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**From Subordination to Partnership?  
Changing Institutional Relationships in Sweden  
in a Comparative Perspective**

**Jon Pierre**  
University of Gothenburg (Suède)  
[Jon.Pierre@pol.gu.se](mailto:Jon.Pierre@pol.gu.se)

**1- Understanding institutional relationships**

We have recently witnessed a rapidly growing interest in institutional, particularly intergovernmental relationships among practitioners and academics. Most scholars agree that the previously predominant hierarchies are softening up and losing much of their former strength. In their place, more complex systems of negotiated and contextually defined institutional relationships are evolving. Previous models of hierarchical governance are assumed to be gradually replaced by less formal and more inclusive arrangements like networks and partnerships (Pierre and Peters, 2000; Rhodes, 1997). Similarly, the relationship between political institutions at different levels has been described more as one of a division of labor with overlapping or concurrent competencies (Painter, 2000) and less as one where higher levels command and control lower levels.

Placed alongside other significant developments like the predominant regime of deregulation in most Western democracies and the economic globalization, these new forms of intergovernmental relationships have contributed to fuel the debate on the future of the nation state. The state, it has been argued, is thus challenged both from above and below and significant parts of its power has thus been displaced to other institutional levels.

The demise of the state is not a novel argument (Navari, 1991). This paper has no intention of entering that debate. What seems more intriguing, perhaps, is a discussion on how recent changes in intergovernmental relationships have affected the state's ability to implement its programs and how the role of institutions at different levels in that process have changed during the past 10-15 years.

This paper thus first briefly discusses the emergence of new forms of governance at different institutional levels. Following that, we will concentrate on changes in intergovernmental relationships. Finally, the paper will compare traditional and emerging models of intergovernmental relationships with regard to the implementation of legislation and

public policy. The paper is primarily focused on the case of Sweden although we will also open up for a more general and comparative analysis.

The main argument put forward in the paper is that the increasing emphasis on governance--as shorthand for processes aimed at bringing together political institutions, private businesses, voluntary associations and other important actors--at different institutional level has weakened the hierarchical structure of the Swedish political system. While much attention has been paid to the emergence of multilevel governance, the paper argues that governance at the regional and local levels strengthens political institutions at these levels vis-à-vis central government.

Overall, the approach in this paper is institutional. An analysis of new or emerging forms of governance can either observe the extent to which networks, partnerships and similar models of cooperative behavior pursue collective interests, or concentrate on the changing role of institutions given these developments (Peters, 2000). The present analysis will lean more towards the latter approach than the former. The paper also takes a comparative approach; although we do not have any systematically collected data on how intergovernmental relationships are evolving, there is a good deal of work reported which allows us to conduct at least some comparative assessments.

## **2- Towards multi-level governance**

The development towards multilevel governance could be seen as the final step in a longer process of changes in policy style and institutional behavior. While the concept of governance is not in any way new, its inclusion in the political science vernacular is largely a phenomenon of the late 1980s and 1990s. "Governance" as an analytical concept is employed to capture a policy-style emphasizing inclusion, partnership, a broad (i.e. public and private) mobilization of resources and--to put it more broadly--concerted efforts in the pursuit of collective goals.

These developments were first observed at different institutional level. At the local level, "local governance" was the overarching theme of an ESRC research program in the UK. The research program was launched not least because promoting local governance was also a key theme in the Thatcherite political project. The general idea was to reduce conflict between political authorities and the local business community and to create incentives for cooperative and joint projects (Anderson, 1990; Harding, 1998; Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001).

