, *potential slack*, involving new assets or resources outside of the organization.

The Church of Sweden in the 2015 Refugee Wave

Two parish examples from the 2015 reception of refugees are presented. Both are situated in major urban areas, Saltsjöbaden in the east of Sweden, and Bergsjön in the west. The parish examples are based on our interviews with staff, board members and active volunteers and

they illustrate the role of the Church in the formation of resilience at local community level.

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

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

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

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

ech inspired the vicar to consider how their own parish could contribute. In the parish was also a priest with a special interest in refugee matter who would eventually step in and coordinate all the refugee-related activities in the parish.

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

The volunteers collected and provided food and hygiene products, picked the families up at the train station and helped them settle in. They also cleaned the rooms where the families were sheltered, and they initiated cooperation with a local dry-cleaning company agreeing to laundry the sheets free of cost. Even if the parish would eventually receive some governmental funding via the diocese, most of the practical work was provided by the new volunteers not previously engaged in the parish. The vicar emphasized that mutual trust was essential for the success of the operation. Some of the coordinating volunteers were provided with keys to the premises of the parish and a large number of previously unknown volunteers were involved in the project. The vicar also noted that the parish had the opportunity to react quickly once the opportunity arose. Later, the focus changed to operating a café where newly arrived immigrants could practice using Swedish ("*språkcafé*") and other activities supporting their integration into the Swedish society.

Our second example Bergsjön is a suburban low-income community in eastern Gothenburg, which is Sweden's second largest city located in the west of the country. Almost half of the population in this community originates from countries outside of Europe. Consequently, only

17 percent of the entire population (16,700 inhabitants) were formally members of the Church in 2016 (2 700 members). Given the mixed ethnic composition of the population, the people in the parish have a long experience of working with different groups of immigrants, often undocumented.



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

The activities organized for immigrants by the parish started well before the 2015 refugee wave. One early step was an initiative by the parish deacon to gather a group of women for sewing and Swedish language training. An unemployed teacher joined in as a volunteer, and the initial initiative developed further into a program consisting of education and training. The ambition was to develop long-term services to complement the pure emergency aid. A folk high school (*Helsjöns folkhögskola*), a second hand shop (*Erikshjälpen Secondhand i Kortedala*) and two other parishes of the Church (*Örgryte and Kortedala*) became partners in a network effort with the expressed intention to support the

self-esteem of the immigrants and offer – as the program ENVIS was to be labeled – “a way into the Swedish society”.

In 2015–2016, another parish in a different part of Gothenburg wanted to start a “language café” (*språkcafé*) as a response to the new wave of refugees to offer a low-threshold opportunity for them to practice their language skills. Volunteers from this local inner-city community, some without earlier experience from the Church, signed up. But no refugees showed up. The new volunteers were instead invited to take part in the activities organized by the suburb parish in Bergsjön. Learning developed between two parishes, also creating a situation where people from different parts of the city could meet and join as volunteers.

Since 2004, the parish has also been cooperating closely with a local Gothenburg-based philanthropic foundation, *Rosengrenska stiftelsen*, in an effort to provide health care for the migrants. Over the years, this cooperation has taken on different forms, but in 2015, the parish and the foundation together organized bi-weekly receptions. During these receptions people in need of care receive help from volunteers coming in from the wider Gothenburg area. Lawyers provide legal guidance, but also dentists, opticians, therapists, priests and interpreters offer their services pro bono. All in all, up to 60 volunteers normally appear at every occasion and these receptions attract some 100–150 people in need of help.

The interviewees claim that for many other parishes, the 2015 refugee wave was an extraordinary event that spurred a great deal of new activities. In Bergsjön, however, it was pretty much “business as usual”. The new wave of refugees did not really change the already existing activities and all the necessary staff, volunteers and also the infrastructure, both for short and for long-term services, were already in place.