The regional level of the polity was for a long period of time a "forgotten" level of the unitary state (see Wright, 1998). Powerful regions has historically speaking been a feature of federal states. However, two developments have placed regions in unitary states at the forefront of institutional reform. In economic development, problems were conceived of either as local issues--i.e. related to individual companies--or matters of national concern, primarily the management of declining industrial sectors. Over time, it has become increasingly obvious that the spatial distribution of industrial sectors is a key factor in economic development (see, for instance, Evans and Harding, 1997; Markusen, 1987); structural change in an industrial sector has different ramifications on different regions depending on the location of the industry. Since much of the mature manufacturing industry tends to be concentrated to a very limited number of regions in a given country, the confluence of sector and region has highlighted the need to address matters of industrial structural change at the regional rather than the local level. Furthermore, locales are also increasingly often seen as embedded in the regional economy. The current interest in industrial clusters and inserting the local economy into such clusters as an objective of local economic development is proof of the growing significance of regions.

Perhaps more importantly, however, regions became the key recipient for financial

resources from the structural funds of the European Union. Also, the Constitutional philosophy of the EU to build a "Europe of the Regions" (see Le Galès and Lequesne, 1998) has propelled institutional reform at the regional institutional level. Since the structural funds explicitly promote cooperative strategies between the public sector and the business community, regional governance has become a key political and institutional objective in the European member states. There is much to suggest that the structural funds have strengthened the regions, internally as well as with regard to the relationship between the state and the region (Smyrl, 1997).

At the level of the nation state, finally, several West European democracies emphasized an "enabling" policy style during the 1990s. The "enabling" state, in brief, is a state which defines its role in society as one of removing obstacles to economic growth. More broadly, the "enabling state" is less intervening, less steering, and less proactive than a state pursuing a more traditional policy style. Thus, the policy style of the "enabling state's" was part and parcel of the predominant public policy in Western Europe during the past decade or so, based in opening up for markets, deregulation and reducing the scope of the public sector. Also, the notion of the "enabling state" fits nicely with a governance perspective on the role of the state in society, emphasizing collaborative projects with the state as the chief structure in the pursuit of collective goals.

As has already been noted, multilevel governance in Western Europe has a distinct transnational component. It is impossible to discuss multilevel governance without mentioning the EU. The EU is a key player in European multilevel governance, partly because it one of the levels involved in such governance and partly because it promotes governance at the local and regional levels of the member states. Primarily through its structural funds, the EU seeks to create incentives for closer public-private cooperation at these institutional levels. More importantly, however, the EU Commission frequently practices multilevel exchanges by corresponding directly with regional and local authorities, thus bypassing the state.

To sum up the discussion so far, multilevel governance is a process incorporating several institutional level in a more informal and more contextually defined exchange than traditional intergovernmental relationships. Furthermore, multilevel governance is non-hierarchical; transnational institutions frequently have bilateral exchanges with local and regional authorities. Additionally, multilevel governance as a theory makes no prejudgments about the locus of political power (Smith, 1997; Smith, forthcoming), largely because that locus changes from case to case, or is found not at any particular institutional level but is more the outcome of bargaining processes between actors at different levels. Finally, multilevel governance should be conceived of as a process integrating not just political institutions but also processes of governance at different institutional levels. Smith (1997) rightly observes that much of the discussion about multilevel governance so far has had a "paradoxical concern with government"; the focus ought to be on how negotiated processes of governance at different levels relate to each other.

One obvious question to raise is the utility of an institutional perspective on multilevel governance. There are two general reasons why we believe that perspective is important. First of all, although policy and political action may be increasingly shaped through informal processes by a multitude of actors at several different institutional levels, formal political institutions still matter a great deal because they are the undisputed channel between the state and the citizenry in terms of democratic input and accountability. As I have argued in other contexts together with my research associate Guy Peters, in order for multilevel governance to be democratic, institutions need to play a *primus inter pares* role in multilevel governance (Peters and Pierre, 2001).

Furthermore, multilevel governance tends to be problem-oriented; it brings together actors centered around a particular policy problem and is arguably better equipped at

identifying problems than presenting sustainable solutions. However, given their greater continuity an accumulation of professional expertise, institutions tend to be skillful in devising solutions. The combination of their democratic nature and their ability to design solutions to societal problems makes institutions extremely important actors in multilevel governance processes. In a more general perspective, it could even be argued that as governance becomes more fluid and informal, the more important will institutions become. In governance processes where there is a significant variety of actors and where many actors participate on an ad hoc basis, institutions will become critical participants by virtue of their continuity (Peters and Pierre, 2002); in a setting where most actors come and go, any actor who is more continuously involved will have a strong position.

### **3- Institutional reform and changing intergovernmental relationships**

It is interesting to note that much of the development towards multilevel governance has taken place with very few formal, institutional changes. True, a number of countries in Western Europe implemented decentralization reforms during the 1980s and 1990s (REF) but at least in some national contexts those reforms were confirmations of a development that was already in progress and not so much institutional changes aimed at creating new forms of governance. Thus, much of the decentralization that has taken place in the Scandinavian countries during the past two decades could be seen as an institutional adaptation to the actual *modus operandi*. In other cases, such as the creation of new institutions for regional economic development in the United Kingdom, institutional reform was implemented primarily in order to strengthen collaborative and concerted action between the public sector and private businesses. It is yet too early to say to what extent these regional institutions will also foster new models of regional governance in Britain.

Let us now look closer at the case of Sweden from the vantage point of institutional change and changing intergovernmental relationships.

#### *The local level*

Intergovernmental relationships in Sweden have for a long period of time been characterized by a somewhat paradoxical pattern. On the one hand, the Swedish Constitution--as well as the political rhetoric on all levels of government and among all political parties--heralds the idea of local autonomy and local self-government. In fact, the strength of local autonomy in Sweden is intriguing, given its nature of a unitary state; in most such states, regional and local institutions tend to be explicitly subordinate to central government. On the other hand, however, local governments (*kommuner*) exercise very little autonomous policy or action when measured as the percentage of their budget over which they have exclusive control. Throughout most of the postwar period, some 80 per cent of the local governments' budgets consists of state grants which they receive for implementing state policies and programs, primarily in education and social welfare. Thus, only about 20 per cent of the local governments' budgets is spent on locally designed programs. Moreover, this part of the local governments' activities comprises most of the least politically salient areas such as culture, leisure and economic development.

How has this pattern of intergovernmental relations evolved and how can the discrepancy between the rhetoric of local autonomy on the one hand and the practice of subordination on the other be sustained? In order to get a grip on these questions, we need to look at the historical process which created the current state of affairs. The development of the Swedish welfare state has deep historical roots but gained stronger momentum in the

1950s and 1960s. At this time, the local government system was highly fragmented, with a large number of small local authorities with limited organizational, economic and administrative capabilities. However, the Swedish welfare state--as many observers have noted (Montin, 199x; Pierre, 1994)--is a local welfare state; while overarching policies and programs have been designed at the central government level, the thrust of welfare state service delivery takes place at the regional and local institutional levels.

Thus, in order to create the necessary institutional vehicles for the expansion of the welfare state, an extensive process of local government modernization began in the 1960s. The most conspicuous element of modernization was the creation of fewer but bigger local authorities. In the early 1970s, the number of *kommuner* had decreased from about 4000 to less than 300. This process of merging small municipalities into fewer but bigger local authorities helped create the necessary local institutional arrangements for the development of the welfare state. At the same time, initial fears that the decreased number of elected offices at the local level would damage local democracy turned out to be exaggerated; if the new, bigger local authorities appeared to be at least as effective vehicles of political debate and action as were the former, smaller municipalities (Strömberg and Westerståhl, 1984).

So far so good, perhaps. But the creation of the new and stronger local authorities also had an impact on the relationship between the state and the local authorities. A less anticipated outcome of the amalgamation process was that local authorities now had the institutional capacity to resist pressures from central government. With some exaggeration it could be argued that the state had "built the perfect beast"; the new *kommuner* turned out to be more difficult to command and control, compared to the smaller and weaker municipalities.