Slack, Learning and the Capacity to “Bounce Back Better”

The account of the efforts by the Church both in the 2015 refugee reception and during the global COVID-19 pandemic suggest that organizational learning took place. Once learning occurred, the new capability

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

In order for organizational learning to happen, the new skills and experiences won by the individuals involved during a particular situation must turn into new knowledge codified and embedded into the “memory” of the organization. This organizational capability is “stored” in new routines, documents and practices. This decouples the new knowledge from the specific individuals, now possible to share with other organizational members. It becomes a new organizational asset with the capacity to increase the ability of the organization to take action. It further represents a different type of resource than traditional economic or financial or even human resource assets with the potential to evolve into the new special form of slack. It becomes an asset that in times of non-crisis might be considered redundant, but during an emergency, the organization can tap into this particular resource again.

We also identified other forms of slack: *Available slack* including the untapped resources most easily converted, like excess liquidity or retained earnings. Our case examples include physical facilities quickly made accessible for the housing of refugee families, but also the use of available parish funds, i.e., excess liquidity. *Recoverable slack*, on the other hand, are assets already assimilated into the organization and its operations, thus slightly more difficult to re-direct, but recoverable when necessary. Excess overhead costs are mentioned in the literature, and our own account points to the capacity of the Church to quickly scale up “Priest on duty” service but also to the ability of parish staff to adapt and go beyond job descriptions as instances of recoverable slack being re-applied.

The third category, *potential slack*, is released by finding or generating new or additional resources from external sources: new loans or equity. In a nonprofit setting, ways to tap into this type of external slack are through available but not yet explored fund-raising events or grant

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

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

(1) The skills and knowledge embedded and “stored” in new routines, like the methods developed in Bergsjön for community and advocacy work prior to the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015; but also the models for national coordination and communication emerging during the refugee reception, and re-applied during the coronavirus emergency.

(2) The new networks and social contacts with other organizations in civil society and the public authorities that were integrated into organizational routines and operations in 2015. Many parishes cooperated with other local organizations as well as with public authorities and private firms. Some of these contacts were re-employed again to take their local communities through the COVID-19 crisis.

The model behind *Support Migration*, is a salient example of a tool added during the refugee reception, and re-deployed as *Support Diakoni* during the coronavirus outbreak. Also the contacts and the cooperation with the sports movement and the Red Cross developed or enhanced during 2015–2016 smoothed the way for the cooperation in the new Corona compact. Clearly, knowledge and skills were embedded in the organization and its memory, thus representing instances of organizational learning.

The Church – like many other civil society organizations – has a

more holistic approach to the world and to the individuals coming in for community, participation and support, both in contrast to government agencies and to for-profit corporations. We argue that because of this, the organizational learning taking place between extreme and sudden jolts is made more easily possible. In the public sector, many different national authorities are involved and take center stage "in silos" depending on the specific variety of emergency, and neither of the national agencies have the extended local network like the parish and diocese level, which in the Church are tied together in one and the same organization. The special way to organize at national, regional (diocese) and local (parish) level also facilitates smoother learning and the build-up of slack to take place between crises.

During the virus outbreak, the Public Health Authority and The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency were crucial actors in the public-sector response. During the refugee crisis, the Swedish Migration Agency was instead the most central public body. Each in their silo, and none of them with "boots on the ground". In contrast, it is the very same Church and parishes that provide advocacy, local community work and welfare during these and other jolts, no matter whether it is a tsunami, a sudden influx of refugees, or a global pandemic.

We started out with a brief discussion of society's resilience. The field of resilience policy and study is still fragmented, but the concepts of 'perturbation' and 'recovery' remain constant at the core. Recent developments, however, signal a strive to go beyond recovery only, to instead reach and tap into the ability to adapt and adjust to new circumstances. An ambition to not only "bounce back" to the original shape or function but to "bounce back better" – meaning that society, after a shock or jolt, transforms to a better situation than before. The system is "capable of self-organisation, learning, renewal and continuous development" (Aldunce et al. 2014).

The special way to organize and facilitate organizational learning as well as the level of slack easily available seem to set the Church apart from both public-sector bodies and commercial for-profit entities. But

in many respects, the Church shares characteristics with other actors in civil society which indicate a unique role for these organizations in the resilience of society during unexpected jolts and sudden emergencies.

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