The case of Sweden shows very clearly how intergovernmental relationships are affected by changes in the economy. As was the case in several other countries in Western Europe during the 1980s (Sharpe, 1988), central government experienced severe macro-economic problems, including an increasing budget deficit and a weak economic growth. Meanwhile, local governments--with some variation across the country--were doing comparatively speaking well. Here was a powerful incentive for the state to embark on a political project of decentralization. Such reform had the double blessing of responding to a critique against too centralized government and at the same time allowing the state to "hive off" some financial responsibilities to regional and local government.

The decentralization during the 1980s was extensive. In 1982, a large number of detailed state regulations in the field of social welfare were abolished and replaced by a so-called "frame law" (*ramlag*)--i.e. a legislation defining the long-term, overarching goals for the public service in a particular sector but leaving the detailed design and implementation decisions to local government--for the social welfare sector. "Frame laws" were also introduced in a couple of other policy sectors like health care and care of the elderly. Furthermore, state control over planning and land use was relaxed in 1987.

The most significant decentralization reform, however, was the transfer of basic (primary and secondary) education from the state to local government in 1988. Implemented under strong initial opposition from the teachers' unions, the decentralization of basic education aimed at allowing for the schools to become more integrated with related activities at the local level. By having the schools operating under the auspices of the local authorities instead of under the auspices of the state, the argument went, schools would become more free to respond to local needs and to work more closely with local sports associations, leisure-time services, and so on.

The significance of this reform can not be exaggerated. Primary education has historically speaking been a core central government responsibility. Through detailed regulation and close monitoring, the state has ensured close compliance with its curriculum across the country. To be sure, if there ever was a sector of the Swedish welfare state were

equal standard was a key objective, education was it. After the decentralization, the national curriculum has all but been abolished. The emphasis now is on allowing each local authority, and indeed each individual school, to develop its own curriculum and profile. Thus, education has come a long way from a detailed national curriculum to a situation where schools even in the same city offer different themes and profiles in terms of the education they provide. The general idea is that children and parents should have been allowed to choose the school that fits the interests of the child the best.

The financial arrangement in the education sector after the decentralization is that local authorities receive state grants covering most, but far from all, their costs for the schools. This arrangement is important in several ways. Alongside the decentralization of education, legislation during the 1990s has also opened up for schools operating under private auspices but with public financial support at the same per capita level as public schools receive. Such privately run schools--so-called "free schools" (*friskolor*)--have mushroomed during the late 1990s and now offer a major challenge to the public schools.

### *The regional level*

Institutional reform at the regional level has been slower but gained significant momentum during the 1990s. To some extent, reform was triggered by the EU's focus on regions. However, there was also a need to devise institutional solutions which offer some political and democratic control over economic development and which can help bring together political and corporate actors at the regional levels. The elected assembly in the Swedish regions, the *landsting*, has had health care as its chief responsibility; some 85 percent of the *landsting* budgets go into the health care sector. Economic development at the regional level has been the task of the state administration at the regional level, the *länsstyrelse*. The reform during the 1990s sought to address this state of affairs which was believed to be unsatisfactory from a democratic point of view. So far, these reforms have been implemented on an experimental basis in a limited number of selected regions. The more long-term arrangements are yet to be finalized, pending evaluations of the impact of the regional institutional reform.

Along with bringing the economic development sector under closer elected control, a key objective of institutional reform at the regional level was to create arenas and forums which would help bring all the main actors in the region closer together. Drawing on positive experiences in that respect from the local level, it was believed that the regions--mainly because economic development had been the concern of the state regional administration--were poorly equipped to mobilize the chief actors in the regional territory towards joint, concerted action to boost the regional economy. In order to ameliorate this problem, central government launched a program with the goal to have regions produce so-called regional growth agreements (RGA) (*regionala tillväxtavtal*).

The general idea behind the RGA was to lump together all the various grants from central government to the regions--grants for regional economic development, environmental protection, some education programs, labor market programs, culture, nature preservation projects, and so on--into one non-targeted grant. The regions would then be allowed to spend that grant according to a program which had been negotiated among political institutions at the regional and local levels, the business community, organized interests, voluntary associations, and so on. Central government reserved the right to formally approve the RGAs before the projects listed in the agreement were given funding. Also, private businesses were encouraged not just to participate in the process of deliberating the RGAs but also to put their money where their proverbial mouths were, i.e. to make contributions towards the financing of the projects. Thus, here is a textbook example of central government creating incentives to build

governance at the regional level.

The deliberation process turned out to be more complex and time-consuming than expected. One problem was getting the corporate actor involved; private businesses tend to operate according to a different time-perspective than political authorities and probably had problems understanding the need for due process. Business representatives have been quoted commenting on the RGA deliberation process that the "mountain gave birth to a mouse"; to them, the (eventual) return did not correspond to the time and energy invested in the process. In addition, there were some disagreement between the region and the local RGA groups with regard to the division of financing between region and the local groups of some projects.

These differences between the *modus operandi* of private businesses on the one hand and political institutions on the other is, of course, not very novel. However, they do substantiate the practical problems in creating long-term governance arrangements, particularly when cooperation does not evolve spontaneously from below but more as a response from central government incentives.

It is still premature to assess the long-term outcome of the RGAs. It does seem clear, however, that central government is pursuing a strategy of relaxing control over regional and local government. We will return to this question below.

### *The central government level*

As has been the case in all of the Western European countries, the past decade has seen significant institutional changes at the central government level in Sweden. In the present analysis we will only comments on those reforms which have had an impact on intergovernmental relationships.

The Swedish political system has a long history of autonomous agencies. Although Constitutionally subordinate to the Cabinet, these agencies have acquired--and defended--a rather extensive autonomy and insulation from political pressures. The agencies are key structures in the implementation of public policy and, as such, they have previously worked close with regional and local authorities. Along with the increasingly common use of single grants to regional and local authorities, however, some of the previous leverage over cities and regions which the agencies controlled has been undermined. Controlling grants to subnational institutions had been an effective instrument for the agencies to ensure compliance.

The combined result of the relaxation of rules, decentralization and the increasing use of non-targeted state grants has been that agencies has had to develop new and "softer" policy instruments to seek to steer subnational government. As a result of these changes, central agencies have seen their role vis-à-vis local authorities developing more into one of "co-administration"--not too different from the French case (Reigner, 2001)--and shared responsibilities rather than formal command and control.

### *Changing intergovernmental relationships*

Are these new, emerging intergovernmental relationships typical to multilevel governance? Well, yes and no. Yes, in so far as institutional relationships are becoming increasingly negotiated and also in so far as the growing number of institutional levels are concerned. Overall, there is a tendency in Swedish intergovernmental relationships from hierarchical control and towards a division of labor between the levels. The relaxation of state rules and legislation in several of the core welfare state sectors such as social welfare, health care and education testifies to a strategy aiming at giving regional and local authorities a more immediate responsibility for these programs while at the same time allowing for greater variation in public service among regions and locales. The heyday of equal standard in public

service provision is clearly gone; instead, the current emphasis is on adapting public service to local needs and local demand; to allow local service providers to "tailor" their services according to clients' preferences; and to open up for customer choice.

All of this having been said, the Swedish pattern is not typical to multilevel governance in so far as the role of institutions are concerned. The development towards governance at the regional and local levels still portray political institutions as very much the "hub" of governance.

Thus, the development we can observe in intergovernmental relationships in Sweden is not perhaps not so much typical to multilevel governance as it is to the evolving policy style and role of the state in society more broadly. Let us now turn to the final part of the paper and discuss how the changes described above have affected the process of policy implementation.

#### **4- Policy implementation in a multi-level governance context**

As we can see, there exists an interesting correlation between the nature of the overarching political projects which states pursue and the institutional strength that characterizes these states at different points in time. In the Scandinavian countries, the implementation of a universal welfare state during the postwar period was predicated on strong central institutions with a clear mandate to command and control regional and local institutions. As the equal standard goal gradually became replaced by public service objectives like diversification and customer-related service design, the institutional model that served these goals best was a decentralized and less regulated system.

A rather clear pattern, looking at developments of state strength over time, is that the institutional capabilities of West European states are to a very large extent determined by the states themselves and not by exogenous forces like the market or transnational institutions. Certainly, we can point at several developments which have undermined some of the historical strength of these states. But these reforms, we need to remind ourselves, were initiated and implemented by the states themselves. The growing strength of the EU, or the deregulation of financial markets which was a precondition for the emergence of a global economy, were both state-driven reforms.

This, needless to say, is not very far from a classical institutional argument; states develop the institutional arrangements necessary to pursue the dominant political projects at any particular time. The institutional setup of the *laissez-faire* state was different from that of the typical welfare state which, in turn, was different from that of a developmental state (Johnson, 1982; Okimoto, 1986). That said, institutionalists also emphasize the longevity of institutions and the inertia in institutional change. It could well be that the West European states during the past decade or so are cases of states undergoing a process of change from an interventionist towards an enabling regime. The increasing focus on macro-economic balance and low inflation has pushed states to cut back on public expenditures and to adopt a policy style which is considerably less *dirigiste* compared to the early 1980s. But the institutional structures of the state still bear some resemblance with the bigger, redistributive states which were typical of the early postwar period. Bert Rockman has described the present situation in which we see big governments in small states in many of the advanced industrial democracies (Rockman, 1998).

The Swedish case would fit this description rather well. As argued earlier, we can see a fairly high degree of correspondence between institutional change, intergovernmental relationships and public service objectives. This also applies to the role of subnational government in policy implementation; when policies were interventionist and emphasized equality across the country, intergovernmental relationships were clearly hierarchical. As the



policy style has changed, so has the intergovernmental relationships.

The case of Sweden also substantiates the momentum of institutional change and the problems associated with such reform. At both the local and regional levels, institutional changes have been implemented which, although they solved much of the problems they were intended to solve, set in train processes which were not anticipated or even desired by the architects of the reform. The massive amalgamation of municipalities between 1950 and the early 1970s did create local authorities which were well equipped to shoulder the responsibilities associated with the expanding welfare state. At the same time, however, these new local authorities also proved to be sufficiently strong in financial and organizational terms to resist political pressures from the state to a much greater extent than the former, smaller municipalities.

Institutional reform at the regional levels gives paints a similar picture. Although these reforms have yet to find their final form, it appears clear that by encouraging a development towards governance, the state has devised regional structures which it is quite likely to experience increasing problems controlling in the future. At both levels institutional reform has set in train processes of adaptive behavior among key actors--for instance, the creation of new networks or coalitions, increasing cooperation between political and corporate actors, or a strategy of positioning the city or region in the international arena--which tend to strengthen the political capabilities at these levels, something which, in turn, makes them more difficult to control by the state.

Taken together, these patterns of institutional change and the growing emphasis on governance at the local and regional levels have had profound effects on the role of regional and local government in the implementation of public policy. Regional and local institutions play different roles in implementation because the objectives and design of policy has changed, from a rather strict top-down, interventionist policy towards less targeted programs aimed enabling private businesses to prosper.

The only significant development that seems to question the logical relationship between institutional change, intergovernmental relationships and policy style relates to the long-term effects of the emergence of governance at the regional and local levels. While intergovernmental relationships in a Constitutional perspective could be conceived of as a zero-sum game--one level's increase in power and control is at the expense of the other levels--the governance perspective highlights the extent to which institutions at different levels can enhance their ability to steer and coordinate their territory. Thus, governance, from that perspective could be described as an empowerment of institutions, not in relationship to each other but in relationship to their external environment (Pierre and Peters, 2000).

By creating incentives for such governance, central government has probably contributed to strengthening political institutions and the regional and local levels. We have previously argued that an important unintended consequence of that development could well be that regional and local authorities become more autonomous and assertive vis-à-vis central government.

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